

FEMINISM ACROSS OUR GENERATIONS

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PREFACE

We are a Filipino mother and Filipino-American daughter whose perspectives on feminism—as a theory and as a political practice—have been formed over years of study, discussion, debate, and struggle in the Philippines and in the United States. In this piece, we offer our reflections as food for thought. We offer them because, despite the inevitably personal markings of the experiences we recount, they are in reality reflections of specific historical moments and of ongoing sociopolitical changes to which others, Filipino or not, might in some ways relate. We believe that our individual stories are ultimately all tied up with a broader and more enduring collective narrative about gender, race, colonialism, and national liberation.

Who are we? Delia was a professor of Women's Studies and Comparative American Cultures at Washington State University and at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. She now teaches women's studies courses at the University of Connecticut. She has written

several books published in the Philippines: *The Feminist Challenge* (1988), *Filipino Housewives Speak* (1991), and *Toward a Nationalist Feminism* (1998). Her most recent book, an anthology titled *Women and Globalization* (co-edited with Anne Lacsamana), addresses her latest concerns (2004). She was born in Capiz in 1938 and has lived in the United States since 1961. Karin, the older of Delia's two children, was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1962. Karin is a former editor for *Dollars & Sense* magazine, a progressive monthly for non-economists, and a former member of the South End Press publishing collective. Ten years ago, she edited and introduced an anthology, *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*. Since 1999, Karin has been a tenure-track faculty member in the American Studies Department at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. Her courses focus on racism and racial inequality, urban sociology, and Asian American Studies. She likes to refer to living in Minnesota as being "stranded in the Great White North."

In place of a co-authored formal essay on feminism, we decided to engage in a "dialogue" where we would draw out each other's ideas by responding to a set of questions that we could answer in writing and exchange over e-mail. Our first question, "How did you become a feminist?" led naturally to the second set of questions: Did/does feminism help to frame your politics? Or does/did your politics frame your engagement with feminism/feminists? The third and last question, "What do you see as the concerns of young Filipino-American women today, and how would you address them?" came as an effort to connect our thoughts about the past to the present, and to establish some generational links in our own experiences that we hope would interest not only Filipinos and Filipino Americans, but also those whose feminism has an international reach.

QUESTION 1: HOW DID YOU BECOME A FEMINIST?

Karin Aguilar-San Juan: I feel that the "how" in this question must first bring in the "when," and then the "why," and finally the "with what consequences." I would say that I became a feminist *in utero*. How could I not with a powerhouse for a mother? But that answer would as easily implicate my mother—who will speak for herself here—as it would take me off the hook, as if biology could provide any kind of answer to this ultimately political topic.

If I was not a feminist by birth, at least I was born a girl into a world that does not see girls as having the same potential as boys. Maybe that was not always true in my family, but it was true in school, with my friends, and in the town that I grew up in. I was encouraged to read and write and practice spelling, not to play soccer or basketball

as I would often have preferred. Sometimes I cannot separate the moments in which I was treated “as a girl” from the moments I was treated “as not American.” In fact, being racialized—treated like a foreigner because of my physical appearance and assumed cultural traits—during childhood is a much more vivid memory for me than being gendered. So actually, I do separate out the gender and the racial process as I look back on my past. Perhaps that is also because I probably fit into many of the expectations of girlhood, much more than I fit into the expectations for being “an American.”

My mother taught me to fight for my rights. I began practicing these lessons in the backyard. I remember wrestling little Bobby Tate to the ground for borrowing my bicycles without my permission, stealing it really. I think Mom watched from the kitchen window. She might have cheered me on. Later, I had to confront the white boys (always boys) in high school who would taunt me with racial slurs. Armed at home with nasty rejoinders by my mother, I would walk up to these pathetic individuals and say, “Do you know that in my country we EAT white monkeys like you?” I don’t remember any response from them—just mild shock. Sometimes I would have to confront my high school teachers for their narrowness of mind, particularly regarding the politics of the time. I learned to use polite language, and references to ideas and books in my comments. It was the late 1970s, and there was plenty to debate in the classroom: the justness of the war in Vietnam, police brutality against anti-war protestors, whether radical activism is an American tradition, the role of labor unions in improving society. Then, of course my favorite topic: the role of the US government in propping up the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines. I gave my teachers all of my mind in those years, and I could only do so because I thought I deserved to be heard. I think that made me a feminist of some kind, at least in the eyes of those I harassed.

