

## **“Made in China,” or When Solidarity Goes to Die**

*Shampa Biswas*\*

It is very late at night. Past one a.m. when the nightclub closed. I am on a city bus.

I live in a liberal white city. An American city in the American heartland. One that has been more hospitable than others to the hordes of immigrants displaced by America’s wars and American interventions. The city is strewn with clusters of black and brown bodies. Hmong. Laotians. Somalis. Ethiopians. Clustered, not mingled. I live in a clustered city. Just enough to feel lonely. Just enough to be reminded of a time and place where my body merged rather than clustered.

The music is West African. The singer a celebrity from Senegal. In that nightclub, for just a few hours, I merge. With black and brown bodies. The song breaks a hunger in my body. My feet anticipate and move to the rhythms of cultures not my own, but of people with whom I feel immediate kinship. The clusters of white bodies stand apart. Look on. Meanwhile, I drown and I soar and I dance to the form of we. I dance into the circle. For a moment, I am on the inside. Mingled, merged, not clustered.

I live in a time when *Made in China* has become an epithet in America.

Not the time of the so-called “Yellow Peril.” When the Chinese gave blood and sweat laying track for transcontinental railroads. Which was also the time when the Chinese were curfewed and ghettoed, and Chinese men prohibited from marrying white women. All of which led to the time of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), barring the Chinese from entering the United States of America.

I live in less cruel times. I live in more soothing times. When Americans smile at foreigners. When Chinese restaurants are ubiquitous. When Americans love Yoga. And dance to Afro beats. I live in a time of multiculturalism.

This also is a time when China is ascendant in the world. When scholars and commentators ponder American decline and the growing China threat. When cheap Chinese goods flood the American market. Goods that feed America’s insatiable desire for things. The same goods that also feed hungry sweatshop workers working long hard days in China.

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*Made in China* packs all the anxiety, disgust, envy, fear, rage stuffed into America's ambivalent relationship with its long inscrutable, Oriental other. I am not Chinese. I am Indian.

As I dance amidst brown and black people in that multicultural club, I choose to forget. The fissures among us. The ephemerality of the union. The fragility of the moment. The bitter cold of the falling snow outside. The white bouncer who had mocked me for bringing a passport in place of the driver's license I did not have as my form of identification. The worrying thoughts of the big nightclub-shaped hole in my meager graduate student income. For a few hours, I stay those thoughts.

I forget other small indignities, as well. The voice out of a speeding car: "go back to your country." The humiliation of forcing a smile at the immigration officer who had just made a pass at me. The white co-worker who had seen my short skirt as an invitation to run his hands up my thighs. My brown people telling me which brown people were worthy of my love.

I forget, because I move. In dance. With brown and black bodies. For refuge and in solidarity.

I am a graduate student. I have just finished my first class in feminist theory. I am intoxicated with the notion of solidarity.

I am giddy with the writings of feminists of color. They came at the end of the course, tagged on to the respectable feminist canon. First Wave Feminism. Second Wave Feminism. Then the others. Us. Tentatively. As response and as rejoinder. As an after, always an after.

It will be years before I will unlearn my feminist education. It will be years before I will decide to begin with the black feminists, the Chicana feminists, the third world feminists. All the ones who were already speaking when the white women were hiding in the protection of white men, even though no one wanted to hear them. Before feminism was fad.

But now, I am just giddy. To have fresh eyes and the sight of a world I see anew. I see the margins as places of raw pain, but also the most creative insights into the making of new worlds.<sup>1</sup> I see the bridge made by poor, queer, brown and black women over which the rest of America had walked with abandon, but I also hear it is as a call to make a different bridge, across difference.<sup>2</sup> I feel the shape of "the master's tools" in my own hands, which lead me in search of those forging new instruments to dismantle "the master's house."<sup>3</sup> I see that the story that has

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<sup>1</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: from margins to center*. Boston: South End Press, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: writings by radical women of color*. Berkeley: Third World Women Press, 1983.

<sup>3</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984.

shaped my presence in the world has been formed “Under Western Eyes,” and go looking for those speaking back in different tongues.<sup>4</sup>

With my new eyes, I see how the clusters have set us apart. I know there is no going back. Only forward. Toward solidarity.

