This Tree Needs Water!: A Case Study on the Radical Potential of Afro-Asian Solidarity in the Era of Black Lives Matter

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To cite this article: Jeanelle K. Hope (2019) This Tree Needs Water!: A Case Study on the Radical Potential of Afro-Asian Solidarity in the Era of Black Lives Matter, Amerasia Journal, 45:2, 222-237, DOI: 10.1080/00447471.2019.1684807

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2019.1684807

Published online: 07 Nov 2019.

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This Tree Needs Water!: A Case Study on the Radical Potential of Afro-Asian Solidarity in the Era of Black Lives Matter

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**ABSTRACT**

In 2018, Stephon “Zoe” Clark and Darel Richards were killed by the Sacramento Police Department as an act of state-sanctioned violence at the intersection of a historically Black and Southeast Asian community. This article examines how a new iteration of Afro-Asian solidarity led by Asian American activists, artists, and organizers is emerging in South Sacramento as a direct response to urban repression and state-sanctioned violence in the era of #blacklivesmatter.

**KEYWORDS**
Asian American activism; #blacklivesmatter; police brutality; Afro-Asian solidarity; Sacramento

On March 18 2018, two Sacramento Police Department (SPD) officers fatally shot 22-year-old Stephon “Zoe” Clark in the Meadowview neighborhood of South Sacramento. After public outcry, video footage was released by SPD showing the officers chasing Clark into his grandmother’s backyard, demanding he show his hands in one instance, and, in the next, yelling, “gun, gun, gun” with a barrage of gunfire. The two officers fired twenty rounds, with eight shots tearing through Clark’s body, six of which went into his back. Contrary to the frantic commentary of the officers, Clark was unarmed. What they believed was a gun turned out to be a cell phone. With national news attention, protests swelled throughout the city and county of Sacramento for over a year.¹

Clark’s death was a moment with which both Black people and Asian Americans in South Sacramento were forced to reckon. Clark was killed minutes away from Sacramento’s Little Saigon business and cultural district and he had been in an interracial relationship with his fiancée. Salena Manni, who is Southeast Asian and with whom he had two small children. Moreover, just five months after Clark’s untimely death, Darel Richards, a 19-year-old mixed-race Hmong and Black youth, was also fatally shot by SPD under similar circumstances.² In the days and months following Clark’s death, several marches occurred near the cultural district, eliciting responses from Asian American community members. While some Asian American business owners disagreed with the protests or feared that protests of any sort – no matter how righteous – would result in property damage, other Asian American Sacramentans took to the streets, marching, blocking traffic, and laying their bodies on the line with other protestors to demand justice for the Clark and Richards families. This period of unrest highlighted the precarious relationship – a swirl of volatility and solidarity – between Black people and Asian Americans in South Sacramento.

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In this essay, my main argument is that state-sanctioned violence, domestically and globally, as well as the geographic proximity of Black people and Asian Americans are motivating new iterations of Afro-Asian solidarity in the era of #blacklivesmatter. This article examines the complex history of Black and Asian American community formation in South Sacramento. Unlike San Francisco and Los Angeles, which have been examined as sites of Afro-Asian solidarity and include large East Asian communities, South Sacramento’s settlement patterns involve a Southeast Asian refugee community, similar to Fresno and Long Beach, and presents another lens to understand Black and Asian American racial formation. These are Asian Americans who have been differently racialized. To put it simply, they are not “model minorities.” Moreover, many carry with them explicit experiences of state-sanctioned violence and militarism. I turn to the narratives of local activists, community organizers, and artists to interrogate and better understand how they are working to actualize a new iteration of Afro-Asian solidarity in the era of #blacklivesmatter. This solidarity is directly informed by a shared experience with state-sanctioned violence, the dynamics of being in an urban environment, and of Black people and Southeast Asians being subjected to a similar racialization that often casts them as deviant. By foregrounding the narratives of Asian American activists across three generations – baby boomers, Generation X, and millennials – with differing approaches to solidarity building and activism, this work begins to illustrate emergent forms of Afro-Asian solidarities and their radical potential, underscoring contemporary modes of activism from a hyperlocal perspective. Finally, I conclude this work by reflecting on some current barriers that have stymied Afro-Asian solidarity building in South Sacramento and beyond.

Asian Americans in South Sacramento are increasingly confronted with issues commonly associated with the Black struggle, including colorism, homelessness and untenable housing, geographical displacement, joblessness and wage inequality, hyper policing and surveillance, gang violence, mass incarceration, food insecurity, other health inequities, and the broader implications of racial capitalism. During a period marked by the dismantling of civil rights victories gained during the 1950s–1970s, some older Asian Americans have become reenergized, and younger generations have arguably been drawn to the Movement for Black Lives as a means to confront and grapple with some of the aforementioned inequities and injustices in the community. Additionally, geographic and material proximity of Asian Americans to Black people in South Sacramento, the often-organic exchange of cultures and formation of hybrid identities, and the many shared economic and political struggles residents are seeking to address emerge as key entry points for cultivating solidarity. Thus, South Sacramento serves as a salient case study on the challenges and opportunities toward growing relationships, strategies, and conditions necessary for building a new iteration of Afro-Asian solidarity.

