Chapter Three

Reflexive Feminist Methodologies

In the previous chapters, I presented several unconventional methods women have used to exert influence in their communities and sustain a sense of purpose within institutions that generally are inhospitable to them. Beginning with the proposition that transnational advocacy networks (TANs) are an important means to achieve human rights and gender justice,[1] this chapter explains why collecting and disseminating oral histories from women in local communities increases the capacity of these networks to achieve their objectives. Second, it demonstrates that reflexive feminist methodologies are necessary to expand our world view of female empowerment. Finally, this chapter presents several features of female empowerment – with unique transnational and translational relationships – from Central America, Southeast Asia, Europe, and Africa.

Oral Histories in Transnational Advocacy

A number of studies published in scholarly journals assess the advantages and disadvantages of using transnational advocacy networks (TANs) to implement climate change adaptation strategies.[2] One study published in 2017 in the *Third World Quarterly* concluded that the most prominent characteristics of TANs – forming complex, flexible, and adaptable webs of connections – were not consistently effective in certain geographical regions.[3] In addition, its authors B. Arensman, M. van Wessel, and D. Hilhorst observed the specific ways representatives from different countries communicated their approaches to conflict prevention and peace-building in an international conference setting:

- Those from West Africa provided an "international-level voice" to "open doors."
- Those from the Middle East set out a "common platform" useful for connecting people.
- Those from Southeast Asia offered "clout, prestige and input."

While the above approaches are complementary rather than mutually exclusive, it may be that they are all present to one degree or another in all three regions, but not in the same order of magnitude. The co-authors assert that different social considerations determine the effectiveness of transnational networks' norms and practices. It seems likely that these considerations can attract and/or deter international supporters, which would affect the success of TANs in addressing human rights and female empowerment.

As far as I know, field studies have not been conducted to determine whether women in different geographical regions are uniquely positioned to "open doors," "establish common platforms," and/or "exert authority." Nonetheless, it seems useful to reflect on how women exert influence in their communities and internationally in ways that help them sustain a sense of purpose in challenging patriarchal structures. In authoritarian countries where *all* autonomous grass roots political activity is proscribed, especially patriarchal ones like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan under the Taliban, and so on, women take great risks in trying to exert influence of any kind, whether in their local communities or at a national level.

In 2018, a case study published by S. Osterhoudt in *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems*, "Remembered resilience: Oral history narratives and community resilience in agroforestry systems," details the ways a community in northeastern Madagascar suffered tremendous losses from a category 3 cyclone in 2011.[4] Osterhoudt found that oral histories enabled communities to rebuild local agricultural systems through "collective memories;" and that this was the first time that men and women elders, who had experienced a cyclone in 1959, felt valued and integral to the relief efforts in their role as oral history tellers. Within their communities, they shared adaptive strategies from fifty years earlier when many traditional crops had been washed away, which included changing agricultural practices and finding new food sources. She concluded that village elders helped their communities overcome challenges by encouraging younger generations to rebuild. Incorporating into TANs the experiences of elders effectively enrich complex, flexible, and adaptable webs of connections.

In 2018, a study by C. C. Makondo and D. S. G. Thomas in *Environmental Science & Policy* focused on linkages between indigenous knowledge and western science in African societies regarding climate change adaptation.[5] They found that oral histories were useful in gathering information in local communities about strategies relating to migration, cultivating social networks, changing eating habits, spirituality, ecosystem services/resource utilization, and rainwater harvesting. However, they also found gaps between local communities and international networks in utilizing the knowledge indigenous African communities have cultivated over thousands of years. A key finding in their study is that local communities thrived when they were the ones coming up with the adaptation strategies, such as those mentioned above, but tended to struggle when inappropriate strategies were implemented from an external source such as a colonizing power. The sweet spot is when both indigenous knowledge and modern-day technology and funding are brought together in a synthesis of ideas and power. Otherwise, external, perhaps well-intended efforts, tended to alienate entire populations from their own communities by preaching high-level, niche scientific approaches to climate mitigation.

