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Vivian Truong

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# FROM STATE-SANCTIONED REMOVAL TO THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

*The Policing of Asian Immigrants in Southern Brooklyn,  
1987–1995*

**Vivian Truong**

**ABSTRACT.** Drawing on archival research and oral histories, this article situates the 1995 police shooting of Chinese immigrant teenager Yong Xin Huang within the context of segregationist violence in southern Brooklyn. I argue that hate crimes and policing were interconnected forms of state-sanctioned removal deployed in response to white anxieties as New York became a “majority minority” city in the late twentieth century. Asian immigrants were subject to this removal based on a long history of their racialization as an invasive threat. Connecting the experiences of Asian Americans to those of Black and Latinx New Yorkers, community organizers built multiracial coalitions to claim the right to the city on behalf of its criminalized residents.

On January 15, 2019, thirty-four-year-old white Brooklyn resident Arthur Martunovich entered the Seaport Buffet in Sheepshead Bay wielding a hammer. He killed three Chinese and Malaysian immigrants who were working at the restaurant that night: chef Fufai Pun, thirty-four, owner Kheong Ng-Thang, sixty, and manager Tsz Mat Pun, fifty. Police reported that in an interview after his arrest, Martunovich stated, “Chinese men are awful. They hold their women captive.”<sup>1</sup> Even as his statement evoked long-standing racist stereotypes of gender relations between Asian American men and women, news reports have framed the attack as an arbitrary act of incomprehensible violence committed by

a mentally unstable perpetrator.<sup>2</sup> Theresa Scavo, the chairwoman for the local community board, expressed her disbelief, stating, "There's no such thing in this community where we don't all get along. We're all friends in this community, since I was a child. . . . Southern Brooklyn, this district, we all stand for each other."<sup>3</sup> Her statement suggests the attack was an aberration in an otherwise welcoming community, eliding the legacy of anti-Asian violence in southern Brooklyn.

In fact, the assault was the latest incident in a longer history of racist violence and exclusion in the area. Throughout the late 1980s, the Bensonhurst and Gravesend neighborhoods were the epicenter of a segregationist campaign against Chinese and Korean immigrants that involved the distribution of thousands of anti-Asian flyers and physical attacks on Asian youth and businesses. White residents acted on the fear of a "takeover" of their neighborhoods as New York became "majority minority" for the first time. By the 1990s, the racial anxiety of the previous decade became part of state practice as the police were empowered as arbiters of who belonged in both public and private spaces across the city. In 1995, police officer Steven Mizrahi shot and killed Chinese American teenager Yong Xin Huang while Huang was playing with a pellet gun in his friend's backyard in Sheepshead Bay. As Mayor Rudolph Giuliani implemented a punitive law-and-order regime, Huang's death was one of a multitude of police violence cases against Asian Americans in the area and of police killings of youth of color across the city.

Focusing on the history of an understudied area of New York, this article argues that the reinforcement of urban segregation in the 1980s and police violence in the 1990s were interconnected forms of state-sanctioned removal responding to the city's changing racial demographics. In response, Asian American community organizers built multiracial coalitions with Black and Latinx activists to claim their right to the city. Centering the leadership of those who lost family members to police violence, they put forth a vision of the city in which its marginalized and criminalized residents would be able to determine the future of New York for themselves. Elaborating on Henri Lefebvre's formulation of the term, David Harvey defines the right to the city as "more than the individual liberty to access urban resources," but rather a collective transformation of both the self and the city.<sup>4</sup> Utilizing protest as a means to reclaim urban space and to remember their loved ones in the face of state erasure, the families and organizers anchored the movement in spatially and temporally transgressive acts of care. Their collective work as a multiracial, women-led coalition pushed for both the transformation of the city and a reconfiguration of the relationships between its residents.