In the nightclub, I lose track of time. I am a cautious brown girl in a white city. I have planned ahead to arrange a ride home. But when I yield to the music, my abandon makes me careless. I let my ride leave, without me. I am not ready to leave, yet. I can't stop till the music stops.

Outside, it has stopped snowing. The cab is inviting, but where will I find the money? The bus stop is only a block away. It isn't long before the bus shows up. I think it is the last bus of the night. I feel lucky.

An oldish white man sits in the middle right, diagonal to the driver, window seat. He looks broken. Maybe he is just tired. But in my heady, upbeat, body still tapping to music and dance, his huddle looks sad and pitiable. Not a threat. Still, my instinct propels me to move past him. To a seat diagonally behind him on the left. Window seat. From where I have a full view. Of him, and of everyone who might enter through the door on the right. Be prepared. Keep your eyes on strangers. I pick a seat close to the back door. Exit strategy.

Next stop. An Asian woman. I think Hmong or Laotian. Maybe she is Chinese. I don't want to stare. I imagine she just closed up one of the many cheap 'ethnic' restaurants still serving drunken downtowners. I feel relief. Now there are two of 'us'. Two is better than alone. One step toward solidarity.

She wears a long coat, scarf wrapped around her head. She sits a couple of seats behind and to the right of the driver, next aisle, a few seats in front of the white man. Window seat. Close to the door and the driver. Exit strategy.

I can see all three. White driver. Diagonally behind, Asian woman. Straight behind her, old white man. Perhaps they are regulars. Perhaps this is the rhythm to which all three move every night, circling each other in this geometrical order. Perhaps I am the interruption and the chaos.

The bus moves along. Two more stops. A man straggles in. I note right away that he is white. Now they are three. We are two.

The man sways, but not to a rhythm. I am too far away to smell the alcohol. I think I am safely away. He is unsteady on his feet. He needs to sit. He can barely get past two rows behind the driver. He sits down. In the same row as the Asian woman. Next column, aisle seat.

The two form a straight horizontal line. Left to Right. Empty seat. White Man. Empty Seat. Asian Woman.

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<sup>4</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, Lourdes Torres (ed.), *Third World Women and the Problem of Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

From where I sit, a few rows behind him, I can only see the back of his head. The bus moves. I look outside at the beautiful snow-covered streets glimmering in downtown lights.

I hear words. At first, mumbblings. My eyes move toward the voice. I see his head turned toward the woman. The words rise in volume. They take shape. And fury. I hear three crisp words: *Made in China*. Was that a question? I can't tell. But I hear the unmistakable edge in it. An edge I feel in the back of my neck and the palm of my hands. Then some more words about "you people." And then, sharper, clearer, dripping with hate: *Don't say anything, bitch, or I will cut you*.

She doesn't move. She sits still. She keeps her eyes on the outside. The beautiful snow-covered streets glimmering in downtown lights. Years later, I will wonder if she saw the glimmer then.

Does he have a knife? I can't tell. Where are his hands? I can't even recall. But I can still hear the hate-dripping sound of those words: *Made in China...Don't say anything, bitch, or I will cut you*. I can hear my own heart pounding in my chest. And feel the feel in my spine I felt then.

The other white man stays huddled. No movement. Is he just pretending not to hear? I look to the bus driver. His head stays straight. On the road. Is he just trying to keep us safe on this icy road? He, too, says nothing. Have I trespassed into some ghastly nightly routine? A drunk white man's racial venom. The silent complicity of others. Where do I belong in this?

I am terrified. I should say something. I should call out to the driver. He should say something. The other white man should say something. Someone should do something.

There is also the empty seat between the woman and the man. The empty expanse of her vulnerability. I should go sit there. Put my own body, younger and stronger, as buffer and fortification. It is a moment that calls me to step up. In solidarity.

I stay where I am. I remain voiceless. I slink down my seat. My only thoughts: "Please, please, don't turn around. Please don't look at me." I feel my brownest. Unmerged *and* Unclustered. I do everything to make myself invisible.

The man rewinds. The words turn back to mumble. Then stop. The head moves away from the woman. There is silence. The bus stops. The man disembarks. Next stop. The woman disembarks. Next stop. My stop.

I am on the street. I am shaking. My body moves toward my house. It moves with the rhythm of defeat. And cowardice. There is no dance left in it. I am home. Alone.

It will be years before I will speak of solidarity again.