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Refugees in a World on Fire: Dispossession, Diaspora and
the Possibilities of Queer Resistance

By

Kim Thien Tran

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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and the Designated Emphasis

in

Women, Gender and Sexuality

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Keith P. Feldman, Chair

Professor Elaine Kim

Professor Evelyn Nakano Glenn

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Abstract

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the Possibilities of Queer Resistance

by

Kim Thien Tran

Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnic Studies

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Keith P. Feldman, Chair

On August 9th, 2014, Michael Brown was killed by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. Afterward, Brown's 18-year old body lay in the sweltering sun for four hours; uncovered and defaced even in mourning.¹ The death of Michael Brown—a Black teenager—at the hands of a white police officer catapulted national racial tensions, drew protests and created #BlackLivesMatter. Across the country, #BlackLivesMatter issued clarion calls for solidarity in action and creed. My dissertation explores how Asian American activists responded by marshaling relational and affective frameworks in order to forge coalitions with the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Between 2014-2016, I argue Asian Americans pursued solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter through a framework of mediated advantage which disavowed the model minority myth and relied upon histories of Asian exclusion to build bridges across diverging iterations of white supremacy. Moreover, through interviews with Vietnamese American community activists, I find that solidarity between these two communities depends upon nebulous yet powerful affective linkages, the “impossible psychic attachments”² of what I term a queer diasporic praxis.

The first chapter provides a theoretical framework and historical context for diaspora and dispossession. Chapter one establishes the political and economic structure specific to Vietnamese diaspora and dispossession in order to argue for indeterminacy between the two. I engage seminal political and economic theory and to tease out the common veins of violence and disenfranchisement endemic to diaspora and capitalism that make solidarity possible.

¹ Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).

² David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.)

In this chapter, I perform a close reading of solidarity statements from various sources including #Asians4BlackLives, CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities, The National Korean American Service & Education Consortium (NAKASEC), 18 Million Rising, SAALT: South Asian Americans Leading Together, and the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA), Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM) and Bay Area Solidarity. I contend Asian American solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter functions through a technology of mediated advantage that simultaneously disavows the model minority myth³ and prioritizes anti-black racism in an attempt to think race relationally.

In chapter three I reimagine cross-racial coalition in the Vietnamese diaspora through Women of Color Feminism and Queer of Color Critique. I introduce the framework of a queer diasporic praxis as the analytic through which solidarity can be understood as affective and queer. Using participant observation, I locate affect and emotion as the engine and facilitating mechanism for coalition-making. I assert Vietnamese American activists employ rubrics of alternative kinship and a “common context of struggle”⁴ in their efforts to end anti-Black racism alongside Black Lives Matter.

In chapter four, I challenge popular narratives of social death that would render efforts to foment racial justice meaningless. Taking Asian and Vietnamese American organizing as a point of departure, I re-read afro and queer pessimism through Black Feminism. Foregrounding life-affirming acts of activism and simply living on the margins of social and political existence, I queery pessimistic frameworks through the spaces of possibility created by coalition-making. I conclude the dissertation by making explicit why Ethnic Studies scholars must be more than “academic coroners”⁵ of our own communities.

³ Ellen D Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.)

⁴ Alexander M. Jaqui and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. Introduction: *Genealogies, Legacies, Movements in Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

⁵ Clyde Woods, “Life After Death” in *The Professional Geographer* 54.1 (2002): 62-66.

For My Students, For My Teachers

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To my partner, Krishna, you have taught me more about queer solidarities than any theorist. Many of these ideas are collaborations shaped by your hard edged brilliance and dedication to community. You are my brightest and best example of coalition: both in its challenge and its promise.

Finally, this work is the result of a singular herculean effort of one person. I am the the daughter of a refugee who came to these shores through three camps, desolate poverty and myriads of structural and personal violence. To my mother who raised a baby at union protests and continues to be the most committed activist I know: me, we made it!!!

There are hundreds of people I could not thank in this limited space. Please know that I am in your debt.

It takes a community. Thank you for being mine.

Kim Tran, Ph.D

Introduction

I began writing my dissertation in 2014. At the time, there were two years left of the Obama Administration. Michael Brown had just been slain in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, and before long, *Obergefell v. Hodges* would grant same sex couples federal marriage equality. My early work asked questions about refugees, queerness, normativity and Black death. Today, the inquiries that haunted those early pages feel even more pressing. The country is a year into the Trump Administration, there is a renewed attack on the formal liberties of LGBTQ people and the tally of the Black dead continues to grow.

Mere weeks ago, in July 2018, Nia Wilson and her sister arrived at the MacArthur Bay Are Rapid Transit station. As they left, they were approached and then brutally stabbed by John Cowell. Nia Wilson died “calling out her sister's name for help.”¹ Wilson was a Black woman; Cowell a white man. After community activists planned a well-attended vigil, Phuong Thao,² a former Hai Ba Trung School for Organizing student and Viet Unity member authored a Facebook status. She included pictures of a smiling Wilson and a lament in which she mourned the passing of her student. Further, Thao resisted the reduction of the young woman to yet another Black person slain. Thao wrote, “Yes, #sayhername #niawilson. and also, i remember you as a whole person.” She described Wilson as, “rambunctious and full of laughter.” In light of Wilson’s death and Thao’s public display of grief and reverence for Wilson’s joy—both affective responses—returning to concerns about refugees, diaspora, and queer solidarity in the face of ongoing anti-blackness is imperative.

My dissertation asks how Asian American and queer Vietnamese diasporic communities, like Thao’s, envision their own struggles for racial justice and, in doing so, how they navigate racial and gendered difference. It represents a concerted effort to bridge the seemingly disparate fields of diaspora theory, neoliberal discourse, Women of Color Feminism and Queer of Color Critique. The first chapter provides a theoretical framework and historical context for thinking about diaspora and dispossession in the context of neoliberalism. It establishes the political and economic structure specific to Vietnamese diaspora and dispossession in order to argue for a queer relationship between the two. I engage seminal political and economic theory to tease out the common veins of violence and disenfranchisement endemic to diaspora and capitalism, and suggest that these entanglements are the grounds for queer solidarity that uses the relational mediated advantage of Asian American identity.

In the second chapter, I perform a close reading of solidarity statements from various Asian American organizations, including #Asians4BlackLives, CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities, The National Korean American Service & Education Consortium (NAKASEC), 18 Million Rising, SAALT: South Asian Americans Leading Together, and the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA), Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM) and Bay Area Solidarity. I build on the definition of neoliberal colorblindness and anti-racist attention to difference in the previous chapter to contend that Asian American solidarity with

¹ ABC7 “What We Know About Deadly Stabbing at Oakland's MacArthur BART Station” ABC7NEWS July 25th, 2018. <http://abc7news.com/what-we-know-about-deadly-oakland-bart-stabbing/3812465/>

²name anonymized

#BlackLivesMatter functions through a framework of hyper racial awareness. Mediated advantage is a racially cognizant framework that heeds racial tropes and corporal impacts of anti-Black racism to simultaneously disavow the model minority myth³ and prioritize Black American struggles for social justice.

In the third chapter of my dissertation I build on the relational and affective rumblings of the solidarity statements to reimagine cross-racial coalition in the Vietnamese diaspora through Women of Color Feminism and Queer of Color Critique. I introduce the framework of a queer diasporic praxis as the analytic through which solidarity can be understood as affective and queer. Using participant observation and interviews, I locate joy, happiness and grief as the facilitating mechanisms for coalition-making. I assert Vietnamese American activists employ rubrics of alternative kinship and a “common context of struggle”⁴ in their efforts to end anti-Black racism alongside #BlackLivesMatter.

Finally, in the last chapter, I challenge popular narratives of social death that would render efforts to foment racial justice meaningless. Taking Asian and Vietnamese American organizing as a point of departure, I re-read afro and queer pessimism through Black Feminism. Foregrounding life-affirming acts of activism and simply living on the margins of social and political existence, I query pessimistic frameworks through the spaces of possibility created by coalition-making. I conclude the dissertation by making explicit why Ethnic Studies scholars must be more than “academic coroners”⁵ of our own communities.

³ Wu Ellen D, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

⁴ Alexander M. Jaqui and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. Introduction: Genealogies, Legacies, Movements, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.

⁵ Woods, Clyde. “Life After Death” *The Professional Geographer* 54.1 (2002): 62-66. Print.

Chapter 1

The World Ablaze: Dispossession and Diaspora

In the 1983 edition of *This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Writings by Women of Color*, Cherrie Moraga wrote humanity is wholly constitutive of “refugees in a world on fire.”⁶ Over ten years later the queer Black feminist writer and teacher June Jordan published a searing indictment of the neoliberal epoch entitled “We Are All Refugees” in *The Progressive*, a leftist political magazine. What is this world Moraga and Jordan attempted to capture in their descriptive and proscriptive statements? What does it mean to chart the world as made up of stateless, dispossessed peoples? Moreover, how might a common disenfranchisement serve cross-racial coalition?

I begin with Jordan’s work in part because Black Feminism has been woefully misinterpreted as neglecting the concerns of geopolitics and late capitalism. A short reading of Jordan’s essay illuminates Black Feminism as attentive to capital flows and diaspora. Following Grace Hong, I use the aforementioned statements issued by Moraga and Jordan as a historicizing device.⁷ Hong looks to the emergence of women of color formations to query why the ideas embedded in their theories emerged when they did and to grasp the world to which they were responding. Along similar lines, I cull Jordan’s seemingly grandiose proclamations for a theoretical point of departure with which to trace shifts in neoliberalism, subject formation, and coalition. Through Jordan, I attempt to capture the figure of the common refugee and the economy of diaspora with the aim of illuminating the ways the symbolic, juridical and structural significance of each are inextricably tied.

The very first sentence of June Jordan’s essay maps the mid 1990’s as “a moment of enormous and demanding contradiction.”⁸ Jordan characterizes the conjuncture as enigmatic in economic, political and discursive ways. She claims democracy in the United States is a purely rhetorical promise considering the prominence of leaders who “contemplate the taxation of food stamps . . . and who can sleep very well in verified coexistence with genocide in Bosnia.”⁹ Bringing together the language of liberation, taxation of the poor and ethnic cleansing, Jordan manifests an inherently conflictual relationship between global policies, domestic action and the language used to justify both. Pondering the connection between state and interpersonal violence further Jordan goes on to ask, “Is that the problem worldwide?”¹⁰

This final, vital question is rhetorical. The answer is clear to Jordan, who continues her essay to opine that the gendered asymmetry of violence imbricated in state, economic, political

⁶ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, and Cherrie Moraga, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*. Berkeley: Kitchen Table Press, 1983.

⁷ Grace Kyungwon Hong. *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, Print 2006.

⁸ Jordan, 90.

⁹ Jordan, 91.

¹⁰ Jordan, 93.

and cultural power have created not only an “American space disfigured by traditions of hatred and selfishness,”¹¹ but a more generalized global condition. In other words, the “contradiction” has grown historical and transnational legs with the contemporary and widespread ramifications of dispossession and greed. Yet importantly, Jordan takes a step away from the somewhat anticipated responses such powerful statement might warrant. She neither advances reform of the system nor its dismantling. Jordan instead advocates a declaration that all people identify as “perpetual refugees.” Specifically, she asks readers to consider the aforementioned litany of facts describing pervasive political and economic disenfranchisement to arrive at the conclusion that, “We are all refugees horribly displaced from a benign and welcoming community.”¹²

For Jordan, a shared refugeehood is polyvocal. It is first and foremost a means of describing the “horror” of a neoliberalism rife with discursive contradiction and codified by irreversible economic policies. Refugeehood is the predictable result of economic and political violence perpetrated by the state, architected by politicians, globalized in its scope and shaped by changing racial demographics. As a concept metaphor, refugeehood most appropriately apprehends and responds to a milieu of “multifaceted oppression” characterized by its personal as well as structural components. However, a discussion of refugeehood also bespeaks a parallel relational experience of forced migration and psychic diasporic despair: the tragic absence of a sense of belonging to either a territory or a people. “Perpetual refugees” thus alludes to a world marred by the continuing oppressive relationship between the legal and the discursive, but also one contoured by diasporic identity itself and the interstices available for queer world-making within it.

Jordan’s poignant treatise marks the beginning of my investigation. It provides a common theoretical ground for the questions I will continue to pose throughout the dissertation about refugees, diaspora, neoliberalism and the possibilities for resistance through allegiance. Women of color feminists like Jordan and Moraga portray the contemporary as what bell hooks has termed white supremacist capitalist patriarchy¹³ whilst simultaneously hinting at the endurance and potential of collective refugeehood. Mapping a common refugeehood and subsequently a queer diasporic praxis to which it gives rise, requires unpacking diaspora and neoliberalism toward a rigorous understanding of how coalitions across race are formed in accordance with specific economic, political and social constraints.

What are refugees? What is diaspora? And considering the optimistic and pervasive rhetoric of globalization and transnational mobility, why does the pain of statelessness persist? What processes, machinations and consequences describe refugeehood and dispossession? How are they congruent and incongruent? I initiate this early chapter with a discussion about economies of dispossession and transnational movement under neoliberal regimes that are part and parcel to diaspora because the trope of mobility-*cum*-freedom is deceptive.

¹¹ Jordan, 94.

¹² Jordan, 94.

¹³ bell hooks, “Understanding Patriarchy” Louisville: Louisville Anarchist Federation Federation, 2010.

Neoliberal discourse is shaped by utopian desires for the facile migration of people and capital from one space, often the space of the nation-state, to another. Complicating rhetoric with reality, I argue that the language of liberation enshrined in neoliberal thought has specific racialized and classed implications in both fiscal and physical contexts. The contradictions of “free trade” and “flexible labor” point to a necessary exchange between refugee, diaspora and neoliberal theories. They elucidate the ways the vernacular of “freedom” within neoliberalism eclipses the consequences of the movement it advocates.

This chapter concludes with a return to June Jordan and a shift toward other Queer of Color thinkers. While Jordan employs refugeehood as a mechanism with which to apprehend a litany of socio-economic and political ills, she also signals that displacement and un-belonging hold the capacity for an enduring alternative political kinship, what I call a queer diasporic praxis. Following Jordan’s directive, I begin to think about how queer Vietnamese refugees can build solidarity and community with Black Lives Matter from the detritus of dispossession.

The Gift of Neoliberal Freedom

Neoliberalism has become a strangely ubiquitous term. It has and can describe a range of phenomena ranging from the financialization of primitive accumulation,¹⁴ to the multicultural scaffolding¹⁵ of late capitalism and a broad array of other social ills. But its defiance of a common definition, or ambiguity, is one of neoliberalism’s greatest assets. Within cultural and Ethnic Studies, neoliberalism has often served as an empty signifier through which to harangue big banks and elite politicians without specificity. Political economist David Harvey defines neoliberalism as “in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.”¹⁶ Harvey identifies a few vital components of neoliberalism which work in tandem to centralize power for an elite class of capitalists. The first is a series of politico-economic strategies, the second is belief or faith in neoliberalism itself to provide a platform for socio-economic health, while the third (related, but separate) is the structural scaffolding required to enact neoliberal policies. Each is a vital element. For the purpose of this dissertation and with a broader goal of providing a corrective in the field of Ethnic Studies, I focus on an idea Harvey mentions no less than three times in his one-sentence description of neoliberalism: freedom.

Scholar of Vietnamese diaspora Mimi Nguyen describes the gift of freedom as the core of liberal warfare. Nguyen’s work articulates the gendered and racialized process of rendering Vietnamese refugees the sole proprietors of an ever-un-returnable gift of freedom. By interrogating Vietnamese subject formation, the author intuitively gestures toward the imbrication of certain field formations. Impressing the narratives of diaspora, political theory and neoliberalism upon one another expands on Nguyen’s revelatory concept but also transitions

¹⁴David, Harvey. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

¹⁵ Jodi Melammed *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 201.1

¹⁶ Harvey, 2.

toward describing a type of economic freedom that is insinuated but not explicitly included in the bundle of promises set forth by the notion of liberal freedom. As a framework the gift of freedom aptly captures a perverse political irony albeit while failing to provide scrutiny for its manifest forms. Honing in on the movement of bodies within neoliberalism offers precision with which to carry irony to contradiction, glimpsing one specific manifestation of the freedom Nguyen enunciates. Moreover, examining how neoliberal ideologues promote and justify such movement captures the cultural and rhetorical scaffolding buttressing promises of free trade and its attendant labor mobility. Put simply, what and who moves? And why?

In 1980 Milton Friedman, one progenitor of what would become neoliberal ideology professed, “Few measures that we could take would do more to promote the cause of freedom at home and abroad than complete free trade.” At the precipice of Reaganism and only one year after Margaret Thatcher took office, Friedman connected political freedom and an economic approach that emphasized the facile mobility of capital and people. Indeed, “neoliberalism required both politically and economically the construction of a neoliberal market-based populist culture of differentiated consumerism and individual libertarianism.”¹⁷ At its inception, neoliberalism advocated free trade across national borders, specifically, an “easing barriers to entry and exit, not on abolishing regulations designed for safety or environmental reasons.”¹⁸ However, the violent Chilean coup in 1973 that brought Augusto Pinochet to power and widespread structural adjustment policies to the South American country illuminate the violent effects of liberating capital, let alone people.

In a grossly glaring contradiction, capital can only move “freely” across nation-states with heavy assistance. Harvey articulates the state-finance nexus as the connective and deeply secretive motor of the “free” market. It is the mechanism by which capital is permitted to flow from places of surplus to places of scarcity. In the current conjuncture, capital relies mightily on state management for capital creation and mobility integral to a healthy credit system. However, the state-finance nexus is not without its limits. It collects state taxes and demands interest and takes monopoly rent from those who require its services. The increasing need for massive amounts of start-up capital translates into the centralization of money power and associations of capital facilitated by the state. Yet such organization threatens to monopolize, decreasing competition, creating stagnation and leading to crisis. The state-finance nexus ironically goes to great lengths to prevent crisis by preparing nations for competition in the so-called free market. It assists capital migration in multifarious and conflictual ways, highlighting the frequently counterintuitive material necessities of capital circulation. While the state finance nexus explains the role of state power in moving capital, only certain spaces permit such movement.

Despite the fervency of its advocacy and the widespread implementation of its policies, by the 1990’s neoliberalism writ large had failed to bring either domestic bliss or global autonomy. In Singapore, the implementation of neoliberal dogma was facilitated through

¹⁷ Harvey, 42.

¹⁸ John Williamson “A Short History of the Washington Consensus” From the Washington Consensus towards a new Global Governance September 24, 2004. <http://w.piie.com/publications/papers/williamson0904-2.pdf>

coercive state power and bolstered with moral rhetoric. More generally, increases in foreign direct investment were funneled through a collusion between Wall Street, the International Monetary Fund and the United States government forcing third world countries into adopting neoliberalism. The shifting requirements for structural adjustment policies in Latin America were a notable example of such conditions. The realities and consequences of neoliberalism for marginalized populations point toward a particular brand of freedom, one fraught and bounded by race and class.

Neoliberal arguments for the glory of free trade are bolstered by concomitant claims for labor mobility in almost any context. In a speech given at the Standard Oil Company of Ohio in 1978, Milton Friedman said of Mexican immigrants,

“Now, that Mexican immigration, over the border, is a good thing. It’s a good thing for the illegal immigrants. It’s a good thing for the United States . . . So long as they don’t qualify [for citizenship] they migrate to jobs. They take jobs that most residents of this country are unwilling to take. They provide employers with the kind of workers that they cannot get. They’re hard workers, they’re good workers, and they are clearly better off.”

The quote quickly became famous, if not polarizing, amongst economists. In it Friedman insinuates, “Free migration is *such an unmitigated good*, limits on legal migration make both the immigrants and the natives worse off. So, *illegal* migration, which severs the fact of residency from welfare eligibility, is therefore *desirable* in the context of a regime that guarantees welfare eligibility to all *legal* residents.”¹⁹ But the cutthroat way in which he advocates transnational immigration at any cost and the popularity of the speech translated into enduring beliefs (read: policies) that molded the living conditions for people of color for decades.

Transnational mobility is a politically constructed and dubious undertaking, particularly for marginalized groups. “Free trade” is incontrovertibly uneven, it is restricted to global cities and select subjects with vast implications for people of color. The contemporary circuitry of people, capital, and subjectivity depicts the statist, raced, and gendered lines of power facilitating and enabling neoliberal rationality, which advocates the facile transportation of people across national borders.²⁰ In a cross-country study conducted by Cagatay and Ozler from 1985-1990—at the height of structural adjustment—data illustrate that worsening income inequality and the global “outward orientation” of labor induced by IMF policy led to the feminization of labor. Critics have further argued neoliberal policies geared toward poverty reduction actually produce the opposite results by reducing or eliminating public expenditures, limiting income-generating opportunities through closing jobs; and eliminating safety nets.²¹ These realities strike at the heart of what Friedman famously said in 1980 on a PBS show called “Created Equal” that, “The great virtue of a free market system is that it does not care what color people are; it does not care what their religion is; it only cares whether they can produce something you want to buy. It is the most effective system we have discovered to enable people who hate one another to deal with

¹⁹ <http://web.archive.org/web/20101113035713/http://www.willwilkinson.net/flybottle/2008/06/11/milton-friedmans-argument-for-illegal-immigration/>

¹⁷ Brown, Wendy. “Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy” *Theory & Event* 7:1 (2003).

²¹ See Vladisavljevic and Zuckerman 2004.

one another and help one another.” Considering the racialized and gendered parameters of labor mobility within neoliberalism, what might it mean to bridge the material dispossession inevitably produced by this phase of late capitalism, and the formations of diaspora that emerge in dispossession’s wake? How would one imbricate debates about financialization with identity and homeland? In order to draw an effective relationship between diasporic ambits and the deleterious consequences of labor mobility within neoliberalism, we must first ask: what prompts transnational movements to leave home?

Neoliberalism describes the contemporary iteration of capitalism; rife with contradiction and reliant upon an apolitical and ahistorical multiculturalism. However, returning to early ruminations on the origins of capitalism presents an opportunity to consider how communities were dispossessed uninhibited by rhetorics of globalization or de-nationalization. Revisiting primitive accumulation, or the “prehistory of capitalism”, within a discussion about neoliberalism probes the heart of diasporic and refugee movement.

