Multicultural Politics and the Paradox of Being Special: Interrogating Immigrant Women's Activism and the Voice of Difference

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Abstract

Interviews with racialized minority immigrant women activist-managers in immigrant service sector in Toronto, Canada demonstrate how women construct their activist identities. An antiracist postcolonial feminist framework is used to explore their narrative strategies and to show that their activist possibilities are constrained by their identities. Activism is limited to advocating for their ethnic community in multicultural politics that is structured by postcolonial "speaking" configuration that allows "native informants" to represent their communities as culturally alien and to authorize state management of racial and ethnic differences. The interviews also show the complexities of immigrant women's political agency as they navigate the limiting politics.

Keywords: activism, native informant, immigrant community organizations

Introduction

I analyze third world activist immigrant women's engagement with multicultural politics in Toronto, Canada from a postcolonial feminist and antiracist perspective. Thirteen self-identified immigrant women activists spoke about their activism. These immigrant women are also managers of immigrant service organizations in Toronto, the largest and the most diverse city in Canada. Interview narratives demonstrate how they construct their identities in order to invest their speech with maximum authority and power so that they could be more credible and acknowledged more readily as they advocate for their communities. I worked in the immigrant services sector and spoke to these women in 2000. Many of these women were my colleagues, employers and friends whom I respected and admired for their dedication, hard work and sharp analysis. I learned much about feminist and multicultural politics from them and would have remained there had my academic pursuit not taken me to a different direction. I write this article to show their complex navigation of their relatively privileged role in this sector.

The "immigrant services sector" or the "settlement sector" is made up of numerous immigrant community-based organizations funded by state agencies (most notably, Citizenship and Immigration Canada) to support immigrant newcomers' integration into Canadian society (Beyene et al, 1996; Richmond, 1996; Richmond and Shields, 2005; Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto, 1996). I have also included here those organizations targeted at ethnoracial groups even though their primary service focus is not "settlement". Language training and information provision are keys to settlement service provision for newcomers to Canada. Ethnic matching of

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workers with service users or "ethno-specific" service provision is considered superior in minimizing the effects of Eurocentric biases in mainstream organizations (Das Gupta, 1999; Reitz, 1995; Weinfeld, 1999). The argument that ethnoracial people understand their own communities better than mainstream organizations counters Eurocentric, racist and ineffective services and philosophy (Beyene et al, 1996). However, this led to a culturalized discourse towards serving immigrants which relies on cultural interpreters to mediate between the Canadian state and the newcomers who are mostly from third world countries. The culturalization of service has been critiqued as a denial of racism and racialization (Jiwani 2005).

In this space, immigrant women from third world countries are positioned as advocates and representatives of their ethnic communities by virtue of their cultural proximity to their communities, and negotiate with state and funding agencies to access resources for their respective ethnic communities. Thus, many of these community organizations are ethno-specific, or match services and personnel with the clients. Ethnospecific organizations are usually smaller and serve a particular ethnic group; they are often founded by people in that community sometimes with "mainstream" activist support. They started to form since 1970s and 80s when increasing third world immigration and enshrinement of multicultural framework made it difficult for the state to ignore antiracist and ethnic activism. Mainstream organizations are usually larger, older and more established. They are also usually "multicultural" as they provide services to many ethnoracial groups. Settlement may be one of the many services they provide. They respond to the critique of mainstream-ness by ensuring that their staff members' cultural background matches the clients'. Thus a pool of ethnic diasporics is necessary to serve their own community regardless of whether settlement services are provided by ethno-specific or mainstream organizations (see Table 1 for a brief description of the participants and their organizations).

Immigrant women from the South or "Third world" countries have been the subject and object of community services and advocacy in this sector (Agnew, 1996; Arat-Koc, 1999; Das Gupta, 1999; Ng, 1996; Thobani, 2000). Edited collections on women of colour in Canada have also contributed to our understanding of immigrant women not just as object of service provision but as activists and political agents (Bannerji, 1993; Dua, and Robertson, 1999). These studies have critiqued the voicelessness of the representations of immigrant women; instead, the feminist scholars in this field (see also Bannerji, 2000; Dossa, 2004; Ng, 1993; Razack, 1998; Walton-Roberts, 2004) have paid particular attention to their activism and contextualized their feminist politics and agency in race, class and gender processes and feminist and multicultural politics. Racialized third world immigrant women in Canada are often referred to as "visible minority women", a state-created category that helps depoliticize antiracist resistance and avoid discussions of racialized hierarchies (Carty, 1993). Naming these women "third world" highlights the postcolonial connections and makes explicit the racialization and marginalization of these women in western space. It is also a way of referencing the postcolonial literature on third world and transnational feminist activism in the tradition of Mohanty (1988), Trinh (1989) and Chow (1993), and others following them (John, 1996). Placing the participants in the context of culturalization of services and multicultural politics of depoliticizing antiracist resistance, we can be more critical of the space of third world immigrant women's activism where they claim they

have unique abilities to serve their clients and it is no accident that the majority of the service providers in the area are also women (see also Lewis, 2000). They have to name the cultural specificity of non English speaking immigrants who need special intervention because of their difference even though they risk entrenching immigrants as alien and different from the English-speaking western society (see Yue, 2008, pp. 229-231). The reality is that immigrant women's professional skill and knowledge is assumed to be located in her third world and racialized embodiment (Lewis, 2000).