In college I began to take on feminism as a political cause. I remember writing an essay for the newsletter of the Women’s Center on Raya Dunayevskaya and her idea of humanism. Early on, then, I wrote about social change as a feminist, from a feminist perspective. Instinctively I knew that the Women’s Center was providing one of the only venues I would ever have for developing and articulating my views about the world. Feminism became one place, one theoretical platform, from which to interpret and criticize the world. I remember in a seminar on Marx and Social Theory, my classmates and I had a mutiny when our professor declared that feminists had nothing to say about Marxism or social theory. After that session, we took over and taught the class to ourselves. I worked hard on a paper about Juliet Mitchell, one of the first Marxist Feminists I encountered, as if I were planning to convince our professor about the relevance of feminist theory. It was

good for me, but I don't think he ever changed his view about feminists.

When I came out as a lesbian in my last year of college, "feminism" finally made sense to me as a theory and as a way of life. It just felt like all the pieces fit together and I got a clue about who I was and who I might become. Looking back, I would say that feminists made a place for me to take control of my own future; without an idea of personal independence (which is a very loaded, biased, and historically constructed idea), I could not have pushed on to new things. As far as I was concerned, feminism allowed me to deal with my inner world on my own terms. In a way, feminism allowed me to move "past" gender, to disregard people's expectations of me as a young woman who should eventually marry a man and produce his children and live in his, and their, shadows.

In the end, I was not as interested in feminism as I was in other social issues or causes. My main issues back then were Central America and the Philippines. I was mostly interested in fighting US multinationals and their death grip on the Third World. Of course, the people who cared what I thought were usually feminists, or people who were influenced and informed by feminism. You know, I don't think I made much of an impact on big, old, white corporate men or women. When I began to work as an educator and organizer in Boston in the mid-1980s, I did so in an environment that accepted and encouraged women to be strong people in their own right. So that had to involve feminism in some way. As a young lesbian, I also had to find my way in a local movement that did not always know what to do with me. Within a week of moving to Boston, I had a semi-traumatic encounter with the hard-core leftists in Chinatown who told me I would have to "subordinate my cause" (meaning "homosexuality") to the cause of socialism. They actually used those words, too. It was semi-traumatic because I had the same attitude towards them that I had towards the boys who taunted me in high school. I was just enraged and annoyed at their stupidity. I could not believe people could be so idiotic as to draw such simple lines in the sand, and believe in them heart and soul.

My eleven years as an activist in Boston are in many ways foundational to my thinking now about feminism. I don't attend to being a feminist. I mean, I don't label myself that way, nor do I spend much energy in feminist organizations. I gave \$25 to Planned Parenthood and I walked miles and miles to help find a cure for breast cancer, and that is what many people—especially rich, white, suburban housewives mean by "feminism." But those gestures are simple, not profound or radical. I did those things because they don't hurt anyone and maybe they help a tiny little bit. But I think I do other things with much more gusto, attention, and belief. I attend to other ways of creating political and social change in the world.

When I think about whether or not I am a feminist, I remember what Sonia Shah wrote in her introduction to *Dragon Ladies: Asian American Feminists Breathe Fire*. She said that Asian American women have to deal with Asian American issues because no other feminists will do that for them. It's not like we can expect white or black women to take up our Asian issues. In the same way, I think I cannot pretend I don't care about feminism, because there is hardly any other venue in which my work and my vision—and more generally, the fate of women like me—will be entertained as worthwhile. If I were to walk away from feminism as a cause, I think I could not expect to be treated seriously by non-feminists, or anti-feminists, or homophobes, or racists. In the end, I am forced to embrace feminism and to make feminism matter to me, because the world is otherwise not going to have a place for someone who thinks, and acts, like I do.

Delia D. Aguilar: This question would have been easier to answer ten or fifteen years ago. It isn't that I would have had a different response then. It's simply that feminism means so many different things now, partly as a result of the success of the women's movement of the 60s and 70s. Now institutionalized and integrated into the mainstream, feminism has become domesticated, losing its critical edge. So it just isn't possible for me to speak with the same excitement or urgency. But perhaps I can talk about this later.

I came to feminism, I suppose, the way that many others during my time did—through political struggles of a broader nature. I was politically awakened, to use the jargon of liberation movements of that period, by events transpiring in the homeland. The declaration of martial rule by Ferdinand Marcos was met with fierce opposition by large masses of people, many of whom were placed on the wanted list of the regime and forced to join the revolutionary underground. In the United States, a group of young Filipino progressives who had fled the repression began to organize in support of that anti-imperialist, national democratic movement, urging attention to the US government's complicity in giving military and economic aid to the dictatorship. It was through participation in this movement that I came to grips with what leftist circles called "the woman question." Put more plainly, it was in the process of organizing—at rallies, picket lines, house meetings and, more crucially, in closed meetings where the "political line" was set forth and discussed—that I was struck by the incongruity of it all. Here we were, talking about fighting for a more humane society, one in which class differences would eventually be eliminated and where women would gain equality with men. Yet I saw that the way we were conducting ourselves contrasted sharply with these stated goals. Without question, men consistently took leadership positions in the most important activities (those requiring

the use of the mind), while women were relegated to traditional support roles.