Karl Marx defines primitive accumulation as the division of the producer from the means of production vis-à-vis “ruthless terrorism,” resulting in the enslavement of the laborer to the capitalist.²² The author historically unpacks the transformation of money and commodities into capital through a specific interaction, “the confrontation of, and contact between, two very different kinds of commodity owners; on the one hand, the owners of money, means of production, means of subsistence, who are eager to valorize the sum of values they have appropriated by buying the labour power of others; on the other hand, free workers, the sellers of their own labour power, and therefore the sellers of labour.”²³ Marx here makes the unequivocal argument that industrial capitalism is a system of co-dependence between the capitalist and the wage-laborer. Capitalism relies upon the fact that the worker has already been forcefully stripped of the means of existing independently from the capitalist. The modern “free” laborer, the basic necessity of industrial capitalism does not enter, but is hurled into the labor market, the result of illegal then legal expropriation from systems of subsistence agriculture. The process of establishing the laborer as free thereby entails the asymmetrical practice of violently cleaving people from land and incapacitating their ability to survive without selling their labor power.

Marx’ steps are somewhat simple. The first involves the disappearance of communal property followed by the appearance of private property and finally, state-consolidation of the separation of the two. He describes the integral steps of primitive accumulation thusly, “The spoliation of the Church’s property, the fraudulent alienation of the state domains, the theft of the common lands, the usurpation of feudal and clan property and its transformation into modern private property under circumstances of ruthless terrorism.”²⁴ Subsequently, agricultural laborers are expelled from the land which they no longer own and “free” to participate in the labor market.

²² See Marx’ *Capital Volume I* chapters 26-28

²³ Marx, 874.

²⁴ Marx, 895.

Primitive accumulation entails division of producer from the means of production vis-à-vis brutal force and state intervention in the form of laws (what Marx colorfully termed “bloody legislation”). Key to Marx’ equation is the violent separation of people from their land. In other words: displacement. And while Marx describes a form of subsistence agriculture specific to the English peasantry, the process and prerequisites of primitive accumulation have proven themselves transhistorical.

One of Harvey's best-known theoretical contributions bridges each of the previously discussed nodes of policy, ideology and state violence in the contemporary context. His concept of accumulation by dispossession is a neoliberal re-reading of Marx's “primitive or original practices.”²⁵ Accumulation by dispossession disenfranchises millions of people to accomplish the neoliberal aim of centralizing wealth within the ruling class using various tactics. Methods of accumulation by dispossession include: 1) the privatization of public assets and commodification of cultural forms through “wholesale dispossession” or “*appropriation and exploitation*” 2) financialization through speculation, predation, fraud and thievery that strips assets of their values, dispossessing entire populations 3) management and architecture of crises and lastly 4) state redistribution.²⁶ Like primitive accumulation, accumulation by dispossession commoditizes and destabilizes labor, creating a surplus population at speculative capital's mercy. Yet neoliberalism relies upon accumulation by dispossession within a financialized context to perform diverse functions including: subvert formal labor, broad financialization, and lowering corporate tax rates to the detriment of individuals. Accumulation by dispossession is a helpful concept through which to understand the codependent relationship Harvey deconstructs between neoliberal practices, ideology and institutions. It also productively gestures toward their consequences.

Wide scale reforms are made possible and bolstered using justifications of utopian neoliberal arguments. Put mildly, Harvey shows neoliberalism to be a process of human degradation vis-a-vis state-sponsored financialization dependent upon the contradictory legitimations of social freedom. Yet ahistorical claims for liberating trade and people fail to account for the trajectory of displaced bodies rendered “free” by transnational movements. If diasporic communities are created by racialized economic policies as those that “can’t literally go home again,” then where do they go and how?²⁷

Zygmunt Bauman attributes the domineering crisis of modernity to the generation of a ““human waste” disposal industry.” He claims, “each new outpost conquered by global markets adds new thousands to the mass of men and women already deprived of their lands, workshops and communal safety nets.”²⁸ The groups of people created by the enterprising production of

²⁵ Marx, 874.

²⁶ Harvey, 160.

²⁷ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader* ed Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur. New York: Blackwell, 2003. 241.

²⁸ Bauman, Zygmunt. “Humanity on the Move” in *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press 2007, 28.

human detritus Bauman cites serve to demarcate modernity via their direct engagement with the same global progress and peoples that bore them as figures of antiquity. Direct conflict between the two has historically been avoided through specifically allocated spaces provided for valueless cohorts, but the ongoing processes of globalization have had the two dire consequences of blocking those outlets and relegating millions of migrants to return from modernity on the same routes originally used by surplus populations to walk toward it. The pathways of modern devalued bodies doubling back to greet their progenitors is an endemic and fundamental aspect of capitalist modernity. Undoubtedly it also mimics the crux of diasporic belonging.

Theorizing the enigma of vacant land and wandering people is not isolated to scholars of late capitalism. Diaspora theorists share a concomitant wrestling with “the juncture-point where the many cultural tributaries meet, the “empty” land (the European colonizers emptied it) where strangers from every other part of the globe collided” as well as the people who “who now occupy the islands” and never “originally “belonged there.”²⁹ However, an important point distinguishes each antagonism. Bauman’s meditation exemplifies a fixation on temporality and portraying the present epoch as one defined by a novel modernity. Hall on the other hand centers processes of violence, like colonization, forging a correspondent mutuality between diasporic communities. Both are indispensable to reimagining the interplay of economic structure with grids of intelligibility governing refugee and diasporic movement.

Bodies within the diaspora share symbolic and corporeal resonance with those defined by neoliberal policy. Superimposing the consequences of economic violence linking all three, the connections between embodied and psychic pathways of neoliberalism and diaspora become heartbreakingly clear. Hall opines, “It was the uprooting of slavery and transportation and the insertion into the plantation economy (as well as the symbolic economy) of the Western world that “unified” these peoples across their differences, in the same moment as it cut them off from direct access to their past.”³⁰ So while Bauman advances a liquid modernity characterized by the absence of accommodating spaces and subsequent blurring of valued and devalued bodies in an obscure temporal frame forced to face and blend modernity with its cast-offs, Hall illuminates a similar level of engagement between physical movement and historical significance within diasporic thought. The encounters of previously discrete subjects with one another as well as the unavailability of an inaccessible past speak to both the temporal and corporeal ramifications produced by neoliberal dogma. They further underscore the importance of thinking diaspora, neoliberalism and refugeehood together and through the valence of freedom.

We Refugees?

For refugees, freedom is a fraught enterprise. Since the early 20th century, “refugee” has been a nebulous categorization. Following the First World War, denationalization was the *modus vivendi* of totalitarian regimes rendering refugee subjects expelled to the purgatory of statelessness. Amidst the “liquidation of the two multinational states of pre-war Europe, Russia and Austria-Hungary,” Hannah Arendt defined refugees as fundamentally different from their

²⁹ Hall, 243.

³⁰ Hall, 238.

solace-seeking precursors. Refugees became the ensnared byproduct of the political shift of the state from one of law to one of nation. As a result, early refugees “lost those rights which had been thought of and even defined as inalienable, namely the Rights of Man.”³¹

Linking rightlessness to the decline of the nation state, Arendt attributes the latter to its inability to accommodate or compensate for the huge influx of refugees who, by virtue of their creation, abolished the right to asylum, proved impossible to repatriate or nationalize and were more than willing to participate in ideological struggles. The confluence of these factors, absence of place in the community and existence outside the “pale of the law”, undermined the false premise of human equality upon which nation-states and the Rights of Man rest. According to Arendt then, “refugee” is a largely juridical classification, albeit a nebulous one, considering the unsteady ground upon which it resides. She continues to describe refugees as those “who have been so unfortunate as to arrive in a new country without means and have to be helped by Refugee Committees.”³² The distinction of a group of people as “refugees” economically and juridically fastens a community to the deployment of state power. Specifically, it necessitates a particular form of aid— financial assistance and biopolitical regulation.

Following Arendt, I conceptualize early refugeehood as a series of juridical distinctions defining stateless solace seekers. In this regard, the 1975 arrival of approximately 130,000 Vietnamese refugees to the United States conforms to the author’s prerequisites of political reception. Displaced by the upheaval of American intervention in Vietnam, hundreds of thousands sought sanctuary. The years between 1950 and 1954 saw the early influx of what would ultimately be 150 billion U.S dollars to the war effort in Vietnam. American ground troops followed funding and prefigured the partition of the country in 1965, followed by the eventual collapse of the ruling regime, and the deaths of an estimated three million Vietnamese. The physical and manifest consequences of the American War in Vietnam resulted in the allocation of \$98 million by President Ford through the US Agency for International Development, the establishment of four major refugee camps in the United States vis-à-vis the Interagency Task Force for Indochina Refugees (IATF) as well as the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 (IRAP), in other words, “refugee committees”. Moreover, efforts toward cultural change like the 1976 Indochinese Refugee Children Assistance Act that channeled funds toward a broad integration agenda including English as a Second Language programming, rendered the subtle machinations of these bodies as engines of assimilation more or less invisible.³³ In a twist of ideological irony, American imperialism produced its own stateless bodies whom it then had to accommodate with millions of U.S. dollars through reactionary committees.

The inextricable relationship between neoliberal policy, refugeehood and diaspora in the Vietnamese context cannot be overstated. A trade embargo by the United States that began in 1964 in Northern Vietnam, extended to the rest of the country in 1975 and was only lifted by

³¹ Hannah Arendt *Origins of Totalitarianism The Origins of Totalitarianism New York: Harcourt, 1966.*

³² Arendt, 1.

³³ Irene Bloemraad, *Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

President Clinton in 1994. It excluded the country from formal neoliberalism³⁴ and fomented widespread wealth inequality bolstering increasing numbers of people leaving the country. In addition, Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization relatively late compared to other non-OECD countries, in 1999. The efforts of the IATF and IRAP thus represent attempts to culturally and economically assimilate the Vietnamese diaspora into a grammar of American neoliberalism that is at once social, political and economic. Therefore, unpacking the roots of neoliberalism, diaspora and pushing toward a queerness and relational solidarity that intervenes in each of them becomes paramount.

Thinking Diasporically

Employing refugeehood as a theoretical entryway generatively redevelops the subject-position of refugeehood from one founded on juridical grounds to a more flexible notion. Apart from their legal moorings, refugees depict the cultural and geopolitical boundaries of the modern nation-state. Refugees' legal status complicates the relationship between the state, sovereignty and citizenship, but the consistent emphasis on the legal limits refugeehood as a theoretical entryway. Giorgio Agamben's formation of refugeehood transitions away from Arendt's early analysis of refugees as theoretical vanguards.³⁵ Asking what conditions of possibility prompt Arendt to make such an ambitious statement, Agamben broadens the refugee to contextualize their subject formation. And while he ultimately concurs with Arendt to conclude refugees represent the only "imaginable figure" of the contemporary epoch, Agamben provides a pivot from thinking through a figure defined by its national boundaries toward a more transient, liminal and indeed, diasporic place.

It is not because refugees are vanguards of expulsion that they embody a critical positionality, but because "in the system of the nation-state the refugee represents such a disquieting element . . . by breaking up the identity between man and citizen, between nativity and nationality, the refugee throws into crisis the original fiction of sovereignty."³⁶ Refugees thereby make visible the possibilities and limitations of juridically determined communities. Agamben further hints that because refugeehood is wedded at its inception to a legal distinction of statelessness and state responsibility, untethering refugees from the nation state is both necessary and productive. Along similar lines, shifting toward diaspora as a framework in which the relationship between the nation, statelessness and identity is always already liminal might more aptly capture the perpetual transnational movement and identitarian terrain upon which refugees reside.

Refugeehood as a theoretical construction is bounded by the limitations of thinking primarily through statehood. Diaspora provides a productive point of departure from which to emphasize the tenuous nature of statehood and more importantly of the identities that arise as a result of fragile connections to nation-states. Indeed, if the nation is "an imagined political

³⁴ Patrick Cockbrun, "US Finally Ends Vietnam Embargo" Independent Friday 4 February 1994
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/us-finally-ends-vietnam-embargo-1391770.html>

³⁵ Hannah Arendt "We Refugees" *The Menorah Journal*. 1943

³⁶ Agamben, 117.

community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”³⁷ with historical and spontaneous foundations, the nation-state emphasizing presuppositions of refugeehood restrict its ability to map new positionalities. Stuart Hall’s formative analysis of diaspora is helpful in thinking from refugeehood to diaspora. Hall eschews identity as a fixed phenomenon moored in place since “what we share is precisely the experience of a profound discontinuity: the peoples dragged into slavery, transportation, colonization, migration.”³⁸ A diaspora framework then represents a rupture in the cohesive narrative fabric of nationality itself if such tapestry is woven with the sense of common territory. Diaspora forces a transition from thinking *about* refugees, a certain juridically distinguished group of people, to thinking *from the space* of multiple belongings, habitations and histories. It asks for an identitarian politics that uneasily yet consistently navigates a modality of being that is “*both the same and different*.”³⁹ Uninhibited by essentialism or place but still attentive to the axes of power creating refugee relationships to both, diaspora proffers a means of accommodation and consideration for the numerous iterations of neoliberal circuitry prompted by colonialism, political exile, and international trade arrangements.

The quickly changing economic terrain of neoliberalism creates new and more concentrated labor migrations and increased economic asymmetries despite its rhetoric of multicultural equality. In the early 1990’s diaspora theorists responded to an anachronistic fixation on territory by approaching diaspora dialogically.⁴⁰ The limited concepts of unidirectional migration once productive to thinking through displacement became inadequate when applied to the ways bodies, capital and cultural forms migrate transnationally. The multiple (dis)locations of the Vietnamese community requires a malleable framework, one that creates space with which to rethink transnational circuitry and identity, one which further “recuperates a variety of personal voices of sojourns and shifting identities.”⁴¹ Moreover, thinking diasporically illuminates the sublimated power dynamics at play within the creation of a diasporic community as well as a consideration of the socio-political economic climate in which this process proceeds.

Diaspora recalibrates the figure of the refugee to reflect the underpinnings of her unstable existence. It excavates and emphasizes the lines of state and economic power and latent socialities governing refugeehood as a largely juridical phenomenon. Diaspora is primarily concerned with the interlocking systems of structure and discourse that create the refugee. For example, Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan points to a “predicament of ethnicity” in an analysis of diasporic belonging. Arguing ethnicity “opposes American national identity even as it seeks an

³⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 2006.

³⁸ Hall, 237.

³⁹ Hall, 239.

⁴⁰ See Gilroy 1993 and Hall 2003.

⁴¹ John Lie. “Diasporic Nationalism” in *Cultural Studies: Critical Methodologies*, 1, no. 1 (2006): 356.

equal share in it” he simultaneously urges, “We must remember that this conflict is taking place within the context of a capitalist, corporate, multinationalist ideology.”⁴² Diaspora therefore foregrounds the economic and cultural forces creating its own the conditions of possibility. It requires delimiting the framework of state violence and economic control⁴³ that give rise to the figure of the refugee. Thinking diasporically then means holding refugeehood and neoliberalism in uneasy yet consistent tension.

Thinking diasporically forces contemplation of the social and structural processes creating refugeehood whilst never denying their imbrication. The consociative relationship between these two discursive categories speaks to the larger interest of this chapter, bridging refugeehood, diaspora and neoliberalism in order to understand the epoch inside of which affective and relational strategies of resistance take place.

Coming Home

Returning to June Jordan who instigated this inquiry admittedly provides a convenient narrative arc to the chapter, but more importantly, illustrates the ways Women of Color Feminists and Queer of Color thinkers have sutured refugeehood, dispossession and diaspora as related juridical, economic and psychic states. More importantly, the linking of the aforementioned concepts introduces the building blocks for the framework of queer diasporic praxis and its method of mediated advantage and that undergird the rest of the dissertation. How are neoliberalism and refugeehood related? More importantly for this chapter, how does diaspora usher in a platform for thinking about queer solidarities? I argue queer diasporas are derivative of colorblind neoliberal circuitry that ousts non-normative subjects who then interrupt its ambit with a hyperawareness of their difference using a technology I unpack in the next chapter called mediated advantage. Queer diasporic praxis creates the possibility for meaningful political resistance and cross-racial coalition by using alternative forms of kinship that are affective and highly attuned to race and gender. Hyper awareness of un-belonging within Black and Asian communities as well as to normative whiteness creates queer diasporic praxis and enables its use of mediated advantage.

How does racism endure in light of an exceptionally clear rhetorical commitment to liberal anti-racism in the post Civil Rights era? Neoliberalism depends upon rhetorics of multiculturalism and racial and cultural difference in order to embed itself into the American imaginary. While it celebrates multiculturalism, it invisibilizes racial hierarchy permitting neoliberalism to advance policies of asymmetrical benefit. Critical Ethnic Studies scholar Jodi Melamed traces the historical development of what she calls a “liberal race paradigm” from the post-WWII era to the contemporary moment of “neoliberal multiculturalism” to hone in on the particularly evasive racial violence of capitalist exploitation.⁴⁴ She argues neoliberal multiculturalism characterizes the most recent iteration of American society that has transitioned

⁴² Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan. “Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora” in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader* ed Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur. New York: Blackwell, 2003. 54.

⁴³ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* New York: Verso, 2016.

⁴⁴ “The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism” Melamed 3)

from explicit tactics of racialized marginalization to having “sutured an official antiracism to a U.S. nationalism itself bearing the agency for transnational capitalism.”⁴⁵ The dialectic of anti-racism and U.S. nationalism is the mechanism for an ongoing project of American social, political, and economic hegemony vis-a-vis global capitalist exploitation.

Melamed makes two helpful arguments about the liberal race paradigm. She claims American capitalism relies on the embedded discourse of anti-racism to justify its global exploitation of workers. She also claims neoliberalism cleaves racism from its long held definition of “categories of privilege and stigma.”⁴⁶ Her theorizations uncover the fact that the very reasons the racist technologies of capitalism continue to function within neoliberal multiculturalism are threefold: US nationalist discourse has consumed and refracted anti-racism to bolster geopolitical power since the post-war period, neoliberal multiculturalism simultaneously “legitimizes as it obfuscates” paradigms of racial difference, and lastly neoliberal multiculturalism transforms the terrain of racial discourse to revolve around cultural asymmetries. The shift from traditional practices of racism to “new privileged and stigmatized forms of humanity, and . . . a normative cultural model of race (which now sometimes displaces conventional racial reference altogether) as a discourse to justify inequality for some as fair or natural.”⁴⁷

While racial liberalism maintained and propagated American socio-economic hegemony *because* anti-racism was its founding principle, neoliberal multiculturalism is a organizing rubric of sociality that evolves racial liberalism to even further disappear race. In fact, it deracializes anti-racism to an “unprecedented degree . . . turning (deracialized) racial reference into a series of rhetorical gestures of ethical right and certainty”, meaning “Concepts previously associated with 1980s and 1990s liberal multiculturalism—“openness,” “diversity,” and “freedom”—are recycled such that “open societies” and “economic freedoms” (shibboleths for neoliberal measures) come to signify human rights that the United States has a duty to secure for the world.”⁴⁸ While previous iterations of racial liberalism similarly seek to manage contradiction and concretize geopolitical dominance via anti-racism, neoliberal multiculturalism *appropriates* anti-racist arguments *explicitly toward* laissez faire ends. Neoliberal multiculturalism therefore imbricates and deploys the narratives of multiculturalism themselves to legitimate the operating procedures of neoliberalism; conflating the freedom of diversity with free trade. However, Jordan’s centralizing of Elizabeth Alvarez punctures the neoliberal mores to which Melamed alludes, restoring gender and racial as front and center within the blind logic of neoliberal multiculturalism.

⁴⁵ Melamed, 5.

⁴⁶ Melamed, 2.

⁴⁷ Melamed, 14.

⁴⁸ Melamed, 16.

In “We Are All Refugees,” Jordan opines, “In this American space disfigured by traditions of hatred and selfishness, we are all alien and we are, none of us, legitimate.”⁴⁹ The “traditions” that produce the refugeehood to which the author refers are existing rubrics of neoliberal dispossession that are explicitly gendered and raced. In the short five-page article, Jordan asks for “economic asylum” twice, once immediately after the sentence that opens this paragraph and a second time within a greater inquiry about Elizabeth Alvarez, a woman from South Central Los Angeles who was killed during the Clinton Administration by two young boys for the paltry sum of eighty dollars. Jordan says Alvarez is generically described in the New York Times as a “mother of three.” In an attempt to restore Alvarez’ humanity and illuminate the conditions of her economic and gendered precarity, Jordan asks a question that gets at the heart of neoliberal disenfranchisement as an intersectional process which produces the refugee. She says, “As a woman, married or not, and pregnant or not, and mother of one/two/three, or none—where could she find political or economic asylum that would mean safety and respect and equal access to freedom *and to the power* to guarantee her own safety and her own equal access to freedom?”⁵⁰ Jordan’s inquiry illustrates how economic unfreedom generates refugeehood, or the need for “economic asylum.” However, the positionality of the refugee is shaped by conventional gender mores. Alvarez is overdetermined through her gynocentric reproductive capacity as a “mother of three.” Alvarez is a refugee in need of sanctuary from poverty-inducing policies and gender-based violence. These two realities intersect to construct refugeehood as a convergence of economic policies that are gendered, sexualized and racialized.

In response to the “illegitimate” refugee “alien” seeking “economic asylum,” the “we” and “us” of un-belonging to which Jordan refers is queer, diasporic and highly cognizant of difference. In *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*, queer theorist David Eng claims, “The methodology of queer diasporas provides critical resources to denaturalize heteronormative discourses of racial purity underwriting dominant nationalist as well as diasporic imaginaries, it simultaneously complicates the homogenizing narratives of globalization that take for granted the totalizing logic of commodification, the inexorable march of economic development as the guiding beacon of (neo)liberal rights and freedoms.”⁵¹ Following Eng, queer diasporas unravel the violence of late capitalism that is both raced and gendered. Recalling Jordan’s focus on Alvarez, queer diasporas offer a way of seeing her death as situated within the frameworks of motherhood and financial unviability. Queer diasporas provide a means of perceiving the constraints. Further, they refashion gendered and racialized exclusion into a new modality of solidarity that is relational, malleable and dependent upon race and gender.

A key feature of queer diasporas is non-normative difference. Eng claims queer diasporas offer, “Other psychic pathways of displacement and affiliation, by demarcating alternative

⁴⁹ Jordan, 94.

⁵⁰ Jordan, 93.

⁵¹ Eng, 14.

material structures and psychic formations that demand a new language for family and kinship”⁵² Like Jordan’s collective alienation and illegitimacy, Eng points to a productive affective relationship of exclusion; in other words, a difference that coheres. The absence of a normative place creates a common and perpetual refugeehood that is queer both in its failure to integrate into traditional frameworks and in its capacity to use that very specific relationship of state terror as a tie that binds new allegiances. It is also deeply aware of its own racial parameters within neoliberalism, a fundamental component of solidarity.

