UCLA
UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title
Radical Social Work and Asian Americans: An Examination of Practice, Politics, and the Paradox of the Profession

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4df9932h

Author
Higa, Lauren Kiyo

Publication Date
2021

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Radical Social Work and Asian Americans:

An Examination of Practice, Politics, and the Paradox of the Profession

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in Asian American Studies

by

Lauren Kiyo Higa

2021

© Copyright by

Lauren Kiyo Higa

2021

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Radical Social Work and Asian Americans:

An Examination of Practice, Politics, and the Paradox of the Profession

By

Lauren Kiyo Higa

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Karen Umemoto, Chair

This study investigates the practices that radical Asian American social workers undertake in response to the dilemmas that arise between their political beliefs and the social work profession. Based on interviews with ten activist social workers selected through snowball and criterion sampling, this project asks: How are radical Asian American social workers shaping their practice based on a reimagination of the field? This study responds to the paucity of social work literature on Asian American practitioners, especially as related to the social work profession's heightened contradictions in the time of neoliberalism. It remains clear that there is much for social work to learn from Asian Americans who have more radical agendas for change. Heeding Robert Mullaly and Eric Keating's (1991) call that "radical social workers work both inside and outside the welfare state" (p. 69), I argue that radical Asian American social work encompasses three modes of practice: infrapolitics and insurgency, healing work as political

practice, and political and community organizing. Within the welfare state, interviewees engage in subversive practices, or infrapolitics and insurgency, to help protect and empower themselves and the people with whom they work. Interviewees also take part in healing work as political practice by invoking family history and radical imaginations in a typically ahistorical space. Their organizing work takes place outside traditional service organizations and involves organizing social work colleagues as well as addressing social and political forces that affect their communities' lives. Ultimately, the work of radical Asian American social workers lead us to identify the ways white supremacy have shaped the contemporary field's lens and refuse to comply with practices we know harm communities our own or otherwise. Instead, we will offer critiques of the current structures and begin building alternate modes of practice to empower and survive, pending revolution.

Diane Fujino

Cindy Sangalang

Karen Umemoto, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2021

For past, present, and future MA MSWs.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS vii

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction 1

CHAPTER TWO: Methodology 14

CHAPTER THREE: Infrapolitics and Insurgency 20

CHAPTER FOUR: Healing Work as Political Practice 36

CHAPTER FIVE: Political and Community Organizing 53

CHAPTER SIX: Concluding Discussion 72

BIBLIOGRAPHY 79

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The acknowledgements are my favorite part of reading culminating academic projects because I like being reminded that projects like this can't and shouldn't be done without a village. I relied heavily on mine.

First, I would like to thank my participants, who were gracious with their time, stories, and reflections. I am relieved to know that there are social workers like you all in the world supporting our communities.

Next, I must thank my committee. Thank you, Karen, for supporting this thesis idea and the twelve I had before this; for allowing me to GSR for you; and for being a kind and generous mentor unafraid to walk the walk. When I was an undergraduate and first read "On Strike!" I could not have imagined I would get to work so closely with its author. Thank you, Cindy, for offering advice and support at each step, microstep, and misstep of this project, and for sponsoring many of my independent study units. It means a lot to have gotten to work with one of the few Pinay professors out there; you are the first one I've had. Thank you, Diane, for supporting me and my work from the time I was an undergraduate until now. I was a quiet undergraduate student, and I think I only spoke to you twice outside of class. In one of those conversations, you talked about how therapists do good work but can ultimately help people cope with a sick society. I doubt you remember that conversation, but I'm not sure this thesis would have happened without it.

A number of "thank yous" to other academic and university folks are in order. Thank you, Toby Hur, for being a sounding board for my cross-program woes, and for working your magic to get my second year internship. I hope more students end up with "trouble makers," and I hope this project can be useful for your own research endeavors. Thank you, Dr. Lee Ann

Wang, for providing feedback on my project at the AAS Research Symposium, and for serving as a discussant for our Asian Americans and Social Work panel at AAAS. Your reflections on my work helped push me to the finish line. Thank you, Dr. Jane Yamashiro, for being in community with me both at the OAA and in academic spaces, as well as for practicing my interview questions with you. I'm happy to report that they all went well. Thank you, Dr. Ben Zulueta, for believing in me since my very first Asian American Studies class -- so much so that you accidentally talked me into going to grad school. Thank you for continuing to be a gracious mentor and friend. Lastly, thank you to Greg Pancho, Kylin Sakamoto, and Professor Lucy MSP Burns for making the department run so smoothly and always making sure I was doing okay.

I must also thank my family. Mom and Ruel, thank you for throwing the full weight of your support behind whatever I decide to do. Grandma Lola, thank you for letting me move in halfway through the pandemic, for keeping me fed, and for your curiosity about my work in and outside of school. Lola and Lolo, thank you for your many jokes, plentiful encouragement, and interest in what I'm up to. I would also like to thank my doggie friends Gumbo the black lab and Bruno the pug for bringing so much joy into my life, especially during dark and scary times.

Another huge "thank you" is in order for my friends and chosen family. Thank you to Elyse Izumi, for your deep friendship, scholarly support, and for helping reconnect the Higas to the OAA. Thank you, soon-to-be Dr. Reuben Deleon, for always showing up. I'm not sure I would've gotten through these past three years without you. Thank you, Alex Nguyen, for understanding me at a weird level and for acting as editor in all arenas of my life. Thank you, Adrian Bacong, for your positivity and for modelling good work boundaries. Thank you, Bing Wang, for the music (yes, that is a Mamma Mia reference), for the many hours of 140 bpm played, and for your TAFlove. Thank you, Angel Trazo, for being by my side as I floundered to

find my footing in the weird world of academia. Thank you, soon-to-be Dr. Stephanie Chang for all the ankle conversations, laughs, and good energy. Thank you, Carl Ann Rei Bolano, Hanako Justice, and Iris Xu, for keeping me sane during my MSW years. Thank you, Belinda Gaspar, Joi Duncan, Kristen Mizutani, Leeza Oyoung, and Vivian Bui, for always showing me the kind of love only found in Santa Barbara. Thank you, Justin Arcangel and Thea Cabrera Montejo, for keeping me grounded and my heart full. Lastly, thank you to Robert Lawrence, Tyler Boesen, and Patrick Tarango for sticking around all these years.

A penultimate thank you is due to Gavin at 310 Coffee in Mar Vista for your generosity in letting me sit in the space after having purchased only one iced tea, and for the times you gave me all the leftover pastries.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank the UCLA Institute of American Culture and the UCLA Asian American Studies Center for providing funding for this project.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This study investigates the practices that radical Asian American social workers undertake in response to the dilemmas that arise between their political beliefs and the social work profession. Based on interviews with ten activist social workers selected through criterion and snowball sampling, this project asks: How are radical Asian American social workers shaping their practice based on a reimagination of the field? This study responds to the paucity of social work literature on Asian American practitioners, especially as related to the social work profession's heightened contradictions in the time of neoliberalism. It remains clear that there is much for social work to learn from Asian Americans who have more radical agendas for change.

Heeding the call that "radical social workers work both inside and outside the welfare state" (Mullaly and Keating, 1991, p. 69), I argue that radical Asian American social work encompasses three modes of practice: infrapolitics and insurgency, healing work as political practice, and political and community organizing. Within the welfare state, interviewees engage in subversive practices, or infrapolitics and insurgency, to help protect and empower themselves and the people with whom they work. Interviewees also take part in healing work as political practice by invoking family history and radical imaginations in a typically ahistorical space. Their organizing work takes place outside traditional service organizations and involves organizing social work colleagues as well as addressing social and political forces that affect their communities' lives. Ultimately, the work of radical Asian American social workers lead us to identify the ways white supremacy have shaped the contemporary field's lens and refuse to comply with practices we know harm communities our own or otherwise. Instead, we will offer

critiques of the current structures and begin building alternate modes of practice to empower and survive, pending revolution.

Radical Social Work

The call for radical social work finds its origins in the 1970s. In "Social Work in Search of a Radical Profession," Rein (1970) argues that, for social work as a profession to radicalize, it must hold itself accountable to its clients rather than colleagues, as well as advocate for clients at both individual and institutional levels. Five years later, an edited volume, *Radical Social Work* emerged from Britain. In the introduction, Bailey and Brake (1975) put forth a radical social work that understands a person within an environment of oppressive structures, widening the contextual lens put forth in the preceding literature from concrete institutions to larger social structures. They also suggest an element of empowerment via education, "innovat[ing] a dual process, assisting people to understand their alienation in terms of their oppression, and building up their self-esteem" (p. 10).

When this edited volume was published in the US, poverty scholars Cloward and Piven (1975) augmented frameworks befitting a radical social work. They agreed with their predecessors' thoughts on social context, writing that many clients' problems were rooted not in their personality, but in larger economic issues (p. xxii). To add, Cloward and Piven rejected the idea that social welfare institutions were benevolent, alluding to their role in managing poverty instead of alleviating it. Like Rein, who advocated for accountability to clients over colleagues, they recognized how professional theories, status, and roles legitimate dominance over other people's lives. From this, they underscore that social service agencies and their clients' interests are incompatible (p. xxii-xxviii).

Throughout the 1990s, several scholars traced emerging trends in the literature on radical social work. In "Similarities, Differences and Dialectics of Radical Social Work," Mullaly and Keating (1991) listed commonalities as a rejection of capitalism, liberal reformism, and professionalism; an understanding that the welfare state upholds capitalism; and an embrace of socialism. Similarly, Jansson and Smith (1996) claimed that radical social workers agreed on the failing of capitalism, which drove oppressive corporate interests. Longres (1996) maintains that radical social workers shared "(1) A belief that the institutional structure of society is the primary source of the personal problems of clients; (2) a focus on economic inequality as a central concern and cause of other social and individual problems; (3) a critical view of social service agencies as instruments of social control, co-optation, or stigmatization; (4) a focus on both structural and internalized oppression; (5) a linkage of cause and function and private troubles and public issues" (Reisch and Andrews, 2014, p. 6). It was also in this decade that de Maria (1992) offered a more concise definition of radical social work: that, correlated with the etymology of "radical," it is concerned with identifying and acting upon the roots of social problems.

The twentieth century has seen two major texts from the United Kingdom and one from the United States. Reisch and Andrews' (2014) *The Road Not Taken* is careful *not* to define "radical social work" because of the different standards and contexts in which it has used across decades. In *Radical social work in practice*, Ferguson and Woodward (2009) define radical social work as the antithesis of the profession's current state in the UK, where a neoliberal practice is doing little to mitigate growing economic inequality. In *Radical social work* today, Lavalette (2011) shares a similar definition, denouncing the privatization of social services.

Social Work, Social Services, and Social Movements

Of the scant literature on the relationship between social work and social movements, few scholars have worked at the level of theory. Wagner (1989) presents the relationships among social work, social movements, and social action in three stages. Wagner purports that the first stage involves social workers positioning themselves as allies to client-led militancy. In the Rank and File worker power period of the 1930s as well as the 1960s, social workers "did not see a separation between themselves and their clients" (p. 267). Stage two incorporates militancy into the professional sphere to challenge dominant practice paradigms. In "'A Nice Social Tea Party': The Rocky Relationship Between Social Work and Black Liberation" Bell (2014) argues that, during social movements like that of Black Power, social workers are forced to "rethink their roles," especially as the movement "create[s] openings for dissenting social workers to seek change within the profession," supporting Wagner's first two stages (p. 70-71). In short, social workers tend to join broader social unrest, then bring the lessons from the "frontlines" into their professions. Wagner's final stage is a softening of radical political critiques in order to compromise with mainstream professional leadership.

A handful of studies have examined the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements' relationship with social work. In *Righteous Self Determination: The Black Social Work Movement in America*, Reid-Merritt (2010) approaches Black social work as a professional movement that stemmed from societal changes in the 50s and 60s. Reid-Merritt presents engagement with Black intellectual traditions and the use of an Afrocentric worldview as central to defining Black social work. In *The Black Power Movement and American Social Work,* Bell (2014) argues that the establishment of the National Association of Black Social Workers

professional organization, which in its current state is concerned with professional development and Black issues, is an institutional legacy of Black Power.

Studies have also examined the Black Panthers' social service work. In *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination,* Nelson (2011) posits that health activism became such a large part of the Panthers' politics and programs as a critique of the Civil Rights Movement's "gains" for Black communities. They understood Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty as an extension of state control that offered resources when they wanted the power of self-determination. As a result, the Panthers hosted "serve the people" community programs ranging from food distribution events to "trusted-expert volunteer"-led medical clinics that provided tangible benefits and acted as an organizing tool. In *Black Against Empire*, Bloom and Martin (2016) discuss the Panthers' free breakfast program for children in a similar way: they highlighted the lack of War on Poverty resources being directed toward their communities and the capability of the community to fill those gaps when the government would not.

More recently, a wave of literature on anti-carceral and abolitionist social work emerged in response to George Floyd's murder in 2020, the subsequent calls for social workers to replace police, and the corresponding social movements. They align with Wagner's theorization that social workers align with "clients," as well as Bell's idea that social movements are an invitation for social workers to rethink their roles. M. E. Kim (2018) proposes that social work move away from domestic violence intervention strategies reliant on law enforcement and state violence, moving instead toward non-violent, community led alternatives. Jacobs et al. (2021) posit that social work's current level of collaboration with the law enforcement, especially in regard to the realms of gender-based violence, child welfare, schools, and mental health, makes up "carceral

social work." Like Kim, they call for a refusal to involve the police and a turn to community based alternatives and mutual aid efforts. James (2021) speaks to the heightened impact of carceral systems in the time of COVID-19 and, similar to Kim and Jacobs et al., calls for abolitionist social work.

Social Work and Whiteness

A number of scholars discuss how contemporary social work is intimately connected to whiteness. Gregory (2021) takes a historical approach to social work, tracing how, since its nineteenth century founding, it has always been a product and project of whiteness. With the goal of helping the poor, Mary Richmond and the New-York based Charity Organization Society's (COS) "charitable giving" approach encouraged its workers to reward those who overcame the personal failures at fault for their poverty. In practice, COS workers engaged in "friendly visiting," where they briefly left their white middle-class neighborhoods to model proper citizenship, judge living conditions, and perform good deeds for their less fortunate brethren. Another approach briefly existed through Jane Addams and the settlement house movement where they embedded themselves in their mostly white immigrant clients' neighborhoods with the understanding that suffering was much more related to social conditions than personal failures. However, Richmond's "charitable giving" and "friendly visiting" became the dominant social work tradition.

The contemporary social work profession is largely based on Mary Richmond's model of "charitable giving," in which white, Protestant, middle class workers engaged in "friendly visiting." This involved briefly leaving their neighborhoods for the tenements to do benevolent work, bringing the spirit of white saviorism back home. The workers modeled proper citizenship for their poor, racialized brethren, insinuating that the poor were in such an economic state

because of their own moral failings. Based on this individualistic view of poverty, as discussed by Katz (2015), they could rise up out of poverty if only they would make better choices. These early social workers also monitored the poors' progress in rising up out of poverty. If surveillance of their personal lives and inspection of their homes did not raise any red flags, they were rewarded with resources. Like many other disciplines, it is the early values and practices of this model -- white saviorism, onus on the individual to change, surveillance, and rewarding assimilation -- that structure the contemporary field. As such, to let it run its course of projecting a benevolent image and doing "good work" is to allow another white supremacist institution to uphold the status quo (Crenshaw, Harris, HoSang, Li, & Lipsitz, 2019).

