

# **CONTEMPORARY ASIAN AMERICAN ACTIVISM**

*Building Movements for Liberation*

**EDITED BY**

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For Kano and Seku

Working toward abolitionist and cooperative futures

## DRIVERS ON THE FRONT LINES

The New York Taxi Workers Alliance, Neoliberalism, and Global Pandemic—An Interview with Javaid Tariq

DIANE C. FUJINO

THE NEW YORK TAXI WORKERS ALLIANCE (NYTWA) WAS founded in January 1998 to struggle for taxi drivers, 60 percent of whom were South Asian—primarily Indian, Pakistani, and Bangledishi—and more than 90 percent were immigrants. The NYTWA emerged from the Lease Drivers Coalition (LDC), established in 1992 as the first workers project of the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAAAV) to organize against the violence and threats of violence faced daily by taxi drivers. CAAAV itself formed in response to the most widely known case at that time of anti-Asian violence, the Vincent Chin case, and to the widespread police violence in New York City. Together, the NYTWA and the LDC have done extraordinary organizing across their thirty-year history. In August 1997 cabdrivers and the LDC organized the first massive motorcade of taxi drivers to protest the harsh and dangerous working conditions of taxi drivers. In May 1998 the newly formed NYTWA organized a historic one-day strike of twelve thousand taxi drivers in response to a Mayor Giuliani's proposed seventeen-point plan to the Taxi and Limousine Commission that would dramatically increase fines for drivers, turn minor violations into suspension of licenses, and in other ways push drivers out of work. Bhairavi Desai noted that at the time India and Pakistan, where the majority of drivers were from, were on the brink of nuclear conflict. The NYTWA showed the possibilities of united work across

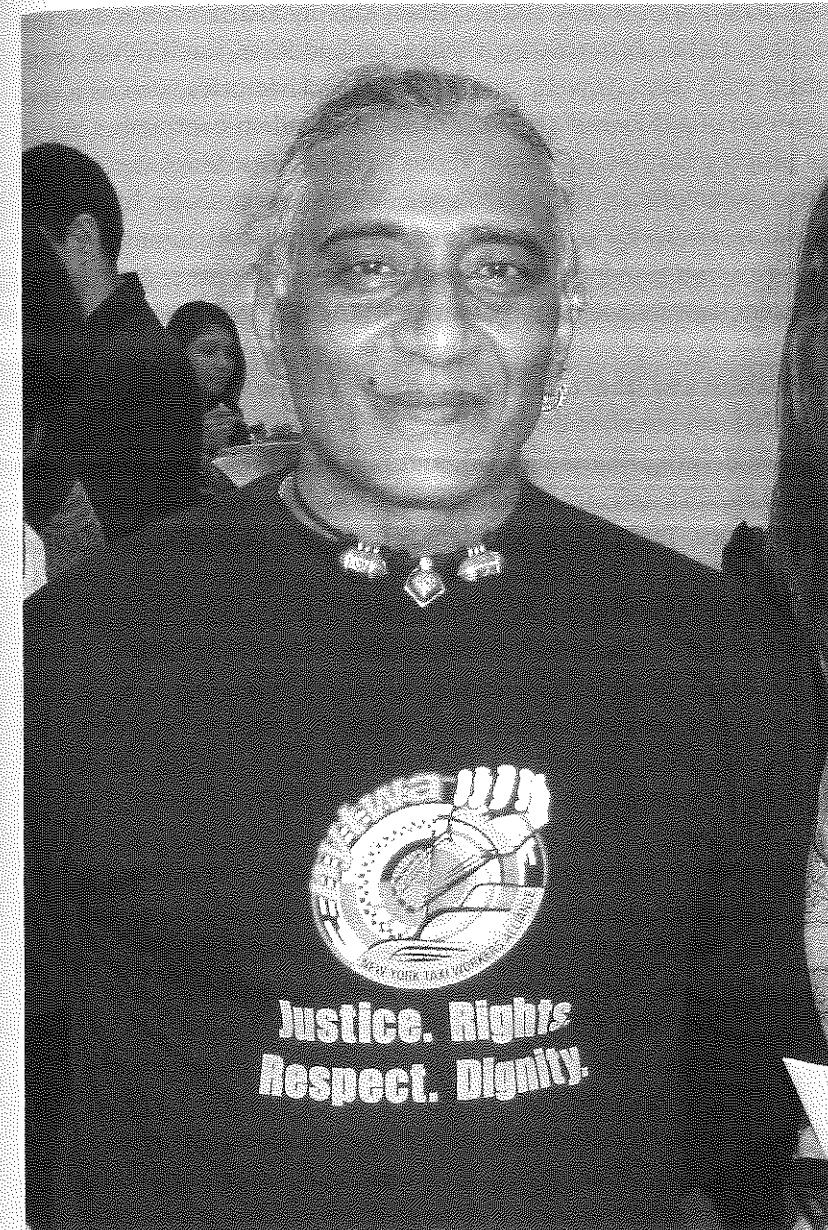


FIGURE 5.1. Javaid Tariq is a cofounder and senior staff member of New York Taxi Workers Alliance and treasurer of the National Taxi Workers Alliance. Over the years he has organized numerous successful strikes, campaigns, and actions to promote economic and social justice for taxi drivers, a workforce that is 94 percent immigrant and primarily people of color. Photo courtesy of Javaid Tariq.

significant differences. When Uber and Lyft drivers flooded the market, rather than treating them as competition, the NYTWA organized with them as well, gaining important victories such as a recognition of app-based drivers, not as independent contractors but as employees entitled to worker rights and benefits. Since the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020, the NYTWA organizers have been working tirelessly to supply information, get full unemployment benefits, and provide other crucial resources to drivers. As frontline workers, drivers are at particular risk. The NYTWA reported that in the first three months of the pandemic, sixty-two drivers died of COVID-19 and the organization received ten thousand calls or emails from member-drivers.<sup>1</sup>

Javaid Tariq, Bhairavi Desai, and Biju Mathew, along with others who have since left, are founding members of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance. Tariq, while a student activist in college in Pakistan, fled his country in 1978, following the military coup to overthrow Z. A. Bhutto. He traveled to Germany, where he studied Marxism and became a DJ influenced by the music of Bob Marley, and immigrated to the United States in 1990. With an interest in photojournalism and wanting to document the conditions of South Asian drivers, he became a taxi driver himself in 1994. By 1996 he was organizing cabdrivers with Desai and Mathew.<sup>2</sup>

**DIANE FUJINO:** The New York Taxi Workers Alliance was established in the 1998 to organize taxi drivers in a period of global restructuring and deindustrialization. In the recent period the huge influx of app-based, for-hire drivers has dramatically impacted the taxi industry. How has the rise of neoliberalism and the gig economy changed the taxi industry and also created other kinds of problems for Uber and Lyft drivers, including the rising and then falling prices of taxi medallions and the suicides of drivers?

**JAVAID TARIQ:** It is a hardship. The gig economy is neoliberalism on steroids. This economy is based on a business model that is unsustainable and entirely dependent upon destroying the life of drivers. It is based on the situation after 2008 of rising unemployment, a model of part-time work, and lowering income. The drivers end up with no

benefits and not enough money to put food on their table. So workers are forced to work two or three jobs. This model is not working.

We started out working with Yellow Cab drivers and FHV (for-hire vehicle) drivers. When Uber and Lyft started, they were making good money. But as more and more cars entered the market, their income was reduced. Before, there were only 13,600 Yellow Cabs around, and now there are about 120,000 Uber and Lyft cars. So Uber drivers and Yellow Cab drivers were becoming the enemy of each of other. But in time Uber drivers were not making much money either. We were trying to figure out how we can stop this exploitation. You can only win that fight when you unify the drivers. That's what we started doing in 2008.

"Uber starves the Uber driver to starve the Yellow Cab driver," our executive director Bhairavi Desai says. The Uber business model is based fundamentally on the part-time-ization of work, where the sub-minimum rates that Uber pays its drivers makes consumers happy but ensures that the only drivers who can sustain driving Uber are those who do it for additional or part-time income. As Uber drives the wages down for its drivers, it undercuts the Yellow Taxi drivers' business. In this model nobody can make a full-time living—neither the full-time Uber driver nor the Yellow Taxi driver. The only way forward then is that all drivers must be unified under one union that has a vision for a just and sustainable system of urban transportation. NYTWA built a Unity Platform in 2017–18 that brought Uber/Lyft and Yellow Taxi drivers together to fight on both fronts. NYTWA is probably the only union in the United States and possibly in the world to have united the traditional taxi sector drivers with the Uber and Lyft drivers.

**DF:** The gig economy has indeed created horrendous hardships for workers and has also made labor organizing really challenging. Yet in 2018 the NYTWA won at least two major victories. One was that the New York unemployment appeals board specified that drivers are employees,

not independent contractors, so Uber could no longer bypass overtime and minimum wage protections.<sup>3</sup>

JT: There is a misunderstanding about minimum wage and overtime protection. In that struggle we won that they can no longer control us calling drivers contractors. The drivers are employees. But we, in other ways, still don't have any kind of protection. We had to fight separately for minimum wages and overtime. So last year we fought the minimum wage issue through the city council, and they passed a law that Uber and Lyft drivers would earn a minimum wage of \$17.33 per hour after all expenses. But then, to avoid paying that, Uber started blocking the drivers from working longer hours. That's the way they were playing games with the drivers.

So before, there was about 13,000 Yellow Cabs, 20,000 FHV cars, and 7,000 plain cabs, which was more or less working. But as they kept adding more cars, drivers were making less money, but the company was making the same profit. So we wanted to put a cap on the number of cars. When the number reached to around 120,000 cars in 2014, we went to the city and introduced a bill to protect the cab drivers. We had enough votes on the city council to win that. But two weeks before the city council vote, Uber's lobbyists came to New York and put \$15 million into advertisements on TV. They showed African American faces on TV saying they could now get a ride when they had previously been discriminated against. So we lost that vote.

But a couple years ago we got the vote of the majority of council members, and the city agreed that they would limit the number of FHV vehicle licenses for Uber and Lyft drivers. So that was a big victory for us. Our main principle is to not pit drivers against one another.

We see all drivers as workers trying to put food on their table. How can we unify them together? That's the only way that we can win some campaigns. On one hand, we are fighting for the Uber drivers for their minimum wages and fighting the state Department of Labor for unemployment insurance. On the other hand, we are fighting for

Yellow Cab drivers, who are around six thousand individuals who put their life savings into buying those medallions. In 2014 no one seemed to know where this industry was going. They were advertising to become medallion owners, and a lot of drivers bought those medallions at \$850,000. At the same time, when 120,000 Uber/Lyft drivers came into the market, the price of medallions started falling. Yellow Cab drivers used to pick up a million passengers a day but now had less and less work. The taxi drivers who bought medallions got into \$500,000 or \$600,000 debt. By 2015 some medallion owners were up to \$1 million in debt for their vehicles, and the banks were still charging them for that price, though the value of the medallions had gone down drastically. They were under so much stress and the suicides started happening. Around nine drivers committed suicide. In the 2008 financial crisis the government bailed out the banks. So we started this movement to organize a campaign for loan forgiveness for the individual medallion owners.<sup>4</sup>

DF: What you're describing is the intensified greed and profit making made possible under capitalism [JT: yes!]. In the 1990s worker centers started forming to address the restructuring of the economy and the problems of the union movement. The NYTWA emerges out of CAAAV. By contrast to traditional unions, worker centers tend to promote the leadership of ordinary workers to collectively organize on their own behalf, to engage in popular education, and also to view labor struggles as part of broader movements for social and racial justice. I'd like to hear about the NYTWA's model of leadership, especially developing the leadership of the workers themselves? And I know you used to be a taxi driver.

JT: I started driving a taxi in 1994, end of 1994. The NYTWA model is totally different from worker centers and traditional unions. We started from CAAAV [Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence; now CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities] in New York City. CAAAV had different projects. One was domestic workers with Ai-jen Poo. One is for housing with Helena Wong. Another was the

LDC [Lease Drivers Coalition], which Bhairavi Desai, who is our leader, headed when she joined CAAAV in 1996.<sup>5</sup> They started the LDC because at that time there was so much police brutality happening against taxi drivers. It's not just the police but also the Taxi and Limousine Commission. They have their own police, which has so much power that they can, with very little violation, beat or handcuff or harass taxi drivers. When any driver had problems, they could come to CAAAV to get help. When Bhairavi Desai started, she had some other visions. CAAAV's office was on Third Street, between Avenues A and B and near Houston Street, which was a big space for shift change. Most of the workers there were South Asian, especially Indians. At 5:00 p.m. they were changing their shifts. When Bhairavi Desai went out to pick up some dinner, she started talking to the drivers hanging out there. She had her notebook with her and kept writing everything down. She was listening and analyzing what they said.<sup>6</sup>

That's how I met Bhairavi Desai. I had started driving a taxi to do my photographic project about cab drivers' lives. I was studying to be a photojournalist at the New School in New York. I was reading stories about drivers getting killed on the job, and most of them were South Asians, mostly Pakistani. The drivers were half a world away from their home and were working very hard to send money back home. When they die, what kind of benefits do they have? Their family hasn't anything. I couldn't just take my camera and go talk to drivers. So I became a taxi driver, and I'd have my camera with me. When I met Bhairavi Desai, she gave me a flyer, and I went to the meeting. That was the first time I met Ai-jen Poo and we started working together and seeing each other in CAAAV. We talked about that, about taxi drivers' rights. Meanwhile, I was learning through my own experience about how dangerous and exploitative the job is. You work twelve hours a day, very hard work. You are always in danger. The taxi driver is eighty times more likely to be robbed on the job, sixty times more likely to be killed on

the job.<sup>7</sup> They have no protection. Nobody was talking about that. So Biju Mathew, Bhairavi Desai, and I reached out, one by one, and it was to three hundred drivers. All of them were South Asian. At that time 60 to 70 percent of cab drivers were South Asian; the majority were Indian (mainly Punjabi), Pakistani, and Bangladeshi.<sup>8</sup> Our drivers were sick of all this exploitation. They organized a motorcade against Mayor Giuliani. He was cracking down on taxi drivers, against street vendors, against many workers. We were the first South Asian movement to get a motorcade against Giuliani from Fourteenth Street to City Hall. We did enormous outreach by flyering and talking one by one to the drivers. We were broadcasting our message through CB [citizens' band] radio in different languages, primarily in Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi, and Bangladeshi. We were expecting a rally of three to four hundred. But on that day in August 1997, over two thousand Yellow Cabs showed up for the motorcade!

It was big, and it was not only South Asians. People of color from many communities came because they heard that taxi drivers were having this protest motorcade against labor exploitation and police brutality and the harsh rules and regulations. These were everybody's problems. We had a very successful motorcade in 1997.

Our members voted that we should be separate from CAAAV and have our own organization. We have a very great respect for CAAAV. We still talk to them. But there were some political differences because we believed in mass membership. In 1998 we incorporated as the New York Taxi Workers Alliance. We didn't have any office space. We didn't have any funds. Thanks to the Brecht Forum, which said come into our office. We started with one table and one chair and a phone. Luckily, the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association was at the office there too. So we learned a lot from the Chinese staff about these activities happening at the Brecht Forum, and we were learning about Marxism.

Worker centers usually work for the community. They are solving community problems. We are a new kind of

model in the middle of worker centers and traditional unions. Traditional unions are declining because these big bosses sit in their offices and don't interact with the members. Because they are automatically getting their monthly dues, they don't have to go to the workers to convince them to join the union. We have to work hard to reach out to our members. We are 85 percent running our organization with membership dues. Our model gives workers the power of accountability. It gives the organizers the responsibility to fight for the workers, for our members, because they are paying their membership dues. In the beginning we were thinking of becoming a union but decided against that.

Then in 1998 we had a historic strike in New York City, where 95 percent of Yellow Cab drivers were out of work. This was the first time since last century when the people of New York coalesced because the Yellow Cab is a symbol of New York. The Yellow Cab drivers are ambassadors of sorts for New York City. At the airports people come from all over the world, and after the immigration officer, they meet the cab driver. Cab drivers know everything about New York City. In the '98 strike people of color stood with us. We have members from over one hundred countries. We started this organization as South Asians, but we cannot win alone. We are open for everybody, any ethnicity. We became global.<sup>9</sup>

DF: And you organize Dominicans, Haitians, and others?

JT: The majority of South Asians are Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, Nepalese, Tibetan, Burmese, and Malaysian, and Chinese too. Our members are also West Africans from Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, and even Senegal.

DF: I'm wondering what challenges you face in organizing across differences of language, race, culture, religion.

Also, what kind of strengths you find in this diversity?

JT: Bhairavi Desai and Biju Mathew are from India. I'm from Pakistan. I'm Muslim; Biju Mathew is Hindu; Bhairavi is Christian. So while we started as South Asians, the drivers were not united. Indians were on one side, Pakistani on the other, Haitian drivers elsewhere. Before the 1998

strike we had this strategy. Our OC [Organizing Committee] members are drivers in the field. They talk to other drivers. The OC members speak different languages—Urdu, Punjabi, Bangladeshi, Nepalese, Arabic, West African languages, French, Spanish, and Chinese—and so they could talk to the different workers. We are not each other's enemy. We have similar problems as cab drivers. We talked to workers one on one to bring awareness to drivers. It took years and years of work. We went out day and night, whether hot or cold, we'd go to the airport and talk to drivers one by one, give them a flyer or our newspaper that we started, *Shift Change*. In the newspaper we included diverse faces and problems, not just those of South Asians. At the Brecht Forum, in our one chair and one table, we talked to the drivers. The majority of our OC members voted to have a strike. They were very enthusiastic. They gave money to make flyers and spread them all over New York City. As they were driving around, they put flyers under the windshield wipers of cars. We told our members, if you're a Pakistani driver stopped at a red light and see a Pakistani driver on your right and an African American driver on your left, talk to the African American driver about the strike. Will you join the strike? That strategy worked well.

That historic strike of 1998 built our power base. Today we have twenty-four thousand members—Uber and Lyft, Yellow Cabs, green cabs, liveries. Our principle is to unify them all. We are clear that if you get money from the company, like Uber, you won't stand with the workers. To break the power of workers, companies start their own company union to divide the workers.

After 9/11, with the rise in Islamophobia, we stood strong against this new kind of racism. We have a lot of Muslim drivers. It was also affecting South Asians because some Americans don't know the difference between Muslims and Sikhs. They only see the turban and the beard. Cars were vandalized. People got assaulted.