In April 1980, Audre Lorde delivered a talk titled “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” at the Copeland Colloquium at Amherst College. The lecture was printed in the seminal Women of Color and Black Feminist text, *Sister Outsider* published by Crossing Press in 1984. In her discussion about the fractures of the white liberal feminist movement, Lorde hones in on racial, class and sexual difference as major weaknesses of the current wave of feminism. However, it is not that difference exists that makes feminism frail, but that it exists without acknowledgement. Lorde says, “The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference.” Race is an imperative and constructive part of solidarity. It informs how allegiances form and function. The author points toward the potential of difference to both unite and dissolve political coalition. In the balance of the dissertation I center difference as Jordan and Lorde have; as a vital and irrevocable part of cross-racial solidarity. If queer diasporas unify new communities of refugees in a world shaped by neoliberal dispossession, how do they navigate the meeting ground of anti-Blackness and anti-Asianness and the multivariate realities of lived experience for different communities of color? How does queer diasporic praxis employ a the lever of mediated advantage as a means of effectively forging solidarity with Black Lives Matter?

⁵² Eng, 16.

Chapter Two

Together and (A)part

On August 9th, 2014, Michael Brown was killed by white police officer Darren Wilson in the city of Ferguson, Missouri. Afterward, Brown's 18-year-old body lay in the sweltering sun for four hours. Uncovered and defaced even in his mourning. Fourteen eyewitnesses testified before a grand jury that Brown had his hands up when he was fatally shot.⁵³

The death of Michael Brown in 2014 was yet another in the long march toward death of young Black men including 17-year-old Trayvon Martin and 23-year-old Oscar Grant, who were also shot in the back. Brown's death at the hands of a white police officer catapulted racial tensions to their breaking point in the already-segregated town of Ferguson. Cries of "hands-up don't shoot" reverberated across the city and drew protesters from across the country into an uprising that lasted well into the winter. The nascent movement had roots in the tradition of Black radicalism, refusing the demands for colorblindness, respectability, and non-violence from legislators and the country's first Black President.⁵⁴ Initial marches and rallies gave way to more formal movements, including #BlackLivesMatter led by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometti, and the Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100).

Asian American organizations and affinity groups responded to public calls from #BlackLivesMatter organizers for solidarity in action and creed. They undertook protest marches and direct actions, and released a series of statements engaging the public wave of Black premature death. Following the non-indictments of Darren Wilson and Daniel Pantaleo (for the murder of Eric Garner) in November and December 2014 respectively, activists in Oakland, California embarked upon four weeks of protests.⁵⁵

Longtime organizer, Nadia Khastagir, identifies as mixed race South Asian and an early member of activist affinity group #Asian4BlackLives. #Asian4BlackLives' first act was to shut down the headquarters of the Oakland Police Department. On the morning of December 15th, 2015 a coalition of Asian Americans silently linked arms and chained themselves to the front of the building. They held small signs proclaiming their own ethnic identities as well as a banner reading, "End the war on black people #Asians4BlackLives." In a post titled, "Our Name is Rebel: #Asians4BlackLives Protest Police Violence" Khastagir describes:

Two hundred and fifty people made up of Asian, white, Latino, black, elderly and disabled people, protested police violence that rainy morning. Through coordinated and

⁵³ Laura Santhanam and Vanessa Daniels, "What Do the Newly Released Witness Statements Tell Us About the Michael Brown Shooting?" PBS, Nov 15th, 2014, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/newly-released-witness-testimony-tell-us-michael-brown-shooting>.

⁵⁴ See Taylor 2016.

⁵⁵ CBS SF, "#BlackLivesMatter Protesters Block Entrance To Oakland Police Headquarters; 25 Arrested" KPIX CBSSF Bay Area, December 15, 2014, <http://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2014/12/15/protesters-blocking-entrance-to-oakland-police-headquarters/>

disciplined direct action, our goal was to occupy the space for 4 hours and 28 minutes — 4 hours for the amount of time that Mike Brown was left dead on the road and 28 minutes to symbolize the killing of a black person by police, security or vigilantes every 28 hours. Nearly 40 of us were arrested, cited, and released. We succeeded in shutting down the Oakland Police Department for 4:28 hours.⁵⁶

The day commemorated the 86th birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The duration symbolized the length of time Brown's was left on the street after he was shot and killed. The chained Asian American activists were alone until they were joined by two contingents. The first was another cadre of Asian Americans behind a sign reading "THIRD WORLD FOR BLACK POWER." The second group was a coalition of Black organizers who had been undertaking #BlackBrunch tactics throughout the city.

#BlackBrunch was a small group of people clad in black who would interrupt crowded, affluent restaurants during the busy brunch hours to declare the names of Black people killed by police brutality. Originator Wazi Maret Davis sought to undertake "types of civil disobedience that were about disrupting the system, stopping business as usual."⁵⁷ The merging of the two groups cemented a new iteration of the battle to make Black lives matter—one that involved fellowship with non-Black people of color. Khastagir writes, "It felt powerful and beautiful. The feeling of solidarity was deep. Although our tone was serious and disciplined, I was joyous inside as people expressed their support. . . . They chanted and sang and the hundreds of allies chanted in unity. Black Brunch protesters called out "Allies, are you with us?" to a resounding "YES!"⁵⁸ Khastagir's writings gesture toward important building blocks of Asian American solidarity. From Afro-Asian collaboration on anti-Apartheid to anti-colonial struggles to present day efforts for racial justice, she illuminates the historical roots of the relationship between Black and Asian communities and the affective rumblings of their components today. Khastagir concludes by drawing upon her own sense of ethnically specific anti-racism. She writes:

We Desis come out of a legacy of civil disobedience and struggle. The very tactic began in South Africa in the early 1900s, where Indians and Africans struggled together against Apartheid. My Bengali family were Freedom Fighters against British colonial rule. That story has been passed down through many branches of my family, and there are some members who today are still standing up for justice.

⁵⁶ See Appendix 1 for all solidarity writing mentioned in this chapter.

⁵⁷ Lee Romney, "#BlackBrunch Brings Peaceful Protest to Oakland Restaurants" *Los Angeles Times*, January 04, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-black-brunch-20150105-story.html>

⁵⁸ Nadia Khastagir, "Our Name is Rebel: #Asians4BlackLives Protest Police Violence" *The Aerogram: A Curated Take on South Asian Art, Literature, Life and News*, December 29, 2014, <http://theaerogram.com/name-rebel/>

However, perhaps most telling about her narrative is what is left unsaid. While Khastagir illustrates the polycultural⁵⁹ histories and contemporaries of solidarity between Asian and Black Americans as one of a common “interlocking heritage,”⁶⁰ she simultaneously insinuates its converse of embedded “absolute difference”⁶¹ against which she struggles. Put differently, the impulse to uncover—and indeed center—the entangled genealogies of cross-racial coalition between Black and South Asian Americans described by polyculturalism is a byproduct of a socially constructed animus between the two. In concentrating upon the former, Khastagir elucidates a familiar dynamic within Asian American activism, that of coalition versus hostility alongside the model minority myth; an all too familiar landscape of tropes in Asian American Studies.

Much of the historiography of Black/Asian American relations is trapped within a binary. The majority of work attempts to grasp the entanglement of these two communities either through their long legacy of socio-political antagonism through providing celebratory verging on utopian portraits of solidarity across time. Bracketed by the Civil Rights Movement on one end and the insurmountable racialized hostility of the Los Angeles Uprisings on the other, the scholarship—perhaps in subject only—is limited. Seminal texts focus upon aspects of each pole: the trajectories and nuance of racial conflict in ethnic enclaves (Kurashige, Kim), successful coalition in the 1960’s (Maeda, Pulido, Okihiro), and analyses of how cultural forms exemplify hybridity (Sharma, Prashad). While these accounts are astute depictions of the historical occurrence of strife and allegiance, they can inaccurately capture in its totality the “field of racial positions”⁶² beyond the stated locations of superior/inferior and insider/foreigner, not to mention racial middlemen, scapegoats, and comrades. More importantly to this project, to date, few works hone in on the constitutive components of solidarity itself.

Scholarship on Asian American solidarity can be prototypically idyllic. Vaunting the establishment of formal ethnic studies programs at San Francisco State University and the University of California, Berkeley in the late 1960’s provides a platform for scholars to wax poetic about the coalitionary impulses of the Asian American movement despite the reality of the nearly 50-year old discipline as a “concession”⁶³ or neoliberal “compromise.”⁶⁴ Quoting Laura Pulido, Daryl Joji Maeda argues Asian Americans were “arguably the most self conscious” about

⁵⁹ Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting Afro Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.

⁶⁰ Prashad, 67.

⁶¹ Prashad, 63.

⁶² Claire Jean Kim, *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.)

⁶³ Fred Ho and Bill Mullen, editors. *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political & Cultural Connections Between African Americans and Asian Americans*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 8.

⁶⁴ Cherrie Moraga. “This Benighted Nation We Call Home” in *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000–2010*. (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2011.)

working with “other people of color.”⁶⁵ Pulido herself claims, “Radical activists changed the meaning of Asian American to an identity rooted in Third World ideology.”⁶⁶ The Asian American organizers of the 1960’s are thus portrayed as the apogee of cross-racial bridge-building. As the historical leaders in Third Worldism, they are charged with being its perpetual vanguards. This notion of contemporary Asian American activism is a strange absolute, wavering between impregnable antagonism and picturesque solidarity.

Cross racial unity in the first quarter of the 21st century is shaped by the antagonisms of the 20th. The Los Angeles Uprisings in April and May 1992 exposed racial and ethnic tensions between Black and Asian residents after the acquittal of four police officers who brutally assaulted Rodney King. Explanations for the enmity range from the nature of Black rage to the ostracization of the Asian merchant⁶⁷ to locating the destruction as “the limits of amity within a capitalist structure that relies upon ethnicity to camouflage its power.”⁶⁸ Regardless of interpretation, the location of the 1992 uprisings was foundational to understanding the relationship between Black and Asian Americans is a ubiquitous feature of Asian American studies as well as popular conception. The long-lasting stain of the “riots” prompted police reform, a quinquennial study⁶⁹ measuring racial tension in the city and even an official rechristening⁷⁰ of the area from South Central to “South Los Angeles” in an attempt to erase the perception of racial unrest associated with its previous moniker. Asian American scholarship has followed suit, entrapped between the bookends of acrimony and allegiance.

Solidarity pursued by Asian American activists with #BlackLivesMatter warrants closer attention than this binary allows. Asian American organizers are acutely aware of the framework in which they forge cross racial allegiance. Daryl Maeda points out that an enduring strength of the Asian American Left is an “inherently coalitional politics” that stemmed from the “powerful influence” of the Black Panther Party.⁷¹ Subsequently, activists’ mobilization across racial difference occurs in light of hegemonic perceptions of racial conflict as well as simultaneous understandings its idyllic obverse. As such, scholars interested in the current moment, must ask a different set of questions than their predecessors: how do community organizers think Black and Asian communities together, historically, socially, affectively? Considering the embedded fault lines of impassable difference stemming from the 1992 uprisings and the romanticized alliances

⁶⁵ Daryl J. Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American movement*. (London: Routledge, 2012.), 108.

⁶⁶ Laura Pullido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles*, (Berkeley: University of California, Press, 2006), 107.

⁶⁷ Ho and Mullen, 7.

¹⁵ Prashad, 117.

⁶⁹ Fernando Guerra, Brianne Gilbert, Berto Solis, *LA Riots 25 Years Later: A Los Angeles Public Opinion Survey Report*. (Los Angeles: Loyola Marymount University, 2017).

⁷⁰ Calvin Sims, “In Los Angeles, It’s South-Central No More” New York Times, April 30th, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/10/us/in-los-angeles-it-s-south-central-no-more.html>

⁷¹ Maeda, 135.

of the 1960's, how do they engage racial cleavages? Moreover, how do they push against difference while avoiding the fraught terrain of neoliberal multiculturalism which demands colorblind racism?⁷² Charting the terrain of the relationship between Black and Asian American communities beyond "the binary of antagonism versus solidarity"⁷³ demands a closer look at how contemporary Asian American organizers envision solidarity rubrics through their stated objectives and opinions.

Since 2014, Asian Americans have supported the burgeoning #BlackLivesMatter movement. In 2015, #Asians4BlackLives handed out red envelopes⁷⁴ for Lunar New Year in San Francisco. But instead of the customary money, each parcel contained a card partially reading, "As Asian Americans, we enjoy many rights that were fought for and won by Black liberation movements. Today, we too have the power to stand on the side of justice. We can create harmony by building strong relationships between Black and Asian communities and standing together for Black Lives. Which side are you on?"⁷⁵ The pointed question digs at the cultural scaffolding of diapsoric communities that are slow to join the fight against police brutality. They signal inherited and future challenges.

The deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Alton Sterling, Akai Gurley, and Philando Castile prompted Asian American community based organizations and affinity groups to both deed and rhetoric. In 2014, a multiracial coalition including #Asians4BlackLives barricaded interstate 880, an eight lane highway. In the early hours of January 15th, 2015, an alliance of Asian Americans banded together with other activists under the moniker of Third World Resistance to lock arms in front of the Federal Building of Oakland. In New York, Asian American solidarity took the form of door-knocking campaigns to initiate conversations about anti-Black racism in predominantly Chinese communities following the death of Akai Gurley at the hands of rookie New York Police officer Peter Liang. Asian Americans further protested outside *Sing Tao Daily*, a Chinese daily publication located in Manhattan Chinatown⁷⁶. Apart from engaging in direct action, between 2014 and into 2016, established organizations like New York based CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities and newly formed affinity groups like Bay

⁷² Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2008.)

⁷³ Eric Tang, "A Gulf Unites Us: The Vietnamese Americans of Black New Orleans East." *American Quarterly*, 63, 1, 2011, 117-149. 128.

⁷⁴ Julia Carrie Wong, "Which side are you on?": #Asians4BlackLives Confronts Anti-Black Prejudice in Asian Communities" *Salon*, March 8, 2015. http://www.salon.com/2015/03/08/which_side_are_you_on_asians4blacklives_confronts_anti_black_prejudice_in_asian_communities/

⁷⁵ Julia Carrie Wong, "'Which side are you on?': #Asians4BlackLives Confronts Anti-Black Prejudice in Asian Communities" in *Soul Brother Speaks*, March 8, 2015. <https://soulbrotherspeaks.com/2015/03/08/which-side-are-you-on-asians4blacklives-confronts-anti-black-prejudice-in-asian-communities/>

⁷⁶ Sameer Rao, "Asian-American Activists Demand #Justice4Akai, Protest Outside Major Chinese-Language Paper's Offices" in *Colorlines*, May 19, 2016. <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/asian-american-activists-demand-justice4akai-protest-outside-major-chinese-language-papers>

Area based #Asians4BlackLives tackled the fraught and complex question of cross racial alliances through statements of solidarity.

In this chapter, I perform a close reading of the aforementioned statements from various sources including #Asians4BlackLives, CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities, The National Korean American Service & Education Consortium (NAKASEC), 18 Million Rising, SAALT: South Asian Americans Leading Together, the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA), Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM), and Bay Area Solidarity. I refrain from including interviews in this chapter in order to focus solely on the disseminated explanations of solidarity professed by Asian American activists. Put simply, the solidarity statements comprise the public and collective face of cross-racial coalition. Addressed to elders, community and frequently family members, they moreover embody a clear invitation to do the work of solidarity, making the statements themselves at once conscriptive and performative. That is, they both derive from solidarity work and provide a blueprint for its future pathways. The statements are deserving of attention because the doing of solidarity takes place—at least partially—through its framing.

I argue Asian American solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter functions through a framework of queer diasporic praxis. This term applies to what I later describe in detail as an affective tapestry of grief, joy and exteriority. Importantly, queer diasporic praxis utilizes a technology of mediated advantage that disavows the model minority myth and prioritizes Blackness in an attempt to think race relationally, foregrounding intersectional notions of difference found in Women of Color Feminism. I contend solidarity efforts are built with and through the hegemonic cosmology of the model minority myth and the economic and social privilege it begets for Asian Americans. The model minority trope reinforces notions of racial conflict between Black and Asian Americans in part by bestowing a blanket honorary whiteness. It remains the preeminent social comprehension of Asian Americans and persists against the hyper visible backdrop of Black death, making it a primary shaping force in efforts to forge coalition. Responding to its intractability in the American racial imaginary, Asian American activists employ a framework of mediated advantage that centralizes the material consequences of anti-Black racism as a way of honoring the relational impact of white supremacy socio-culturally and economically.

The solidarity statements evince a technology of mediated advantage that is hyperaware of the consequences of divisive tropes while manifesting a public conversation about anti-Black racism. In so doing, it takes a vital and concerted stand against colorblindness as a tactic of neoliberal policy. African American Studies scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor points toward the Nixon era as the meeting ground of post-racial myths of meritocracy and the defanging of the welfare state. She claims that following the civil rights era, the erasure of race enabled the ascension of neoliberalism. She contends, “The politics of colorblindness helped to shroud not only racism but also its companion: the economic crisis of the 1970s.”⁷⁷ The removal of race specific language from law and social rhetoric made racism an individual and individualized

⁷⁷ Taylor, 53.

plight. This slight of hand facilitated the state's "retreat from public expenditure."⁷⁸ Most importantly for the concerns of this chapter, muzzling difference permitted the Nixon Administration to "build a case against programs that benefit poor and working class whites, while undermining the potential for solidarity among those who have the most to gain by uniting and the most to lose by continuing to be divided."⁷⁹ By staging an explicit discussion about race—and indeed the consequences of anti-Black racism—the solidarity statements interrupt the systematic rooting of neoliberalism through divisive tropes and the elision institutional racial harm.

Spending time with these documents captures solidarity between two communities that remain at gross odds in the national imaginary. They proffer a means of understanding how one community pitted against another navigates differential racialization in a climate of antagonism and racial opacity. Recuperating the difference that Audre Lorde unpacked in her 1980's lecture interrupts the projects of colorblindness and neoliberal multiculturalism that seek to invisibilize racial hierarchies and impacts of white supremacy that are paramount to coalition-building. Such work is important as people of color in the United States experience unprecedented levels of formalized white supremacy. From travel bans to increased voter suppression to workplace and school harassment, Asian American solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter provides a potential rubric for scholars and organizers to engage the controlling imagery that continues to define people of color and the unity required to resist it.

Finally, spending time with these documents captures solidarity between two communities that remain at gross odds in the national imaginary. They proffer a means of understanding how one community pitted against another navigates differential racialization in a climate of deep antagonism. Recuperating racial difference within an epoch of neoliberal multiculturalism which seeks to invisibilize racial hierarchies is paramount to coalition-building. The solidarity statements evince a framework that is hyperaware of the consequences of divisive tropes. They resist the flattening of both the Black and Asian American experience. Such work is important as people of color in the United States experience unprecedented levels of formalized white supremacy. From travel bans to increased voter suppression to workplace and school harassment, Asian American solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter provides a potential rubric for scholars and organizers to engage the controlling imagery that continues to define people of color and the unity required to resist it.

"We are not asking for white privilege."

Contemporary efforts to build solidarity between Asian and Black Americans are consistently plagued by seeds of anti-Black racism hewn in the stereotype of the model minority myth and popularly substantiated by the unrest of the 1990's. Before the 1950's, America perceived Asian Americans as foreign and vile. The Asiatic Barred Zone Act underscored such beliefs with legislation limiting immigration from a broad part of the Asian continent, attributing exclusion to social and sexual deviance including homosexuality, alcoholism, feeble mindedness,

⁷⁸ Taylor, 53.

⁷⁹ Taylor 61.

and anarchy. The Page Act barred “undesirables” generally, and Chinese women specifically, because they were assumed to be “prostitutes” and the Chinese Exclusion Act remains the first piece of United States legislation to ever bar immigration due to nationality. The plethora of racist and xenophobic policies against Asian Americans culminated with the internment of Japanese Americans in 1942.

Following the incarceration of 120,000 Japanese Americans, Asian communities in the United States made concerted efforts to disseminate ideology that portrayed Asian Americans as highly desirable model citizens with cultural and biological predispositions toward academic and professional success. After WWII, Asian Americans traversed the racial spectrum from “assimilating others” to “definitively not-black model minorities.”⁸⁰ A handful of decades later, the evidence used to ground claims of perennial conflict focused on the Brooklyn boycotts of Korean grocery stores: Soon Ja Du’s killing of Latasha Harlins and of course the 1992 Los Angeles Uprisings.⁸¹ All together, these vignettes paint a picture of Black/Asian conflict in which the two communities are pitted against each other in perpetuity.

Within the scholarly field, the aforementioned antagonism is taken as either given or fallacy. Fred Ho resists claims that the 1990’s evinced hyper-charged tensions between the Korean diaspora and Black America. Instead he portends the boycotts and protests were “exploited and sensationalized” by “the mass media.”⁸² Meanwhile, Jared Sexton argues Asian American theorists have failed to bridge the experiences of Black and Korean Americans in any meaningful way. While he alludes specifically to the work of Elaine Kim, Michael Omi, and Howard Winant as lacking in reference to the urban political economy of early 1990’s Los Angeles, Sexton decries the field generally for failing to locate the comparative economic positioning of Korean shop-owners which he says “elicits no critical discussion and is instead framed as an objective account of the material conditions of conflict.”⁸³ To wit, Vijay Prashad’s analysis of the same uprisings glosses over economic culpability, contending that regional racial tension and tropes “forged in the smithy of U.S. imperial policies, becomes the determinate contradiction to black liberation, while in fact it is the very racial conceit of imperialism that should be in the gunshots instead.”⁸⁴ Prashad attributes the L.A. uprisings to geopolitics and later the territoriality resultant of limited resources provided to both communities under the same regime of white supremacy. The disagreement between Ho, Sexton, and Prashad highlights a looming theoretical tension regarding Asian American economic and socio-cultural stratification within racial hierarchies. It bespeaks a hesitance to engage anti-Black racism and the difference it creates within conflict and movement work. Prashad and Ho stridently refute Black/Asian

²⁵ Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.) 9.

⁸¹ See Ho and Mullen.

⁸² Ho and Mullen, 8.

⁸³ Jared Sexton, “Proprieties of Coalition: Blacks, Asians, and the Politics of Policing” *Critical Sociology* 36, no. 87 (2010): 92.

⁸⁴ Prashad, 104.

antagonism as a matter of historical and systemic accuracy focusing instead genealogies of solidarity. In response to accounts like theirs which pivot upon deflection and a flattened experience of racism, Sexton calls for more attention to the impact and roots of anti-Blackness. While Prashad, Ho, and Sexton each take cross-racial discord as a given to either contradict or expand, none of these authors consider the model minority myth that drives their positions.