Vestiges of whiteness are alive and well in social work today. In "Is social work still racist? A content analysis of recent literature," Corley and Young (2018) find that only 7% of articles from four prominent social work journals focus on communities of color, highlighting the field's convention of colorblindness. Part of this failure may lie in identifying and naming whiteness, as discussed by Young (2004) in direct relation to social work, as well as more broadly by a number of ethnic and cultural studies scholars. Similarly, Nylund (2006) critiques how diversity and multiculturalism are taught in social work because of their failure to discuss power and whiteness.

Social Work and Communities of Color

It is no secret that social work has a history of surveilling and punishing communities of color. In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, Hartman (2019) tells the story of Black women living in turn of the twentieth century tenements. Much of their lives had to be hidden from agents of surveillance -- police officers, social workers, and scholars – who were ready to report any

trouble to authorities. This would often lead to arrest. In *States of Delinquency: Race and Science in the Making of California's Juvenile Justice System*, Chávez-García (2012) illuminates the role of social worker as the enforcer of a racist pseudoscience meant to force families of color into complying to white standards of living or have their children separated and institutionalized.

The majority of the limited literature on Asian Americans and social work discusses Asian Americans as recipients of the field's benevolence. Park (2013) uncovers the ambivalent relationship between the Young Women's Club of America, colloquially known as the YWCA, and incarcerated Japanese Americans during World War II. The YWCA was the only social work organization that tried to support incarcerated Japanese Americans while they were in the camps. However, at the end of the war, they supported dissolution of ethnic enclaves so that the Nikkei might better assimilate, propping up the stereotypical perpetual foreigner trope. In *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto*, Tang (2015) reveals the experiences of Cambodian refugees after they were "liberated" in the US. Tang discusses how this group was treated by state workers under the trope of "refugee exceptionalism" as the idea that refugees are geographically in the ghetto, but not of it, so they ultimately had the ability to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and leave. At play was the model minority myth, through which the issue of poverty is reframed to be a problem of the individual.

There is little literature on Asian Americans as social workers. Lee (2008) discusses factors influencing Asian Americans' decisions to pursue "non-stereotypical" professions like social work. While not specific to Asian Americans, Badwall (2015) importantly explores how racialized bodies, like those of Asian Americans, become sites for investigating the contradictions of how the "professional values and practices committed to the goals of social

justice are the same values and practices that reinstall whiteness and underpin incidents of racial violence" (p. 1).

Asian American Activism and Social Work

There was an early generation of Asian American social work professionals who came of age during the social movements of the 1960s. The community shed the label "Oriental" for one they created themselves, "Asian American" (Fujino, 2012). Asian Americans generated political analysis that exposed the contradictions of capitalism and colonialism. The community prioritized helping one another under the slogan "serve the people" (Fujino, 2008).

While the people we know as Asian American today have been immigrating to the US for centuries, the term "Asian American" was not coined until the late 1960s. Political tension was high across the country, and particularly on college campuses, due to masses protesting the Vietnam War and the ongoing civil rights movement. At UC Berkeley, a group of students, including Yuji Ichioka, who would eventually become president of the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA), and Richard Aoki, who would become an Asian American Black Panther, coined the term "Asian American." This decision came out of needing language to articulate their identities on a political level. It also served as a self-determined phrase to describe themselves as an expressly political student group. It replaced the label "Oriental," something described as "a rug you would step on" (Fujino, 2012).

It is under the identity "Asian American" that members of the community worked to "serve the people." In 1968, Asian Americans, along with other students of color, at San Francisco State went on strike for a more relevant education and established ethnic studies (Umemoto, 1989). Students at UCLA made their voices heard through the student-run publication *Gidra*. Asian Americans in San Francisco fought against evicting elderly community

members at the I-Hotel. Asian Americans at the Asian Community Center developed a platform and program called "What We See, What We Want, and What Be Believed" (Dere, 2009). Asian Americans also engaged in mutual aid efforts, such as the Asian Women's Center, who provided substance use support among other services (Kao, 2009). Their office was located within the Japanese American Community Services space, which offered medical, employment, and legal resources (Ishizuka, 2016).

In "The 'Four Prisons' and the Movements of Liberation," Omatsu (2016) cites the "corporate offensive" as a prime factor in the deceleration of Asian American activism. Ideologically, this era witnessed the entry of a zeitgeist that centered on a return to American values of hard work and a free market. The realization of these ideas looked like big corporations moving jobs overseas and stifling wages in order to increase profits that should "trickle down." These ideas also shrunk the social safety net.

Neoliberalism, Asian Americans, and Social Work

In the 1980s, neoliberal economics played a role in slowing the Asian American Movement and shrinking the social safety net. Neoliberalism can be understood economically as a "fundamentalist form of capitalism" marked by privatization, government deregulation and deep cuts to social spending (Klein, 2007, p. 9). These economic demands translate into a widening gap between the rich and poor. Neoliberalism can be understood socially as "an ideological project and governmental practice mandating submission to the 'free market' and the celebration of 'individual responsibility' in all realms" (Wacquant, 2009), meaning that approaches to public wellbeing are often replaced with punitive measures.

The 1980s' conservative political climate forced what M. Liu, Geron, and Lai (2008), describe as the Asian American "social service activist" transforming into "the social service

professional." As the Movement slowed, the divide between political and service organizations became more apparent. Political groups shifted their focus to multiracial or issue-based politics, while others "de-radicalized" or folded due to a lack of resources. On the other hand, many service organizations took steps to "professionalize" for the survival of their organization. Notably, Liu, Geron, and Lai write, "Many of those engaged in expanding services considered this work a continuation of the Movement" (p. 98). Professionalization included applying for institutional grants and hiring managers with degrees like Masters of Social Work, or MSWs. At this time, it seemed like the surviving social service organizations balanced the "dialectical relationship between reform and revolution" through rooting their work the principles of the Asian American Movement but realistically adjusting to their circumstances.

The Racial Bourgeoisie? Asian Americans and the Profession of Social Work

The profession offers Asian Americans proximity to whiteness. In the resulting racial hierarchy, Asian Americans often fall in the middle, below whites and above blacks, and are often racialized as the "other." Law scholar C. J. Kim (1999) posited the theory of racial triangulation, which locates Asian Americans outside of the immediate white-black binary, but still in relation to both whiteness and blackness. Asian Americans' relationship to whiteness is best explained using the model minority myth and the false offer for white proximity. Some Asian Americans buy into this idea and grapple with their ideologies and material conditions aligning with whiteness -- what Matsuda (2010) calls the "racial bourgeoisie". Recent examples of such buy-in include Asian Americans going to trial against Harvard University for their affirmative action policies and Asian American New Yorkers coming together to acquit ex-NYPD officer Peter Liang for the death of Akai Gurley. However, Asian Americans can never assimilate into whiteness because of their relationship to blackness, which manifests as

“otherization” vis-a-vis the “perpetual foreigner.” Social workers of color are positioned to either fill the powerful and predetermined role of social worker to enact control over their own communities, or they must transform the traditional role. This study reveals some of the ways in which social workers are attempting to implement more radical politics given the constraints of their profession.

Organization of the Paper

In Chapter Two, I describe this project’s methodology. I begin with the study’s design, which draws on grounded theory. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling, and data was collected via in-depth interview. Data was analyzed using an open coding scheme. This chapter concludes with a positionality statement and a discussion of the project’s limitations.

Chapter Three examines the ways that social workers positioned inside large social service organizations carve out spaces of resistance. Rooted in a sense of discontent with the field’s contemporary forms as well as the welfare state, interviewees who work for traditional social service groups engage in subversive practices that stretch the limits of their job descriptions as mental health workers and supervisors.

Chapter Four investigates ways that radical Asian American social workers move beyond helping others cope with systemic oppression through connecting experiences to history, taking action based off of that history, and reimagining the future. Through their work as storytellers, spiritual coaches, therapist-organizers, and farmers, these social workers cultivate healing spaces, conventional and not, for both individuals in their communities and for themselves.

Chapter Five discusses interviewees’ political and community organizing activities as the first part of a radical Asian American social work practice. Interviewees take up the call in Abramovitz (1998), to “ensure that [the social work] profession remains a site of political

struggle" through joining community-led mobilizations to fight for social change from the ground up.

Chapter Six offers a concluding discussion that contextualizes this project in a longer history of radical social work and Asian American activism. Ultimately, the work of radical Asian American social workers lead us to identify the ways white supremacy have shaped the contemporary field's lens and refuse to comply with practices we know harm communities our own or otherwise. Instead, we will offer critiques of the current structures and begin building alternate modes of practice to empower and survive, pending revolution.

CHAPTER TWO

Methodology

Design

This project uses in-depth interviews to understand the experiences of Asian American social worker-activists. The in-depth interview invites the investigator to "journey with" the interviewee, ultimately leading them to "new insights" and, drawing from a feminist perspective, a co-created narrative (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003, p. 139). In-depth interviewing's lack of strict structuring allows the investigator to pursue interesting soundbites that cannot be anticipated. This is crucial because each interviewees' experience in their upbringing, activism, and professional work is too unique to be accurately captured by heavily shaped instruments like a survey. Overall, in-depth interviews particularly useful for investigating understudied topics, like Asian American activism and the contemporary radical social work tradition, both of which have been sidelined or censored from mainstream social movement history and social work history, respectively.

Methodologically, this project uses grounded theory. In this approach, investigators are tasked with "generat[ing] a general explanation (a theory) of a process, action, or interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998 as cited in Creswell & Creswell, 2017). It specifically makes use of a social constructivist perspective, which "includes emphasizing diverse local worlds, multiple realities, and the complexities of particular worlds, views, and actions" (Charmaz, 2006 as cited in Creswell & Creswell, 2017). It also relies "on the researcher's view, learning about the experience within embedded, hidden networks, situations, and relationships, and making visible hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity," as well as places "emphasis on the views, values, beliefs, feelings,

assumptions, and ideologies of individuals" (p. 65). Each of the ten stories will then be discussed on the aggregate, lending itself to analysis that will draw out themes and ideas that were salient across participants.

Sampling

According to a 2017 National Association of Social Workers report, only 3.2% of MSWs are Asian American (Salsberg et al., 2017). Even smaller within that number are Asian American social workers involved in social or political activism. Given the small size of this population, I implemented criterion sampling, which requires a participant to possess a number of attributes in order to be eligible for the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). The eligibility criteria were as follows: identifies as Asian American; holds an MSW degree; is involved in political activism; has practiced social work for at least two years; and is currently employed in an advocacy or service work position. Based on the above criteria, I identified ten interviewees first through my own academic and activist networks to contact, then through snowball sampling.

Participants carried a range of identities. Half of the participants identified ethnically as Filipina/x; others identified as Chinese-Vietnamese, multiracial (Chinese and Irish), Lao/Thai-Isaan, Japanese, and Pakistani. Of the ten participants, six identified as female or as a woman, two as male, and two as gender nonbinary. In terms of age, two participants listed that they were 29 years old. Three participants were between the ages of 30 and 34, four were between 35 and 39, and one was 40. The majority of participants were based in the Greater Los Angeles area, while two live and work in the Bay Area and one in New York City. Participants finished their MSW programs at different times, with four finishing between two and four years ago (2016-2018), four completing their program eight to ten years ago (2010-2012), and two concluding 12-13 years ago (2007-2008).

Demographic Breakdown

Ethnicity	Filipina/o/x - 5 Biracial - 1 Chinese-Vietnamese - 1 Japanese - 1 Lao/Thai-Isaan - 1 Pakistani - 1
Gender Identity	Female / Womxn / Femme - 6 Male - 2 Nonbinary - 2
Age	29 years old - 2 30-34 years old - 3 35-39 years old - 4 40 years old - 1
Location	Greater Los Angeles Area - 7 Bay Area - 2 New York City - 1
Years since obtaining MSW (as of 2020)	2-4 years - 4 8-10 years - 4 12-13 years - 2

Eight participants consented to use their real names, while two chose to use pseudonyms, as indicated below.

1. Adelina Tancioco (she/her), a spiritual life coach and collaborator with AAPI Women Lead
2. Allison Beltran (pseudonym) (she/her), clinical director at an Asian American substance use organization and member of transnational feminist organization AF3IRM
3. Eddy Gaña (they/he), a counselor at Search to Involve Pilipino Americans (SIPA), a co-founder of the Sunday Jump, an open mic series in Historic Filipinotown, and an organizer at Kabataan makaBayan (KmB)

4. Jollene Levid (she/her), a regional organizer at United Teachers Los Angeles and a member of AF3IRM's international organizing committee
5. Luke Patterson (he/they), Director of Youth Services at the Social and Emotional Wellness Initiative (SEWI) and lifelong community organizer
6. Maha Ansari (pseudonym) (she/her), a home health program social worker and a co-facilitator at a support group for Guayanese women
7. Michelle Fortunado-Kewin (she/her), a program coordinator and clinical supervisor at the San Francisco Unified School District and field faculty advisor for Smith College
8. Rita Phetmixay (she/they), an AB109 reentry counselor, founder and host of the Healing Out Lao'd podcast, and organizer at Laos Angeles
9. Stephanie Van (they/them), a private practice therapist and co-farmer-owner of the Los Angeles Worm Farm Collective
10. traci ishigo (they/them), a private practice therapist and co-founder and organizer at #VigilantLove

Procedures and Data Collection

Once participants' eligibility was confirmed and their informed consent form completed, they were asked to complete a biographical data sheet that inquired about demographic data and work histories. Then, I scheduled an approximately two-hour slot and emailed my list of interview questions, listed below.

1. Did you get involved with social work or activism first, and how did one affect the other?
2. How would you describe your practice to somebody else in a way that captures the whole of who you are?
3. What communities or issues have you focused on over the course of your life's work?

4. How did you end up pursuing an MSW?
5. If you have any critiques of the social work profession, can you share what these might be?
6. What changes, if any, do you hope to see in the larger social work profession?
7. What do you see as the importance/contribution of Asian American progressive/radical social workers to the field?

All interviews took place between June and October 2020, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the Black Lives Matter uprisings. In compliance with the nationwide "stay at home" orders, all interviews were conducted over Zoom, an online video conferencing platform. To begin the call, I reminded interviewees of their participant rights, then asked if they had questions for me. To follow, I asked the interviewee for permission to begin recording. Once the interview began, I reviewed their biographical data sheets and delved into my prepared questions. After completing the interview, participants received a $50 Amazon e-gift card for their time.

Data Analysis

Transcripts from each interview were automatically generated by Zoom. To ensure accuracy, I reviewed each document for accuracy. In response to each transcript, I wrote memos to begin identifying themes. Additional rounds of memoing occurred after each coding cycle.

