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## “Lovely to Me”: An Immigrant’s Daughter’s Critical Self-reflexivity Research Journey

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**“Lovely to Me”:  
An Immigrant’s Daughter’s Critical Self-Reflexivity Research Journey**

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*This paper chronicles my reflections as a child of immigrants of color and activist scholar when working with and for (immigrant) communities of color. I examine the importance of humility and to engage in critical self-reflexivity in research. Later, I illustrate how I incorporated my own community cultural wealth through my mother’s assistance and support in building rapport with immigrant parents in the research.*

**Keywords:** Critical Self-Reflexivity | Activist Scholar | Collaborative Research | Community-Based Research.

I gained two insights while growing up in an immigrant family: Race, class, and gender shape the immigrant experience and cultural adjustment is a difficult and often painful experience. Similar to many immigrants that come to the U.S., my parents underwent a process of racialization as they interacted with the dominant society (Lee, 2005; Olsen, 1997; Waters, 2001). My mother immigrated from Hong Kong to the U.S. with only her husband and two infant children by her side. As part of the post-1965 wave of immigrants<sup>1</sup>, my parents packed up their entire life into a couple of boxes and said farewell to their families, friends, and homeland as they left for the U.S. Once the plane departed, my mother would not return to visit her homeland until more than 17 years later.

My mother did not fulfill her dream of an education. Instead, along with caring for two young children, she started out working in garment factories and co-ethnic restaurants while enrolled in English and job development classes. After a long week of work and classes, my mother, like many working-class immigrants, became “something like a fighter” as she carried “loads of groceries” home (Na, 2008). While my mother did not have the opportunity to obtain much of a classroom education, she has always held a deep passion for learning that she passed down to my siblings and me at a very young age. Her resilience and constant expressions of encouragement, like “try your best,” “reach for your dreams,” and “I will always support you,” offered me a place and space to pursue my dreams. I am sharing lyrics from New York based artist and educator Taiyo Na’s (2008) “Lovely to me (immigrant mother)” to highlight the strengths and struggles of immigrants, like my own mother.

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<sup>1</sup> The passage of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act (also known as the Hart-Celler Act of 1965) had a significant impact on Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) immigration to the U.S. The Act eliminated the 1924 National Origins Quota System and ended various racist laws that affected AAPIs, along with other communities.

I got an immigrant mother, ain't no one like her  
She struggle everyday so she's something like a fighter....  
It takes a whole lot to leave your homeland  
And raise a few children with your own hands....  
I got an immigrant mother (Lovely to me)  
Immigrant mother (A dear mother to me)

I share my story with you because my experiences as an Asian American woman, activist scholar, and a child of working-class immigrants<sup>2</sup> shape my perceptions of research and scholarship. For instance, during one of my doctoral seminars, a colleague shared that after completing the dissertation, the doctorate degree will belong to them. Thus, they can focus on and do the type of research that they want without needing the approval of their dissertation committee and others. After their comment, everyone seemed to be nodding in agreement. However, a friend of mine, who was also in the seminar, and I looked at each other and we immediately gave a look of disagreement. After class, we both agreed that the degree never belonged solely to us or was just for our individual benefit; rather, as activist scholars of color, we viewed our degrees as belonging to our communities and as being connected to the collective and historical struggle to eliminate the injustices in schools and the larger society. Unlike our colleague, we agreed that we did not complete our degrees in isolation. Rather, we completed our degrees to honor our family, community, and those individuals who have mentored, supported, and loved us throughout our academic journey. Essentially, we represent them, and as such, we hold ourselves responsible for bridging research and activism. As Ladson-Billings (2000) eloquently reminded us, “My research is a part of my life and my life is a part of my research” (p. 268). Therefore, I cannot “just do any type of research” without the consent of my research collaborators because I have a commitment and responsibility to them. Having been involved in community and youth work for more than eighteen years, I am committed to constructing collaborative research that works for and with communities of color, addressing their experiences with the commitment to social justice that improves the lives of the community and society.

This paper chronicles and focuses on my reflections as a child of immigrants of color and an activist scholar while working with and for (immigrant) communities of color. The purpose is to illustrate the importance of (a) critical self-reflexivity and humility as mediating factors in the research process and (b) community cultural wealth as a methodological framework to enact social justice (Yosso, 2005). I will first discuss the need, as activist scholars, to engage in critical self-reflexivity and humility throughout the entire research process. Then I will provide a discussion of the community cultural wealth framework and its relevance when working with and for (immigrant) communities of color to enact social justice. Throughout this paper, I will also incorporate my own reflexivity and share the lessons that I have learned. The following questions provide the focus for

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<sup>2</sup> The term *children of immigrants* refers to both U.S.-born (i.e., second generation) and foreign-born (i.e., the first and 1.5 generation) children, and although there are differences in their experiences, “they nevertheless share an important common denominator: immigrant parents” (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p. 1). I defined *1.5 generation* as those who immigrated to the U.S. before the age of 12, and *second generation* as those born in the U.S.

this paper: What does it mean to be an activist scholar and engage in community-based collaborative and socially just research with (immigrant) communities of color? What lessons have I learned from participating in social justice practices and scholarship? I will share my experiences working with a community-based organization (CBO) that serves low-income Chinese immigrant families.

