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Looking for Merle

Participatory Archiving as *Bridge Work*

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After all, the subversive intellectual came under false pretenses, with bad documents, out of love. Her labor is as necessary as it is unwelcome. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings.

—Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten

I have studied the history of our people in this country . . . I want to tell everyone about that, all the particulars that are left out of our schools . . . I feel now that I can begin to put our lives in a larger framework. Ma, a larger framework! The outlines for us are time and blood, but today there is breadth possible through making connections with others involved in community struggle.

—Merle Woo

Keeping House

In the summer of 2020, I found myself sitting in a sun patch in my kitchen talking to Merle Woo and her eldest child, Emily Woo Yamasaki, through my laptop. I had gone looking for Merle at the beginning of that year, after rereading “Letter to Ma” for the umpteenth time. Merle is a Chinese Korean lesbian socialist feminist teacher and organizer perhaps most widely known for her affiliation with Kitchen Table Press and *This Bridge Called My Back*, the women of color feminist press and 1981 anthology that published “Letter to Ma.” Like many before me, I was moved by Merle’s letter to her Korean immigrant mother and its frank

discussion of Asian American history, homosexuality, and anti-imperialist socialist feminist politics, framed through a confession from daughter to mother of the perils of shame, silence, and assimilation.¹

Before I found Merle, I looked for her in existing archives. I caught glimpses of her in radical Third World feminist journals and anthologies of Asian/Pacific/American leftist movement organizers and in chapbooks published with Kitchen Table Press and the Freedom Socialist Party (FSP), and I heard her voice reading poems and speaking on gay and lesbian radio shows. Her writing revealed her to be an anti-apartheid activist, integrationist, unionist, and a trans-affirmative lesbian feminist in the eighties (the latter history we've often since considered implausible).² Images littered the internet and social media of her time with Unbound Feet, a feminist Asian American literary and performance collective she co-founded, though there were no writings or recordings I could find from their readings.

Surprisingly, what I also found, scattered across digital archives, were dozens of articles from periodicals in the eighties that tracked Merle's unlawful firing and subsequent discrimination lawsuits against UC Berkeley and the coalition of students, contingent workers, and socialist feminists who fought for her reinstatement. Much later I would learn that the Merle Woo Defense Committee (MWDC) named certain ladder-rank faculty in Asian American Studies as the "liberal establishment" who facilitated the institutionalization of the field in ways that eschewed multi-issue feminist analyses, disenfranchised undergraduate students, and created tiers of second-class workers through the development of graduate studies programs, tenured lines, and increase in contingent faculty.³ The accused faculty—primarily Ling-chi Wang, Ronald Takaki, Elaine Kim, and Sucheng Chan—later had their own public rupture at the Association for Asian American Studies over the merit and ethics of Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore*. This incident spilled into a special forum in *Amerasia Journal* dedicated to further airing the debate.⁴ Hostility toward Merle within the department also catalyzed the bitter breakup of Unbound Feet and litigation between its members. These articles hinted at the vexed history of Asian American Studies. Merle's part in this history has not made it into the canon of the field. Later, I found an article in which Merle, writing at the dawn of the twenty-first century, spoke to three decades of class struggle on campus, outlining similar grievances at departments across the University of California and California State University systems. Sara Ahmed said, "[T]o complain about an abuse of power is to learn about power."⁵ What had Merle and the MWDC learned, I wondered, and who had listened?

My curiosity gave way to more urgent feelings when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, revealing once again the global scale and stakes of Asian diasporic racialization. The pandemic generated a wave of hypervisibility, paranoia, and fear that drove reactionary demands for more tracking and apprehension of anti-Asian violence through research institutions ("data") and police surveillance. Among these calls were also increased demands for more Asian American Studies classes and programs. I hoped Merle could provide answers gleaned from decades of organizing and working on college campuses in Ethnic Studies programs. In this moment, Asian American Studies was posed as the demand itself. However, in 1969, Ethnic Studies had been a compromise; the original demand, as many of us know, was for an autonomous Third World University democratically controlled by minoritized students and workers.⁶ Instead, San Francisco State College and UC Berkeley agreed to fund Ethnic Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, and educational opportunity programs (EOP). Working for decades in this compromised space, Merle had dared not only to complain but also to organize; she risked being thought of as "tiresome," a "distraction," or—worse—a

“problem.” At the same time, however, she undertook the exhausting work of transforming the conditions of possibility which were thought to be immovable by working collectively to refigure the networks of people in the university to think and do differently.

I found Merle in 2020, and over the next few years built a relationship with her and Emily that would turn into an archiving project focused on donating Merle’s personal papers to an institutional archive.



Figure 1: *Merle and Emily* (photographs by Mich Ling, 2023), a collage of photos from Merle’s papers (1970s–1980s). One is from dinner in San Francisco in 2023. Reproduced by permission of Merle Woo.

In this essay I begin to articulate the messy methodologies of participatory archiving, based in a “politic borne of necessity” that Merle, Emily, and our network of collaborators continue to flesh out to this day.⁷ In this way, I lend a feminist ear to Merle’s complaint where others sought to dismiss it. Lending an ear means sharing in the work of complaint or contributing to “counterinstitutional knowledge of how universities work, [and] for whom they work.”⁸ But this project moves beyond lending an ear to complaint, into the more complicated, contradictory terrain of organizing, or how to make institutions work differently. Ruth Wilson Gilmore warns against fetishizing institutions; the state, for example, does not think and do, people think and do. In this sense, organizing is a practice that understands that mobilizing people is both the problem and the answer.

Merle’s papers include manuscripts of Merle’s essay “Letter to Ma”; speeches and poems like “Front Line of Freedom,” read during the 1981 San Francisco Gay Pride March; letters and cards to and from friends, lovers, and comrades, including from poet Nellie Wong to partner Karen Brodine and filmmaker Julie Dash; personal pictures featuring Merle and Emily with Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith; and flyers from Unbound Feet, FSP (including anti-Zionist and anti-apartheid pamphlets from the 1980s), and

Merle's 1990 third-party campaign for governor of California. Most of the materials are not currently available to the public, including depositions, letters, and other documents that flesh out Merle's fight for reinstatement at UC Berkeley after she was fired twice (1982 and 1986) for being too "radical."² Together with the MWDC—which included lead organizers like Emily and Nancy Reiko Keito as well as supporters like Cherríe Moraga and Angela Davis—Merle won reinstatement once and backpay twice. These files help us to understand the contradictions inherent in the formation of Ethnic Studies as a hard-won concession of the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) and its many afterlives: critical history for those of us who continue to struggle against the neoliberal capitalist interests that shape university conditions and (re)route its investments.