Two cycles of coding were utilized in this project. Initially, an "in vivo" coding approach was used to identify important passages and codeable units. According to Saldana (2009), in vivo coding uses the participant's own language as a code. This first cycle coding method was ultimately used to gain a deeper sense of familiarity with the transcripts in order to develop an

initial set of thematic codes. These themes guided the second cycle of coding and were added and adjusted as necessary.

Data Management

Biographical data sheets, transcripts, and recordings were stored on a password-protected laptop.

Positionality

Interested in both study of and work with Asian American communities, I pursued a concurrent Asian American Studies MA and Master of Social Work program. After matriculating, I was surprised at how quickly I felt dissonance between the fields that, at least in my head, were supposed to have synergy. In terms of founding, Asian American Studies emerged as a part of the longest student strike in American history, while social work's past was largely defined by wealthy people and whiteness. The Asian American Studies degree focuses on research training while, much to my surprise, the MSW prioritizes "professional training" geared toward becoming a therapist. In many of my social work classes, I could not quiet the voice asking me if our therapy tools were just preparing "the downtrodden" to accommodate the violences of capitalism and vestiges of colonialism discussed in my Asian American Studies classes. Lastly, I was disappointed at the lack of seriousness given to what social work calls "mezzo" or "macro" work, which involves the processes of community organizing and policy change that Asian American Studies cares so deeply about. I was left wondering, "Can I make this dual degree make sense?"

As I experienced the tension between my politics and the social work profession in real time, I concluded that I could not be the only one who felt this way. Certainly there were other activist-, community organizer-, and movement builder-turned-social workers who navigated this

path before me. Who were they? Where were they? Could their journeys and practices help me understand what social work could be? Would their stories help me make some kind of peace with this profession?

I approached this project with a level of curiosity that, as a student, few questioned. As such, I felt a sense of freedom to probe about the decisions and motivators that led interviewees to their current work. Oftentimes, I found myself relating to the things that made my interviewees frustrated and tired, or inspired and uplifted. I also spent the last four years, dating back to before I started graduate school, with different Asian American organizations throughout the Los Angeles area, and was able to draw on these connections to recruit interviewees.

I find myself using Asian American Studies lens to do work *on* the field of social work, as opposed to *in* it. Yet, if the field consists of social work scholars and social workers on the ground, it is necessary to bring the voices of those *in* the field to the birds eye discussion happening at the scholarly level - the discussion *on* the field. And so I embarked on this project.

Limitations

This project's limitations include its participant inclusion criteria, interview format, and sample size. For recruitment, the criteria "involved in political activism" was too vague, leading some interviewees whose work was outside the scope of this project to be included. Another of this project's limitations was interview formats. Unfortunately, I was scheduled to conduct in-person interviews just after the highly contagious COVID-19 virus put the US in lockdown. As such, interviews were conducted over the video conference platform Zoom, which limited the collection of non-verbal data such as body language and interviewees' setting choice. Lastly, this project only interviewed ten Asian American social workers. Due to the size of the interviewee pool, this research project cannot draw finite conclusions about radical social work practices.

CHAPTER THREE

Infrapolitics and Insurgency

Among radical Asian American social workers, using subversive practices to push the boundaries of the profession is a significant mode of practice. A number of social workers positioned within large, traditional social service systems carve out spaces of resistance for both themselves and those with whom they are working. They engage in "covert workplace activism" as a response to their discontent with the field's contemporary forms as well as the welfare state (Greenslade, McAuliffe, & Chenoweth, 2015). Some perform acts of resistance individually, for which I borrow anthropologist and political scientist James Scott's conceptualization of infrapolitics, while others advance coordinated efforts of resistance, for which I draw on the insurgent planning literature.

To discuss small, individual acts of resistance, I turn to anthropologist and political scientist James Scott's discussion of infrapolitics. Scott (1990) defines this as everyday, difficult-to-detect actions of resistance performed by subordinate groups (p. 183). In the context of social workers positioned in large systems, part of "everydayness" of their actions comes from the agents being individual actors. These "lone wolf" actions contribute to how difficult detection of them may be, which is crucial to remaining in the system and experimenting with what work can be done. To this end, Scott explains, "Like prudent opposition newspaper editors under strict censorship, subordinate groups must find ways of getting their message across, while staying somehow within the law. This requires an experimental spirit and a capacity to test and exploit all the loopholes, ambiguities, silences, and lapses available to them" (p. 138). Agents of infrapolitics perform their work while positioned within systems of power, and they intend to stay there to "take on the riskier work of engaging in consciousness-raising, organizing,

organizational and institutional critique, and mobilization for change. We are doing subversive work that is not within buffer-zone job descriptions when we support people's efforts to get together with others for greater collective power" (Kivel, 2017, p. 142).

Some social workers take to larger, coordinated efforts of within-system resistance, for which I turn to the urban planning literature on the field's insurgent tradition. While the literature on activist, radical, or oppositional social work is more dispersed, insurgent planners are making a concerted effort to define their mode of practice. In reflecting on past insurgent planners, Sandercock (1998), one of the most prominent contributors to the literature on insurgent planning, writes that there must be an "epistemological break with what planners thought and did in the past" (Sandercock, 1998, p. 99). To add, Miraftab (2017) writes, "[Insurgent planning] ontologically departs from liberal traditions of so-called inclusive planning that have held the inclusion of disadvantaged groups as an objective of professional intervention" (p. 276). John Friedmann, the father of urban planning, points to an oppositional element as central to insurgent planning. Thus, insurgent planning's epistemological and ontological breaks remain in opposition to those of mainstream planning, similar to how this group of social workers' beliefs remain in tension with those of the mainstream field.

In this chapter, I demonstrate that radical Asian American social workers engage in both coordinated and everyday acts of within-system resistance. Through interviewees' narratives, I describe the strategies and settings used to stretch the limits of their jobs and the profession. This section will explore Allison's tactics navigating clinical documentation, Eddy's injection of political education in therapy, Adelina's weaving of spiritual practices with more traditional therapy modalities, and Luke's approach to supervision.

Navigating Clinical Documentation

Allison, now a clinical supervisor at a substance use program, recalled accomplishing her therapy work under the constraints of social work documentation and traditional therapy models. Her first job out of her master's program was working with youth, many of whom had contact with the foster care system and had high levels of trauma, at a South LA counseling center. Allison reflected on how his clinical approach swayed her to stay in this line of work:

> I originally didn't want to be licensed because I thought I was going to do labor [organizing] work, but I also recognize how I could pivot with that. So it was one of the things with my first boss, he was an OG social worker back in the 60s and also during the civil rights era and his grandparents were slaves. So he was like our communities of color have to be leaders. So he and I had a lot of one on ones… Because of his perspective I adopted that I was like, oh, we need this in our communities.

Recognizing her communities' need for individual therapy convinced her to stay. However, another dilemma emerged. Drawing on her activist background, Allison spoke to the tension of doing her job while attending to her values. She asked, "How do we bridge the world we live in to our personal experience so that we can still function, but still push and create disruption?"

She would find part of the answer while working with her former supervisor, who helped her see the flexibility in their work. She describes this supervisor as encouraging her to "practice in a way that was reflective of what communities of color needed as long as [she] could translate that into what the system wanted from [her] on paper." Between Allison and her supervisor, there was a shared understanding that the scope of conventional therapy practices was insufficient for their communities, so they found a way to make their work legible to the systems that needed to approve their work. She said:

> It was like using a lot of “normalizing,” “validating experience” on paper, when I'm saying like normalizing that this is bullshit, normalizing that like you shouldn't feel this way and these are ways to regain that sense of power and strength back. Or when we're talking about how our clients would be like, “Oh, I have these diagnoses,” and it’s like well you have these diagnoses because our system’s messed up. Let's talk about it from that approach: this is a fragmented system that it's an illness model. You have to be sick enough to get basic care and that's not okay. But if we don't approach it in this way of getting you well enough, I might have to language things to be a little more abrasive but to still be from the perspective of there's nothing wrong with you.

Allison not only offered her therapy collaborated some transparency in their documentation, but she also framed her subversive work with clients to go unnoticed to bureaucratic oversight. Additionally, against the backdrop of a society where healthcare is not readily available, she recognized the relationship between her documentation and the resources available with those she was seeing. In resistance to potentially inaccessible care, Allison expressed willingness to amplify pieces of sessions in order to make available any necessary tools that could support the people she was seeing. She further reflected on the guidance she received in prioritizing her clients over bureaucratic processes:

> That's how I practice. So I've been really fortunate that all my clinical work has been in communities of color in south LA where I grew up, and one of my first jobs out of my master's program. My boss was like fine, do whatever you need to do. Just make sure it looks, it's applicable in documentation. So I could practice in the way that makes the most sense to me. And as long as I could make it acceptable to like public structures or county structures, you know, paying sources that I can practice in a social justice lens.

Allison makes clear that exerting her agency in a way that prioritizes care over bureaucracy is part of her social justice lens.

Opportunities for Political Education and Empowerment

For their day job, Eddy works with system-involved Filipinx families, as theirs once was. When their younger sister was sexually assaulted, she had to navigate various points of the reporting system through talking with law enforcement and a counselor. Eddy shared, “I was able to see how it affected my entire family, and I wanted to provide assistance for other families navigating that system to feel uplifted, to make it through, and to be well after the case is done." Now, through Search to Involve Pilipino Americans, Eddy works with Tagalog-speaking Filipinx families participating in a voluntary Department of Child and Family services (DCFS) program dealing with child abuse. They said:

> I do my best to help families navigate the system, empower themselves and find strength in it, rather than being lost and overwhelmed by it, especially immigrant families. SIPA’s a Filipino based organization, so all my families, they speak Tagalog. And so I've also been practicing on my Tagalog, as well, to being able to speak to them and address those cultural differences.

However, Eddy is aware that, as a social worker, they are navigating a complex situation between wanting to support the families in this program and essentially being the face of an oppressive system like DCFS. They said:

> With this talk now about the People's Budget, defund the police, and refund social services, we also have to realize that social work has its roots in the white savior complex, that it does have its roots within the system where you work with the police that

> you are mandated to report, which may have a family be deeper embedded into a system and feel trapped.

To mitigate the risk of further ensnaring a family in the DCFS system, Eddy facilitates their sessions in a way that prioritizes empowerment through holding space for each member of the family to tell their story. They said:

> I love talking to folks. I love listening to their stories, and it's also why I continue to organize Sunday Jump. I believe in folks sharing their stories to find that empowerment in artistic sense, and it then translates to my family counseling experience. Families get to talk about their trauma and process it and one session at a time.

In these sessions with families, Eddy found that many struggled with issues that have come to be associated with "the postcolonial Filipino psyche," such as colorism (David, 2013). Eddy explained:

> The mother would compare her daughter to a cousin that was a valedictorian, or make comments about the daughter's weight or how dark she is, and how she should stay at home. You know that colorism, right, and how that comes into play.

They shared how they might respond:

> You say that darker skin is not as beautiful - tell me more about that. Or even bring it back to, like, oh, what comments were said to you by your mom that made you feel low and then she'll open up and may say like, Oh, my mom said this about me having darker skin, and then we just go from there. And then depending on the conversation or even a session. Maybe later on. Then they bring up the historical part of it… You talk about shame or low self esteem. But then maybe in a later discussion and relating it to larger systems at play.

Rather than just addressing the “shame or low self esteem” components, or how colorism is affecting the family, Eddy poses the opportunity to discuss why this is so. In this, there is an opening for the family to understand how historical matters are intimately affecting their selves and their relationships with one another.

Departing from Evidence Based Practices

In her work as a healer and spiritual coach, Adelina draws on an intuitive gift passed down in her family, who hails from the Pangasinan region of the Philippines. Her gift, which provides a tangible relationship with her ancestors, was meant to remain a secret at the risk of others thinking she and her family are “crazy.” It was during her social work program that a friend introduced her to a curandera, a Latinx spiritualist, and Adelina “really realized that [she] could do healing work full time.” Deeper into the profession, she reflects, “I was on my way to become licensed, but even as a licensed social worker, some of the work that I do wouldn’t be appropriate in that, you know, I do a lot of very heavy spiritual work,” and “anything that we don't understand we discredit.”

Now, instead of adhering strictly to evidence-based practices, Adelina uses her social work training to educate her clients about relevant psychological phenomena that may help them process their past. She shared:

> I use my MSW background even if sometimes I feel like it was a lot of money for nothing. But I use it all the time. For instance, I'll talk about the stages of grief, and I'll let them know this is more my therapy background. It's not necessarily coaching. I say “therapy background” because I'm not a therapist. I make sure that they understand, they have to sign a contract knowing that I'm not a therapist. I also serve people who are both receiving coaching and healing from me and then receiving therapy from somebody else

> and I'm able to say to them, okay, what you just said is actually a better place for therapy. What we can do here is XYZ. I'm kind of that in between for folks where it's like, yes, this is what's happened to you, this is experience you've had. Let's work through that.
>
> Let's sit with that and let's look at what you know where you're being called to go now.

It is in looking to where someone is "being called to go now" that Adelina sees her current work as departing from therapy. In addition to her reliance on her spiritual gift and intuition, it is why she considers herself "no longer in the field in I guess a more traditional sense." While not in a private practice, Adelina conducts her spiritual coaching through her organization Surrendered Healing, which:

> specializes in serving women of color and connecting to their higher selves and their intuition to really be able to embrace their gifts. While moving past any fears and doubts and you know, like, internalized kind of stuff. I do that through one on one coaching and healing and group coaching and healing, mostly. And then I also have some events and, you know, have some like free meditations and things.

In terms of selecting individuals to with whom to work, Adelina's work stands on a fundamental belief that her "higher power is for social justice. Social justice itself is about love, right, and love is God." She also relies on her intuition:

> If you were to look at my website, it's not very detailed of what I offer because I don't offer it to everybody. Right, so I'll take it through a session, or two, or whatever. And then if it's in alignment, if they're from the same lens. And I serve them. Otherwise, I don't serve them. I'm not here to perpetuate systems of oppression. So if you're not coming from a lens of social justice, send you love, and I'll send you to someone else, because my work is to increase social justice work and healing work.

Adelina relies on her intuition and spiritual gifts, rather than just evidence based practices, to guide women of color. Because she is not a therapist or social worker in the traditional sense, she is only accountable to the people she serves, not to any bureaucratic institutions. As such, she sees her work as outside the scope of traditional social work.

Normalizing Radical Education in Social Work Training

Exemplifying a coordinated effort of resistance, Luke, the director of youth services at the Social Emotional Wellbeing Initiative (SEWI), trains cohorts of MSWs in different modalities and places them in youth-serving organizations that need mental health resources. Luke shared that SEWI's training is "redirecting things to have much more of an approach based in restorative practices." Additionally, their training is helping build a "foundation within understanding our work as breaking up the status quo and being a wedge in oppressive institutions rather than just becoming part of that." While this is a departure from his organizing work and one-on-one work with youth, Luke sees this current project as:

> possibly affecting more lives. Our main project is training and developing MSWs, and so I feel like this is a way to impact who was going to be doing the work with the next generation of young people. There's only so much you can do as a social worker yourself. When you're multiplying that change, you can hopefully affect way more lives. I'm seeing the opportunity to try to put a wedge in the isms in our society and try to add some radical education into the training that folks are receiving and really trying to like normalize some of that as part of what it means to be a social worker.