DF: Javaid, I get a sense of the kind of strategies that NYTWA uses. It's an industrial union model, organizing across all

workers across all skills levels. It's also about connecting with issues happening in the community around race, religion, racism, and not just narrow labor issues.

JT: Ninety-nine percent of cab drivers are immigrants. In their families maybe his wife is a domestic worker, his son a construction worker. So we think broadly about the labor issues. We have good relations with different organizations. We always stand in solidarity with them against racism and Islamophobia. We stood against Trump's Muslim ban, and 60-70 percent of our members are Muslim from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, and Senegal. We went to the JFK Airport strike in solidarity with our members against the Muslim Ban.

DF: Your ability to organize strikes in this day is incredible. It reminds me of the post-World War II moment in union organizing. I want to ask about influences on the NYTWA. You talked about what I'm calling industrial unionism. I'm not sure if your thinking is along lines of the IWW [International Workers of the World]. You also mentioned Marxism. What are the influences on the NYTWA? Do you see yourself as part of the Asian American Movement?

JT: Our founder is South Asian. But the taxi industry is not easy to organize. Yellow Cab drivers used to be unionized. But when the immigrants from India and Pakistan started coming to the United States in the mid-1970s and driving cabs, they didn't want to give them the benefits of unions and changed the whole system. They started them as lease drivers. As lease drivers, they started with negative money. They had to pay the lease up front, though they didn't know how much they'll make. They were not employees but were working on a commission basis, called dependent workers. They also had to pay three dollars every day or ninety dollars a month. They said the three dollars was for union dues, but there was no union. But it was going into the pockets of the union. So the unions sold out the rank and file. When we started talking to the drivers about organizing, they didn't trust us because the unions had sold them out. We are between worker centers and

traditional unions, a new labor movement. When we started, taxi workers started as contractors. We were not under the NLRB [National Labor Relations Board] and received no benefits from that. We started ourselves, now twenty-two years of struggle. Because we received our money from our membership, this provides necessary checks and balances. It gives us the responsibility to work tirelessly. It's not just about protesting. We are doing the persistent and tedious work of organizing because we want to create change, to get better wages.

In time the NYTWA became a national TWA [Taxi Workers Alliance] affiliated with the AFL-CIO. Traditionally, almost all AFL-CIO affiliates represent workers who are classified as employees and are therefore entitled to a "union" that will represent the employees in the collective bargaining process and for other matters. But this does not mean that to be a union of workers you necessarily have to be covered under the NLRB or be a collective bargaining agent. If you fight for workers' rights, every so often the AFL-CIO recognizes this. Because of NYTWA's organizing successes and because of the growing presence of independent contractors and contingent workers in the American economy, the AFL-CIO recognized the need to bring in new affiliates that don't fit their traditional model. That's how we became one of the few unions not under NLRB. We have chapters in Philadelphia, Austin, Maryland, San Francisco, and other cities too.

We also work with the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF). In 2014 I went to the ILO, the International Labor Organization, in Geneva, Switzerland. What model is Uber bringing? Uberization means sweatshop on wheels. I spoke there: "Be careful of Uberization. It will kill workers." I had meetings with taxi unions to plan how to force the government to crack down on Uber. We had a plan to organize the hundreds of drivers who are loyal to the drivers' union, to block every exit of the highways on a single day. It became big news. The French government stopped Uber from working there. So we're also part of international transportation organizing. In terms of

strategy the main thing is to establish the trust of drivers and to unify them. Now Uber, Yellow Cab, Green Cab, look to each other not as enemies but as working together.

**DF:** I want to turn to the current moment of pandemic. New York was the epicenter of the coronavirus. Then we had the Black Lives Matter protests, on top of neoliberalism already driving workers to ground. I see from your website that the NYTWA has been doing intensive organizing to respond to this moment. Can you speak to work you're doing and what this moment has been like for workers and for organizers?

**JT:** America has the biggest airports, where planes come from all over the world. Cab drivers are always on the front line. In America they don't take any precautions for COVID-19. Travelers are free to come out of the airport without any checks. Early in the pandemic, one driver in New York picked up a passenger from the airport. That passenger was coughing. The pandemic was on everyone's mind. The driver worried he might have COVID and quarantined in his home. But after one week he was getting sicker. He went to the hospital, and two days later he died. His wife and kids were also admitted to the hospital, but thank God, they were saved. I got the message from a member who told us his cousin died. It was alarming for us. There was no protection for the drivers. Yellow Cabs have a partition between the driver and passengers, but Uber has no partition. We started to alert all the drivers. We did e-blasts, phone calls—you need protection, gloves, hand sanitizer, masks. You're on the front lines.

We had to shut down our office because COVID cases were rising in New York. All our staff began working from home. In the first two to three months we got over ten thousand calls from members. Every two to three days another driver died. We got information from our members and found that sixty-two drivers had died from COVID. We asked the city for the number of drivers who died of COVID in New York City. They couldn't tell us. We started our own survey and worked with ACLU [American

Civil Liberties Union] California on this project. Bhairavi Desai wrote a thirty-page information guide not just for drivers but for every person. Every immigrant, every undocumented person, every worker, could get that link for the information guide. The city didn't provide that broad information, but you can see the guide on our website.<sup>10</sup> We got lists and started calling drivers to find out how they're doing. The government was afraid because 95 percent of drivers stopped driving. The Taxi and Limousine Commission started to give jobs to drivers and paid them seventeen dollars per hour to pick up food and deliver it to people who were stuck in their home. Drivers are heroes. They are essential workers. They help people to not die of hunger during the pandemic. Delivery workers, cab drivers, nurses, doctors, are all essential workers. Looking at the value of essential workers under capitalism, the big bosses cannot treat them as they did five years ago.

Many of our workers don't speak English, don't have internet. Our drivers turn to us for help. We're there helping them fight to get unemployment for Uber drivers and Yellow Cab drivers too. The applications in English are hard to understand, so our lawyers started helping. We put information on Facebook, sent out e-blasts with our lawyers showing picture by picture how to fill out the forms. The drivers started getting unemployment. But Uber wouldn't provide the earnings data to the Department of Labor. Workers are supposed to get \$504 in unemployment, but they were getting only \$182. We filed a lawsuit in federal court against the state Department of Labor and Governor Cuomo, and in two months we were able to get unemployment for the Uber/Lyft drivers raised from \$182 to \$504.<sup>11</sup> They also got the \$1,000 [stimulus that went to all working-class workers] that they don't have to pay back. The drivers needed this support because they were not able to make money, so how will they pay insurance on cars, mortgage on cars? They got SBL [small business loans] for thirty years with 3.75 percent interest. We're now working to help drivers with rent problems. Any working-class person can fill out the applications.

We started Zoom meetings on Tuesdays—we had one today at 2:00 p.m.—and every Friday we also have Zoom meetings where our lawyers talk to drivers to show how to get benefits from the city's rental programs.<sup>12</sup>

The first three to four months we were working 24/7. I'm upstairs calling from my cell phone. Drivers call at six o'clock at night, two o'clock in the morning, anytime. They need to know that people are there for us. There are tons of heartbreaking stories from drivers. We've been working for them for the last twenty-two years; we cannot run away from them. Maybe some think we're crazy. Bhairavi Desai spends all her time helping drivers though her health is not that good, but she keeps working. She wakes up at six o'clock in the morning, going through emails, giving interviews, writing letters to congresspeople. There is so much work to do. We're working round the clock. Unless we're in touch with our members, there's no way to build more trust.

DF: Congratulations as well. You won your lawsuit for unemployment just a week ago. Your work is extraordinary. You're providing direct services and mutual aid and also organizing in multifaceted ways. What would you say are the most crucial actions we can take to create a liberatory future?

JT: Just keep fighting the fight. Never give up. Unify the workers. This is the only way to liberate us. This is our strategy.

DF: Javaid, you've shared so many lessons, history, stories, and great organizing strategies. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

JT: Our way is not the way of the bosses. We have meetings day and night so drivers can attend. Hundreds of drivers are coming to the day meetings, and we're talking to them, trying to find out what their big issues are. We vote, and based on what the majority of workers want, we start that campaign. We pick up the most difficult problems of the workers, and we have to work on that.

DF: You are building deeply democratic ways of working, and it comes through listening to the workers.

JT: Correct, because our members are drivers, and they know the issues best from their own experiences and from talking with other drivers. When I was driving, I knew from talking to other drivers all the time. Traditional union bosses sit in their offices and make decisions on their own.

DF: Thank you so much for all of your tremendously important work over the decades.

JT: It's an honor for me. Thank you for thinking of us and spreading the message of the NYTWA. We're proud to be South Asian. We've been here twenty to thirty years as an organization and reached this level. We are gaining something for the workers.

#### NOTES

This is a slightly edited version of the interview conducted by phone on August 4, 2020, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic and requiring several communications before and after the interview.

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3 Another major victory won by the NYTWA in 2018 was legislation that made New York the first city to place a cap on app-based, for-hire vehicles and to require a minimum wage for Uber and Lyft drivers. Chris Brooks, “How New York Taxi Workers Took on Uber and Won,”

- Labor Notes*, August 23, 2018,<https://www.labornotes.org/2018/08/how-new-york-taxi-workers-took-uber-and-won>.
- 4 Bhairavi Desai, "NYC Taxi Driver Kills Himself at City Hall after Condemning Uber & Politicians for Financial Ruin," interview on *Democracy Now!*, February 7, 2018, [https://www.democracynow.org/2018/2/7/nyc\\_taxi\\_driver\\_kills\\_himself\\_at](https://www.democracynow.org/2018/2/7/nyc_taxi_driver_kills_himself_at).
  - 5 The Lease Drivers Coalition (LDC), established in 1992, was CAAAV's first worker project; see Das Gupta, *Unruly Immigrants*, 227–29.
  - 6 The NYTWA organizers would talk to the drivers, who were then working twelve-hour shifts, at their shift changes at 5:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. as well as hold meetings at all different times to accommodate the drivers, including "on top of a taxi cab . . . on the street at 3 a.m." (Desai, recording; J. Tariq, recording).
  - 7 Zia, *Asian American Dreams*, 202.
  - 8 Das Gupta, *Unruly Immigrants*, 231.
  - 9 South Asian cabdrivers and the newly formed NYTWA organized the twenty-four-hour strike of the twelve thousand Yellow Cab drivers on May 13, 1998, creating a shocking day of "near-absence of taxis" in New York City and making headline news; see "Commuters Brace for a Cab-less Wednesday as Drivers Protest," *New York Times*, May 13, 1998; "Miles of Street with Nary a Yellow Taxicab," *New York Times*, May 14, 1998; "Renewed Call for Motorcade against Giuliani's Taxi Rules," *New York Times*, May 21, 1998.
  - 10 The *NYTWA Resource Guide for Drivers and Families to Get Through COVID-19 Pandemic* is a thirty-two-page, detailed how-to guide explaining the resources, criteria for eligibility, and process to obtain services, including unemployment, stimulus check, small business loans, food, health care, tenants' rights, and more. See <http://www.nytwa.org/home/2020/4/20/nytwa-resources-guide-for-drivers-and-families>.
  - 11 Noam Scheiber, "Uber and Lyft Drivers Sue for New York Unemployment Benefits," *New York Times*, May 26, 2020; Noam Scheiber, "Uber and Lyft Drivers Win Ruling on Unemployment Benefits," *New York Times*, July 28, 2020.
  - 12 On the NYTWA's intensive organizing during the COVID-19 pandemic, see <http://www.nytwa.org/resources>.

## CHAPTER 6

**BAYAN USA**

Filipino Transnational Radical Activism in the United States in the Twenty-First Century

JESSICA ANTONIO

ECONOMIC DISTRESS IN THE PHILIPPINES PUSHES MORE THAN sixty-five hundred Filipinos to escape the Philippines daily, resulting in the various formations of Filipino communities in over 190 countries. Philippine census figures indicate that Filipinos in the United States constitute the largest overseas Filipino community. It is not only one of the Philippines' largest diasporic communities but also the oldest, as Filipinos were displaced from the Philippines beginning with the US colonization and occupation of the country with the Philippine-American War of 1898. Nominal independence granted by the United States in 1946 and continued US imperialism to this day have ultimately contributed to the continued growth of the Filipino diaspora in the United States.

The formation of Filipino transnational political organizational structures in the United States have engaged Filipinos in the diaspora, including many who were born and raised in the United States, to participate in Philippine politics. In this chapter I discuss the history and structure of BAYAN USA, an alliance of organizations that engages Filipinos in the United States to participate in movements working to fundamentally transform Philippine society. Though there are a number of Filipino groups based in the United States oriented toward homeland politics, the BAYAN USA alliance is among the most radical in analysis and practice and among the few that is directly linked

to radical movements in the Philippines. BAYAN USA is an overseas chapter of BAYAN Philippines, which is an alliance of people's organizations united by a program of advancing national democracy in the Philippines. Through BAYAN USA, Filipinos in the United States—many who are US born and/or US citizens—can become direct participants in the Philippine National Democratic movement, a movement for Philippine national liberation that strives to root out what we believe are the “three basic problems” of the Philippines: US imperialism; bureaucrat capitalism, or what most might think of as government corruption; and feudalism because the Philippines continues to be a peasant society dominated by a centuries-old landlord class. BAYAN USA is significant as a long-standing diasporic organization with multiple US chapters working in solidarity with the national liberation movement in the Philippines. We also seek to build relationships rooted in anti-imperialist solidarity with non-Filipino groups, though this area of work has not been as strongly developed.

To better understand why and how Filipinos in the United States get politicized to engage in transnational activism, I discuss the politicization process of BAYAN USA members. I analyze interviews of BAYAN USA members to pull key information, looking for ways in which identity formation, politics, history, and current connections to the Philippines have affected organizers and activists. I look in particular at the impact of what BAYAN USA calls “exposure,” or “integration,” programs that facilitate US-based Filipinos’ travel to the Philippines. Through these programs Filipinos from the United States travel to the Philippines and integrate with—that is, live with, learn from, and work alongside—individuals from different sectors of Philippine society (including youths/students, peasants, workers, fisherfolk, and urban poor) as well as the BAYAN Philippines-affiliated people’s organizations of which these sectors are part. Generally, exposure allows US Filipinos to directly witness the struggles of the most exploited, marginalized, and oppressed in the Philippines; they get to directly experience—however temporarily—the three basic problems of Philippine society. For many participants BAYAN USA exposure/integration programs may well be their first time visiting the Philippines or a rare opportunity to connect to their Filipino roots independent of their families, who often introduce them to the Philippine culture and society through primarily familial connections and tourist activities. Those who come back from a trip to the Philippines from an

exposure/integration program often come back with a (re)invigorated commitment to transforming Philippine society while living in the United States and simultaneously shaping the political landscape in the United States by sharing stories of inspiration and lessons learned from organizers in the Philippine liberation struggle with greater numbers of Filipino Americans and non-Filipino progressive and radical allies.

What is striking about Philippine exposure/integration programs is that they can be equally impactful for even those who do not necessarily identify as Filipino. BAYAN USA’s Peace Missions, which are similar to the exposure/integration programs that are geared toward those who identify as Filipino, also have the effect of deepening the resolve of those who participate in them to commit to sharing their firsthand experiences of the impacts of US imperialism—along with bureaucratic capitalism and feudalism—to a broader American public. Through our work in BAYAN USA we find that to grow our movement among non-Filipinos in the diaspora, as well as to strengthen relationships with allies, it is vital for people to directly experience and witness what plagues Philippine society as well as to feel hope and inspiration from experiencing and witnessing the Philippine liberation struggle. Though we live in a world that might seem so transnationally connected through media and other communications technologies, there is something that continues to be distinctively important about the experiential and interpersonal relationships that get formed through exposure/integration programs. This chapter therefore builds on themes laid out in the introduction of this anthology that include the importance of relationship building; we illustrate how relationship building is important not only in forming international solidarity but also in extending the diaspora’s participation in the Philippine liberation struggle transnationally.

#### FILIPINO TRANSNATIONALISM HISTORICALLY

Filipino radicals in the Philippines have an expansive understanding of what it means to be Filipino and therefore who can and should legitimately engage in the struggle for Philippine liberation. Antonio Tujan, a leftist intellectual of the Institute of Political Economy, Manila, for example, stated in 2019: “By its definition (displaced collective community), diaspora is an adjunct to the homeland, and shares

history, social and cultural characteristics. This means compatriots identify with and share the responsibility to focus on the lot of the homeland and intuitively identify with the struggle for freedom and democracy.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Filipino transnational radicalism in the United States has been similarly expansive and has a history that even predates the formation of BAYAN USA in the early 2000s. During the dictatorship of President Ferdinand Marcos from the 1970s to 1980s, anti-martial law activists in the Philippines actively engaged Filipinos in the diaspora, most notably in the United States, to support the struggle to depose Marcos. Some fled the Marcos dictatorship and immigrated to the United States to join relatives and would eventually form anti-martial law groups. The Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino (Union of Democratic Filipinos, KDP), launched in July 1973 in Santa Cruz, California, was one such group. The KDP united on the basis of a “dual-line” program of supporting national democracy in the Philippine and simultaneously promoting socialism in the United States. The radical politicization of Filipino youth during the late 1960s and 1970s in the United States shifted the political landscape of Filipino communities in the diaspora. Not only did members of KDP become active in their local Filipino communities; they also began mobilizing around issues based in their ancestral homeland, most significantly the rising fascism of the Marcos regime. In investigating Filipino history through their conversations with the *Manong* generation of Filipino migrants, members learned about the *Manongs*’ experiences of fighting against racism, including white supremacist vigilante violence and labor exploitation during the 1930s and about their current situation of eviction and housing rights issues at San Francisco’s International Hotel. The KDP was able to unite Filipino immigrants and Filipino Americans on these varying issues.

At the same time, the KDP became engaged in vigorously opposing martial law in the Philippines. Though KDP provided Filipinos in the United States, many of whom were second-generation (or even later) Filipino Americans, an opportunity to engage in homeland politics, the KDP’s framework with respect to Philippine politics remained limited to a notion of solidarity. In other words, though Filipinos in the diaspora based in the United States were engaging in the issues affecting their ancestral homeland, they still saw themselves as separated from and not direct participants in the National Democratic

movement in the Philippines; that is, they were in solidarity with the Philippine movement but not necessarily part of it. This distinction has become more apparent in retrospect through reflections from former KDP members but was not always so clear at the time. For some the KDP’s dual revolutionary program meant that they supported both the revolutionary movement in the Philippines as well as the socialist movement in the United States. This, among other organizational issues, caused stress and confusion for KDP members, and eventually the KDP fractioned into variant groups. Estella Habal, a former member of the KDP, notes in her book, *San Francisco’s International Hotel: Mobilizing the Filipino American Community in the Anti-Eviction Movement*: “We also suffered because of conflicting priorities, along with limited people power. The dual program seemed accurate, correct for the time, but our practice often lagged far behind.”<sup>2</sup> Eventually, the KDP dissolved, with many choosing to focus primarily on socialist transformation in the United States, and others who would eventually go on to organize a new generation of Filipino Americans to engage in Philippine radical politics transnationally.