To understand the position of immigrant women activist managers, I borrow Spivak's (1999) conceptualization of the Native Informant, a figure that stands in between the absolute Third World Other and the Western Subject. This is not merely an apt description of the pool of well-educated third world women, sufficiently westernized and can communicate their community's needs to the state and its representatives. It spells out the multicultural politics of race in which these women find themselves. In the terrain of race and ethnic relations management, immigrant women as activists play a vital role in reproducing Third World in the west. The Native Informant who is authentically native is an authorizing agent who helps reinforce the unequal structures that hold up unequal global relations (Wood, 2001). Focusing on her constitution makes visible seemingly unrelated transnational and historical relations that play out at the local site -- the immigrant services sector. The Native Informant has often been a much-maligned figure who is less than innocent and is perhaps even manipulative as she tells on her community to further her own advancement (Sa'ar, 2005; Wood, 2001). Indeed, even as she speaks on behalf of her community, she also has to differentiate herself from them so that she can be the special speaker (Spivak, 1999 p. 358; Trinh, 1989). While she can appeal to the notion that she can speak because she has the "epistemic privilege of the oppressed" (Narayan, 1988) or has special insights and knowledge into her experience as a minority third world person, she can lose her credibility once she is seen as less than oppressed.

Yet the Native Informant is performable only by a privileged few who are constituted in this position through race, class and gender hierarchies that continue to operate through multiculturalism in the west (Bannerji, 2000; Brah, 1996; Razack, 1999). In this privileged position also lies the main contradiction and dilemma: since the Native Informant is not an absolute Other, she cannot be authentically Third World. Neither is she fully western. She can be accused of being either too much of or not being sufficiently of either of the extreme figures. This dilemma is exemplified by the case of Chinese cultural producers who are deemed to be corrupted by western influence to be considered authentically Chinese or know anything about Chinese people (Chow, 1993) and the third world writer who must stoop in the fields alongside of her brethren to show her commitment to her community instead of indulging in the luxury of writing (Trinh, 1989). Thus to speak is itself a dangerous path or can potentially be turned against her. For these activist women, being seen as too removed from their community or too established to know the needs of the community challenges their authenticity. Thus the activists have to construct their commitment to their community. Their inauthenticity is made all the more real when some of them have been in Canada for decades so that they cannot claim simplistically that they know what newcomers experience. Secondly, their gender-status prevents them from representing the whole "community" (men too). Patriarchal elements from the community discredit them as (western) feminists who have

no sympathies for the larger ethnic community, i.e., men. Thirdly, having been in an established organizational position for a certain length of time undermines the women's closeness to their community. These women's identification with their community is doubly precarious in that they are also managers of organizations, and by definition, they are responsible to the state, more so than to the communities they serve.

Nevertheless, the norm in the modern liberal democratic society is to accommodate difference by insisting that the Voice of Difference speaks (Trinh, 1989). Thus the Native Informant is vital to the legitimation of multicultural politics as accommodating of difference by being this Voice of Difference. In order to consolidate her speaking position, the Native Informant necessarily has to authorize her speech by "self-subalternizing" her position (Chow 1993). For example, Maeve, one of the activist managers tries to retain her immigrantness by speaking about knowing "what it is like" to be an immigrant because she has been an immigrant. Her relative establishment has to be erased in order to remain similar to the immigrant community she represents but this is unlike the move used to discredit third world speech by the west as described by Chow. Here the immigrant activist is self-consolidating in order to advocate for her community and the only way to speak is as an authentic native. Put in another way, we have to consider the immigrant woman "in the context of her own present" (Khan, 2001) where she is required to be simultaneously an authentic third world native and has sufficient knowledge of the west. She is thus located in the structure of violence where she is limited to engaging in the discourse of authenticity; she has to demonstrate that she is not corrupted by western knowledge and influence, that she is one with her community or authentically native, and that her self-interest is also the interest of her community. This pre-occupation makes it difficult to challenge the structures of speech. Unpacking the limiting structures faced by the Native Informant is not to excuse such self-consolidating practices but to see those performing it as actors within a specific set of constraints produced by race, class and gender in historical geopolitical relations in postcoloniality. In this way, we can reconceptualize their resistance as possible but also limited, and unsettle our reliance on authentic speech and current authorizing structures.