A 2018 study by J. Rosenberg in *The Journal of Environment and Development* links oral histories to TANs, pointing out that while these networks amplified the voices of local actors in Grenada who focused on saving the habitat for its indigenous dove population, they did not exert significant influence on elected political officials or transnational corporations in domestic policy-making arenas.[6] Instead, powerful politicians with foreign ties continue to enjoy strong electoral support and attract rapid infusions of capital to implement their projects without regard to the organized voices from below. Nevertheless, continuing their efforts, local activists utilized traditional media, town gatherings, and other information-sharing spaces to educate and inform the public about the history of the natural habitat and the vital role it plays in the Grenadian ecosystem. Rosenberg presented stories of survivors of Hurricane Ivan, which occurred in September 2004, to augment habitat rehabilitation and expansion efforts; and concluded that TANs were useful in two ways: (1) by spreading messages internationally to governments with interests in the project or ecosystem and (2) providing a forum for working out compromises between foreign direct investors in hotels and conservationists.

Yet another way TANs may operate was described in a 2021 study in *Capitalism Nature Socialism* in which R. Borde and B. Bluemling identify several transnational advocacy organizations that support domestic protests against the exploitation of the Dongaria Kondh people who live in the Niyamgiri forest in eastern India. In this context, oral histories document and promote indigenous spiritual and ecological beliefs.[7]

In their 2021 study published in the *International Review of Environmental History,* titled "Talking to water: Memory, gender and environment for Hazara refugees in Australia," H. Goodall and L. Hekmat make an even stronger case for documenting life histories by focusing on twelve Hazara women (displaced from Afghanistan from 2005 onward) who migrated to southeastern Australia.[8] They found that women were important in helping migrant communities adapt to the new environment by passing on knowledge and skills to their sons and daughters. Their oral histories documented the ways women adapted traditional Afghani rituals involving water to the new landscape in Australia.[9] Of note is the fact that widely scattered diasporas comprising refugees or other kinds of displaced persons, often are the result of wars, foreign and civil, natural disasters, revolutions, etc. Modern transportation facilitates the widespread resettlement in many countries of such displaced persons while the internet, cell phone networks, and social media enable these widely separated diasporic communities to maintain contact to a degree unprecedented in earlier world history.

In the study by Goodall and Hekmat, women maintained and perpetuated an international network of various Afghani groups, which gave them a sense of community. These researchers concluded that TANs exist on many different levels to link ethnic and religious communities that strive to maintain traditions. Community-based networks ensured the survival of the accumulated knowledge of older generations and allowed elders to pass down this vital knowledge to enable their communities to thrive.

A final example, a study published by P. Dauvergne and L. Shipton in *The Journal of Environment and Development*, titled "The Politics of Transnational

Advocacy Against Chinese, Indian, and Brazilian Extractive Projects in the Global South," posited that TANs effectively advocated for indigenous groups and against exploitative corporate extraction in politically repressive regions.[10] They found that interactions between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Global South were more effective than interactions between the Global North and Global South in building solidarity and confronting exploitative practices; and recommended that those in Global North readjust their roles to function as "outward facing advocacy networks" and not act in paternalistic ways.

Though the above literature review is merely suggestive, and by no means exhaustive, it does reveal the range of contexts within which TANs operate and how oral histories enable communities to adapt to and mitigate environmental challenges. The examples suggest that oral histories collected from two groups – elders (both men and women) and middle-aged women who care for children and elderly family members – have the potential to change the socio-cultural environment. Thus far, however, these studies only describe women as *supporting* traditional ways rather than *promoting* new knowledge structures.

To be truly effective and maintain a sense of community among groups dispersed around the world, TANs also must include younger generations of males and females. Large-scale mass and/or social media campaigns usually attract a younger, millennial generation with dual interests in promoting both economically profitable enterprises and social justice. Instead of being beholden to a particular institution, mass social media campaigns aim to integrate the values of individual freedom/empowerment with a strong awareness of membership in a larger, global community to support women-led climate change initiatives.

In 2021, the United Nations' Paris Committee on Capacity Building (PCCB) indicated that universities in the Global North do not become involved in building collaborative networks in the Global South. This deficiency is manifested in programs that often exclude women and fail to build long-term capacities in education. Thus, to achieve more satisfactory results, it is important to compare environmental and gender equity strategies across organizational cultures. Such a comparison will almost certainly further illuminate the need for intercultural cooperation (Hofstede et al., 2010) in support of rural women entrepreneurs as change makers, the cohort that is the central focus of this book.