#### **FROM SOLIDARITY TO PARTICIPATION: A CLEARER ROLE FOR FILIPINOS IN THE DIASPORA**

BAYAN USA, in many ways, emerged to fill the gap left with the dissolution of KDP. Those who would eventually lead in the formation of BAYAN USA, including some who were involved in the KDP and other anti-martial law formations, came to understand that there was a need for a political organization of Filipinos in the United States that was not just a solidarity organization but one that was directly involved in the National Democratic struggle alongside activists in the Philippines and primarily oriented toward Philippine politics. Moreover, there was the view that when issues of Filipinos in the United States are addressed, it is necessary to frame these issues as ultimately due to the fact that Filipinos have been massively displaced from their homeland as a consequence of the root problems persisting in the Philippines. Thus, from this perspective Filipino issues in the United States are best addressed by rooting out the problems that force Filipinos to migrate to the United States to begin with and thus ultimately through the genuine liberation of the Philippines. US-Filipino National Democratic activists, focus their energies primarily on the liberation

of the Philippines, their ancestral homeland, to which they hope they or their descendants can return. Though the effort to dismantle the current structures of society in the United States, where they are currently residing, is also vital to them, it is of secondary importance. Drawing from these understandings of transnational activism, BAYAN USA was established as the first overseas chapter of BAYAN in the Philippines; other BAYAN alliances would later form in the Filipino diaspora in Australia, Canada, and Hong Kong, and other countries where Filipino migrants have settled. As an overseas chapter, BAYAN USA maintains direct communication with BAYAN Philippines. Moreover, BAYAN USA maintains organizational accountability to BAYAN Philippines. This represents a major shift from the Filipino transnational activism during the anti-martial law movement, when communication and accountability across the Pacific was loose at best.

Notably, BAYAN Philippines was actually formed during the anti-martial law movement but did not form chapters abroad at the time. According to the website for BAYAN's Bagong Alyansang Makabayan Philippines (BAYAN, New Patriotic Alliance of the Philippines), the group formed in 1985, operating as an umbrella alliance of thousands of organizations representing different class backgrounds and sectors of society committed to the people's struggle for national freedom and democracy across the seventy-one hundred islands.<sup>3</sup> BAYAN's analysis of Philippine society claims that the Philippines remains semifeudal and semicolonial, and only through uniting in the National Democratic movement's objectives for national industrialization and genuine agrarian reform can the Philippines be truly free from foreign domination and internal corruption.<sup>4</sup> In order to achieve these goals, BAYAN states that the power of the workers, peasants, youths, students, women, educators, and professionals—all sectors of society—is needed to engage in the long process of struggle to transform Philippine society as a whole and for the benefit of future generations of Filipinos. BAYAN Philippines believes that while the Philippines continues to be controlled by corrupt puppet governments that serve imperialist nations and the wealth of the country remains in the hands of the few, the people will continue to organize broadly and boldly. BAYAN Philippines is composed of numerous people's organizations, including the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU, or May First Movement), a militant trade union confederation; and the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP, or Peasant Movement of the Philippines), an alliance

of peasant organizations as well as organizations representing faculty (CONTEND), government workers (COURAGE), Indigenous peoples (Cordillera People's Alliance), and many, many more.<sup>5</sup> Since the ouster of Ferdinand Marcos, BAYAN Philippines has been the leading force mobilizing thousands upon thousands of Filipino people to push back against the antipeople policies that each successive regime has introduced to preserve the economic dominance of multinational corporations, traditional landlords, and corrupt politicians.

#### BAYAN USA: AN ESSENTIAL TRANSNATIONAL LINK

With the launch of BAYAN USA, BAYAN Philippines formed an essential transnational link in order to mobilize the largest number of Filipino compatriots living abroad. BAYAN USA formed in 2005 as the first international chapter of BAYAN Philippines and was created to "organize, mobilize, and raise the consciousness of Filipinos in the United States, linking their basic issues of rights and welfare to the National Democratic struggle against three roots problems: imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat capitalism." Thus, BAYAN USA's primary task is to raise the consciousness of Filipinos in the United States by mobilizing them around issues in the Philippines. The establishment of BAYAN USA as an international chapter of BAYAN underscored our political orientation on the National Democratic movement in the Philippines and as a campaign center for Filipinos in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Taking the lead from BAYAN Philippines, BAYAN USA is able to concentrate on advancing the progress of the Filipino people's movement for true democracy, genuine land reform, and national independence from US imperialism in the Philippines.

BAYAN USA modeled our bylaws and structure after BAYAN Philippines and primarily operates as an alliance of youth and students', women's, and migrant workers' organizations represented, respectively, by Anakbayan USA, GABRIELA USA, and Migrante USA. To clarify further, BAYAN USA is a multisector alliance, engaging groups representing different sectors of the Filipino diaspora in the United States—youth/students, women, and migrant workers at present, though conceivably other sectors in the future—composed of member organizations and not individuals. Most of our campaigns are driven by issues being taken up by BAYAN Philippines and its allied organizations. As of this writing, for example, our chapters have been

exposing the rising fascism under the Duterte regime. We have launched major social media campaigns and educational programs aimed at raising awareness of the dire human rights situation in the Philippines. Together with other Filipino and non-Filipino progressive organizations, BAYAN USA is working to support passage of the Philippine Human Rights Act (PHRA). In the past we have worked to support boycotts of specific products consumed by Filipinos and others in the United States in response to calls from the KMU in the Philippines; rallied behind GABRIELA Philippines for justice for transgender woman, Jennifer Laude, who was murdered by an American marine stationed in the Philippines; and supported the Save Our Schools Campaign championed by the National Democratic organization Lumad, made up of Indigenous people in the Mindanao region of the southern Philippines (figure 6.1). Notably, Indigenous groups in



FIGURE 6.1. Over 250 Filipinos and allies from across the United States rallied in front of the Philippine embassy in Washington, DC, in April 2019, in a protest organized by BAYAN USA that brought together people from multiple generations, political views, and organizations calling for the ouster of President Duterte. Fourteen people staged a die-in at the gates of the embassy, to symbolize the fourteen peasants and farmers killed by the Philippine National Police and Armed Forces of the Philippines in a joint "anti-criminality" operation in Negros Island. Photo courtesy of BAYAN USA.

the United States hosted Lumad activists from the Philippines, which led to important new ties among movements.

Though our primary focus of BAYAN USA is the struggle for national democracy in the Philippines, we cannot ignore the issues pervading our backyards as Filipinos in the United States, and therefore we also engage in local community issues, especially those concerning Filipino migrants. What we do that is different, however, is that we offer a transnational perspective by linking these issues to the overall conditions of Filipinos in the Philippines. Participating in localized issues is a way to approach and understand the complex layers of the diasporic realities that Filipino communities face. However, we strive to continue to link diasporic Filipinos' issues back to the three basic problems in the Philippines in our political education programs. Though we support Filipino Americans' and US-based Filipinos' issues such as wage theft and housing displacement and we fight alongside them to get justice from their employers or landlords, we emphasize the fact that we would never have had to live in the United States to begin with if our ancestral homeland was genuinely free.

For example, members of Anakbayan chapters in California took up a legislative campaign supporting AB 123, which was signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown in 2013 and requires the state curriculum to include the contributions of Filipino Americans to the farm labor movement in California. We believed it was an important struggle to support. Our organizations pay particular attention to Filipino and Philippine history, especially in relation to the United States, and utilize the slogan "Know History, Know Self" as a way to deepen identity politics among Filipinos from past to present. We especially highlight the role of US colonialism in ultimately producing the Filipino diaspora in the United States, which is a history few Filipinos in America grow up knowing. To support AB 123, therefore, would mean that Filipinos in the United States could develop a more critical understanding of their historical presence in this country by better understanding the role of US colonialism, and now imperialism, in displacing our people. Moreover, with its focus on Filipinos' leadership and participation in the farmworkers' movements, which led to the formation of the United Farm Workers, they can have activist role models to aspire to, including the likes of Philip Vera Cruz, who was also very committed to Philippine liberation.

Through our transnational analytic framework, Filipinos participating in BAYAN USA are engaging in the transnational struggle for national democracy in the Philippines while situated in the United States and also incorporating struggles Filipinos face as Filipino Americans and Filipino migrants (figure 6.2). This is different from KDP's dual revolutionary program, in which they ultimately saw themselves as part of the socialist revolutionary movement in the United States and only in solidarity with the revolutionary movement in the Philippines. BAYAN USA's political framework focuses on addressing the issues in the Philippines with the analysis that the root cause of the forced migration of Filipinos globally is linked to the three basic problems in the Philippines. At the same time, BAYAN USA promotes a clear, anti-imperialist analysis that underscores the importance of building international solidarity with other oppressed people around

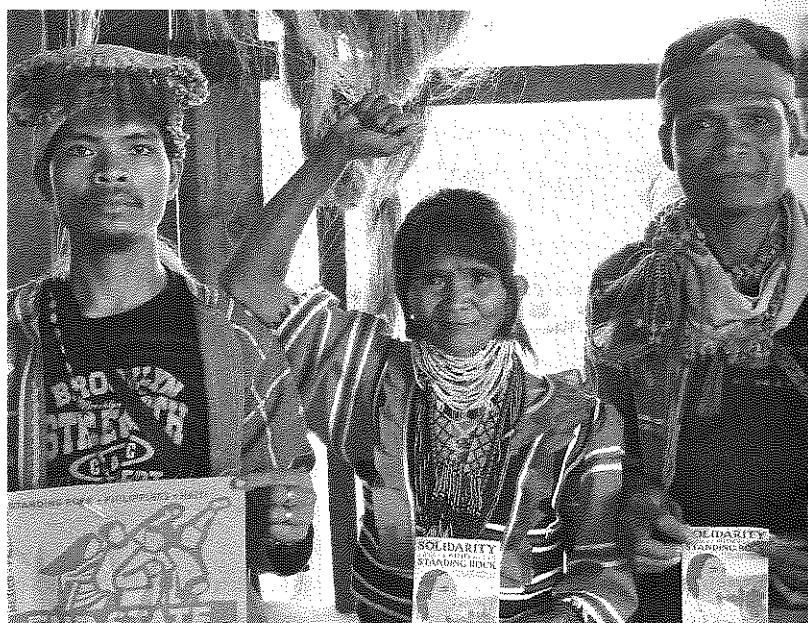


FIGURE 6.2. In this BAYAN USA Peace Mission 2017, the exposurists visited Lumad communities in Mindanao, where they learned about the fight for Lumad rights to ancestral lands, the Lumad schools that incorporate their Indigenous cultural practices, and the need for basic healthcare in their communities. This photo further shows the solidarity between the Lumad and the Standing Rock Indigenous rights to land and protection of natural resources. Photo courtesy of Jessica Antonio.

the world against the common enemy of US imperialism by participating in the International League of People's Struggles (ILPS),<sup>7</sup> International Migrants Alliance, National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, and other alliances.

In summary, what makes BAYAN USA different from its predecessors is that it propagates the idea that Filipinos in the United States can and should take an interest in the liberation of the Philippines, their ancestral homeland. Filipinos in the United States can ultimately claim a liberated Philippines as a place to which to return and genuinely belong. We believe that by participating directly in the national liberation struggle of our ancestral homeland, we or our descendants can return to an independent and self-reliant economy that can sustain Filipino families and end the economic need for forced migration abroad. BAYAN USA thus leverages Filipinos' presence in the United States to play a role in directly combatting one of the three basic problems—that of US imperialism—right in the belly of the beast. A liberated Philippines, moreover, can contribute to further breaking the chains of US imperialism as it exploits the people and resources of the entire planet.

#### **PHILIPPINE EXPOSURE PROGRAMS: CULTIVATING A TRANSNATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE DIASPORA**

BAYAN USA has been able to maintain its multi-sector alliance for over ten years, with now more than thirty member organizations. Through conducting interviews with BAYAN USA members, we found that there is a significant importance for Filipino Americans—that is, Filipinos who mostly grew up in the United States—to participate in integration and exposure programs. These exposure programs are coordinated between BAYAN Philippines and BAYAN USA and the sectoral formations part of BAYAN and BAYAN USA, such as between Anakbayan and Anakbayan USA and GABRIELA and GABRIELA USA, in which Filipino Americans travel to the Philippines, work alongside National Democratic activists, integrate in communities by living with peasants, workers, urban poor or squatter communities, and Indigenous people, among others, to experience the issues and struggles faced by ordinary Filipino people in the Philippines. In addition, these programs contribute to strengthening our member organizations and our alliance.

The transnational relationship between BAYAN Philippines and BAYAN USA fosters the ability to have well-organized exposure programs that facilitate the important face-to-face interactions between Filipino activists in the United States and in the Philippines. These programs primarily facilitate a deeper understanding of the concrete conditions in Philippine society for the US "exposureist" who may or may not have any direct experience of living in the Philippines. In addition, these programs also help to maintain and strengthen relationships between BAYAN USA and BAYAN Philippines, especially when activists who are part of BAYAN USA integrate with BAYAN Philippines' main office in Quezon City. It is through these exposure programs that many Filipino activists based in the United States describe their experience as transformative.

Filipinos residing in the United States are physically, and at times mentally, separated from the Philippines. This is especially true for Filipino Americans born and raised in the United States who have no experience of what life is like growing up in the Philippines. This common feeling of disconnection is challenged through the process of connecting to the Philippines beyond concept and theory, beyond culture and identity politics, by physically going there and experiencing firsthand a sample of life through the organization's integration programs. Moreover, BAYAN USA activists are able to directly observe the three basic problems up close. BAYAN USA activists typically undergo a political education process that starts with the *Philippine Society and Revolution (PSR)*, a book by Amado Guerrero, a pseudonym of Jose Maria Sison, published in 1970. The book fleshes out exactly how US imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism, and feudalism have shaped the Philippine economy, politics, and culture and lays out why a program of national democracy is therefore necessary to Philippine liberation.

Jill Mangaliman, BAYAN USA, explains how she was able to internalize educational materials such as the *PSR* through the exposure program:

When I traveled on expo [the exposure program], I started to truly understand the conditions in the Philippines. I had taken the Philippine Revolution and Society educational series, but it wasn't until I saw what multinational corporations had done to the land, the large-scale logging and the clear-cut hills, and the massive

graves of townspeople were killed in the landslides following Typhoon Pablo, that I finally internalized [the *PSR*]. I carry the stories of people I met on the expo trips with me, not just to remember that there are people counting on us to keep fighting but also to give me courage while being in the belly of the beast. We don't have the same conditions, so it's easy to become complacent or numb here. ("Things are bad here but not so bad.") Also, the larger society thinks that "the US is great and imperialism is great," but we know the truth; we saw it. US imperialism is what is killing our *kababayan* and our homeland.<sup>8</sup>

Not only does the exposure program bring the *PSR* to life for Mangaliman; the relationships she forges with her activist counterparts in the Philippines compel her to commit all the work to fighting "in the belly of the beast." Through these relationships Mangaliman becomes more acutely aware of the relative privilege she enjoys as a resident in the United States and how that privilege can have the effect of making her complacent about the struggles of people in the Philippines, but the direct connections made with people on the ground serve to keep her motivated to sustain her work.

Pyxie Castillo, GABRIELA USA, shares her exposure program experience in the Philippines: "The experience of traveling to and integrating in the Philippines gave me a deeper understanding of the history of the Philippines. Having a heritage of resistance and revolution was no longer theories and words in a book but has become lived experience. I became more committed to doing as much as I could to address the root problems of the suffering of the Filipino people and made a promise to tell the stories of those on the ground in the Philippines organizing every day, risking their lives to change things."<sup>9</sup> Here Castillo is impacted not only by her firsthand experiences of the three basic problems but by her personal involvement with the liberation movement. As she puts it, "Resistance and revolution . . . have become lived experiences."

The relationships forged and stories shared between Filipino activists from the United States with Filipino activists in the Philippines are not only important in ensuring that members of BAYAN USA gain a deeper political and social understanding of the radical organizing work done by BAYAN; they also maintain and strengthen the organizational relationships of the alliances across the Pacific. Perhaps

most important, the relationships forged with their counterparts in the Philippines offer US-based activists a sense of inspiration and hope. This was true of Jhonry Delacruz of Migrante Youth Fort Washington, who states: "It gives me so much hope, inspiration, and energy to see the vibrant mass movement and different forms of community building and engagement back home, which I can try to rebuild and replicate here. The resources, campaign materials, and stories shared really inform how I conduct my organizing and political work here in the United States."<sup>10</sup>

Terrie Cervas of GABRIELA USA, however, is not only inspired by her counterparts in the Philippines but also outraged by the fact that many activists risk the possibility of losing their lives for the work they do. She shared her observations:

During my ten-month-long exposure trip with Kilusang Mayo Uno, I spent time on picket lines and learned about how unions are formed and collective bargaining agreements.<sup>11</sup> I saw firsthand the hardships that workers and peasants faced and the injustices done to them when they were unjustly exploited and taken advantage of. I met some union leaders and other activists who were later murdered because of the organizing they were doing. Witnessing these things changed me, and I felt a responsibility to tell their stories and to be involved. I also decided to get involved because I agreed with the analysis of the movement—that the basic problems of the country must be solved and that there must be national industrialization and genuine agrarian reform to achieve national democracy in the Philippines. I saw the power of the workers and peasants when they collectively banded together to fight and assert their rights. I learned how the National Democratic movement in the Philippines organizes the most oppressed and exploited people in the country and fights for national liberation, and I felt I found the cause that I wanted to be committed to for the rest of my life.<sup>12</sup>

Among the interviews there is a common thread, in which the interviewees explain a sense of responsibility in needing to share the stories of the people and communities they've encountered while on exposure programs in the Philippines. Storytelling is key in the report-backs that the organizations host following exposure programs in

order to share the experiences of the participants and, more important, the stories from the communities they visited. Jennelle Barajas, with GABRIELA Portland, shares some of her most memorable experiences:

There was a cultural sharing night at the Alternative Learning Center for Agricultural and Livelihood Development [ALCADEV] when I went in summer 2019. It was raining so hard, and the stage covering was aluminum, so the rain beating down was deafening, but the show didn't stop. The people's voices rang so loud, and they sang in a cadence I never heard before. Someone explained it to me later—that since they're connected to their land, their singing lilts like the changing of the seasons, the sowing and the harvest. There was another woman whose brother and nephew were just killed by the Armed Forces of the Philippines [AFP] as they were farming abaca. I remember she was explaining to us what they did to them, and she put her wrists together and showed us how they shot them and bound their hands with the abaca they were farming. I have that image burned into my memory. The tears in her eyes, her hands raised up wrist to wrist. She was looking straight into my eyes. She just wanted her story to be told.<sup>13</sup>

These stories are connected to the overall issues in the Philippines and in particular to three basic problems and the National Democratic movement. By conducting report-backs, in which exposurists share their experiences in the Philippines to community members in their local areas, a wider audience is exposed to the issues in the Philippines through the real-life stories and experiences of the exposurists, typically through cultural song, dance/movement, theater, video, and photos. The aim is to encourage the audience to take action by joining the organizations or enrolling in the next exposure program to the Philippines.