For example, Zuhura plays up her own specialness yet she also attempts to question how she is deemed an unusual South Asian as though all South Asians can be so easily known by the mainstream Canadian society. Thus she cleverly claims her specialness and insider status while at the same time challenges the essentialism that goes hand in hand with her specialness:

> I think I have been successful in terms of articulating the mandate of my organization vis-a-vis structures of power and white mainstream structures. I think I am very effective because I understand their language. But I think that's because I have a great facility for English language and I use it to the hilt. It's very disarming for them, [i.e., funders and undifferentiated mainstream] because they automatically assume that all South Asian women are either submissive or cannot speak properly or whatever. So when they see me, they are ready to label me off as that unusual South Asian and I try to, you know, use that as a symbol of racism: Out of a billion people in Asia, they know how I am different?

She questions the representation of all South Asian women as indistinguishable from one another. Her double consciousness makes it all the more clear that she views her space as a negotiation instead of simply a way to advance herself. Thus I argue that their performance is not simply a replication of the Native Informant. Instead, we can think of multiple and unstable performances. As Judith Butler (1990) explains, a repetition can never replicate exactly, and individual interpretations of the script open up the possibility of resistance. Thus, these immigrant women are seen as negotiators, and as both agents and instruments within a multicultural political terrain that is produced by historical global and local forces and current geopolitical realities. They reproduce multiple native informants rather than inhabit the Native Informant.

Maintaining "difference in sameness" is the tightrope walked by the Native Informant. The charge of inauthenticity is a looming possibility when one has to be authentically third world and yet be readily accessible to the west. Trinh Minh-Ha calls this dilemma the "paradox of being special" as she must speak as the same voice as the faceless crowd, yet she must have a special ability to stand above the masses. This is a precarious and unstable position as her inauthenticity threatens to expose her. In such an impossible space, it is no wonder that the immigrant woman self-subalternizes to maintain their precarious foothold on the slippery slope -- of possessing specialized knowledge and expertise and of having an interest that is transparent and one with the community for which she advocates. Their self-subalternization must be evaluated against their own self-locating practices and consciousness of politics of representation in multicultural politics.

Table 1
A Brief Description of Immigrant Women Activists

Participant	Age	Country of Origin	Time of Immigration	Type of Organization & Service
Angie	30s	Jamaica	1980s	Multicultural; settlement
Angelina	50s	Phillipines	1970s	Multicultural; health
Brenda	50s	Hong Kong	1950s	Multicultural; settlement
Clarissa	30s	Hong Kong	1980s	Ethnospecific; advocacy
Christine	30s	Hong Kong	1970s	Multicultural; women
Glenda	60s	Dominican Republic	1950s	Multicultural; health
Leela	40s	India	1980s	Multicultural; settlement
Maeve	40s	Hong Kong	1980s	Multicultural; multi-service
Pamela	40s	Guyana	1970s	Multicultural; employment
Shakti	50s	Pakistan	1990s	Ethnospecific; health
Sharon	40s	Somalia	1990s	Multicultural; employment
Yvette	40s	Hong Kong	1980s	Ethnospecific; legal
Zuhura	30s	India	1980s	Ethnospecific; settlement

Notes: Services are geared towards ethnoracial newcomers and immigrants but service focus may differ. There are overlaps between "multicultural" and "ethnospecific" as an ethnospecific organization may cover a huge group such as "African". The classification of the nature of the organizations is left to broad categories such as "health" or "settlement" to avoid easy identification of the participants.

"My Community"

I now turn to the interview transcripts to explore immigrant women's self-subalternizing strategy of claiming oneness with their community, or more specifically, claiming their authenticity as spokespersons whose interests coincides with the community's. In order to claim "immigrantness" for example, they would have to construct a static memory of their immigrant experience, one that remains largely the same as the newcomers. However, as they do so, it is clear that they do not simply reproduce their immigrantness but construct an identity that destabilizes hegemonic Canadian nationhood. So for example, Glenda, a woman who works for an organization serving women of colour and who has been in Canada for almost 40 years, says this:

> I don't necessarily say that I'm an immigrant woman anymore. I have been here for 30 years. I am a Canadian. I am a black woman. I was an immigrant. I am a Canadian citizen. ..... I have the knowledge, the experience to say, okay, when a woman comes here and say this is her experience, I know what she is talking about....

Glenda claims an insider status through an unmediated access to her immigrant experience. Yet, she claims a "Canadian" identity too. In asserting her contradictory status in relation to Canada, as an immigrant and as a Canadian citizen now, she forges new possibilities for constructing a Canadian identity that does not contradict her immigrantness. For Glenda, her professional knowledge is not simply acquired through her job experience but also through her embodiment as a black immigrant woman who is now a Canadian citizen. She is simultaneously a product of First World and Third World.