Using ethnographic, collaborative, and community-based research approaches, I collected data at the Harborview Chinatown Community Center (HCCC), a CBO in an East Coast city I call Harborview and its youth program, Community Youth Center (CYC). HCCC, the largest Asian American social service provider in the state, is a multi-service 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization located in the heart of Chinatown that began in the late-1960s as a grassroots community effort. While a diverse population utilizes HCCC’s services, Chinese immigrant families are the prime group at the CBO. Today, after more than forty-five years in the community, HCCC serves over 4,000 children, youth, and adults each year and offers early childcare, year-round programs for 5-18 year-old children, adult education, and family-based toddler and infant care.

My research methods incorporated participant observations, document analysis, and in-depth interviews with 39 youth, 14 parents, and nine HCCC staff. The interviews were conducted in Chinese Cantonese, English, or a mixture of both languages. I transcribed the interviews conducted in English verbatim while I translated and transcribed the interviews conducted in Cantonese in the form of “standard English.” I interviewed nine HCCC staff members, who were either first, 1.5, or second generation children of immigrants of color. All of the youth, ages 12-20, attend(ed) urban public schools in or right outside Harborview. I conducted a total of 39 youth interviews. Of those, 20 were females and 19 were males; eight of the young people were first generation, 13 were 1.5 generation, and 18 were second generation Chinese Americans. All of the youth came from homes in which Cantonese, Fujianese, Mandarin, and/or Toisanese are the language used for communication. Out of the 14 parents, there were twelve mothers and two fathers. The parents were all first-generation immigrants from Guangdong and Fukien Provinces of Mainland China or Hong Kong.

Having grown up in Harborview and having been involved in community and youth organizing in the area, I was able to negotiate entry in certain contexts that might have been difficult for someone who was not from and accountable to the community. For example, while I grew up in the same community and spoke Cantonese, I was also a community organizer and maintained friendships that helped facilitate my initial research. I got CYC’s contact information from a childhood friend who was a part of CYC and later in college worked as a youth staff during the summers. Thus, through my childhood friend, I was able to connect with Wai-Ming, who was the Director of CYC at the time of my research, more easily. Throughout the research process, I also incorporated my own community cultural wealth, which is illustrated in the next section.

### **The Relevance of Critical Self-Reflexivity & Humility**

I have always spent a great deal of time reflecting on my multiple identities, especially when I entered graduate school. I ask myself how my identities would play out in the academy – a world that at times still remains so strange and distant to me. I bring with me my life experiences as a woman of color, as a child of immigrants, as a bilingual speaker,

as a community organizer and educator, as a first-generation college student, and as an activist scholar. Thus, it would appear that I am conducting “insider” (or emic) research because these are the communities that I identify with. In some respects, that is true. These experiences give me a unique perspective for examining issues relating to students of color and children of immigrants, particularly Asian American youth, because I have lived in and experienced similar circumstances. I understand the youths’ lifestyles, their home environments, and cultural and societal expectations. I have struggled with similar issues. In addition, my work with youth in the community and in school districts provides me with insight on the challenges and opportunities that youth, families, and school personnel grapple with constantly. For instance, Asian Americans are portrayed as model minorities who do not face any challenges. The model minority stereotype<sup>3</sup> hides the diversity within the Asian American community. Furthermore, they have historically been perceived as perpetual foreigners or forever foreigners (Suzuki, 1995; Takaki, 2008; Tuan, 1998). Thus, the line of “Where are you *really* from?” is a constant racial trauma for Asian Americans, despite their rich history in the U.S. By failing to recognize this diversity, stereotypes allow policy makers, educators, and other service providers to ignore many of their basic needs and often overlook the community as a whole.