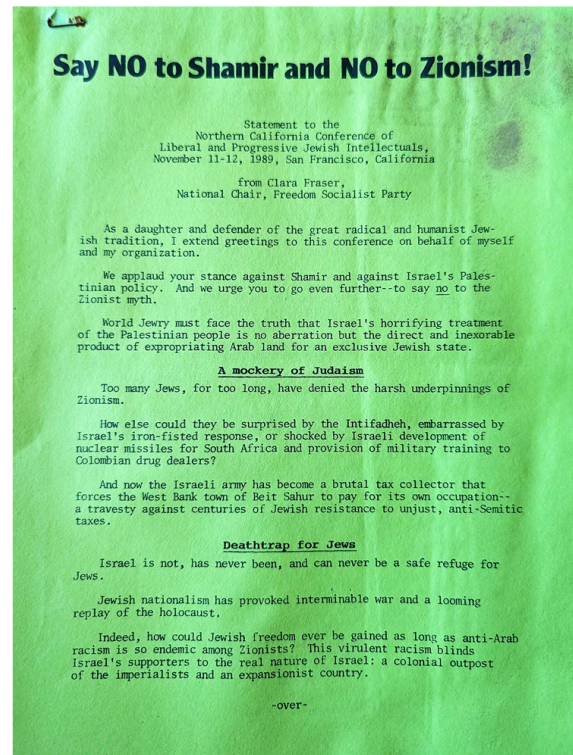


Figure 2: *Say NO to Shamir and NO to Zionism!* (photograph by Mich Ling, 2024), a statement from Clara Fraser, National Chair of the Freedom Socialist Party, to the Northern California Conference of Liberal and Progressive Jewish Intellectuals. Reproduced by permission of Merle Woo.

Merle's papers also challenge us in the academy to look critically at the institutionalization of Asian American Studies, through her unyielding indictment of neoliberalism, and the faculty who utilized the administrative power of the university to reposition her as an adjunct without her knowledge and fired her.

Archiving Merle's papers *with* Merle has required a critical orientation to history and its subjects and a consideration of the "subjective capacity" of people to be historical actors and historical narrators simultaneously.¹⁰ This orientation to history is not without its contradictions; indeed, as a socialist feminist, Merle's life has been dedicated to parsing the particularity and historicity of contradiction. This article does not argue that archiving is inherently radical, but rather that archiving collaboratively, and with a queer of color feminist ethic of care, is a kind of bridge work. Bridge work is *organizing* in that it embraces contradiction: the "both/and." Bridge work is "painstaking drudgery," it is care work, administrative work,

and the work of acknowledging difference—what Ahmed calls “house work” and Merle calls “homework” or “keep[ing] house.”¹¹

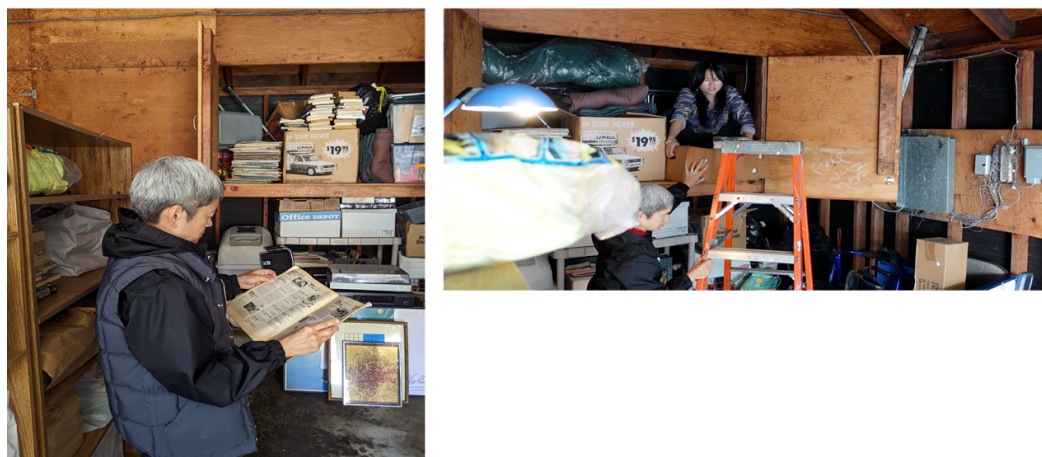


Figure 3: *Bridge work* (photographs by Mich Ling, 2023). Emily and I in Merle’s garage. Reproduced by permission of Merle Woo.

Looking for Merle is an archiving project full of contradiction; it bridges the personal and the collective, the embodied and the digital, the grassroots and the institutional, the past and the present, the radical and the reformist. An organizer works not only to critique and dismantle systems but also to build alternative ones. This process inevitably produces new kinds of contradictions that we then work to resolve. Bridge work is about building shared analysis and strategic action, or about navigating the space between the two. In this sense, to do bridge work is to move through contradiction with an ethics of accountability, care, and generosity.¹²

Making Connections

In some ways, Merle has been hiding in plain sight. Reflecting on her early years of teaching in the resource-starved EOP program at San Francisco State University (SFSU), Merle wrote of the isolation she and her colleagues experienced: “we never really organized,” she said, “we let ourselves be picked off one by one.”¹³ To this day, lack of access to information or democratic participation in academic institutions feeds cycles of misinformation and paranoia. Contingent faculty, who are fighting for basic things like healthcare and the right to democratic participation in departmental decision-making, are teaching many times more classes than do their tenured peers. They are not expected to mentor graduate students, take on administrative roles in the department, or produce research (though many do); this “relief” from the labor of reproducing the academy somehow further legitimates their contingency (“They don’t do *x* work, so why should they have a say in *y*?”). It also forces a gap in historical memory and institutional knowledge that is strategic. In the financialization of the university, administration is a process of governmentality, or “consensus, best practices, and accumulation of metrics rather than a reaching of decisions through democratic participation and active debate.”¹⁴ Governance works to privatize social reproductive labor; in this schema, ladder-rank faculty members are *selectively incorporated* into mechanisms of governance.¹⁵ The student and the contingent worker are too, but their position is more precarious; they remain central to the public

university's mission of accessible education and research but are alienated from its means of production. Neglected without shares or interests due to their nonadministrative status, they are imagined without the "perks" or the "burdens" of those with power. But materially, those who experience organized abandonment under racial capitalism have less to gain and more to lose.¹⁶