In the United States there are a variety of Filipino or Philippine-specific organizations and nonprofits that Filipinos can choose to participate in. Through our interviews we gained insight into why people decided to join our National Democratic organizations. We found that members gravitated toward the political issues happening in the Philippines and felt the desire to do something about it. Many of them

experienced a certain type of politicization in our organizations that connected them to their homeland, the Philippines, and some of them were involved in political issues based in the United States and then got introduced to our organizations.

Another striking dynamic about Filipino Americans' experience while in the Philippines in exposure and integration programs is that they come to develop a deep sense of belonging and home while there. Several describe their experiences of being marginalized in American society as immigrants or people of color while growing up and how involvement in BAYAN USA organizations and going back to the Philippines give these activists the feeling that they have a legitimate claim to the Philippines as their homeland. Pyxie Castillo describes her politicization in college and how she connected to the Philippines:

For me, even growing up in the diaspora, the Philippines was always painted as "home." I didn't analyze my relationship with the Philippines as my personal "homeland" until I was in college with other Filipinos who grew up with their Filipino identity estranged or seen through a more white and/or Western lens. Now, in college, they were now afforded the opportunity to learn more about themselves, as they might not have had the ability to grow up knowing themselves as part of the land of the Philippines and thus were estranged from it. I also connect to the Philippines in understanding that if my family was not forced to migrate, due to the lack of national industrialization and available jobs, the Philippines would have been my physical home.<sup>14</sup>

Jill Mangaliman explains how she got politicized through issues in the United States and then was exposed to the Philippine National Democratic movement and organizations that then connected her to Philippine politics and community building:

I became politicized in 2008 due to the US presidential elections and later the Occupy movement. At the time I had little knowledge of or connection to my Filipino heritage or identity. All I knew about being Filipino was around food and culture. There was something different about the National Democratic organizations that I met. They had a goal to liberate the Philippines from US

imperialism, and I was excited to learn more and to do more. It was not only educational, but it was fun. We would hang out and tell each other stories about our lives, eventually to become part of each other's lives. It felt good to belong to something and have people I could rely on while working on very important work.<sup>15</sup>

The process for Sharlyn Santiago was also similar in that she was engaging in issues primarily happening in the United States and through attending those mobilizations and actions met an Anakbayan chapter: "I was getting more politicized by seeing the Standing Rock and Black Lives Matter movement. I saw Anakbayan was the only Filipino organization really standing in solidarity. Then I learned about our own struggle, and it confirmed all the feelings I felt growing up here in the States. It made me feel the connection to home I've been longing for."<sup>16</sup>

A particular way that Filipinos in the United States become politicized is through investigation into their own family migration story, and in joining our organizations, they are able to link the reasons why their families had to leave the Philippines to the basic problems that persist in Philippine society. Nina Macapinlac, BAYAN USA, makes this connection within her own story:

I got involved with organizing in 2013, when Anakbayan New Jersey was engaged in a campaign for the New Jersey Dream Act. I was a student at Rutgers University at the time and saw the struggle of undocumented youth in my own story. I did not consider myself an activist and was more interested in academic research, but I went to meetings and supported the campaign. Anakbayan New Jersey was in a coalition of youth organizations pushing for the bill, and I was naturally drawn, as I'd never seen a progressive Filipino organization so involved in immigrant rights for undocumented people. I chose to join Anakbayan New Jersey because they were on the ground fighting a campaign that I cared about. I saw that they were doing work in the community while also providing comprehensive political education. Learning about forced migration and imperialism contextualized my own life in a way I'd never been able to articulate before. The analysis Anakbayan provided also landed on a concrete way to take action—to continue serving the people.<sup>17</sup>

Many of the stories shared in these interview excerpts show multiple pathways that people found that led them to join one of our BAYAN USA organizations. Some of them did not consider themselves to be activists or connected to Filipino activism, but ultimately, many of them realized that underneath they were looking for an organization that was both political and Filipino. Whether they were politicized through college or through joining US-based issues, in the end they found one of our organizations and eventually joined because they wanted to be part of a Filipino activist organization that was connected to issues in the Philippines.

#### **SOLIDARITY BUILT FROM THE GROUND: BAYAN USA PEACE MISSIONS**

In addition to Philippine exposure programs for its members, BAYAN USA wanted to engage non-Filipino solidarity allies in an exposure program to the Philippines. We wanted to build on the positive experiences of previous generations of US-based activists on their trips to the Philippines. For example, Yuri Kochiyama details how she became involved: “We were invited by Bayan, which has a membership of 1.5 million people and twenty-one different organizations. GABRIELA, the women’s group, comes under it and there are about five different college organizations. The press people, reporters, come under it. Even the religious orders. I couldn’t believe it, but we even met with the Catholic nuns and other sisters. We met with the street sweepers, the jeepney drivers, the fishermen, the farmers, the unemployed. They all came under BAYAN, and BAYAN also has a couple of very revolutionary groups.”<sup>18</sup>

The kind of admiration for the Philippine liberation struggle that Kochiyama expresses here is something we hoped to inspire in newer generations of solidarity allies. In 2014 we formed the BAYAN USA Peace Mission to the Muslim Mindanao areas of the Philippines that focus on the impact of US-backed counterinsurgency and military presence in the region. Being situated in the United States, BAYAN USA also has a certain duty to convey the realities of the political situation in the Philippines to solidarity allies from non-Filipino communities and organizations while also engaging in solidarity on issues allies are working on. Rhonda Ramiro, chairperson of BAYAN USA,

explained, “Our peace missions have been one of the most effective and lasting ways that BAYAN USA has been able to generate tangible solidarity with the movements for self-determination of Moro and Indigenous people of Mindanao—two of the movements most viciously under attack by the US-Duterte regime.”

The peace missions welcome Filipinos and non-Filipino solidarity allies to learn about the struggle of Moro (Muslim) and Indigenous people facing extreme poverty, land grabbing, and state violence. During the first peace mission, US-based activists spent time with Moro communities in Cotabato City and Maguindanao. Ramon Meiji, US Iraq war veteran-turned–peace activist reflected on his experience: “As a former US Marine, I can say that the only objective of US militarism is to pursue hegemony, that is what the Obama administration’s so-called Pivot to Asia is about. The EDCA is not going to ensure protection for the Philippines, nor will it modernize the Philippine military. Securing US military control over the Philippines is strategic to the drive for US hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region, and it will come at a grave social cost for the Filipino people.” He continued: “We are concerned over the conditions of abject poverty and human rights abuses we saw the Moro people suffering from on their own ancestral domain. We fully support their right to self-determination, including the right to fight to economically uplift their lives.”<sup>19</sup>

Juyeon Rhee, US-based activist and member of Nodutol, an organization based in New York City composed of first- through fourth-generation Koreans living in the United States, describes his experience on a peace mission: “As active peace activists in the US, we came to hear the stories of a people facing increasing US intervention and witness their struggles to fight for their basic rights. And we will take these stories back to better inform the US-based peace movement of what is happening on the ground in the Philippines. There are problems inside the US that need to be resolved—unemployment, homelessness, lack of access to education, and affordable health care. We need our tax dollars to be directed toward solving these problems, not for US intervention in countries like the Philippines.”

In 2019 John Prysner, from Los Angeles, joined the peace mission in Lianga, the location of a Lumad school and a resource-rich region in Mindanao, and wrote about his experience meeting Indigenous families impacted by militarism and state violence:

[We] asked Lumad villagers in Lianga about the effect of this state terrorism on children. We were told, "There is extreme fear among the children. Some start screaming in the middle of the night. Some refuse to go to school." We were also told that two infants have died from extreme stress as a result of bombings and violence (these deaths are not included in the direct extrajudicial killings statistics). Villagers in Lianga spoke about the importance of international solidarity for their struggle: "Brothers and sisters from another country, we are grateful you are here to help us in our struggle, and you are in the US, which is the most oppressive country to us. We are happy you are there to fight."<sup>20</sup>

Past participants included delegates from Veterans for Peace, Nodutol for Korean Community Development, the Palestinian Youth Movement, the Coalition of Anti-Racist Whites, the School of Americas Watch, the Party for Socialism and Liberation, People Organizing for Philippine Solidarity, and the International League of People's Struggles. The successful mission trips have deepened solidarity and understanding between groups united in the fight against a common enemy, US imperialism.

Filipinos in the United States continue to play an integral role in educating, organizing, and mobilizing their local communities to contribute to advancing the national liberation movement in the Philippines. Filipinos residing in the United States are driven to connect to their history, culture, and homeland through community organizing and educational exposure trips to the Philippines with the most oppressed sectors of Philippine society, particularly peasants, workers, and Indigenous people. The BAYAN USA exposure programs are essential in teaching young activists, US-born and Filipino immigrants, and non-Filipino solidarity activists the concrete conditions of Philippine society that have driven many families to migrate across the world and even gain inspiration and lessons on how to organize youths, women, workers, artists, health workers, teachers, and professionals. Their experiences have helped activists to find a sense of purpose and responsibility in organizing communities in the United States to support the National Democratic movement, connect their local issues to a national and international level, and in some cases even move to the Philippines. So long as there is a neocolonial relationship between

the United States and the Philippines, activists will continue to struggle for a brighter future and toward revolutionary change.

Jill Mangaliman helps to sum up the purpose of this chapter in answering the importance of Filipino transnational activism in the United States and the need for Filipinos in the United States to go on Philippine exposure programs:

To participate in the National Democratic movement is to be "Happy and Determined." To find joy in taking up the everyday struggles of the masses, to serve the people and be with them and to fight with them. To be so resolute that the way to victory is when the people all rise up together to overthrow US imperialism, the comprador landlords, and the bureaucrat capitalists. To want to never give up (and when I do feel like giving up, *kasamas* ["comrades" in Filipino] are there to help bring me back and vice versa). Just as I had wanted to feel happiness for myself to go home, I want that and more for the whole of the Philippines, the Lumad who are losing their ancestral lands, the urban poor who are being gunned down by Duterte's death squads, and the families who are losing loved ones in this rotten system. I hope we can muster every bit of strength, resources, and creativity to organize more and more migrant workers here in the US, more youth and women, so that they too can take up the call to struggle and fight for a truly sovereign Philippines.<sup>21</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1 Antonio Tujan Jr., "Role of Diaspora in the Struggle for National and Social Liberation," *IPE Journal* (October 2019), <https://iboninternational.org/download/ipe-journals-october-2019>.
- 2 Rene Ciria Cruz, Cindy Domingo, and Bruce Occena, *A Time to Rise: Collective Memoirs of the Union of Democratic Filipinos (KDP)* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 9; Estella Habal, *San Francisco's International Hotel: Mobilizing the Filipino American Community in the Anti-Eviction Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 180.
- 3 In order to be part of BAYAN, you must be part of a member organization. Individuals typically cannot join the alliance.
- 4 Despite nominal independence granted in 1946, the Philippines is considered semicolonial in that it remains a neo-colony of the United States, exercising control of the Philippine economy, politics, culture,

- military, and foreign relations, particularly through unequal policies and support from the Armed Forces of the Philippines. The Philippines remains semifeudal in character because of the uneven development of the country, in which the main mode of production remains feudalism dominated by rich landlords and foreign monopoly capitalists. Amado Guerrero, *Philippine Society and Revolution* (Hayward, CA: Philippine Information Network Service, 1996).
- 5 This is not a full list of BAYAN Philippines member organizations, but among the major ones are Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU, May First Movement Labor Center); Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP, Peasant Movement of the Philippines); Anakbayan (youth and students); League of Filipino Students (LFS); Student Christian Movement of the Philippines (SCMP); GABRIELA (National Alliance of Women's Organizations); Kilusan ng Manggagawang Kababaihan (KMK, Women Workers' Movement); Amihan (peasant women's association); Samahan ng Malayang Kababaihang Nagkakaisa (Samakana, urban poor women's association); Health Alliance for Democracy (Head); Ecumenical Movement for Justice and Peace (EMJP); Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT); Pambansang Lakas ng Kilusang Mamamalakaya ng Pilipinas (Pamalakaya, fisherfolk association); Confederation for Unity, Recognition and Advancement of Government Employees (COURAGE); Promotion for Church People's Response (PCPR); Kalipunan ng Katutubong Mamamayan sa Pilipinas (Kamp, National Minorities'Association); Migrante International; and First Quarter Storm movement. There are also other organizations that may not be member organizations of BAYAN Philippines but are supportive of the National Democratic movement.
  - 6 As part of BAYAN's eight-point program, the member organizations are united in wanting to build a self-reliant and progressive economy by dismantling the imperialist and feudal stranglehold of the economy and carrying out national industrialization and genuine land reform.
  - 7 "The International League of Peoples' Struggle (ILPS) is an anti-imperialist and democratic formation (see ILPS Charter). It promotes, supports, and develops the anti-imperialist and democratic struggles of the peoples of the world against imperialism and all reaction." <https://ilps.info/en/about-ilps/>, accessed January 20, 2020.
  - 8 Jill Mangaliman, personal interview, October 13, 2019.
  - 9 Pyxie Castillo, personal interview, October 9, 2019.
  - 10 Jhonry Delacruz, personal interview, October 11, 2019.
  - 11 The Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU), formed in 1980 in the Philippines, is an independent labor center promoting genuine militant and patriotic trade unionism. The KMU is a member organization of BAYAN.
  - 12 Terrie Cervas, personal interview, October 11, 2019.
  - 13 Jennelle Barajas, personal interview, October 13, 2019.
  - 14 Castillo, personal interview, October 9, 2019.
  - 15 Mangaliman, personal interview, October 13, 2019.
  - 16 Sharlyn Santiago, personal interview, October 11, 2019.
  - 17 Nina Macapinlac, personal interview, October 14, 2019.
  - 18 "Yuri Kochiyama: With Justice in Her Heart," *Revolutionary Worker* 986, December 13, 1998, <https://www.revcom.us/a/v20/980-89/986/yuri.htm>.
  - 19 BAYAN USA Statement, "US Iraq War Veteran Warns of Drones in Mindanao, Pacification, and EDCA," August 7, 2014, <http://bayanusa.org/us-iraq-war-veteran-warns-of-drones-in-mindanao-pacification-and-edca>.
  - 20 John Prysner, "Eyewitness: US Tax Dollars Fund State-Run Terrorism in the Philippines," *Liberation News*, July 10, 2019, <https://www.liberationnews.org/eyewitness-u-s-tax-dollars-fund-state-run-terrorism-in-the-philippines>.
  - 21 Mangaliman, personal interview, October 13, 2019.

CHAPTER 10

## ON MOVEMENT PRAXIS IN THE ERA OF TRUMPISM

ALEX T. TOM

SPURRED BY MOUNTING OPPRESSION AND INEQUALITIES aggravated by the global pandemic, racist police killings, and massive unemployment, grassroots communities of color showed up in full force to defeat Trump and stem the slide toward authoritarianism. These movements were rooted in the radical traditions of the Southern Freedom Movement, decades in the making, and a Black-led, multiracial united front. We have also seen an emboldened right wing and white nationalist movement. While we advance our struggles for justice, we work with a sober assessment that it will take decades to undo the harm and decimation to our democracy and communities. Even with Trump out of office, the ongoing impacts of Trumpism continue in ways that are demoralizing and disheartening. And yet I truly believe self- and social transformation is not only possible but necessary in the twenty-first century. We need a “movement of movements” to win the hearts and minds of millions.<sup>1</sup> Across the country and around the world, young people, especially working-class, women, disabled, queer and trans people of color, are already leading the way in bold and inspiring ways. The key is supporting and sustaining this work toward a vision of collective liberation. In this struggle, deepening our movement praxis is critical.

Praxis is the application of theory into practice. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Paulo Freire, the Brazilian Marxist, defines *praxis* as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.”<sup>2</sup> In the

movement there is a false dichotomy between theory and practice. Some get stuck in theory and ideas, while others get immobilized by practicing and doing the work.

As Mia Mingus, a community organizer for disability justice and transformative justice, said: “Practice yields the sharpest analysis. Practice is one of the most effective teachers. If theory alone could have gotten us free, it would have already happened.” Praxis is the constant process of applying theory into action toward our long-term vision.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter reflects on the process and politics of movement building, based on my years of organizing and study, primarily with the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA) in San Francisco and the Seeding Change Fellowship. Our collective liberation is not only possible; it is necessary. It is also a long journey. We must deepen our movement praxis toward a long-term vision and strategy. The first section are my observations of the time, place, and conditions of our times. I see three dangerous trends in the movement, which include pessimism, perfectionism, and purism. In the second section I share ten movement practices that have helped me as an organizer and activist over the last couple of decades. These practices are based on a deep desire to transform self and society toward our collective liberation. In the final section I share three key opportunities to deepen our praxis in these urgent times: calling in and out the right wing in the Asian American community, especially the rise of the new Chinese American Right; combating Trumpism on local, national, and international levels; and (3) practicing long-term self- and community care.

The ideas in this chapter emerge from many years of conducting trainings for the Seeding Change Fellowship, a national summer fellowship for young Asian Americans interested in community organizing.<sup>4</sup> Every summer the program provides training and support to twenty to twenty-five fellows who are placed in grassroots organizations across the country. In particular, my focus has been on how to organize in these times within the myriad of contradictions from capitalism and other systems of oppression as well as challenges within our own community and movement. It was also an immense privilege for me to learn from and better understand the needs of young organizers and activists.