While there are glaring socio-economic differences cleaving Black and Asian populations, the enabling mechanism for both conflict and solidarity between the two communities is the model minority myth. At first blush, the stereotype of Asian success seems corroborated by simple statistics. The most populous Asian American subgroups earn significantly higher incomes than Black Americans. According to the 2010 census, the median household income for South Asians is \$88,000 and for Filipinos it's \$75,000—both significantly higher than the U.S. average of \$49,800 and the Black American average of \$43,300.⁸⁵

Ellen D. Wu offers an invaluable framework for comprehending the model minority myth as a triangulating force. She considers various factors including geopolitics, individual interests, and the formation of broader political ideologies to contend that by the 1960's a series of stakeholders had obliterated the yellow peril trope of the 19th century. After WWII, Wu argues reporters, organizations, and specific power players created an image of Asian Americans as culturally and biologically resilient, particularly when contrasted against Black Americans. This cohort concerted advanced “a new stereotype of Asian Americans as the model minority—a racial group distinct from the white majority, but lauded as well assimilated, upwardly mobile, politically non-threatening, and definitively *not-black*”⁸⁶ (emphasis by the author). These disseminated and fundamentally anti-Black beliefs bolstered American democratic ideals of racial liberalism and benevolence abroad. Wu claims the reach of the Asian racial parable has been extensive and especially durable since its inception calling it, “the overriding figuration of Asian America—the most prevalent assumption about how someone who “looks Asian” will be.”⁸⁷

She writes:

Not-blackness has remained a core dimension but has shed its liberal imperatives, adapting instead to the needs of the rightward lurch in political culture. In the 1980's, conservatives who pondered the persistence of urban poverty renewed the comparison between African Americans and Asian Americans by counterposing the culture of the model minority to that of the “urban underclass,” depicted as void of family values and impervious to change. Rather than understanding the worsening conditions in inner cities as a product of deindustrialization, apartheid, and other conditions of the global economy, conservatives trotted out indicators of Asian American success to justify reducing or eliminating welfare benefits and public services--cuts that impacted impoverished black and brown people most severely.

During moments of national crisis in recent decades, analysts have dragooned black-Asian juxtapositions to serve an assortment of political ends, especially to excuse state inattention to the

⁸⁵ It is worth noting that disaggregating the data illustrates much more variety within the categorization of Asian. According to the same census data, Korean median household income is \$50,000 and Vietnamese \$53,000.

⁸⁶ Wu, 2.

⁸⁷ Wu, 254.

plight of the African American poor. Reporting on the 1992 Los Angeles riots, for instance, latched on to the notion of long-simmering black-Korean tensions as a root cause of upheaval. Journalists and pundits predictably attributed the purported conflict to a clash of cultures: the African American ghetto dweller's propensity to sloth, vice and lawlessness versus the Korean immigrant-entrepreneur's penchant toward the Confucian ethos of industry and kinship. Coverage of New Orleans' Vietnamese Americans post-Hurricane Katrina in 2005 echoed the same dichotomy.⁸⁸

It is worth quoting Wu at length because she points to an enduring and damning feature of Asian America: its positioning as both irrevocably not Black vis-a-vis cultural essentialism *and* its subsequent rivalry with and against Blackness as a byproduct of that location. According to Wu, model minority mythology is transhistorical, durable, and perhaps most importantly, active. It cyclically produces a cleavage of advantageous social perception and material benefit that it then can also reflexively justify. The over-determined positionality of Asian Americans as the perpetual model race doggedly follows activists seeking to bridge Black and Asian communities. In their solidarity statement, Asians4BlackLives (A4BL) embeds the organizing efforts of notable activists, Grace Lee Boggs and Yuri Kochiyama, with the privilege associated with the model minority, one both visible and relative to their Black revolutionary counterparts. An Asian American activist lore, Yuri Kochiyama is best known for her short friendship with Malcom X.⁸⁹ As a young adult, Kochiyama was one of the thousands of interned Japanese Americans. The experience radicalized her and brought her to the Black American Civil Rights Movement, Black Nationalism and Asian American resistance to U.S. imperialism. On February 21st, 1965, Kochiyama was one of many gathered to watch Malcom X address the Organization of Afro-American Unity in Harlem's Audubon Ballroom. Moments after he stepped behind the podium, X was shot 7 times. In a photo immortalized in *Life Magazine*, Kochiyama is seen cradling Malcom X's dying face.⁹⁰ Prashad states, "among radical Asian Americans the vision of Yuri holding Malcom in her arms is by now commonplace, just as it almost unknown among African Americans."⁹¹ A4BL writes:

We remember that we have always had leaders like Yuri Kochiyama, Grace Lee Boggs, Kartar Dhillon, and others in our community who have resisted anti-Black racism and leveraged their relative privilege to stand in struggle with Black communities. We remember the importance of humility as we aspire to follow in their footsteps, committed to advancing their visions in ways relevant to our times.⁹²

⁸⁸ Wu, 252.

⁸⁹ Diane Fujino, *Heartbeat of Struggle: The Revolutionary Life of Yuri Kochiyama*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.)

⁹⁰ Peter Kihss, "Malcom X Shot to Death at Rally Here" New York Times, February 22 1965. <https://partners.nytimes.com/library/national/race/022265race-ra.html>

⁹¹ Prashad, 105.

⁹² See Appendix 1

In invoking Kochiyama, A4BL irrevocably draws upon the grainy image as an allegory with which to consider the sharp contrast of the Asian American experience in its ability to survive alongside Black death. Citing privilege thus seems apropos. Kochiyama embodies a history of racist oppression that is distinctive and seemingly advantageous when compared to anti-Black racism. The division between Kochiyama's Asianness and Malcom X's Blackness serves as a starting point for solidarity. Yet, for the other authors, following "in their [Asian American activists] footsteps" requires the framework of mediated advantage that can cohabit marginalization in Asian diasporic communities alongside Black fatality by completely doing away with the discourse of privilege and acknowledging the model minority from which it derives.

By definition, privilege in the United States is comprised of social benefits which are unearned, unacknowledged, and perhaps irrevocably white. In 1988, Peggy McIntosh described privilege as the "elusive and fugitive . . . conditions of daily experience that I once took for granted."⁹³ McIntosh's list of clandestine privileges is commonplace in organizing culture and education; its definition serving as a metric for how privilege is both comprehended and enacted. Specifically, McIntosh's work became a cultural touchstone in activism and established the discourse of privilege as one that collapsed the advantages whiteness with class, gender, and ability. The Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social work at the University of Southern California offers a "Diversity Toolkit" which includes a node called "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." The New York Times reports that private schools including Friends Seminary, Collegiate School, and Saint Ann's offer daylong workshops centered on better engaging the social isolation of elitism where "the term "white privilege" is now bantered about with frequency."⁹⁴ These events are indicative of a greater social awareness built upon McIntosh's formative portrait of privilege as that which is unrecognized and irrevocably white.

Following McIntosh's definitive writing, Asian Americans do not experience privilege per se. As the solidarity statements will show, mediated advantage includes an Asian American reluctance to define itself as a privileged community which stems from an intrinsic awareness of racial oppression as an othered racial group. Asian Americans are reluctant to embody privileged status because their educational and economic accomplishments are bracketed by white supremacy. Instead of "unearned" and "unrecognized," Asian American accomplishments and injustices both are hyper-acknowledged and hyper-visible in their communities. Therefore, many Asian Americans regardless of generation, balk at the implication that they have privilege, rejecting what Rosalind S. Chou and Joe R. Feagin call the "white racial frame"⁹⁵ that circumscribes and engenders their model minority status. This sentiment is perhaps best

⁹³ Peggy McIntosh "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Peace and Freedom Magazine* (1989): 10-12.

⁹⁴ Kyle Spencer, "At New York Private Schools, Challenging White Privilege From the Inside" New York Times Feb. 20, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/22/nyregion/at-new-york-private-schools-challenging-white-privilege-from-the-inside.html?_r=1

⁹⁵ Rosalind S. Chou & Joe R. Feagin, *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism*. Boulder: Paradigm, 2010.

exemplified by a viral video of 22-year-old Chinese American Jess Fong at a rally calling for the exoneration of Peter Liang in February 2016.

On November 2014, a New York Police Department officer Peter Liang killed Akai Gurley. Gurley was walking down a staircase with his girlfriend when he encountered Liang whose gun discharged sending a ricocheted bullet into Gurley's body. Gurley was 28, unarmed and Black. Two years later, Liang was found guilty of second-degree manslaughter and faced up to 15 years in prison. The verdict was divisive for the Asian American, specifically East Asian community, illustrating tensions within and across race, ethnicity, generation, and politics.

Fueled in part by the hashtags [#Justice4Liang](#) and [#FreePeterLiang](#), The Los Angeles Times reported over 10,000 Asian Americans across the country rallied behind the police officer, claiming his conviction was evidence of the racism Asian Americans have suffered for generations. Thousands gathered in New York, where Fong said:

We are not asking for white privilege. We are not asking to be included in this cycle of systemic injustice. . . We are angry because we are also hurt by the systemic injustices and the structural oppression and the racism that continues to pervade this country . . . White privilege means they want to be put above the law. They have a sense of superiority and a supremacy that we DO NOT and SHOULD NOT want to associate ourselves with. So this protest is not about aligning ourselves with white privilege. This protest is us standing up and saying our system is wrong. The criminal justice system is wrong. It is unfair. . . We want white privilege to end because this is not how democracy works.⁹⁶

The video, which was eventually translated into Chinese, was originally circulated by Fusion and has nearly 4 million views. Its viral popularity illustrates many Asian Americans understand the relationship between privilege and whiteness as one of proprietorship. Fong enumerates a series of episodes into which Asian Americans refuse to and cannot be inaugurated into privilege because of their race. They include a social “sense of superiority” as well as institutional impunity in the criminal justice system—something that resonates deeply because of the context of Liang and Gurley. She declares, “white privilege means they want to be put above the law.” Whiteness itself confers the injustice of a privilege which Asian Americans cannot inhabit as those “also hurt” by white supremacy. That is to say, whiteness as a set of experiences and mores that has an exclusive purchase on privilege. Put simply, the convenience, protections and social graces associated with privilege are racially coded and static to white bodies.

W.E.B. Du Bois and Fong point to a transhistorical relationship between whiteness and privilege. Du Bois argues white laborers during reconstruction, “were given public defense . . . because they were white. They were admitted feely, with all classes of white people, to public functions [and] public parks. The police were drawn from their ranks and the courts, dependent

⁹⁶ See Appendix 1

on their votes, treated them with leniency.”⁹⁷ The initial use of “because” is telling; implying whiteness is that which opens the doors to public space, voter enfranchisement, legal impunity. Without whiteness as a lever, privilege cannot and does not exist. Aligning Fong and DuBois, privilege is neither Asian nor Black, it is immutably white in character.

If the model minority myth fuses “Asian” with privilege and anti-Blackness, diasporic Asians respond by conjoining privilege with whiteness. Narratives of valorization and honorary whiteness associated with Asian racial uplift have “at times rested upon appeals to be considered White (and to be granted the myriad privileges bundled with Whiteness.)”⁹⁸ The model minority myth bolsters the racial triangulation of Asian Americans between Blackness and whiteness, requiring them to simultaneously strive for—and fail to inhabit—an unattainable whiteness. It does this through a concerted forgetting of anti-Black racial terror. Interestingly, while Fong staunchly refutes the desire for white privilege and locates her community as victims of white supremacy, her diatribe advocates for Liang’s acquittal by reminding society of Asian oppression. She therefore enunciates an utter refusal of whiteness, but not the advantages associated with it. Like Fong, organizations in solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter cling to the legacies of their marginalization as a means of contextualizing Asian racialization and rendering wholly invisible the long *duree* of anti-Asian exclusion and oppression of the last two centuries. They do so in order to delink the forceful coupling of Asian and privilege that the model minority continually reproduces.

Longstanding community-based organization CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities arose in 1986 with the original name Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence. Based in New York, the formation of CAAAV was a response to the murder of Vincent Chin and other Asian directed hate crimes. As the group grew, its analysis expanded to encompass a broader understanding of the root causes of racial terror. In 2014, CAAAV joined with South Asians Organizing Center (formerly Desis Rising Up and Moving, or DRUM), to author a solidarity statement. DRUM was founded in 2000, “built the leadership of thousands of low-income, South Asian immigrants” with the self-determining objective of cultural and legal change in education, civil rights and labor. They boast a diverse, south Asian intergenerational membership of over 2,4000 people from: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Guyana, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Trinidad. The co-written piece was signed by 14 additional Asian American groups from across the country. The treatise foregrounds anti-Asian racism as the beginning of solidarity. The first paragraph states:

As Asian and South Asian organizations who have been fighting police violence in its various forms, we want to express our solidarity and love for Ferguson and all victims to state-sponsored violence. From the murder of Fong Lee by police officers in Minneapolis, to surveillance of Muslim and South Asian communities by NYPD, to the drone attacks on Pakistan, Asian communities have experienced violence at the hands of the police and the military. We have seen the impact on South Asian, Arab, and Muslim communities after 9/11, the internment of Japanese

⁹⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America (The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois): An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

⁹⁸ Claire Jean Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” *Politics and Society*. 27, no. 1 (1999): 112.

communities during WWII, and throughout wars that have labeled our communities as “alien,” “terrorist,” and “foreign.”⁹⁹

Mediated advantage is a process of building solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter that is predicated upon an early and clear acknowledgement that racism has been directed against both Asian and Black Americans throughout history. From Japanese internment to colonialism to post 9/11 Islamophobia, making visible racial terror directed at Asians cleaves the community from an impenetrable and un-maligned honorary whiteness (cum privilege) by bringing Asianness into proximity with—though importantly not the habitation of— anti-Black racism. By focusing on “state-sponsored violence,” the murder of Fong Lee and post 9/11 jingoism, CAAAV and DRUM concertedly rupture the slow process of de-ghettoization and mis-characterization of Asian Americans as antithetical to Black criminality¹⁰⁰ that has been a hallmark of the model minority myth since the turn of the 20th century.

South Asian Americans leading Together (SAALT) performs a similar move, focusing on state surveillance and the dissolution of the American dream for South Asians. SAALT convenes the National Coalition of South Asian Organizations—a bi-coastal network seeking to elevate “the voices and perspectives of South Asian individuals and organizations to build a more just and inclusive society.”¹⁰¹ In 2014, they issued a short, four-paragraph statement on behalf of their affinity groups. It begins, “As a national civil rights organization working with communities targeted by hate violence, racial and religious profiling, and surveillance, we understand the damaging ramifications of mistrust between the police and the communities they are sworn to protect.” Returning to DuBois, SAALT articulates the assumptive logic of whiteness as that which rightly presumes policing is in its service. By identifying its constituency as those “targeted” by hate, police profiling, and surveillance; SAALT ruptures the pristine imagery of the model minority and its concomitant notions of privilege with the mechanisms of state power used against Desis and Black Americans. Mediated advantage reminds the community that surveillance is a function within the machinery of policing exercised against Asian people, SAALT conjoins Blackness and Asianness whilst carving space for their categorical difference.

Asian American activists across the political spectrum disavow the discourse of privilege. Their resistance to this categorization aligns with the cultural essentialism socially instantiated by the model minority myth. Perhaps more importantly, organizers reject whiteness as the primary modality through which privilege is popularly articulated. In so doing, Jess Fong, SAALT, CAAAV, and DRUM exemplify the ways in which Asian American activists select a framework of mediated advantage that opposes controlling imagery of biologically determined success and speaks to the reality of anti-Asian racism. In addition, the solidarity statements

⁹⁹ See Appendix 1

¹⁰⁰ Wu, 193.

¹⁰¹ “About Saalt,” South Asian Americans Leading Together”, January 21, 2017. <http://saalt.org/about/#sthash.YiUCyAGe.dpuf>

maintain the integrity of differential racialization¹⁰² between Black and Asian Americans as a cornerstone of coalition-building.

Nobody Thinks “Dangerous Criminal”

#Asians4BlackLives sutures the disavowal of white privilege with activists’ calls to marshal diasporic social capital in the service of anti-Black oppression. While the affinity group makes similar moves to SAALT, DRUM, and Caaav to trace genealogies of anti-Asian racism, it further provides a relational rubric of mediated advantage with which to navigate the various and seemingly divergent iterations of white supremacy. They state:

Many of our communities have faced state repression and capitalist violence in our homelands and many Asian Americans are particularly vulnerable to state violence (including refugees, those targeted by surveillance and profiling, those who are undocumented, and those who are Sikh or Muslim) including police violence. We recognize that we are targeted differently than Black people and we also recognize the relationship between racist, militarized police forces waging wars on Black people, and imperialist forces waging wars in our homelands. We are determined to resist both.

The operative phrase in the above passage is “targeted differently.” If Asian American activists dispute the racial privilege associated with whiteness, how to do they cohabit the deadly tendencies of anti-Blackness? Key to mediated advantage is the simultaneous maintenance of, and connection to, varying iterations of racism meted out relationally in Asian and Black communities. Mediated advantage dictates that Asian Americans hold “both” anti-Black racism *and* the violence of U.S. empire are coeval, yet manifest in varying ways with diverse material impacts. Put differently, mediated advantage makes racism plural and positions its consequences on a spectrum relying on a “proximity to death.”¹⁰³ Paying great attention to racial specificity, Asian Americans can both eschew white supremacy whilst illuminating how Asian Americans benefit within it. #Asians4BlackLives thus highlights recognition and specificity of racial difference—which they underscore through repetition—as tools of solidarity.

In the summer of 2016 following the deaths of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, a project, called “Letters for Black Lives,” authored by Christina Xu went live. The letter is an impassioned narrative conveying the importance of Asian American understanding and mobilization in the fight against anti-Black racism. It was translated into dozens of languages including Punjabi, Bengali, and Vietnamese (hence the plural title), it was covered by Salon, NPR and Vox, quickly making the letter from Asian American millennials to their elders a viral treatise. In its opening gesture, the letter makes clear Asian American phenotype is an advantage when it comes to everyday life. It states that despite an enumerated list of common anti-Asian and Islamophobic occurrences, “for the most part, nobody thinks dangerous criminal when we are walking down the street. The police do not gun down our children and parents for simply

¹⁰² Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992.)

¹⁰³ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

existing.”¹⁰⁴ The distinction between the potentially deadly within what for Asian Americans is a customarily banal exchange with state authority is a key step to making racial difference heterogenous and using mediated advantage.

Formative Asian American scholarship on racial power attempts to engage with white supremacy as that which articulates itself “in a wide variety of political, economic, social, and cultural processes that tend cumulatively to perpetuate White dominance over non-Whites.”¹⁰⁵ Coded within the conscription of all “non-whites” into one group is the wholesale loss of the specificity of anti-Black racism. Analyses of racial power elide and detract from the intentionality of racial domination of the darker and Blacker populace; negating intra-racial hierarchy by homogenizing the everyday experience of racism. But as the Letters for Black Lives makes clear, the racialization of Asian Americans as those who “nobody” would consider “dangerous” is a recognizable and critical difference from an amorphous distinction of all “non-white” persons. In effect, the letter echoes Orlando Patterson’s attempt to carve a space of Blackness in which to assert that “the concept of social death cannot be generalized. . . It is indexed to slavery and it does not travel.”¹⁰⁶ In Asian America activism, solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter is facilitated by mediated advantage which distinguishes between the varying consequences of white supremacy with its diverse array of effects that depends in large part on the particularities of anti-Blackness. Asian American activists make a concerted effort to simultaneously carry the reality of Asian American discrimination alongside the differential impact of police brutality in Black communities. However, mediated advantage also encourages a collective, pan ethnic identification with anti-Asian racializing processes.

The Letters for Black Lives both embodies and resists ethnicity. The letters cohere through the use of a familial mode of address. They state, “Sometimes people are rude to us about our accents, or withhold promotions because they don’t think of us as “leadership material.” The statement creates a clear sense of insider-ship and one-ness when it comes to experiencing racism both in its content and language. Using “us” and “they” could potentially replicate the white and non-white binary I cautioned against earlier. However, there is an important caveat: the shared collusion and knowledge of social and structural alienation indicated by the authors is bracketed by the specificity and limitation of anti-Black racism. That is to say, there is an Asian “us” and a white supremacist “they”, but there is also a Black “other” within the racial framework for whom we must account. The authors continue, “When someone is walking home and gets shot by a sworn protector of the peace—even if that officer’s last name is Liang—that is an assault on all of us, and on all of our hopes for equality and fairness under the law.” Using the differential modality of policing Asianness and Blackness, the authors bring specificity to bear upon the coupling of white versus non-white. Contrasting Asian employment discrimination against Black death, the authors of “Letters for Black Lives,” productively highlights filigree within the broad category of non-white. Further, because mediated advantage

¹⁰⁴ See Appendix 1.

¹⁰⁵ Kim, 2.

¹⁰⁶ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.)

is precise with its understanding of concomitant racial formations, it hints toward the importance of Black primacy to broad movements for racial justice.

“Our Liberation Depends on the Liberation of Black People”

The turn in critical ethnic studies¹⁰⁷ toward relational approaches to racialization is a means of refuting sedimented relationships of power that are “baked in” to racial categories, and subsequently notions of identity and difference. Contemporary racial groupings and their concomitant juxtaposition within academe can be attributed to “modernity’s racially “structuring logics.”¹⁰⁸ Put differently, comparative scholarship is derivative of the same genealogies of oppression it seeks to investigate, trapped by an unacknowledged fidelity to, “a racial epistemology emerging out of an earlier conjunction of European colonialism and slavery in the ‘new world.’”¹⁰⁹ That is to say, comparative analyses of race which have become common in ethnic studies are themselves the byproduct of definitions of race that pivot upon normative whiteness and the mechanisms maintaining it. Deviating from comparative models requires rethinking race, how its classified and how these definitions relate to each other through familiar albeit unacknowledged machinations of power and privilege.

By simply labeling Black and Asian as mutually constitutive and worthy of comparison, scholars can neglect the important factors of why and how they are. Jared Sexton has argued that the positioning of Black and Korean communities as those which experience equivalent marginalizations is a key feature of the latter’s inability to address anti-Blackness and ultimately foment substantive racial solidarity. The tendency to “incorporate and thereby neutralize difference”¹¹⁰ within comparative lenses has consequences on the possibilities for resistance. In response, scholars and activists favor mediated advantage as a means of thinking race relations that speaks to the uneven allocation of racial power.