Ideas and stories have a rate of transmission that differs from the trajectories of people working and organizing on the ground. Institutions mediate the processes of both. *Bridge* had found its way to me, but the women of *Bridge* were working-class women of color of an older generation whose paths I had not crossed. Though many had worked in universities, they often did so without doctorates or tenure-track positions, rotating in and out of universities, sometimes working in a few at once. Systems of power incapacitate people slowly in this way, but also, during eruptive crises, all at once. Many *Bridge* women, though younger than my grandmother, have passed from diabetes (Gloria Anzaldúa), cancer (Audre, Pat Parker, and Toni Cade Bambara), and other forms of premature death.¹⁷ Merle herself was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1991, amid a second round of struggles against UC Berkeley; she later wrote that her double mastectomy was part of why she dropped her fight for reinstatement.¹⁸ At a memorial for Audre a year later, Merle wrote, "Now I and many others must add our names to the epidemic that is breast cancer, though for so many of our brothers and sisters it is AIDS."¹⁹ Scholars working across disability studies, Asian American Studies, and queer and feminist theory write about the debilitating effects of work and the tricky matter of refusing to work when we are disabled and debilitated in different ways.²⁰ Scholars like Iyko Day point to how racial capitalism and settler colonialism produce the myth of the hyperproductive Asian worker.²¹ In response to the model minority myth, crip-of-color scholars offer anti-work manifestos and engage critically with the disability movement's call to refuse work. Pointing to another contradiction, Mel Chen writes that refusing work, even as a measure of self-preservation, can create more work for others—consequences that come from our embeddedness in systems not entirely of our own making.²² Without romanticizing choice and with acknowledgment of (inter)dependency, Merle and other women of color feminists created mutual aid networks and organized with undergraduate students and contingent workers. Their efforts were met with resistance from other faculty, who slashed community programs and fought for more tenure lines and the establishment of a graduate program, building power through governance. Their use of tenure and departmental leadership positions to push out lecturers they disagreed with turned political conflict into structural violence.

Considering all this, it might seem contradictory for Merle, Emily, and me to archive Merle's papers with an academic institution; why do it if they have been so hostile to her? We in the academy often say that visibility is a trap—we know all too well the perils of being "included"—but academic institutions hoard resources (people, ideas, materials, and other forms of wealth) that can and need to be diverted and redistributed. More than visibility, organizing requires study, keeping an eye on histories that help us strategize for the future. This study can and must be done, wherever you are. Further, coalitions that are "politically intelligent require not only an understanding of power relations that condition them but also of a shared commitment to the abolitionist transformation of society."²³

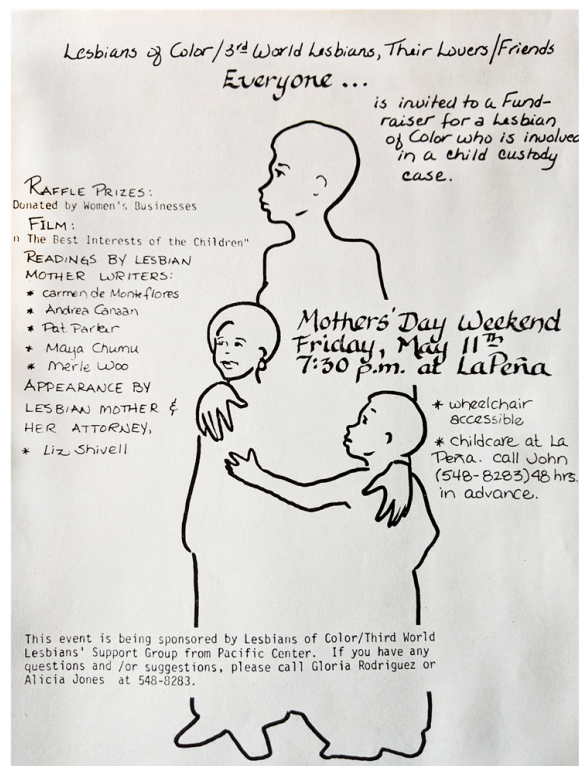


Figure 4: *Lesbians of Color/3rd World Lesbians, Their Lovers/Friends, Everyone* (photograph by Mich Ling, 2023), a flyer to support a fundraiser for a lesbian of color's child custody case, from Merle's papers. Reprinted by permission of Merle Woo.

Archiving Merle's papers therefore is not the goal itself, but an organizing tool we're offering to other beleaguered workers (yes, including students), those who do "labor upon labor" and are deemed "unprofessional."²⁴ In this sense, the decision to institutionalize Merle's papers is not about "belonging"—to some imagined past or to some identity group—but accountability to a shared future and the transformation of society. My own study and accountability to the women of color feminists who'd taught me to organize pushed me to ask certain questions: if Ethnic Studies was always a compromise and never the goal of the TWLF, why do many of us see the maintenance or creation of Asian American Studies as an adequate response to the violences of our current time? What, or who, has been silenced in history for this solution to maintain its coherence? What had Merle learned in her fight over Asian American Studies in the emergence of the neoliberal university? What can we learn from Merle and the MWDC now?

Merle, Emily, and I spent years simply getting to know each other, talking about leftist movements and tactics from reparations to abolition. We learned each other's position to build trust and shared analysis. We also brought our networks to the tables we shared. I spoke to people, from organizing comrades who knew the history of the TWLF and had read *Bridge*, to tenured faculty who had been mentored by Merle's tenured colleagues and other involved faculty, to graduate students currently at UC Berkeley's Asian American Studies. Nobody knew the story of Merle's lawsuit, not even a rumor. When I told Merle and Emily about this gap in knowledge, they told me nonchalantly that the MWDC had kept meticulous records of the campaign, partly as the committee leaders were FSP members who'd learned to file papers for accountability to one another as to where funds went, but also to draw strategy for future campaigns. "We got the [MWDC] strategy from [FSP co-founder] Clara Fraser, who'd done something similar," Emily

said.²⁵ Merle's papers already existed across two archives prior to this project: her personal collection—what she refers to as “the old junk in the garage”—and the FSP archive, or eight crumbling boxes kept in a storage unit in San Francisco. FSP did not have the resources to house the materials in any way that they could be easily viewed, let alone digitized.