This article responds to Eric Tang’s challenge that Asian Americans “take seriously the question of state violence, avoiding the assumption that it is an exceptional issue for our communities.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, scholarship in Asian American studies in past years has begun to grapple with the historical and contemporary manifestations of state violence in Asian American communities. Sunaina Maira and Junaid Rana have illustrated how the intensification of imperial violence after 9/11, particularly in the forms of profiling, surveillance, detention, and deportation, has structured the lives of South Asian Muslim youth and migrant laborers.<sup>6</sup> Soo Ah Kwon documents how the members of an Asian American and Pacific Islander youth organization in Oakland fought the expansion of a juvenile hall and deportations of Cambodian refugees.<sup>7</sup> Asian Americanist engagements with state violence have also begun to adopt relational and comparative approaches, examining, for instance, how Japanese American incarceration during World War II and settler colonial displacement of Native Americans were overlapping processes of dispossession.<sup>8</sup> From Dylan Rodríguez’s article outlining the concurrent rise of the model minority narrative and Black and Latinx criminalization through the prison-industrial complex to the *Journal of Asian American Studies* forum on Black Lives Matter, scholars have raised the wide-ranging experiences of Asian Americans as both victims and perpetrators of state violence.<sup>9</sup> Still, the literature in Asian American studies and histories of the carceral state have yet to fully explore how Asian Americans have experienced the rise in mass incarceration and punitive policing regimes since the mid-twentieth century.

State violence is not an “exceptional issue” for Asian Americans, nor is it merely incidental to carceral and punitive regimes targeting Black and Latinx communities. I contend that Asian Americans in the late twentieth century were policed in ways that were particular to a long history of their racialization as an invasive threat. From Chinese exclusion in the late nineteenth century to Japanese incarceration during World War II and the contemporary deportations of Cambodian refugees and South Asian Muslims, state-sanctioned removal has been a defining characteristic of Asian American experiences. While Asian Americans have been “relatively valorized” in comparison to other communities of color,<sup>10</sup> this study shows how they have continued to be figured as threatening pollutants in white spaces. State-sanctioned removal, as a framework for understanding Asian American racialization, makes legible instances of anti-Asian violence such as the Huang case that have otherwise been treated as exceptional. Furthermore, as a field that has long grappled with issues of foreignness and exclusion, Asian American studies provides a necessary analytic to understand policing as a means of managing racially undesirable bodies rather than a response to real or perceived danger.<sup>11</sup>

This article draws on oral histories and newly recovered sources in the organizational archive of CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities (formerly known as the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence),<sup>12</sup> which are in the process of preservation and digitization through a public history project I have led over the past several years. CAAAV, founded by Asian American women in 1986 in response to the rise in hate crimes in the aftermath of the Vincent Chin case, became one of the most prominent Asian American organizations to address issues of police violence since the late twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> Against the relative dearth of sources in official archives, their organizational records are a site of exhaustive documentation of state violence against Asian Americans. The oral histories, which I conducted with community leaders including Yong Xin Huang's sister Qing Lan Huang, CAAAV cofounders Mini Liu and Monona Yin, and lawyer on the Huang case Elizabeth OuYang, provide the perspectives of those who shaped Asian American responses to policing and racial violence. I analyze these sources in conversation with the records of the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights (NCPRR), which worked closely with CAAAV in the 1990s,<sup>14</sup> as well as local news coverage and city records from the New York City Municipal Archive. Centering oral histories and archives of grassroots organizations, I join other scholars who "offer a history of the carceral state from below"<sup>15</sup> to document not only the effects of state violence, but the voices and stories of those who resisted.

Throughout its history, CAAAV has maintained a critical analysis of the racial positioning of Asian Americans in relation to Black and Latinx communities. At the same time, the organization has also highlighted and organized against a shared vulnerability to state-sanctioned violence as a means of building a base of support within their communities. As Grace Hong writes, "What distinguishes both Asian American organizing and scholarship is our long and sustained commitment to a coalitional and relational analytic and practice."<sup>16</sup> This article reflects on the lessons that a history of this commitment might offer for understanding Asian American racialization and resistance today. As an organization that is still a leading force in Asian American movement building, CAAAV has been the focus of conversations on the role of Asian Americans in the Movement for Black Lives, especially after their support of the family of African American Akai Gurley who was fatally shot by Chinese American NYPD officer Peter Liang in 2014.<sup>17</sup> In recent years, the question of racial violence has been an uneasy one as Asian Americans have navigated the complex reality of continuing to be subject to it and being used as a wedge to perpetrate that violence against other communities of color.<sup>18</sup> This article analyzes the history of southern Brooklyn as a means of exploring this contradiction so that we

may better understand present-day movements and future possibilities for multiracial coalition-building.