Black bodies endure a common morbidity that warrants attention to its specific dimensions. In 2016, the Guardian’s project “The Counted” recorded 561 people killed by law enforcement agencies—136 of them Black—a highly disproportionate number relative to the racial demographics of the country.¹¹¹ The on-going hypervisible and systematic debasement of Black life demands a framework that can speak to the corporeal realities of anti-Black racism and anti-blackness. Orlando Patterson calls the proximity of blackness to death its most “stunning attribute.” Taking Sexton and Patterson’s appraisals as urgent for academicians, how

¹⁰⁷ Critical Ethnic Studies Editorial Collective *Critical Ethnic Studies: A Reader*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.)

¹⁰⁸ Nicholas Mitchell, “On Afropessimism; or, The People Critique Makes” (presentation, The Humanities Institute, Santa Cruz, CA, January 20, 2016).

¹⁰⁹ Lisa Lowe, “Insufficient Difference.” *Ethnicities*, no. 4, (2005): 410.

¹¹⁰ Roderick A. Ferguson, “Administering Sexuality; or the Will to Institutionalality” *Radical History Review* no. 100 (2008): 161.

¹¹¹ Importantly, the deaths of indigenous people outnumbered that of Black Americans. Scholarship on this vital reality is being pursued by both Black and Native scholars. See Davis 2016, and Morgenson 2015.

do activists forge a relational ethics of coalition? How do organizers engage with a long history of chattel slavery and state sanctioned violence against black bodies while also honoring colonialism and exploitation on the Asian continent? If, as Frank Wilkerson states, “Blackness is predicated on modalities of accumulation and fungibility, not exploitation and alienation” how do Asian American organizers ‘do’ race differently?

Comparative rubrics, albeit effective in their ability to bring their own constitutive elements of power into relief,¹¹² consistently fail to recognize anti-Black racism as the “debasement of black humanity, utter indifference to black suffering, and the denial of black people’s right to exist.”¹¹³ The compunction which prompts comparison is intrinsic and arbitrarily assigned racial difference yielding an analytic shortcoming that has given way to unethical approaches to scholarship. To wit, Jared Sexton calls attention specifically to coalition between Black community and Asian Americans as an “ultimately conservative allegiance.”¹¹⁴ Looking to seminal Asian American scholarship, he finds a comparison template that prioritizes flatten asymmetrical racial experiences of police brutality and economic dispossession. Perhaps most importantly, because Sexton says Asian American attempts at solidarity fail to bridge the specificity of anti-Black racism, these gestures of discursive solidarity wind up void of “a coherent ethical justification”¹¹⁵ with which to resist racism. Ultimately, Sexton lambasts Asian Americanists who have, in an alarming fashion, glossed over their own economic culpability and class difference in service of a colorblind racial coalition.

Sexton does well to hang on to important variations that belong to different iterations of white supremacy. However, while anti-Black racism is undeniably distinctive, all branches of white supremacy are interrelated. The task at hand for both scholars and activists is locating a framework that simultaneously speaks to anti-Blackness itself as well its attendants. While Sexton illuminates an embedded impossibility of critique within Asian American Studies, activists make strides toward suturing Asian American interpellation as a part of the racial schematic while irrevocably apart from anti-Blackness in the archive of solidarity statements. The texts suggest a framework that pivots upon the very ethical mode of address Sexton finds absent. The statements evince a form of solidarity through that simultaneously honors anti-Asian and Black racism while making the latter primary in anti-racist struggles. Mediated advantage brings anti-Black racism to the fore, enabling Asian American organizers to re-imagine divergent forms of racism as intrinsically linked, but with varying degrees of corporeal consequence. Centering material—and indeed deadly—impacts as those deserving of immediate and principle action, Asian American solidarity statements articulate a relational framework of coalition attentive to the ways anti-Blackness and anti-Asian racism are uneven in their constitution.

¹¹² Keith Feldman “On Relationality, On Blackness: A Listening Post” *Blackness and Relationality: An ACLA Forum*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

¹¹³ Michael P. Jeffries “Ferguson Must Force Us to Face Anti-Blackness” *The Boston Globe* November 28, 2014.

¹¹⁴ Sexton, 89.

¹¹⁵ Sexton, 90.

For Asian American activists, navigating racial relations through a technology of mediated advantage means necessarily countering a common neoliberal schematic of equality that elides articulations of racism between and amongst Black and Asian subjects. If neoliberal multiculturalism erases racial hierarchies between these communities, the solidarity statements restore vital elements of intra-community racial difference. In so doing, they provide a racially cognizant framework for coalition. The National Korean American Service & Education Consortium (NAKASEC) is based in Los Angeles and was founded in 1994 as a platform “to project a progressive voice and promote the full participation of Korean Americans on major social justice issues.” It has affiliates in Chicago through the Korean American Resource & Cultural Center and Orange County through the Korean Resource Center. In 2016, they released a joint statement titled, “NAKASEC OUTRAGED. BLACK LIVES MATTER.”¹¹⁶ In the treatise, they convey a certitude “that achieving true justice means that our community's struggle for immigrant rights must be linked to justice for the family of Mike Brown, and to a larger movement for social change.” (NAKASEC) In so doing, NAKASEC echoes Andrea Smith's contention that racial slavery is the bedrock of white supremacy.

The framework of mediated advantage pursues a full and relational accounting of the various trajectories of racial formation. NAKASEC locates anti-Black racism as foundational to all iterations of white supremacy. Andrea Smith asserts that while slavery/capitalism is accompanied by other pillars of white supremacy commonplace on the Asian continent like orientalism/war, it remains a central racial rubric “that we cannot “go beyond” in our racial justice organizing efforts.”¹¹⁷ Organizers then, cannot supersede, or exist peripherally to the long history of chattel slavery, they must take it as formative to their experiences and therefore work to end racism in America. In saying, that the “struggle for immigrant rights must be linked to justice for the family of Mike Brown” NAKASEC fashions a movement that pushes against a single issue model. Instead, they advocate for racial justice that locates the legacy of enslavement at its core. Similarly, grassroots organization, 18 Million Rising, mirrors Smith's argument and a commitment to centering anti-Black racism in racial justice.

18 Million Rising was founded in September 2012 with the goal to “promote AAPI civic engagement, influence, and movement by leveraging the power of technology and media”¹¹⁸ Since its inception, the small national organization has run successful campaigns to remove racist Snapchat filters and increase voter registration among diasporic and American Asians. Following the non-indictment of Darren Wilson, then Executive Director C.M. Samala posted a statement reading “Our justice system, yet again, has failed Black America. It has failed America, period.” Samala's words make two important points. Firstly, they corroborate Smith's contention that slavery is foundational to white supremacy. Secondly, they make American injustice synonymous with anti-Black racism.

¹¹⁶ See Appendix 1.

¹¹⁷ Andrea Smith, “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing” *Color of Violence the INCITE Anthology* Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. 3.

¹¹⁸ “ABOUT 18MR.ORG” 18MillionRising <https://18millionrising.org/index.html>

18 Million Rising refuses to forgo or sublimate anti-Black racism under a greater rubric of racial injustice by marking anti-Black violence as that which conscripts America as a failed experiment in racial equality. Samala attributes the collapse of the justice system writ large to the absence of remuneration for Black America specifically. Notably, Samala does not mention Asian Americans in the statement about Mike Brown. The statement diverges from the others read in this chapter in that it contains absolutely no comparative or contrasting impulse. The wholesale foreclosure of contrasting Asian experience against anti-Blackness is a gesture of specificity. It identifies a particular grammar of state violence that is meted out disproportionately. By heeding this unique modality of racial terror as that which has “failed America, period” Samala recognizes that anti-Blackness is elemental to the American racial experience.

The solidarity statements further illustrate the relational aspect of mediated advantage by foregrounding Black Feminist frameworks. In an effort to further prioritize the role of anti-Black racism as an organizing force of raciality, A4BL echoes Black Feminist thought. In an undeniable reference to its Black predecessors, #Asians4BlackLives states, “To us, solidarity encompasses understanding that we will never be truly free till Black people are free.” The statement is a nod to #BlackLivesMatter founder Alicia Garza’s herstory of the movement published in *The Feminist Wire* in October 2014 which reads, “*When Black people get free, everybody gets free*” (italics not mine).¹¹⁹ The underlying sentiment in both enunciations is that the hinge of liberation for all communities is the emancipation of Black people from the brutal concurrent forces of police violence and heteropatriarchy. Moreover, bringing Black morbidity and agony into relief against what A4BL calls their “relative privilege” resists the complicity and complacency of Asian American frameworks which experience an “affective difficulty shaping the engagement of Asian American intellectuals with the intersection of racial hierarchy and the hierarchy of class society.”¹²⁰ In other words, in an effort to establish their recognition of the multiple oppressions affecting Black Americans, A4BL positions preserving Black life as the apex of domestic struggles for racial justice and the primary space of movement work. Ultimately, their aim is to “resist both” by prioritizing one.

Employing intersectionality as a central framework is another way of making the organizing role of anti-Black racism and heteropatriarchy essential to racial justice movements. Using a Black Feminist lens foregrounds anti-Blackness, but also the radical potentiality of the “meeting ground between black women and conjunctures of power.”¹²¹ A4BL writes, “To us, solidarity encompasses understanding that we will never be truly free till Black people are free,” an homage to the Combahee River Collective Statement which declares, “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.” If Alicia Garza’s text is located as an interim proclamation mediating the A4BL articulation and the 1977 Combahee manifesto, then A4BL’s framework for solidarity is derivative of the some of the earliest historical and radical harbingers

¹¹⁹ See Appendix 1.

¹²⁰ Sexton, 94.

¹²¹ Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” *Diacritics*, No. 217 (1987): 61.

of intersectionality. Alluding to the Combahee River Collective and even earlier legacies of Black women led struggles for emancipation, A4BL draws upon the interstice of Blackness and womanness as an emancipatory force. The intersectional genealogy upon which A4BL draws asserts the relational direction of mediated advantage that is cognizant of how white supremacy functions in specific gendered and anti-Black ways.

Perhaps the most important aspects of mediated advantage are simple: the capacity to uncover racial difference and engage and refute tropes of privilege, honorary whiteness, and comparativity. Asian American activists who frame their solidarity efforts using the lens of mediated advantage engage and employ a direct acknowledgement of their racial positioning, confronting, and destabilizing the imposition of relative valorization that frequently defines their role in the racial hierarchy. Moreover, the framework of mediated advantage heeds the craggy realities of anti-Black and anti-Asian racism as those with disparate and diverging material impacts. Locating Black people's proximity, or "group differentiated vulnerability to premature death,"¹²² as the pivot point for coalition-building, Asians 4 Black Lives, NAKASEC, 18 Million Rising, and others make concerted decisions to foreground remuneration for Black Americans as paramount in the struggle for racial justice. The prioritization of preserving Black life speaks to the relational ways Asianness and Blackness are formed and affectively experienced.

¹²² Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Fatal Couplings," *The Professional Geographer* 54 no.1 (2002): 28.

Chapter 3

Affective Possibility and Queer Resistance

The morning of January 16th, 2015, was cold and gray, but Bao¹²³ had been training for weeks. At the first sound of a 5 a.m. alarm, they¹²⁴ rose to dress in warm clothes, meditate, and prepare to be chained to the Ronald V. Dellums Federal Building in Oakland, California. Bao and 30 others stood silently, their hands locked together encased in plastic PVC tubing, connected to the building with chains and U-locks: blocking the two main entrances. Participants were multiracial and intergenerational, affiliated with local groups and organizations including; Anakbayan-USA, ASATA: Alliance of South Asians Taking Action, Critical Resistance Oakland, HOBAK: Hella Organized Bay Area Koreans, and Bao's organizing home, Viet Unity. All of them identified as Asian American. The activists linked arms silently for 4 hours and 28 minutes. The day commemorated the 86th birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The duration was the length of time the body of 18-year-old Michael Brown was left on the street after he was shot and killed by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri the prior year.

About 300 people gathered slowly and quietly around the small cadre. The growing crowd and those barricading the building were predominantly clad in black. Close to 11a.m., the group was joined by another contingent of activists, many of whom had been directly involved with the Black Lives Matter Movement in the area. The San Jose Mercury reported that together they numbered close to 1,000. Both groups rallied and chanted behind a sign reading "THIRD WORLD FOR BLACK POWER." Now complete, the Third World Resistance contingent and Black Lives Matter marched toward East Oakland where they would eventually wind down and disperse after a full day of protesting the deaths of unarmed Black people across the nation.

Following the series of direct protest actions, the website Third World Resistance published statements from many of the organizations and groups involved. Together they wrote:

While the war then in Vietnam was decades ago, new wars across the world are being fought by the same imperialist and colonialist powers, especially against our African American brothers and sisters in this country. African American people are being murdered in cold blood by the police. As members of the Vietnamese American community, we are outraged at the violence and inhumanity of these killings. We join the demands to remove police officers responsible for these murders, for independent prosecutors to handle cases of police violence, and for immediate release of the names of police officers involved in fatal shootings. We pledge to join our sisters, brothers, and comrades in building a strong movement to demand that these murders be ended and that those responsible be punished.

The notions of "outrage," the kinship of shared struggle evoked by "our African American brothers and sisters," and clear delineation of relational racial difference constituted by anti-Black violence pushes back against a tendency within Asian diasporic frameworks and

¹²³ Name changed for anonymity.

¹²⁴ Bao identifies as gender non-binary and uses "they/them" pronouns.

neoliberal narratives. The former can advance patrilineal narratives and invisibilize race¹²⁵ in ways that foreclose diverse formations of belonging. The latter works to elide the impact of white supremacy on Black bodies under myths of minority success. Using language that makes the continuity and specificity of racial terror experienced by both communities exceptionally clear, Third World Resistance hints at the circuitry of Vietnamese diasporic feelings that undergird cross-racial coalition.

In the third chapter of my dissertation, I take Bao and Viet Unity as starting points from which to reimagine cross-racial coalition in the Vietnamese diaspora. In the previous chapter, I moved slowly through written and public articulations of solidarity to argue Asian American organizations pursued coalition through what I call mediated advantage, a technology that does away with the model minority myth and its insinuations of privilege and whiteness. I moreover contended that mediated advantage is a mode of locating anti-Asian racism relationally in accordance with the material impact of anti-Black racism. In the next pages, I hone in on the affective solidarity of queer diasporic Vietnamese community organizers because while discursive acts have been vital for outlining the parameters of coalition, enacted, and embodied forms of solidarity do different kinds of work. I center activism in this chapter in part because activists are the most astute representatives of the allegiances they build, but also because the solidarity statements point toward mediated advantage as reliant upon a greater affective frame. I met the core Viet Unity members in the winter of 2013 at an event called “*Ăn Tết with The People's Kitchen and Viet Unity*.” I was introduced to both social justice groups by Ethnic Studies scholar Marcelo Felipe Montalvo Garzo, who knew Bao from the food sovereignty movement. *Ăn Tết* was a sliding scale, pay-what-you-can family style community dinner. It featured live performers and traditional foods in a celebration of *Tết*, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year. The proceeds of that night went to the Hai Bà Trưng School for Organizing. Over the years, I struck up casual friendships with Bao and Thuyet Pham. The former had been one of the small handful of members who formed VU seven years ago, the latter one of their earliest recruits. My initial involvement with Viet Unity was non-academic. I was searching for an organizing home after leaving a queer youth space I had established in San Jose, California. I participated in select engagements—primarily arts based—with VU throughout my graduate studies. In 2014, after the killing of Michael Brown and the non-indictment of his killer, I increased my involvement. I marched with Viet Unity and the Third World Resistance in 2015 and last year in 2017, I was one of four planners who facilitated and ran its social justice incubator program, Hai Ba Trung School for Organizing.

Drawing on conversations and participant observation throughout this period, I argue Vietnamese American activists employ a framework of queer diasporic praxis in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. I claim that feelings of joy, grief, and exteriority are foundational to formulating queer diasporic praxis (and its concomitant technology of mediated advantage) as a series of actions and orientations in pursuit of solidarity. Shifting away from a focus on the “saying” of coalition vis-a-vis the solidarity statements in chapter two; I turn toward the psychic and felt intangibilities that comprise the spectrum of an affective solidarity. I introduce the

¹²⁵ John Lie’s article “Diasporic Nationalism” (2001) establishes and refutes the ways the Korean diaspora pivots upon a logic of national and biological belonging.

framework of a queer diasporic praxis as the analytic through which solidarity can be understood as queer. Using interviews with activists and participant observation, I locate affect and emotion as the engines and facilitating mechanisms for coalition-making. I assert Vietnamese American activists employ rubrics of alternative kinship in their efforts to end anti-Black racism alongside #BlackLivesMatter.

If affect is, as Sarah Ahmed says, “the emotions [that] operate to 'make' and 'shape' bodies as forms of action which also involve orientations towards others,” Bao and the dozens of Asian Americans alongside them can be considered affective first responders to clarion calls for solidarity from the then-nascent #BlackLivesMatter movement.¹²⁶ The #FedShutDown exhibits an undeniably queer affect, one that produces the practice and genre of Vietnamese American solidarity with Black communities outside of the ready-made templates for mono- and cross-racial organizing.

In recent years, social scientists have grappled with the formation of Black and Asian allegiance in Vietnamese American communities across the country. Specifically, Eric Tang¹²⁷ and Christian Collet¹²⁸ have made notable strides toward theorizing political coalition in the Vietnamese American contexts of New Orleans, Louisiana and Orange County, California respectively. Tang claims the Vietnamese Americans of eastern New Orleans acknowledged and tapped into Black Americans' established lineage of Civil Rights while also maintaining their own history of resistance to American war and imperialism. According to Tang, Vietnamese Americans maintained divergent genealogies of Black and Vietnamese struggles while utilizing the extant similarities between them to end oppression, forging an alliance across race and generations. In so doing, Black Americans and Vietnamese refugees became “mutually recognizable—or resonant” to one another beyond purely “economic concerns.”¹²⁹ Tang argues Vietnamese refugees and Black Americans marshal common yet distinct “usable pasts” in order to unify politically.

Collet is interested in whether Vietnamese Americans should organizationally “go it alone,” by following the homogenizing impulse of the Black Power Movement illuminated by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton.¹³⁰ She traces the development of a necessary “internal cohesion” within the Vietnamese communities of Westminster, Garden Grove and San Jose, California to map the path in electoral politics from “descriptive representation to full

¹²⁶ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004): 4.

¹²⁷ Eric Tang, “A Gulf Unites Us: The Vietnamese Americans of Black New Orleans East” *American Quarterly* 63:1 (March 2011): 117-149.

¹²⁸ Christian Collet, “The Viability of ‘Going It Alone’: Vietnamese in America and the Coalition Experience of a Transnational Community” *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 1:2 (Spring: 2008): 279-311.

¹²⁹ Tang, 120.

¹³⁰ Charles V. Hamilton and Stokely Carmichael, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, (New York: Random house, 1967).

incorporation”¹³¹ as rife with potential internal and external intra-group conflict. Importantly, Tang and Collet gesture meaningfully toward Vietnamese coalitions as defying static racial and class categorizations. Collet ultimately decides that Vietnamese coalition is a “multilayered process, one that may cut across conventional lines of race, ethnicity, and ideology.”¹³² Together, Collet and Tang hint that what produces a durable political allegiance across racial difference is an alternative rendering of what constitutes a community.

Taking Tang and Collet as a point of entry, how can scholars begin to creatively engage questions about coalition in the Vietnamese diaspora? What can Ethnic Studies scholars offer as a corrective to social movement and diasporic literatures that are all too often bounded by their own fidelity to race and class? What frameworks exist that function to uproot the dominance of these two categories in order to take into account the myriad ways coalitions form within and amongst groups?

In response to these questions, Women of Color Feminism and Queer of Color Thought provide a meaningful and enduring foundation for thinking about solidarity and coalitions for social change through affect. Foregrounding the non-identical quality of shared displacements and marginalizations, I argue Vietnamese Americans advance a mode of relationality that is, as Hong and Ferguson argue, “fundamentally organized around difference, the difference between and within racialized, gendered, sexualized collectivities.”¹³³ Women of Color Feminism and Queer of Color Critique reframe the Vietnamese American community as one that effectively resists state repression *because* it defies the theoretical parameters of diaspora. In other words, if the discourse of diaspora is organized around a connection to specific places and bodies, Women of Color Feminism and Queer of Color Critique “profoundly question nationalist and identitarian modes of political organization and craft alternative understandings of subjectivity, collectivity, and power”¹³⁴ to undermine traditional paradigms of diasporic belonging. Indeed, Women of Color Feminism and Queer of Color Critique offer a new way to shift our understanding of political coalitions toward queer formations across space, time, and kinship.

How do communities cohere across difference and what theoretical frameworks capture this process? In the following pages, I argue for a new way of understanding this well-tread theoretical question. Women of Color Feminism and Queer Theory offer key insights into the affective circuitries of diaspora and difference. The struggle to make Black lives matter rely upon what Transnational Feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls, “a *common context of struggle* rather than color or racial identifications.”¹³⁵ (emphasis in the original) I contend the successful

¹³¹ Collet, 279.

¹³² Collet, 305.

¹³³ Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson eds., *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2011). Kindle Edition

¹³⁴ Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson eds., *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2011). Kindle Edition.

¹³⁵ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Introduction” *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres eds., (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991).

coalitions formed by Vietnamese Americans with other communities of color are not a result of identical engagements with capitalism, patriarchy, or colonialism. Instead, they rely upon identifying the similarities of oppressive conditions which give rise to structural marginalizations. Vietnamese Americans refuse to claim anti-Black racism. They forge linkages across the differences of their experience to locate a shared yet relative sense of statelessness, dispossession, and disenfranchisement in order to recognize the instigating power of capitalism and colonialism at the root of any racial or class oppression. In unpacking Vietnamese American cross-racial political coalition as a queer diasporic practice, I build on concepts of queer diaspora as a critical mode of interrogation undermining the dominant rubrics of patrilineality and filiality. I extend a description of queerness through Women of Color Feminism and Queer of Color Thought which provides what Hong and Ferguson term a “blueprint for coalition around contemporary struggles” steeped in affect and couched in social justice work.

In this chapter, I trace the sonic, artistic, and emotional materialities of queer Vietnamese American protesters between 2014 and 2016 in solidarity with the movement for Black lives. I chart the affective movements of protesters who participated in the second annual “96 Hours of Direct Action” to reclaim Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s “radical legacy” in the Bay Area; the four-day campaign included the #FedShutdown of the Dellums Federal Building in Oakland, California and march on the nationally-recognized holiday in honor of Dr. King. I also map affective exchanges of founders of Viet 4 Black Lives in San Jose, California and attendees of an intergenerational dinner. Analyzing their displays of joy, grief, and exteriority, I argue the solidarity pursued by Vietnamese American activists with Black Lives Matter can be understood through the concept of queer diasporic praxis that is material, affective, and relational.