Smith (1999), Feagin and Vera (2001), and Ristock and Pennell (1996) all discussed the importance of reflexivity and/or humility when conducting research. Smith, for example, contextualized the importance of having Indigenous researchers to first reflect on their own identities. She stated, “one of the first issues to be confronted is their *own* identities as indigenous and their connected identities to other indigenous peers” (Smith, 1999, p. 136). In addition, Smith argued researchers cannot simply recognize their own personal beliefs, assumptions, and biases; rather, they also must constantly and consciously reflect on and ask the following questions:

For whom is this study worthy and relevant? Who says so?  
What knowledge will the community gain from this study?  
What knowledge will the researcher gain from this study?  
What are some likely positive outcomes from this study?  
What are some possible negative outcomes?  
How can the negative outcomes be eliminated?  
To whom is the researcher accountable?  
What processes are in place to support the research, the researched and the researcher?  
(p. 173)

Similarly, Ristock and Pennell (1996), from a feminist empowerment perspective, explained that “[a]rticulating a reflective analysis and exploring our own subjectivities and locations as researchers are necessary in order to bring forward questions of accountability such as ‘Why am I doing this research?’ and ‘Who am I doing it for?’” (p. 76). In other words, they used what other scholars have termed “transparency,” which involves “revealing who one is and how one’s location shapes the research process” (Ristock & Pennell, 1996, p. 13). All research should practice critical self-reflexivity and transparency.

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<sup>3</sup> Please see Lee, Wong, and Alvarez (2009) for a full discussion on the model minority stereotype.

Feagin and Vera (2001), from a liberation sociology perspective, similarly argued for self-reflexivity; in fact, they asserted, “the heart of liberation sociology is self-reflective” (p. 23). They used Gramsci’s term “organic intellectuals” to describe those from oppressed communities who work “consciously for the liberation of their own oppressed groups” (Feagin & Vera, 2001, p. 17). Moreover, Smith (1999) added the importance of “the constant need for reflectivity” as a critical issue particularly for activist scholars who are from the community because they “have to live with their consequences of their processes on a day-to-day basis for ever more” (p. 137). Therefore, the activist scholar “also needs to be humble because the researcher belongs to the community as a member with a different set of roles and relationships, status and position” (Smith, 1999, p. 139). In other words, Smith implied that activist scholars of color conducting research in their communities are expected to report back. They also are perceived as more accountable in terms of how the research portrays the community. Indigenous scholars are not only seen as simply researchers since they also embody other social identities and roles in the community. Smith also made an important point when stating that “[w]hile a researcher could be an insider, they could also be an outsider” (i.e. outsider within) (p. 138). For instance, an Indigenous researcher is viewed as an outsider within when she/he/they is educated in the western system and now returns *home*. Regardless of whether one is an organic intellectual, insider, outsider, or outsider within, activist scholars acknowledge and dismantle the power structures that exist in both research and the larger society and examine how might one’s identities and actions influence and impact the research process.

Smith (1999), Feagin and Vera (2001), and Ristock and Pennell (1996) also provided an important lens for activist scholars throughout the research process. Activist scholars constantly problematize their own identities and power status throughout the research process (i.e. prior, present and post stages), because they often have the power to decide the how, what, when, and why’s in the research process. Moreover, Ladson-Billings (2000) noted how research “done by people of color and poor people is rarely represented fully in the literature of the academy” (p. 270). She further explained that “too often, concern is voiced that scholars of color will not be able to meet certain standards” because of the “‘biased’ in their approach to scholarly inquiry” (p. 271). In this sense, activist scholars of color have to prove that they “belong” in the academy while conducting research that is “toward civic responsibility” (AERA, 2008) and “in the public interest” (AERA, 2006). In order to eliminate such negativity and biases, the academy must welcome and train more activist scholars of color and their allies rather than (re)produce armchair or drive-by researchers. Moreover, we all need to recognize the importance of praxis in our work (Freire, 1999). In other words, theory must lead to practice and vice-versa, because the two should always be in dialogue with one another, and not be in separate entities. At the same time, critical reflexivity is also a part of the dialogue. Foster (1999) explained, “It is not enough to theorize about social justice without taking affirmative action to begin to make it a reality in our practice, scholarship, and actions as academics” (p. 83). Thus, creating a space where activist scholars could critically reflect is a crucial and necessary step.

Moreover, I see the youth, parents, and staff as collaborators rather than participants, informants, or subjects because such a view allows me to, as in Ladson-Billings’ (1994) work with African Americans, “work collectively” and “honor . . . and benefit” the community (p. 153). I also do not use the term “giving voice” because by using it the assumption is that the “oppressed” (Freire, 1999) do not have a voice and, thus, they must

be given permission by an authority (e.g., a researcher) to speak. If researchers are holding to such a belief and mentality then we, too, are guilty of perpetuating oppressive ideologies and practices. Rather than “giving voice” to my collaborators, I “amplify” the voices that are too often unheard (Diniz-Pereira, 2005), marginalized, and ignored by the systems and structures that hold inequality in place. For instance, my work amplifies the visibility of Asian Americans who face complex structural and cultural barriers. However, this perspective is dismissed by the model minority framework, thereby generating racial microaggressions.