Reflexive Feminist Methodologies

Reflexive feminist methodologies help identify the various ways women and men act to improve their communities. I first became aware of these methodologies in the 1990s when I conducted biographical research on female community leaders in Chicago's Chinatown through a National Endowment for the Humanities project, *Women Building Chicago 1790–1990*. Before this project, no one had documented women's activities in, and contributions to, Chicago's Chinatown because, in the late-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, Chinese women in the United States were virtually invisible: America's draconian immigration laws during the Chinese Exclusion era (1882–1943) had prevented many Chinese

women from living in the United States, and "Chinatowns" consisted mostly of single male laundry and restaurant workers. The few women and children who were there – families of merchants – did not leave their homes for fear of being questioned by immigration officials about their status. In the early 1990s, an octogenarian community leader in Chicago, G. H. Wang, decided to correct the historical record and help me identify women who had made significant contributions. My hundred plus oral history interviews with church members, medical professionals, lawyers, immigration service interpreters, and businesspeople, gave the community a reason to establish the first Chinese American museum in Chicago and the city to name two public parks to honor two of the women I wrote about.[11]

Twenty years later, in researching women in Asia who were active in climate change initiatives in the Global South, I used the same methods I had used in Chicago to learn about the lives of women in India, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam. This involved interviewing program managers, journalists, heads of NGOs, scientists, and engineers. As with my previous research in Chinatown, my methodology included a combination of ethnographic, historical, and archival research. I developed open-ended questions, audio recorded the interviews, prepared detailed transcripts, used multiple sources to check facts, and integrated historical events to compose the final narratives.[12]

While the above steps seem straightforward, this methodology is slightly unconventional because I relied on oral interviews to guide me in collecting historical data. In the West, while oral history has become more accepted by the profession, historians still are encouraged to trust written records over oral narratives. We scrutinize stories that contain moral messages and visual imagery of historical events. And, in collecting data from interviews and aggregating and analyzing such data, anthropologists, political scientists, and sociologists follow mandates outlined in "human subjects research."

Much later in my career as a scholar and teacher, I realized how my research fit under the rubric of feminist methodologies that were introduced in the 1980s and have reemerged today. This methodology incorporates experiences, emotions, and ideas to learn about sociocultural contexts.[13] An American philosopher of feminist and postcolonial theory, Sandra Harding, explains this as follows:

> Introducing this "subjective" element into the analysis in fact increases the objectivity of the research and decreases the "objectivism" which hides this kind of evidence from the public. This kind of relationship between the researcher and the object of research is usually discussed under the heading of the "reflexivity of social science." I refer to it here as a new subject matter of inquiry to emphasize the unusual strength of this form of the reflexivity recommendation.[14]

Because women in disadvantaged communities of urban-based Chinatowns and in the Global South often are "invisible" to the outside world, I wanted to identify the interviewees by name, with their permission, and not treat them as

mere "objects" to be studied.[15] This is important because, otherwise, the women could be targeted for abuse or violence in communities dominated by hostile males or local officials enforcing patriarchal norms and regulations. I hoped to validate their experiences and honor the dignity of those who have endured significant climate change events. As part of a digital collection, identifying interviewees formally by name also may elicit more information than would otherwise be forthcoming. Thus, my co-researcher, Jamie Sommer, posted an essay as part of our digital oral history collection for a general audience, which included the following statement:

> […] We hope to inspire visitors to formulate their own research projects – and incorporate global dimensions of environmental social justice. In the *Bhungroo* case study, everyone involved came to recognize the power of practical solutions to inequality; and that the context within which solutions can be achieved requires a different lens. "Mirroring Hope" means that you not only need good translators to get it right, but you also need to be aware of your particular frames, confront the geopolitics of knowledge, and unlearn hegemonic ideology.[16]

Our "hope" was to inspire others – laypeople as well as scholars – to understand their frames of reference and learn from those who continually adapt to climate-related disasters. In interviewing the women in Gujarat, India, we explored many meanings that helped us understand climate change tragedies and strategies. One simple example is that rural farmers never used the abstract terms "climate change" or "food insecurity" to describe their daily challenges but, instead, talked about how they felt when their crops were ruined by droughts or floods, when moneylenders charged exorbitant interest rates, and when, for weeks on end, they did not have food to eat.

Jamie and I believed that understanding farmers' struggles and ways forward – as a sequential part of their lives – would help outsiders (including ourselves and our readers) perceive elements of meaning that might otherwise be overlooked. In fact, the women-led irrigation technology in India, *Bhungroo*, became a universal and relatable symbol of water and the ability to survive. It cannot be overemphasized that empathy is an essential part of the social science researcher's toolkit rather than the pose of detached clinical "objectivity," which treats human beings as specimens. Social science should not be neutral. It should be engaged in promoting the survival and welfare of people, particularly those disadvantaged by hierarchical and patriarchal power structures, whether feudal, capitalist, or socialist.