### **“A Complete Takeover”: Anti-Asian Racism in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn**

The 1980s saw an escalation of national hostilities toward Asian Americans as they were scapegoated for country’s economic troubles, most prominently in the fatal beating of Chinese American Vincent Chin at the hands of two Detroit autoworkers in 1982. While the model minority had become the dominant image of Asian Americans by the 1980s, the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes demonstrated how they also continued to be viewed as deviant and undesirable threats. These conflicting tropes at once precipitated anti-Asian violence and denied the existence of racism against Asian Americans on the basis of their apparent success.

The national rise in cases of anti-Asian violence coincided with local backlash to demographic change in New York. The city became “majority minority” for the first time, as the share of white residents dropped from 52.4 to 43.2 percent of the population between 1980 and 1990.<sup>19</sup> White anxieties concerning the city’s demographic transformation manifested in a spate of hate crimes, especially against people of color who transgressed racial boundaries into primarily white neighborhoods. In 1986, a mob of white youth in Howard Beach, Queens, chased Trinidadian American Michael Griffith onto a highway to his death. The case precipitated citywide mobilizations as protesters decried the lackluster response of Mayor Ed Koch’s administration and the local police precinct’s treatment of Griffith’s companions as suspects.<sup>20</sup> The Howard Beach case occurred on the heels of another incident in which a white subway rider, Bernhard Goetz, shot four young Black men who he claimed attempted to mug him. Goetz became a folk hero representing white fantasies about exacting revenge against racialized criminals in an era of heightened fear of crime. Koch, on the verge of reelection, pandered to white voters by supporting the jury’s acquittal of Goetz on charges of attempted murder.<sup>21</sup> Koch’s endorsement of vigilantism created an environment permissive of further racial violence.

These local and national forces converged in southern Brooklyn in the late 1980s, when white residents launched a campaign against the growing population of Chinese and Korean immigrants in the neighborhood. Through most of the twentieth century, southern Brooklyn was a quintessential symbol of white ethnic working-class New York, serving as the setting of the 1950s sitcom *The Honeymooners* and the 1977 film *Saturday Night Fever*. Italian and Jewish immigrants moved to the area from the Lower East Side after the 1908 construction of a subway line that connected

the two neighborhoods.<sup>22</sup> In the decades following the 1965 Immigration Act, that same subway line brought Chinese immigrants with the means to move beyond crowded housing conditions in Chinatown. Korean immigrants, a comparatively smaller presence, established the First Korean Church of Brooklyn in the Gravesend neighborhood in 1976 and opened small businesses across southern Brooklyn.<sup>23</sup> As of the 1980 census, the population of Bensonhurst was almost entirely white at 93.4 percent, with Latinxs (4.2 percent) and Asian Americans (2 percent) composing smaller shares of the population. By the 1990 census, the white population had dropped to 80.3 percent, while the Latinx and Asian American populations increased to 8.2 and 10.8 percent, respectively.<sup>24</sup> The neighboring Gravesend and Sheepshead Bay area, to the south and east of Bensonhurst, experienced a similar decrease in its white population, from 92.3 to 84.4 percent, and increase in the population of Asian Americans, from 2.4 to 7.2 percent (see Table 1).<sup>25</sup>

Table 1. Racial and ethnic demographics of New York City and Southern Brooklyn in 1980 and 1990. New York Department of City Planning, *Demographic Profiles: A Portrait of New York City's Community Districts From the 1980 and 1990 Censuses of Population and Housing*, 1992.

	Citywide		Bensonhurst		Gravesend/ Sheepshead Bay	
	1980	1990	1980	1990	1980	1990
White (non-Hispanic)	52.4%	43.2%	93.4%	80.3%	92.3%	84.4%
Asian (non-Hispanic)	3.4%	6.7%	2%	10.8%	2.4%	7.2%
Black (non-Hispanic)	24.0%	25.2%	0.4%	0.5%	1.4%	2.3%
Hispanic origin	19.9%	24.4%	4.2%	8.2%	3.7%	5.9%

In October 1987, residents responded to these demographic changes by distributing an estimated 700,000 anti-Asian flyers across southern Brooklyn.<sup>26</sup> Placed in mailboxes and slipped under doors, the flyers warned of a “complete takeover” by Korean and Chinese immigrants (see Figure 1). Two versions of the flyer appeared, one in Bensonhurst and the other in the adjacent neighborhood of Gravesend. Tirades that covered the front and back of legal-sized sheets of paper urged residents to boycott Asian businesses and realtors who sold homes to Asian families, as well as to convince their neighbors not to sell their homes to Asian buyers.