Maeve also uses her experience as an immigrant woman to show that she understands newcomers' experience because "I know how it feels to be disadvantaged. Perhaps this is one of the reasons how I can feel for these people; I was there before". Claiming a memory of being disadvantaged, Maeve constructs identification with her community. Maeve works for an organization that serves a number of ethnicities, most notably Chinese communities. However, there are also other emerging communities such as Somalian communities, mainland Chinese communities who speak Mandarin, unlike Maeve herself, a Hong Kong ex-patriot whose dialect is Cantonese. Maeve strategically talks of a common *immigrant* experience as opposed to a Hong Kong Chinese immigrant experience.

Brenda, who is of mixed racial origin, has a lot more difficulty operating within one ethnic culture. Moreover, Brenda immigrated as a child and has been here since the 50s on top of working for an immigrant service organization that is considered by other immigrants to be a mainstream agency. Rather than claiming an ethnicity, Brenda speaks of her closeness with grassroots communities.

J: What is your community?
B: I call it international community because my own heritage is that. My whole experience has been across boundaries, across borders, across cultures or whatever [...] so for me is: Who do I identify? I identify really probably with the most emerging communities; those who've got less voice. That's where I identify. I don't identify with the more established. The real grassroots, I identify much more from a grassroots perspective though I'm a systems person. I do have a community development side of me and that's really where my background and most of my life experiences have been.

Instead of identifying with a particular community, Brenda claims a grassroots or community development approach that grounds her in the community, the general community of marginalized people. Yes, she admits, she has been trained as a social worker to see the world from a "systems-approach" but she chooses to take a "community-development approach" so that she can give voice to the grassroots. This is a common strategy of siding with the most marginalized to claim their legitimacy. Using the most marginalized as the guiding principle for decision making allows one to claim that one's interest coincides with the desires of the Other. This reasserts an undifferentiated and undivided speaker. This way, the speaker speaks for the community; thus providing her with immunity against challenges of self-interest.

Direct contact with the "community" is an important route to claiming one's tie to the community and one's special knowledge of the community. Maeve lays claim to the insider status through her constant contact with the community as well as her years of experience working on the front line. Her continual accessibility to the clients and her front-line staff members provides her with closeness which gives her insights and special insider knowledge about the community that outsiders cannot possibly have:

I have a sense about my community. It's again, my front-line experiences and the way I relate to my staff. I don't know if I can do it, if I'm successful in doing it but I always consider myself one of them, not above them. They feel it in their social activities or whatever. They always include me but not necessarily other, you know, directors or whatever. I've been working with them for a long time. When we talk about our clients, our community, all the time when we have time to chat with each other in meeting, informal meeting, staff lunch or whatever. And I actually go to the program. That's why I know. And I think the funders know that [our organization] knows what it's doing. It's not theoretical, it's really, we have a lot of insights about our community. I think we develop it together that kind of insights... myself and my staff.

The women's relationship with and how they conceptualize their "community" is integral to their claim to speech and shows their ambivalence and contradiction in being the voice of difference. As Zuhura's quote on her specialness beyond the South Asian mass shows,

these women do not treat their special difference without understanding the risks and benefits.

Institutionalized Voice of Difference

What is ironic is that in the immigrant sector, there is an organizational requirement that service agencies must maintain close ties with the community they serve. This organizational requirement occurs through bureaucratic procedures such as representation in the board of directors and through formalized "community consultation" such as research activities. This works to the advantage of women's claim to authenticity and special knowledge. The community organization is where the "people" reside. Whether there is true representativeness is rarely questioned. The community organization in its structural definition is close to the community. Certainly, relative to other mainstream agencies, these community organizations rely much more on the community they serve. Nevertheless, the difficulty of raising questions is inherent through this formalization. Amit-Talai (1996) has written scathingly of the professionalization of ethnic activism where the state has in effect created a minority circuit of ethnic public relations experts who facilitate a farcical exercise of multicultural representation in Canada. While I do not agree with her cynicism, the dangers of institutionalization of ethnic representation are real. The women I spoke to did not necessarily accept the position of institutional representative of the people quite readily or unproblematically. So for example, Angie, who is the executive director of an umbrella advocacy organization, is very conscious of this institutionalized position but claims it with the knowledge that she has to show a unified public voice to represent her all members. When I asked her about her official status as the voice and expert of immigrant groups, she laughs and says in a conspirational tone:

> Yes. Don't tell anyone. But we do say that about [our organization]; we are the only ones who can speak about immigrant issues. She then explains that when her organization takes an official position, it is understood that none of the organizations she represents would challenge her position publicly. This is part of playing essentialist ethnic politics. She is conscious that claiming a unitary voice and singular difference gives her own and her organization's position greater authority.