I think it is important to emphasize that my awareness of women's subordination by no means came automatically. I happened at this time to be attending meetings on my campus of a group called the Women's Radical Union. We read socialist literature, discussed the Marxist analysis of capitalism, and talked about the emancipation of women. While many of the women in this group were graduate students who were acutely sensitive to macho behavior among their male peers and professors, their feminism was tempered by their socialism. In this way they differed markedly from liberal or radical feminists whose feminism was confrontational and direct, but narrowly confined to gender relations. The latter never had any appeal for me because, of course, I was deeply conscious of my "Third World" status. It was also at this time that I first began to teach women's studies, courses in marriage and family, and gender roles socialization. Because textbooks on these topics broached from a women's perspective were not to see print until several years later, in the beginning years of my teaching I used pamphlets from the New England Free Press and other underground publications, all of which stressed the overthrow of patriarchy as well as capitalism. Interestingly enough, despite these activities, I did not refer to myself as a "feminist." "Feminism" in revolutionary Third World struggles was then anathema. It was considered bourgeois, individualist, and divisive. I understood well that MAKIBAKA, the revolutionary underground women's organization founded in 1970, stood for the liberation of women, not feminism.

Feminist though I was not, I was determined to engage "the woman question" among my revolutionary comrades because, by this point, the limitations of the national democratic platform's stance on women had become apparent to me. The fights I had were angry, fierce, and heated, and these were not confined to men. I questioned what I saw then as the productivist orientation of the movement and its instrumental reckoning of women's participation in it. I wanted conventional gender relations addressed and changed. I was told in not so many words that women in the Philippines were already liberated because they controlled the purse strings in the family, and because they were respected members of society, and because they were strong. Weren't women guerrilla fighters proof of this? That's what I received in response to my mailed queries to the Philippines--underground photos of red women fighters! And aren't women, by merely joining the movement, already beginning to cast off old norms that require them to stay home? I remember addressing an audience of mostly women in the Philippines in the early 80s, where one very articulate woman stood up and told me exactly that, using this very language. (A mere two years later, she was to become an outspoken feminist and head of a women's

NGO.) Those were extremely frustrating times for me, so frustrating that I decided to turn to academic work to find empirical support for my stand. I set to work on an examination of the gender division of household labor in the Philippines, an issue I considered vital to my argument, by conducting interviews with women across class (women who were mothers) and letting them speak for themselves. I decided to write about this as I could not find a receptive ear and felt that our debates had reached an impasse.

At about this time, I was invited to join an ongoing Marxist/feminist study group that had been in existence since the early 70s. My involvement here also proved to be another significant source of tension. For if I was waging a battle against sexism among my Filipino comrades, with these women I would be raising doubts about their specific version of Marxism, or of Marxist/feminism. Within this group, however, I found support in the few women of color who had been invited to join along with me. They, too, were active in national liberation solidarity struggles and had reservations about these Marxist/feminist women identical to mine. What was “Marxist” about these women when their vocabulary was circumscribed by patriarchal issues and the politics of gender? Holding our own separate meetings, we women of color explored the ways in which we could effectively bring our anti-imperialist concerns to the main group. We were particularly taken aback and appalled by the reaction of one white woman after we had given individual presentations on national liberation in Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Turning to the other white women, she casually dismissed our very presence by asking, “Should we support national liberation struggles that are patriarchal?” I would say that the tensions I encountered in this and other arenas of conflict were often quite unsettling, but they were useful in goading me to study Marxist feminism on my own.