The fearmongering rhetoric portrayed Chinese and Korean immigrants as conspiring, devious invaders, stating, "Right now, they are very quiet and not 'bothering' anyone—just smiling at us and behind our backs planning to take over our whole neighborhood."<sup>27</sup> The authors of the flyers alleged that the Chinese residents were drug dealers whose motivations for moving into these neighborhoods were to gain respectability and that the Korean residents were brainwashed members of the "Moonies" religious organization.<sup>28</sup> Bensonhurst residents centered economic concerns in their flyer, portraying themselves as a working-class community embattled by invasive foreigners with unearned wealth—drug money in the case of the Chinese and money from a religious cult in the case of the Koreans. On the other hand, the Gravesend flyer raised concerns that the arrival of Asian immigrants would be a detriment to the social and economic status of the neighborhood, urging residents to act to "return once again to a stable, desirable neighborhood, keeping the value of our property."<sup>29</sup> The caricatures portrayed in the flyers mobilized a bewildering mix of stereotypes of Asian Americans as simultaneously quiet and conniving, as wealthy and criminal, and as faceless hordes whose only purpose was to deprive white residents of their homes and property.

URGENT MESSAGE TO ALL BENSONHURST HOME OWNERS AND RESIDENTS!!!

People of Bensonhurst wake up and see what is happening all around you! A certain interest group has targeted our area for a complete takeover within 5 years. By means of thousands and thousands of dollars of CASH monies they are pressuring businessses to sell, they are harassing homeowners to sell "at whatever price" and they are causing our people to become a prey to temptation by dangling huge bags of money in front of them to sell their homes way over the fair market value just so they can get into our blocks.

Who are these special interest groups and where are they getting these thousands and even millions of dollars to buy up a whole neighborhood? For one, they are Chinese who are involved in the illegal drug trade. Years ago, Chinatown was a decent family-oriented section. Today it is full of drug lords, gangs and violence. People are fleeing from that area. These "drug lords" wish to settle in a quiet, middle-class neighborhood such as Bensonhurst to gain "respectability" Second, they are Koreans who mostly belong to the "Moonies" organization--the ones that sell flowers on street corners. They collect billions of dollars each year through these poor brainwashed people who do whatever they say. These people give the money back to the organization and the Leader (who was sent to jail) then "lends" selected families money each month to go out and buy a business and a home--usually CASH money. And these flows of cash monies are too much of a temptation to our people and they are selling out their own people and their own neighborhood.

Figure 1. The first two paragraphs of an anti-Asian flyer distributed in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn in 1987. Mini Liu Papers, CAAAV Archive, New York, NY.

The flyers had an immediate impact on Chinese and Korean immigrants in southern Brooklyn. The New York City Commission on Human Rights found that, as a result of the flyers advocating for a boycott, 90 percent of the Asian-owned businesses in the area experienced a 30 percent decrease in business.<sup>30</sup> The campaign to exclude Chinese and Korean immigrants from the neighborhood also manifested in harassment, property damage,



and physical violence. Among the incidents reported were the smashing of the storefront windows of two real estate offices accused of selling homes to Asian immigrants, the firing of BB gun bullets at an Asian-owned store, eggings of houses owned by Asian immigrants, and beatings of Asian American youth.<sup>31</sup>

In the months following the initial appearance of the flyers, CAAAV worked with Chinese, Korean, Black, and Italian American leaders from local churches, schools, and tenant associations to address racial violence in Bensonhurst.<sup>32</sup> Among the Asian American representatives of the task force that formed out of these efforts were CAAAV founders Mini Liu and Monona Yin, as well as Katie Quan, a labor organizer with the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), which represented Chinese American garment workers living in the area.<sup>33</sup> While they supported local organizations' efforts, including creating intercultural exchange programs in schools and recruiting Asian American representatives for the community board, CAAAV explicitly challenged the police and city officials' inability to confront acts of racial violence in the neighborhood and the city at large.