Sing Freedom, Sing

January 19th, 2015, was a sunny day in Oakland, California. It was made warmer still by at least 2,000 marchers gathered at Fruitvale Station, a stop on the Bay Area Rapid Transit system. Six years prior, early on New Year’s Day, Johannes Mehserle killed unarmed Hayward man Oscar Grant at this working-class hub. To conclude a 96-hour campaign to reclaim Martin Luther King Jr’s legacy and to inaugurate the new Third World Resistance, it was apropos that a crowd the *San Francisco Chronicle* labeled “strikingly diverse”¹³⁶ convened at this location to acknowledge, mourn, and protest the lives and deaths of Black people. On this Monday, signs proclaimed solidarity with the new Black Lives Matter movement. They read “Palestinian for Black Resistance,” “White silence = violence,” and “Third World for Black Power.” A small contingent of 12 people behind one of the banners proclaimed “Viet Unity 4 Black Power.” Viet Unity (VU) was formed in 2004 in the Bay Area. According to its website, VU was created “as a response to the needs for a progressive/radical voice and presence in the Vietnamese American community.”¹³⁷ Most often, Viet Unity members are activists who participate in direct

¹³⁶ Steve Rubenstein, Kale Williams, and Vivian Ho, “Martin Luther King Jr. Day Rallies Strike Chord Across Bay Area”, SF Gate, January 19, 2015, <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Final-Freedom-Train-rides-toward-San-Francisco-6025326.php>.

¹³⁷ The conservatism of the Vietnamese diaspora has been well documented by Caroline Kieu Linh in *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: Community, Culture, and Politics in the Diaspora* (Temple University Press, 2012).

actions and protests. Many members have matriculated from or participated in the planning of its two racial justice schools. In 2017, the newest branch of Viet Unity in the city of San Jose, California established the Bà Triệu School of Consciousness, a social justice incubator program seeking to instill culturally-specific organizing analysis and skills to high school students in the region. Bà Triệu is the youth-oriented companion to the almost identical, Hai Bà Trưng School for Organizing (HBT). Viet Unity has facilitated Hai Bà Trưng for seven years in various states and cities throughout the country including the Vietnamese diasporic hubs of California's Bay Area and Orange County. On this day, the 12 marchers (apart from myself) were HBT graduates, teachers, or both.

At the head of the day's contingent was Thuyet Pham.¹³⁸ Thuyet is a refugee, one of Vietnam's self-proclaimed "boat people" whose family settled in Oakland nearly thirty years ago. She was a major planner in the lead-up to the day's march through the streets of East Oakland. Following the initial procession out of the train station and into the wide street of International Boulevard, Pham led the group in a rendition of "Bốn Phương Trời."

I pause on the singing of Bốn Phương Trời by marchers as a moment indicative of queer affective movement-making that transcends the confines of historical racial antagonism as well as the heteropatriarchal and ethno-nationalist strictures of diaspora. Moreover, I claim that Bốn Phương Trời as a Vietnamese protest song is relational, drawing upon a specific ethnic positionality to carve out solidarity with Black Lives Matter. Altogether, I argue Bốn Phương Trời is a nonlinear, multitudinous affective moment that evinces Vietnamese American solidarity as a queer diasporic praxis.

Bốn Phương Trời is meant to be sung by four different quadrants in the fashion of call and response. It is a children's song developed in the early 1990's by two teachers in order to teach diction. Because the group was small, Pham designated roles and parts for groups of three, herself excluded. The song consists of only one verse repeated. Roughly translated, it states:

We come home from the different cardinal directions to share happiness/
There's no difference between us when it comes to communicating/
Holding hands and sharing words or affection.

As Viet Unity ambled down International Avenue, they linked arms behind a banner that declared "Viet Unity 4 Black Power" and sang Bốn Phương Trời. Together, the small group reimagined the relationship between Black and Vietnamese Americans through urban space.

The transition from a relationship of racial antagonism to one of solidarity between Black and Asian Americans takes place in a city and state that has seen both due to economic and political conditions. The westward migration of Black Americans from the South to California during the second World War dovetailed with employment in the military industrial complex.¹³⁹ Political economist, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, calls economic imperialism that pulled Black Americans to Californian industry "military Keynesian," a system in which "California's relative

¹³⁸ Name anonymized.

¹³⁹ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 37.

stability depended on interlacing the military complex with consumer and producer goods manufacturing, agriculture, resource-extraction industries, and high levels of consumption.”¹⁴⁰ Hot war led to military spending and jobs that also expanded education. However, when WWII ended, labor—particularly for Black families—remained segregated in quickly-deteriorating lower skilled occupations. Over a handful of decades, economic crisis resulting from a decrease in military assembly-line work and an influx of immigrants who threatened white supremacy merged to produce hyper-incarceration and racial apartheid.¹⁴¹

While Gilmore’s work focuses on anti-Black hostility and the ascension of the prison industrial complex in California, cross-racial coalition was also forged in the smithy of unemployment and economic recession. The Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP) formed in Oakland in 1966, in the radicalized hands of Bobby Seale and Huey Newton.¹⁴² Alongside national efforts to protect Black people through street patrols and community initiatives, the BPP offered refuge to the North Vietnamese and sent a contingent to the Southeast Asian peninsula in 1970.¹⁴³ The symbiotic history of cross racial coalition between Black and Vietnamese American communities undergirds the contrasting inimitable specter of Black/Asian conflict in the California metropolitan imaginary.

On their own, Oakland-based Black and Vietnamese coalitions built in the 1960’s by the Black Panthers and the Third World for Black Power protests of 2015 paint a rather idyllic picture of race relations. However, between these two bookends are the seeds of Black/Asian antagonism planted a few hundred miles away in Los Angeles. The Los Angeles Uprisings of 1992 display the toll that the “vise of capitalism and the American dream” took on Asian merchants and the Black communities in which they found themselves.¹⁴⁴ Landscapes of controlling images of Black America were birthed by the Rodney King trial and the protests that took place after. These were met by model minority mythology with which Asian American activists dispensed using mediated advantage in the current movement for Black lives. Each of these distinct historical nodes coalesced in 2015 to present Thuyet Pham with one narrow option as she marched down International Boulevard in East Oakland: heed the triangulating force of Black/Asian conflict. Instead, Pham chose an alternative trajectory. In leading Viet Unity through Bốn Phương Trời, Viet Unity performed what Tamara Roberts calls sono-racializations, or “racial possibilities that confound dominant offerings even as they draw on its constitutive elements.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Gilmore, 37.

¹⁴¹ Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹⁴² Donna J. Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

¹⁴³ Sean Malloy *Out of Oakland: Black Panther Party Internationalism During the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

¹⁴⁴ Prashad, 101.

¹⁴⁵ Tamara Roberts, *Resounding Afro Asia: Interracial Music and the Politics of Collaboration*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5.

Sono-racializations reimagine the relationship of Afro-Asia through interracial music. They trouble the divisive racial categorizations and structures of stereotypes and racial antagonism between Black and Asian communities through embodied articulations of cross-racial music and sound.

Bốn Phương Trời sutures the four cardinal directions of north, east, south and west. In the context of a revived Third World Resistance and a march for Black lives, the song takes on new meaning and circuitry. It becomes a sonic and affective bridge between the well-tread “directions” of racial tropes and contestation and the prospect of a forthcoming and always already historical Afro-Asian coalition. Emphasizing both a sense of coming together and the distance between the “four corners,” Bốn Phương Trời evokes a crossing of racial division as well as geospatial distance. Through a simple repetitive proclamation, Viet Unity contests the legacy that pits the relative valorization of Asian Americans against the criminality of their Black counterparts.

As the protesters moved through East Oakland, they repeated the song 4 times. In so doing, they exemplified the transformation of this children’s song into an anthem. As an invaluable part of the “movement repertoire,” anthems are a methodology, a means “for announcement, camaraderie, and dissent.”¹⁴⁶ Many scholars have charted the ways protest music offers and illustrates a not yet actualized pathway toward social change. Their generative analyses often focus on intra-racial and intra-ethnic application.¹⁴⁷ In contrast, Bốn Phương Trời is an embodiment of queer diasporic praxis, an anthem sung in the explicit spirit and offering of coalition that is at once a refutation of unidimensional politics and a proclamation of solidarity that hinges upon explicit feelings of happiness and joy to cohere communities across difference.

Bốn Phương Trời exemplifies an anthem couched in the “shared desire to cross racial lines rather than the commonality of race, culture, musical style, or geography.”¹⁴⁸ The cross-racial impetus behind Bốn Phương Trời is indicative of its queer and affective underpinnings. For Roberts, sono-racial collaborations are the result of intentional gestures toward “interracial rapport.” Thematically, Bốn Phương Trời employs two mechanisms with which to overcome the space between the cardinal directions or racial division in the context of the protest: happiness and affection. Specifically,

We come home from the different cardinal directions to share **happiness**/
Holding hands and sharing words of **affection**.

In this refrain, the emotions of happiness and affection—both physical and spoken—are tools with which to mend the physical and social division between Vietnamese and Black people. Bốn Phương Trời reflects a particular affective circuitry. The modality of affection contours and orients differentially racialized bodies toward each other. Bốn Phương Trời simultaneously

¹⁴⁶ Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora*, (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 178.

¹⁴⁷ See the scholarship of Bernice Reagon Johnson and Shana Redmond.

¹⁴⁸ Roberts, 5.

implies a closing of space and a broadening of Vietnamese diasporic social habitus to include and indeed encourage affection for Black community and its mortality. Happiness and affection become an invitation to care and then to build solidarity. Finally, the open yet assertive quality of *Bốn Phương Trời* points to an explicitly queer methodology of movement-making that binds in a non-deterministic way.

How does queerness reconfigure communities? In “Friendship as a Way of Life,” Michel Foucault contributes a seminal re-conceptualization of affective ties through homosexuality. Although he limits his meditation to gay men, he argues compellingly for homosexuality’s expansive qualities. Specifically, Foucault claims, “Homosexuality is an historic occasion to re-open affective and relational virtualities, not so much through the intrinsic qualities of the homosexual, but due to the biases against the position he occupies; in a certain sense diagonal lines that he can trace in the social fabric permit him to make these virtualities visible.”¹⁴⁹ According to Foucault, gay men render new forms of affective ties conspicuous and accessible due to their oppositional positionality. By illuminating friendship as an alternative to sexually oriented linkages, Foucault contributes a novel trajectory for Vietnamese diasporic solidarity with Black Lives Matter.

Applied to *Bốn Phương Trời*, Foucault’s formulation encourages a reading of the song that highlights how solidarity between Vietnamese and Black communities refute rigid rubrics of anti-Black racism and honorary whiteness to advance an alternative kinship. Sung in the space of East Oakland in a dual moment of Black morbidity and Asian American valorization, *Bốn Phương Trời* directly contravenes the narratives of Asian American social ascension and Black deviance. Instead, it affectively sutures these communities in protest to one another. In a different parallel moment, a dinner conversation illustrates the capacity of joy to build solidarity.

In 2015, Viet Unity hosted an intergenerational feast. It was an effort to bring youth and elders together in part for a screening of Jaq Nguyen’s documentary, “*Bữa Ăn Tiếng Việt* (BATV),” translated, Vietnamese speaking dinner. The film is based on an on-going event begun in 2012 by UC Berkeley students who met to eat Vietnamese food and hone their language skills. Over the years, BATV became a haven for the queer and trans Vietnamese community. The film “captures an unexpected night of intergenerational healing.”¹⁵⁰

The dinner was held at the East Bay Arts Alliance, a popular social justice hub on International Boulevard. It had been transformed for the evening with a plethora of signs, two of which hung on either side of the stage. On the left, a banner proclaiming “Viet 4 Black Lives” and on the right a sign that read Black Lives Matter in Vietnamese. Between these bookends, stood about 10 activists with their parents: the cast of the film. (The latter had earlier hosted a “cookshop,” teaching young Vietnamese organizers how to make the traditional dishes served that evening.) After the audience of approximately 100 applauded, they discussed its content. The conversation is an example of queer diasporic praxis and the ways it pivots on the axle of joy.

¹⁴⁹Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life” in *Foucault Live: Interviews 1966-1984* Ed: Sylvère Lotringer, (France: Semiotext(e), 1989), 207.

¹⁵⁰ “*Bữa Ăn Tiếng Việt: Vietnamese Speaking Dinner*” Vimeo, August 3rd, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/201320901>

Nguyen's film depicts a discussion between queer, trans, and non-binary Vietnamese activists with their parents about their development of the gender neutral pronoun "chanh," an amalgamation of the familial older sister and older brother pronouns in Vietnamese, "chi" and "anh" respectively. While the film showcases some challenging moments, the conversation on stage was one filled with laughter, frivolity, and levity. The night's organizers including Tracy Nguyen, Tran Sam,¹⁵¹ and Bao were each actively planning Black Lives Matter actions in the Bay Area. On stage, they and their parents, aunts and uncles laughed about early mishaps in the first usages of "chanh," which is also a homonym for lemon. The activists also underscored the need to communicate about queerness and racial justice, specifically the movement for Black lives. Bao said, "It's important to talk to our parents about racial justice, because if we don't, who will?" If *Bốn Phương Trời* portrays how anthemic impulses are building blocks for solidarity, the intergenerational feast depicts the necessary role of pleasure alongside pain. This relationship is instrumental to queer diasporic praxis and the cross-racial coalition it foment.

Christina Xu's "Letters for Black Lives" affirmed the imperative of building solidarity with Black Lives Matter by appealing to parents and elder family members. However, the conversation at the intergenerational feast highlights an equally vital element of the discussion-joy. In 2016, Irene Van said that despite the droves of activists sharing the letter on social media, "We would never send that to our parents. They would think it was hon." Hon means disobedient. The success of the conversations on the stage is indicative of how laughter and joy cohere queer Vietnamese diasporic community in its efforts to fight anti-Black racism. Van, who was also there that evening contrasts the seriousness of the stakes with the requisite levity required to uproot anti-Blackness. She uncovers how narratives of distress and state violence—while accurate—are ineffective and coded insubordinate within the Vietnamese filial order. When queer and trans Vietnamese activists attempt to bring their parents into the fold of anti-racism the use affective methods of laughter, joy, food, and raucous conversation to interrupt white supremacy.

Pleasure is a main ingredient of queer diasporic praxis. The hyper visible Black Lives Matter signs suggest the gravity of anti-racist work, the stakes of the evening. Yet, they bracket another dimension of reality, that joy plays an integral role in cross-racial coalition, particularly when marshaling the political will of Vietnamese diaspora for Black liberation. At one point, an elder on the stage made a lewd gesture about a lemon, referring to the new gender pronoun. Those onstage and off enjoyed a laugh before returning to the topic of gender identity and race. The vignette illustrates how that laughter is an affective bridge that spans generations and punctures the normative power of anti-Black racism and heteronormativity. Joyous exchanges queer the trajectory of normative racial and gendered fraternity. As Foucault says, these instances of pleasure, "short circuit it [institutional codes] and introduce love where there's only supposed to be law, rule, or habit."¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Name changed for anonymity.

¹⁵² Foucault, 205.

Some of the most compelling features of affective solidarity are rendered by organizers themselves. In the next section, I broaden and deepen queer relationality in the Vietnamese diaspora by turning toward a broader conception of affect that includes grief as well as joy.

I Feel ‘Em

Bốn Phương Trời exemplifies the joyousness of solidarity. It is an anthem of elation sung in the streets with child-like glee. However, grief is also a core affective component of coalition that works in tandem with elation to formulate queer diasporic praxis. But how does grief conscript? How does grief create? How does grief “collapse the distinction between the other and myself?”¹⁵³ Grief both binds and fuses, but perhaps most importantly in the trajectory of cross-racial allegiance, grief undoes.

In Judith Butler’s landmark Queer Studies text, *Undoing Gender*, the author argues that the body is always already constitutive of a relationality, but that being “beside oneself”, through grief or vulnerability, opens it up to an entangled sociality. This “ethical enmeshment”—or undoing that is at once a matter of embodiment and ontology—engenders a new mode of political association that tethers queer lives to a similar precarity within biopolitical state violence. Whether linked as AIDS-addled or subjects of imperialism, Butler claims we are always more than ourselves, overflowing with the making-of ourselves in relation to others. Bodies, not just queer bodies, but non-normatively gendered bodies are co-created in their grief to trouble and extend the shaping forces of our reality and to create new ones in which trans, femme, and butch bodies become grievable. As Butler writes, “we are constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies; we are constituted as fields of desire and physical vulnerability, at once publicly assertive and vulnerable.”¹⁵⁴ Ultimately Butler asks us to deconstruct the norms that govern humanity and frame who is grievable and who is not.

In the context of the cold morning of January 16th, 2015, Butler’s inquiries take on new and prescient meaning. Keeping in mind the vignette about Bao, a non-binary Vietnamese refugee chained to the doors of the Federal Building in Oakland, how do we make Black lives grievable? Asked differently, how do we make Black lives matter? The inaugural Third World for Black Power direct action responds to this query with a public display of grief. Clad in the traditional American funeral attire of all black, bound to one another with plastic and chains, with each passing mute minute a reminder of Michael Brown’s mortality and the pain it so publicly generated, Bao and those alongside them, symbolize how grief binds physically and socially.

The plastic tubing encasing the activists’ arms locked them in a joint lament of Black life. This material entrapment is a tangible manifestation of the “ethical enmeshment” to which Butler alludes. The rigid plastic enclosing the hands held inside it signals the affective potentiality of grief as that which forcibly conjoins the experiences of different communities of color under white supremacy and racial terror. Bao’s willing submission to physical and emotional

¹⁵³ Butler, 20.

¹⁵⁴ Butler, 18.

attachment to other Asian American organizers in the service of Black lives speaks to the ways grief bridges the geographically and epistemologically disparate phenomena of refugeehood and police brutality. While these phenomena are neither easily nor hastily brought together, dwelling upon grief is “to allow one to extrapolate from this experience of vulnerability to the vulnerability that others suffer through military incursions, occupations, suddenly declared wars, and police brutality.”¹⁵⁵ Grief can undo a myriad of historical sins. In mourning, the friction between Black and Asian communities exemplified by the Los Angeles Uprisings in 1992 and the anti-Black slant of the model minority trope begin to unravel. Through collective grief for Black life, affective solidarity can tentatively cohere a wide spectrum of seemingly disparate political violence from foreign imperialism to domestic anti-Black racism.

Irene Van, a former core member of Viet Unity, also channels pain and grief as a relational motivation and underlying factor of solidarity. After the protests in January, Van began facilitating anti-Blackness workshops for Vietnamese communities using methods drawn from the Theatre of the Oppressed,¹⁵⁶ a program and modality that uses theatre to promote social and political change. Van's efforts focused exclusively on uprooting anti-Blackness in Vietnamese families and community. Explaining why they were organizing solidarity efforts they said, “How much pain there is in talking to our parents about anti-blackness. Definitely not as much pain as folks getting shot, but the amount of silence and shame.” While on the spectrum of white supremacist violence, shame about internalized anti-Blackness and Black death itself vastly differ in their impact; Van offers a means of marshaling the pain as a common albeit limited lever for solidarity. In saying, “not as much pain . . . but the amount of silence and shame,” Van illustrates that grief is a key presence, but in racialized degrees. Similarly, a founder of Viet for Black Lives in San Jose, California locates the power of her own relational grief as an engine of coalition.

At a panel for Hai Ba Trung School for organizing, Trang Tran,¹⁵⁷ began crying after retracing her family's escape from Vietnam and her own experience with domestic violence. Ultimately she concluded, “I just know we have to do this.” Her words connect the racial terror of imperialism and the fear of corporeal violence to why fighting anti-Black racism is paramount in her struggle. Her tears are a telling example of a queer diasporic connection. Grief is a queer tie that binds.

In queer diasporic praxis, mediated advantage and its willingness to foreground Black death as a consequence of differential racialization, plays a vital role in a relational understanding of grief. Queer diasporic praxis encourages grief as a byproduct of the uneven experience of racial oppression. Similarly, Bao echoes the ability of grief and pain to bridge systemic oppression. When asked about their underlying desire or rationale for coalition with the

¹⁵⁵Judith Butler, “Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy” in *Undoing Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 23.

¹⁵⁶ Theatre of the Oppressed began in the 1970's, as a project of Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal. Boal was influenced by Paolo Friere to create a modality that required the audience to become active "spect-actors" capable of exploring, showing, analyzing and importantly, changing social and political realities.

¹⁵⁷ Name has been changed for anonymity.

Black Lives Matter movement Bao said, “As a queer person, I want to be in solidarity with queer Black people as I believe we’re oppressed to [sic] the same heteronormative systems.” Importantly, Bao’s use of “queer” in this sense is applicable to those who imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy has disavowed as exterior. Used in this way, both Bao and Michael Brown are queer or queered subjects in terms of their externality to white normative belonging. Queer contains a double meaning. Queer becomes both person and relationship; queer is a body as well as an experience of terror and expulsion.

In a conversation about the composition of Vietnamese/Black solidarity, Chan Phan,¹⁵⁸ another non-binary, queer Vietnamese organizer said the allegiance is built on the absence of belonging and the concomitant positionality that such racial and gendered violence begets. Phan, who is a core member of Viet Unity’s Oakland branch, is also a part of Third World Resistance. They contend a key part of solidarity is asking the rhetorical, “How do queer Viet folks make home?” implying that affective longing for home is a bedrock of allegiance between Vietnamese and Black communities.

Asian Americanists Rhacel S. Parrenas and Lok C. D. Siu offer a theory of Asian diaspora that is a polyvocal mode of interrogation premised upon spatial displacement, alienation, and a particular sense of collective consciousness.¹⁵⁹ At its core, their framework encourages scholars to understand Asian diaspora as an enabling mechanism for the normative disruption of homemaking by defining Asian diaspora subjects as those who “yearn to locate” a home they do not and cannot possess. Importantly, this “home” is the space of ethnic and national belonging. In the context of Vietnamese/Black American coalition, I augment Parrenas and Siu’s argument with the non-normative consideration of queer belonging.

Phan’s inquiry is an example of how queer diasporic praxis exceeds the boundaries of nationalism or sexually deterministic notions of diasporic belonging. David Eng contends that contemporary colorblindness during heightened moments of structural racism is the most recent chapter in the historical fabric of liberal white supremacy. He demonstrates how racial forgetting is crucial to inducting queer subjects into homonormative nationalist frames. Eng thus asks ever-important and looming questions like: what kinds of racial violence must be forgotten in order for subjectivity to form? In other words, what must be elided, be it race or queer social incomprehensibility, in order for subject formation to occur within neoliberalism?