For nearly thirty years I “grew up” in the youth and labor movement, in the 1990s, and the progressive 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizing

sector, in the 2000s and beyond. As a cis-gender, middle-class, Chinese American man, I was fortunate to have access to political education and organizing trainings at a young age. In 1992 I was trained in high school youth programs in San Francisco and the broader Bay Area, such as the Encampment for Citizenship, which is an anti-oppression program that trained and developed thousands of young people since the 1940s.<sup>5</sup> Then I attended the University of California, San Diego, and spent nearly ten years organizing in the San Diego US-Mexico border region with the Center on Policy Initiatives, Students for Economic Justice and Youth Organizing Communities.<sup>6</sup> There I cut my teeth during the reign of California governor Pete Wilson, which I thought would be the most xenophobic and racist time period in my life. This was later proved wrong with the election of Donald Trump. Finally, I spent fifteen years at the Chinese Progressive Association in San Francisco, including ten years as the executive director, where I learned about the radical legacy of Asian American activism and the power of intergenerational grassroots community organizing.<sup>7</sup>

I faced several challenges when I started organizing at CPA. Coming out of the youth sector and organizing primarily Black and Latinx high school—and college-aged youths, I saw how our identities are often siloed in the movement. When I started organizing garment and restaurant workers, I realized young people were part of a larger movement and that I was organizing the children of these adults. Also, workers are often also tenants, mothers, and/or caretakers. I learned that the basis of community organizing is to work with people across generations, with all their identities.

Also, I realized early on that most of the community organizations like CPA had political education and skill trainings for working-class grassroots community members; there were few, if any, programs for young Asian Americans. Often students are seen as too “privileged”; however, there are many first-generation and working-class students who are often “invisibilized.” Not to mention, youth and students have historically played a critical role in all movements. We started the Eva Lowe Fellowship Program and the Seeding Change Fellowship Program as an intervention to ensure that young people had the mentorship, support, and tools to engage and organize in the community.

The movement is where I found my inspiration, joy, and purpose; it was also an extremely lonely and difficult place. I spent years challenging my privilege and guilt by overworking myself for multiple

cycles of burnout. I fell into the pitfalls of martyrism without even knowing it. Each time, I became more aware of my needs and limits and slowly learned how to ask for help. I was also lifted up by the good people around me. I feel immense gratitude for the love and support I received for nearly three decades.

I'm especially grateful for the movement elders at CPA who listened, mentored, and shared their own experiences. Eva Lowe, who cofounded the Chinese Worker Mutual Aid Association in the 1930s was nearly one hundred when I met her in 2007. She shared the incredibly rich history of the transnational role of Chinese leftists and progressives during the Japanese aggression against China and of organizing unemployed worker councils in the Chinatown during the Great Depression. Pam Tau Lee, a cofounder of CPA, was the board chair for over ten years and a leader in the labor and environmental justice movement. I will always cherish the inspiration, mentorship, and friendship she provided me in some of my most difficult times. Ben Lee, a cofounder, was one of the best movement storytellers. He could always provide humor as well as historical and ideological insights grounded in the community and movement. Warren Mar, a cofounder who was also a community and labor leader, always had some real talk and solid perspectives on the Chinese immigrant community and the broader working class. Francis Wong, a former board chair and world-renowned artist and community leader, always had profound reflections on how to take care of each other and sustain the movement long term. Mabel Teng, the former board chair and member of the Board of Supervisors and Assessor in San Francisco, had such an important role in the Chinese immigrant community in the 1980s and 1990s. Her insights on the community and political strategy were invaluable. Gordon Mar started as a student volunteer in the 1980s and then became the first paid staff member of CPA in 1991. He is currently serving as a supervisor for District 4 Board of Supervisors in San Francisco. I have much to thank for his leadership and the foundation he built at CPA in the 1990s and 2000s. Finally, Qi Wan Pan, who passed away in 2017 at the age of ninety-six, was a longtime member of CPA since the 1980s. She was the first generation of revolutionaries in China in 1949 and a teacher. I will always remember the time she spent with me analyzing community issues and contradictions. She was patient, kind, and full of wisdom. There are so many more to

name, but these are some movement elders who kept me grounded and helped me keep my eyes on the prize.

Now in my midforties, I am a proud "yelder" (young elder) and understand my role is to be a steward for the current and next generation of young leaders. It is indeed a daunting task, but as Happy Lim, one of the cofounders of the 1930s Chinese Worker Mutual Aid Association,<sup>8</sup> a mass organization that fought for the rights of unemployed Chinese immigrant workers during the Great Depression, said: "Those revolutionary-minded youths who were advanced in thinking had an unshakeable determination and faith. They provided a solution to transform the social services of the Chinese community, to fight against poverty, and to answer 'the problem of starvation. . . . I will follow the advanced youths of today and keep on fighting."<sup>9</sup> Yelders are a critical bridge between generations. Through the years young people would ask deep and profound questions about what to do with their lives, how to deal with burnout, and how to be in solidarity with other oppressed communities. "Should I go to law school, graduate school, or become a teacher or community organizer?" "How do I do this work without burning out?" "How do we fight anti-Black racism and show up for Black folks without re-centering Asian Americans?"

Most organizers grapple with these questions, and there are usually no simple answers. Soon I realized that it was less about giving the "perfect" answers and that the act of revealing my personal journey, challenges, and lessons was powerful in its own right. Organizing is a journey and a dynamic process with constant ebbs and flows. In this heightened stage of capitalism, many who are doing this work feel "stuck" in contradictions and fear failure and making mistakes. Through the decades I've seen too many people leave the movement or tear each other apart because of these doubts and contradictions. This is exactly what the system wants us to do. Instead, how do we stay centered despite these contradictions and move toward our collective liberation? We can build a strong and vibrant movement in which we all have the capacity to take care of ourselves and each other while changing the material conditions of our community toward our collective liberation.

This chapter is my contribution to deepening our movement praxis. I have been humbled by so many movement organizers and activists,

the young and the young at heart. Much of what I share comes from my own experiences and the wisdom of others. In particular, some of the most grounded praxis comes organically from struggle within grassroots communities that are the backbone of our resilient movements. Deepening our collective movement praxis is not an easy task, but it is critical, especially in these times.

To be clear, there are many roles in the movement. Since my experience has been mainly in paid and nonpaid organizing and activism in the Chinese immigrant community and Asian American Movement, this is the particular focus of this chapter. We need expertise in all areas, including caregivers, doctors, service workers, storytellers, social workers, economists, healers, teachers, engineers, farmers, spiritual and religious leaders, activists, and organizers, to name a few.<sup>10</sup> Recently, however, I've seen that many have conflated paid organizing in progressive 501(c)(3) nonprofits as the entire work of the movement. In actuality progressive 501(c)(3) nonprofits are part of a much larger movement. Organizing, in fact, is a value, and everyone needs to organize in their perspective fields. It is also a profession and a craft that fails to be understood clearly enough, which has led to some dangerous trends.

### **THE 3 PS: DANGEROUS TRENDS IN THE MOVEMENT—PESSIMISM, PERFECTIONISM, AND PURISM**

Even before Trump, capitalism, sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, ableism, ageism, and other systems of oppression were alive and well in the United States. At its core capitalism breeds isolation, competition, fragmentation, and alienation. Over the last few years the right wing has become emboldened by white nationalism, white supremacy leaning toward neofascism. The system creates conditions that prevent us from uniting and achieving our collective liberation. How do we stay grounded and keep our eyes on the prize of building a world based on interdependence, mutuality, and love?

Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist of the early nineteenth century, provides a useful tool for understanding this dynamic. He saw that Western capitalist societies maintained their power not only through force and coercion but also through the consent of the working class. He believed that the system maintained its hegemony through institutions in civil society such as media, education, and government, to

name a few. Therefore, he asserted that our role as revolutionaries is a “war of position,” which is resistance to domination with culture, rather than physical might, as its foundation.<sup>11</sup> Countering hegemony and organizing people to build an alternative within society is a long-term strategy in the twenty-first century. Some of the most toxic symptoms of US hegemony are pessimism, perfectionism, and purism. Here I offer my observations of these dangerous trends.

#### **PESSIMISM**

It is understandable that people feel demoralized in the face of overwhelming power. But let's be clear, negativity is a symptom of capitalism. The system needs us to be cynical about change and transformation. Many want change but do not believe it is possible. This is especially true among Asian immigrants and refugees in the United States who have largely had painful experiences in communist and socialist experiments in their home countries. When I started at the Chinese Progressive Association in 2005, we took on worker exploitation in San Francisco Chinatown. Even though many believed in the values and ideals, we were told by community members: “That's a nice idea. We tried this in China, but we will never change Chinese culture and the minds of Chinese people.”

This is how hegemony works. It is not necessarily coercive and physical but achieves its dominance through culture and ideas. It takes years of listening, education, and organizing to develop people's capacity to believe that change is possible. Worker exploitation continues to exist, but now wage theft and wage exploitation are broadly seen as “bad” across the Chinese immigrant community, whereas before they were seen as normal.

Similarly, pessimism also deeply impacts our strategic orientation. For example, some may not believe that radical change is possible in these times and think that change can only happen through short-term policy and electoral fights. Historically, however, the most strategic movements have had bold visions and have used the policy and electoral arena as part of the long arc of radical change.

#### **PERFECTIONISM**

Perfectionism is also pervasive in the movement and leads to overthinking, overprocessing, and ultimately stagnation and inaction. The #BlackLivesMatter movement, started in 2014, inspired a new

generation of Asian Americans who wanted to show their solidarity with the Black community. However, as a new and emerging movement, there was no twenty-first-century “blueprint” for solidarity. Many Asian Americans continued to ask, “How do we show up without re-centering Asian Americans?” Many Black leaders saw how Asian Americans were being used as a wedge to maintain white supremacy and the racial hierarchy. They called on Asian Americans not to overthink and to take action by “putting their bodies on the line.”<sup>12</sup>

Across the country Asians showed up in solidarity for Black lives and began to counter anti-Black racism within their own communities.<sup>13</sup> Some already had been building long-standing relationships for decades, and some were just beginning to build new relationships. Regardless, nothing was “perfect,” but the solidarity built in real time was dynamic and beautiful. It was within this ongoing practice that solidarity and “co-conspiring” were defined and sharpened.

The allyship also unraveled deeper questions of solidarity within the Asian American community. Organizers in the Southeast Asian community “called in” East Asians, who were so ready to support non-Asian people of color while offering little to no support to Southeast Asians, who were also facing police and state violence, not to mention to members of the Arab and Muslim community. This process sparked honest conversations and started to deepen our movement praxis and solidarity within the Asian American community. How to build solidarity within continues to be an important question for the Asian American Movement.<sup>14</sup>

As we strive toward our collective liberation, we need to remember not to get immobilized by perfectionism. There is no perfect person, no perfect idea, no perfect space, nor is there a perfect plan. Instead, we can create a movement that can embrace and learn from all our imperfections.

#### PURISM

Purism is another symptom of capitalism and can be extremely toxic to our ability to develop a long-term visionary strategy. In some cases purism can be harmful and reactionary. It seeks to have pure ideas that are not grounded in our current conditions of contradictions among people, relationships, the community, and the movement. This does

not mean we accept all contradictions. It means we need to understand the core contradictions based on the time, place, and conditions and understand that transformation is a dynamic process.

As Paulo Freire says in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, achieving our collective liberation is not a guarantee; it is a process of navigating the complex set of contradictions: “The contradiction between the oppressors and the oppressed, and how it is overcome; oppression and the oppressors; oppression and the oppressed; *Liberation: not a gift, not a self-achievement, but a mutual process.*”<sup>15</sup> Some of the worst forms of purism appear in the “call out” culture, in which some use oppression as a weapon against others. It often comes from a place of fear, anger, and rage and ultimately becomes reactionary.

Purism creates a false dichotomy between “long termism” and “short termism.” Long termism appears to be more visionary and transformative but also smaller and weaker, while short termism seems to be more impactful and scalable yet is very transactional. However, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. For example, many radicals avoid electoral work because it tends to be dominated by short-term thinking and winning the next election or policy; however, it is also critical for young radicals to engage. Not only do we have the threat of an emboldened right-wing and white nationalist movement; it is a time in which we have the attention of millions of people who are seeking change. Without young radicals, the field will remain nothing but transactional and short term. We need to learn how to engage in the short term and develop a bold strategy toward our long-term vision.

Although pessimism, perfectionism, and purism are so pervasive in the movement, visionary movements have also emerged in these times. From movement moments such as Occupy Wall Street, Standing Rock, Black Lives Matter, and Mauna Kea to winning on local and national levels such as the Fight for 15, Indigenous communities stopping the Keystone XL Pipeline, and disability justice activists staving off attacks on the Affordable Care Act (ACA) as well as the fight against deportations, and the climate justice movement, there are new leaders and organizations emerging across the country.<sup>16</sup> In 2020 movements have pushed forward bold and visionary policy platforms such as the BREATHE Act, Green New Deal, and People’s Charter.<sup>17</sup> The key question is how to sustain this, grow our movement, and win the hearts and minds of millions.

### DEEPENING OUR MOVEMENT PRAXIS: TEN MOVEMENT PRACTICES

We often forget that “another world is possible and necessary” because capitalism is unstable and unsustainable and will eventually implode. But what will the next system be, and who will define it? If we truly desire another world that is based on mutuality, interdependence, and love, we need to deepen our praxis and prepare to govern toward our long-term vision.

While there have been inspiring wins, we are facing unprecedented attacks and it will only get worse. In the post-9/11 world the role of the surveillance state has intensified. Although social media created the scalability of movements, they have also been strategically used by right-wing forces to spread misinformation and diffuse movements.<sup>18</sup> Social media is an important organizing tool, but we need to remember that movements now and historically are built upon trust and relationships and ongoing organizing on the ground. Finally, in these intense times organizers, activists, and our communities overall are more traumatized than ever before. Even with Trump defeated, the conditions that gave rise to his election and to Trumpism will not disappear, and it will take decades to undo the harm and destruction Trumpism has caused.

Here are ten practices that have helped deepen my own praxis. At the core they are based on transforming self and society toward our collective liberation.

1. Think dialectically. Capitalism is quite nimble yet pushes us to think rigidly. Dialectic thinking is the practice of analyzing and holding multiple contradictions toward the long-term vision. Instead of an “either-or” framework, we will need a “both-and” framework to navigate these complex times. It should not be mistaken for indecisiveness; it is an approach that allows for greater precision in the path forward.
2. Develop strategy grounded in time, place, and conditions. The path to our collective liberation requires a short- and long-term strategy that is based in a sharp and sober assessment of the time, place, and conditions. Too often, strategies do not match the actual circumstances and can lead to inaction. Knowing that conditions are complex and rapidly changing, we need to

be willing constantly to assess and reassess them on a micro and macro level.

3. Be a “fighter, thinker, and healer.” Drawing from the late revolutionary general Gordon Baker Jr. aka General Baker, organizers and activists need to assess their own strengths and weaknesses and grow in new areas. For example, some people are good “fighters” in campaigns, some are good “thinkers” and writers, and some do a lot of emotional labor as healers. In the end everyone needs these skills and more. It is the only way we can grow a leaderful movement in which we are able to rotate roles and take turns.
4. Be a unity builder. To counter the fragmentation and alienation of the times, we need to become stronger unity builders. Concretely, we need to learn to struggle alongside other people with love and compassion, especially within the community and movement. This will not happen overnight. It will require ongoing practice of self-awareness, listening, and reflection.
5. Prepare to govern. As a movement, we need to believe that through every action we are preparing to govern. Too often, governing is seen as just the work of the government; however, we are also governing every day in our relationships, families, the community, and the movement. We need to govern at all levels for the present and the future and cannot do one without the other. We can also learn a lot from Indigenous communities whose members have a long-term vision of governance and have been governing for thousands of years. Regardless of whether you are a lawyer, academic, teacher, or community organizer, there is a role for everyone. We need people everywhere, and, more important, organizing is needed everywhere.
6. Practice self and community care. “Self-care” has been misunderstood and mischaracterized within the movement. For a full transformation of self and society, we need to balance the individual and collective needs of the movement. However, this requires us to be aware of our needs and stronger systems of community support. The tendency in these times is to isolate and wait until burnout hits to call for support. Unintentionally, without fully considering the needs of the people around us, self-care can lead to “selfish care.” Under capitalism this will

not change anytime soon, but how do we counter isolation until it is eventually not necessary?

7. Build a political home. Many confuse their paid work in the community as their only political home. This may be more the case with a growing number of progressive nonprofit organizations. However, the role of the community organization is primarily a space for community members to develop their ideas and vision.<sup>19</sup> Organizers also need time and space to reflect on their community work, develop their vision, and practice working with others in different ways.<sup>20</sup>

After volunteering at CPA and becoming the campaign coordinator in 2005, I was so excited to breakdown capitalism and imperialism to grassroots community members. I was quickly humbled and learned that community organizing was actually a transformative process of *building relationships*, *listening* to people, and *being in dialogue* with each other over a long period of time. As mentioned earlier, many in the community already understood the systems of oppression but did not believe change was possible. CPA was a political home for them to tap into their own agency, individually and collectively.

But CPA did give me space to create my own political home. Since CPA was part of a rich legacy and ecosystem of radical Asian Americans, I participated in and built projects, such as the Activist Community Training (ACT), a community organizing training program for college-age youths; API Movement Building Network (APIMB), an initiative to build a national network of progressive organizers and organizations; and the WT(N)O Delegation, which was an Asian American delegation of workers, students, youths, and activists to protest the World Trade Organization meeting (WTO) in Hong Kong in 2005. More important, these political homes and activities were open to everyone regardless of if you were a paid organizer.

8. Stretch and try things on. Organizing is the process of constantly building new skills and muscles outside of our comfort zones. As we prepare to govern, we need to own our leadership in building organizations and political power. These areas are fraught with contradictions; however, if we do not deepen our

praxis, we will not be prepared to govern when the time comes. We need more leaders, and they need to be everywhere. Some say movements are *leaderless*, but really movements are full of leaders and leadership.<sup>21</sup>

As I mentioned earlier, I initially came out of the youth sector organizing mostly Black and Latinx high school and college-aged youths in San Diego and the US-Mexico border region. At CPA I was tasked with organizing garment and restaurant workers who were the same age as my parents. Immediately, I was confronted with my own class guilt as I organized workers to confront their employers. In fact, I was called out several times by workers: "Who do you think you are telling me to stand up to my boss? What do you have to lose? You already have a job, and you went to college." I gradually learned that organizing is not about pushing people to do things they don't want to do; rather, it is tapping into their sense of agency and supporting them individually and collectively as much as possible. This stretched me in so many difficult ways but eventually transformed my leadership.