CAAAV leaders decried the city's refusal to act beyond lip service about fostering racial harmony in the area. After a preliminary investigation, the Bias Unit of the NYPD concluded that "no criminal statutes are violated by the distribution of the leaflets," arguing that the authors of the flyers were protected by the First Amendment.<sup>34</sup> CAAAV canvassed the neighborhood with Chinese and Korean organizers to speak to residents, collecting over a thousand signatures on a petition that protested the NYPD's response. In a letter to the Brooklyn district attorney, Elizabeth Holtzman, CAAAV wrote, "The police department's inaction sanctions the kind of hatred which leads to crimes against innocent people and deep neighborhood polarization."<sup>35</sup> Their approach to the case highlighted the role of the police in allowing hate crimes and the reinforcement of racial segregation to continue.

In response to their efforts, CAAAV and other Asian American organizations, some of which were not actively involved in the campaign, received anonymous letters from white supremacists. Signed "White America the Beautiful," they read, "White America is going to put you all right back on your Asian continent. . . . You are all going to leave here. So no more demands, agitation, pressure."<sup>36</sup> The hate mail employed the familiar rhetoric of Asian immigrant exclusion to threaten the removal of residents, especially those who not only lived in a neighborhood and country claimed as white but also dared to be political. The letters demonstrated that the struggle over southern Brooklyn was emblematic of broader concerns around the racial composition of the nation.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the escalation of threats and violence against Asian residents and activists, the office of the mayor took a hands-off approach to the issue. In May 1988, Mini Liu wrote to Koch enclosing CAAAV's petition and the hate letters they received, pointing out the failure of the criminal justice system and city agencies to protect the civil rights of Asian immigrants in the neighborhood.<sup>38</sup> Eva Tan, the Mayor's Special Advisor for Asian Affairs, responded, "I believe that giving everyone in the community an opportunity to work things out will be more beneficial to the community."<sup>39</sup> Tan's response was consistent with Mayor Koch's approach. When a local high school student asked Koch for funding for a program that would promote racial harmony among Bensonhurst residents, Koch cited constraints in the city budget and replied, "There is a limit to what the city can do. You have to find it in yourselves to start these programs."<sup>40</sup> The administration essentially left residents to resolve the situation on their own.

Unsurprisingly, racial violence against people of color continued in southern Brooklyn. On August 23, 1989, a group of white youth assaulted and fatally shot sixteen-year-old African American Yusuf Hawkins, believing he was dating a white woman in the neighborhood, while he was visiting Bensonhurst with three friends to purchase a used car. After Hawkins's death, Black community leaders including Reverend Al Sharpton led a march through the neighborhood as residents hurled racial slurs at the demonstrators, held up watermelons, and shouted at them to "go home."<sup>41</sup> The mayor's inability to contend with racial violence and exclusion, in Bensonhurst and beyond, arguably led to his defeat in the 1989 mayoral election to David Dinkins, who would become the city's first Black mayor.<sup>42</sup> The Hawkins case occurred weeks before the Democratic primary and, as with the Howard Beach case, sparked a multiracial outcry against hate crimes in the city.

The weekly mobilizations for Yusuf Hawkins included a march of 150 Latinxs through Bensonhurst, as groups like the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights (NCPRR) gathered to express their solidarity with Black communities. Founded in the Bronx in 1981, NCPRR was a grassroots organization that included former Young Lords Richie Pérez and Vicente "Panama" Alba among their leadership and addressed cases of racial and police violence against Latinx communities in the 1980s and 1990s. They connected the Hawkins case to the September 7, 1989, assault of two Latino brothers, Luis and Enrique Andrade, by three white youths in Bensonhurst who told them, "Get out, Spanish."<sup>43</sup> Like CAAAV, NCPRR challenged the reinforcement of urban segregation in the 1980s, asserting that "there can be no part of this city where our people cannot live, walk, or work."<sup>44</sup> The two organizations would form a close alliance in the following years as they confronted Mayor Giuliani's policing regime.