Pamela, the head of an organization that is considered relatively mainstream in that its funding base is more stable than smaller organizations and it serves a "multicultural" population rather than targeting a specific group of newcomers, explains specifically the mandate to maintain a link with the community to be an institutional representative:

> [The service goal is] more than just the delivery of service. You have to have that linkage with the community because it's from the community that you get validation, your boards of directors, your access to volunteers, your access to resources in the community so you have to work past just the direct service component and establish credibility and strategic alliances and relationships ... because of who you are -- you are a non-profit organization.

By being the executive director of the organization, Pamela can claim to speak on behalf of the communities served. It is not just a personal issue; it is an organizational issue. To elaborate what this organizational requirement means, the community that she represents is

> the broader settlement service and social service community ...The people, first of all, are your clients. Their feedback [and] evaluations [are necessary]. We have to do evaluations all the time for program enhancement because you need to know if what you are providing people is the most helpful so that ongoing feedback from the participants and user of the services themselves. You also have to do it for the point that I raised earlier -- the whole issue of accountability ... to donors, to your membership, to your funders [and to] the larger community.

By accepting and using her organizational claim to be the voice of people, Pamela in this instance does not interrogate organizational requirements and accountability. "Community" is in fact accomplished by the state through institutionalization (Ng, Walker, & Muller, 1990). The community is made equivalent to the community organization. In this scenario, Pamela becomes simply a manager and an administrator who has a direct connection with "the people", conflating activism and managerism. When I asked her if she felt any contradiction in this role, she argued that the contradiction was an integral part of her institutional position and this contradiction is comparable to that of a CEO in the private sector who must promote the agency and relate well to the government and the community. This understanding of her contradictory role leads her to explain that she is simply an "advocate", not an "activist". An activist in her conception works outside of the system. She explains that this is because "you do have to make a business case for [the organization]", so that you will be able to maintain funding levels for the organization. She is an exception among this group of women to see herself this way.

Action and Commitment
These women perform a distinctive subalternizing strategy of showing one's commitment to the community through working in the trenches, and acting for change rather than engaging in intellectual activities. All except for one participant has a university degree and nine of the thirteen women I spoke to either already had a postgraduate degree or were pursuing a higher degree. Graduate degrees have been used to discredit ethnic academics as too distant from their communities. It is clear that these women are mindful of this particular risk they take in being highly educated. Trinh writes that third world writers often have to prove their commitment to their communities through their actions rather than words. It is not surprising then that these women have to ground their activism in the community by asserting that they are "doers" rather than "thinkers" -- their activism is about action rather than words. So for example, Yvette, the coordinator of a community organization serving Asian newcomers, says this when asked to define activism:

> Maybe this is the difference between the activist and the academic. You know, I don't sit down here and say my vision of activism is this and that... I don't have time for that. I'm looking at the issues more or less [by] tackling the problems as they come to me or as we see happening within the community. And our job ... is to try and resolve these problems. And sometimes it takes changes to an individual's circumstances; other times, it means I have to do broader lobbying work, working with other organizations, or sometimes it means educating people about the issues.

The thinking work that is required in how she approaches her work is not acknowledged as part of activism; only academics "think"; she "tackles" problems. Yvette was pursuing a master's degree at the time when she was interviewed. Another woman, Christine, who had a bachelor's degree, also concurred with Yvette in saying she did not have the luxury or the time to indulge in such intellectual debates - the important issue for her is whether her clients are served.

I pointed out to Zuhura that she was not that different from academics as she would have us believe especially since she had been an academic before coming to Canada. She responded with a chuckle: "Actually no, I'm not. I'm just cleverer". She said she was able to combine her analysis and her practice more effectively than academics. Again, it is the element of practice or "action" that makes her different from academics. However, she conceded that she was given "a privilege" to question academics for their complicity in the marginalization of immigrants and of the sector. Her privilege comes from her being associated with her ethnic community. Even though she sees the difficulty of drawing a line between her and academics, she also had to argue that activism was about "commonsense", not about "theories". This anti-theoretical move is important, as it performs the function of distancing her from the mainstream space of academia. Furthermore, it produces a theory-practice split where the latter is the privileged source of knowledge about the community. This is particularly important for claiming a voice of difference where one's practice or experience is foundational in claiming insider knowledge. The theory-practice split leaves unquestioned her experience as the source of insider knowledge. The high-handedness of academics was also noted as unbecoming and incompatible with activism. For example, Angelina observed that she could have had a PhD by now with all the experience she had acquired. She said that while she had a high regard for academics, she could not forgive the way people regarded academics so highly without any justifiable grounds, and academic's tendency to be in spaces where they should not be. Aside from suggesting the fact that academics were arrogant, this comment points to the need for activists to distance themselves from privilege, appearing here as academic privilege. It also points to the environment where funding agencies are privileging research or community consultation projects conducted by large consortiums with a claim to academically-supported research and expertise. As Christine also noted, this sector was being funded mostly for research and many organizations had taken on research instead of service provision as a core activity of their organizations. While Christine did not complain specifically about the fact that academics were "taking over" the sector because of this funding environment,

the point about academics being in wrong places is well taken and can explain the resentment and fear of academic appropriation.