9. Have your ear to the ground. Collective liberation will only be possible when we win the hearts and minds of people. We need to learn to listen and reflect while taking action. This can be one of the most difficult practices because there is a lot of internalized oppression and many divisions within the community and movement. Through the process we can sharpen our approach and analysis.
10. Be your best self. Capitalism is built on competition with others, which is destructive. Instead, we need to strive to be the best versions of ourselves. Doing so requires incredible self-awareness and self-compassion.

#### MOVEMENT TASKS IN THESE URGENT TIMES

Although our path to collective liberation is a long journey, I will share three urgent tasks to consider as opportunities to deepen our praxis. In this stage of capitalism we need to call in (and out) the right wing in the Asian American community, especially the Chinese American Right; take on Trumpism on a local and national level; and deepen practices around self- and community care.

1. Calling in (and out) the right wing in the Asian American community. With the rise of white nationalism, there is also a more emboldened ethnic nationalism, such as the “Chinese Tea Party,” the new Chinese American right wing in the United States, whose members are primarily wealthy and educated. This trend is happening in some form in all communities of color. In this current moment the Chinese immigrant community has been strategically used as a wedge against other people of color, including other Asian Americans.<sup>22</sup> I think it’s a mistake to write off this community as lacking any progressive politics, as many, including Asian Americans, have done. We recognize, too, that the Chinese American right wing has been weakened nationally with Trump’s escalation against China and the Chinese community. Asian American support for Trump decreased from 37 percent in 2016 to 20 percent in 2020.<sup>23</sup> I believe that we need to expose the self-interests and political interests of key individuals and engage and build in new ways with segments of the new Chinese immigrant community, to encourage them to be part of the broader Asian American Movement. I believe that there is a great potential for building a cross-class and multiracial movement in the current moment with issues such as public charge rules, further limits on H1B visas, and US-China trade war tensions. CRW Strategies LLC, the WeChat Project, and Chinese for Affirmative Action offer some examples of how we can develop a new digital hub for progressive content creation to engage Chinese immigrants and counter rampant misinformation online.<sup>24</sup> Lastly, the Hindu Right is also a dangerous force, and building a program around countering the Chinese and Hindu right wings could prove to be very powerful.<sup>25</sup>
2. Taking on Trumpism on the local, national, and international levels. Even with Trump out of office, it will still take decades to repair the harm of Trumpism and of the systems of oppression in place long before Trump. We need to think about our short-term policy and electoral fights as part of the long-term strategy. We cannot wait for Trumpism’s destruction of what is left of our democracy to destabilize us further into inaction. We need to see the current moment as an opportunity to practice all strategies and to build toward the transformation of the system

we want. As the Organizing Upgrade Collective wrote: “The struggle against Trumpism will last longer than any electoral cycle. . . . Defeating the political bloc that is driven by white nationalism and has captured the Republican Party is our immediate responsibility as left organizers.”<sup>26</sup> Some great examples are the National Domestic Workers Alliance’s winning \$400 billion for the caregiving sector within the American Jobs Plan, Movement for Black Lives’ BREATHE Act, Sunrise’s Green New Deal, United We Dream’s campaign for citizenship for all immigrants, and the Working Families Party’s People’s Charter.

3. Practicing long-term self- and community care. As mentioned earlier, the last few decades, especially the last several years, have been deeply traumatic to our communities. Many in the movement are ill equipped to address trauma and healing, especially those who are working class, queer or trans, women, disabled, and/or people of color. Trauma also shows up within the community and movement. Without clearer interventions and leadership, self-care has almost come to mean that individuals need to isolate and “leave” the movement or that the organization needs to shut down to “heal” before continuing the work. It also strongly relies on the (invisible) emotional labor of women and/or people with higher emotional intelligence. We need to redefine and “visibilize” this work more. It is hopeful that there are more resources such as Generative Somatics, Transformative Justice, and Coaching for Healing Justice and Liberation that integrate within the movement the social, personal, and political aspects of being human.<sup>27</sup>

As activist and writer Grace Lee Boggs wrote: “[We must] redefine our relationships with one another, to the Earth and to the world . . . about finding the courage to love and care for the peoples of the world as we love and care for our own families.”<sup>28</sup> *How do we practice self-care and community care as a way to reimagine our revolutionary politics for the current and future?*

How do we know if we are on the right track? How do we know when and what to start? How do we stay accountable to our vision? Many, including myself, have gotten stuck here. To me it goes back to praxis, which is the applying of theory into practice, assessing and reflecting and repeat.

First, it is less about the “perfect” vision and more about having a grounded assessment of time, place, and conditions. All campaigns need to have good strategy that is grounded by assessing and reassessing our vision. Second, we need to practice learning about ourselves and how to be in community with each other. This does not mean we just practice random things or fail fast just for the sake of it. It means we practice *toward* our vision. I have practiced a lot as a martyr, and the results have been mostly reckless and about myself. Practicing with real friends and comrades and getting good at it over time will take our collective and individual power to another level. Finally, organizing and movement building are about building power and transforming the system. The idea of power has been misused and tainted. We have an automated response that power only means top-down, not grassroots; individual, not collective; scale, not depth; anger and rage, not love; replication, not transformation, to name a few. Many of us shy away from power because these binaries immobilize us. We need to redefine power for a world of interdependence, mutuality, and love. Simply put, power is about getting what our communities deserve.

Alicia Garza, cofounder of the Black Lives Matter Network and the Black Futures Lab, describes it well: “For me, power means getting to make decisions over your own life. Power means being able to determine where resources go, who they go to, where they don’t go, and who they don’t go to. . . . For me, power is about the ability to shape the narrative of what is right, what is wrong, what is just, what is unjust. But most importantly for me, power is about making sure that there are consequences when you’re disappointed. When the people who you elect don’t carry out the agenda that you elected them to carry out.”<sup>29</sup>

We need everyone to be in their full power so that we can transform big and small parts of society. It will require us to deepen our movement praxis in these times. We all need each other and are counting on each other to be visionary practitioners and powerful in our own ways. This is our path to self- and societal transformation.

#### NOTES

1 Movements are complex, dynamic, and not prescribed. It is not only one set of individuals, nor is it just a group of organizations. I’ve found the term *movement of movements* useful; it was coined by Naomi Klein

in 2001 in a PBS series *Commanding Heights: The Battle for the World Economy* to describe the anti-globalization movement; also see Van Gosse, “A Movement of Movements: The Definition and Periodization of the New Left,” in *A Companion to Post-1945 America*, ed. Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 277–302.

- 2 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970; reprint, New York: Continuum, 2007), 51.
- 3 Praxis also builds on Mao in “On Practice,” stressing the unity of theory and practice and the importance of practice.
- 4 On Seeding Change, see <https://seeding-change.org>.
- 5 On Encampment for Citizenship, see <http://encampmentforcitizenship.org>.
- 6 On the Center on Policy Initiatives, see <https://www.cpisandiego.org/sej>.
- 7 On the Chinese Progressive Association, see <https://cpasf.org>. On intergenerational organizing and Black-Asian solidarity in the CPA, see Alex T. Tom, “The Chinese Progressive Association and the Red Door,” in *Black Power Afterlives: The Enduring Significance of the Black Panther Party*, ed. Diane C. Fujino and Matef Harmachis (Chicago: Haymarket Press, 2020), 289–300.
- 8 H. M. Lai, “A Historical Survey of Organizations of the Left among the Chinese in America,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 4 (1972): 10–20.
- 9 *East Wind: Politics & Culture of Asians in the US* 1, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1982).
- 10 This is not a new concept. In movements, including US and international movements (past and present), everyone has a crucial role in the “popular front” toward a long-term vision.
- 11 Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, vol. 3, trans. J. A. Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
- 12 In the initial phase of the movement, there were hundreds of direct actions across the country on a monthly basis. There were also specific calls to Asian American activists to put their bodies on the line and to lead and follow at various times.
- 13 Asian Americans responded to the police killings of Eric Garner and Akai Gurley in New York, Philando Castile in Minnesota, and Mario Woods in San Francisco, to name a few. See May Fu, Simmy Makhijani, Anh-Thu Pham, Meejin Richart, Joanne Tien, and Diane Wong, “#Asians4BlackLives: Notes from the Ground,” *Amerasia Journal* 45 (2019): 253–70.
- 14 In 2013 movement leaders from the Southeast Asian Freedom Network raised this question at the Grassroots Asians Rising (GAR) gathering in New Orleans, which catalyzed new and deeper relationship building within the Asian American Movement. In 2018 GAR integrated this

- principle into its movement statement, "Building a Movement Family: Our Statement," <https://www.grassrootsasians.org/2018-statement>.
- 15 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.
  - 16 For more examples of visionary movement organizations, see the Climate Justice Alliance, the Movement for Black Lives, Mijente, United We Dream, Native Organizing Alliance, Indigenous Environmental Network, Southeast Asian Freedom Network, and the Grassroots Asians Rising, to name a few.
  - 17 Movement for Black Lives, "The BREATHE Act," <https://breathact.org>; Working Families Party, "The People's Charter," <https://www.peoplescharter.us/read-the-charter>; Sunrise Movement, "What Is the Green New Deal?" <https://www.sunrisemovement.org/green-new-deal/?ms=WhatistheGreenNewDeal%3F>.
  - 18 Emily Stewart, "Facebook's Political Ads Policy Is Predictably Turning Out to Be a Disaster," *Recode*, October 30, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/recode/2019/10/30/20939830/facebook-false-ads-california-adriel-hampton-elizabeth-warren-aoc>.
  - 19 CPA was formed in 1972 to be a grassroots organization for people in the community; I Wor Kuen (IWK) was the collective for people in the community who wanted revolutionary change. There was a lot of synergy between CPA and IWK, but there were clear roles and identities.
  - 20 Many organizers are from the community as well but need time and space to reflect in the capacity of an organizer
  - 21 Barbara Ransy, "Ella Taught Me: Shattering the Myth of the Leaderless Movement," *Colorlines*, June 12, 2015, <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/ella-taught-me-shattering-myth-leaderless-movement>.
  - 22 Chinese Americans have been used as wedges on core issues such as affirmative action, police violence, and data disaggregation, to name a few.
  - 23 2020 Asian American Voter Survey, by APIAVote, AAPI Data, and Asian Americans Advancing Justice, <https://www.apiavote.org/research/2020-asian-american-voter-survey>.
  - 24 On CRW Strategy, see <http://crwstrategy.com/front-page/our-services>; on WeChat, see <https://www.thewechatproject.org>; on Chinese Against Affirmative Action, see <https://caaf.org>. These entities played a crucial role in creating more educational Chinese-language content and massive distribution among WeChat groups to ensure ACA-5 (Proposition 16) got on the ballot in California. Progressive Chinese American college students who started "The WeChat Project" (<https://www.thewechatproject.org>) have also challenged conservative discourse on WeChat; see Zijia Song, "Can WeChat Be Woke? The Progressive Chinese Americans Counteracting Right-Wing Narratives," *SupChina*, October 22, 2020, <https://supchina.com/2020/10/22/can-wechat-be-woke-the-progressive-chinese-americans-counteracting-right-wing-narratives>. The group published an open letter in response to the murder of George Floyd that went viral on the platform; see Eileen Huang, "A Letter from a Yale Student to the Chinese American Community," <https://chineseamerican.org/p/31571>.
  - 25 On the Chinese Right's use of social media as an organizing tool, see Yuanyuan Feng and Mark Tseng-Putterman, "Scattered like Sand: WeChat Warriors in the Trial of Peter Liang," *Amerasia Journal* 45, no. 2 (2019): 238–52.
  - 26 Trumpism, El Paso and Our Responsibility as Left Organizers," *OrgUp* (blog), August 6, 2019, ("Hyperlink16","<https://www.organizingupgrade.com/trumpism-el-paso-and-our-responsibility-as-left-organizers>).
  - 27 On Generative Somatics, see <http://www.generativeomatics.org>; on Transformative Justice, see <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2019/01/09/transformative-justice-a-brief-description>; on Coaching for Healing Justice and Liberation, see <https://www.healingjusticeliberation.org>.
  - 28 Grace Lee Boggs, "Solutionaries Are Today's Revolutionaries," *Boggs Blog*, October 27, 2013, <https://conversationsthatyouwillneverfinish.wordpress.com/2013/10/27/solutionaries-are-todays-revolutionaries-by-grace-lee-boggs>.
  - 29 Leah Fessler "How the Leader of Black Lives Matter Defines 'Power,'" *Quartz*, September 16, 2018, <https://qz.com/1391762/black-lives-matter-co-founder-alicia-garzas-definition-of-power>.

## CHAPTER 12

## THE STRUGGLE TO ABOLISH ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC RACISM

Asian Radical Imagining from the Homeland to the Front Line

PAM TAU LEE

IT'S OCTOBER 9, 2018. I'M GATHERING MATERIAL TO WRITE this chapter when my eye catches the news announcing the findings of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report. I spot the Red Guard Political Platform, written in San Francisco Chinatown, February 1969. It reads: "We demand that the United States government halt the rape of the land. We believe that if greedy businessmen, with the help of the US government, do not stop destroying our land, air, oceans, and streams, the earth will become a lifeless planet of rock and dust."<sup>1</sup> In the midst of current environmental crises—including unprecedented fires in California, monstrous flooding in the Midwest, and the IPCC's finding that we are rapidly approaching the disastrous 1.5-degree C mark—I realize all of the Red Guard's demands remain relevant. Fifty years ago the Black Liberation movement, international struggles for self-determination, and the occupation of Alcatraz Island by the American Indian Movement awakened the social consciousness of youths of color and progressive whites.<sup>2</sup> Imagine where we might be if an environmental movement with similar impact had evolved.

In a recent conversation over coffee, youth activist Monica Chan asked, "What can we do about the climate?" Climate change is the crisis that threatens all humanity and living things. Her question kept me awake that night. After thirteen days of smoke from the 2018 California Camp Fire, I emailed my friend Vida Kuang, who lives in Chinatown, and asked her how things were. She replied:

It's harder to get clean fresh air in SROs [single-room occupancy units]. Especially for folks who don't have access to a window that isn't facing another wall. Windows are our only source for air circulation between shared bathrooms and kitchens. We use our rooftops to dry our clothes. We depend on clean air for everyday living. With the smoke being so thick and being told to stay indoors and close the windows, it's even harder to get *any* air. It's the lack of circulation. With spaces being tight and public spaces being our only living room—imagine your living room being polluted. Where do you go now? This isn't just about folks who live in SROs—it's also about people who are living on the streets. You end up feeling trapped. This is like a slow apocalypse—climate change won't hit us all of a sudden. It's going to be something people will slowly normalize and not question. We're walking in a cloud of smoke doing our thing, heads bent over our phones, working, commuting. People won't know what hit them because climate change is the slowest kind of poison.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter is my attempt to respond to Monica's query through a collection of radical love stories, using my activism as an entry into the Asian American and environmental justice movements of the past fifty years.

### BECOMING AN ENVIRONMENTALIST

My journey is grounded in my family's history. I am fourth-generation Chinese American, born in San Francisco in 1948. My early years were spent in Chinatown, mainly with my maternal grandmother, Alice Jan, who took care of me during the week while my parents worked. She had earlier raised my mom and her two brothers as a single mom surviving on welfare. My maternal grandfather struggled with drug

addiction and alcoholism, aggravated by the pressures of poverty and racism. We rarely saw him. Grandmother Alice herself worked at the Doh Lei garment factory on Washington Street in Chinatown, which produced overalls and jeans for Levi Strauss & Company. I spent a lot of time in this factory, as women loudly shared gossip, trying to be heard above the constant noise of fifty blaring sewing machines.

When I was seven years old, I remember sitting at the foot of my grandmother's machine and hearing a scream, followed by women rushing toward a coworker whose hand was caught in her sewing machine. As women brought paper towels to soak up the blood and dislodge her hand from the machine, the freight elevator door swung open and the boss man stormed out shouting, "Get back to work!" The women shouted back at him but gradually went back to work, the sound of the machines again filling the air. As the boss stalked the aisles to cement his authority, Grandma turned to me and asked, "Ah Guen, did you see what happened?" Pointing to the boss, she said: "Do you know who he is? Do you know why he acts like that? It's because he's mean, greedy . . . and too much soy sauce!" I had never heard my grandmother speak with such harshness. Why "soy sauce"? I believe this was my grandma telling me he had become salty and cranky from the conditions of poverty and racism that constituted Chinatown.

Chinatowns arose from exclusionary laws and racist practices that confined Chinese to segregated areas, with overcrowded, noisy, and unsafe living and working conditions. Women and men work six days a week, ten hours a day, in sweatshops that create super-profits from the super-exploitation of the labor of workers of color, especially women and immigrants. Low wages force most families to live in single-room occupancy units. These are eight-by-ten-feet single rooms, with a shared toilet, a shower down the hall, and if you are lucky, maybe one window. The lack of fresh air and adequate rest makes conditions ripe for the presence of diseases. My father had tuberculosis, as did my mother and I. This is the underbelly of the capitalist system that benefits corporations like Levi Strauss.

Etched in my mind is the violent memory of a worker's hand caught in a sewing machine. Through this event I became aware of racism and environmental justice at the same moment. As I grew older, I began to see that these events were part of daily life inside the factory. I call experiences like this my "soy sauce moments"; they transformed my consciousness and called me to action.