It's perhaps an understatement to say that digital archives are not free from the inaccessibilities of their physical counterparts. In the height of the COVID-19 lockdown, in-person research was impossible to conduct; archives, museums, and libraries were shuttered indefinitely to outside visitors. Institutions began directing more time toward digitization, but paying for equipment, secure platforms, and training workers to digitize materials is immensely costly. Most archives have decades of backlogged materials waiting to be converted. However, in a period defined by increased isolation and scarcity, digital humanities are a way to build “communities of practice” that work “publicly to raise awareness and improve dialogue that identifies, recognizes, and rewards intellectual work by scholars operating outside traditional tenure-track placements.”²⁶ In the accelerated attention economy and increasing precarity of the market of ideas, digitizing Merle's work and making it accessible—not simply to academics affiliated with the university or professionals with credentials—became a priority.

Once we determined that accessibility and collaboration were central tenets of the participatory archiving we would do, we worked to collect and curate the materials. Doing so required crowdsourcing skills and fundraising. I used graduate coursework credits to take a class on digital archiving with Duncan Faherty and Lisa Rhody at the Graduate Center (City University of New York). My friend Sarah Cuk, an abolitionist librarian and archivist, answered my rambling questions patiently, sending me lists of online archives to check out and a template for taking inventory of Merle's things. In August of 2024, Maggie Mang and Gabriel Medina-Kim, graduate school friends, drove from the Central Coast to San Francisco to help Emily, Merle, and me organize and catalogue papers. Recently, Maggie successfully applied for a grant through California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, where they are now on the tenure track, to pay underrepresented (undocumented, international, first-generation, etc.) undergraduate students to work on the archive, specifically to make a zine to raise awareness about the project. FSP comrades and friends—including Nancy, Amy Gray, and Tony Mendicino—continue to pop in and out, driving us around, feeding us, housing us, and sharing stories about Merle.

Going into this process, Merle, Emily, and I didn't know that selling the papers was a possibility. Many of Merle's comrades had already donated their papers to archives across the United States—her partner Karen Brodine's to the San Francisco Public Library, Nellie Wong's to the University of Santa Barbara, Audre Lorde's to Spelman College, and Pat Parker's to the Schlesinger Library at the Harvard Radcliffe Institute. We began with the intention of donating Merle's papers to a public institution with a community-friendly, open-access archive that had the capacity to securely digitize Merle's papers within a year or two.²⁷ We knew that material conditions would make meeting all points somewhat impossible. Community-led archives do not have the resources to digitize ten linear feet worth of materials in the space of a few years and keep them secure. Public colleges, museums, and archives are often funded through a mix of government funds and private grants and have a five- to ten-year backlog of materials to digitize and few personnel and resources to do so. But Merle and Emily set a bottom line: as internationalist socialists, they believed the only benefit of giving over the papers to an institution was for them to be available to anyone and everyone.

We contacted the director at a historical society and museum in San Francisco, a nonprofit supported by government and corporate funding. We knew that this nonprofit has a robust community of nonprofessional researchers who utilized their archives frequently, mostly San Franciscans curious about family and city history. The nonprofit's director was enthusiastic and generous about the potential of acquiring Merle's papers, but considering their timebound grant structure, they could not promise that Merle's papers would be able to be digitized completely or quickly. They were also honest that Merle would be their first significant acquisition of an Asian American lesbian's papers. This gave us pause. Merle spent her career critiquing the isolation of women of color feminists within white supremacist structures, from her experiences in early women's studies programs to alcoholic support groups in San Francisco. Though primacy is often given to "the first," as if it were a victory, we wanted Merle to be in conversation with her women of color feminist comrades. Later, we spoke to Eunsong Kim, who connected us with an Ivy League library that has in its collection some of Merle's women of color contemporaries, friends, organizers, and poets she deeply admired.²⁸ The library had undergone a curatorial shift in recent years, with acquisitions organized thematically around race, diaspora, and migration. Eunsong shared useful knowledge she had learned through her time writing and researching the settler colonial history of museums and archives and the importance of getting paid for papers, especially for those who had been consistently disenfranchised by universities. When Emily and I spoke later, we discussed the potential uses of that money—it could be put toward further publicizing the papers, Merle's eldercare, and potentially donating to organizing communities they were a part of. When I reminded them that the money should also be considered compensation for Merle's labor—it was her life and work, after all, that were being sold—Emily responded, "Yes, and the work of fighting for Merle's job and creating this archive was done by students, FSP comrades, you, and our other collaborators. We want to compensate you all as best we can."²⁹

Yellow Woman Speaks

Waging revolution and building movements requires attention to the specificity of ongoing historical processes. Jimmy Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs used to ask, "What time is it on the clock of the world?"³⁰ to encourage people to develop an analysis of the problems of the times and decide what interventions and movements were necessary to build. Building a sense of history is essential to organizing. Audre Lorde was a librarian as well as a teacher and poet, and abolitionist Mariame Kaba is known for her extensive personal library of zines and other writings by incarcerated peoples. When we archive, we don't just remember the past, we participate in its making. Archives are a way that we decide whose voices belong to the future.

