

Re-defining Warrior: Terms of Struggle for Women Abolitionists

By Sharon Luk

For about two years now, I have been involved in prison activism here in California, prison capital of the world. My interest in prison abolition began in college, when my studies in history and political theory led me to consciously understand the role of prisons in building or maintaining a tyrannical state. As a racial minority and as a woman exposed to both oppression and privilege in the United States, from a very young age I was sensitive to the unspoken ways in which non-elite populations were subject to different standards of policing, disciplining, and control in everyday sectors of civil society. I saw it in my neighbourhood and in my schools, as well as on television and in the streets. Thus, when I learned about the prison system as an extension of genocide in its isolation and elimination of the “undesirables” of society—the descendants of slaves, the poor, the physically, socially, or politically inassimilable—the merits of this worldview made sense to me. It subsequently also made sense to me that as one of the most visceral sites of state violence today, the abolition of the prison was central to the overall movement to end oppression.

www.cjpart.com



In my abolitionist work then, I have been involved specifically in helping to build the case of the San Quentin Three, whose work is steadily rising to visibility. The San Quentin Three (SQ3) refers to three Asia and Pacific Islander brothers—Viet Mike Ngo, Eddy Zheng, and Rico Remeidio—who became politicised while incarcerated, and joined the struggle for human rights in their place of captivity. During their confinement at the notorious San Quentin State Prison, each worked separately and together to challenge prison violence and inhumane prison policies. Their legal work addresses such issues as the institutional policy of racial segregation; the failure of the prisoner appeals process; inadequate provisions for clothing and hygiene; denials of the freedom of speech and association; and repression of intellectual and religious freedoms.

As a result of their political activities, the SQ3 suffered months in solitary confinement before being transferred to different prisons throughout the state. Despite the retaliation they face—including solitary confinement, threats of sexual assault by prison guards, psychological persecution, severance from their legal work, changes in their parole status, and higher security levels—each continues in his battles against state violence. Their body of work

and spirit of struggle have inspired the support of an increasing number of people throughout the country.

I first met Mike Ngo and Eddy Zheng in September 2001, when I volunteered as a teaching assistant in the San Quentin College Education Program. In 2002, a multi-racial group of prisoners, including the SQ3, demanded an Ethnic Studies curriculum which offered an academic analysis of historical liberation movements across time and place. Guided by shared intellectual and political beliefs, I was also vocal in advocating for their demands. As a result of these activities, the SQ3 remain the targets of an active campaign of retaliation by the California Department of Corrections. I myself was pressured to leave my position in the programme, and after I stopped working inside the prison, underwent months of surveillance in the “free” world.

The treatment I received from programme administrators while teaching inside SQ foreshadowed the more intense “policing” that followed. It is important to note here that civilian volunteers administer the college programme, as is largely the case throughout the country where prison enrichment programmes are allowed. This detail is significant because predominantly white elite volunteers, soaked in their mentality of “taming the savages,” hold the institutional power to initiate processes of brutal repression by the state. That is, the civilians’ own ignorance of prisoners (and the communities that they come from), whether this is innocent or malicious, can be immediately enforced by direct acts of state violence upon prisoners themselves—and in select cases, upon other civilians. Thus, dominant perceptions that foment in civil society about one’s humanity or identity, normalized and seemingly harmless, hold particular meaning and danger. Often also oblivious to the nature of their own privilege, civilian volunteers who actualise such violence do so without accepting any accountability for the material consequences that ensue.

Under these conditions, the racialised and gendered constructions of people catalyse brutality. As such, prison administrators and civilian elites operating with them often objectify and centralise women of colour in their construction of a situation that demands disciplinary action against prisoners. While white women have traditionally been the focus of attempts to legitimise assault and lynching, the real or perceived proximity that women of colour have to their male counterparts (the prisoners), by virtue of shared racial subordination or identity (whether or not we are actually of the same race or subject to the same racial stereotypes), works to position us as targets for both “protection” against prisoners and as well as for our own policing.

An incident that occurred while I was still teaching in SQ between a prisoner and another woman of colour volunteer illustrates this point. The prisoner-student (a

Black male) was engaged in discussion with the volunteer (a South Asian woman) at the close of class, and brushed her shoulder as he opened the door and they exited the classroom. The prisoner-student was sent to solitary confinement and later transferred for what the administration labelled an “over-familiar” gesture, claims embedded in the hyper-sexualisation of both bodies, one criminal and the other object. The volunteer as a free person disputed this violence, emphasising that she was comfortable with the prisoner-student’s gesture, and on the contrary felt uncomfortable and threatened by the prison’s use of force. She herself went from victim to deviant and was punished by removal from participation in the college programme.

An important note about the treatment of women of colour in this setting is the malleability of our human construction. As educated civilians volunteering in prison, we wield class/caste privilege that grants us a degree of social existence through the eyes of prison and civilian administrators. Coupled with the construction of men of colour as sexual predators, along with the perception that women of colour are more available to our men than white women are, we are treated as victims of sexual threat when it is convenient to administrators’ aims to do so. However, when we exercise our agency to work in accordance with our own consciousness and positioning—an act in inherent defiance of the state—we instead become criminals in need of our own form of disciplining. Since our “crime” is our failure to subscribe to sanctioned racialised-gendered roles (as sexual objects or victims), our criminality is inextricably connected to projections of our sexuality. In this way, the terms of our criminality are also steeped in (heterosexist) patriarchy, for our deviance is marked by our perceived role as gendered accessories to our male counterparts, the prisoners.