#### BLACK PANTHERS AND ASIAN AMERICAN RADICALS

In the 1960s the Black Liberation movement had a strong influence on me. In 1969 I was twenty-one, a student at Cal State Hayward. Across the Bay students at San Francisco State College were fighting for a Third World Studies College. They were demanding an education that could equip us to "change society" and envisioned a "new system of governance."<sup>4</sup> George Murray, an SF State instructor and the Black Panther Party minister of education, challenged students to study the root cause of war and counter white supremacy with a vision of Black Power. I was moved when Murray called for "power for all persons of African, Asian, or Latin-American descent in the United States, as well as progressive whites to change the system and overturn all power by the government to oppress."<sup>5</sup>

For me and so many others, "All power to the people" also meant being internationalists. When the Black Panthers came to San Francisco Chinatown to organize support to "Free Huey," they discovered a group of young, "cool" Chinese youths. Having been constantly harassed by the police, the Chinatown youths were ripe for consciousness raising. The Black Panthers soon led political study sessions with Chinatown youths and introduced them to the Panther Ten-Point Program. When these Chinatown youths asked to join the Black Panther Party, Bobby Seale replied, "No, you've got to form your own group, grounded in your own struggle." They soon formed the San Francisco Red Guards in 1969, which two years later merged with I Wor Kuen (IWK) of New York.<sup>6</sup>

In 1972 the San Francisco chapter of IWK became my political home. Its platform aligned with my experiences in Chinatown. IWK was a radical Asian American collective of youths inspired by the Black Panther Party and the Puerto Rican Young Lords Party. IWK was not a copy of the Black Panther Party but, rather, its own entity that centered Asians to oppose capitalism, racism, and hetero-patriarchy in the United States and the world. IWK's demands were grounded in our Asian experience, and its Twelve-Point Program provided clarity to what I had witnessed and experienced growing up.<sup>7</sup> The Twelve-Point platform recognized the racist oppression of communities by the wealthy, affirmed that women should hold key roles in fighting for liberation, and sought to put people's needs first through the principles of love and unity.<sup>8</sup>

Point 2 of IWK's program called on us to be anti-imperialist. Asian youths were being drafted into the US Army and deployed to fight in a racist, imperialist war of aggression for oil, minerals, and "cheap" labor. Point 2 exposed these problems: "We want self-determination for all Asians. Western imperialists have been invading and colonizing countries in Asia for the past 500 years. Amerikan imperialism, concentrating in Asia, is now engaged in the most sadistic [and environmentally destructive—Agent Orange] and genocidal war of aggression the world has ever seen. We want an immediate end to Amerikan imperialism."<sup>9</sup>

The US war in Southeast Asia was dividing the country, including families like mine. These divisions were contentious, with sectors from the white working class attacking and beating up antiwar activists. Youths from the Latinx and Black communities led the way in growing an anti-imperialist, antiwar movement. Chicanos were being killed and wounded in the war in disproportionate numbers compared to the general population. They mobilized opposition to the war. The National Chicano Moratorium Committee's assertion that "our struggle is not in Vietnam but in the movement for social justice at home" resonated with Asian youths, including those of us in Chinatowns and Japantowns and on campuses.<sup>10</sup>

IWK understood it was important to unite with the greater US antiwar movement. To do this, the organization helped to form the Bay Area Asian Coalition Against the War, a volunteer group of Asian radical activists who worked to expose the racist nature of US imperial wars for oil. We also wanted to call attention to self-determination for the Vietnamese people and their nine-point proposal for peace. At one planning meeting for a April 1972 rally and march, the organizers, instead of welcoming us, told us to leave, saying we were bringing in "too many -isms-isms." In that meeting we came face to face with the mainstream antiwar organizers exercising their privilege to exclude our voices and experiences. In actuality it wasn't about too many -isms; it was about race and imperialism.<sup>11</sup>

We returned to our communities and campuses and mobilized for the antiwar march by organizing an Asian contingent to raise our presence and consolidate our unity. On the day of the march, our contingent "snake-danced" to the stage, chanted "One struggle many fronts," and carried flags of our respective homelands.<sup>12</sup> Our spokeswoman, Patsy Chan, read a statement, which included: "We, as Third World

sisters, express our militant solidarity with our brothers and sisters from Indochina. We, as Third World people, know of the struggle the Indochinese are waging against imperialism, because we share that common enemy in the United States."<sup>13</sup>

History has proven that our position was correct—the call to end the war was not just about "bringing our boys home," but it was also about exposing the racist imperialist nature of the war to gain control of Asia's natural resources; the horrors of the use of Agent Orange as a chemical weapon to kill people and destroy the land; and the massacres, such as the 1968 My Lai massacre, at the hands of the US military. Amid a country divided on the war, we as Asians had a unique understanding and perspective. It was our responsibility to expose the true motives for the war. Formations such as the Chicano Moratorium and Bay Area Asian Coalition Against the War and leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Dr. Vincent Harding took radical and bold stands against the war and were critical of growing an antiwar movement that focused primarily on American lives, as in the "Bring the Boys Home" slogan, but not issues of imperialism and white supremacy.

#### THE FIRST NATIONAL PEOPLE OF COLOR ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, DC, October 24–27, 1991, was a groundbreaking event in the environmental justice movement and a major soy sauce moment for me. Those four days rocked the environmental movement by pivoting attention and action to the findings of the landmark study of the Commission for Racial Justice, United Church of Christ, titled "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States" (1987), which highlighted the fights against environmental racism, specifically against the development of toxic facilities, landfills, and other sites of pollution where people of color live, work, go to school, and pray, including Native sacred sites.<sup>14</sup> I was one of thirty Asian and Pacific Islander delegates invited to participate. At the time my day job was in the field of workplace and environmental health and safety at the UC Berkeley School of Public Health's Labor Occupational Health Program. Dana Alston and Charles Lee, African American and Chinese American key conveners of the summit, respectively, invited me to submit a paper

focused on workers of color and to facilitate the policy group on occupational health and safety issues.<sup>15</sup> This “ask” not only changed the way I understood how to be an “environmentalist” but changed my life.

The air was electric as three hundred delegates from rural areas, cities, tribal lands, the Marshall Islands, and Puerto Rico came together. Delegates spoke of the high rates of cancer, children born with birth defects, lupus, miscarriages, asthma, and a host of other health conditions. They shared frustration and anger at a myriad of issues, including health impacts from poisoned water, air, and soil; plundered land for coal, gas, uranium, and oil; and the destruction of sacred sites from logging, nuclear waste, and military toxins.<sup>16</sup>

On day 3 Dana Alston took the podium and delivered a speech that would have huge implications for the summit and the environmental movement. On behalf of the Planning Committee, Dana presented a redefinition of *environment* to include “where we live, work, go to school, and pray” and argued that “adults and children living in communities of color are endangered species, and environmental issues are immediate survival issues.”<sup>17</sup> Dana challenged the 250 nondelegate participants and observers to align on this redefinition and called on the representatives from the Big Green environmental organizations in the audience to acknowledge, address, and repudiate the paternalistic behaviors their organizations practiced toward frontline communities. Her speech took courage to write and deliver. I was proud of her as she stood up and spoke truth to power. Dana risked her reputation and job on behalf of frontline communities and in the spirit of radical love and courage.<sup>18</sup>

On day 4 summit delegates assembled to discuss, debate, and affirm the landmark Preamble and Principles of Environmental Justice. The summit and the drafting of the preamble and principles launched the movement for environmental justice across the country and in countries around the world. I am proud to have authored the worker of color health and safety discussion paper that helped contribute to the adoption of Principle 8, which “affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment, without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment,” and which also “affirms the right of those who work at home to be free from environmental hazards.”<sup>19</sup>

The voices of millions have been affirmed because of the principles we committed to at the summit. The National Environmental Justice Advisory Committee was also created in 1993. Presidential Executive Order 12898 was issued the next year, mandating federal agencies to consider the impact of current policies and regulations on racial and ethnic communities.<sup>20</sup> In the late 1990s I asked longtime activist and writer Grace Lee Boggs for her thoughts on environmental justice. She replied, “I believe the Principles of Environmental Justice lays the foundation for a new constitution.”<sup>21</sup>

## BUILDING UNITY AND POWER WITHIN THE MAJORITY TO ACHIEVE JUSTICE AND LIBERATION

### WORKERS AND THE COMMUNITY

Grace Lee Boggs made a statement that impacted my thinking. She chastised a group of us Asian Americans: “You are thinking like a minority, like victims. Don’t do that! Start thinking and acting like a majority.”<sup>22</sup> Her words made me reflect on an experience I’d had in the early 1990s. I was in Canada when I first met and heard Tony Mazzochi of the Oil, Chemical Atomic Workers Union (OCAW) speak. He was a visionary who was keenly aware that the reliance on fossil fuels and uranium was destroying the planet. He knew it was imperative to keep dirty fuels in the ground but that this would have a devastating impact on the men and women of his union who worked in the refineries and power plants, including my hero, the whistleblower Karen Silkwood.<sup>23</sup> Mazzochi refused to allow his union and workers to play into the “Jobs versus Environment” scenario. He maintained that there be both good, safe jobs and protection of the environment and proposed an early version of what people now call the “Green New Deal.” He envisioned a public policy that would call on the government to set aside a “super-fund” of money to prepare workers for alternative, good-paying jobs. I was familiar with his proposal because my father was a World War II vet and qualified for the “super”-funded GI Bill. Dad felt that without this program, he could never have gone to college and moved from being a storeroom clerk to becoming an engineer. A radical love policy? Yes! An undeserved entitlement? No. I saw in Mazzochi’s proposal a pathway that could unite workers and environmentalists.

A couple of years later, as a board member of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN), I was invited to meet with James Carlton and Dion Ferris, who were in the Bay Area to introduce APEN to an OCAW proposal that would center on bringing frontline worker leaders together with frontline communities to draft a Just Transition public policy for safe jobs and environment stewardship. Besides being an APEN board member, I was a workplace and environmental health and safety trainer and was brought on to be a facilitator for the project. I would assist in the long-term process of joining OCAW worker leaders with environmental justice fence line residents affiliated with the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, Southwest Public Workers Union, Indigenous Environmental Network, and the Southern Organizing Project.

This project was a dream come true. It took hold in different geographic locations, including Alabama, Arizona, and Oklahoma, and this project gave voice and opportunity for building genuine unity and creating public policy that was place based and informed by the experiences of those who are directly impacted.<sup>24</sup> The story I'd like to highlight took place in McIntosh, Alabama. I remember listening to an African American worker and OCAW member describe exactly where the company had him dump PCB along the riverbanks. I sat with alarm as residents talked of being trapped on all four sides of their town by parked company trains waiting to be loaded with toxic chemical products. If a toxic explosion or other emergency crisis were to happen, the residents would have no way to escape. These company practices motivated the residents to organize an informational picket outside of the chemical plant. Predictably, this picket action angered the workers and their union. The future of the project was in jeopardy.

In response to the picket action and media coverage it generated, a series of meetings between the union were held with Connie Tucker of the Southern Organizing Project, Richard Moore of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, Tom Goldtooth of the Indigenous Environmental Network, Ruben Solis Garcia of the Southwest Public Workers Union, and me from the Asian Pacific Environmental Network. The union threatened to call off the project; the environmental justice organizations, on the other hand, were frustrated and angered by the union's demand that the residents cease actions against the company. But a breakthrough was achieved when

the environmental justice organizations described why taking public direct action against the company was their only option for protecting the community. Hearing this, the union realized that asking residents of color not to take action against the company that was putting them in danger was like demanding their workers give up their rights to fight management and to strike. A joint statement was signed on February 14, 1997. It read in part: "Our previous struggles to protect jobs, workplace safety and health, community health, and the environment led us to each other. . . . We affirm the right of environmental justice organizations to engage in the battle for equity and fairness for those fence-line communities surrounding the toxic facilities employing OCAW workers. We affirm the right to resist corporate efforts to destroy our jobs, harm our health, and pollute our environment in pursuit of higher corporate profits. We affirm the right to a just transition when a shift to a sustainable community and cleaner environment costs workers and communities our jobs, income, and tax base."<sup>25</sup>

How could this statement play out in real life? When community residents affiliated with the environmental justice groups engaged in a struggle with a company where OCAW members were employed, that environmental justice group would alert the local and national union so the union could work with union leaders inside to ensure they would not interfere or engage in conflict with the residents. This communication could open opportunities to engage in solidarity with the residents. The same efforts to inform and engage in supportive actions would hold true if workers were engaged in a struggle.

For the next ten years I was part of a team that led workshops across the country focused on building a Just Transition Movement for Jobs and the Environment that brought together workers and environmental justice residents. But because of declining union membership from refineries shutting down, OCAW was forced to merge with the United Paperworkers International Union in 1999 to become PACE, the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers International Union. In 2005 PACE merged with the United Steelworkers. Each merger created challenges for the project from declining interest in uniting impacted workers and communities on a grassroots level, as these grassroots efforts took more time and resources and were not "headline news-grabbing" topics of interest. Around 2006 unions were looking for more visibility regarding issues of jobs and the environment. This gave rise to the 2006 creation of a Blue Green Alliance, which relies

more on the unity of labor leadership. By 2007 financial resources to the Just Transition Alliance and projects declined, and the program was shut down. I believe that the ending of the on-the-ground joint work was because of an uneasiness within the union foundations to boldly recognize and work to abolish environmental racism and the fear that the issue would divide people. The shift from abolishing environmental injustice to a focus on green jobs softens but does not eliminate the importance of addressing environmental racism.

I wish that our grassroots environmental justice policy making approach had not been pitted against other approaches. By shutting down this project, we as a society lost an opportunity to test our ability to bring people together around kitchen tables and in meetings in school auditoriums where they are exposed to each other's humanity. To be in spaces where distrust and suspicion fades and where these frontline communities, Indigenous groups, and workers uplift the issues of jobs and the environment with proposals grounded in their day-to-day experiences.<sup>26</sup>

#### **INTERNATIONALISM AND SOLIDARITY AS ACTS OF RADICAL LOVE FROM CHINATOWN TO STANDING ROCK**

The fight to stop the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, begun in 2016, affirmed the Principles of Environmental Justice that we developed at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit back in 1991. Standing Rock exposed the evils and hazards of dirty energy. It educated non-Natives on the issues of sovereignty, destruction of sacred sites, violence against women from the pipeline man camps, human rights abuses and the lack of prior consent, and the alignment of the fossil fuel industry with the state of North Dakota, local officials, local police, and the National Guard. On April 24, 2016, Native youths from the International Indigenous Youth Council launched a historic run to stop the building of the Dakota Access Pipeline. Their act galvanized the Standing Rock Sioux tribal leaders to mobilize resistance. Standing Rock drew thousands across the country and the world to challenge the fossil fuel industry, including from San Francisco Chinatown.<sup>27</sup>

I was fundraising to support Standing Rock when Dallas Goldtooth, an Indigenous Environmental Network youth organizer, encouraged us to come to North Dakota. From this invitation the Chinese

Progressive Association (CPA) organized the Berta Vive Delegation to travel from San Francisco to Standing Rock.<sup>28</sup> On September 27, 2016, our delegation issued a statement connecting the fight for sovereignty and the protection of water, life, and community at Standing Rock with our histories in San Francisco Chinatown.<sup>29</sup>

To support the resistance, we brought financial aid to the camp, delivered gifts for the elders designed by artist Leon Sun, and worked under the leadership of the camp Water Protector elders. It was important to learn and honor the rules of the camp so that our actions were respectful, contributed collectively, and did not result in a burden for our hosts. Most important, we each came back with a deeper understanding of prayer and spirituality. For myself I've since strived to embrace this as a daily personal practice to decolonize and fight for justice not only with my brain and body but also from the heart.

At the Standing Rock campfire we were invited to address the elders and children who gather for the daily morning ceremony. Linda Lee from CPA shared her family's "Water Is Life" story. Linda is second-generation Hmong and grew up in Sacramento. Linda's mother is an amazingly strong and talented woman who, as Linda explains, "can grow anything." The family relies on what comes out of the garden. In 2017, in the midst of the California drought, water-use restrictions were levied across the state. Violations of the policy would result in fines and possible legal charges. The community felt scared and criminalized. Visits to water the garden became uncomfortable and intimidating. Fearing they might violate water rules, neighbors resorted to spending precious money to buy bottled water and to use the Laundromat, rather than use water from the tap. We should not be criminalizing the vulnerable communities for activities such as growing their own food. Instead, two principles should guide our work. First, in seeking to address issues such as the California water shortage, we must ensure these solutions do no harm to the community. Second, Linda recommends that people like her mother should be involved in developing protocols and policies when future climate policies are drafted and implemented. At the conclusion of Linda's story, we were humbled when the elders came and welcomed each of us into the camp with a warm handshake and hug.

On our last day Dallas Goldtooth and Kandi Mossett from IEN sent us off with much appreciation and the "ask" for us to keep up the local direct actions to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline and draw attention

to the abuse, disappearance, and murder of Native women as a result of construction of the pipeline.<sup>30</sup> When we returned to the Bay Area, we worked with Pennie Opal Plant, Isabella Zizi, and Briana Ruiz from Idle No More and Corrina Gould from Indian People Organized for Change. Together we mobilized thousands in direct actions to shut down the populous Market Street in San Francisco, confront the US Army Corps of Engineers, and shut down Wells Fargo, CitiBank, and Chase Bank. These direct actions, which involved civil disobedience, were needed to shift the political climate and pressure the City of San Francisco to divest city funds from banks doing business with companies that engaged in dirty energy and prisons. The San Francisco Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to divest city funds and create a San Francisco Public Bank, where the funds would be deposited and



FIGURE 12.1. Gloria Ushigua Santi, president of the Sapara Women's Association of Ecuador, delivers a letter to the Chinese consulate's office in San Francisco in 2017 demanding the withdrawal of Andes Petroleum from the Amazon. The Chinese state-owned oil company was seeking to explore for and extract oil in the ancestral lands of the Sarapa Nation. The Chinese Progressive Association extended international solidarity, mobilizing a delegation to accompany Gloria Ushigua Santi as she delivered her letter. Media coverage of this exchange went viral internationally. Two years later the Ecuadorian government issued a resolution stating that Andes Petroleum would withdraw from Sapara territory. Photo by Joyce Xi.

used to serve the community. A public bank is an example of what Grace Lee Boggs meant when she said, "A revolution that is based on the people exercising their creativity in the midst of devastation is one of the great historical contributions of humankind."

#### FROM CHINATOWN TO THE AMAZON

Rainforests around the planet are described as the lungs of Mother Earth. All of us are dependent on tropical rainforests, but the Indigenous peoples who live there are the stewards of the land and defenders against extractive plunder and deforestation. In 2017 I learned from a representative of IEN that Andes Petroleum, a Chinese state-owned oil company, had acquired the concession to explore for and extract oil on the ancestral territory of the Sapara Nation. She informed me that Gloria Ushigua Santi, president of the Sapara Women's Association of Ecuador, tried to deliver a letter to the Chinese ambassador to the United Nations requesting that Andes Petroleum not explore for oil and immediately cancel the contract with the Ecuadorian government. She only managed to slip the letter under the door of the mission.