In *The Undercommons*, Moten and Harvey list off the "unprofessional" academic laborers who resist and incite revolt; among composition teachers, adjunct historians, and mentorless graduate students are "state college ethnic studies departments."³¹ This uneasy categorization of a department alongside job categories seemingly collapses uneven power relations in ways that bear further examination. Merle's papers offer us this opportunity within Asian American Studies, where we see how sharp critiques of capitalism and power often result in widely different political and personal stances within the field. For example, in their 1990 critiques of Ronald Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore*, both Ling-chi Wang and Sucheng Chan focused their ire on its outsized success, which they attributed to the "capitalist nature of commercial publishing" and "marketing."³² Otherwise, they argued, the book was simply a readable "commodified"

synthesis of ideas and research (already done by others in the field) for white audiences. This was ironic, given that only a few years earlier Merle accused these same “scholar-activists” of pushing for the accreditation and privatization of Asian American Studies and pushing out lower-rank faculty and students who disagreed with them. Later, Chan would refer to the work of departmentalizing and building Asian American Studies as a fight for “academic legitimacy,” suggesting without qualification that incorporation had become the agenda of the department even if it had not been the original goal of the movement that had made it possible.³³

Ongoing discourse within the interdisciplinary humanities, and specifically queer and feminist theory, would benefit from Merle’s papers for several reasons. From Stuart Hall and Lisa Lowe to Roderick Ferguson and Grace Kyungwon Hong, many interdisciplinary scholars have unveiled the “institutionalizing and archiving power” of the neoliberal university and its selective incorporation of minoritized peoples and knowledges of them.³⁴ Their critiques of minoritized subjects’ capitulation to “systems of recognition and desire” often end with a call for alternatives.³⁵ Merle’s life’s work offers historical specificity to the “redistributive practices” and “small and seemingly insignificant acts” that people continue to engage in everyday that we cannot afford to miss.³⁶ Also, anxieties over the viability of women of color feminist genealogies require contextualization that is currently not available. In Merle’s case, she offers insight into yellow feminist contributions to women of color praxis. Through a brief review of some debates over the viability of women of color feminism and the figure of the yellow woman within it, I show how capitalist and colonial logics of scarcity incentivize scholars to engage with a lack of generosity and care in the academic market of ideas.

Critiques of women of color feminism from within queer and feminist scholarship in the last two decades frame it as a theoretical genealogy within the academy and not as a capacious practice of coalitional organizing across difference. These critiques have often conflated women of color feminism with intersectionality; more specifically, they credit intersectionality with *creating* the “women of color.” Jasbir Puar argues that intersectionality is largely deployed for the purpose of “diversity management,” and as such, “always produces an Other, and that other is always a Woman of Color (now on referred to as WOC, to underscore the overdetermined emptiness of its gratuitousness).”³⁷ Following Puar, Ann Anlin Cheng writes, “the category of ‘women of color’ teeters dangerously close to the tiresome, a category of critical exhaustion that in fact has never come to full life.”³⁸ In these critiques, women of color feminism is imagined as an easily co-opted category, a faulty map for tracing the ever-shifting terrain of power.

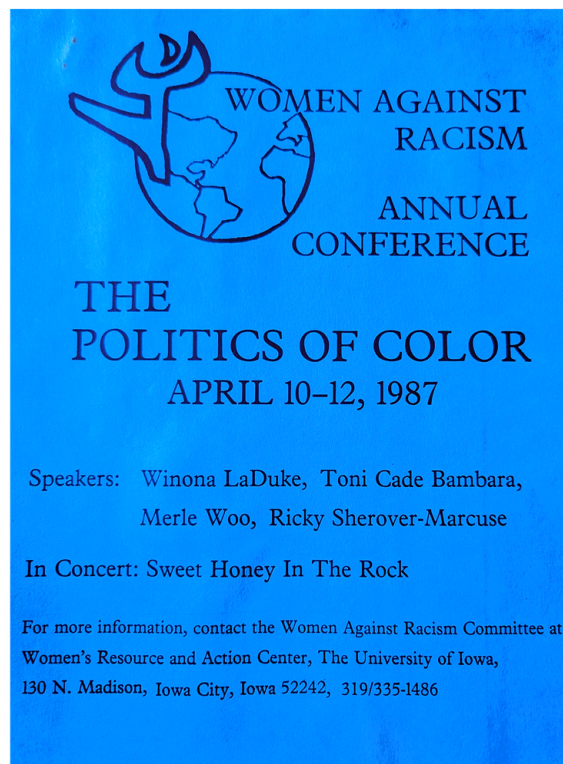


Figure 5: *The Politics of Color* (photograph by Mich Ling, 2023), a flyer for Women Against Racism’s annual conference in 1987, from Merle’s papers. Reprinted by permission of Merle Woo.

In response to this tendency, Tiffany Lethabo King argues that the affective anxiety over intersectionality’s value is tied to its status as a commodity circulating within the neoliberal university. King writes, “The coining and commodification of work becomes increasingly important to the process of being monetized, absorbed, and institutionalized within corporate university spaces.” On all sides of the debate, scholars agree that Black feminist theory enlivens and enmeshes WOC feminism with intersectionality, but certain critiques operate ahistorically—mistaking the map for the territory—when they posit women of color as merely a symptom of theory and not a political strategy “borne of necessity.” Through “market-like processes,” women of color feminism is evacuated of its socialist principles, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, who “coined” the term intersectionality, is made to “stand in for domestic Black and women of color politics oriented toward state/institutional redress and redistribution.”³⁹ Puar writes that the “diversity management” of intersectionality displaces it from the political practice and historical context which produced it, but Puar removes the WOC from her context by arguing for her existence as a product of intersectionality, a mere “signifier” of someone “resistant, subversive, and articulating a grievance.” Cheng, too, finds fault with the “culture of grievance” articulated by the WOC, arguing that the yellow woman is an exception to the category because she is not thought of as angry or aggrieved as Black and brown women are. Having thus been removed from her historical context, the aggrieved woman of color is abstracted into a cultural signifier, a representational sign that has since become outdated. Missing from Cheng’s critique is any mention of the overlapping or constitutive relation of the yellow feminist and women of color, which Merle embodied in her work and life. Her argument rests on an assumption that the aggrieved Asian woman exists immaterially, without interrogating the material conditions of the academy which might have (quite

literally) evacuated the WOC from her university position, the yellow woman from the WOC, and Merle from feminist and queer citational genealogies within the academy.

