Mothers without Citizenship: Asian Immigrant Families and the Consequences of Welfare Reform by Lynn Fujiwara
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promote alternative development; feminists who reconstitute work and market; women and the environment, or regenerative development; and feminist movements for nonviolence and peace. In the final chapter, Dickinson and Schaeffer revisit their conceptual framework and underscore the need for a more holistic analysis in the feminist intersectional approach. To this reader, they make a strong case for a feminist-informed world-system analysis to better explain differences among the world’s people, notably differentiations of age, gender, ethnicity, class, and geography. What is more, while such intersecting hierarchies and “multiple bonds of inequality” have been historically created by the world-system, the system’s contradictions lead to resistance and concerted efforts toward change. Hence the emergence of movements that promote equality, democracy, environmental regeneration, humanizing work relations, and peace.

Another appeal—certainly to this reader—is the materialist approach found in the book. While some radical social constructionists might argue that sex, gender, race, and class are socially constructed performances, Dickinson and Schaeffer counter that these (intersecting) hierarchies assume a real, material force in the world. Rather than view bodies as “fleshy abstractions that are induced to perform gender” (p. 118), a more accurate approach is to acknowledge the ways in which gender, patriarchy, race, class, age, and so on are etched on bodies.

The readings in the anthology are by, inter alia, Gargi Bhattacharyya, Chandra Mohanty, Paulo Freire, Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes, June Jordan, Jacqui Alexander, Farida Akhter, Kathleen Staudt, and Andrea Smith. While one or two did not quite work for me, taken as a whole they are appropriate to the book’s objective of highlighting feminist contributions to the theory and practice of alternative development, equality, and peace; demonstrating the diversity of women’s activism; and offering a new conceptual framework that is also effective pedagogically. In relation to the latter, there is an apposite quote by Paulo Freire: “The progressive teacher teaches the content of her discipline with rigor, and demands, with rigor, that the learners produce, but she does not hide her political option in the impossible neutrality of her occupation” (p. 76).

The book is especially useful for Women’s Studies courses and is a corrective to what can sometimes be an excessive focus on culture and sexuality to the neglect of political economy and the state; or an excessive focus on differences and disparate identities without reference to history or to the hegemonic nature of global capitalism. But sociologists, too, will find the book a useful addition to resources on social change, social movements, and gender.


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Fujiwara examines the “new nativist racism” targeting poor Asian women and children immigrants in the contemporary period of economic globalization, coerced displacement, and transnational migration. Her focus on welfare and immigration provisions analyzes citizenship as “multilayered,” embedded within hierarchical racial and gendered constructs. Her study is based on participatory observation of service-providing community organizations in the Bay Area between 1996–1998, interviews with immigrant community leaders and service providers, and legislative reports and newspapers.

In the first chapter, Fujiwara contends that foreignness is the proxy through which acts of racial exclusion circumscribe the lives of Asian Americans historically and in the contemporary anti-Asian discourse of “new nativism.” In particular, she maintains that the new nativism of the 1990s has reaffirmed white superiority by denying Asian immigrant women of their motherhood and reproductive rights, blaming them for their economic hardships and denying them social services. For instance, two bills passed in 1996, the Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) which enforced citizenship as a requirement
for access to a number of public benefits, and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) which placed more hurdles before immigrants seeking public assistance.

In the next three chapters, Fujiwara analyzes the implications of the citizenship requirement in PRWORA on the lives of noncitizen Asian Americans. The second chapter links race and gender to citizenship politics, where the politics of belonging and entitlement is in constant tension with the global economic order that forces people to migrate across national borders. She argues that PRWORA assumes immigrants such as Asian women are undeserving of welfare support because, as inassimilable, they could never fulfill the Anglo-Saxon concern for "racial uplift" of the nation. In the following chapter, she uses the case of Southeast Asian refugees to demonstrate that PRWORA's primary focus on citizenship overlooks the internal diversity of the Asian American community by treating the experiences of refugees as similar to other immigrants, but in fact their dire socio-economic circumstances are the result of trauma and forced displacement.

Although noncitizens could seek naturalization to meet the citizenship requirement of PRWORA, Fujiwara shows in her fourth chapter that this process is a "technocratic apparatus of exclusion" because it imposes singular definitions of unacceptable moral characters, criminality, and public charges that trigger fears and dissuade noncitizens from seeking citizenship. She further underscores that immigrant and refugee noncitizen women are more likely than their male counterparts to fail the naturalization process because of their limited English language ability, lower education, and fewer documented hours of work outside the home.

In her fifth chapter, the author argues that the welfare-to-work program of the 1990s, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), has restricted the reproductive rights of immigrant women and exploited their productive labor. Because of the program's strict scrutiny and ambiguous guidelines, some women have opted to "disappear" from welfare usage. Others who have chosen to participate in TANF plans, such as CalWORKS (California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids), are vulnerable to hyper-exploited labor because of their limited English and low-level marketable skills.

In her final chapter, Fujiwara examines the effects of the 1990s welfare and immigrant reforms on the well-being of Asian immigrant families. The author maintains that these legislative provisions devalue families and force them to survive on less by favoring work over health and cultural sensitivity. In order for Asian mothers to meet the work and marital requirements to access welfare support, they are compelled to leave their children in substandard childcare and are bound to abusive marital relationships. Fujiwara contends that the health of Asian mothers and children is endangered by culturally insensitive managed healthcare systems and food stamp cuts. Overall, Fujiwara provides a complex, detailed, and in-depth analysis of the racialized idea of citizenship hidden in the 1990s immigrant and welfare reforms. Her detailing of specific racialized experiences of Asian immigrants, and Asian mothers in particular, pushes us to contemplate the intricacy, particularity, and unpredictability of race and racism acting in tandem with gender, citizenship, welfare, and immigration.

I believe, however, that her arguments could be much stronger if she seriously considered internal class dynamics and gender relations. Her focus is on poor Asian noncitizens, but her analysis ignores the ways in which their experiences of racialization hinge upon class diversity within the Asian American community. Stringent public policies may induce the poor to surrender their rights to more economically advantaged groups, but many immigrants arrive in the United States with some professional and educational qualifications, which she does not consider. Moreover, although Fujiwara briefly discusses domestic violence, her examination of gender relations could be broadened to include how Asian women and their men work together to strategically navigate the challenges presented by welfare and immigrant policies. These directions could bolster her assertion that the contemporary "new nativism" not only layers citizenship with race and gender but also penetrates racialized group relations through institutionalized policies and programs.

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