The line between ethnic academics and community activists is quite difficult to draw when most of these women have graduate degrees and when we consider the fact that these women are proficient in academic jargon themselves. The boundaries that they draw are not about excluding certain ethnic women as activists but this was more about insulating themselves against the charge of being too privileged to be activists or having self-interest. The need to insist on "action" rather than "thinking" is conceptualized by Trinh this way:

> Commitment as an ideal is particularly dear to third world writers. It helps to alleviate the Guilt: that of being privileged (Inequality), of `going over the hill' to join the clan of literates (Assimilation), and of indulging in a `useless' activity while most community members `stoop over the tomato fields, bending under the hot sun' (a perpetuation of the same privilege)" (p. 10).

Commitment and loyalty is endangered by the scent of privilege; these women prove their commitment through their long-term involvement with 'the community' as well as actually working in the sector, thus revealing that they can roll up their sleeves and wade in the muddy waters of activist politics. Here is Angelina demonstrating her commitment beyond a shadow of doubt:

> So you see, the reason why I continue to be very involved in these different places is that ... I feel that in order for me to criticize or comment, to take responsibility, to take leadership, is because I know - I know the issue. I am there [with] both my feet. I never want to say something or even comment on something that I am not comfortable or not familiar [with such as if] I [just] read somewhere. I would never; I would feel very inadequate [to express my view]. For a long time, I used to associate with the homeless because my friend is in a homeless [organization but] you would never hear me [say something about it]. If someone asked me about it, you would not hear me comment on that. Maybe [I would] support them but to be the authority? I will not. Now that I am there, I could say [something about homelessness] and I take a position.

By claiming to have both her feet in the community, Angelina claims a knowledge gained from being in the trenches, and also asserts her difference from other people (such as academics) who claims closeness to the community without actually "acting" to change the world. My own association with this woman reveals that she is indeed reluctant to act as an expert or representative of any particular group unless she has been working around this particular issue or with the community.

"My Work is Activism"

Another way of proving one's commitment is through claims about the all encompassing nature of activism that filters through their work. The fact that they are paid for their activism undermines their claim that their interest is the same as the

people's. They are conscious of what Chow calls the "surplus value" they gain from their closeness to the community that gives them the privileged space of being the voice of their community. In their situation, separation of work from activism is impossible. Yet by its definition, work is about earning money and making a living. Thus, instead of trying to separate activism from work, they simply see their work as activism. It is in this light that we can understand why all of them take the trouble to emphasize activism as a guiding principle of their work. It is a reason for their work. It also subalternizes them so that self-interest cannot be used to undermine their authority with which they negotiate with those in powerful position such as funders.

On the whole, directly or indirectly, all the women claim that activism is their whole orientation towards their life, whether in their work capacities or outside. Whatever they do, even when they compromise their ideals, it is with the understanding that it is best for their clients in the specific situation. As Maeve argues, the "middle" ground she takes is often the only choice she has, pointing to the lack of funding she faces while attempting to implement her activist vision. Yvette also asserts that her activist orientation frames her perspective and her actions. This activist philosophy guides all her actions:

> I don't start with an ideology saying that I want to live in a peaceful [world]. I mean, it's very subconscious. You have certain perspective of what is right and what is wrong. What is equality, what is inequality. You kind of just, this is all embedded and then you apply those values and principles on your day-to-day job, whether it's helping your client or even educating your client on their views…

Yvette's assertion not only declares that she is more than just a manager or an agent of the state, it also breaks down the division between work and activism, effectively melding the two together and affirming her authenticity. Asserting one's commitment alleviates the guilt of being privileged -- assert one's commitment which is not only at work but in her everyday life.

Christine makes a specific claim that her activism structures not only her work but in everyday situations:

> I would say activism is my entirety. My activism is this. I am at the bank, and say there is a black man in front of me, and there is a white man in front of him, sorry, behind him, and the teller will look aside and recognize the white man and ask the white man to come forward. Now if I saw that, more likely than not, depending on how tired I am. I would say something to support this gentleman who was waiting before the other man…

In asserting the all-encompassing nature of their activism, Christine not only asserts her commitment but also disrupts the distinct categorizations of "manager" and "activist".

Here is another quote from Angie to show her attempt to combine activism with one's work:

Jane: Have you always considered yourself an activist?
Angie: Yes. Even in my paid work. Even in my paid work.

The repetition of "Even in my paid work" is a repudiation of the separation between what is paid work and what is activism (read as unpaid and selfless work). In these constructions, activists become people who have to make a living and must be paid just as well as any worker. In fact, activists are not sufficiently compensated. As Angelina said, she should be paid "ten times more" for the amount of work and stress that she goes through daily in her job but for her beliefs, she is here. Pamela opines that many people in the sector have the potential of "commanding higher salaries" in the private sector but choose to stay here. Such statements reaffirm that it is their activism or their interest in their community that brought them here, not the pay.