One tricky question, however, is how humans interact with the natural world. Public intellectual Amitav Ghosh notes that the "great derangement" of climate change makes it difficult for humans to situate themselves in a world in which they are not central authorities or authors. To answer this, feminist methodologies do give the roles assumed by women (and girls) authority over their own lives within the context of climate crises:[17] In essence, females,

especially in rural communities, become a bridge between the "situated" patriarchal social structure and the natural world.[18] As a result, their stories are relevant because they are integral to a world concerned about the environment and "our" relation to it.

I found Ruth Bottigheimer's work on the ethical framework of medieval fairy tales, which are among the earliest recorded Western narratives of fairy tales, useful in helping me understand the nuances of feminist methodologies.[19] Bottigheimer noted that fairy tales changed over time. By tracing their trajectories, she was able to determine when women lost control over their own fertility; and she found a correlation between women's loss of reproductive rights and their exclusion from the moneyed economy, which restricted their chances for pursuing an independent livelihood. Hers was a significant insight into my understanding of the value of a mosaic of multiple oral histories. Oral histories, too, can reveal these changes – the relationships between women and how they navigate changes in socio-cultural and political systems of the time – and are important for understanding female empowerment.

Because fairy tales were passed down over several generations, Bottigheimer notes, *shared knowledge* made it possible for listeners and readers to understand and relate to the brief tales. She states: "The narratives are open texts that lack internal explanations such as subordinate clauses and backstories for what happens."[20] Similarly, as one aspect of feminist methodology, those who conduct oral history interviews with women in the present-day are recording one slice of a larger story. In these "open texts," the interviewer needs to follow ethical principles by ensuring that the interviewee understands the purpose of the interview and consents to being interviewed. Furthermore, the interviewer has an ethical responsibility to listen empathetically to what is being said, to capture experiences, emotions, and ideas, and to interview multiple people – men and women – to identify common and divergent threads.

For example, in our oral history research, Jamie and I used a Gujarati interpreter to explain our purpose to the farmers and obtain their consent to record the interview. Those who did not know how to write their name used a thumb-print stamp. Before conducting the interview, we worked closely with a local "cultural informant" to develop questions that would make sense in context and ensure that the interviewees understood our intentions – that we were researchers from an American university who wanted to learn about how their lives had been affected by climate-related disasters. When their stories were tragic, Harding's concept of "reflexivity" meant that we could freely express empathy to our interviewees without feeling like we were being biased. Within a week, we had conducted 42 interviews, evenly divided between men and women. Our follow-up questions, photos, and audio recordings helped us identify nuances relating to women's roles as mothers, their inclusion in the "moneyed economy," and chances of making independent financial decisions.

Ten oral history projects that I and several graduate and undergraduate students conducted between 2016 and 2022 feature entrepreneurs in Central America, Southeast Asia, Europe, and Africa who created and/or managed programs to empower women.[21] To understand how these entrepreneurs connected climate
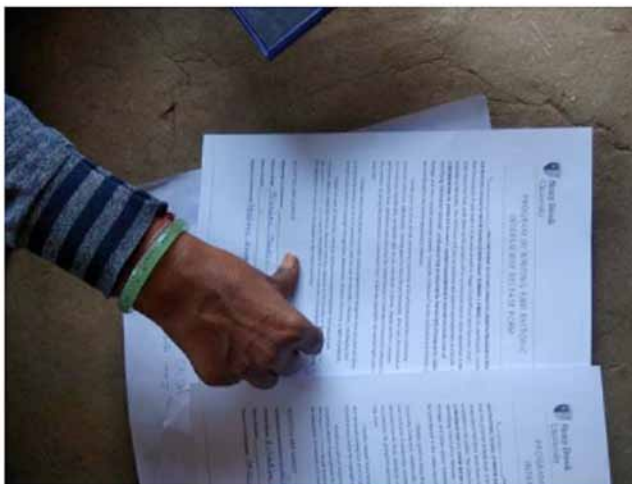
Fig. 5.   Thumbprint Signing the Release Form. Copyright © 2019 Courtesy of Peggy Ann Spitzer.