In the meantime, feminist stirrings could be discerned at the margins of the national democratic movement back home. In groping for answers to my questions, I was put in touch with a group of women in the Philippines who, themselves no longer satisfied with the old line on women, were starting to hold forums about organizing an autonomous women’s movement. Many of them had earned their place in the movement as cultural workers; several had undergone incarceration as political prisoners. I am certain that it was their immersion in the movement that gave them the confidence to express dissent without feeling vulnerable to the facile charge of “divisiveness.” I still recall the excitement of those small gatherings. While these activists called upon me to provide the theoretical frame within which their discomfiture as women could be articulated, the now gendered stories which they shared with me gave me the foundation, in practice, upon which to base my critique. I was also much encouraged and energized in knowing that there were

several such aggrupations of women, not just the one I was meeting with. Not long after this, Ninoy Aquino was assassinated. The event drew the ire of the middle class who took to the streets as it had not before. The ensuing opening up of what is now referred to as a “democratic space” led to the mobilization of a wide variety of “sectors” comprising Philippine society. Shortly afterward, a semi-autonomous women’s movement developed and flourished, easily becoming the most vibrant of the sectoral organizations. GABRIELA was founded and, with its establishment, women came out in the open declaring themselves “feminists.” It must be remarked that when they did, they made sure to explain that they were appropriating the term for themselves and imbuing it with their own nationalist content. It was not until this moment that I, too, could give myself this label.

QUESTION 2: DID/DOES FEMINISM HELP TO FRAME YOUR POLITICS? OR, DOES/DID YOUR POLITICS FRAME YOUR ENGAGEMENT WITH FEMINISM/FEMINISTS?

Delia: Although it may seem circuitous, I think that I can best answer this question by continuing my narrative. In the late 80s, 1987 to be exact, we (Karin’s father, brother, and myself) spent the year in the Philippines. That was a very, very stimulating period. Politics was in the air, and the atmosphere was, quite simply, electric. The women’s movement, a feminist one now, was the most alive and visible among the progressive associations. I set up a small study group of women who met weekly to read and study feminism. It was very different from any group I had participated in the United States. For one thing, these women had a wealth of experience in revolutionary activity, and so every little paragraph that we read (representing theory) was incessantly interrupted by a discussion of multiple examples of lived realities (representing practice). For another, many of our weekly meetings had to be shelved because there were urgent actions constantly taking place, some of them on behalf of a person or persons arrested or tortured, while others entailed joining massive demonstrations. But now that the democratic space allowed travel and an easy flow of ideas from the West, I perceived an understanding of race and racism to be an important subject for us Filipino feminists to grapple with. That was not a topic that was readily grasped in our study group. But it bothered me no end that US feminists would come and lecture to Filipino women about how, for example, we should “not keep blaming colonialism for [our] problems as women.” The message: move on, already; you just don’t know it, but it’s your men who are the problem. It also bothered me that Filipino feminists could mindlessly quote something that, say, Betty Friedan wrote and apply that directly

to our situation as Filipino women. As a result, I found myself waging a wholly new educational struggle. I began reading feminist theory in a different way--and now feminist presses and feminist theory-making in the US were burgeoning--and I started thinking and writing about how feminist theoretical production in the industrial West could adversely affect Third World women's movements.

When we returned to the United States, the growing dominance of the "cultural turn" was becoming evident in the academy. Having just arrived from the Philippines where, despite a lively women's organization, the progressive movement as a whole had retained its economist character, I welcomed this trend as an antidote. Postmodernism seemed to give room for conversations around race and gender in addition to class in its insistence on recognizing "difference." I initially experienced this trend as freeing, both from the restrictions of a rigid class-bound perspective embraced by national liberation, and from the racism and narrowness of middle-class, white feminism. By this time, too, the neo-conservatism inaugurated by the Reagan/Bush administration had taken hold and progressive organizations in the US had all but disappeared. What was left of organizing became local and specific, having lost any overarching or unifying frame. In fact, thinking back, I realize that it was as early as 1982 that feminists in the US started asking one another, where's the women's movement? Connected as I was to the struggle in the Philippines, I wasn't troubled by this, knowing fully well that it was very much alive in the Philippines and in other Third World countries.

Today feminism is confined to the academy in the United States. There has not been a women's movement to speak of for some time, although its absence is something feminists themselves seem fearful of examining seriously. Progressive politics in the academy has been enacted mainly in the discursive, cultural terrain, with a profound disconnect from the real world, even when it employs "left" rhetoric. Its language is elitist, its jargon incomprehensible except to initiates, and its progressive claims highly questionable. To be expected of a Third World neocolonial formation, the academy in the Philippines has not been free of this influence. But as always, rapid changes in the global political economy—more specifically, the devastation and immiseration that neo-liberalism has brought about—have spawned a worldwide anti-globalization movement that is now difficult to ignore. The "Battle of Seattle" of 1999 and the numerous international gatherings in its wake signal a new, altogether different type of movement. In contrast to academics, feminists included, whose unspoken mantra has been Margaret Thatcher's TINA (There Is No Alternative), anti-globalization activists speak of a new world that is possible. Perhaps some among them imagine a "new world" in which capitalism might be humanized, but

one hopes that others will come to envision a totally different society. This has to happen, because following the terror of 9/11, the Bush administration's "war on terror," and the invasion of Iraq, it is an understatement to assert that we live in perilous times.