Merle's papers also reveal a disturbing history of squeezing out undergraduate students and lecturers from the power structures of the university within the very programs and departments that they fought for and that were meant to champion them. From Asian American Studies at UC Berkeley to Women's Studies at SFSU, Merle wrote of the "careerist faculty" who used tenure to obtain administrative and management positions that they then used to demote and fire faculty who pushed for more rank-and-file organization of their programs.⁴⁰ She explained, "Up through the 80s, lecturers and students had participated in democratic decision-making in both curriculum and hiring. . . . [B]y 1997, lecturers and students had absolutely no voice in the running of Women's Studies. It became well-known on campus that we who had had the most democracy on campus now had the least democracy of any other department."⁴¹ Tenured faculty actively demobilized radical organizing by refusing to join the union, refusing Merle and other lecturers they politically disagreed with the right to present at department conferences, and influenced graduate students to believe that anyone without a doctorate was unqualified to teach graduate courses.⁴² These professors were white and nonwhite, transnational and nationalist, poststructuralist and Marxist, suggesting that intellectual discipline alone does not determine one's political praxis. Ideas can be developed to guide practice, but they cannot stand in for action; evolving praxis determines the strength of our convictions and the weight of our impact. Power mediates history as it is lived and as it is narrated. Becoming conscious to one's active role in making history is to become an organizer. This process—of becoming intentional and accountable—renders oneself vulnerable to not only critique and failure but also the inevitability of contradiction.

Broad coalitions such as the one that came together to form the TWLF require developing a shared analysis and a common goal. Radical coalitions, however broad, are tied together by a shared political goal that cannot be conceded. For the TWLF, that was a Third World curriculum and college. Self-determination for Third World peoples (locally and globally) meant the total transformation of society and the emergence of a new consciousness. Merle shared in her lawsuit depositions that over the course of her time at UC Berkeley, people in faculty meetings in AAS and across Ethnic Studies, including Wang, began to question the idea of a Third World College, with many giving it up entirely by her third year. Okihiro argues that the post-1968 Ethnic Studies program was designed by administrators to be both assimilationist (such as the Chicago school of sociology) and anticommunist (as in Cold War-era area studies), focusing on "cultural pluralism and ethnic minorities" in a US nation-state context.⁴³ During her time working in AAS at Berkeley, Merle saw the formal absorption of Ethnic Studies into the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) as a betrayal of the TWLF and the work she thought she'd been hired to do. In contrast, Okihiro points toward another teleology which Merle came to in the process of waging her lawsuits. In this causality, the creation of Ethnic Studies was not a step toward a Third World College, but rather a concession that compromised the TWLF's radical praxis of self-determination. Its absorption into CAS, in this sense, was an inevitable conclusion.

Careful Critique

In a 2009 tribute commemorating Lorde's legacy, Merle wrote, "I am afraid that academics and reform-minded liberal feminists will not remember that [Audre] was a socialist. Like Pat Parker. They do these revolutionary feminists a great dishonor when they water down their politics." Puar's and Cheng's anxieties over the emptiness of the WOC reflect King's and Merle's own concerns about the "watering down" of Black revolutionary feminism, even as Puar and Cheng elide Asian diasporic feminist socialist politics in their narrative of women of color feminism. These overlapping anxieties and concerns reflect contradictions in intellectual articulations of power and resistance that are never fully resolved. In the manufactured scarcity of the academic marketplace, it is not surprising that working-class women of color's labor is devalued in the fields they helped form, structured as contingent in the departments they built, and deemed theoretically lifeless by certain tenured colleagues. Neoliberal cooptation, historical silencing, and elite capture are part and parcel of the history of institutionalizing Ethnic Studies.⁴⁴ Some scholars find WOC empty and tiresome, feelings to which they are entitled. But Merle's papers offer testimony that historicizes the production of knowledge in the interdisciplinary humanities and its correlation to its machinations and working conditions, context that we desperately need if queer and feminist scholars are to wage ethical and caring critiques from within universities that are hostile to us all, albeit in uneven ways.

Indeed, the socialist principles of women of color feminism writ large have also been watered down, as scholars from Keeanga Yamahatta Taylor to Colleen Lye have pointed out in their work on Third World movements from the Combahee River Collective (CRC) to the TWLF.⁴⁵ As socialist feminists, the CRC believed in the importance of criticism and self-criticism, an analysis of revolutionary strategy that is explicitly Maoist. Colleen Lye points out a similar "forgetting" of the Global Maoist roots of the TWLF and Ethnic Studies, in which the coalitional subject emphasized praxis and the "logic of the situation," as well as the concept of thirdness and the liberated zone.⁴⁶ Lye writes that if women of color feminism were to be conflated with any scholarly term, it would be Gayatri Spivak's *strategic essentialism*, a tactic through which minority groups mobilize collectivity based on shared identity to meet a political goal. I point out this history to contest Chen's accusation that yellow women is an exception to the women of color. Asian thought, and its uptake by diasporic Asian women as well as other minoritized subjects, is integral to Third World and women of color feminist formations in and out of the academy. More importantly, by its own definition, women of color feminism is practical to the logic of the situation, a theory in practice. The point of women of color feminism was never comparison but coalition.