To wit, Eng favors charged affectivities, or what he terms the “impossible psychic attachments”¹⁶⁰ of a queer diaspora. Wresting diaspora away from its organizing spatial and chronological narratives, its “backward looking glance,” he exhumes the intangible affective ties amongst diasporic subjects. In so doing, the author queers diaspora and denaturalizes kinship bonds premised upon race thereby reorganizing heterosexual and national filiations toward more malleable and liberatory frameworks. Revisiting Phan’s future-oriented rhetorical question,

¹⁵⁸ Name changed for confidentiality.

¹⁵⁹ Lok Siu and Rhacel Parrenas, Introduction to *Asian Diasporas: New Formations, New Conceptions*. Eds Lok Siu and Rhacel Parrenas, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 1.

¹⁶⁰ David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 60.

“How do queer Viet folks make home?” in light of Eng’s emphasis on psychic attachment makes room for alliances across race that deny “heteronormative discourses of racial purity underwriting dominant nationalist as well as diasporic imaginaries.”¹⁶¹ Queer Vietnamese activists organize coalition around feelings of loss, longing, and perpetual racial and gendered not-belonging. Dwelling on the “vexed identification and affiliations with lost objects, places, and ideals” forces them to productively “remain estranged and unresolved.”¹⁶² Distant from a diasporic ideal, queer Vietnamese activists carve out a positionality of solidarity that is distinguished by estrangement from the mores of performative gender and racial filiation.

Finally, while queer diasporic praxis makes normative exclusion a means for coalition, it grounds racial and gender difference—not similarity—as its necessary platform. Audre Lorde is one of many women of color who made bridging difference a principle tenet of women of color feminism and queer of color critique. In 1980, she resisted a “mythical norm” that took a similar racial and gendered shape to that from which queer Vietnamese organizers are excluded. She claimed within the white women’s movement, limited gender identity divergence from that norm defined the edges of political community. However, further diversity was seen as damning by those who interpreted the realities of Blackness and queerness and their intersectional weight as distraction. In contrast, Lorde presented neglecting difference as “the most serious threat to the mobilization of women’s joint power.” She claimed, “we sharpen self-definition by exposing the self in work and struggle together with those whom we define as different from ourselves, although sharing the same goals.”¹⁶³

Lorde advocated for the kind of affective, relational work Vietnamese activists pursue through queer diasporic praxis. Re-routing solidarity through the racial dissonance instead of sameness locates possibility within difference. Queer Vietnamese organizers foreground cross racial solidarity “not in our shared history or identity, but in our shared marginal relationship to dominant power which normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges.”¹⁶⁴ Put differently, solidarity is built upon acting with full acknowledgement of variance in the effects of white supremacist heteropatriarchal violence. Phan, Van, and Bao point toward difference and the pain associated with that difference as key to the work of allegiance. This centering allows Vietnamese organizers to reach toward Mohanty’s “common context of struggle” and not necessarily the specificities of the struggle itself. By reaching for difference and the pain it engenders, whether through diasporic un-belonging or parental shame, Vietnamese activists illustrate the vital role of affect.

Through joy, grief, exteriority, or longing, queer diasporic praxis relies on affect to forge solidarity. Queer diasporic praxis operates in a relational way, locating Black pain as that which has material consequences that vary greatly from feelings of familial shame. Centering this difference, the framework relies upon inextricable and often unnamed emotion as the ties that

¹⁶¹ Eng, 14.

¹⁶² Eng, 116.

¹⁶³ Lorde, 458.

¹⁶⁴ Lorde, 458.

bind and undo racial cleavage. Importantly, queer diasporic praxis refuses to rely upon grief as its sole mechanism. It is not simply agonized Blackness that creates or even informs solidarity. In the next chapter, I turn to the commitment to life as a key feature of cross-racial coalition. I ask what responsibility scholars have to life and how that undergirds the imagination required for enduring political community.

Chapter 4

Where's the Love? A Black Feminist Haunting of Social Death

A mentor once asked me a question that indelibly changed the parameters of my dissertation. During a conversation in which I was teasing out how Women of Color Feminism—Black Feminism specifically—counters contemporary theories of social death she asked me, “What would June Jordan say to Frank Wilderson?”¹⁶⁵ In other words, how would a formative Black Feminist articulate an argument against one of the preeminent scholars of afro-pessimism? I had been reading Jordan’s anthology, *Some of Us Did Not Die*, and thus delving deeply into the relationship between the lived experience of love and material death when this simple question veered me in an entirely new direction.

I tackle my mentor’s question—along with its attendant counterparts—here, in the last pages of an effort to re-frame radical acts of grassroots community struggle as fundamentally affective. I bridge Jordan and Wilderson, but also ask the questions crucial to such an investigation. For instance, how are Afro-Pessimism and Queer Pessimism rendered possible by white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy?¹⁶⁶ If these theories derive from oppressive structures, could “the potential for gender differentiation as it might express itself along a range of stress points” disrupt both the schematic of interlocking marginalization and the un-abiding pessimism to which it gives rise?¹⁶⁷ How does a Black Feminist lens render a pessimistic approach an untenable byproduct of masculinist desires for revolution? How do Black Feminists augment the pessimistic grid of intelligibility by advocating anti-patriarchal and anti-racist practices it excludes? Put differently, if we tether Afro, Black, and Queer Pessimism to the systems of marginalization of which they are derivative, what might a critical Ethnic and Asian American Studies platform resistant to—or at least cognizant of—pessimistic underpinnings look like? And finally, what are the implications of scholarship advocating any branches of pessimism?

In the aptly titled article “Life After Death,” Clyde Woods hints at the implications and answers to the above questions. He interrogates social scientists charting the decline of communities of color. Imploring scholars to move beyond or outside the overwhelming frame of anti-Black racism as experience, Woods encourages creating ethical scholarship that carves new worlds by envisioning scholarship as a tool of new world-making. Referring to the ways the sociologists have chronicled low-income communities of color, Woods asks the central question of the forthcoming pages, that is, “Is the patient really dead?”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Ula Taylor, personal conversation, April 24th, 2013.

¹⁶⁶ bell hooks, *Feminism is For Everybody: Passionate Politics* (New York: South End Press, 2000).

¹⁶⁷ Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” in *Diacritics*, 17, no. 2 (1987): 66.

¹⁶⁸ Clyde Woods, “Life After Death,” *The Professional Geographer*, 54, no. 1 (2002): 68.

While skeptical of essentializing narratives of resiliency common to theorizing activism, I argue alongside Woods that the dire prognosis for communities of color—particularly in relationship to the activism that uphold them—is a facile trope. I have argued the organizing efforts of the Vietnamese diaspora across generations and race creates a rupture in the discourse of diaspora. I now further contend this intervention extends to the conditions of possibility which work together to create pessimism. Employing Black Feminism as a framework, I claim Vietnamese diasporic acts of living, laughing, and mourning Black life actively destabilize over-determined theorizations of Afro and Queer Pessimism. In doing so, I follow Hortense Spillers in offering “a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations.”¹⁶⁹

Schools of pessimism have an investment in the relegation of Black and queer bodies to social death. Their commitment to this designation of fatality is what Chela Sandoval calls “an interested construction,” a discourse that privileges certain populations at the expense of others.¹⁷⁰ However, queer Vietnamese diasporic activism framed by Women of Color U.S. based feminism, Black Feminism in particular, forge a vital praxis that denies the imposition of morbid logics. Instead, it favors the material reality of a lived experience which resists the hegemonic landscape of oppression and its concomitant rhetoric of pessimism. Ultimately, this refusal resists the mantle of social non-existence and carves decisive pathways toward life. Pausing to meditate upon “a people, intact”¹⁷¹ brings the lived necessarily back into contemplations of social death. Moreover, doing so through a Black Feminist framework recaptures the forgotten, neglected, and negated epistemologies of Afro and Queer pessimism.

Troubling Afro and Queer pessimism is an admittedly tall task. Perhaps more importantly, interrogating these theories vis-à-vis the lived experience of a queer diasporic praxis within the Vietnamese diaspora could be considered comparing discursive apples to oranges. However, I choose to investigate the aforementioned theories not necessarily for the ideas proliferate within them, but for the inextricable lines of power that create and reinforce them. That is to say, if Blackness is inevitably queer because it consistently creates “new and different positions and conditions for thinking,” then perhaps queerness as it is articulated within the Vietnamese diaspora in movements for Black liberation is unavoidably tethered to dialogues around Afro and Queer Pessimism that push it to reimagine the lives with which it stands.¹⁷² If discourse is the “beliefs, habits, vocabularies, representations, institutional practices that taken together serve to articulate what will count as knowledge and succeed as power,”¹⁷³ investigating

¹⁶⁹ Spillers, 68.

¹⁷⁰ Sandoval, 85.

¹⁷¹ June Jordan, “Where’s the Love” in *But Some Of Us Did Not Die* (New York: Doubleday, 1998): 34.

¹⁷² Rinaldo Walcott, “Outside in Black Studies: Reading from a Queer Place in the Diaspora” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 91.

¹⁷³ Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000): 53.

the underpinnings of Afro and Queer Pessimism moves toward capturing the milieu in which their content can arise and perhaps queers the conjuncture in which they are received.

Queer theory is, as Lauren Berlant argues, “a training in paying attention to all that, the multiplicity of beats and points of convergence that correlate the surprise and contingency of relationality and desire with threat, delight, and ongoingness, world making and world building.”¹⁷⁴ Such a formulation reminds us how forging a relationality betwixt and between these Queer Studies, Black Studies, and Asian American Studies is both vital and necessary for Ethnic Studies scholars. In asking, what are the conceptual building blocks of frameworks activists are circulating and using, I also follow Rinaldo Walcott, to investigate how “queer studies interrupts the black studies project” and how Black Feminism then frames how queer Asian American activists conceive of Black life.¹⁷⁵ Such questions are vital to an Asian American Studies project.

In the final pages of my dissertation, I contemplate Black Feminism as an alternative trajectory for Asian American Activists. In part because Afro and Queer Pessimism are premised upon underlying systemic oppressions which both gives them rise and eclipses Black Feminist theorizations. More importantly because, as performance and African diaspora scholar Malika Imhotep succinctly poses it, “Is afro-pessimism making Black Feminism its ghost?”¹⁷⁶ This poignant question has the capacity to productively reroute the pathways of social death back toward its Black feminist origins; when the Combahee River Collective so profoundly stated that the genesis of Black Feminism was the “continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation.”¹⁷⁷ Black Feminism thereby renders the intimacy¹⁷⁸ of social life, social justice, and social death mobile, inextricable, and unavoidable. It is not a corrective, but a parallel genealogy with the potential to generatively interrupt or remind Afro and Queer Pessimism of the given intimacy between the living and the dead, but also that the woman and the lesbian are vital to forging that proximity. Thus, I shift the paradigm from Afro and Queer pessimism to Black Feminism in order to reimagine and re-establish concordance between Afro and Queer Pessimism *and* life lived within social death. Following the queering project outlined by Rinaldo Walcott and Chandan Reddy to queer Black Studies and interrupt Queer pessimism with Ethnic Studies respectively, I argue a Black Feminist project troubles the polemic set forth by both Afro and Queer Pessimism and exemplified by Asian American organizers.

¹⁷⁴ Lauren Berlant, “A Properly Political Concept of Love: Three Approaches in Ten Pages” in *Cultural Anthropology*. The American Anthropological Association 26:4. 693-691. 2011.

¹⁷⁵ Walcott, 91.

¹⁷⁶ Malika Imhotep, personal communication in Afro-Pessimist reading group, April 26, 2016.

Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in ¹⁷⁷ Hull Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith eds. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: But Some of Us are Brave*. (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1982): 14.

¹⁷⁸ Jared Saxon, “Ante-Anti Blackness: Afterthoughts” in *Lateral* no. 1. (2012).

In 2016, Asian American organizers circulated an online syllabus¹⁷⁹ for those in allyship with Black liberation. Many of the organizers discussed in this dissertation read and disseminated the works of Jared Sexton, Frank Wilderson III. They posted, liked, and shared the writings of Alicia Garza and the Combahee River Collective. Delving into the foundations of Afro-Pessimism to uncover its theoretical constructions, implications and the relationship it has to Black Feminism and activism is essential considering the ways each continues to shape current movement work. In this chapter I ask how, in light of its popularity, Afro and Queer-Pessimism attempt and fail to frame the queer diasporic praxis of Vietnamese American activism and how Black Feminism might succeed in the interstices of its deficits.

The grassroots work being done by Asian American activists recognizes the formative and ongoing violence of anti-Blackness without minimizing or conflating it with other structural forms of oppression. The dispossession wrought by capitalism and warfare that comes to organize the Vietnamese diaspora becomes the grounds to enunciate a common context of struggle against state-sanctioned violence. Within that work, Afro-Pessimism provides an invaluable blueprint for the particularities of anti-Black racism that Asian American organizers have used in both action and creed. It engages with the “foundational ahistorical quality of anti-Blackness,”¹⁸⁰ the deadly difference that Blackness makes in relationship to other communities of color. Afro-pessimists name the confrontation of Black life and racial terror in unique, important, and compelling ways. Similarly, queer pessimism productively charts the limitations of reproductive futurity. It pauses on the material reality of legal enfranchisement as a straw man in the quest for liberation. While these nodes of theorization are each productive in their request for contemplation of the limits of institutional gains, there are vital caveats to consider in accepting both Afro and Queer pessimist arguments whole cloth. Queer Vietnamese diasporic and Asian American solidarity with Black Lives Matter urges a shift toward a more expansive heuristic than that offered by arbiters of pessimism; one rooted in the political action and existence of lived experience; a praxis framed by Black Feminism.

Queer diasporic praxis and its accompanying technology, mediated advantage, address neoliberal mechanisms that dispossess communities of color. However, it refuses the kind of unidimensional engagement with state terror and jurisprudence offered by both Afro and Queer Pessimists. The joy, grief, exteriority, and relationality of queer diasporic praxis calls for a turn toward Black Feminism as a framework that can cohabit and indeed foreground the complexities of interlocking oppressions as well as the simultaneity of acting for justice while burdened with social death.

The proceeding chapter is not geared toward establishing a “non-existent” black ontology. Instead, I attempt to reintegrate and recapture the traces of Black Feminism within Afro and Queer Pessimist discourse. In so doing, I seek to frame the revolutionary potentiality of queer diasporic praxis as enacted by Vietnamese community activists as practices which trouble and exceed the grids of intelligibility provided by Afro and Queer Pessimism. If there is a recuperative impulse within this chapter, it is the desire to hold a protracted gaze at the Black

¹⁷⁹ The syllabus has since been taken offline, but existed as a Google Doc.

¹⁸⁰ Keith Feldman, Personal Communication, August 5th, 2018.

Feminism that Afro and Queer Pessimism has disavowed with the intention of discerning how activists hold these veins in common tension. Returning to this particular line of inquiry and the relationality between oppressions, flesh, and indeed the life it advances, I propose to re-map theoretical possibilities and chart new directions for Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies scholars.

Creating Pessimism

The work of Jared Sexton and Frank Wilderson III have roots in cherishing the fatality of specific bodies subjugated to white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. This investment in morbidity and indeed in death itself, is relative. Afro Pessimists like Frank Wilderson describe Blackness “as a structural *position* of non-communicability in the face of all other positions.”¹⁸¹(emphasis added) Wilderson captures Black subjects as non-subjects, purged of ontology and flexibility when contrasted against other marginalizations—importantly including indigenous genocide and imperialist war. That is to say, slavery produced a decisive and static “social and epistemological expulsion of the slave from the category of the human.”¹⁸² It is only through the abjection of the enslaved from white and non-Black subjectivities that humanity is rendered possible.

Sexton and Wilderson collectively argue for a hypostasis between the “twin axioms of white superiority and black inferiority.” Their seminal Afro-pessimist scholarship has paved the way for theorists and community activists. They claim there exists no exteriority to an all encompassing social, political and indeed, ontological death. It is overwhelming and perhaps the most profound in its simple ability to articulate that, “black life is lived in social death.”¹⁸³ Components of this claim vary. Jared Sexton proffers a productive entanglement between Black life and death, while Wilderson enunciates a more polemical framework for thinking through Afro-Pessimism.

Sexton centers the conjoining and perhaps irrevocable suturing of black life to black death within the “afterlife of slavery.”¹⁸⁴ His animating questions include whether and how Fred Moten has conceived of black optimism by disavowing black pathology; thereby rendering the relationship invisible, an elision Sexton cannot abide. By recuperating the black, Sexton claims Moten has evinced a tendency within black studies to resist the fatal and honest coupling of social life to social death. He asks whether black decay is “something that we ought to strain against as it strains against us. And even if, in the last instance, we decide to stay the course,

¹⁸¹ Frank Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham:Duke University Press, 2010): 58.

¹⁸² Mitchell, 9.

¹⁸³ Jared Sexton, “Ante-Anti Blackness: Afterthoughts” in *Lateral* no. 1 (2012): 29.

¹⁸⁴ Saidiya Hartman and Stephen Best, “Fugitive Justice” *Source: Representations*, vol. 92, no. 1 (Fall 2005).

need we mobilize a philosophy of life in order to do so?”¹⁸⁵ He rails against erasure within Moten’s work as reactionary and instead advocates a reading of Blackness that considers the conjoined nature of “black social life under the shadow of social death.”¹⁸⁶ According to Sexton, Black life and Black death share an “intimacy,” not an antagonism. He describes Afro-Pessimism thusly:

Nothing in afro-pessimism suggests that there is no black (social) life, only that black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage, of all the things that colonial society has in common with the colonized, of all that capital has in common with labor – the modern world system. Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space.

Afro Pessimism does well to carve a space for the specificity of anti-blackness as a racial project that implicates modalities of comparison and equivalency in its construction and reproduction of the modernity. Such a re-reading of racialization has wide impact for theorists and activists. By first illuminating where and how Black life does not exist in the ‘modern world system’ theorists can chart the ways in which anti-blackness functions materially as a force which distinguishes and demarcates “the noble agency of resistance” from its enslaved counterpart.¹⁸⁷ Afro Pessimism becomes a necessary way of thinking through two sets of relationships: theorizations of race/race as lived experience and social/material death.

Scholars are in a moment of reckoning and questioning to which Afro-Pessimism provides a provisional answer. The post mortems of Black life beg if not force the question: what are we to do with anti-Black racism and the differential racialization of anti-Blackness? Put differently, how can Asian American scholars and community activists better engage “the debasement of black humanity, utter indifference to black suffering, and the denial of black people’s right to exist?”¹⁸⁸ The question is broadly applicable to theorists and organizers. Taking up the latter, Andrea Smith contends while the black/white binary is accompanied by other binaries (she also refers to distinct parallel pillars of genocide/colonialism and orientalism/war) “it is still a central one that we cannot “go beyond” in our racial justice organizing efforts.”¹⁸⁹ The task then is not to ‘go beyond’, or outside of the black/white binary. The binary itself is a major foundation of racial capital in the United States. To forgo or sublimate it under a greater rubric of racial injustice is not only to deny that factuality, but also to pursue an unethical approach to scholarship that at its best is little more than an extension of the neoliberal

¹⁸⁵ Sexton, 14.

¹⁸⁶ Sexton, 27.

¹⁸⁷ Sexton, 32.

¹⁸⁸ Michael Jeffries, “Ferguson Must Force Us to Face Anti-Blackness” *The Boston Globe*, November 28, 2014.

¹⁸⁹ Andrea Smith, “The Three Pillars of White Supremacy” in *INCITE: Women of Color Against Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): 70.

multicultural project.¹⁹⁰ Smith's commitment to the black white binary within organizing is illuminating for its ability to hold racial slavery as a founding logic. Outside of an explicitly organizing context, Frank Wilderson offers a parallel framework with which to understand Afro-Pessimism.

Wilderson contends Afro-Pessimists render unavoidable a relationship between the long *duree* of chattel slavery and ontology and between ontology and field formation; making the question of whether "the Black position is indeed a position"¹⁹¹ warrant further examination. Wilderson backs a powerful discursive designation through an impossible genealogy of the slave and multicultural film. Unlike Sexton's focus on relationality, Wilderson apprehends slavery as the polemical moment of non-creation; that which "connotes an ontological status for Blackness."¹⁹² Borrowing from Saidiya Hartman he argues the logics of the slave trade are symptomatic of the incontrovertibly anti-human condition of Black bodies. In other words, slavery painted the Black outside of the civil order in perpetuity. He states:

Afro-pessimism explores the meaning of Blackness not—in the first instance-- as variously and unconsciously interpellated identity or as conscious social actor, but as a structural position of noncommunicability in the face of all other positions; this meaning is noncommunicable because... as a position, Blackness is predicated on modalities of accumulation and fungibility, not exploitation and alienation.¹⁹³

Wilderson posits Blackness stands outside of an analysis of not only the human, but also the non-Black and also the differently marginalized. For Wilderson, Blackness is that which cannot be uttered, spoken, or known. Built on the debasement of accumulation and fungibility, it follows that in order to attain meaningful freedom blackness which has been disavowed by humanity must then itself eschew the same subject-making force. Within blackness, freedom is only available in the form of total self-destruction. Recuperation is nonexistent. Clarity thus resides with the conclusion that "in order to attain the ethical purity of freedom itself, one would have to die."¹⁹⁴ Death and freedom thus become synonymous, irrevocable, and revolutionary. Lee Edelman applies a similar argument to the liberatory prospects of the queer.

Afro and Queer Pessimism employ different trajectories and figural bodies to which they lay claim. While Wilderson and Sexton fixate on the slave, Edelman claims the white male AIDS ravaged body. Edelman laments the queer impetus toward "reproductive futurity" as the truly damning inadequacy of queer subjects to discern their radical potential. The queer future-looking glance yolks queer subjectivity to a captive heteronormativity. Thus, releasing the queer from the

¹⁹⁰ Jodi Melamed, "The Spirit if Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism" in *Social Text*. vol. 24, no. 4. (2006): 2-24.

¹⁹¹ Wilderson, 27.

¹⁹² Wilderson, 15.

¹⁹³ Wilderson, 59.

¹⁹⁴ Wilderson, 23.

ubiquitous child and its orientation toward optimism foments revolutionary change. Edelman opines:

The governing compulsion, the singular imperative, that affords us no meaningful choice is the compulsion to embrace our own futurity in the privileged form of the Child, to imagine each moment as pregnant with the Child of our Imaginary identifications, as pregnant, that is, with a meaning whose presence would fill up the hole in the Symbolic—the hole that marks both the place of the Real and the internal division or distance by which we are constituted as subjects and destined to pursue the phantom of meaning through the signifier’s metonymic side.¹⁹⁵

In this rather lengthy and clunky quote Edelman dooms queer efforts to acquire civil rights because they labor under a reproductive compunction. The figure of the Child and the forward orientation it demands, defines limits and governs queer political life. Edelman encourages an alternate identification with the social and physical abjection of the queer as the space of radical potential disinvested from homonormativity. He argues the figural child undergirding all politics infuses political mobilization with futile hope, but relinquishing reproductive futurity and disavowing the Child potentially establishes a more democratic present.