Since the reality is that activists have to work within institutional settings and from the position of the native informant, their attempts at claiming a marginalized status and disinterestedness must be seen in that light. Moreover, the immigrant service sector is notorious for low pay and unstable funding. As well, highly educated racialized immigrant women are excluded from more lucrative spaces and better paid employment (see Man 2004). The dismissal and devaluation of their overseas training means that they have to forge meaningful work wherever possible. These rhetorical strategies are more than self-interested moves; they speak to their own marginalization too. Moreover, as Pamela and Angelina protested, they would not be in this space were they merely self-serving. Due to space limitation, I would briefly point out that immigrant women are managers because they are middle class women with western education who can mediate between new immigrants and the state. Through this initial enablement, they are offered the opportunity to get firsthand knowledge, develop a network, contacts and the know-how along with a critique of the state. A combination of both enablement and disenablement, and constitution and self-making creates a contradictory space where they can act and perhaps do some good. As Pamela said, it is impossible to work in a totally "free" space where frameworks and policies do not restrict what one can do or not do. She pragmatically accepts both her managerial status and her "advocate" status, while realizing that there are "contradictions but that's life". While her relative faith in institutions is not echoed by most, most agree that they have to engage with organizations in order to make a difference. These women use their position for the interest of the communities they serve. Sure, there are contradictions in being an activist manager; there have also been advantages, as many of the above excerpts show, not only for themselves but for their communities as well.

The all-encompassing nature of their work is also claimed through the fact that many of them do a lot of work voluntarily and their hours are not fixed. This is part and parcel of the underfunded situation of the immigrant sector, and the fact that the staff is perpetually on alert and working in a crisis mode. For the higher-profile women, they are constantly being asked to speak at one event or another, to participate in a community project or an endeavour, to counsel people or give them advice and so on. Their assertion of activism being their whole life is not an exaggeration. These women are

"everywhere." While their work is beneficial to their career in the long run, it is still severely underestimated and devalued in the market economy. The number of hours that they work and the stress that they go through are not compensated equally. This is the result of the marginalization of the immigrant space and women's work, or work that is not valued in the capitalist paradigm.

Private Doubts

In her public persona, the woman who is a voice of difference must be completely clear that she is wholly at one with the community so that her representativeness is unquestionable. Privately, a completely different picture can be revealed about immigrant women's own feelings towards their representativeness and their relation with their communities. Their public declaration is for the benefit of the audience; they are conscious that they are not as representative of their communities or that they could misrepresent their communities.

The state, through its funding programs, requires immigrant women to supply their knowledge about their communities in order to effectively manage the "settlement problems" of these communities and to conduct ethnic relations exercise through representatives and experts. However, these women also have to constantly negotiate what they can and cannot reveal to the state so that harm would not come to their agency and community. This awareness is very much a part of how these women represent their communities. This constant negotiation of what they can reveal without harming their community can be identified in all the interviews. As Leela said with respect to the question around the state:

> I think it is oppressive. I think that it's so subtle that you don't know what you are fighting against. It's like giving you a small amount of dough to ... respond to resistance but just enough that you are satisfied... The state just does that to keep our mouths shut. Actually, I was talking to a reporter in the Star [newspaper] because I wanted to have something written about our organization and I came to the part about other agencies. I said to her, maybe we should talk about this. She said, no, there could be a backlash because the government will become aware of how much money is being spent on immigrants and they will be scapegoats of this whole process.

The exorbitant funding for immigrant services is debatable but such a negotiation and mental calculation about the consequences of a public action is common among these women.

Yvette, while claiming that she does not worry about how her public words impact on her community, the following quote reveals that her concern around representation is about not harming her community. Her wariness of misrepresentation is so automatic that she did not fully realize that she was concerned about the issue:

> Jane: Being a spokesperson, do you feel that there are any pitfalls that you have to be concerned about?
> Yvette: No, I guess that's just me. I mean, I've done this enough, yeah, I think I'm inherently [cautious]… I know that what I'm saying like, you know... I'm a very cautious person. I'm not saying anything that could be used against whatever issue that I'm working on. I think that I've already worked out within the system that this is what I should say.