Of course, I continue my interest in Filipino women and in political struggle. The unprecedented diaspora of Filipino migrant workers is currently a topic that is being researched by feminists in the United States. This is all very good, but only if these studies do not fail to critique the predations of globalized capitalism. Unfortunately, so far little is happening along these lines. For this reason, feminist politics as it exists right now is hardly relevant to me. You might say that my tenure as a "feminist" has been very short lived.

Karin: I think for me, because of when and how I grew up, feminism and politics were all the same thing. I mean that "feminism" was one small, mostly unspoken part of what I understood as "politics." It was all just woven together into one cloth: the idea that girls/women are human, and the idea that all humans deserve to live in a just and fair society. As I remember my childhood, feminism hardly ever needed to be spoken out loud. I was the oldest child, and I do not remember being treated differently from my younger brother. I saw my mother as her own person, not a shadow of my father as was the case for some of my friends' parents. Politics writ large shaped my memories of school, and growing up as a political person included discussions with my parents, homework assignments, and arguments with my teachers about the evils of capitalism, colonialism, and US imperialism.

From the kitchen table, I could see a poster my parents had taped to the dark wood paneling. It was a black mask on an orange background that read: "*Kung hindi ngayon, kailan pa?*" (If not now, then when?) I always interpreted that to mean that one day there would be a people's revolution and on that day, the people would be free. It was a hopeful message, but also a call to action and political consciousness—a warning about the dangers that would come if one did *not* act or become aware.

From when I was in fifth grade in 1972 until 1984 when I graduated from college, the main issue—really the defining issue—that shaped my political life was the US-Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines. This was the issue that shaped my parents' vexed relationship to their homeland, and so therefore it also shaped my sense of connection to a place and a history beyond my parents. Looking back I know this is so because at my 10th high school reunion in 1990, a white American woman whom I liked but barely knew greeted me with a fist in the air. "*Makibaka!*" she shouted, flashing me a big grin. She was referring, of course, to the revolutionary slogan of the anti-imperialist movement that

I taught all my classmates (and everyone in the entire school, evidently) and also wore plastered in orange letters on my favorite brown sweatshirt for our class picture that year. I stood in the middle of the front row, so the slogan is plainly visible to this day to anyone who still has the picture!

I don't think I ever thought of myself as anything other than "Filipino" until after college in the mid- to late 1980s. Feminism was an assumed category; it could be so for me because my parents did not place any obvious expectations upon me to fulfill my "womanly" role as someone else's wife, and I was never instructed to marry a doctor, lawyer, or some such professional *man*. Instead, I was very clearly expected to become that person *myself*. In addition, I also received the message that my professional independence should be the highest—maybe *only* goal—above and beyond any kind of personal or family relationship. I wonder if other women of my generation got a similarly strong message from their 70s activist parents.

And the role models I had for being a politically engaged Filipino person were not only, maybe hardly ever, men. For example, I remember Sister Caridad and Father Gigi, crazy-acting radical clergy who gave themselves wholeheartedly to fighting martial law in the Philippines. I remember my parents' friends who were hippie artists or writers or students or teachers. I remember that hardly anyone my parents knew and liked got married in a traditional ceremony, and certainly none of the women went so far as to change their last names. In contrast to these activist friends, "regular" (white, mainstream, heterosexual) people in town such as the town doctor and dentist had "all-American" families with wives who didn't even have their own first names and children who were allowed to go out on dates and drive the family car.

Feminism became an identifiable political agenda unto itself for me in college. Having professional, academic parents boosted me into an elite world in which I was able to find myself and define myself in personal, social, and political terms. As it turns out, many of my female peers were raised in horribly patriarchal families where ancestral lineage mattered because generations of accumulated wealth was passed down through men. Many of my smartest women friends were never expected to do much more than graduate with a shiny degree from our fancy college, only to find a man of the same, or better, social status. They were rebelling against the weight of all of that, something I didn't know anything about. My best friend in college came from a similar background as me, with a powerful, highly educated mother and clearly articulated expectation that she be her own person. We got along because of an assumed belief in our own capabilities as human—which, since we are women, could be called "feminism."