During my time as a teaching assistant in the prison, concerns about my political beliefs and affiliations were first expressed as sexualised comments about my physical attractiveness. Instead of being directly asked to curb my political dialogues, I was told by the programme administrator, a white woman volunteer, that I was a “beautiful, intelligent young woman” who was susceptible to attempts at “flirtation” and thus should not engage in so much discussion. When I voiced my own concerns that I felt inappropriately sexualised by no one else but by *her*, she averted responsibility by saying that as a woman she knew how I felt. As political conflicts became more intense within the programme, administrators and other volunteers, unable to victimise me, cast me instead as irrational and undisciplined—without any direct reference to or engagement with the intellectual and political contributions I made to the programme during this time.

In June 2002, Mike Ngo, Eddy Zheng, and Rico Remedio were sent to solitary confinement for their par-

ticipation in organising the demand for Ethnic Studies. Their placement in “the Hole” was predicated on information that the volunteer administrator had given to the prison, under the context that she felt “threatened” by the prisoner-activists. Pretences for disciplinary action against the SQ3 again invoke the legacy of lynching, whereby the protection of white womanhood against (sexual) threat justifies the brutalisation of men of colour (historically, lynching has terrorised the Black community most intensely, but as we have seen, this has also existed in Native, Latino and Asian communities). I left the programme during this time, knowing that my continued presence inside would only exacerbate the circumstances of those in solitary confinement.

In July 2002, an investigation unit from San Quentin entered my private residence in the hours of the dawn, interrogating me without the presence of a lawyer (which I requested) about the nature of my relationship to the SQ3. Questions about my political beliefs and activities were interspersed with allusions to my sexuality and to my alleged sexual relationship with Mike Ngo. Because I would not cooperate with such narratives—that claimed that I was a sexual object; that I was being manipulated or brainwashed into political activity; that I was engaged in activity that I did not in fact consent to or understand (because as racialised women, we do not possess the capacity to think)—unable or unwilling to be cast as victim, I was instead cast and pursued as criminal. The terms of my criminality, however, had nothing to do with the content or potency of my own political agency per se. Rather, I was sought after merely as part of the state’s tactic to sweep and dispose of assets, much like a notepad, a telephone or a book.

The negation of our agency as women of colour is a routine part of state violence, and remains at the core of extreme depictions. Such negation aims to devalue our attempts to contribute to meaningful social change, both by intimidating us into submission and by sabotaging the projects we belong to. For example, at the 2002 parole hearing of Eddy Zheng, the Parole Board rejected the admission of a petition for Eddy’s release signed by hundreds of community members, based solely on the justification that women organised and circulated the petition. They claimed that women were easily infatuated with Eddy, and through romantic infatuation, coerced into working on his behalf. Such narratives seek to nullify the substantial efforts of women to lead their communities out of oppression.

Women abolitionists who choose men’s prisons as the site of their political work must consciously reflect on their positioning relative to other prison and civilian administrators. They must be prepared to contest attempts to manipulate and discipline. As free people, our failure to do so has more direct effect on our brothers inside than on ourselves; thus, those who are unaware or unwilling to risk

their own policing instead become a part of the machinery of state violence.

In my experience, these obstacles severely obstruct the work of women in men’s prisons. They open up many questions about the (im)possibilities of functionality in such circumstances. The (heterosexist) policing of sexuality and the wholesale denial of being from which it stems, in environments rooted and run by hyper-masculine notions of domination, complicate, and at times succeed to incapacitate, political work. The unprecedented incarceration rate of women, the conditions of their imprisonment and neglect, and the relatively freer relationships prison culture allows women with other women are perhaps the most cogent indications that women involved in prisoner advocacy or prison abolition may see more progress if we devote more of our focus to breaking through women’s walls.

The ongoing leadership and contributions of women of colour in the work for liberation attest to our survival and agency, our unwillingness to accept domination. We must resist the conditions of our negation, which have seeped into our own consciousness and struggles as oppressed people. One of the ways we can do this, to re-iterate the call that has already been issued by many, is to expand our notion of political work and political production as a progressive community to include the role of caretaking. Because caretaking has traditionally been considered women’s work, it has been overlooked and unappreciated as a significant source of strength from which our communities struggle and grow.

The number of mothers, wives, sisters, and comrades that I have witnessed toil and fight on behalf of their communities and loved ones far exceeds the extent of respect or validation they receive. The imperative to recognise the value of caretaking is not to limit the role or capacity of women’s work, or to designate it as women’s duties; rather, it is to recognise that for many women, caretaking is the most available opportunity (or responsibility) we have to develop our struggles, and continues to be integrated into our approaches as we forge new opportunities for ourselves. To recognise the worth and work of caretaking is to recognise those women and men who establish the foundation for all other forms of resistance to develop. If we acknowledge that nurturing is not only an instinct but a set of concrete skills that we must teach men as well as other women, we may also remove some of the gendered barriers that continue to divide our communities. This creates a more holistic framework from which we may conceive of political work, re-defining the role of warrior to surpass hyper-masculine notions that inhibit our collective advancement. ☺

Sharon Luk lives and works in San Francisco as a social service provider and freelance writer. She graduated from Brown University in 2001.