Although her words show a certain amount of confidence in her position as an activist and a publicly recognized one by virtue of the fact that she has been doing this for a long time, she acknowledges the dangers of representation. It is not very clear what she means by having worked out what she should say in this system. One thing is clear; she will not consciously say anything that can be used against her community. The double-consciousness of her thoughts is the result of having to mediate between her own lived experience and the demands of the state, between what she considers as the community's reality and that of the state. The mechanical way in which she accepts her position as a representative could potentially be problematic; however, she shows in another instance that she worries about being pushed into that position where she is always the expert. She accepts this role as it is better than the alternative:

> The client called and talked to another [staff] person and [the client] said no, she wanted to speak to me. Why? Because … I see her on TV all the time …. This is how people think. That speaks to the power you have in a sense. So whatever you say carries a lot more weight than someone who has no profile, you don't even know what they say. So I hope that I'm using that in a positive way. I don't think I'm using it for personal gain. And for the mainstream, it's the same thing… If I were not known to them, then all you would get would be Reform party's [right-wing position]… But I was given the opportunity to counter some of them because I was recognized as the spokesperson. So I don't care. I just use it.

Likewise, Glenda thinks that where she is at in her career is a result of having worked in this field for a long time (having "experience" and being active) and she does not shy away from being seen by others as a legitimate voice. However, she sees her legitimacy and knowledge being put to use not for herself but for her community. She asserts that she can still make a contribution whether she is seen as an expert or not. In this particular instance, questioning her own position is not as consciously or clearly articulated but it is evident that what is paramount to her is that her opinions, since she is a person from a "minority group", should be taken into account and validated by the state. This is based upon an assumption of how multicultural politics should work -- the voice of difference must be present. While transparency is assumed between herself and her community, Glenda also assumes that she speaks on behalf of those that cannot while she is in the position to do so.

In the following quote, the need to question one's own position is articulated in Zuhura's reflection about activists' position:

...we have to have a critical appreciation of our own position, of what we are doing so that we don't get carried away by what we are doing, into professional activism. [We] should be ... constantly vigilant… It's so hard to tell other people in our sector, for god's sake, you are not god's gift to humankind. Just because you provide services to people who happen to need you doesn't mean that you are superior but for the grace of god, that could be you.

Clarissa reveals a consciousness about not using the privilege of working in the space of the "community" to marginalize those who are more oppressed "within" the community. She is making reference to the fact that Chinese community groups have been largely dominated by the better established Cantonese activists who arrived earlier from Hong Kong:

I am really concerned about taking up that space and marginalizing mainland Chinese. I'm really concerned about that really in a very big way, because I feel as if we're actively participating in their erasure, in how we represent the Chinese community ourselves.

While Clarissa accepts that she has to play by the rules of multicultural politics, she is conscious of not essentializing Chineseness and is attempting to work through this danger. She adds this reflection to the struggle she has with being a representative of an essentialized community:

I think what we really should be seeing is the lack of vision of how all of the external factors are really shifting and we are not shifting with it… Because we are thinking exclusively Chinese Canadian and we haven't even defined that for ourselves what that means.

In the above passages, the speakers are conscious of how their actions reflect on "their communities" and so use their authority and position pragmatically towards what they perceive as the good of their communities. They themselves are complicit in cultivating that perceived unmediated association with their communities because they are called upon by funders and the dominant institutions and groups to represent their communities, whether they want to or not. On the other hand, in all these cases, accountability has been an issue of activists' relationship to the funding agency, rather than how they can be made accountable to their community members. Their long years of service in this sector are recognized as experiential knowledge that adds towards their credibility as experts and representatives.

Conclusion

I have focused on how immigrant activists claim their authenticity and their legitimacy but emphasized that their claiming to be the voice of the community does not discredit their commitment to social justice and to their community. What has to be

claimed does not mean that their interests are essentially corrupt because of their investments. Instead, we have to look at the impossible and contradictory situation in which the structures of legitimation require them to be simultaneously immigrant and not-immigrant women, and third world women and westernized women. The Native Informant is thus the structure of violence in which they speak and are comprehended. Self-subalternizing is therefore important for their survival. Working through some of the rhetorical strategies they employ, it is possible to see the multiple consciousness with which they exercise self-subalternizing strategies. Their claims are not simplistically about self-consolidation but fraught with contradictory desires and motivations. They open the boundaries of discourse around authenticity, third worldness and multiculturalism even as they reify ethnicities and cultural groups. These women find ways to raise questions about their own complicity and about the misrepresentation of their constituencies. They destabilize the Native Informant and the categories of "manager" and "activist".

Although resistance is limited, this does not necessarily call for pessimism towards social change. Spivak notes that social change is more "provisional than one would like to believe" (cited in Sharpe, 2002, p. 204). What I have tried to do is then to affirm the research participants' self-consolidating strategies but also highlight their problematic reproduction of privilege; in other words, it is an "affirmative deconstruction". While not all strategies have equal activist value, my overall representation of these women is to show that resistance is possible even while they self-consolidate. By contextualizing their complicity in Native Informing as a structure of violence, we can see the need for persistent critique of the constitution of our subjectivities through these structures of epistemic violence, and the limitations in contemporary multicultural politics. What I have tried to show is the web of enablement *and* disenablement that constitute the Third World subject that can speak on behalf of the Undifferentiated Third World Other.

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