Today I would say that feminism gives me political voice. I mean that without feminism as an agenda that demands attention for marginalized groups, my views and my ideas would never be included in any political forum. But at the same time, feminism does not necessarily guide me in determining the terms of my political engagement. Now as a person with job stability in academia, I look for ways to build and support movements for social justice. I am less interested in feminism as a theory—say, coming out of women’s studies—than I am in feminism as form of engagement among theorists and practitioners of social change. I was never very attracted to Women’s Studies, or to the professionalization of feminism in academia. At the same time, as a person now seeking tenure at a liberal arts college, I am very grateful to the feminists in academia who included me in their circles even before I had earned the “proper” credentials because they recognized my writings and organizing work as contributions to their field.

While feminism and feminists have helped me to find myself, I think I would have to say that as a political agenda for broad-based structural change, feminism has never appealed to me. And, as feminists have moved into academia and turned common-sense ideas about women and gender oppression into high theory, I have been even less compelled to keep up with what is going on there. Similarly, I have not followed developments in LGBTQ (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered/queer) studies, or queer studies, because I have not found them interesting, or engaged, with the realities that I understand deeply and care about. In some ways, that has been my loss, as I have been unable to participate in sophisticated ways in conversations happening across academia. Recently, a queer Latino scholar visited our campus and I was invited to join an informal conversation with him over dinner. Considered a “rising star” in his field, this person is immersed in academic culture, its norms and its values are embedded in his every gesture, and yet he is also committed to theorizing for social change. I admired his dedication to his work; I even got excited about some of the ideas he proposed about “queer” as a stance of political rebellion, for instance. But I do admit that the job of high theorizing does not appeal to me much—which is what most of the feminists and queers around me are doing these days, when they are not going shopping.

So if feminism does not shape my politics, what does? I think I have created my own framework for social justice out of an eclectic, and perhaps somewhat strange, collection of life and work experiences. In this, of course, I demonstrate my many privileges: my view of what is wrong in the world—and how it should be changed—is not based in a position of stark oppression or economic subordination, and I do not keep an organic connection to a neighborhood or a social group or a political party or a nation. In this, I suppose I am very

“American,” very individualist, middle-class, and just plain petit-bourgeois. This is my background, and I don’t think I can or need to do anything to change it. On the other hand, one of the points of these essays is to suggest that our views about feminism have been shaped by the particular contexts in which we developed into politically conscious adults. I have been exposed throughout my life to a variety of people and struggles from which I have learned that human suffering is not natural or inevitable, and that many changes are both possible and necessary.

Now as a person who is paid to teach and write about that world—even though I am deeply ambivalent about being ensconced in an ivory tower and being stranded, as I often tell people, in the Great White North—I would say that you cannot claim to “know” anything if you do not understand who you are and where you came from. That may not be a question of feminism, but it is definitely a question of community.

QUESTION 3: WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE CONCERNS OF YOUNG FILIPINO-AMERICAN WOMEN TODAY, AND HOW WOULD YOU ADDRESS THEM?

Karin: I see this question as a gesture toward the issues I’d like young Filipino-American women to think about and understand more fully. Maybe I’ll break this question down into two parts. The first part is about my relationship to young Filipino-American women today. I ask myself: Do you even know what are the concerns of young Fil-Am women today? How do you know? What, if any, do you think are your obligations to them? And the second part is about feminism as it relates to young Filipino-American women. I ask: Does the feminism that mattered to you as you were growing up still matter to young women today? In other words, how has the world changed for Filipino-American women since the 1970s and 80s when you were “young”?

OK. So for the first question, I will have to frankly assess my relationship to young Filipino-American women—indeed, to young women of any nationality, race, or ethnicity—as sociological rather than direct, as a theoretical matter of shared experience, mostly imagined, not based on everyday occurrences. Sometimes, I think this is sad; it is a tribute to my assimilation both as a hyphenated American and as a second-generation academic. I have moved away from anything that looks like “roots.” But I think it is important to be honest, to reflect and acknowledge my “flotation” position in this regard because there is always someone out there who wants me to “represent” a category I may not fully understand or relate to. I think we all know too well what it means to be

tokenized, and sometimes I have no choice but to play the role I have been given by dominant society. In being frank and transparent, I hope I raise some questions about what it means to be “authentic.”

The easiest way for me to find out something about Filipino-American women, given my estranged and alienated relationship to almost any kind of Filipino-American group, is to “google” them. But what do I discover by typing in “Filipina women” into an internet search? Same thing you’ll find. Lots and lots of sites for sex and marriage: single women seeking foreign men, pen pals, pornography featuring “cherry blossoms,” and mail-order brides. Sick to my stomach, I scroll down hoping to find something more empowering, political, community-oriented, or, at the very least, just plain angry. The first informational site I see is a 1995 article about Filipino women campaigning against sex tourism in Australia. The second: a scientific article about breast cancer among Filipino-American women. The third: a United Nations document about trafficking of Filipino women to Japan. So far, not uplifting.