Existing literature on Afro-Asian solidarity can be divided into five traditions. The first is an abstract or intellectual analysis, often locating Afro-Asian solidarity in the writings and ideologies of activists, philosophers, and international leaders (e.g., W.E.B. DuBois, Grace Lee Boggs, and Mao Zedong) whose work has foregrounded Black and Asian shared struggles and alludes to the necessity of solidarity. Another strand is based on imagined solidarities manifested via cultural production, hybrid identities, and Black-Asian masculinity. Relatedly, there is an internationalist tradition, based on solidarities defined by foreign affairs and forged between African and Asian nations, as well as those that emerge in response to war and militarism. Taking on an anti-imperialist geopolitical inflection, another form of Afro-Asian coalition was influenced by the nonaligned
movement and third worldism. These approaches to Afro-Asian solidarity informed the grassroots and intellectual solidarities born out of the Asian American and Black Power movements, which, in turn, have shaped ethnic studies. On the whole, these traditions have overwhelmingly approached Afro-Asian solidarity from a Black-East Asian perspective, turning to ideology and cultural production as primary sites of solidarity, though they seldom explored solidarity beyond the 1970s.

In “Insurgency and Asian American Studies in the Time of Black Lives Matter,” Justin Leroy calls on scholars in the field to critically grapple with the Movement for Black Lives and to draw connections to shared struggles between Asian Americans and Black people in an effort to “dislodge from nationalistic narratives.” This necessary shift will generate more global analyses and counterpoints that will help an already internationalist movement further castigate global white supremacy. Drawing on the aforementioned traditions of Afro-Asian studies, this case study begins to chart new directions within the field that also respond to Leroy’s call. While there is certainly a proliferation of different kinds of Afro-Asian solidarity in the era of #blacklivesmatter, including those that emerge in response to third world liberation movements happening elsewhere and displays of digital solidarity on social media platforms, this essay homes in on how a shared history of state-sanctioned violence, urban renewal and suburbanization, and refugee resettlement has brought Black people and Asian Americans in South Sacramento together in a moment of heightened trauma and crisis to help propel a local and global movement.

As we reflect on fifty years since the establishment of Asian American studies and the emergence of the Asian American Movement (AAM), it is impossible to divorce this milestone from grassroots activism. Choosing Third World solidarity in lieu of racial isolation and assimilation, Asian American activists were intimately involved in many struggles during the late 1960s and 1970s, including the Third World Liberation Front strike, the Free Huey campaigns, and the United Farm Workers movement. However, while seeds of solidarity, especially Afro-Asian solidarity, were planted both at the grassroots and in the field of Asian American studies fifty years ago, have they germinated? In a historiographical analysis of the Asian American Movement, Diane Fujino, for instance, has critiqued the field for its erasure of Asian American activism and, subsequently, its discussion of solidarity and movement building. While much has changed in the 11 years since the publication of Fujino’s article, as reflected in the work of Daryl Maeda, Karen Ishizuka, and the publication of this special issue of Amerasia Journal, there is still a great deal of work ahead of us in chronicling and analyzing contemporary Asian American activism and Afro-Asian solidarity, particularly among Black, Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islander populations.

As a field born out of being in solidarity with other oppressed people, it is not surprising that we, as Asian American studies scholars, are studying the Movement for Black Lives, which has reshaped contemporary social movements and social movement scholarship, grassroots activism, and politics. Drawing on the early history of Afro-Asian solidarity and Asian American activism, this case study begins to frame emerging solidarities while considering how they might help us reimagine our collective future—both as a scholarly field and as people engaged in struggle.
Asian American migration and community formation in South Sacramento

Although scholars like Yong Chen and Judy Yung have long written about Chinese migration to major cities in the West during the nineteenth century, the history of Asian migration to the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta region remains underdeveloped. Due to the area’s rich agricultural landscape, Sacramento became a destination of interest for new immigrants. Early Asian migration to the region and community formation largely echoes what occurred in other major cities in California, i.e., Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland – a wave of Chinese immigrants were soon trailed by Japanese and Filipinos. In Sacramento, both Chinese and Japanese immigrants established their own bustling racial enclaves in the West End, which were nearly decimated during World War II and the postwar era due to heightened anti-Asian sentiment, Japanese internment, the construction of three major highways, and the development of the Capitol Mall.

During the post-World War II era, South Sacramento developed into a catch-all community for many Black, Japanese, and Chinese Sacramentans who had been systematically marginalized and displaced from other neighborhoods in the city due to urban renewal, redlining, and racial covenants.