Work in Progress

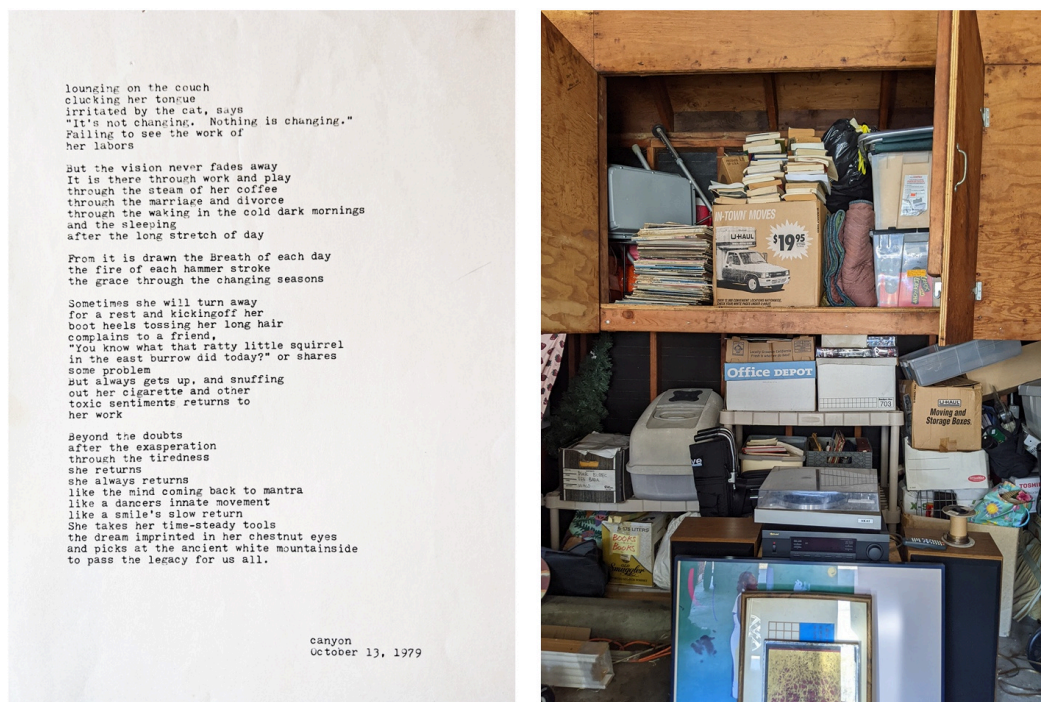


Figure 6: *Work in Progress* (photographs by Mich Ling, 2024), collage featuring a poem by canyon sam and a picture of Merle's garage. Reprinted by permission of Merle Woo.

This article shares some of the process of curating and making accessible socialist feminist organizer and teacher Merle Woo's papers and frames this process as a particular kind of organizing or bridge work. It also queries the time and place of the queer yellow feminist amid contemporary political struggles and ongoing crisis by telling the story of how I came to know Merle. Merle's humor, grace, and political discipline far exceeded the snapshots of her I had before we met. Working with her, Emily, and our many collaborators and conspirators has made me a more ethical scholar and organizer. The gap between "looking for" and "collaborating with" has continued to be a generative, contradictory space that I navigate.

I want to end with a provocation and series of questions. A decade of learning about, teaching to, and organizing with Asian diasporic peoples has taught me this: Asian American Studies is a compromised space. In its institutionalization, it became a voice of compromise. Asian American politics is vulnerable to critique due to its coalitional nature—its hybridity, its embodied difference—but also for what it failed to do, and for whom and what it leaves out.⁴⁷ Women of color feminists who are enlivened by Third World radical socialism address these contradictions through accountability, self-criticism, and processes of transformative justice which focus on the structural conditions that perpetuate harm, violence, and injustice. In organizing, we open ourselves up to the contradictions between our ideals (what we believe) and our actions (what we do). Speaking and writing are forms of doing but are often solitary endeavors for scholars professionalizing under the dictates of the tenure track. As you move in and out of the space of the academy, where "the street has always run into the campus,"⁴⁸ when is it time to read and reflect, or shout and fight back? Where do you go to lick your wounds and strategize? With whom do you break bread at the kitchen table? Which histories tell you what time it is on the clock of the world?

Postscript

After this article was submitted for publication, Merle sold her papers to the Schlesinger Library for approximately \$55,000. The sale came with a commitment to prioritizing the processing and digitizing of her papers, which we expect to be completed within a two-year period. The price includes compensation for expenses (labor, travel, housing, etc.) that went into the project as well as a future trip for Merle, Emily, and me to visit the archive.

1. One such person was transnational feminist M. Jacqui Alexander, who wrote, “I read Merle Woo’s ‘Letter to Ma’ with my mouth open and aghast—and covered, of course. After all, I could not be caught staring at something, or someone, so impolitely, with my mouth open.” M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*, Perverse Modernities (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 260. ↩
2. For more on the plausible history of transfeminism in the women’s movement, see Finn Enke, “Collective Memory and the Transfeminist 1970s,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (February 1, 2018): 9–29, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-4291502>. For a conversation on Black transfeminist anarchism and its materialist history, see edxi betts, NZ Suékama, g, and Ren-yo Hwang, “Black Transfeminist Anarchism,” *TSQ* 11, no. 1 (February 1, 2024): 34–65, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-11131676>. ↩
3. Merle Woo, “Three Decades of Class Struggle on Campus: A Personal History,” in *Legacy to Liberation: Politics and Culture of Revolutionary Asian Pacific America*, ed. Fred Wei-han Ho (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2000), 159–73. ↩
4. Ronald Takaki, Russell C. Leong, L. Ling-chi Wang, Elaine H. Kim, Sucheng Chan, Karen Leonard, Frank Chin, and Paul Wong, “Amerasia Forum—*Strangers from a Different Shore*,” *Amerasia Journal* 16, no. 2 (January 1990): 63–154. ↩
5. Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 25. ↩
6. Gary Y. Okihiro, *Third World Studies: Theorizing Liberation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). ↩
7. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 4th ed. (Albany: State University of New York [SUNY] Press, 2015), 19. ↩
8. Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 22. ↩
9. In a letter to Ling-chi Wang in the spring of 1982, following a phone call between the two of them, Merle expressed concern about her security of employment status and sought to correct hearsay about her: “A professor in another program expressed that you had said that I had decided to leave because I only wanted to do poetry readings and radical activism. What kind of rumor circuit is going on? I have never indicated any such thing: this is entirely false and a rumor which has been perpetuated behind my back.” Merle later revealed in her deposition that the professor in question

was Barbara Christian (*Merle Woo v. Board of Regents of the University of California, et al.*, First Volume, First Day of Deps., Merle Woo Deposition, November 1, 1983, 105); Merle Woo to Ling-chi Wang, letter dated March 14, 1982, Merle Woo's Papers. ↩

10. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 22–24. ↩
11. Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 23; Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*, 144. ↩
12. The women of *Bridge* defined bridge work as both a “transformative consciousness” and an “embodied practice” of finding commonality within difference. Later, scholars like Sheena Malhotra and Kimberlee Pérez identified bridge work as a “more resistive politics of belonging” or a way of identifying conditions of possibility for building alliances; more recently, Thompson writes of it as a form of abolitionist environmental justice work, or of “confronting and undoing the borders, walls, and cages that attempt to separate and isolate us and prohibit coconspiracy toward our collective liberation.” Malhotra and Pérez, “Belonging, Bridges, and Bodies,” *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 48; Ki'Amber Thompson, “Toward a World Where We Can Breathe: Abolitionist Environmental Justice Praxis,” n.d., 1703. ↩
13. Merle Woo, “Campus Politics: Bootcamp for Revolutionary Feminism,” *Off Our Backs* 12, no. 5 (May 1982): 25. ↩
14. Min Hyoung Song, “An Ethics of Generosity,” in *Flashpoints for Asian American Studies*, ed. Cathy Schlund-Vials (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 283. ↩
15. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 53. ↩
16. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, American Crossroads 21 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). ↩
17. Merle's partner, Karen Brodine, passed away from cancer in 1987, the year following Merle's second firing from UC Berkeley. Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes about June Jordan and Audre Lorde's health struggles and the denials of their medical leave by their respective universities in her essay “The Shape of My Impact.” ↩
18. Woo, “Three Decades of Class Struggle on Campus: A Personal History,” 167. ↩
19. There is much to be said about mutual aid networks as a type of bridge work steeped in care. Audre and Pat's personal correspondence also traces their support for one another amid cancer diagnoses and treatment. Audre Lorde and Pat Parker, *Sister Love: The Letters of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker, 1974–1989*, ed. Julie R. Enszer, 1st ed. (New York: A Midsummer Night's Press, 2018). ↩