I was moved by our shared experiences of colonization and immediately started to think of ways to be in solidarity through concrete action. I suggested that on her way home to the Amazon, Gloria could attempt to deliver the letter to the Chinese consulate's office in San Francisco. On July 14, 2017, I helped mobilize a delegation to the Chinese consulate along with holding a press conference where local and international Chinese press were present.<sup>31</sup> Surrounded by supporters holding signs and chanting, Gloria led us to the door of the Chinese consulate. After a few minutes of knocking, a consulate representative opened the door. We were surprised that he was not hostile but instead listened intently as Gloria explained the situation. He then accepted the letter and acknowledged it would get to the proper authorities.<sup>32</sup> Media coverage of this exchange went viral internationally.<sup>33</sup>

We did not know the impact of these actions until 2018, when we heard that the Chinese oil company was considering pulling out. Then, on October 10, 2019, the Ecuadorian government issued a resolution stating that Andes Petroleum would withdraw from Sapara territory in response to Sapara opposition to oil exploitation.<sup>34</sup> While this is not yet a total victory—the Sapara Nation requested the total withdrawal from all areas designated for oil exploitation, and the resolution only references one of the two designated areas—Gloria



FIGURE 12.2. An Asian American contingent marching in the People's Climate March in San Francisco on September 8, 2018. During the Solidarity 2 Solutions week of activities, the Chinese Progressive Association hosted a Chinatown Environmental Justice tour. Pam Tau Lee has long been a leader of the national Environmental Justice and Asian American Movements. Photo by Eurydice Thomas, eurydicedphoto.com.

has repeatedly acknowledged that the support received from CPA made a big difference.<sup>35</sup> This experience reaffirmed for me the importance of solidarity not as an isolated act but as part of international movement building.

#### TOWARD “ALL MY RELATIONS”

Dallas Goldtooth, an organizer for IEN's Keep It In the Ground project, always starts his presentations with the prayer *Mitakuye Oyasin*, or “All My Relations.” His invocation was always a good indication of what would follow: wisdom, leadership, encouragement, connection, being in balance with Mother Earth. Every morning I wake up with the hope that I can make these words come to life in their own particular way.

In 2018 the People's Climate Movement March was held in San Francisco under the national call “Rise for Climate, Jobs, and Justice.” I represented CPA at the planning meetings. In the spirit of “all my

relations,” this mobilization was an opportunity to deepen relationships within the Asian American community and with the broader Climate Justice movement. During the Solidarity 2 Solutions week of activities, CPA hosted a Chinatown Environmental Justice tour. The tour started at Wentworth Alley, historically known as “Fish Alley” for the mural of painted fish that were once plentiful in the San Francisco Bay and that are now threatened. We explained how pollution from toxic waste and climate change have impacted subsistence fishing in our local waters. Artist and environmentalist Leon Sun and I designed and distributed thousands of bilingual buttons in English and Chinese: “Water Is Life,” “Sky Protector,” and “No REDDS.” For the People's Climate Movement March, I approached Leon about designing and leading a team of young people to contribute to painting the world's largest street mural. Leon and Vida Kuang created a beautiful Sky Protector design.<sup>36</sup>

On September 8, 2018, I was proud to play a part in mobilizing more than three hundred Asians under the banner “From our homelands to the front line—Asians Rise 4 Climate” and initiating a joint Asian statement documenting the devastating environmental impacts of climate change and the forced extraction of natural resources across Asia as well as the racialized health and environmental impacts of white supremacy and economic exploitation on Asian communities in the United States.<sup>37</sup> In the spirit of all my relations and acting like a majority, the joint statement calls for Asians to work together and reimagine what it means to find solutions that work:

The crisis of climate change has inflicted environmental disaster across our home-lands in Asia ranging from rising sea levels, air, soil and water pollution, dams bursting, typhoons, extreme temperatures, drought, major threats to food security and a host of other assaults, resulting in deaths, illness and displacement of millions of people. . . . In our local communities in the US, environmental racism, the disproportionate exposure to harmful environmental exposure, can also be traced to white supremacy and economic exploitation that has resulted in our families living near toxic facilities such as refineries, chemical plants, landfills, freeways, or in urban areas such as the Tenderloin and Chinatown. A toxic environment is also present when our humanity is denied, when our cultures, genders and ways of being are not embraced.

We come together to oppose false solutions. . . . We come with solutions of our own that unite and uplift the voices of those most impacted by the climate crisis.<sup>38</sup>

It is imperative that we come together to be radical environmental justice “solutionaries,” that we be aggressive in critiquing, exposing, and challenging the kinds of proposals that look like solutions but in fact enable dirty energy. For environmental justice organizations this is a challenge because many mainstream funders and environmental organizations support such market-based policies. In my search I have found only one group of funders who openly oppose funding market-based solutions.<sup>39</sup> We must be bold and act as the majority to halt emissions at the source, keep dirty fuels in the ground, and engage in practices to live in balance with Mother Earth.

#### **WE WILL NOT BE SILENCED: THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY**

In 2019 Global Witness documented “164 killings of land and environmental defenders—ordinary people murdered for defending their homes, forests and rivers against destructive industries. Countless more were silenced through violent attacks, arrests, death threats or lawsuits.” The Philippines had become, under President Duterte, the deadliest place in the world for environmentalists.<sup>40</sup> One survivor of this brutality is Brandon Lee, a volunteer with the Chinese Progressive Association, whose commitment to democracy and liberation took him from San Francisco to the Philippines. His passion for the people’s struggles for democracy and liberation took root during an exposure trip to the Philippines, where he met with Indigenous people, environmental activists, farmers, peasants, and human rights defenders.<sup>41</sup> He returned to the States and volunteered with BAYAN USA Northern California, but for him this was not enough. Despite the dangers for activists, he relocated to the Philippines in 2010 and volunteered as a paralegal for the Cordillera Human Rights Alliance and as provincial human rights officer for the Ifugao Peasant Movement and the Justice and Peace Advocates of Ifugao. In 2015 a death threat was mailed to him and nine others. Even after the killing of movement leader and farmer leader Ricardo Mayumi in 2018, Brandon stepped forward as

an activist journalist campaigning against the Quad River Hydropower Project.

Beverly Longid, chair of the Indigenous People’s Movement for Self-Determination and Liberation, testified before a US congressional hearing about the human rights situation in the Philippines: “We have been facing intensified incursion into our ancestral lands because of the government’s ‘Build Build Build’ policy that would bring in destructive projects like mining, corporate energy projects and plantations. Alongside the ‘Build Build Build’ policy is Duterte’s ‘kill kill kill’ policy against people who are resisting, dissenting, or critical to his policy or programs.”<sup>42</sup> Nine days later, on August 6, 2019, Brandon was shot multiple times in the back by unidentified men whom he believes were state security forces or agents. Brandon Lee represents the kinds of courageous international and interethnic solidarities that are necessary if we are to transform our world. We must not be silent because our voices and acts of solidarity can make a difference.

It’s been fifty years since I was criticized by my family for becoming a radical activist. Twenty years ago, over lunch with my then seventy-year-old parents, the topic of the war in Vietnam came up. My dad, who worked as an engineer as part of the US military complex, leaned over and asked, “Mama, what side was I on?” Mom looked at him and with a firm voice said, “The wrong side.” Dad turned to me and said, “I’m proud of you.” My heart swelled with joy. For me it was an affirmation that being radically “different” and acting on my views for peace was not a bad thing. I was lucky to have learned that over time my parents understood where I was coming from and that they were proud. So to all the Asians out there worried about advocating for a better world, my advice is to own it and trust yourself and your family.

For me organizing starts with the “ask.” I was twenty years old when I gave my first public speech. I was attending a student antiwar rally planning meeting when Floyd Huen recommended that I deliver the Asian Coalition speech. Though I knew very little about the situation and was new to the movement, accepting that ask pushed me to study up on the war, understand why the United States was in Asia, and analyze why we as Asian Americans were taking a stand in opposition to the war. That ask was key for me in transforming my personal fear of public speaking into taking responsibility so my speech

could bring clarity, tell the truth, uplift solidarity, and help to grow the greater radical “we.” It was the organizing insight of people like Floyd who supported my development and pushed me to step up.

Radical love has sustained me throughout these years. In 2017, when I was invited to go on an exploratory trip to the Philippines, I hesitantly expressed concern for my husband’s health and welfare. Ben’s support and encouragement have been crucial in my ability to stay engaged, and he would now be home alone for two weeks. Almost immediately, Armael Malinis developed a spreadsheet. Friends and community stepped up, and each day for Ben was filled with visits, phone calls, shared meals, walks, and lively conversation. To this day Ben and I look back at how everyday situations can become transformative organizing moments that strengthen our love for the movement.

So many times the work of being in the journey toward liberation and environmental and economic justice can be overwhelming. During these moments I have learned not to internalize it but to reach out, instead, and ask my friends who worry about me, “What do you think I need to do?” I have learned that there is a difference between burnout and fatigue. With fatigue one should rest and recover. Burnout is when you no longer want to be a part of the movement. I have been blessed to be in the struggle alongside room attendants, community residents, and frontline environmental justice communities. I have been inspired by the grassroots leaders and freedom fighters and environmental defenders from around the world. These experiences and relationships have kept me grounded and engaged. When in the course of organizing, if a community resident, room cleaner, or ally invited me to go to their home for dinner or tea, I went. These were moments when we got to learn about and from each other. These were spaces where trust and authentic friendships evolved and we became each other’s support and cheerleader. These are the spaces in which the real work of growing the greater we is done and where, instead of burnout, our personal commitment to the work becomes more grounded.

It is my hope that the radical love stories can provide some guidance on the crisis of “what can we do about the climate?” For me it has been about growing the greater we and not relying on the system that got us into this crisis to get us out. For me the root cause for this crisis is the system of capitalism that has evolved into imperialism, the hetero-patriarchial violence and militarization of our communities, and the brutal extraction of resources from the land and unbridled

consumption. Dismantling this system needs to go hand in hand with a just transition away from capitalism and guided by a vision that a “better world is possible,” one with a clean and healthy environment for all. This vision for the future is grounded in my firm belief that what happens in the world will be determined by working-class people. My own work as an environmental justice activist started with and will always be grounded in my family’s roots in Chinatown, and I believe that our work and visions for a better world must necessarily emerge from and be rooted in place, class consciousness, and the experiences and visions of working-class people.

I also believe that the youth of today bring their own ideas about what we must do about the climate to make a better world possible and, through their visions, will continue to advance and grow in new ways the work that my generation and those before me began. Happy Lim, another elder mentor for many of us Chinese radical 1960s youths, inspired his generation of 1930s radical Chinese youths and believed in the power of young people to move liberation forward. In an interview for *East Wind* magazine, he said: “Only if we take reality as it is, do mass work, persist in the correct line, and struggle relentlessly will a free, just, and equal society become a reality. I will follow the advanced youth of today and keep fighting.” For me, in the words of Happy Lim, I will follow the advanced youth and will strive to keep on fighting.

#### NOTES

This chapter is an expanded version of Pam Tau Lee’s keynote address for the Contemporary Asian American Activism symposium, held at UCSB, January 24–25, 2019. Thank you, Monica Chan, Diane Fujino, and Robyn Rodriguez, for this invitation to document and reflect on the past, present, and the future. I also want to thank everyone who supported me in writing this chapter, including Katherine Lee, Ben Lee, Cassandra Smithies, and those whose stories I’ve included in it.

1 Red Guard Political Program, Point 11, *Aion Magazine* 1, no. 1 (1970): 30–31. The Red Guard Political Platform is modeled after the Black Panther Party’s Ten-Point Platform. It is Asian focused and includes the additional demand on environment.

2 Indians of All Tribes, “The Alcatraz Proclamation, 1969,” in *Environmental Justice in Postwar America: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Christopher W. Wells (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 93–94.

3 Vida Kuang, email message to author, November 10, 2018.

- 4 George Murray and Joudon Major Ford, "Black Panthers: The Afro-Americans' Challenge," *Tricontinental* 10 (January–February 1969): 96–111.
- 5 Murray and Ford, "Black Panthers."
- 6 Bobby Seale, Alex Hing, Sadie Lum, and Irwin Lum, in discussion with the author, July 2009; Fred Ho, ed., *Legacy to Liberation: Politics and Culture of Revolutionary Asian Pacific America* (San Francisco: AK Press, 2000), 396.
- 7 "I Wor Kuen 12 Point Platform and Program," in *Roots: An Asian American Reader*, ed. Amy Tachiki et al. (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1971).
- 8 Angela Zhao argues that IWK was a feminist organization; this meant that the core leadership group was led by women and half the membership was women. For more about IWK as a feminist organization, see Angela Zhao, "The Righteous Fists of Harmony: Asian American Revolutionaries in the Radical Minority and Third World Liberation Movements, 1960–1978" (bachelor's thesis, University of Chicago, April 6, 2018), <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1a/zhao.pdf>. I found IWK women to be down-to-earth, responsible, and politically clear. They practiced methods of work that facilitated our personal and political growth and development, including study and discussion. Point 4 of the IWK platform reads: "The thousands of years of oppression under feudalism and capitalism have created institutions and myths of male supremacy over women. Men must fight along with sisters in the struggle for economic and social equality and must recognize that sisters make up over half of the revolutionary army. Sisters and brothers are equals fighting for our people."
- The IWK platform also emphasized mutual support and acceptance: "Asian people in Amerika have been continually oppressed by greedy and traitorous people in our own communities and wider racist exploitative society. We want an end to male chauvinism and sexual exploitation. We are working for a world of peace, where the needs of the people come first, which is without class distinctions and is based upon the love and unity of all peoples" ("I Wor Kuen 12 Point Platform and Program").
- 9 "I Wor Kuen 12 Point Platform and Program."
- 10 On the Chicano Moratorium Committee, see Lorena Oropeza, *Raza Si, Guerra No: Chicano Protest and Patriotism during the Viet Nam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
- 11 On the Bay Area Asian Coalition Against the War, see Daryl J. Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 120–25.
- 12 Michael Liu, Kim Geron, and Tracy Lai, *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism: Community, Vision, and Power* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 66; Maeda, *Chains of Babylon*, 123.
- 13 "In the Belly of the Monster: Asian American Opposition to the Vietnam War," *Densho Blog*, November 15, 2017, <https://densho.org/asian-american-opposition-vietnam-war>; Maeda, *Chains of Babylon*, 123.
- 14 United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites" (New York: Public Data Access, 1987); Christopher W. Wells, introduction to Wells, *Environmental Justice in Postwar American*, 3–21; World Rainforest Movement, "For a Change of Paradigm": Interview with Tom Goldtooth from the Indigenous Environmental Network, 2016," in Wells, *Environmental Justice in Postwar America*, 286–90.
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  - 26 I wish to acknowledge and appreciate OCAW union members Joe Anderson and Paul Renner, who were strong allies in their support for the environmental justice community in this process, and to Jenice View, Jose Bravo, Richard Moore, Tom Goldtooth, Ruben Solis-Garcia, and the late Connie Tucker for their dedication to keeping the concept of a Just Transition grounded in the struggles of workers and grassroots work and centered around abolishing environmental racism.
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  - 29 The full beginning of the delegation statement reads: "We travel as the Berta Vive Delegation to join the actions to protect the water, life, and community from being destroyed by the Dakota Access Pipeline. We travel also to honor the life of Berta Caceres who was murdered for protecting her community's land and water in Honduras. We are humbled yet proud to be a part of this historic moment and contribute towards building international vigilance and solidarity with the Water Protectors at Standing Rock. While our group comes in solidarity under the organizational banner of the Chinese Progressive Association, we are of Hmong, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Yaqui/Apache/Mexican heritage. For many of us, the history and violence of US Imperialism and wars of aggression in our homelands capture the roots for the arrival of our people to America. This violence included the use of chemical warfare (Agent Orange and napalm), the dropping of bombs, the infusion of drugs and other acts of control and domination."
  - 30 Oil pipeline construction crew "man camps" are linked to the sexual abuse of, violence against, and disappearance of Native women. See Nick Estes, "Prologue: Prophets," *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2019), 8.
  - 31 Press conference speakers were Gloria Ushigua Santi, Sapara Women's Association of Ecuador (ASHINWAKA); Corrina Gould, Indian People Organized for Change; Leila Salazar-Lopez, Amazon Watch; Metzali Andrade, PODER; Pam Tau Lee, Chinese Progressive Association.
  - 32 The letter includes this statement: "The Sapara Nation of the Amazon . . . write to . . . request that you act to prevent the genocide of the Sapara Nation and of the Indigenous Peoples in Isolation and that the contracts . . . to explore and exploit oil be immediately and definitively canceled. The survival of the Sapara Nation and Indigenous Peoples in Isolation depends on the health of our rainforests, rivers, mountains and biodiversity, where our spirits are born. The Sapara Nation was never consulted. Nor did the Nation grant its free, prior and informed consent, as stipulated by the Constitution of Ecuador, international human rights treaties and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. . . . There are precedents of genocides caused by the exploration, extraction, exploitation and transportation of oil in the Amazon. The operations of Texaco caused grave destruction of the environment. Both the Tetetes and the Sanshauri who inhabited the region exploited by Texaco were wiped out." For Chinese TV and print coverage on the contents of the letter, see *AppleDaily*, July 16, 2017, <https://hk.news.appledaily.com/international/daily/article/20170716/20091501>.

- 33 For Chinese coverage of the delivery of the Sapara letter to the Chinese consulate, see *AppleDaily*, July 16, 2017, <http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/international/art/20170716/20091501> (Cantonese); and *Apple-Daily*, July 15, 2017, <https://tw.appledaily.com/international/20170715/3YOZYR75LWEUASKHKYKA6PK6HY> (Mandarin).
- 34 See “Resolution Nro. MERNR-MERNR-2019-0013-RM—Ministerio de Energía y Recursos Naturales No Renovables,” printed resolution, in possession of author, October 10, 2019.
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- 41 On BAYAN’s exposure trips, see Jessica Antonio’s chapter in this volume, “BAYAN USA: Filipino Transnational Radical Activism in the United States in the Twenty-First Century.”
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## EPILOGUE

## RADICAL LOVE FOR A NEW GENERATION

ROBYN MAGALIT RODRIGUEZ

Be Love, Be Loved, Be Amado  
Amado Khaya Canham Rodriguez  
May 9, 1998–August 4, 2020

Let's lift up his memory and remember his legacy.  
He is the new ancestor that has carved out a new path and way of being.  
He is the success story we need to celebrate.  
He is the epitome of humanity.

—EHGOSA HAMILTON, TEACHER AND BLACK STUDENT UNION ADVISOR, CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOL

WE WERE IN THE MIDST OF FINALIZING THE REVISIONS TO this anthology when I received the tragic news that my son, Amado Khaya Canham Rodriguez, suddenly passed away on August 4, 2020, in Mindoro, Philippines. He was twenty-two. For two years he had been living and working alongside Indigenous peoples of the Philippines in their struggle for self-determination and national democracy. For the past few months Amado lived among the Mangyan people, supporting relief efforts in the wake of two successive typhoons and the onset of COVID-19.