Following the Vietnam War, the space quickly became a haven for Hmong and Vietnamese refugees. Through the 1980s, both Vietnamese and Hmong immigrants settled along Florin and Stockton Boulevards, creating their own racial enclaves. By the 1990s, the area witnessed an influx of Pacific Islanders (specifically Fijians, Tongans, and Samoans) and immigrant-owned businesses, setting the stage for the creation of Little Saigon. It is this history of urban renewal, redlining, and refugee resettlement that has truly shaped contemporary South Sacramento with regards to its Black and Asian American, and Pacific Islander communities.

From the 1980s through the early 2000s, the area gained a reputation for its gritty landscape – widespread poverty and drug addiction, thriving gang culture and street violence – which only worsened with “War on Drugs” policies. Confronted with decades of depressed property values and a lack of city and county investment, Black and Asian American youth turned to the streets and underground economies, redesigning South Sacramento’s geography through gang lines and creating makeshift families of their own. Beyond factions of Black-led Bloods and Crips, there were (and still are) factions led by Vietnamese and other Asian Americans, as well as distinct Vietnamese, Hmong, Tongan, Samoan, and Latinx gangs. Despite Black and Asian American and Pacific Islander communities intersecting in South Sacramento, gang culture made it incredibly difficult to reconcile geographic proximity and peace; it was an urban war zone.

In an interview, longtime South Sacramento resident and local educator Denisha “Calo Blossom” Bland described the space: “like, you can have a Mexican family, a Tongan family, and a Black family all on yo same block in G-Parkway. And it’s like, okay, we here; how we gon’ navigate this space?” Between this history of urban violence among youth and the histories of militarism and warfare abroad held by immigrants and veterans of color living in South Sacramento, the area gained a new moniker: “South Sac Iraq,” which has become increasingly incongruous with the vision of local politicians, more recent migration, and the changing socioeconomic dynamics.

As Sacramento’s leaders work to transform the second-tier city into a booming metropolitan area, residents are witnessing the rise of the police state and neoliberal
capitalism. As Margit Mayer argues, “Cities are today confronting a more competitive (global) environment and local governments have taken to place-marketing, enterprise zones, tax abatement, public-private partnerships, and new forms of local boosterism.”

In Sacramento, this political economic restructuring is all too familiar. While city dollars are frequently approved to greenlight public-private partnership (P3) projects in the downtown and midtown districts, including the Golden 1 Center and recent proposal for the construction of a Major League Soccer (MLS) Stadium, “impacted neighborhoods” are often overlooked. Conversely, communities such as South Sacramento experienced increased surveillance and racial profiling, ticketing, forfeitures, and arrests by militarized law enforcement. The inequitable distribution of city and county funding is stark, but through it all, residents of South Sacramento have remained resilient, finding ways to address social issues amongst themselves. If anything, the racial demographics, growing disdain with the city’s lack of investment in South Sacramento, and the surge in state-sanctioned violence impacting both Black and Asian Americans actually gesture toward the radical potential of building Afro-Asian solidarity in the community.

Consciousness raising through imagined and street solidarities in South Sacramento

Urban farms, after-school and extracurricular programs for youth of color, extended community center hours, and summer programming are some of the most visible community and nonprofit responses to the conditions in South Sacramento. Despite being devoid of a radical political agenda, many of these services and programs function similarly to the “serve the people” programs that were popularized during the late 1960s and 1970s. However, sustained solidarity building in the area has been much more challenging. In his single, “Sleep Walkin,” Mozzy, a local Black hip hop artist and member of the Oak Park Bloods, names a moment of Afro-Asian encounter that offers some semblance of rudimentary solidarity. Mozzy raps,

Shoot you if you make me, nigga.
E. we finally made it nigga.
Mozzy, Shawn callin’ from the bounty, “what you facing, nigga”
Shout out to the Asian boys, I love you for them katas, nigga27
Call me when you need me, y’all forever in my favor, nigga28

“Sleep Walkin” is an ode to Mozzy’s experience navigating South Sacramento as a Black youth. From being entrenched within the city’s gang culture, his complicated relationship with the prison industrial complex, and abuse of prescription drugs to grapple with feelings of depression, grief, and pain. Mozzy’s metaphorical use of sleep walking succinctly captures his lived experience – a cycle of violence (both state-sanctioned and gang-related) and a dazed and unpredictable state that is underscored with nihilism. Conversely, the song also highlights these moments of reprieve that are often facilitated by the Black youth that he names and “Asian boys” he credits toward the latter end of the song. While brief, the aforementioned verse helps name an often-unspoken history of both solidarity and volatility within California gang history. While gangs, especially the Bloods and Crips, are often depicted as predominately Black organizations, in South Sacramento, as well as in cities like Long Beach and Fresno, Southeast Asians are known affiliates, members, and even leaders of sets of the Bloods and Crips. The multiracial
dynamics of gang culture has created both moments of heightened Black-Asian conflict and Afro-Asian solidarity.

