

## THE STRUGGLE OF UNBOUND FEET

Unbound Feet was a collective of six Chinese and Korean American women writers who formed in the summer of 1979 to write and perform our work as poets, fiction writers, and dramatists. Our founding members were Nancy Hom, Genny Lim, Canyon Sam, Kitty Tsui, Nellie Wong, and Merle Woo. Our connecting link was our writing and our feminism. In that spirit, we wrote a Statement of Purpose to elucidate our goals and our collective philosophy:

"As writers and cultural workers, we believe in the power of words as a tool for radical social change. We believe that our writing is a political act, and that politics and art cannot be divided. . . We have experienced oppression because of our race, sex, sexuality, and class; therefore, we speak out from a multi-issue base. We do not believe in isolating political struggles, such as separating ourselves from men or non-Asians as a method of social change, but believe that real equality can only come about by all oppressed groups working together. As feminists, our work examines, questions, and challenges traditional roles and relationships, breaks down stereotypes, and moves toward linking women's experiences together all over the world."

In the 1-1/2 years of our existence, we performed our work throughout California. We decided to publish a book as well as to continue to write and perform amidst our daily lives as lesbians and straight women, working mothers, graphic artists, educators, electricians, office workers, and feminist activists.

Today we have a split, not over petty issues or personal differences. It is a class struggle directly related to the communities that have supported Unbound Feet since its inception. Unbound Feet was a movement group. Our politics were an integral part of our writing, and we were an integral part of our communities: the Third World, the Women's, the Gay, and the Left communities. For this reason, Kitty Tsui, Nellie Wong, and Merle Woo are publicizing what has happened.

This class struggle is divided into two groups: our opposition -- Nancy Hom, Genny Lim, and Canyon Sam -- has united, not around a principled, affirmative program, but with the single aim of dissolving the group; they want to shelve the name and the tradition described in our Statement of Purpose. We will prove in the following history of our group and the split, that our opposition -- despite the collective Statement of Purpose -- chose to avoid principled political activism. When confronted with issues that should be publicly addressed, they are afraid to make waves that might hamper their own artistic careers within the establishment.

They have attacked us, three Asian American women who have worked closely with them for one and one-half years, for taking a stand on issues when that stand was openly critical of the more powerful element of our community. Their position has been that we must be careful not to turn off potential supporters by pushing for too much; they have attempted to terminate a movement group that has actively pushed toward radical change in both writing and community work. Kitty Tsui, Nellie Wong, and Merle Woo, who shall be known as Unbound Feet Three, are dedicated to multi-issue feminism, emphasizing mutual support and solidarity between all movements of oppressed groups. Before the split, Unbound Feet Three consistently stood up for our ideas, but we were attacked, red-baited, and finally, after the split, our opposition resorted to obstructionist tactics.

### Unbound Feet's Differences Emerge

While Unbound Feet built its reputation as Asian American feminist writers, our differences as feminists emerged from our planning of "Yellow Daughters," a performance sponsored by Asian American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.



"Daughters" was set for February 6, 1981, with initial negotiations for a performance contract based on Asian American Studies paying publicity and technical costs and a performance fee. In return, we agreed to give 300+ seats to students in Asian American Studies. Relying on this agreement, we issued publicity and spent time and money on silkscreened posters. Meanwhile we made several attempts to get Asian American Studies to put in writing a memo of our oral agreement. Finally, Asian American Studies told us we had "misconstrued" the agreement. They would not pay publicity and technical costs and the only payment we could expect would be a performance fee.

We met to discuss the dilemma: to go on with the show, to cancel, or to fight back. We were angered by the sexist condescension used by AAS throughout our discussions and we decided to confront this mistreatment by issuing a statement at the end of the show.

During this same period, students in AAS had begun their own battle against similar patronizing and unilateral treatment by the AAS administration. The students' objectives were to have a voice in the decision-making process, to help save AAS from several financial cutbacks, and to have the administrators of AAS accountable to the community by not allowing such crucial courses as community languages to be cut. Because Unbound Feet connected the students' struggle with its own as an expression of its multi-issue feminism, we agreed to have a student representative speak out at the end of the performance. We felt that our statement and the students' statement together would demand that AAS be accountable to the community.

#### The Opposition Finally Speaks Out

Afterwards, we all met to evaluate the performance. At that meeting, Genny, Nancy, and Canyon complained they had not really wanted to make the statement after all, that those of us who were "stronger, more vocal," forced them into it, by "mind-twisting and head-bending" them. This is an attack on our leadership as vocal Asian American women. This is also red-baiting: radicals have historically been accused of brainwashing and forcing their opinions on others. In a letter Nancy stated:

"The dynamics of the group has changed to a point where I no longer feel comfortable voicing opinions. I am dismayed over the way we have handled the whole Asian Studies question, if that's an indication of how this group will operate on this new political plane."

The opposition had ample opportunity to voice their dissension; they actively participated in writing the statement and we unanimously agreed to issue it. They kept their disagreements quiet and resented us for their own silence. We understand that exploited peoples have often dealt with their oppression by internalizing their anger and by keeping silent. Therefore, we were dismayed that this tactic was used in our collective. This is why a true feminist perspective is necessary: to abandon self-contempt and to externalize the criticism and place it where it belongs.

Canyon resorted to left-baiting of Nellie and Merle who are open about their socialist-feminist politics; she stated in a letter:

"Unbound Feet did not form to engage in direct politicking (sic), organizing, or party building. . .