Fig. 6.   Program Officer Explaining Interviews to a *Bhungroo* Farmer. Copyright © 2019 Courtesy of Peggy Ann Spitzer.

Fig. 7. Preparing for Field Interviews. Copyright © 2019 Courtesy of Peggy Ann Spitzer.

Fig. 8. Map of Central America (Including the Countries of Belize, Guatemala, and Colombia). "Map of Central America" by Cacahuate (amendments by Joelf) is licensed under CC-BY-SA-4.0.

change adaptation to female empowerment, we posed six open-ended discussion questions to learn about their activities:

- How did you become involved in women-led climate change projects?
- How did you integrate women's empowerment in the climate change projects?
- Did you acknowledge or in any way challenge existing patriarchal attitudes?
- In what ways did your project uplift women within rural communities?
- In what ways did you aim to inspire future generations?
- How did you assess the results of your project?

Mainland Southeast Asia

Fig. 9.   Map of Southeast Asia, Including Vietnam and Thailand. "Mainland Southeast Asia" in the public domain through the Library of Congress.

Fig. 10.   Map of EUROPE, Including Italy and Turkey (Renamed Türkiye in 2022). "Europe Countries Map" by San Jose is licensed under CC-BY-SA-3.0.

In all 10 projects, we found that those who made connections outside of their communities gained the attention of scientists, policy makers, and other constituencies who study the effects of climate change on vulnerable populations around the world.

In Belize, *Fragments of Hope* focuses on restoring endangered coral reefs and helping local women gain community recognition, monetary compensation, and cooperation from male peers.[22] In Guatemala, the *Meal Flour Project* in the western highlands trains women to cultivate mealworm farms to provide a source of protein for indigenous Mam communities;[23] and the *Foundation for Ecodevelopment and Conservation* (Fundación Para El Ecodesarrollo Y La Conservación) establishes healthcare centers and midwife training in protected areas among indigenous and non-indigenous people who are outside of the court system to address domestic violence.[24] The fourth case study in Latin America, *ENDA Colombia* in Bogotá, organizes women's recycling collectives to protect local lands and "deconstruct patriarchal frames." (See the map in Fig. 8.)[25]

In Southeast Asia, an international program initiative through the Vietnamese Women's Union facilitated the dissemination and use of environmentally friendly cookstoves; and in Thailand, women reportedly use multiple strategies to gain acceptance and rally public opinion to address environmental degradation in rural spiritual and cultural centers that were affected by male migration to urban areas. (See the map in Fig. 9.)[26]

Fig. 11.   Map of Africa (with Tunisia and Uganda). "Africa-political-map" by Maps world is licensed under CC-BY-SA-4.0.

In Europe, activists focus on segments of female populations who are socially isolated and cultural outcasts: *Progetto Quid,* a social enterprise in Verona, Italy, provides job opportunities for poor and disenfranchised women who learn to recycle waste created by the fashion industry;[27] and in Türkiye, *Imece Inisifiyati* trains women in refugee camps to assemble and sell solar batteries outside of the camps and provide their children with educational opportunities. (See the map in Fig. 10.)[28]

Finally, in Africa, the *Women's Empowerment for Resilience and Adaptation Against Climate Change* in Uganda provides financial support for women farmers, who are uniformly marginalized, to implement farming methods to reduce carbon emissions and upgrade their social status;[29] and a women-led community education initiative in Tunisia through the *Association of Environmental Education for Future Generations (AEEFG)* helps local communities influence decision makers to get rid of dangerous chemicals such as lead in paint, amalgam in dentistry, pesticides, and hazardous chemicals in makeup products. (See the map in Fig. 11.)[30]

Features of Female Empowerment

Each of the above-mentioned projects pursued female agency by connecting local communities with national/governmental organizations and international NGOs. In addition, all the interviewees focused on gender equity and climate justice by challenging existing leadership structures. In discussing their networks and relationships, the interviewees reflected on the needs of their local communities, national and international environments, available resources, political structures, social practices, and funding opportunities – all variables that can change over time and induce individual leaders or organizations to adapt and change their focus and strategy.

An examination of transnational networks reveals that female agency takes on many different forms; and that individuals who developed the projects have different reasons for pursuing relationships that depended upon their personal dispositions, the socio-political-cultural contexts, and targeted spheres of influence (i.e., local, national, and international). Below is a word cloud that illustrates some common concerns. Following that are statements that relate transnational networks that were designed to support female empowerment and climate justice for each of the ten projects.