While this is not an example of radical Afro-Asian solidarity, this illicit exchange of guns, like the one that Mozzy is describing, has spurred moments of truce between otherwise rival Black and Asian American gangs in South Sacramento. Mozzy’s assertion, “Call me when you need me, y’all forever in my favor, nigga,” suggests a fictive kinship and commitment to showing up for Asian American gang members in moments of peril, whether that be a street conflict or larger struggle. This moment of solidarity, while steeped in violence, at the grassroots is significant as it can help spur greater commitments to intercultural relations within communities like South Sacramento. Moreover, the formation of Afro-Asian solidarity around the exchange of guns in an urban setting has historical precedent, as Richard Aoki notoriously provided the Black Panther Party with their first guns in the mid-1960s. Overall, Mozzy’s experience echoes that of many Black and Asian American millennial men that came of age in urban centers like South Sacramento, in that masculinity for this generation has often been constructed around forms of racialized violence. Thus, solidarity within this context becomes inextricably linked to violence.

But what does it look like to transform the street solidarities in South Sacramento into a sustained working-class movement grounded in Afro-Asian solidarity that aims to address state-sanctioned violence, racism, and inequities in the community more broadly? At the grassroots, local activists have begun to respond to this question through art, consciousness raising, and political education, leading to intercultural dialogues with Black and Asian American youth. While attending an event at Sol Collective, a grassroots center for art and activism, in 2016, I had the opportunity to hear Salvin Chahal, a Sacramento-based Indian American poet and activist, perform. Chahal describes his poetic style as an intersection of hip hop and Indian culture. As a dark-skinned Asian American, much of his poetry is about colorism and racism, police brutality, and growing up in Sacramento. In his piece, “Dreams After 9/11,” he spits

Asian American but a different type of brown
Imagine all the stress in picking out the right crowds
Imagine guessing ways that the day would play out
So Mom and Pops could imagine living safe with no doubt
But the image in this American dream is hard to see

The poem is a reflection on Chahal’s experience being confronted with islamophobia and state-sanctioned violence as an Indian American, post-9/11. Furthermore, Chahal complicates what it means to be Asian American. He starts the piece, “Asian American but a different type of brown,” centering his lived experience navigating South Sacramento as a darker Asian American and emphasizing the demonization that often manifests in response to his physical appearance. Moreover, Chahal’s discussion on his brownness parallels how scholars, and many Black people in general, discuss the implications of blackness. He is intentional about connecting Black and South Asian struggles, while simultaneously amplifying incidents of state-sanctioned violence and #blacklivesmatter activism. His work even includes nods to historical moments of sustained Afro-Asian solidarity, as his style is arguably influenced by Black nationalist rhetoric and poetic devices that were popularized during the Black Arts Movement. Chahal’s work echoes how Black people and Asian Americans in South Sacramento are being similarly racialized
in the space. Through poetry and spoken word, Chahal is creating this imagined space of Afro-Asian solidarity, verse by verse.

But Chahal’s commitment to curating Afro-Asian solidarity moves beyond the imagined and into workshops and classrooms. In April 2018, Chahal was tapped to assist with coordinating the Sierra Health Foundation’s “My Brother’s Keeper” programming. Building on former President Barack Obama’s task force, which shared the same moniker, the localized programming aimed to better understand the challenges that confront boys and young men of color (BMoC) in the Sacramento region. Similarly, Brian Phu, a 26-year-old Chinese American whose parents fled Vietnam, works with Improve Your Tomorrow, a South Sacramento-based nonprofit for boys and men of color. In these capacities, both Chahal and Phu mentor and advise dozens of Black and Asian American, often Southeast Asian, boys who are frequently labeled as “at-risk” or have been tracked for gang violence.

While Chahal and Phu are often interpreted as Asian Americans who embody elements of blackness (i.e., their art, style, their friend groups, and even the cadence in their voices), especially Black masculinity, they are positioned and embraced as authentic representations of South Sacramento—one that is not strictly Black or Asian American, but an example of hybrid identities born out of similar racialization, shared struggles, and geographic proximity. Moreover, because of their own radicalization, which has manifested as a commitment to addressing childhood trauma as well as mending Black-Asian relations, Chahal and Phu are able to leverage their work to help cultivate a sense of brotherhood or fictive kinship between Black and Asian American youth. In essence, they are helping to water the seeds of solidarity that were planted fifty years ago, while simultaneously working to sow new ones.