Luke went on to explain that this "radical education" includes "what it means to just talk about racism and not talk about why there's racism," as well as "really vocalizing the ways that

capitalist, imperialist society is still contributing to great harm for, shit, most communities."
Luke continues:

> It is a lot of the ideas of survival pending revolution. Like, how do we put ourselves in the best position to take care of our young people in these times. It's hard to make change and to fight for change when you don't even believe in yourself. Right. And it's hard to believe in yourself when you don't understand how historical traumas have affected you and your family. Right. And if you don't have an understanding and what is going on in society that has made it so that your living conditions are the way they are, and your community is looking the way it is.

Luke highlights the ways that one’s material conditions connect to self esteem. As such, he hoped to find a way to get SEWI into the most under-resourced but politically vibrant parts of LA. Luke provided background on how SEWI grew out of the executive director’s experience with the Boys and Girls Club in parts of Los Angeles that tend to be affluent. He said:

> [SEWI] was largely based in the Boys and Girls Club and in the West LA, Santa Monica area for the most part. Our ED Sarah grew up in the Boys and Girls Club, started working there, became a social worker, and then she started seeing there was these gaps where they had great you know academic and youth activities but it wasn't creating any space for like mental health and stuff for young people. So she started her program.

Drawing on his community organizing connections to place his MSW interns, Luke is making an effort to expand the scope of SEWI intern placements. He said:

> In this last year since I've joined, we started to expand to more community spaces around the city. I'm really happy about our ability to reach some different communities, like we're starting to work with Chuco’s Justice Center in South Central, which is the home of

Youth Justice Coalition, and it was like kind of my headquarters. I've been a long time member and supporter of that space, since our first our first site was like by King and Broadway many moons ago. We used to do a lot of events with the young people there and now were always like a big part of coalition work. Coming back to LA was like, I gotta be able to work with Chuco's and figure out how to have our selves there more and be able to take more part in the work they're doing, the really radical work that's going on there. And so we're gonna have some interns there this year. We can support like really awesome on the ground work that's going on and not only have young people who need the supports, but also help give quote unquote up and coming social workers more of this idea that you would talk about the importance of these other levels of social work beyond just the clinical.

In placing MSW interns at grassroots organizations like Chuco's – whose goal is "to build a youth, family, and formerly and currently incarcerated people's movement to challenge America's addiction to incarceration and race, gender and class discrimination in Los Angeles County's, California's and the nation's juvenile and criminal injustice systems" ("Chuco's Justice Center,")– they will be exposed to real community-based projects that "break up the status quo."

Luke is also looking to normalize radical education in social work through Harriet's Tracks, an education initiative that grew out of the New York-based Radical Social Work Group. He described the project as investigating the ways social workers can do good work without harm. He said:

How do we create a more radicalized form of education for social workers that is really taking a look at social workers taking those roles from police, like really taking a look at

> how we as social workers as a field are still creating so much harm in people's lives. I would say most, if not every single social worker is probably well meaning well intentioned, but that does not mean that the impact is not harmful and that we're not, you know, upholding status quo. You know, things that are continuing to people contribute to people's oppression and contributing to society staying the way it is, instead of growing and stuff.

Luke's work looks to normalize radical education in social work through implementing such trainings with his MSW interns in SEWI, then connecting them to grassroots organizations, as well as through developing a broader radical curriculum through Harriet's Tracks.

Summary

For radical Asian American social workers, within-system resistance is a distinct mode of practice. Across the many bureaucratic systems that social work touches, these social workers subvert what is expected of them in individual and communal ways through smaller, difficult-to-detect infrapolitical actions, as well as coordinated, insurgent efforts. In line with Greenslade, McAuliffe, and Chenoweth's (2014) work on "covert workplace activism," as well as the writings of Miraftab (2017) on insurgent planning, these efforts stem from a sense of discontent toward the expectations put forth by the mainstream field. To this end, in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, Kivel (2017) writes:

> Those of us who are working for progressive social change must do that work subversively. We must make strategic decisions about what the fundamental contradictions are in the system and how we can work together with others to expose and organize around those contradictions. We can use our resources, knowledge, and status as

social service providers to educate and agitate, and to support organizing for social change. We can refuse to be used as buffer-zone agents against our communities. (142)

In order to "educate and agitate" and to "refuse to be used as buffer-zone agents against our communities," these social workers recognize the scope of maneuverability in their particular job categories and stretch their job descriptions' limits. Allison's willingness to prioritize responding to the needs of those she sees in therapy over the "documentable" practices she was taught informs her seeing a degree of flexibility in documentation. Eddy's personal understanding of being ensnared in social service systems drives their desire to empower other Filipinx families in similar situations through infusing political education into their DCFS meetings, in line with the writings of Freire (1996) about conscientização, the process of "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (footnote p. 17). Adelina personally benefited from a coaching approach that emphasized imagination and possibility. Paired with her intuitive gifts, she took on a similar framework to help people with multiple marginalized identities manifest their ideal lives. Finally, Luke's work explicitly focused on power building through approaching his training and supervision of MSWs with a lens that openly addresses systemic issues and pushes toward collective liberation. This is in line with de Maria (1992)'s writings about cause-sensitive action, or a worldview reorientation and action based on that reorientation; radical analysis, which encourages critical thinking and questioning everything; as well as centering marginality (239-46). These actions serve as examples of what Lipsky (2010) discusses as the latitude embedded in direct service providers' work and resulting unevenness within program administration.

For many of the social workers in traditional social service systems, the three letters after their name granted them access to the spaces in which they desired to work. To this end, Cloward and Piven (1975) write, “We have to understand precisely how the agencies work in order to develop the tactics to fight them in the interest of clients. We have to learn how to exploit whatever discretion is available to us in our jobs; how to challenge effectively the bureaucratic and professional authority of those above us; how to short-circuit the bureaucratic run-arounds through which the urgent needs of people are defined away as someone else’s function; how to get around the rules, and even how to break them” (p. xxix-xxx). In order to see youth in therapy at a community counseling center in South LA, Allison was explicit about the power her MSW held, saying, “I needed the letters to validate entry into certain spaces. To see children and families through DCFS and adults in private practice, Eddy, and Adelina also needed these credentials that showed they had been trained and “vetted.” While Luke was working with youth in schools, he was in a similar position, saying “I don't have a false idea that a school is a radical space. But you have access to young people that you don't have in other spaces.” Now that he is a supervisor, he needed not only his MSW, but familiarity with the modalities he would use to train his MSW students.

“Working on the inside” comes with personal tension. For example, Allison spoke to it being "really hard when I was in school" because she felt that there were "a lot of contradicting ideologies and disregard and disrespect of the community." Allison was surprised when other students compounded these ideologies, making comments like, "I don't want to work with poor people," "I'm only here to get licensed and be in private practice," and "my boss said this would be a good job for me because I like kids." Coming from an organizing family and "egalitarian upbringing," Allison’s reaction to these comments was often: "I don't understand the linkage."

Being positioned in a traditional social service bureaucracy highlighted not only personal tension but also structural limitations. Reflecting on their obligation to involve the police when a young person is suicidal, Eddy spoke to their personal frustration with this function of their work, as well as the limits of their ability to advocate and protect:

> If there's a youth and they're suicidal and I make a call at the school, what will happen is usually the police will come, even if there's no weapon present. The police who I've experienced did not have de-escalation training. I've experienced police officers who make a joke of teenagers saying that their suicide was just for attention right. Me and my supervisor just looked at the police officer like what is this guy talking about?... So you think about mandated reporting and yes it's set up to protect the client, but you also have to consider when making a report how, for example, police may get involved and may further escalate the situation.

While there is a growing movement of abolitionist social workers who refuse to call the police upon learning about a mandatory reporting issue, these politics may be more difficult to uphold in more traditional social service programs. It is imperative that the field heed Kim's (2018) and Jacobs et al.'s (2021) calls to move away from "carceral social work" and instead develop community based alternatives that exclude police involvement.

Those pushing for more traditional change, such as diversity, also experienced pushback from their organizations. Michelle, whose day jobs are acting as a program coordinator and clinical supervisor at the San Francisco Unified School District and field faculty advisor for Smith College, also served on the board for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Bay Area chapter. Interestingly, she was the only interviewee who came to social work before

activism. Regarding her work to increase diversity at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, she said:

> A part of that work was really focused on having them acknowledge and identify practices or work with POC and indigenous communities and black communities. They started doing a lot more work with LGBTQ communities which is helpful. But the board I was in there was like only one other person of color and everyone else's white everyone else was upper middle class. And I think over the years I was, I feel like I've done a lot of work in terms of pushing their agenda and just kind of open up their eyes… I think what came to me was, in terms of doing the work with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention I was realizing this is not the space for people of color, like this is not a safe space.

After leaving the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention because of their lack of willingness to diversify both their board and the populations centered in their work, Michelle started looking for other ways to engage in projects that would benefit her populations of concern. She said:

> That's where I kind of started venturing out and looking at, I'm just going to work in other in other capacities and work with other BIPOCs just to be able to acknowledge this because I was like in a predominantly white space, like I feel like I was needing more people behind my back to be able to move this.

Even for more palatable topics like diversity, achieving institutional change is difficult. Instead of waiting for these large systems to change their practices, radical Asian American social workers are taking it upon themselves to stretch the limits of their job descriptions and carve out spaces for empowerment for both themselves and those with whom they work.

CHAPTER FOUR

Healing Work as Political Practice

A second mode of practice among radical Asian American social workers is expressed in healing work as political practice. While social work's general approach to micro work and individual therapy is apolitical, radical Asian American social workers see this work as decidedly political. To this end, Stephanie says, "I think that social work is inherently a political practice. But I think the profession doesn't necessarily see itself and the field doesn't see itself that way." This outlook, which dominates the field, is rooted in a critique put forth by Specht and Courtney (1995) in their book *Unfaithful Angels: How Social Work Has Abandoned Its Mission*. They critique psychotherapists for being "concerned primarily with helping patients deal with problems that are intimately related to their selves. The psychotherapist helps the patient to increase self-esteem -- to have higher regard for the self and to care for and protect the self in dealing with other people" (p. 3). Rita said, "I never saw that you could be a politicized healing practitioner on a micro level. I always thought if you're political then you would change policy." However, a politicized perspective at a micro level is important because without it, as traci says, "a limitation can be a social worker may be focusing more on how clients can continue to mitigate or acculturate to the oppression that they're living." While the therapeutic techniques offered in social work school can be useful in mental health work, this piece of "therapy as a political practice" remains missing.

Critical Asian American psychologists like Uba (2002) and Okazaki, Lee, and Sue (2007) critique the assumptions upon which mainstream psychological methods are based. They argue that European traditions falsely assume neutrality. As such, critical psychology should move toward a postmodern, positivist approach that disrupts "the discipline's assumptions and

practices that reify and institutionalize societal power structure in a discipline that has been dominated by white middle-class male psychologists and white middle-class male subjects" (Okazaki, Lee, and Sue, 2007). They hope that these interventions in psychology move "Asian American psychology," which the field understands as psychology focused on Asian American demographic populations, closer to the paradigms and aims of Asian American Studies. Aligning with the latter would increase the degree to which the field is concerned with justice, not just truth.

In departing from the apolitical, oppression mitigation approach of clinical therapy "canon," several contemporary scholars have offered strategies for politicized therapy, many of which are based in liberation psychology as written by Martín-Baró and Martín-Baró (1994). Ignacio Martin-Baro was a Spanish-born Jesuit priest and social psychologist murdered in 1989, during the Salvadorean civil war. Based on liberation theology, his work conceptualized a liberation psychology, which "assert[s] that psychological dynamics are inseparable from political dynamics" (Prilleltensky, 2003 as cited in French et al., 2020, p. 21). It presents three urgent tasks: recovering historical memory, de-ideologizing common sense and everyday experience, and utilizing the people's virtues (30-31). Based on his work, modern scholars like Comas-Díaz and Rivera (2020) theorized decolonial psychology as "promot[ing] decolonization by helping clients recognize their history, recover their ancestral memory, and critically understand their oppressive circumstances" (135). Also, Harden and Deligio (2021) offer the following definition of politicized healing:

> Politicized healing combines a set of practical approaches based on the belief that healing can be political and the political can be healing. Politicized healing addresses the harm -- felt or experienced by individuals and communities -- caused by historic and evolving

> systems of oppression…Politicized healing rejects an apolitical and ahistorical orientation to healing. Transformation occurs through actions designed to liberate and create a just society.

As politicized actors, in many cases, this line of practice accomplishes its goal of healing for both the practitioner and the collaborator.

Interviewees also put forth ideas for and plans to build alternative futures. In *Freedom Dreams*: *The Black Radical Imagination*, Kelley (2002) writes, “Without new visions we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down” (xii). History gives progressive Asian Americans a good idea of what to "knock down.” This, however, leaves a gap in imagining the future. Kelley meditates on how slaves fought for themselves because they dared to dream about a world where they were free, as it was their imagination that gave them the space to dream of alternative futures. Kelley goes on to write, “Revolutionary dreams erupt out of political engagement; collective social movements are incubators of new knowledge” (p. 8). Thus, it is from this place of healing work as political practice that we can begin building a more equitable world.

In this chapter, I show that radical Asian American social workers engage in politicized healing practices. Using interviewees’ stories, I shed light on their practices and analysis of politicized healing. This section will explore Rita’s recovery of historical memory in her podcast Healing Out Lao’d; traci’s integrated approach to their own healing, therapy, and organizing; Adelina’s incorporation of a radical imagination in her spiritual coaching practice, and Stephanie’s world building work at their queer, Asian American worker-owned worm farm.

Recovering Historical Memory: Rita and the Healing Out Lao'd Podcast

Rita was excited to be in Los Angeles not only because of the visible Asian American community, but also because of the sizable Lao population. Hailing from North Carolina, she did not have much of a Lao or Asian American community around her, which made it difficult to process her experiences as a child of refugees. Stemming from her own experiences, Rita entered UCLA's concurrent MSW and an MA in Asian American Studies program with an interest in Lao students' access to and retention in higher education. However, her interests shifted to consider mental health and wellbeing in the Lao community more broadly. Rita turned to a mentor named Kulap to discuss her next step in the direction of building a diasporic Lao wellbeing project. Rita said:

> Kulap's still like an amazing example and figure in our community. I had a conversation with her in 2018 about what I wanted to do personally with my own background and knowledge on mental health and wellness and about healing in our community, knowing that we shared so many different experiences of trauma, growing up as a child of refugees that it was important for me to expand resources on a more nation wide level. I thought about doing some type of conference, like a healing justice conference for Lao Americans to come together to share about why they went into their specific profession... as a form of healing because I felt very passionate about, you know, being able to share our stories in a way that makes us feel less isolated. Before we found each other in Los Angeles, all of us thought we were the only ones going through it and think a lot of us have shared that same sentiment of like we left our homes to find some type of grounding. And then we found each other and it became really healing to have that type of connection. And so, you know, I was telling Kulap about all my ideas and whatnot and about doing this type

> of healing justice conference for the Lao community in Los Angeles, and then she's like, why don't you start off as like a podcast and it never dawned on me that I would be a podcaster, like never in a million years I would be like, I want to go into podcasting to change culture, change norms.