"I don't see in general a need to make stands on different political issues. I don't see that as our purpose, number one. And number two, such a thing could be time-consuming and we already spend too little time on our art."



So, contrary to our Statement of Purpose, art and politics for Canyon are separate, and Nancy states:

"In these times, I can't afford to spend a lot of energy involved with internal group conflicts or with fighting within our own communities. In the future we can't afford to burn any bridges with anybody who might be sympathetic to our causes. We are going to find ourselves with some very strange bedfellows because we will need everybody's help to offset Reagan and the power structure. . . As long as Asians and women fight in their own communities, to me, it is not 'taking a stand'."

We agree we must offset Reagan and the power structure, but not by selling out what we stand for. As feminist activists we must speak out against injustice in our own backyard before we can make change in the world. Criticism is a positive moving force. Being Asian American alone does not guarantee freedom from conflict. There are political divisions based on sexism, class bias, and ideological differences. Being Asian American women and feminists precisely means that we have no choice but to take a stand. Clearly, the survival of Unbound Feet was at stake. And how did the opposition propose to resolve this conflict?

At first, Genny and Nancy said they were resigning. Kitty, Nellie, and Merle wanted to continue working as Unbound Feet. Canyon said nothing. Then, Genny, Nancy, and Canyon proposed to dissolve the organization, demanding that we renounce the name: "Because we are evenly split on our positions, we feel no one side has the right to claim the name of Unbound Feet and continue functioning under it." We disagree. We were born in direct response to the movements that shaped and supported us. Kitty Tsui, Nellie Wong, and Merle Woo shall be known as Unbound Feet Three, and are determined to carry out the principles in our Statement of Purpose and established by the organization we helped build.

Later, Nancy changed her mind:

". . . . I am deleting the paragraphs that say I'm resigning from the group. I prefer to see it as a divorce."

Her statement is sexist. Unbound Feet was a collective, not a patriarchal institution. She equates a political split to a "divorce" as if our members "married" each other when we formed!

The opposition's main purpose in remaining together was to stop us from continuing. They wanted the group to die rather than struggle to make it live. Kitty, Nellie, and Merle wanted to continue as Unbound Feet, so we filed a fictitious business name statement as Unbound Feet Three.

#### Obstructionist Tactics

First, the opposition presented us with a prepared statement of dissolution. One of the clauses was that in the future none of us could use the name, Unbound Feet. Then, they changed their minds. Using over \$200 from our joint checking account, they incorporated the name, Unbound Feet. Canyon, who was elected treasurer before our group split, withdrew over \$2,400 from our joint savings account. Kitty, Nellie, and Merle were not consulted. We feel that the money belongs to all six of us who worked for it, and by extension, belongs to the movements that have supported us. The opposition has hired an attorney who says that Canyon is now holding our funds "in trust" for all of us. We do not feel that this matter can be settled democratically while the group funds are being held in trust by a member of one side of the controversy. This is not a "personal" dispute. It is a dispute of principles and politics. It involves not only the six in Unbound Feet, but the movements who have made our



survival possible and the communities we represent. If three of us were wronged, the groups we represent were wronged. The opposition is holding our money; they have said, "when the matter of the name is resolved, we will be glad to meet with you to close business matters." They have refused to act on the principles of democracy and feminism, believing they can silence the politics of our struggle by trying to settle it as a "personal" dispute among ourselves.

#### The issue of the Name, Unbound Feet

The name is central to our struggle. Though the opposition proposed to dissolve the collective and wanted the name stricken from Asian American and women's history, Canyon Sam, in recent Gay Freedom Week publicity, advertised herself as a "member of the Asian feminist theater troupe, 'Unbound Feet'." Evidently, it mattered not one whit to Canyon that she proposed the name not be used but then used it! The name, Unbound Feet, symbolizes the active liberation of women; in particular, Asian women who suffer from sexism, racism, and class oppression. The opposition is trying to stop Kitty, Nellie, and Merle from using the Unbound Feet name by their attempts to "dissolve" what we have built through our political and artistic work.

We publicize the struggle of Unbound Feet to defend our democratic rights, multi-issue feminism, and the freedom to speak out as radicals. Kitty, Nellie, and Merle intend to continue working together as Unbound Feet Three. To move towards freedom we must take stands as well as to write and perform our art. We will take political stands, particularly when issues affect us as women, as Asian Americans, as lesbians, as radicals, and as multi-issue feminists. In concert with the name, Unbound Feet, we choose to unbind our feet.

#### We Need Your Support

We ask you, our communities, to support us in our efforts to settle the Unbound Feet dispute in a fair and democratic manner. Here's how you can help:

- .Talk about our political struggle in your classes, workshops, organizations, and homes, and take a stand for democracy and multi-issue feminism.
- .Let us know your views. We are open to our communities' feelings and analysis of our struggle.
- .Write letters to newspapers, community journals, newsletters, and magazines to support our right to work utilizing the name, Unbound Feet. Please send us copies of your letters.
- .Support Unbound Feet Three by coming to our future readings and performances. Show your active support with a donation to Unbound Feet Three. Send your checks to Unbound Feet Three, P. O. Box 1993, Oakland, CA. 94604.

#### ANNOUNCEMENT

Benefit Reading for Unbound Feet Three:  
Kitty Tsui      Nellie Wong      Merle Woo

"Breaking Ground"

Saturday, August 15, 1981, 8:00 p.m.  
Women's Building, 3543 - 18th Street, San Francisco

Child Care Available  
Wheelchair Accessible