As artists, community organizers, and mentors, Chahal and Phu’s work approaches Afro-Asian solidarity building through consciousness raising. By mediating conflicts between rival Black and Asian American gangs, helping to demystify stereotypes held by Black and Asian American youth, and leveraging poetry and mentorship to challenge South Sacramento youth to identify shared struggles instead of differences, Chahal and Phu are able to cultivate the notion of Afro-Asian solidarity among younger generations. During the late 1960s, Asian American activism and Afro-Asian solidarity did not occur in a vacuum. Strategic consciousness raising, political education, and sustained interpersonal relationships grounded in a shared struggle as well as art and cultural production provided a foundation for activism and solidarity to flourish. Today, in spaces like South Sacramento with a new generation of future activists that have fewer contemporary references of Afro-Asian solidarity, Chahal and Phu’s work is a critical form of activism that is helping to counter narratives of Black-Asian conflict and lay the groundwork for future movement building.

Accompliceship and reframing state-sanctioned violence as war

While Chahal and Phu have focused on art and energizing youth by foregrounding the radical potential of Afro-Asian solidarity, seasoned activists in the city have turned to more traditional forms of activism (i.e., protests and community organizing), social media, and mentorship to help grow solidarity in South Sacramento and beyond. On the Saturday following the Clark shooting, a protest was held in South Sacramento in the heart of Little Saigon. One of the protestors guiding everyone up the street, securing intersections, and chanting was Phung “L.B.” Le. In her late forties, Le is a fixture within Sacramento organizing circles. Le has participated in various direct actions that have resulted in her
being forcibly removed from multiple Sacramento city council meetings. Most notably, she was shot while protesting a far-right group in Berkeley. In addition to being on the front lines of protests, Le’s activism also encompasses art and the creation of her own “serve the people” programs in Sacramento. She hosts food and clothing drives for the homeless, teaches self-defense classes, and writes and performs spoken word poetry that is directly informed by her activism. Having escaped war-torn Vietnam as a child, Le became interested in radical politics at an early age. While attending San Francisco State University in the early 1990s, she experienced a political awakening and soon began supporting United Farm Workers and anti-Proposition 184 campaigns.  

More recently, much of Le’s activism has been in response to police brutality. By placing primacy on Black struggles and movements in Sacramento, she actively engages in Afro-Asian solidarity building with the belief that progress within Black communities will help provide justice for all oppressed people. And with Black and Asian American communities overlapping in South Sacramento, Le’s position is incredibly astute. When asked about her commitment to Black struggles, she responded, “Black movements represented to me one of the deepest struggles; it is a human struggle. It’s the deepest wound in humanity that has been inflicted to all of us.”  

Exactly six months after Stephon Clark was killed, law enforcement from across the state convened in downtown Sacramento at the convention center for a Policc Expo. During our interview she vividly described the direct action in response to the convening,  

And the very recent one that I was involved in was against the Police Expo. It was war. And it was war in that they set us up. It was the ruling class that set us up against each other. The police were just guards and the guards had all the guns. And it was like Vietnam. As an adult looking back, we were setup by two governments! How the villagers were killed by both, or whatever government that went against each other, but mainly the U.S. government, and our people were decimated. And that was the feeling that I had. Here are all these people with weapons of war facing a people that were just civilians with no guns and all they had was truth on their side. The truth that no one wanted to hear, even other civilians. How can we wake up the rest of the people that are so safe and so comfortable?  

During the direct action, Le and other activists assembled outside the convention center where they staged a “die-in” and laid makeshift coffins throughout the streets. The protestors were swiftly met with police in riot gear. State-sanctioned violence as it manifests in the form of police brutality is triggering for Le. This aggressive display of unabashed power at the hands of law enforcement reminded her of the state-sanctioned violence and militarism she and her family endured in Vietnam.  

Le raises a salient point as scholars reflect on fifty years of Asian American and Black studies – we must name state-sanctioned violence as war. This framework of reading police brutality as war helps those of us situated in both Asian American and Black studies better understand how the increasing phenomenon of police brutality happening across U.S. urban cities is linked to global imperialism, militarism, and the resurgence of fascism. Additionally, this framework echoes Leroy’s call for Asian American studies to “offer a global counterpoint,” and his insistence that “considering Black Lives Matter through the lens of Asian American studies should shift our gaze to the everwending wars in the Pacific and Middle East, to the insurgent and insurrectionary moments of resistance to U.S. empire.” Furthermore, it illustrates why some Asian Americans might be more responsive and sensitive to acts of state-sanctioned violence that are being interrogated by
the Movement for Black Lives: these incidents, like the Clark and Richards cases, are often occurring in shared spaces and around Southeast Asians who have dealt with the trauma of state-sanctioned violence intergenerationally.