A few more pages of scrolling and I find the Filipino Women’s Network based in the Philippines and learn about a conference to discuss, among other things, the Filipino-American community in 2013. Another site reminds me of the anthology of writings by Filipino and Filipino-American women—but these are not young people or youth. Eventually I find *newfilipina.com* and *Botika Babae* (www.babaegear.com) where I learn about Urduja, a legendary tribal warrior princess. Of course, it is not long before I find the site for FAWN, an organization dedicated to Filipino-American women that is based in Minnesota—so close to me that it is in the same zip code! (I am friendly with at least one member of FAWN; I don’t have any principled reason for being out of touch with them.) Several hours later, I discover myself bleary-eyed from web surfing, having visited everything from a Filipino youth group to Jim Zwick’s on-line anti-imperialist history lesson and bookstore.

There are other ways that I have a sense of what is going on for my younger counterparts. I teach Asian American Studies, and I have met Filipino-American students on many campuses and in many different communities. A few years ago, I was asked to deliver the keynote address for an organization representing Filipino-Americans in the Midwest. I got a feeling then, for some of the things young Filipino-American women care about. Recently through my action/research projects, I have gotten to know teenage activists of color in Detroit and the Twin Cities. They are not Filipinos, and some of them are boys, but they are all youth who are becoming politically aware and engaged in social movement building. Through them I am learning about the world through young eyes and

getting in touch with a new generation of leaders for social change.

What do I think I know about today's Fil-Am women? I know that some things have not changed since I was younger. They are bombarded with contradictory messages about their beauty and desirability (from the perspective of white European men), their exotic culture (eminently saleable in the form of jewelry, clothing, and music but somehow not distinct enough to merit recognition in mainstream US venues), their history of resistance to colonization in the Philippines, their struggle for survival as migrant workers throughout the Filipino diaspora. Certain things have definitely changed for the better since I was young: professional narratives about our history and current-day experience as Filipino Americans are more comprehensive and complex than they were thirty years ago. I believe this is largely the result of decades of grassroots activism among students and faculty who demanded that education at public universities serve the needs of the surrounding communities. Out of these struggles for Ethnic Studies and Filipino-American Studies in particular have emerged a population of Filipino-Americans scholars and teachers who help us all to articulate our own sociological condition.

Although these past few years seem to promise troubled times in the future, the possibilities for radical social change are all very exciting. This is not to downplay the very horrible conditions that face many young Filipino and Filipino-American women, particularly the domestic workers in the US, Canada, and around the globe who are so far from home and family, trapped in lives of virtual slavery. Their voices—among others—are what remind me that oppression is real, that for many people “being a Filipino woman” is not an imaginary state of existence but a completely real and tangible state of struggle for survival and connection to home and family.

I see great hope not so much in my ability, or my mother's, to make these conceptual connections between our lived realities and the collective history of the Filipino people. After all, the point is not simply to liberate ourselves as individuals, to feel good about where we have been and who we have become. I would say that Mom and I have done a lot of “cognitive liberation” for ourselves. Besides, if all I expected from feminism was my own personal freedom, I might as well have become a right-wing Christian fundamentalist. At least then I would feel more victorious at this particular historical moment—a moment I believe must soon pass.

I see hope, instead, in the possibility that the younger generation, Filipino-American women included, will create a new synthesis of radical thought and action that draws constructive lessons from the 1960s, 70s, 80s, and onward. Perhaps in the 21st century, “Pinay feminism” will have a role in these changes.

So what can be done to improve the condition of Filipino-American women? EDUCATE! ORGANIZE! The same work that must be done to free all humanity from the deadening cycles of mass consumption: the food that we eat is deadly, the news that we read is censored, the taxes that we pay go to fund war, the schools that our children attend teach them compliance, the homes that we live in tie us into life-time contracts of debt ... All of this we justify by striving toward an "American Dream" of fitting in, of being accepted, of having "equal access" (to consumer goods and services), of preserving our cultural icons (in their most innocuous forms). These are not issues that only Filipino-American women face, of course, but they are ultimately the issues that we ALL face.

Delia: I would like to begin by saying that I came to the United States at age 22, more or less already a fully-formed adult. My sense of myself as a Filipino was firm; there was nothing about it to be either doubted or confirmed. Consequently, in bringing up my children, all I could teach them was what I knew, which was how to be a Filipino in the United States. It was much later when they had developed their own separate selves that I gleaned from them what it meant to have this other identity, "Filipino-American." Now I cannot say how my insistence on "Filipino-ness" inoculated them against the warping effects of US consumerist culture (which was my hope), or whether this insistence constrained their development in ways I did not wish. In any event, one always is relieved when things turn out just fine in the end in spite of one's worst failings. And when your offspring surpass and exceed your wildest dreams and expectations, what can you do except bless your stars?