From this conversation with Kulap, Rita committed to podcasting as a medium for her diasporic Lao healing project. Rita began to look for podcasts she could use as models. She was inspired by the Healing Justice podcast, now called Irresistible, which was created by Black women and focuses on how healing can be the root of our political movements. Rita was also inspired by the Filipinx diasporic podcast Long Distance. After immersing herself in the two podcast worlds she wanted to bring together in her own work, Rita's vision became clearer:

> It's going to be called Healing Out Lao'd. I mean, what better project than being able to destigmatize mental health within our community and by saying like, you know, we're going to heal, we're going to heal out loud. We love puns, the Lao community, so it was perfect.

The name "Healing Out Lao'd" pays homage to the lively character of her community. Rita intended for her podcast to be a place that acknowledges the shared painful legacies of the Secret War, the US bombing of Laos often left out of Vietnam War narratives; shared experiences of estrangement growing up as children of Lao refugees in the US; and possibly a shared desire to learn, accept, and move forward. She said:

> Healing Out Lao'd is a platform kind of like a nourishing love note to fellow Lao children of refugees to really acknowledge what happened [in Lao history] and we don't have to be victims of the past that we did not know. But now that we notice, maybe there's a way that we can heal the wound of not knowing what happened, why we exist,

> and why we are here today. For a long time, I questioned my being, my existence, and my understanding, because I grew up in a predominantly white community.

It is from this positionality and political consciousness that Rita approaches her work both as the host of Healing Out Lao'd as well as her day job as therapist serving populations reentering society from prison:

> Every intervention that I do is politicized because our very beings are politicized. To be a part of a community of children of refugees says something happened in the political atmosphere, the political landscape that makes my very being inherently political. My parents are political refugees. My dad fought in the secret civil war that happened in Laos and he became a refugee once he left Laos and my mom and Thailand and then eventually came here to the United States, but you know I inherit those types of beliefs and value systems of creating and seeking justice for my people through the ways that my parents made it to the United States. And so for me it's about really honoring you know the uniqueness or also understandings of justice that still needs to be incorporated in I guess I would say like to help my community elevate our voices and to be seen, heard and validated.

It is also from this positionality and political consciousness that Rita offered critiques on replacing police with social workers. She said:

> If we're saying mental health workers are going to be a better intervention than just wellness checks from like police officers who are most of the time being the ones addressing mental health issues in a community, we're just trading one police intervention for another. And so, I firmly believe that we need to acknowledge, first of all, what

systems are being put into place where these people are so vulnerable to again being incarcerated because of their mental illness.

Radical Imagination: Spiritual Coaching and Adelina

An important part of Adelina's spiritual coaching orientation is that unpacking a client's past is only part of the work; equally or perhaps more important is envisioning the client's ideal life. She describes therapy as simply, "supporting people into meeting their goals." She explains coaching as taking things a step further, "moving beyond the coping mechanisms," in a way that people receiving coaching were "not even just meeting your goals, like you are living your ideal life. That was so healing for me, the idea that I could live out my ideal life." Adelina went on to explain that coaching looked past some of the internalized beliefs one may have based on their identities:

> It was just a very different approach than what I had been trained in and it was very much leaning on and I felt in connection to surrendering, leaning on spirit leaning on your intuition to guide you instead of looking at systems of oppression to statistically tell you what was possible.

Shaping a future full of agency is not to say that one's past was simply bypassed. Adelina shared that the coaching approach still addressed one's past, but only as much was necessary to do their planning and building work. She said:

> What I appreciated about coaching is that it was, yes, we're going to talk about what happened in the past, but only enough to inform how you're going to live out your dream life. It wasn't even like it was like It, she said this, where we did this work together, like with all like realness. Like, so, you know, like no one had ever told me from so much certainty like, "Oh, you would love that. That can happen."

Integrated Healing Approaches: Therapy, Organizing, and Traci

Traci is working toward integrating their identities as an organizer with Vigilant Love and a therapist. They started organizing Vigilant Love before they took an interest in therapy work through their MSW program. Now, both aspects of their work, as well as their personal journey, work toward healing at individual and collective levels. They said:

> I think that my work of both Vigilant Love and Webs of Well Being has been really dedicated to creating more possibilities for healing on a personal and a collective level because in much in my own way that's been my own journey, too. When I'm sharing therapy through integrating somatic practices, that just inherently comes from my own experiences of having someone to process with about my life experiences and holding the challenges of really difficult times in my life, saying yes to that kind of support has been helpful for me. I'm doing engaging and Zen meditation, being in tsongas, being both a practitioner and teacher and a student of yoga has been really helpful and important for me as a person. And then doing the community organizing has been a really critical and empowering part of the healing process for me, too. And really, the healing that's for myself that's connected to what's happening in the world directly because I feel like it's all connected. I think perhaps it matters also through the identities that I hold that my practices able to also work towards integrating more of my identities, whether it be as a Buddhist person or as an Asian American or a Japanese American or as a queer person.

In their therapy practice, they value that most of their clients reflect their marginalized gender and racial identities, which comes out in their work together. Traci said:

> Most of my clients identify as queer trans non binary BIPOC people and that's been such a joy because I've worked at previous agencies before where I didn't get to perhaps share

> my clinical approach and my clinical practice with the communities that I really wanted to, and so that's good work, but just noticing like the identities that I hold as like a queer and non binary person of color and Asian American just noticing I have these lived experiences I have my own political analysis. And then my clinical framework, it would be great to also be able to center and prioritize QTIPOC people, women of color and survivors of abuse or intergenerational trauma.

From that shared, identity-based starting point, traci spoke to the importance of holding space for each person to do deep, personal work that helps uncover their full potential. It is from this place of empowerment that many people are more able to engage in transformative community-level work. Traci said:

> Much of that direct practice work also translates into how much we feel as though we can do in the world. Like how much we feel like we're able to access our potential or that we matter enough to do the meaningful profound work that a lot of us are meant to do. And so, you know, when we think about community organizing, perhaps, many of us need to have spaces for our own healing, not just like our communal healing but just to do a deeper dive about ourselves and the struggles that come up for us in our lives.

In both therapy and community organizing, traci spoke to the importance of understanding individuals in their contexts, "understand[ing] the person in their history and their story and their dignity." Traci linked this understanding to the social work framework of the "bio-psycho-social perspective." They said:

> The bio psycho social perspective that social work brings and trains us in really helps us and understanding our ways of activism, our approach to organizing a lot more. Because when we're thinking about the people we're organizing with, we're thinking about people

who are often directly impacted by the political and systemic trauma that people are facing or we're thinking about these people as descendants of similar political and systemic trauma. And so when we think about it in Vigilant Love, I think it's been really helpful to understand like what it means, perhaps, to take a trauma informed approach to our organizing or to recognize how when we're talking about therapists being relational in the therapy room. Like we're building a relationship that feels like it matters like a truly matters for the client and that it matters to us as clinicians.

Traci also illuminated Vigilant Love's healing approach, which speaks to individual-level support that might need to be in place in order for everyone to be fully present for organizing conversations around difficult topics.

> That relationship that we're applying that also that healing approach to the way we're doing our organizing in that like it's not so much about like how only what you're able to produce or support in our organizing campaigns, but it's about your experience in the organizing campaigns and why this issue may matter personally to you. And for what it could bring up for you and or how we might want to collectively hold space for grounding together. Knowing that as we talk about some of these really heavy issues we're probably going to need that moment to get back into our bodies and our breath and some in some way to be more present for the conversation.

They went on to explain that Vigilant Love's healing approach incorporates community-level healing, too. They said:

> I think for Vigilant Love, it's not just the organizing. We're really creating space for communal healing. Sometimes individual therapy might not be the best intervention or the most fruitful intervention. Sometimes, a lot of our healing because it relates to who

> we are, like our identities as a person of color, or as a non binary person or as a Muslim person sometimes all of that healing work about embracing and integrating more of our identities is more powerful when we do that with community who can mirror us or who are similarly impacted or have been impacted two generations before in a similar way. So sometimes community organizing can be a really powerful intervention. And so it's just different. It's like these are different ways of doing the work.

World Building: Worm Farming and Stephanie

After 11 years organizing and running "the grants mill" with Equal Action, a queer, people of color-centered group, Stephanie and their collaborators transitioned into another project: worm farming. In 2014, this group of non-binary Asian American worker-owners officially registered the Los Angeles Worm Farm Collective as a business. Stephanie described the transition from Equal Action to the worm farm as a shift from challenging the system to building the world they wanted to see. Part of this world building is being intentional with their politics at both interpersonal and external levels. Regarding the beginnings of the worm farm, they said:

> For a long time, my activist work or my change work or my more radical work looks like what we commonly think about like mobilization, marches, and trying to challenge the system. And then over time it felt more right for me to think of creating models for how we want to build up the system and build a new system once, theoretically, the old one burns down, or it needs to be replaced in part or in total. And that's felt really good to me.

They went on to describe some of the internal practices they use to enact the relationships they wish to have with one another. One of these practices is a horizontal decision-making structure, as opposed to the hierarchy and bureaucracy found in nonprofit spaces. Stephanie said:

> We are cooperatively run, so the workers decide together what our work should look like. And then we're collectively or cooperatively owned, so the workers own the business also. And then we’re collectively run so that we are not hierarchical in how we make our decisions as an organization like we figure it out as a collective. And I think that, especially as an alternative to what my quote unquote professional life looks like, has been really generative and energizing because when I feel beat down by bureaucracy and hierarchy. And, work that, in operation, is contradictory to its mission. It’s a place where I get to, like where I get to really physically feel and emotionally feel what humanistic work should feel like. So it's grounding in that way.

Stephanie spoke to the ways that the worker-owners experience individual-level healing during their working hours, or what they call “farm days,” through sharing similar experiences in their lives off the farm. They said:

> In formal ways, our farm days are days that often are times we can connect about experiences. Maybe you could say from an MSW perspective, there’s like a support group element to the farm days where we can complain or talk shit about our nonprofit workplaces and how things are oppressive. That's one part of it: there's a healing aspect of it where it's just connecting with other people who feel oppressed in various ways, right.

Stephanie also explained that being with the other non-binary, Asian American worker-owners at the farm creates a sense of ease, where nobody has to worry about snide comments from others who do not understand them or their work. They said:

> My motivation for being part of the worm farm is to create spaces where people like us can farm and garden and feel comfortable with each other and not have to deal with

> microaggressions and how the specific mission or purpose you know where that can shape what the work farming should look like and who we sell to and all those things whereas other people really are going to think about like the environmental aspects.

The worker-owners on this farm carefully tend to their relationships with one another. Stephanie provided an example of this group writing affirmations and "deltas" during a strategic planning retreat. They shared:

> I think it's not particularly social work and it's maybe it's also more like a feminist or womanist organizing model where like the internal dynamics of the organization are just as important as the external work that's happening. And so in a strategic planning retreat in addition to working on our strategic plan, our business goals and things like that, there's also a really important section that we do at the end where we like will spend like two hours reflecting like writing to each other member on things we appreciate about them and things that we need them to work on. And then we like will share with each other and read it and then we'll sit in a circle and process hard things that were shared. But we want to try to grow and be better. And sort of like I mentioned earlier, like you know that farming days are also, it's time for healing. So one thing I'd like to do probably once the pandemic is over is have a more explicit healing angle to our farming days, like maybe having a separate, like a support group or healing space where you know we start off with grounding activities that involve really touching the dirt and like feeling it. And then like reflecting on what it's like to be outside to be a nature and then being able to just sort of like talking to each other. So it's trying to like bring together the farming and like what a support group is like.

These internal politics are also reflected to those outside the organization. For example, Stephanie shared that the worm farm tries to enact equity in its sales. About their sliding scale, they said:

> If there's someone who randomly emails us and is quite cis presenting obviously a lot of this is based on whatever we can gather from a person without knowing them too well. Then we might charge on like the full rate, right, or with someone that we know works full time. Whereas we gave castings to folks who were, I feel the recent like reclaiming homes movement. So we gave the folks who were doing some of that reclaiming homes work castings and they just donated money just like whatever amount that they wanted. So in our sales trying to enact like substance of equity racial economic gender equity.

Stephanie also shared how they think of their farm as part of their political work. They shared:

> We are thinking of moving. There's a new space that we've looked at in Chinatown, and it's this community garden where this white man has been there for a year and has made himself like the president basically. So we think about what it means to move there. And part of moving there is challenging this person and reclaiming space for ourselves, which is obviously complicated because it's ultimately indigenous land. But as someone who's like, born in Chinatown and has seen it get gentrified, it's like, okay, well, how can we remember who actually lives here and has been part of these communities and involve those communities because whoever is running the space now is not open to that. So I'm trying to do gardening and farming in a political way that way.

The uniqueness of this worm farm is not lost on Stephanie. As such, they are selective in whom they share this information with. They said:

> The worm farm is like very deep and strange work for me -- strange in that it's different from what the rest of the world is like in many ways. We are really in the world make sales, things like that, but it's sort of precious to me. So if I'm going to share that with someone, it has to be someone who I think will get it right away or if I don't think they'll get it right away that I will have like the time to really get to talk with them about throughout our relationship. And I don't want to have to deal with someone being like, oh, I don't understand why that's social work, being dismissive. I don't want to invest that work into a lot of people. Like only some people deserve to know about it.

While building this work is "very deep and strange" and "precious," Stephanie shared some of the realities. They said:

> You know the worm farm… I don't make money from that. We might make like two or $3,000 total. So for, you know, for [$800] of our money to have to go to the IRS [in order to maintain LLC status] in addition to whatever taxes. There are all these ways in the private practice or in the worm farm. I'm trying to do things that feel ideal and feel like the way the world should be, but I still have to interact with the real world and oppressive systems.

Summary

For radical Asian American social workers, politicized healing work constitutes another important realm of practice. Through their work as storytellers, spiritual coaches, therapist-organizers, and farmers, these social workers move past the level of coping to cultivate healing spaces, conventional and not, for both individuals in their communities and for themselves. These interviewees heed the calls of liberation psychology through engaging history in their mental health work as well as take up Kelley's idea of a radical imagination.

These healing practices recognize experiences of oppression that stem from events in the political sphere, heeding Martin-Baro's, Prilleltensky's (2003), and Comas-Díaz's (2021) calls that psychological occurrences are inseparable from the outside world and history. For Rita, it was through the US's involvement in the Vietnam War, its subsequent erasure of the bombing of Laos, which cast Rita's family as refugees, and the isolation she felt growing up in predominantly white North Carolina. Through inviting herself and her therapy collaborators to think past what they were told was possible, Adelina's healing practice tackled the limitations placed on her and her community because of their multiple marginalized identities. Traci's work addressed personal and intergenerational experiences related to their identities as a queer Japanese American person as well as their therapy collaborators' and co-organizers' marginalized identities. Stephanie's work on their worm farm collective owned and worked by non-binary Asian Americans involved holding intentional space for everyone to be together without fear of harassment, as well as exerting agency over their personal and work relationships to transform the oppressive ways these show up in the outside world.