On Saturday, March 2, 2019, almost a year after Clark’s death, Sacramento District Attorney Anne Marie Schubert announced that she would not charge the officers responsible for Clark’s death. In the days following, the city once again erupted. That Monday, a march was held in Sacramento’s most elite neighborhood, East Sacramento, where over 80 protestors were arrested by California Highway Patrol and SPD. During the city council meeting held the following day, many of those protestors, along with other concerned citizens, shut down the meeting, demanding answers. During one of several heated moments, Alexander Clark (no relation to Stephon Clark), a Black Sacramentan, jumped on the table that had been designated for civilians to deliver public comments. His actions were met by a swarm of law enforcement officers armed with batons. Le and a white person quickly jumped on the table, forming a human barrier between Alexander Clark and the officers. This moment was captured on video and days later went viral across multiple social media platforms. 56

One version of the video showed the raw footage of what happened when Alexander Clark jumped on the table; another was narrated by a Black woman, @ebonyjanice, who was shocked to see a petite Asian American woman steadfastly stand in defense of a Black man. Le’s actions at the city council meeting sparked a discussion on social media as the narrated video called for more accomplices like Le, not allies. In recent years, activists have argued that allyship often manifests as a form of passive support that does little to challenge the oppression that marginalized groups are confronted with. Subsequently, accompliceship has emerged as a way to describe how to actively support and be in solidarity with oppressed people. The framework of accompliceship recognizes that standing in solidarity with oppressed people is in some cases a criminal act where one is quite literally an “accomplice.” The willingness to put one’s body, freedom, and livelihood on the line for others and to challenge an injustice is accompliceship. Accompliceship always necessitates risk and the abandonment of self-interest for the sake of collective liberation and justice. Within recent Afro-Asian studies and social movement scholarship, the framing of accompliceship is echoed in Diane Fujino’s theorizing of “deep solidarities” and George Lipsitz and Barbara Tomlinson’s notion of “accompaniment.” 39

As the debate on the differences between allies and accomplices unfolded online, what was glaringly missing was a discussion about how the Stephon Clark case was energizing not only Black activists in the city, but also Asian Americans. Moreover, the video lacked necessary background context on South Sacramento to understand why someone like Le would so willingly put their body on the line. Le and other Asian Americans in South Sacramento, who are engaged in Movement for Black Lives activism, are inherently positioned to be accomplices instead of allies. Because Black people and Asian Americans in South Sacramento share communities and struggles, and have been racialized alongside one another, the sense of distance from an issue, which is often associated with allyship, is not always present. State violence is a social condition that both Black people and Asian Americans in South Sacramento are confronted with, thus necessitating a response that is less passive and recognizes both groups as actors in their collective resistance to state-sanctioned violence. Overall, Le’s activism, a model of accompliceship,
and the framing of state-sanctioned violence against Black people as war all further illustrate the radical potential of Afro-Asian solidarity in the era of #blacklivesmatter.

“I’m not gon be complicit for shit”: Digital activism and mentorship as solidarity

Another Asian American activist who was out in the streets in the days immediately following Clark’s death was Raymond Lee. Lee, a 67-year-old Chinese American and fixture within local organizing spaces, has been organizing in the city since the mid-1960s. His organizing genealogy is deep. Lee first began organizing while attending California State University, Sacramento, where he was active in the campus’ Ethnic studies movement. During the 1970s, Lee was a member of the League of Revolutionary Struggle and helped build the city’s first people’s bookstore. Later in life Lee served as Founding Executive Director of the Asian Resource Centre and helped advocate for the city’s police oversight board. Similar to Le, Black struggles are at the crux of Lee’s organizing work. You can always find him at a rally, city council meeting, or vehemently debating more conservative Asian Americans on Facebook, passionately declaring, “I’m not gon be complicit for shit!”

In the wake of Clark’s death and the growth of #blacklivesmatter, Lee has worked with the local Black Lives Matter chapter and sees his role as helping to bridge the divide between Black and Asian American communities in the city. He states, “I try to be out there because they need to know Asians care. We’re not all selfish or self-enclosed.” Lee believes that the Asian American communities in the city, especially older generations, are “out of touch and often turn their backs on injustice,” in an effort to better align themselves with the state and white supremacist systems that they hope to benefit from, too.40