Sexton, Wilderson, and Edelman portray the impossibility of liberators subjectivity within an era of imperial violence, racism, and sexism. Each of these authors ultimately gestures toward social—and occasionally corporal—death as a means of escape from an impossible or indeed non-existent subjectivity. In other words, if subjectivity does not exist or is so constrained by structural marginalization, death becomes the only true pathway toward freedom. My opposition to each of their arguments is analytical and theoretical.

The material reality of lived experience within Women of Color U.S. based feminism and their subsequent theorizing refuses the imposition of social non-existence. The relegation of bodies of color for social death is in other words a “dominant social reality,”¹⁹⁶ its revolutionary conclusion a byproduct of its hegemonic trappings. Put differently, pessimism as a broad field formation is reliant upon and derivative of the very strictures against which it chafes.

It is vital to consider Edelman’s argument as constructed within a moment of overwhelming homonormativity¹⁹⁷ during which a preoccupation with gay adoption and same-sex marriage dominates the national conversation. The social-political climate is a refraction of neoliberal economic policies that have been formulated through cultural meanings which shape the social body in a particular time and place. The pathway toward gay liberation through civil juridical means as well as via Edelman’s fixation on the Freudian death drive derives from a specific liberal—neoliberal—chronos. Elizabeth Freeman outlines the neoliberal project as one which “continues to reconstruct time.” She claims this active process of formulating a linear

¹⁹⁵ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 15.

¹⁹⁶ Sandoval, 85.

¹⁹⁷ Lisa Dugan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. (Boston: Beacon Press Books, 2003.)

post-Fordian time is most clearly captured by the phrase and policy, “No Child Left Behind” suggesting “there is, indeed, a behind in which the unlucky shall dwell.”¹⁹⁸ The unlucky here serves as a euphemism for queers and women of color. Edelman’s emphasis on queer death that is bracketed by queer oppression on one end and gay civil rights on another exemplifies a normative periodizing apparatus. That is to say, the queer death drive exists within normative time and indeed within homonormativity as heteronormativity’s descendant. Importantly, Edelman’s project further bespeaks an entrenched racial project.”¹⁹⁹

Field formations are political. The recent challenge within the social sciences to establish W.E.B. DuBois as a founding father of modern sociology is evidence of the racialized and gendered premise of scholarship. The humanities and social sciences rely upon a similar set of founding principles—that of white liberal thought. Queer theory evinces an analogous commitment to the universalized genderless, raceless man who in actuality is subject to a particular set of white masculine conventions. Deftly refuting Edelman’s argument thus requires interrogating the assumptive logic of the author in order to ultimately ask: what kinds of lived practices are lost or foreclosed by the parameters of Edelman’s project? More to the point, what is presumed about their impossibility?

Reading Edelman’s interpretation of Freud, Chandan Reddy depicts the author’s critique of the Symbolic as bounded implicitly by a construction of the “United States as a White social formation.”²⁰⁰ Invoking the racial character of Edelman’s archive (i.e. Hitchcock and the hit musical *Annie*) Reddy highlights how Edelman’s investigation labors under a hidden racial presupposition in which the “implied reader, viewer, or cultural consumer is a white citizen subject.”²⁰¹ But what are the latent if not explicit consequences of racially bounded scholarship? To wit, Reddy is exceedingly clear. He states, “Both the masculinity and the whiteness of the categories of queer and queerness go unremarked, assimilating diverse historical formations within national space to the historical predicament of the institutionally enfranchised white male queer (as a requisite identification) who elects unintelligibility.”²⁰² At first glance, Reddy’s analysis seem potentially outside the purview of Edelman’s primary arguments. Such claims about exteriority plague Ethnic Studies as a field, fueling designations like “victim studies.” Yet upon closer examination, by investigating the liberal white masculinist bias that is both dormant and foundational to Edelman’s treatise, Reddy illustrates the ways in which normative queerness and racialization are enabling mechanisms for Edelman’s theorizations. Investigating the content and the context of Edelman’s argument paints a clearer picture of how claims are the political byproducts of their racial, gender, and class milieus. Reddy’s analysis therefore provides two

¹⁹⁸ Chandan Reddy, *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011): 57.

¹⁹⁹ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Rutledge, 1994).

²⁰⁰ Reddy, 176.

²⁰¹ Reddy, 176.

²⁰² Reddy, 176.

insights regarding: 1) the value of a critical ethnic studies approach to critique and 2) a pathway for how to be attentive to the normative constraints of white liberal queer studies and Afro Pessimism.

While gender and race are poor analogues, white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy is ubiquitous. In an examination of the Black Studies and Black Feminist project, Nick Mitchell illuminates how the institutionalization of a revolutionary field actually hinges upon its oppressive patriarchal scaffolding. Specifically, Mitchell elucidates what Phillip Brian Harper has argued, that sense of Black community (or identity) is considered “to be fundamentally weakened wherever masculinity appears to be compromised.”²⁰³ Indeed, Mitchell reminds us of Michelle Wallace’s suggestion that the putatively liberatory political imagination of Black (male) liberation carried within it a *positive* investment in patriarchal domination. Heteropatriarchy thereby becomes a necessary, masculinist, and raced feature of emancipation from white supremacy. I contend Black Pessimism reflects and refracts a commitment to the heteronormative limits of revolution cum “freedom.”

Patriarchy is distinctly and insidiously embedded within revolutionary discourse. Discussing the journal *Black Scholar*, Mitchell says of the Black Studies project “it was also already made and animated *by* a dominant ideology that crystallized at and as the heart of its intellectual project and political vision. That ideology, I am arguing, is heteropatriarchy.”²⁰⁴ As a vector that emerges from within Black Studies, Afro-Pessimism exists in parallel fashion, fitting within what bell hooks terms “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” Afro Pessimism is reliant upon the gendered dominant symbolic order with little mediated intervention. To assume Afro pessimism exists outside of the heteropatriarchy which gave rise to the Black Studies project is a dubious proposition that denies history and necessary critique. Reading pessimism as discourse is therefore an exercise in uncovering elided and facilitating regimes of power that continue to go unexamined. How do Afro and Queer pessimism bend and arc when bridged with Black Feminism and glimpsed through activism in solidarity with Black life? Returning to the question Imhotep asked earlier in the chapter, “Is Afro-Pessimism making Black Feminism its ghost?” I launch into this heady line of inquiry through Saidiya Hartman’s meditation on the ethical pursuit and affective challenges of slave narratives.

Though Hartman is cited as one of the leading thinkers of Afro-Pessimism, her work is notably periodized and intentionally tethered to the transatlantic slave trade. Her analyses are in two instances connected specifically to the auction block and the violable-Black-slave figure of Venus. In her rumination of Venus, Hartman explicitly turns away from pessimism as generative. Her discussion of critical fabulation foregrounds a liminal space somewhere between avoiding the imposition of a recuperative narrative to the fungible body and that which “cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death—social and corporeal.”²⁰⁵ Yet residing in the tenuous afterlife of slavery requires a circuitry decidedly

²⁰³ Nick Mitchell, “Disciplinary Matters: Black Studies and the Politics of Institutionalization” (UC Santa Cruz, 2011), 147.

²⁰⁴ Mitchell, 168.

²⁰⁵ Hartman, 12.

different from the non-ontological “abstraction of a conceptual framework” for which Wilderson advocates.²⁰⁶

Hartman asks theorists to make particular moves in relation to conceptualizing anti-Blackness. She proffers, “trying to represent what we cannot, *rather than leading to pessimism or despair* must be embraced as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future.”²⁰⁷ (emphasis mine) Hartman turns decisively toward impossibility as that which is not only communicable across historical lines, but is also the space of a non-optimistic possibility. It is vital to remember the specificity of Hartman’s charge to avoid “pessimism or despair” even within the non-existent and unethical representation of Venus. The ‘impossibility that conditions’ is generative as opposed to ominous, mobile as opposed to static and potentially even productive. The figural Venus resists the temptation of absolutism and binaries of the “oft-noted dialectic of slavery and freedom, or power and resistance.”²⁰⁸ The dialogic to which Hartman alludes with Venus—in all of her violent and violable glory—portrays an ethical relationality between Blackness, womanness, social justice, and the lived.

The Brave Did Not Die

Specific cultural forms shift the the terrain of subjectivity. In *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, an early 1980’s compendium that lays out the contours of Black Feminism, Michele Russell suggests that while blues artists heed the conditions leading Edelman and Wilderson toward social and corporeal death, these singers actively contest the premature death of body and spirit imposed upon Black bodies through slavery.²⁰⁹ She looks to inimitable figures like Nina Simone and Billie Holiday because they reclaim the past, present, and future through the blues. Their singing is a politically aware act of social commentary which provides levers to differently engage matrixes of domination. She declares:

Bessie Smith, Bessie Jackson, (Lucille Bogan), Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, and Esther Phillips recall the worst aspects of our collective situation and teach how to wring from that the best transformation consciousness can achieve at precise moments in history. They are the bearers of the self determination tradition in Black women's blues. Unsentimental. Historical. Materialist. They are not afraid to name a job a slave, a marriage a meal ticket, and a loving grind. They all recreate our past differently. But each, in her own way and for her own day, travels the road from rape to revolution. Their rendering of that process is high art.²¹⁰

²⁰⁶ Hartman, 13.

²⁰⁷ Hartman, 13.

²⁰⁸ Russell, 76.

²⁰⁹ Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith eds., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women Studies* (City University of New York: The Feminist Press, 1982.)

²¹⁰ Wallace, 131.

In singing the historically specific conditions of social death, Russell argues the blues equips its listeners with the tools for a radical shift in consciousness. Her version of the blues is not an idyllic reinterpretation of the world, but a clear snapshot of what brings the Black female body close to death.

According to Ruth Gilmore, “racism is the state sanctioned or extralegal protection and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”²¹¹ Gilmore refrains from assertively moving toward death as a radical solution to this ‘vulnerability,’ a reservation with which I concur. Instead, the author illuminates how processes of racialization engender an important proximity to death which can be rerouted through feminist of color organizing like those of Mothers Reclaiming Our Children in Los Angeles. The racism Gilmore has heretofore referred to as a “fatal coupling of power and difference” characterizes anti-Blackness. Yet, by vocalizing the ways in which Black bodies are circumscribed and restricted, Michele Russell proclaims blues artists reconfigure the genealogies of violence Gilmore outlines in order to create an alternate pathway derivative of marginalizations, “the road from rape to revolution.” The act of the blues paints an “unsentimental,” “material” portrait of social death *while* providing an alternative through the process of unapologetically naming “a job a slave, a marriage a meal ticket.” In so doing, they simultaneously infer that Black womaness has not yet succumb to the parameters of its existence, that within Blackness and womaness (and as I will argue later, queerness of that positionality) exists the “bearers of the self-determination.”

The editors of *But Some of Us Are Brave*, Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, dedicate almost the entirety of their work to furthering the field of Black Women's Studies. They do so because the presence of Black Women's Studies in major universities, (albeit minimal at the time) “indicates that there are political changes afoot which have made possible that growth.”²¹² More simply, Hull, Scott, and Smith explain “At the very least, the combining of these words to name a discipline means taking the stance that Black women exist and—and exist positively—a stance that is in direct opposition to most of what passes for culture and thought on the North American continent.”²¹³

The theoretical entryway from which Edelman and Wilderson depart is highly conditioned; the circumscribed result of oppressive structures, or what Black Feminist Frances Beale calls the “old routines that were established under a racist, capitalist regime.”²¹⁴ I seek to recalibrate their theorizations of Afro and Queer Pessimism “in terms of their commitment to the Struggle.”²¹⁵ Structural oppression inhibits afro and queer pessimists from engaging with the lived strategies of community resistance as theory.²¹⁶ Women of Color U.S. based feminists,

²¹¹ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Fatal Couplings,” *The Professional Geographer* 54, no.1 (2002): 16.

²¹² Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, xvii.

²¹³ Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, 99.

²¹⁴ Wilderson, 99.

²¹⁵ Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, 106.

²¹⁶ Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, xvii.

particularly Black Feminists, undertake liberatory critique through the creative axes of political protest. They write from the spaces of (im)possibility, not optimism, that are borne of materially and perhaps banally resisting racism and sexism on a daily basis. Beale further offers a key distinction between death as freedom and death *for* freedom through the oftentimes violent work of making revolution. She writes:

We must begin to understand that a revolution entails not only the willingness to lay our lives on the firing line and get killed. In some ways, this is an easy commitment to make. To die for the revolution is a one-shot deal; to live for the revolution means taking on the more difficult commitment of changing our day-to-day life patterns.²¹⁷

Black Feminists write from a rooted space of organizing. They identify the seemingly mundane tasks of daily life as both sources of and the spaces most in need of change if revolution is to occur. Notably, Beale describes the chronology of death as linear, defined, escapist, and even “easy” in comparison to the everyday lived. Actively engaging with the cornucopia of internalized sexism and racism is more challenging than the “one-shot deal” encompassed by material death.

Much of *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970) centralizes the pedestrian as means of counteracting the mortal. Walking down the street to catcalls²¹⁸ and waiting in line for child support,²¹⁹ become spaces for social and political innovation making the same heteropatriarchal experiences that provide for Afro and Queer pessimism those which also instantiate a revolutionary praxis within the prosaic that constitute and extend life which refuse them.

Defiant Lesbianism

While I have discussed constructions of queerness previously, I want to be specific about the queerness employed by Black Feminists. I reorganize definitions of queerness around Black Feminism for two primary reasons: 1) because it understands “queer” and social justice as inextricable 2) to again critically trouble the “queer” of Edelman’s “queer studies.” As Jose Esteban Munoz delineates, “reproductive futurity” is embraced as a biopolitical impulse for a select few “queers.” In other words, the ontological certitude of Queer Pessimism is not totalizing, “the future is only the stuff of some kids.”²²⁰ Recognizing the flaws within white liberal queer subjectivity, I elect a Black Lesbian framework as a means of reconsidering queer

²¹⁷ Beale, 99.

²¹⁸ Fran Sanders, “Dear Black Man” in Hull Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith eds. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (City University of New York: The Feminist Press, 1982.)

²¹⁹ Clark, Joanna “Motherhood” in Hull Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith eds. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (City University of New York: The Feminist Press, 1982) Print.

²²⁰ Jose E. Munoz, *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) Print.

possibility. For, “If the condition of possibility for blackness is a certain radicalness in relation to capitalism's naturalizing temporal logic, the black radical tradition is engaged in maneuver that helps elucidate queer futurity.”²²¹

The authors of *All of the Women Are White, All of the Men Are Black, But Some of Us Are Brave* capture lesbianism as an active process that is both affective and material. Lesbianism exposes normativity, embodies a critical stance against patriarchy, centralizes women, and is alinear and revelatory. In her discussion of Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Barbara Smith writes, “If there are strong images of women and there is a refusal to be linear, the result is lesbian literature.”²²² Smith foregrounds a certain visibility and epistemological strength to lesbianism. She understands lesbianism to mean that which resists the parameters of modernity from a particular social practice of lesbianism.

However, Smith is careful of reducing a lesbian praxis to sexuality. She contends lesbianism is powerful because it is a combination of affect and the politically resistant narrative it generates. She elaborates, it is “not because women are “lovers,” but because they are the central figures, are positively portrayed and have pivotal relationships with one another. The form and language of these works are also nothing like what white patriarchal culture requires or expects.”²²³ What is crucial to comprehending lesbianism within Black feminism as a queer praxis (as opposed to a “straightforward” queer formation) is that first and foremost lesbianism is not a set of sexual behaviors. It is a combination of relationships between Black women and how they are informed by what the authors of the Combahee River Collective Statement call a “felt need” for political change. In contemporary queer studies, Gayle Salamon considers affect a “felt sense,” but because Black feminists write and wrote from spaces of social justice organizing such as the Black Panther Party and the recent Civil Rights struggle, they offer a queer praxis that actively and explicitly refutes the strictures of sexism and racism. Theirs is a directed affect with a political purpose. The context of political struggle which gives rise to their theories of the flesh²²⁴ as well as their democratic goals irrevocably alter white liberal queer theory's constructions of either queerness or affect.

Black feminists embed the relationality of lesbianism with a social challenge. Lorraine Bethel makes Black lesbianism interchangeable with feminism or woman-identification. She writes:

Black woman identification, the basis of Black feminism and Black feminist literary criticism, is most simply the idea of Black women seeking their own identity and defining themselves through bonding on various levels—psychic, intellectual, and emotional, as well as physical—with other Black women . . . It is the process of identifying one's self with and the selves of other Black women inherently valuable, and

²²¹ Munoz, 87.

²²² Smith, 164.

²²³ Smith, 164.

²²⁴ Moraga's brief, but instrumental concept of “theory in the flesh” runs throughout and connects *This Bridge Called My Back*.

it is perceived by the dominant white/male culture as the most threatening because it challenges that that culture's foundations.²²⁵

The shift from the affective, or what Bethel calls the “psychic, intellectual, and emotional,” bolsters a specific threat of social change to hegemonic white supremacist heteropatriarchy. While the passage does exemplify “an effect of the impressions left by others,” it further illuminates a socio-cultural antagonism borne of affect.²²⁶ My genealogy of queerness and affect thus begins with Black Feminism because it provides a dynamic unacknowledged affective queer praxis that explicitly seeks to violently disrupt with life as opposed to death. Black Feminism in particular offers a nuanced framework for understanding the endurance of praxis that is neither reductive, essentializing, nor mired in identity politics.

Like the Thuyet Phan singing *Bốn Phương Trờ*, contemporary Black Feminists, like the Crunk Feminist Collective (CFC) use similar sonic affective points of departure to generate a queer praxis. They begin with the lived experience of marginalization as a basis for resistance from the in-between spaces and peripheries of social life, yet they claim affect is that which exceeds matrixes of domination.²²⁷ Affect is that which simultaneously coheres community and provides traction for social justice movements. From marginal spaces of inclusion, CFC indicates “a percussive moment, one that signals the kind of productive dissonance that occurs as we work at the edges of disciplines, on the margins of social life, and in the vexed spaces between academic and non-academic communities.”²²⁸ The Crunk Feminist Collective speaks to a particularly resilient affect, what they call an “intoxication” at the intersection of hip-hop, feminism, and anti-racism that cannot be captured by hegemonic discourse or dominant culture.

What’s Love Got To Do With It?

I conclude with some tentative answers to the inaugural question of this chapter: what would June Jordan say to Frank Wilderson? For this dissertation, I re-read beloved June Jordan essays and argued alongside her about the organizing possibilities of a global refugeehood. I even commandeered some of her less savory tobacco habits along the way. But my mentor’s initial question remains unanswered.

In 1978, Jordan gave a talk titled “Where’s the Love” at Howard University. It was part of a greater seminar billed as “Feminism and the Black Woman Writer.” In the talk, Jordan focuses on love as a project of Black feminism, a process of coming into one’s self in order to connect with others. She discusses the stifling socio-economic strictures Black women face. Ultimately argues, the “inviolable coincidence of my status as a Black feminist” is “that I stand

²²⁵ Bethel, 184.

²²⁶ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

²²⁷ Pat Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 221–238.

²²⁸ Crunk Feminist Collective Mission Statement www.crunkfeministcollective.com

in a struggle against suicide."²²⁹ I am tempted to end the chapter here, without context or connection to Audre Lorde's work on the difference between anger and hatred (the former productive, the latter deathly), but the relationality of one Black Feminist to another is precisely that for which Jordan strives.

She claims love is the political state of being connected to other bodies in struggle and overwhelmed with life. The act of loving is therefore incontrovertibly anti-death, it is a project of establishing ties with other living beings. Whether it is across racialized communities or seemingly insurmountable generational divides, bodies of color are what Jordan calls, "twice stigmatized" a "coincidence" that enables one to stand with others "against suicide." This critical stance means love is a collective feminist project, a process of coming into one's self through relationships with others. And it is precisely what Vietnamese and Asian American organizers have pursued since 2014 in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter Movement.

A few days before the shut down action at the Ronald V. Dellums Federal Building in 2015, I attended an art build at the Eastside Arts Alliance in Oakland. Before the small crowd of twenty began cutting cardboard and splashing paint to craft out "Viet 4 Black Lives" and "Vietnamese Against State Violence" signs, the day's facilitators led a breakout discussion and a larger group share back. There were new and familiar faces in the room and attendees varied in age. Some were elders in their 60's, a small smattering were formerly incarcerated men who organize with the Asian Prisoner Support Committee, but most were in their early 20's and 30's. Of this latter group, three were moved to tears during the discussion of imperial violence and police brutality. A young person in a red hoodie and jean jacket raised their hand to say some words about how the conversation impacted them. They concluded with, "We're Vietnamese, we have to do solidarity different."

Throughout this dissertation, I have attempted to illustrate this young organizer's point. I shed light on the relationship between dispossession, diaspora, and refugeehood as inextricable within neoliberalism. I defined queer diasporic praxis as an affective framework for connection that forges alternative kinship while utilizing the technology of mediated advantage to disavow controlling imagery of the model minority in its efforts to build cross-racial coalition with the Black Lives Matter movement. Finally, I outlined the limitations of Afro and Queer Pessimism in contemplating the affective registers of Asian American and queer diasporic modes of relationality. However, as I moved through each of these chapters and concepts, the central concern of my project was always to consider a now familiar Ethnic Studies question, that is, "what difference does difference make?"

In my dissertation I tried to illustrate that Asian American and queer diasporic Vietnamese organizers refuse to "go it alone." I provided examples of the ways community activists in action and declaration continue to heed the particularities of anti-Black racism while honoring their own lineages of white supremacist struggle. I contributed an analysis of their affective cohabitation of racism against their communities and those of Black Americans in the service of liberation. In so doing, I hoped I to counter a proclamation Audre Lorde made in 1980 at the "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" lecture I unpacked in the first chapter of this investigation, that "Ignoring the differences of race between women and the

²²⁹ Jordan, 271.

implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women's joint power.”²³⁰ In seriously considering the relational and affective particularities of Asian American and queer Vietnamese diasporic solidarity with Black lives, I tried, and hopefully succeeded, in making difference matter.

²³⁰ Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” (lecture, Copeland Colloquium at Amherst College, 1980).

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Appendix 1

Solidarity Statements from Chapter 2

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