While I was conducting insider research, I was consciously aware barriers might arise. For instance, my identity as a graduate student and now a professor might have created awkwardness and distance especially since many of the youths’ families did not attend college or finish high school. I learned that while the distance that I had intended was not a factor, critical self-reflexivity and humility are extremely crucial throughout the entire research process because questions of knowledge and power are always significant. I remember when I first visited CYC during the summer of 2004, the recent immigrant youth, particularly, did not speak to me until I spoke Cantonese to them. Therefore, even though I was of the same ethnic background and grew up in Harborview, I would have been viewed as an outsider until they saw that I spoke Cantonese. On the other hand, the 1.5 and second-generation youth felt comfortable talking to me in English and Cantonese. Additionally, it was initially harder to connect with a few of the middle school young men since they were all immersed in playing ping-pong, card games, computer games, and board games. Therefore, my identity as a woman made it slightly harder for me initially to build a relationship with some of the young men. At our first meeting, Wai-Ming suggested that the best way to build a relationship with the youth was through games. Thus, I asked the youth if I could join them. For instance, even though I was an awful ping-pong player I tried my best to “show my skills.” Though I do not think it worked since a lot of the youth did not want to partner up with me. I remember one of the middle school youth kept making funny faces when it was my turn to play and jokingly said with a chuckle, “I can easily beat you”. Other times, I was able to join in for board games, card games, and karaoke, mentor and tutor the youth, and help facilitate various activities.

As I was there longer, I was able to develop trust and rapport with the youth and staff at CYC. The staff members were extremely helpful in introducing me to the young people and inviting me to join in different activities and events at CYC. After two weeks, the youth would refer to me as a staff member and ask for my help with (non) school-related matters. After completing the initial research with CYC, I have remained in contact with the youth and staff. Wai-Ming expressed interest in future research opportunities with me, thus when I returned to expand on my previous research with CYC, the staff and I both agreed including the youths’ parents and families would be an important lens.

### **Community Cultural Wealth as a Framework**

I employed the concept of “community cultural wealth” (Yosso, 2005) to argue that HCCC helps low-income Chinese immigrant families negotiate and navigate their “multiple worlds” (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu 1998). The community cultural wealth framework consists of at least six forms of capital that are often overlooked and silenced by schools and other institutions: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant

capital. “These various forms of capital,” as Yosso (2005) noted, “are not mutually exclusive or static, but rather are dynamic processes that build on one another as part of community cultural wealth” (p. 77). The framework challenges the dominant research assumptions, which hides the diversity within the Asian American community. For this article, I paid particular attention to aspirational, linguistic, and familial capitals. Rather than using a top-down hierarchical model and cultural-deficit framework (i.e., perceiving difference as a deficit and thus placing the blame on families and communities for inadequacies), HCCC’s sensitivity and knowledge of this community and their ability to access the dominant culture were central to their success (Wong, 2008, 2010, 2013). Recognizing there were limited youth programs in the community, HCCC opened CYC in 1995. The center offers college preparatory and ESL classes, leadership skills building, social recreational activities, and volunteer-run academic tutoring.<sup>4</sup> The programs and services offer the youth forms of cultural wealth that are often diminished in dominant society.

In addition to viewing HCCC as a form of community cultural wealth, I was able to (re)engage my own cultural wealth that I, too, had struggled with while growing up. For example, my linguistic capital was devalued, ignored and silenced during majority of my K-12 schooling experiences. On the other hand, my linguistic and familial capitals along with other forms of capital helped in building and maintaining rapport with my collaborators. I utilized my Cantonese and Toisanese language and communication skills, which the youth, parents, and staff valued and felt more comfortable in talking and opening up to me. Also, my mother is a member of the community and her aspirational and linguistic capitals assisted me in communicating and connecting with the parents.