Lee’s early engagement with Afro-Asian solidarity building during the late 1960s grew out of Third World and internationalist ideologies that were certainly positioned against state violence, but struggled to emerge as a form of solidarity at the grassroots. Today, Lee is still engaged in community organizing and regularly attends protests; however, he attests to spending more of his time engaging in forms of digital activism on Facebook. Via his posts, live streams, debates in comment sections, and pictures that he shares, Lee uses his social media platform to help dispel anti-blackness within the Asian American community. Consequently, he has been blocked, removed from Asian American groups, and has developed a reputation as a radical within more conservative as well as liberal Asian American spaces. Following the killing of Akai Gurley by New York Police Department (NYPD) officer, Peter Liang, in 2014, Lee notes that he found himself battling older Asian Americans that came to the defense of Liang. With Asian Americans, primarily in New York, protesting Liang’s conviction, Lee responded to those in his networks by telling them that they were “on the wrong side of justice,” regularly expressing his dissenting views, and posting a picture of him holding a sign which read, “I am Raymond Lee from Sacramento, CA. Justice for Akai Gurley. Killed by Peter Liang of NY police. Black Lives Matter,” which went on to gain a fair amount of social media attention. Lee views his form of digital activism as “preaching.” The way Lee engages in “preaching” on social media is akin to how Movement for Black Lives activists from Ferguson, Missouri, like Ashley Yates and Alexis Templeton, described their roles as amplifiers in the wake of Mike Brown’s killing.31
Beyond social media amplifying, Lee also sees his role within the movement as serving as an activist-mentor to younger generations of Asian Americans. Following his posts on Akai Gurley, Lee began noticing that more Asian American youth were contacting him, asking about his activism, and advice on how to organize and build sustained solidarity with Black communities. This approach to activism echoes that of Grace Lee Boggs, for instance. Furthermore, Lee’s activism and commitment to Afro-Asian solidarity, which has spanned over four decades, illustrates how Afro-Asian solidarity building is evolving. While Afro-Asian solidarity building during the 1960s was often framed around Third World liberation and internationalist ideologies, emerging Afro-Asian solidarities in the era of #blacklivesmatter are often responses to state violence.

Growing trees and feeding movements: A call to action

While much of this work has focused on how South Sacramento is ripe for growing Afro-Asian solidarity and current Asian American activism in the city, it would be imprudent not to discuss some of the current barriers. Despite the work of Asian American activists, like Raymond Lee, Phung Le, Brian Phu, and Salvin Chahal, the full actualization of any sustained solidarity building in South Sacramento remains deferred.

First, while the notion of Black-Asian conflict has long been dispelled as an urban myth used to deflect from white supremacy, on the ground, Black and Asian American relations are complex, at times resulting in displays of anti-blackness and acts of anti-Asian violence. Over the last two years, there has been a spike in armed robberies, kidnappings, and car thefts in South Sacramento, with mostly elderly Asian American victims and Black and Latinx youth assailants. But this local phenomenon is indicative of many multi-ethnic urban communities that are confronted with swelling racial tensions, especially in a post-Sa-I-Gu era. Secondly, the recent surge of Asian Americans adopting alt-right ideology and ongoing involvement in anti-affirmative action movements place them in direct confrontation with organizers affiliated with the Movement for Black Lives and Black activists more broadly. Similar political shifts and behaviors have been perpetuated by those in Black communities, too, including proliferation of alt-right ideology and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

There is hope, though. The formation of South Sacramento as this catch-all for displaced Asian American and Black working-class communities during the post-World War II era set the stage for decades of marginalization, divestment, and fraught community relations. Yet, today, as city dollars flow into midtown and downtown redevelopment projects at the expense of South Sacramento and local law enforcement faces public outcry in response to a growing number of police brutality incidents, some Asian American activists in South Sacramento have turned to the streets, community organizing and creative spaces, social media, and youth development to respond to these inequities and acts of injustice, instead of racial isolation and conservatism. The activists mentioned throughout this work illustrate the radical potential of Afro-Asian solidarity building by providing new tactics, frameworks, paradigms, and understandings of Asian American activism in the era of #blacklivesmatter.

Finally, to return to the question, “Have the seeds of solidarity that were planted fifty years ago germinated?” Asian American activism across the decades and the studies of these movements show the actuality for Afro-Asian solidarity, so much so that Laura
Pulido observed that Asian American activists in Los Angeles in the late 1960s to late 1970s exhibited the strongest sense of cross-racial solidarity among the race-based movement in her study. But there remains an even greater and untapped potential to cultivate these solidarities and to study, illuminate, and theorize cross-racial solidarities.

As activists mount campaigns, movements, and actions to resist state-sanctioned violence, global white supremacy, and racial capitalism, we, as scholars, must feed these movements with scholarship that offers a counterpoint and new frameworks for activism in this era. Solidarity – in particular Afro-Asian solidarity – is that counterpoint to emerging alt-right ideologies and movements. Additionally, similar to Chahal and Phu’s work, we must remind Asian Americans to see themselves in Black people and their struggles. For many young activists, unfortunately, milestones, such as the Bandung conference and Third World Liberation Front strike are part of a seemingly distant history, despite the many lessons we can learn from those sites of struggle. As we begin to chart our next fifty years, once again, scholars must work strategically to bring solidarity back to the fore.

In closing, this budding tree of solidarity is in dire need of water, re-fertilization, and attentive cultivators. Despite or even because of a mainstream focus on highlighting multiculturalism and boosting representation of Black and Asian American populations, we have entered a period that is eerily similar, if not worse in some aspects, to fifty years ago. As we march further into the new millennium, the traumatizing social, economic, and political conditions that once propelled movements grounded in solidarity are hyper visible. Both at the grassroots, within Asian American studies and ethnic studies more broadly, we are left to ponder what we need to do at this precipice. Moreover, how do we bridge Asian Americans to their historical memory of being radical activists and reconnect them to Black and Third World struggles? There is much we can learn from the South Sacramento Asian American activists featured in this work, including the recognition that, as acts of state-sanctioned violence and white supremacist-derived terrorism continue to rise, they must and will be met with new iterations of solidarity that will demand more accomplices from organizers and scholars alike.