While all of the interviewees in this chapter support the first half of Harden and Deligio's (2021)'s idea, that healing can be political, Rita and traci's work demonstrate that the political can also be healing. Rita discusses that having an understanding of her family's migration story provided much-needed context for her upbringing in North Carolina. Based on those experiences, her podcast Healing Out Lao'd looks to provide community for the Lao diaspora in a way that does not "reprogram" harm. One of the ways traci looks to integrate their clinical and organizing work is through bringing mindfulness techniques into community spaces so that everyone might be present enough to participate in difficult discussions.

Adelina and Stephanie carry forward Kelley (2002) call for invoking a radical imagination to build alternative futures. Through her spiritual coaching, Adelina invites collaborators to imagine their

futures without the statistical limitations placed on them due to their identities. Stephanie's work with their cooperatively owned worm farm takes this one step farther and begins experimenting with what a real, ideal world – what Kelley calls an alternative future – might look like.

CHAPTER FIVE

Political and Community Organizing

A third substantial mode of practice is political and community organizing. This type of work uses a high-level lens to assess social problems and responds through community-level interventions like advocacy and community organizing. This tradition is associated with Jane Addams, one of social work's founding mothers, who embedded her settlement house workers in their clients' neighborhoods, pinned poverty as an issue of social conditions instead of personal failures, and aligned with the working class and laborers' unions. However, this line of practice was disparaged in the McCarthy Era due to its socialist sympathies and spurned again during the 1980s' wave of neoliberal economics, never to regain the acceptance it once enjoyed (Reisch & Andrews, 2014; Schneider & Netting, 1999). Despite social work's outward commitment to social justice through its ethical principles, the dismissal of macro practice remains alive in present day education and practice. This is part of the field's long history of ambivalence toward challenging the status quo (Abramovitz, 1998). Ezell, Chernesky, and Healy (2004) found that a number of social work programs de-emphasize macro approach in favor of guiding their students into clinical work. This may be guided by Starr, Mizrahi, and Gurzinsky (1999), who found that students perceive macro skill sets to be less "hirable" than that of a micro approach. The field's paradoxical commitment to social justice and de-emphasis of macro work led several researchers to sound the alarm bells (Netting et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2010).

A number of interviewees are keeping alive the tradition of macro practice, particularly through community organizing. In this chapter, I show how political and community organizing is one mode of practice among radical Asian American social workers. Weaving the interviewees' stories, I describe the approaches, settings, and applications being used among this

group. This section will explore traci's work educating mental health professionals against a state-sponsored surveillance program, Luke's coalition building around a police brutality trial, Jollene's work as a labor union organizer, Stephanie's queer organizing, and Eddy's political artivism open mic.

Interethnic Organizing: traci, Vigilant Love, and Countering Violent Extremism

Part of traci's work is as co-director of Vigilant Love, a solidarity organization working with the Japanese American community and beyond to build a movement challenging Islamophobic violence. Vigilant Love's current campaign, Services Not Surveillance, organizes against the Department of Homeland Security's Countering Violent Extremism program in all its iterations, including its most recent one entitled Targeted Violence Terrorism Prevention. Traci explained that all of these programs, no matter the name, have a similar logic: in the name of national security, we need to work with communities who are at risk for committing acts of terrorism by creating a "see something, say something" culture and building trust with law enforcement. The programs enlist educators, mosque leaders, and counselors already embedded in the community to act as their eyes and ears in exchange for financial resources, similar to how Japanese Americans were surveilled and incarcerated during World War II. Based on this shared understanding of sacrificing vulnerable communities for the sake of "national security," raci provides context on how Vigilant Love's program provides critical tools that may have been absent in social work education:

> Many people enter our social work field with wanting to do really, really amazing powerful work that's so needed around the social issues that we have, but perhaps we haven't been encouraged or invited enough to think critically about the systems that it's a part of or who we're collaborating with or who our community counseling centers are

> even seeking money from to continue providing the services that they're providing. And so we see a lot of different community counseling centers actually applying for CVE funding and getting trained in the CVE model, which looks to track people's behaviors on different indicators that could alert for risk for terrorism, risk for violence. But a lot of these indicators are very common things… [one] from an anti Muslim point of view is around how often they're going to the mosque or if they're growing out their beard.

Because a systems critique was not built into social work education, these mental health professionals are susceptible to accepting federal funding that can endanger the communities with whom they work to being racially profiled. As such, Vigilant Love's work fills a gap in critical social work education. After providing context to CVE programs through a community-based lens, traci goes on to explain Vigilant Love's current work, the Services not Surveillance campaign, which focuses on discussing critiques of CVE programs and empowering mental health professionals to reject the funds associated with the program. They shared:

> Our first pilot on the campaign towards mental health professionals was to just start [educating] more mental health professionals around [the fact that] this horrific program exists. They veil themselves as talking about supporting community resilience and wellness by providing these funds so you [mental health professionals] can do the work that you do. But we're not understanding the risks that creates for client confidentiality, how a lot of case notes have already been subpoenaed to support DHS and ICE and other law enforcement agencies and further criminalizing certain individuals. And so there's just a lot. We're doing the Services not Surveillance campaign to organize our mental health professionals to understand this, so they can reject CVE funds in their own counseling agencies and that they can be on alert to the fact that this program exists and

can begin to speak out against it.

Organizing mental health professionals to understand why CVE programs are harmful and rejecting their funding sends a signal to the federal administrators of this program that social workers will not be used against their communities, breaking from the profession's history of acting as an arm of the state.

Coalition Building: Luke, the October 22 Coalition to Stop Police Brutality, and the Radical Social Work Group

Born to two activists, Luke is a lifelong community organizer. Between Los Angeles and New York, Luke was involved in restorative justice initiatives, anti-police brutality work, youth and education programs, and organizing radical social workers. Before starting his graduate studies, Luke helped coordinate the October 22 Coalition to Stop Police Brutality to respond to the trial police officer who killed Oscar Grant being moved from Oakland to Los Angeles. He said:

> Some folks from Oakland had come down to talk about the case with us. In Leimert Park we had a film screening around the case and then word is coming out that they were going to try to move [the case] down there, trying to take it out of a place where the officer would 100% most definitely be found guilty and try to go somewhere where hopefully they could ease it up a little bit, let the anger die down some and hopefully try to get this person out, free as usual. A variety of folks that were doing different police brutality work in LA formed a coalition around the case.

It was through working with these Oakland organizers and seeing so closely the effects of this trial on the community that Luke became interested in providing mental health support for the

families of those murdered by the police, as well as young people susceptible to interacting with law enforcement. He shared that he wanted to be:

> supporting the families of people whose lives have been taken by police and trying to figure out what that looked like beyond just passing people a microphone and expecting a grieving mother to suddenly become a leader in the activist movement, which I feel happens all the time. Folks expect, you know, hey, George Floyd's mom now you need to like lead this march and you need to have really precise ideas of where we're going with this movement and stuff because you are at the forefront now. And how about you just try to be a leader for the nation right now in the midst of grieving the loss of your child right. What actually are we doing to actually take care of these folks and their loved ones when these murders happen and how can we best support them, not just throw them on a pedestal and expect them to lead the movement. So that was something that was on my mind a lot as I went into social work school. I wanted to be able to come back to LA, to where I considered home, and to be able to have more skills to work with young people in high schools and these situations.

However, the introduction to social work school fostered concerns about the field's efforts to professionalize and dis-identify with the communities they work with. This was especially so because Luke grew up in a neighborhood where police brutality was a significant issue. He said:

> I don't want to do social work as a job where I feel like this, these type of professionalization of this work separates the idea of what it means to be community and what it means to take care of each other and puts a job title on that and therefore enforces the idea that we should be the gatekeepers in that because we'd be able to keep our jobs. And I want the tools to be in the community's hands to create change for themselves, I

fully believe that nobody knows what change is needed better than the folks who need it.

Luke goes on to highlight how, unlike current trends in the social work field, he views simultaneous macro and micro work as necessary for social change. He reflected:

> Why is this so much about the professionalized thing, social work and creating a bigger divide between the people and the resources and knowledge and wisdom and tools they need. Instead of us helping people to empower themselves, to have that knowledge and ability to do those things for themselves. In a lot of cases, if we're only doing clinical work and we're not looking at things on a macro level and on a more ideological and political level, then all we're doing is skimming the surface and putting band aids on like nationwide oppressions and stuff. There is value in healing individually but what is the point if we're not changing the society as a whole... I fully find activism and organizing to be very much a part of social work. I think it's ridiculous when schools don't support the idea that community organizing is part and parcel to social work.

While in New York, he connected with the Radical Social Work Group, whose mission is to "support each other, and the individuals and families that make up the communities we serve, to resist the status quo, recover from harm and violence in the social services and the world, and boldly re-imagine how to do social service work for the world we dream is possible" (Radical Social Work Group). Luke integrated his LA work with his goals for social work school, sharing:

> Working with the radical social work group, I and a couple other people who were already collaborating on some different things were able to bring together the October 22 Coalition to Stop Police Brutality with the radical social work group. We started having long term discussions around developing social work based supports for families. We started to develop this kind of first responders or rapid responders network where we

> were pulling together agencies and individuals who could provide resources for family members of stolen lives. We wanted organizations and agencies to commit to serving these folks for free or with a discount and just be part of a network that was ready to respond in these cases.

It was through Luke's coalition building first as a Los Angeles-based activist collaborating with a group from Oakland that his community was able to ensure some accountability, albeit to the smallest degree possible, for the police officer that killed Oscar Grant. Then, through the LA-based October 22 Coalition and the New York-based Radical Social Work Group, Luke began building a network of care providers to support families affected by police brutality.

Labor Organizing: Jollene and UTLA

Jollene is a coordinator and regional organizer at United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), the labor union of Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) employees. She was part of the team working behind the scenes for five years to develop union support before their 2019 strike, which shut down all 932 LAUSD schools for six days. As an organizer, she works to ensure that UTLA is always "strike ready" by garnering participation from as close to 100% of the union's 34,000 members as possible. To prepare for union actions such as the 2019 strike, and more recently, defunding LAUSD police, Jollene develops union participation by talking to individual or small groups of union members. She spoke to how her work is outside the normal scope of social work:

> My brother is actually a hospital social worker and he graduated after me. Yeah, my brother, my one and only sibling. And I always look at him and be like, that's a social worker. And I'm over here waiting in parking lots trying to talk to a union member about going on strike. It's a weird disconnect that I have. I do social work, but I'm not like in

> the social work community the way that one would traditionally be.

Jollene's awareness that her work is atypical for a social worker speaks to how uncommon it is for the field to engage in any type of organizing, union or otherwise. Despite their work being significantly different, Jollene and her brother both received their training and education through a program certified by the Council on Social Work Education and hold the same "MSW" title. Parts of this curriculum, which emphasizes clinical work, serves Jollene in her current role. She said:

> I learned to listen so much better because of social work. Basic therapy tools can actually be used when you're doing organizing. The vast majority of time of a good organizer is actually spent listening to workers and talking to them and moving them from the middle to a pro union stance, moving them from the middle and fear.

Jollene is in a prime position to speak to how a social work education, in its current state, might support on-the-ground organizing. Prior to working for UTLA and attending graduate school, she was a worksite organizer for a branch of the Service Employees International Union. For Jollene, going to social work school was a double edged sword that still causes some ambivalence. She said:

> At the same time, some days I wake up and wish I didn't go to grad school. Some days, I'm like, was that a weird class thing that I had in my head that convinced me to spend $80,000 and not practice clinically, right. Like, what did I need to do that. I'm, I'm a well paid organizer…But did I need those three letters behind my name to do what I do. I'm not sure.

To work for a union, one would have to share enough of a belief that workers who generally lack power can come together to improve their working conditions. Because that worldview is central

to Jollene's paid work, the irony of being a union-less social worker working for a labor union is heightened. She reflected:

> [Other students in my social work program] didn't believe that we should have unions and I was like what the fuck like you're going to just go with our $80,000 debt and say, you know what, just pay me minimum wage. This is crazy, we're workers too, and they're like, no, we're professionals. And so there's a lot of elitism that was built into our program and I don't know exactly where it came from. It didn't come from the textbooks. But this idea of professionalism became fused with this like classist idea of who we were, right, which was not worker.

Jollene highlights how the "professional" status designated to the social work profession encourages misalignment from the working class. This is so even if an increasing number of workers with marginalized identities are entering the profession, and if one of the field's ethical principles is social justice.

Transnational Feminist Organizing: Allison, Jollene, and AF3IRM

Allison's clinical work, which will be discussed later, is rooted in her community organizing background with a transnational feminist organization now known as AF3IRM, the acronym for Association of Filipinas, Feminists Fighting Imperialism, Re-feudalization, and Marginalization. The organization describes itself as "a national organization of women engaged in transnational feminist, anti-imperialist activism and dedicated to the fight against oppression in all its forms. AF3IRM's diverse, multi-ethnic membership is committed to militant movement-building from the United States and effects change through grassroots organizing, trans-ethnic alliance building, education, advocacy and direct action" (AF3IRM website).

Allison’s parents met as community organizers in the Philippines during the Martial Law era and continued their work after migrating to the US. Reflecting on this experience, Allison said:

> Growing up, my dad was always in that peasant movement, the labor movement. My mom was always in the women's work. So that's how they worked, respectively, but also collaboratively. Because a lot of times the peasant women were often the first ones oppressed and the last ones to be addressed. So I also recognize that pattern of behavior that's still going around me socially. My parents were big on figure it out. Learn it on your own. So I would, I was always observing like the patterns of behavior is of how people would interact with me or validate my experience or interaction with them or like devalue my experience or interaction with them.

The worldviews and practices of Allison’s parents were reinforced by those around her. As a young person, she found herself looking up to the “cool” older girls visiting her home to seek organizing guidance from her mother. Allison would eventually join their organization, GabNET, after recognizing patterns of women’s work in her community. She reflected:

> This women's work, our value, our ability to want to contribute to our communities. I was going into work, seeing that nursing was a primary field for a lot of women of color; teaching was, too. But these are all service fields. So our work was always wanting to do more for others, but it would be based on like having to be exploited and harmed first, and that was really hard for me to swallow.

She eventually crossed paths with Jollene, and they both went on to fill leadership roles at the national level. Despite having little experience, Allison served as the national finance director for a number of years. She said:

> In a lot of grassroots work is whatever is needed, you do it. Right, so I have no background in fund raising, finance, and all that stuff. But we recognize these are needed, and in a lot of women's work, you know, we're used to wearing multiple hats, so we figure it out.