Having admitted my shortcomings thus, let me now try to answer the question. I suspect that Filipino-American youth are forced to confront their identity as "other" by the racism that they encounter. From what I've observed, those whose parents are immigrants may not find much help because many immigrant Filipinos tend to negate or deny their racialized experiences, attributing these, instead, to their own insufficient enculturation or their individual failures. Filipino-American women may experience racialization not as outright derogation of their person, but in terms of being exoticized. On the other hand, for better or for ill, there are now many more Filipinos in the United States than thirty years ago, and we live in closer proximity to one other and in large enough numbers to establish a distinct community. It is possible now to produce movies about Filipino-American life, for example, and to have an audience for these. As a result, racism and the alienation it gives rise to may be mitigated by living in the presence of an organized community.

I think that there are two general topics that young Filipino-Americans should

educate themselves about, whether or not they ever visit the Philippines with their parents. They should study the history of the United States and learn about what's called internal colonies. In doing so they will be able to locate themselves alongside other racialized "minorities" whose labor in cities and in farms has been appropriated to build this country and to create wealth that they have no access to. Today no one--certainly not Filipinos--can afford to remain ignorant about the nature of the society we live in. They should study the history of the Philippines, in particular that written by Renato Constantino, and learn about how our history is tightly bound up with that of the United States. It is through educating themselves about these matters that they can begin to comprehend the current diaspora of Filipinos, over 70 percent of whom are women, to over 162 different countries—as mail-order brides, overseas contract workers, and entertainers. Whether they like it or not, it is this diaspora that sustains the public perception of Filipino women as patient, docile, well-equipped to please men, and all those other qualities that "liberated" white women are presumed to have forsworn. They need to understand why the country of their parents has been declared as "the second front of the war against terrorism" and what ramifications this has for them.

If there is an opportunity to visit the Philippines, young Filipino Americans should seize it, less to frolic in megamalls and to be impressed by the luxurious accommodations offered by local tourist spots, than to learn how the majority of Filipinos actually live and how they organize for change. For instance, I have sent three students (alas, they were not Filipinos) to study in the intensive women's studies "intercultural program" of St. Scholastica's College. Although it is commonplace to say that students' lives get turned around by practically any study-abroad stint, I can say that this experience is singular. Another student (a Latina, this time) attended the Philippine Studies summer program and she, too, underwent a profound political transformation. I think what these young people acquired from their visits is a kind of awareness that has been out of fashion in this country for a while now. Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi expressed this about feminists in her country today: "They are unaware of the connection between the liberation of women on the one hand and of the economy and country on the other. Many consider only patriarchy as their enemy and ignore corporate capitalism." This lack of political awareness has led to a return to essentialism, notwithstanding postmodern endeavors to eradicate it, as witness the popularity on campuses worldwide of Eve Ensler's V-Day. In the Philippines, the ban on *The Vagina Monologues* at Ateneo University was met with vigorous protests by both faculty and students, all in the name of artistic freedom and freedom of expression. No one thought to question the patently upper-middle-class, "made-in-USA" stamp of the play,

nor its condescending gaze on Third-World female populations it is determined to “save.” No one even thought to consider the ramifications of the landing in Southern Philippines at that very same time of US Navy Seals and Green Berets, and to connect these concurrent events.

If I speak with what might appear like a curious presumption that Filipino-American youth could actually have an interest in these weighty issues, it is because I’ve been at conferences set up by young people (yes, Filipino Americans) where these have been the main themes. A couple of decades back, there were too few young Filipino Americans in universities to make such conferences possible. Moreover, a decade ago the political quiescence of US society as a whole lent itself easily only to cultural events accentuated by *adobo*, *pancit*, and *tinikling*-type offerings in a bid for “ethnics” to simultaneously assimilate and to celebrate their “diversity.” But events are fast transpiring—the recent summary deportations of Filipinos, among them—that force a recognition of a radically different geopolitics. That young Filipino Americans are holding conferences of the kind that I attended is very encouraging. I have no doubt that gatherings like this will soon become more widespread. Also full of promise is the fact that, unlike in the 70s, Filipino Americans now have become a fairly visible contingent in mass mobilizations like anti-war and anti-globalization rallies. All of these are hopeful signs of a coming to political cognizance of a new generation of Filipino Americans.

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