20. Mel Y. Chen, Mimi Khúc, and Jina B. Kim, “Work Will Not Save Us: An Asian American Crip Manifesto,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (December 1, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v43i1.9652>. ↵
21. Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). ↵
22. Admitting to a paradox in positing an Asian American crip anti-work manifesto from within the academy, Chen writes, “Saying ‘no’ from a tenured position in academia usually means that someone else in a less secure position will have to do it.” Chen et al., “Work Will Not Save Us,” 10. ↵
23. Jared Sexton, “Proprieties of Coalition: Blacks, Asians, and the Politics of Policing,” n.d., 89. ↵
24. Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 39. ↵
25. Emily said this to me while we were going through Merle’s garage in San Francisco in July of 2023. ↵
26. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Lisa Marie Rhody, “Working the Digital Humanities: Uncovering Shadows between the Dark and the Light,” *Differences* 25, no. 1 (May 1, 2014): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2419985>. ↵
27. We set this short timeline to ensure that Merle’s age and health would allow her to visit the papers and/or speak publicly to their context and purpose. ↵
28. Eunsong found flyers for Unbound Feet in Pat’s archives and reached out to Merle and Emily. ↵
29. Emily said a version of this statement a handful of times over the last year; on Zoom, on the phone, and in person in San Francisco. Merle too spoke of compensating me and Maggie in August 2024 and most recently in April 2025. Merle and Emily continue to have conversations about the money’s use. Maggie and I applied for and received a BEACoN grant (CalPoly) to pay ourselves and Mariajose, the undergraduate student working with us to make a zine about Merle’s papers. ↵
30. James, and Grace Lee Boggs. *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 168. ↵
31. Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 30. ↵
32. Sucheng Chan, “*Strangers from a Different Shore* as History and Historiography,” 105, and L. Ling-chi Wang, “A Critique of *Strangers from a Different Shore*,” 84, both in *A Companion to Asian American Studies*, ed. Kent A. Ono, 1st ed. (Wiley, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996928.ch5>. ↵
33. Chan capitulates to critiques of Ethnic Studies by arguing, “What we are trying to do is but a variant of what the defenders of a liberal education argue it should do.” Sucheng Chan, “The Making of a

- Quintessential Scholar-Activist,” *Amerasia Journal* 33, no. 1 (January 2007): 120–38, <https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.33.1.21168r6302835138>; Sucheng Chan, *In Defense of Asian American Studies: The Politics of Teaching and Program Building*, The Asian American Experience (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 131. ↵
34. Grace Kyungwon Hong, *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctttvbtbk>; Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*, Difference Incorporated (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 36; Roderick A. Ferguson, *We Demand: The University and Student Protests* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); Stuart Hall, *Essential Essays: Foundations of Cultural Studies*, Stuart Hall: Selected Writings (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996). ↵
35. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*. ↵
36. Ferguson, 231–32. ↵
37. Jasbir K. Puar, “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’: Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory,” *PhiloSOPHIA* 2, no. 1 (2012): 52. ↵
38. Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). ↵
39. Tiffany Lethabo King, “Post-Identitarian and Post-Intersectional Anxiety in the Neoliberal Corporate University,” *Feminist Formations* 27, no. 3 (2016): 124, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2016.0002>. ↵
40. In “Public Enemies and Private Intellectuals,” Ruth Wilson Gilmore similarly identifies intellectual careerism as a tendency among scholars in academy to compete in the market of ideas by claiming expertise and “assign[ing] primary importance to the fact—and survival—of oppositional studies within the intellectual and social structure of the university, the master’s house.” Careerists are a “multiculturalized professional managerial class” who have disarticulated their interests from larger struggles for social change and reproduce the university system. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Public Enemies and Private Intellectuals: Apartheid USA,” *Race and Class* 35, no. 1 (1993). ↵
41. Woo, “Three Decades of Class Struggle on Campus: A Personal History,” 169–72. ↵
42. Merle wrote that the chair of Women’s Studies at the time used postmodernist theory to demean Marxist feminism and organizing because “there is no one central issue people can gather around.” ↵
43. Okihiro, *Third World Studies*, 37. ↵

44. In *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took over Identity Politics (and Everything Else)* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022), Olúfemi O. Táíwò describes how radical concepts and movements can be stripped of their liberatory potential through elite capture, or cooptation by political, social, and economic elites for their own interests. ↩
45. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, ed., *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017). ↩
46. Colleen Lye, “US Ethnic Studies and Third Worldism, 40 Years Later,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (June 2010): 190, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649371003616128>. ↩
47. I mean this in the sense that Lisa Lowe proposes in *Immigrant Acts*, when she writes about how the heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity of Asian American subjects “disrupt[s] the hegemonic relationship between ‘dominant’ and ‘minority’ positions, but also as critique, following Kanaka feminist scholars’ troubling of the field and its assumed subjects.” Lisa Kahaleole Hall, “Which of These Things Is Not Like the Other: Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders Are Not Asian Americans, and All Pacific Islanders Are Not Hawaiian,” *American Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (2015): 727–47; J. Kehaulani Kauanui, “Asian American Studies and the ‘Pacific Question,’” in *Asian American Studies After Critical Mass*, ed. Kent A. Ono (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470774892.ch7>. ↩
48. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays towards Liberation*, ed. Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano (London: Verso, 2023), 84. ↩