The same way that Allison was willing to step up and "figure it out" when needed was reflected in AF3IRM's organizational history. Jollene provides background on the group's transition from GabNET to AF3IRM:

> What we learned after over 20 years is that if we were solely focusing on Philippine issues, we were unable to address what was happening in our home here in the diaspora. So for example, we were mobilizing like crazy at the Philippine consulate all the time to oust former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo but at the same time, we were unable to fully address 17 workers that were traffic here from the Philippines and were now here, looking for asylum, and figure out resources that they needed. So we were always in this balancing act. And when we relaunched as AF3IRM, we decided to become transnational in nature, which means that we address issues that we face here in the US deeply and then organize horizontally with women in different nations and it would look different depending on what kind of work we wanted to do with women in other countries versus, for example, fundraising for the Philippines and then sending it all there. So that happened when we relaunched in 2010.

Overall, the story of Allison's involvement with AF3IRM along with the organization's history demonstrate a praxis responsive to the community of which they are part and their social conditions.

Intersectional Organizing: Stephanie and Equal Action

In 2008, Stephanie helped found Equal Action, an organizing group for young, low income, queer people of color that began in support of California's Proposition 8 same sex marriage bill. Stephanie maintained their organizing while they went to social work school beginning in 2010. They describe the need for the type of space Equal Action created, especially when people with their identities were marginalized during the queer community's "moment." They shared:

> Marriage was important, but those of us who are out there who were not like rich cis gay men from West Hollywood were not in leadership positions. Things that were happening to us like youth being kicked out of their homes, being discriminated against by their teachers, immigration issues that people of color have to endure all those kinds of things were not being focused on in the movement. So we wanted to create a space for people of those people of those various oppressed identities to organize.

Stephanie goes on to describe some of Equal Action's activities, which responded to issues affecting youth, people of color, and poor and working class individuals within the queer community. They said:

> We did a big queer youth march in LA to try to bring attention to youth issues. And then we partnered with Clean Cars' last campaign, which was doing a picket against a car wash in Hollywood, where the workers were being threatened and were not being given safety equipment. We would bring out a bunch of queer folks, adults and youth out to join their pickets. That was really interesting and impactful because you know from the outside because it's like why are these people picketing with rainbow flags when it's about these car wash workers. But I think for one that helped to create solidarity between

> different but overlapping communities… And then we had an open mic called open sessions for about 10 years on and off and that was the only queer open mic that we knew of when we had started and then some other ones popped up.

Stephanie then discussed how Equal Action's activities evolved over time, from marching in the streets and "running on that grants mill" to creating spaces more informal spaces for community members to be together. They reflected:

> There was a shift from us having marches being on the streets to doing more like creating community spaces where people could connect, express themselves, find support. So then that became our focus more. And then the worm farm came out of that group… We started a worm farm because we were tired of, in the organizing group as a non profit, trying to get grants. Sometimes it felt like being part of the nonprofit industrial complex again, trying to meet with funders and doing all this stuff. Last year, there was another effort to try to do a training for queer trans organizers on how to deal with trauma because there's so much conflict and trauma among queer organizing communities and we tried to meet with my friend at the California Endowment to get grants and apply for all these grants and none of it worked out. And so for me, personally, I was just like, I'm tired of running on that grants mill.

Some may not have considered Equal Action's work, in its original form of marches and open mics, within the boundaries of social work. Stephanie remains weary that even a smaller part of social work community would consider Equal Action's current form, a cooperative worm farm, within the field's scope of work. They state:

> The me that's a therapist or me that's a professor - that's accessible to mainstream society, those things are understandable, but I think you have to be open minded one to

understand like what a co-op is and that it can exist and what a collective is and a worm farm like all those three things are weird things in our society and that it's mostly run, it's evolving, but it for the, for the most part it's been owned and run by like non binary Asian Americans like that's another element to have to explain.

Similar to other organizing efforts, the form of Stephanie's organizing remained responsive to its community from its beginnings with Prop 8 on the California ballot to the present day. For them, that took the form of disengaging with "the grants mill" and opening a cooperative worm farm for queer Asian Americans to be in community with one another.

Art Organizing: Eddy and Sunday Jump

Since 2012, Eddy has served as the co-director and resident host of Historic Filipinotown's (HiFi) community open mic series, Sunday Jump. Hosted at one of HiFi's long-standing nonprofits, the Pilipino Workers Center, Sunday Jump seeks to "facilitate a safe space for marginalized voices to share stories and create genuine connections through the arts" (Sunday Jump Website). They also offer two community guidelines: (1) express, not impress, emphasizing sharing one's art for the love of it, not for attention, and (2) free speech, not hate speech, spotlighting the objective of uplifting the community.

Eddy believes that bringing people together to express themselves can build community and lead to social action. They value "listening to [folks'] stories, which is also why I continue to organize Sunday jump. I believe in folk sharing their stories to find that empowerment." Eddy described Sunday Jump as a space where they can not only enjoy hearing other people's stories, but where storytelling as an art form can move people to political action. They shared that Sunday Jump encouraged:

not just for art's sake but arts inspire action. And then, what action brings about change.

> For example, our last show was entitled "Revolution Rising," and it was addressing what is happening right now, today, and we are not living in the moment - that this is a movement right and so with the different issues that we're fighting for, whether it be dismantling institutionalized racism, addressing anti blackness within our communities. How can we gather together? How can we promote civic engagement or direct action, however that may look like for folks? It was encouraging those discussions that comes out of the art first. And then we had a show and all the proceeds were directed towards Black Lives Matter.

Eddy's work with Sunday Jump exemplifies community organizing through bringing people together. Sunday Jump also employs "artivism," which utilizes art's ability to "change our minds—inspiring us to take on different perspectives and to reimagine our worlds… art's ability to change the individual psyche is profound and undeniable" (Nossel, 2016).

This belief in art as a tool to "change the individual psyche" shows up in Eddy's clinical work. They described "therapeutic expression" as a core tenet of their work, "whether that be through in conversation in the family counseling session, whether that be through art or poetry." Eddy discussed how therapeutic expression plays out in their clinical sessions:

> In my sessions I have used poetry as a way for my teenage clients to express themselves and also for the parents to and so they're able to explain in their, in their art, how they're feeling in that moment, rather than just I'm feeling sad, or I'm feeling happy, but like, what is What, like how that creativity encompasses how they're feeling or they draw a picture of their family and then perhaps I noticed that. Oh, in this family, the daughter drew the dad, her two brothers, but then not the mom, then analyzing that.

All in all, Eddy mixture of community organizing and artivism provides an important space for community expression and discussion in the heart of Los Angeles's Historic Filipinotown.

Summary

Among radical Asian American social workers, political and community organizing is a substantial approach to practice. In direct contrast to macro work's marginalization in more traditional social work formations, radical Asian American social workers see the value of briging their neighbors together for community, policy, and, most broadly, systems change. Perhaps the importance of this work is most salient for those that can trace the ways macro forces directly impact clients seeking support in a micro setting, especially for those that were involved in community organizing before social work. Nonetheless, these social workers heed Rein's (1970) early call for social workers to advocate for their clients not just at the individual level but also at the institutional one. Abramovitz's (1998) call to "ensure that their profession remains a site of political struggle" is also taken into account.

Bucking the historical trends of social workers "parachuting" into marginalized communities to provide individual-level services, this group's work is directed toward building power to address real issues in their own communities. Similar to Jane Addams' settlement house workers, interviewees worked out of a sense of alignment with these communities as well as an understanding that their struggles must be addressed at an institutional level. Some, like Luke, Stephanie, and traci, organized community members around particular issues, like ensuring the police officer responsible for Oscar Grant's murder was tried, garnering support for Prop 8 so that same-sex couples could have the right to marry in California, and educating mental health professionals about Countering Violent Extremism programs. Other types of work focused on bringing more people into the fold of identity-based issues, like Allison and her work

with AF3IRM, as well as Eddy with Historic Filipinotown-based Sunday Jump. Additionally, Jollene's union organizing work, which focused on addressing workplace issues and labor rights among LAUSD employees.

As part of these communities, interviewees were positioned to understand the group's current capacity for and potential to make social change. Reisch and Wenocur (1986) highlight that communities engaging in organizing activities begin in a place where they are stripped of much power, preventing "frontal attacks on the existing economic and political structures" (p. 87). They go on to explain that "failure to challenge these structures not only contradicts the democratic ideology we espouse, it also strengthens their dominance over the nation's political economy and perpetuates the powerlessness of our constituents. Although we believe the task of democratizing the political economy cannot fully be accomplished until our present socioeconomic system is replaced, we can no longer afford to wait 'until the revolution comes' to begin the process of democratization" (p. 87). For some of these organizers, their work exemplifies what Luke, drawing on the Black Panthers, calls a "survival pending revolution" approach. About his organizing, he goes on to say that most of the work comes from a place of "We got to do these things. But we're never taken the time to envision the world that we want to see," the latter half of which will be addressed later. Ultimately, these organizers see their work as a tool for building power for social change, especially within marginalized communities.

Some interviewees connected their organizing work with their MSW education, both positively and negatively. In line with Mendes (2007), social workers' activism could be connected to not only larger life influences and specific identities, but also their social work education. In this light, Jollene spoke to a symbiotic relationship, where learning clinical skills like listening enhanced her ability to engage union members. However, she, along with Luke,

Stephanie, and Allison, also spoke to how their organizing work, where everyone is seen as equal, conflicted with the shift in power and expectation of expertise accompanying their higher education degrees and professional work.

Discussion around professionalization exposes class tension among social workers. In her interview, Jollene recalled being shocked when fellow MSW students dismissed the idea of a social worker union because they were professionals, not workers. Unionizing has long been debated in the field, as Reeser and Epstein (1990) explain that while this correlation might be statistically insignificant, it remains symbolically significant. Complementary to Jollene's pro-union stance, Reisch and Wenocur (1986) write, "the elitism of the social work profession is a form of false consciousness. The long-term survival of social work as an organized occupation would be better served by the development of social work unions, in whose formation community organizers could play a crucial role" (p. 89). Many interviewees noted discontent at the lack of paid internships during the MSW program along with depressed wages once graduated, both of which are issues that could be taken up by a social worker union.

It is worth noting that it is difficult to "make ends meet" in a macro, community organizing job. Among the six interviewees discussed in this chapter, only Jollene's organizing work was paid. Maha, who pursued the macro track at her program, expressed difficulty and disappointment in how sparse community organizing jobs are. She said:

> There are just not really that many macro positions. I have seen some of them, but you're also just like wow, you don't really need to be a social worker for this, and then you kind of question the whole macro thing. And you're like, why did they create this? Why do you need to go to social work school to be community organizers? They've kind of hijacked that term.

Maha's experiences in searching for a macro job speak to the necessary consideration of the political economy when examining social workers' capacity for activism (Reisch and Wenocur, 1986). Eddy shared similar considerations when choosing his career path. They said, "What can I do to ensure that I have a career that is stable for me that is stable for future family? And so for me, being a social worker, being a mental health professional seemed to be the best fit." When Zavarzadeh and Morton (1986) write, "We no longer talk about the individual, but about the subject" (p. 2), they imply how the power of the capitalist state usurps individuals' free will, forcing subjects of the state into choices like compromising one's internal politics in order to keep food on the table. For Maha, that choice looked like transitioning into one-on-one work in a hospital, and for Eddy, that looked like pursuing individual mental health work while continuing their organizing unpaid.

While social work outwardly commits to social justice, its research, education, and practice illuminate that such a commitment is not as substantive as one would hope. While the current state of the field does not take seriously community organizing's power for social change, a number of Asian American social workers consider it a central part to their social work practice anyway.

CHAPTER SIX

Concluding Discussion

This project has sought to give shape to radical Asian American social work through defining three arenas of practice: infrapolitics and insurgency, acts of resistance within social service structures; healing work as political practice, a historicized, possibility-laden, and world-building wellness practice; and political and community organizing, located outside traditional social service structures.

Within traditional social work structures, radical Asian American social workers are involved in infrapolitical and insurgent work, stretching the possibilities of social service and the limits of their job descriptions. Based on their critiques of and refusal to comply with social service systems, interviewees navigated the approach, content, and documentation of their clinical meetings in ways that were most empowering for the people they work with. Additionally, when placed in supervisory roles, they began training the next generation of social workers to notice the ways systemic oppression intimately affects the lives of their clients. While not sanctioned, this under-the-radar work makes a difference in the lives of those they work with, in line with Lipsky's conceptualization of the street level bureaucrat. As discussed in *Street Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, these workers have a substantial amount of discretion in how services are provided.

Social workers are not accustomed to seeing healing work as a political practice. Radical Asian American social workers are interested in politicized healing work that moves beyond helping others cope with systemic oppression. This includes understanding oneself and one's community within historical context and acknowledging political work as a form of healing. It

also involves using a radical imagination to envision one's next steps in life, as well as experimenting with those paths and principles to begin building a more equitable world.

As discussed in chapter five, many radical Asian American social workers engage in political and community organizing as part of their practice. Departing from a more traditional social work practice, these social workers believe in bringing community members together to affect social change broader than what can be accomplished one-on-one. They are concerned with an array of issues affecting their lives, ranging from bringing other social workers together to educate and mobilize against programs that can harm their communities, to community-responsive spaces for expression and mutual education.

Who, What, and Where?

Taking up the questions around where social workers should be doing what, this project contends that radical social workers must be both inside and outside the system. This two-prong approach recognizes the urgency of real, material needs, leverages available resources, brings more people into the fold, and takes seriously longer term goals of structural change.

While micro work, which largely exists within-system through services like therapy and food distribution, remains important as a means for immediate care, it can take after the Black Panthers' model and act as an opportunity to engage community members in larger social change efforts. In *Body and Soul*, Nelson (2011) writes, "The 'food serves a double purpose, providing sustenance but also functioning as an organizing tool: people enter the office when they come by, take some leaflets, sit in on an elementary PE [political education] class, talk to cadre, and exchange ideas.' As such, the community service programs were, as one Oakland Panther, Carol Rucker, explained, 'another tactic for revolution' alongside armed self-defense" (p. 58). While still referring community members to appropriate resources, case management can include

conversations about why the relevant social issues persist in individuals' lives as well as invitations to join community-led organizations looking to make higher-level change. Additionally, like Eddy exemplifies, therapy is an opportunity to prompt community members to think about why certain psychological phenomena occur and invite them to make connections with larger social situations. However, this work must be understood as a "band-aid solution" within a larger ecosystem of social change efforts.

Other work must involve a sharper critique of capitalism and the other social structures underpin community members' acute needs, both tangible and not. For example, those involved with DCFS are often poor Black and brown families. If the adults in a family must work to pay their rent and cannot afford childcare, they are forced to leave their child at home unsupervised, constituting what DCFS would call neglect. However, the blame shifts away from the parents and onto larger structures when one widens the lens through which they see the problem. It is through this wider lens that we can consider issues of low pay, driven by a capitalistic desire to depress wages and increase profit. This speaks to related problems of housing as private property owned by the landlord for a profit, as well as unaffordable childcare. Should the field deepen its critique of these structures, it might widen its lens to understand that the idea of "individual problems" is a vestige of white supremacy and colorblindness. Equally important is attention paid to the revolutionary vision of the world that would stand in these systems' wake.