Notes

1. As a resident and activist in Sacramento, this work is greatly informed by my own participation in emerging movements around the city and engagement with local grassroots organizations and Asian American activists. My observations and fieldwork in documenting responses to the Clark case over the last year are supplemented with the narratives of several Asian American activists and community organizers that I had an opportunity to conduct in-depth interviews with and work alongside.


9. Ibid.

10. I use the term digital solidarities to describe how social media and information and communication technologies are being used to express a commitment to a shared struggle or issue.


13. While long-standing residents have differing opinions on lines of demarcation, the general area of South Sacramento has been defined as everything south of Oak Park. Others will say the area consists of the neighborhoods that lay along Highway 99, or communities in and around the southern parts of Martin Luther King Boulevard, Florin Boulevard, Mack Road, Power Inn Road, and Franklin Boulevard. Another way to identify the area is through South Sacramento’s many distinct neighborhoods, including Meadowview, Valley Hi/Laguna, Avondale-Glen Elder, Little Saigon, and Parkway. Unlike downtown and other parts of the city, much of South Sacramento remains unincorporated and, thus, governed by Sacramento County. The visible and systemic differences between areas overseen by the city and the county are stark. County roads often lack adequate lighting, trash and other community services and programs are grossly underfunded, mass transit is limited, and it has been nearly impossible to attract major supermarket chains in some areas.


17. During the 1950s, Sacramento’s West End was completely redeveloped to expand the Capital Mall as part of a larger urban renewal project. These plans displaced thousands of Black, Chinese, and Japanese families to nearby neighborhoods and suburbs north and south of the city, including Oak Park, Del Paso Heights, and South Sacramento.

18. South Sacramento became one of the major areas that Vietnamese and Hmong refugees settled in following the Vietnam War. Many Hmong and Vietnamese refugees arrived in South Sacramento with little to no savings, having endured war, and skeptical of western practices and institutions. Thus, they had a higher chance of being impoverished, developing mental health issues, and had decaying physical health. For more on Hmong and Vietnamese refugees in South Sacramento see: Yer Yang, “Hmong Perceptions of Health and Healing: Shamanism, Mental Health, and Medical Interventions” (PhD diss., California State University, Sacramento, 2013); Scott Thomas Andersen, “After the War,” Sacramento News & Review, October 4, 2018, https://www.newsreview.com/sacramento/after-the-war/content?oid=27180169 (accessed November 1, 2018).

19. California State University, Sacramento, Planning Today for a Better Tomorrow: A Community Survey Profile of Asian Americans and Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders in Sacramento


22. As the city of Sacramento enters a period of unprecedented growth, many people have been displaced and the city’s homeless population has dramatically increased. With old residents resisting many of these changes and the homeless population growing, local law enforcement has been used to remove and criminalize the unhoused, especially in downtown and midtown, and police have been leveraged against local activists and community members. In July 2019, city and county officials began reviewing a proposal to expand the Sacramento County jail. I mention these events to highlight how city growth has coincided with the growth of law enforcement in the city. Moreover, they illustrate how city officials will often use law enforcement to help clear the way for redevelopment plans.


25. Below are some examples of “serve the people” programming and organizations working to address inequities amongst Black people and Asian Americans in South Sacramento: The Black Child Legacy Campaign, Yisrael Farnus (urban gardening project), Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (youth development), Panel Community Center, My Sister’s House (Asian American women’s domestic abuse, human trafficking, and sexual assault support organization).


27. “Katas” is street slang for guns, often AK-47s.


29. For more on Richard Aoki and the Black Panther Party see: Fujino, Samurai Among Panthers.


33. Hope, “Black, Yellow, and Shades of Purple.”

34. Proposition 184 was approved in November 1994 and dramatically changed California sentencing laws for repeat offenders. Commonly referred to as the “Three Strikes Law,” Proposition 184 increased sentences for defendants convicted of prior felonies. Lawmakers at the time argued that harsher and longer sentences, along with fewer opportunities for probation, concurrent sentencing, or “good time” credits, would help curb crime. However, recent scholarship on the prison industrial complex points to the proposition as one of the major factors for the growth in mass incarceration. Le’s work on Proposition 184 served as an entry point to developing activist strategies aimed at resisting policies in support of mass incarceration. Moreover, with the proposition disproportionately impacting Black people, this was also one of her first moments of being in solidarity and working alongside Black activists.

35. Phung “L.B.” Le, interviewed with the author, October 2018.

36. Ibid.

40. Raymond Lee, interviewed with the author, October 2018.
46. Pulido, _Black, Brown, Yellow, and i.s.f.t._

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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