1. In restoring endangered coral reefs, an American female environmentalist (under the pseudonym, Amelia) found ways to develop complex networks between nations, through international environmental organizations headed by women, to support regional projects in the Caribbean, and gain support from the Belizean government and private entrepreneurs (Belize – Fragments of Hope).

2. In addressing food insecurity especially among indigenous communities, Andrea Monzón Juárez develops simple and focused relationships outside of her immediate community to empower women to run the mealworm farms and collect plant species in their villages (Guatemala – The Meal Flour Project).

3. In directing projects on female health and nutrition, Karen Aleida DuBois Recinos develops relationships with those who both challenged international "imperialistic" institutions and empowered women and girls to become educated about health and nutrition (Guatemala – Foundation for Ecodevelopment and Conservation).

4. To gather support for urban camps and rural villages and address the gap between rich and poor in Central America, María Victoria Bojacá Penagos and Graciela Quintero Medina develop networks for women's rights and climate change adaptation (Colombia – ENDA).

5. Working for the US Agency for International Development, Kalpana Giri engaged with women from the Vietnam Women's Union to introduce an experimental technology and assess its effectiveness (Vietnam – Improved Cookstoves).

6. Working as a journalist for *The Bangkok Post,* Karnjana Karnjanatawe wrote feature stories on several women environmental activists and identified large national and international networks that potentially could challenge unresponsive political leaders to become involved in international climate change initiatives (Thailand – Female Activists in the mass media).

7. In the creative entrepreneurial project to "redesign people and fabrics," Valeria Valotto helps develop jobs for disenfranchised women – including migrants, and former sex workers and drug addicts – to uplift and integrate them into the Italian economy with minimal international aid (Italy – Progetto Quid).

8. In the midst of crisis management with a large influx of Syrian refugees, as a French citizen working in Türkiye, Lucie Gamond Rius works with some local organizations, recognizing the need for international support to provide food, clothing, and eco-friendly jobs for women (Türkiye – Imece Inisifiyati).

9. Because the international community often does not acknowledge the success of women's programs in Africa, Mazumira Menya continues to challenge perceptions by emphasizing the marked, gradual improvements on-the-ground in Uganda (Uganda – Women's Empowerment for Resilience and Adaptation Against Climate Change).

10. To raise awareness of environmental challenges in the Middle East and North Africa and to counter unstable leadership in Tunisia, Semia Gharbi works in a regional hub and through international organizations to educate and empower women and youth (Tunisia – AEEFG).

Conclusion

In oral history interviews, reflexive feminist methodologies acknowledge the contributions of both interviewers and interviewees. In this book, I hope to inspire readers to conduct their own oral history interviews. To provide examples, the next chapter details each of above-mentioned oral history projects – with quotes and passages from the interviewees and interviewers. Using feminist reflexive methodology, I add a note of encouragement for your narratives – short or long – which also can facilitate an accurate representation of women's lives, nurture trust, and build support. Interviews capture varied responses to the perils of climate-related disasters; and oral history interviewers, including students, scholars, policymakers, and practitioners, can educate local actors on the importance of women's life stories in informing the outside world and obtaining external support for community projects.

The aggregation of oral histories from diverse settings contributes to creating an intricate mosaic of experiences to be a foundation for civil society and the work of women's international and domestic NGOs. In TANs, the web of connections fostered by the dissemination of oral histories facilitates and energizes social change directed toward climate change adaptation and community survival in the face of new challenges. Furthermore, stories constructed from oral histories enter the mainstream through mass media campaigns designed to influence public opinion and secure support from policy makers and power brokers.

As Bottigheimer's work suggests, these narratives (from modern oral histories to medieval fairy tales) are embraced by successive generations and change over time, especially as the effects of climate change become increasingly traumatic. In my case, I first became sensitized to these issues from my research into the lives of immigrant Chinese women in Chicago's Chinatown. In the early 1990s, I was appalled by the effects of racism when I learned from members of the community about the circumscribed lives of women who were invisible actors. Those oral history interviews set me on a course to research, empathize with, and recognize the injustices endured by women in the Global South who are challenged by the ravages brought about by climate change. For the very reason that individuals have different learning curves and perspectives, reflexive feminist methodologies are vital – especially in highly politically charged environments that are unlikely to offer relief or reasonable solutions.