Attention should also be paid to the tensions arising from the contradiction between radical visions of society and the scope of prevailing social work institutions and practice, especially given cooptation of community organizing and the harms of a degree. These tensions lay parallel to those discussed in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, where in the central question is, "What are the possibilities for transformative politics given the capacity of neoliberal

capital to incorporate, absorb, and/or neutralize demands for social justice?" Maha speaks to social work's partial absorption of community organizing through identifying it, within the broader scope of macro practice, as the primary reason she sought to pursue an MSW. After realizing that not only were macro positions virtually nonexistent, but that others were likely more qualified for them, she questioned why one would need an MSW to pursue this work. If social work were to fully incorporate community organizing into its scope of practice, I anticipate something similar to Luke's thoughts on restorative justice being taught in social work school: "these non-radical, status quo institutions, they find a way to take the umph of radical practices." On the other hand, if community organizing were to be fully removed from the scope of social work practice, social work would have less claim to the "social justice" ethical value they espouse. However, the organizer- and activist-social workers currently embedded in the system would lose financial resources, both personal and organizational, associated with social work being a legible institution.

Additionally, this project seeks to pull the curtain back on what actions constitute a "legitimate" social work practice and who makes these decisions. Stephanie shared, "I always try to talk about like what are other ways that our communities practice social work that we don't recognize as social work, that didn't get to be turned into a profession and given all you know all this legitimacy." If social work is broadly defined, all of these interviewees' organizing work could be considered part of their practice. As a matter of fact, so would other organizations' welfare efforts, such as the Black Panthers' free breakfast programs, sickle cell anemia screenings, and free medical clinics. These programs easily fall within the scope and values of social work, yet they are largely not considered so because the administrators of such programs

did not have a social work-specific training. If one does not need social work training to do the same work, the necessity of pursuing a graduate degree must be called into question.

Asian Americans and Radical Social Work

Regarding many of the concerns of interviewees' organizing work, there is a through line between radical social work and the Asian American Movement of the 60s and 70s. For example, movement activists were concerned with interethnic organizing through projects like the Asian American Political Alliance at UC Berkeley, as well as the production of *Gidra* at UCLA. This interethnic work continues today through organizations like Vigilant Love. Movement activists were also organizing across racial lines and country borders through moments like the San Francisco State strike for ethnic studies and engagement with international Third World events like the Bandung Conference. These strategies continue today through work like the October 22 Coalition to Stop Police Brutality and AF3IRM.

Through their work, interviewees -- as practitioners, not recipients of social welfare -- contribute to a racialized refusal. US racial thinking imposes the "model minority" myth on Asian bodies, narrating stories of success so long as one acts a certain way. Some Asian Americans have taken this myth in stride by going to trial against Harvard University for their affirmative action policies, which allow greater access to higher education for Black and brown communities, as well as through protesting to acquit Peter Liang, a Chinese American NYPD officer, for the death of Akai Gurley, despite law enforcement's history of disproportionately targeting and killing Black men. Asian bodies racialized as the model minority are not supposed to push back, bend the rules, and stretch limits. To explain the concept of the "racial bourgeoisie" and Asian Americans' role in the racial hierarchy, Matsuda (2010) writes, "The role of the racial middle is a critical one. It can reinforce white supremacy if the middle deludes itself

into thinking it can be just like white if it tries hard enough. Conversely, the middle can dismantle white supremacy if it refuses to be the middle, if it refuses to buy into racial hierarchy, and if it refuses to abandon communities of back and brown people, choosing instead to forge alliances with them" (p. 559). W. Liu (2018) continues this line of thought through highlighting Asian American solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, a noteworthy political move as cross racial solidarity becomes not only a more contested topic but a more necessary alliance. Asian Americans partaking in subversive acts that prioritize equity over upholding whiteness constitute a politics of refusal necessary for this moment of racial reckoning and for building a more equitable future.

Social work should prioritize developing empathy and solidarity across lines of difference. Recognizing the butterfly effect of their resistance work, these deprofessionalizing social workers are moving toward what R. Liu and Shange (2018) call thick solidarity, "a kind of solidarity that mobilizes empathy in ways that do not gloss over difference, but rather pushes into the specificity, irreducibility, and incommensurability of racialized experiences" (p. 190). It is through these types of solidarities that our communities might create the necessary health, education, and wellbeing resources to take care of one other. At the end of the day, my interviewees and I would love to work ourselves out of our jobs.

While social work offers a concrete pathway to do community work, its assumptions and practices must be continually examined and critiqued. Radical Asian American social workers are subverting the expectations set forth for them by both their profession and racial hierarchy. Instead, they draw on their activist work and continuation of themes from the Asian American Movement to critique whiteness both in thought and practice. It is through these critiques and subversive practices that we might move the field closer to serving the people.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abramovitz, M. (1998). Social work and social reform: An arena of struggle. *Social work, 43*(6), 512-526.

Badwall, H. K. (2015). Colonial encounters: Racialized social workers negotiating professional scripts of whiteness. *Intersectionalities: A Global Journal of Social Work Analysis, Research, Polity, and Practice, 3*(1), 1–23.

Bailey, R. V., & Brake, M. (1975). *Radical social work*: Pantheon.

Bell, J. M. (2014). *The Black power movement and American social work*: Columbia University Press.

Bloom, J., & Martin, W. E. (2016). *Black against empire: The history and politics of the Black Panther Party*: Univ of California Press.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*: sage.

Chávez-García, M. (2012). *States of Delinquency: Race and Science in the Making of California's Juvenile Justice System* (Vol. 35): Univ of California Press.

Chuco's Justice Center. Retrieved from https://www.youthjusticela.org/

Cloward, R., & Piven, F. F. (1975). Notes toward a radical social work. *Radical social work*, vii-xviii.

Comas-Díaz, L. E., & Rivera, T. (2020). *Liberation psychology: Theory, method, practice, and social justice*: American Psychological Association.

Corley, N. A., & Young, S. M. (2018). Is social work still racist? A content analysis of recent literature. *Social work, 63*(4), 317-326.

Crenshaw, K. W., Harris, L. C., HoSang, D. M., Li, G., & Lipsitz, G. (2019). *Seeing race again: Countering colorblindness across the disciplines*: Univ of California Press.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*: Sage publications.

David, E. J. R. (2013). *Brown skin, white minds: Filipino/American postcolonial psychology*: IAP.

de Maria, W. (1992). On the Trail of a Radical Pedagogy for Social Work Education. *The British Journal of Social Work, 22*(3), 231-252. doi:10.1093/oxfordjournals.bjsw.a055862

Dere, J. (2009). A Wei Min Sister Remembers. *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*, 64.

Ezell, M., Chernesky, R. H., & Healy, L. M. (2004). The learning climate for administration students. *Administration in Social Work, 28*(1), 57-76.

Ferguson, I., & Woodward, R. (2009). *Radical social work in practice: Making a difference*: Policy Press.

Freire, P. (1996). Pedagogy of the oppressed (revised). *New York: Continuum*.

French, B. H., Lewis, J. A., Mosley, D. V., Adames, H. Y., Chavez-Dueñas, N. Y., Chen, G. A., & Neville, H. A. (2020). Toward a psychological framework of radical healing in communities of color. *The Counseling Psychologist, 48*(1), 14-46.

Fujino, D. C. (2008). Who studies the Asian American movement?: A historiographical analysis. *Journal of Asian American Studies, 11*(2), 127-169.

Fujino, D. C. (2012). *Samurai among panthers: Richard Aoki on race, resistance, and a paradoxical life* (Vol. 57): U of Minnesota Press.

Greenslade, L., McAuliffe, D., & Chenoweth, L. (2015). Social Workers' Experiences of Covert Workplace Activism. *Australian Social Work, 68*(4), 422-437. doi:10.1080/0312407X.2014.940360

Gregory, J. R. (2021). Social work as a product and project of whiteness, 1607–1900. *Journal of Progressive Human Services, 32*(1), 17-36.

Harden, T., & Deligio, E. (2021). Politicized Healing: Addressing the Impact of State Sponsored Violence. *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice, 12*(2).

Hartman, S. (2019). *Wayward lives, beautiful experiments: Intimate histories of riotous Black girls, troublesome women, and queer radicals*: WW Norton & Company.

Hill, K. M., Ferguson, S. M., & Erickson, C. (2010). Sustaining and strengthening a macro identity: The association of macro practice social work. *Journal of Community Practice, 18*(4), 513-527.

Ishizuka, K. L. (2016). *Serve the people: Making Asian America in the long sixties*: Verso Books.

Jacobs, L. A., Kim, M. E., Whitfield, D. L., Gartner, R. E., Panichelli, M., Kattari, S. K., . . . Mountz, S. E. (2021). Defund the police: Moving towards an anti-carceral social work. *Journal of Progressive Human Services, 32*(1), 37-62.

James, K. J. (2021). Black Lives, Mass Incarceration, and the Perpetuity of Trauma in the Era of COVID-19: The Road to Abolition Social Work. In *Shared Trauma, Shared Resilience During a Pandemic* (pp. 281-290): Springer.

Jansson, B. S., & Smith, S. (1996). Articulating a "New Nationalism" in American Social Policy. *Social work, 41*(5), 441-451. doi:10.1093/sw/41.5.441

Kao, M. U. (2009). Three-Step Boogie in 1970s Los Angeles: Sansei Women in the Asian American Movement. *Amerasia Journal, 35*(1), 112-138.

Katz, M. B. (2015). What kind of a problem is poverty? The archaeology of an idea. *Territories of poverty: Rethinking north and south*, 39-78.

Kelley, R. D. G. (2002). *Freedom dreams : the Black radical imagination*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press.

Kim, C. J. (1999). The racial triangulation of Asian Americans. *Politics & society, 27*(1), 105-138.

Kim, M. E. (2018). From carceral feminism to transformative justice: Women-of-color feminism and alternatives to incarceration. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 27*(3), 219-233.

Kivel, P. (2017). Social service or social change? In *The revolution will not be funded* (pp. 129-150): Duke University Press.

Klein, N. (2007). *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*: Macmillan.

Lavalette, M. (2011). *Radical social work today: Social work at the crossroads*: Policy Press.

Lee, S. M. (2008). Asian American social workers: Exploring relationships among factors influencing career choices.

Legard, R., Keegan, J., & Ward, K. (2003). In-depth interviews. *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers, 6*(1), 138-169.

Lipsky, M. (2010). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public service*: Russell Sage Foundation.

Liu, M., Geron, K., & Lai, T. A. (2008). *The snake dance of Asian American activism: Community, vision, and power*: Lexington Books.

Liu, R., & Shange, S. (2018). Toward thick solidarity: Theorizing empathy in social justice movements. *Radical History Review, 2018*(131), 189-198.

Liu, W. (2018). Complicity and resistance: Asian American body politics in black lives matter. *Journal of Asian American Studies, 21*(3), 421-451.

Longres, J. F. (1996). From the Editor: Can We Have Our Cake and Eat it Too? In: Taylor & Francis.

Martín-Baró, I., & Martín-Baró, I. (1994). *Writings for a liberation psychology*: Harvard University Press.

Matsuda, M. (2010). 28. WE WILL NOT BE USED: ARE ASIAN AMERICANS THE RACIAL BOURGEOISIE? In *Asian American Studies Now* (pp. 558-564): Rutgers University Press.

Mendes, P. (2007). Social workers and social activism in Victoria, Australia. *Journal of Progessive Human Services, 18*(1), 25-44.

Miraftab, F. (2017). Insurgent practices and decolonization of future (s). In *The Routledge handbook of planning theory* (pp. 276-288): Routledge.

Nelson, A. (2011). *Body and Soul*

The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination: University of Minnesota Press.

Netting, F. E., O'Connor, M. K., Cole, P. L., Hopkins, K., Jones, J. L., Kim, Y., . . . Thomas, M. L. (2016). Reclaiming and reimagining macro social work education: A collective biography. *Journal of Social Work Education, 52*(2), 157-169.

Nossel, S. (2016). Introduction: On" artivism," or art's utility in activism. *Social Research: An International Quarterly, 83*(1), 103-105.

Nylund, D. (2006). Critical multiculturalism, whiteness, and social work: Towards a more radical view of cultural competence. *Journal of Progessive Human Services, 17*(2), 27-42.

Okazaki, S., Lee, R. M., & Sue, S. (2007). Theoretical and conceptual models: Toward Asian Americanist psychology. *Handbook of Asian American psychology, 2*, 29-46.

Omatsu, G. (2016). 2. The "Four Prisons" and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s. In *Contemporary Asian America (third edition)* (pp. 60-98): New York University Press.

Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and policy in mental health and mental health services research, 42*(5), 533-544.

Park, Y. (2013). The role of the YWCA in the World War II internment of Japanese Americans: A cautionary tale for social work. *Social Service Review, 87*(3), 477-524.

Prilleltensky, I. (2003). Understanding, resisting, and overcoming oppression: Toward psychopolitical validity. *American journal of community psychology, 31*(1-2), 195-201.

Reeser, L. C., & Epstein, I. (1990). *Professionalization and activism in social work: The sixties, the eighties, and the future*: Columbia University Press.

Reid-Merritt, P. (2010). *Righteous self determination: The Black social work movement in America*: Inprint Editions.

Rein, M. (1970). Social Work in Search of a Radical Profession. *Social work, 15*(2), 13-28. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/23712586

Reisch, M., & Andrews, J. (2014). *The road not taken: A history of radical social work in the United States*: Routledge.

Reisch, M., & Wenocur, S. (1986). The future of community organization in social work: Social activism and the politics of profession building. *Social Service Review, 60*(1), 70-93.

Salsberg, E., Quigley, L., Mehfoud, N., Acquaviva, K. D., Wyche, K., & Silwa, S. (2017). Profile of the social work workforce.

Sandercock, L. (1998). *Making the invisible visible*: University of California Press Berkeley, CA.

Schneider, R. L., & Netting, F. E. (1999). Influencing social policy in a time of devolution: Upholding social work's great tradition. *Social work, 44*(4), 349-357.

Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*

Hidden Transcripts: Yale University Press.

Specht, H., & Courtney, M. E. (1995). *Unfaithful angels: How social work has abandoned its mission*: Simon and Schuster.

Starr, R., Mizrahi, T., & Gurzinsky, E. (1999). Where have all the organizers gone? The career paths of community organizing social work alumni. *Journal of Community Practice, 6*(3), 23-48.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research techniques*: Citeseer.

Tang, E. (2015). *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto* (Vol. 222): Temple University Press Philadelphia.

Umemoto, K. (1989). “On Strike!” San Francisco State College Strike, 1968–69: The Role of Asian American Students. *Amerasia Journal, 15*(1), 3-41.

Wacquant, L. (2009). *Punishing the poor*: duke university Press.

Wagner, D. (1989). Radical movements in the social services: A theoretical framework. *Social Service Review, 63*(2), 264-284.

Young, S. (2004). Social work theory and practice: The invisibility of whiteness. *Whitening race: Essays in social and cultural criticism*, 104-118.

Zavarzadeh, M. u., & Morton, D. (1986). Theory pedagogy politics: The crisis of" the subject" in the humanities. *Boundary 2*, 1-22.