My immigrant mother’s capital, in particular, as well as her recognition of my collaborative, participatory, and social justice work contributed tremendously in connecting with the parents. While I was comfortable speaking conversational Cantonese, it was more difficult for me to articulate words or phrases relating to schooling and research. My mother was able to explain the research and significance in greater detail and clarity using her advanced fluency in Cantonese. Additionally, being a parent and an immigrant whose family is from a working-class background in Guangdong Province, China, my mother was able to help me negotiate trust with the parents. Therefore, when I called the parents to introduce myself, I was more relaxed to have my mother beside me. Prior to calling the parents, my mom and I spent about ten minutes practicing what I would say. I recalled in my field notes the process:

It was about 3 p.m. on a sunny autumn Saturday. My mom and I just finished talking about what to say when I call the parents. She, who was sitting beside me, reminded me to stay calm and not to worry and that I should imagine I’m talking to one of my aunties and uncles [my parents’ siblings and friends]. However, my nerves began to increase as I started dialing the first number on the list. During this time, my mom gently whispered in Cantonese, “Don’t worry. You’ll do fine.” When the parents answered the phone, I introduced myself and explained the research. I also reassured them that their names would be changed and protected. Most of their initial responses were “I can’t help you. I am uneducated. I don’t know anything.” I then noted the

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<sup>4</sup> Please see Wong (2008, 2010, 2011) for more details about CYC’s programs and services.



importance for others, such as educators and policy makers, to learn more about their experiences as immigrants in the U.S., particularly relating to schooling and HCCC. Additionally, I expressed to them that there are no right or wrong answers. At this time, I asked if my mom could talk to them and help answer any questions they may have. After I gave the phone to my mom, she introduced herself and explained the project in more detail as well as reiterated the importance of the interview. While they never met and do not know each other, the parents and my mom were able to engage in a brief conversation. They talked about being immigrants themselves and the difficulties of adjusting to the U.S. lifestyle and raising children in the U.S. After talking for about 10-15 minutes, most of the parents agreed to an interview. Some of the parents wanted to conduct the interview at that moment. However, my mom and I explained to them that they needed to sign the consent form first. The parents who declined were due to scheduling conflicts and less than a handful were not interested.

Having my mom talk with the parents greatly helped in the rapport. I also was able to utilize my linguistic and familial capitals by having my immigrant mother assist with communicating and connecting with the parents. Again, these forms of capital were once seen by dominant society as barriers and deficits while I was growing up. More importantly, my mom's involvement helped strengthen my methodologies and methods. Before interviewing the parents, I did a mock interview with my mom, which helped tremendously. I also asked her to record on my digital recorder certain terms and phrases that I might need to use so I could practice them before the interviews. I am deeply appreciative that my mom was able to be a part of the research project, which provided her with a clearer understanding of the research process, the research itself and, more importantly, what I do.

As I reflected on the interview process, I was particularly nervous with the parent interviews since they were my elders, plus I have not met most of them previously. All of the parents were very supportive and told me that my Cantonese "is good" and some added, "The fact that you are able to speak fluent Cantonese is really good, especially since you're living here [the U.S.]." The parents also expressed "your parents must be very proud of you" "they taught you well." Interviewing parents was quite an emotional experience for me, because their experiences reminded me of my own parents' experiences. When relevant, I also shared with them my experience growing up in an immigrant family. Overall, the parent interviews and my mother's support enriched the research by providing more depth and context.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this paper, I have shown how and why critical self-reflexivity and humility are extremely crucial practices and processes. Thus, it is important for students to include critical self-reflection early on in their careers (i.e. coursework). In other words, self-reflection on privilege, implicit biases, and "capital" as key aspects of both undergraduate and graduate programs or else, the hierarchical structures perpetuate in a constant oppressive cycle. Additionally, I illustrated the significance of community cultural wealth as a methodological framework to enact social justice. As I have expressed, "I have tried my best to amplify and centralize the voices of my collaborators. I suggest all such research

should similarly honor and work to benefit the community, particularly communities of color that are often marginalized or invisible in academia and the dominant society” (Wong, 2008, p. 199). As educators, activist scholars, and allies, we have a responsibility to work with and for the people as well as amplify their voices. In addition to acknowledging the diversity of Asian Americans, educators and activist scholars must challenge and dismantle damaging and deficit assumptions about Asian Americans, since this population is the fastest growing racial group in the U.S. While it is important to work in our communities, it is equally as important to build coalitions with other communities and allies in order to work towards social justice, equity, and liberation. Such process requires what Freire (1999) called “true communication,” because “solidarity requires true communication” (p. 58) and true communication only happens through dialogue. It is only through true communication that understanding, transformation, and conscientization occurs.

I am ending this piece with song lyrics from Beyond’s (1989) “真的愛妳” [Truly Love You] to show my deep appreciation and love for my immigrant mother. The original lyrics in traditional Chinese:

沒法解釋怎可報盡親恩  
愛意寬大是無限  
請准我說聲真的愛妳

The English translation:

I can’t explain how to fully repay my debt of gratitude  
Love is infinity without boundaries  
Please allow me to merely say, “I truly love you”

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### **Author Notes**

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*Wong – An Immigrant's Daughter's Research Journey*

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