The events that unfolded in the neighborhoods of southern Brooklyn revealed the overlapping yet differentiated forms of racial violence and removal that New Yorkers of color faced in the 1980s. A critical mass of Chinese and Korean Americans moving into the area raised concerns about a foreign invasion, a late twentieth-century iteration of the yellow peril. A Black teenager who simply visited Bensonhurst faced fatal violence from white residents in response to the imagined threat he posed to a white woman. Two Latino men encountered the phenomenon that Perla Guerrero has called “spatial illegality,” or “any instance in which Latinas/os do not break the white community’s laws, customs, or social norms, yet their activity is constructed as objectionable and illicit, and their mere presence is a violation of community.”<sup>45</sup> In the context of the demographic changes of the 1980s, white segregationist residents deployed a variety of tactics, from boycotts to deadly physical violence, to enforce the exclusion and removal of people of color. Rather than blaming the violence on a few aberrant individuals, CAAAV tied these incidents to the complicity of the police and city officials. This approach proved to be prescient when, in the following decade, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Police Commissioner William Bratton answered the call to reclaim the city on behalf of the white middle class.

### **“For the Good People Who Live Here”: Giuliani-Era Policing in Southern Brooklyn**

Giuliani’s mayoral campaign against Dinkins in 1993 appealed to white residents’ sense that they had lost social and political power in a city that was sliding into disorder. After the racist killings in Howard Beach and Bensonhurst roiled the city in the late 1980s, Mayor Dinkins pledged to unite New York’s diverse groups in a “gorgeous mosaic.” The promise of racial harmony quickly dissolved in the first month of his term. The Red Apple Boycott in Flatbush began in January 1990, when a Haitian customer’s report of assault at the hands of Korean shop owner sparked protests and a sixteen-month boycott of the store by Black Brooklyn residents.<sup>46</sup> While crime declined under Dinkins’s community policing program “Safe Streets, Safe City,” the NYPD played a major role in the public backlash against Mayor Dinkins. In 1992, ten thousand off-duty officers protested Dinkins’s support for the establishment of an independent, civilian-controlled complaint review board.<sup>47</sup> The prevailing sense that New York was “a city out of control”<sup>48</sup> contributed to Giuliani’s victory in the 1993 mayoral election.

During Mayor Giuliani’s tenure from 1994 to 2001, the inaction and tacit endorsement of racial violence under Mayor Ed Koch’s administration in the 1980s transformed into active efforts on the part of the police to exclude and remove people of color from urban space. Geographer

Neil Smith called Giuliani-era policing “revanchist” for its effects on communities of color, who were “excoriated for having stolen New York from a white middle class that sees the city as its birthright.”<sup>49</sup> The new policing regime paved the way for the reversal of white flight: Police Commissioner Bratton promised to “take this city back for the good people who live here, neighborhood by neighborhood, block by block, house by house.”<sup>50</sup> He and Giuliani effectively declared war on low-income communities of color, claiming the land of the city for racially and spatially coded “good people.”

The Giuliani era brought about a new regime of state control of urban space based on the broken windows theory formulated by criminologists George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson in 1982.<sup>51</sup> They asserted that signs of disorder, such as a broken window, create an environment permitting more serious crimes. In their implementation of the theory, Giuliani and Bratton promised to improve the city’s quality of life by targeting disorderly behavior, such as panhandling, graffiti writing, and turnstile jumping. In practice, the focus on lower-level offenses gave the NYPD greater discretion to criminalize poor people of color whose very presence was seen as disorderly. Youth of color, the homeless, and street vendors were especially policed for minor infractions as groups that spent much of their time in public space. In 1994, Giuliani’s first year in office, the number of arrests for misdemeanors leapt 31.2 percent from the previous year while the number of summons issued for violations also increased by 10.1 percent.<sup>52</sup> The expansion of police discretion also accompanied an expansion of the police force itself through the addition of over ten thousand uniformed officers during Giuliani’s tenure.<sup>53</sup> While Giuliani’s policies have been lauded for a reduction in crime, the era also saw a dramatic increase in reports of police abuse.<sup>54</sup>

The NYPD enforced what Michelle Alexander has called the “New Jim Crow,” or maintenance of the structural racism that existed before the mid-twentieth-century civil rights reforms by developing and weaponizing the association of Black and other racialized bodies with crime and danger.<sup>55</sup> In New York, the shift from white vigilante violence in the 1980s to the revanchist policing regime of the 1990s supports Alexander’s assertion that the language of social control transformed from the blatant “segregation forever” to the disguised racism of “law and order.”<sup>56</sup> While Alexander and other scholars of mass incarceration have focused on the centrality of the prison system in this transformation, the New York context highlights the role of the police in turning the city itself into a carceral space. As Alex Vitale and Brian Jordan Jefferson have documented, the population of New Yorkers imprisoned in city jails and state prisons actually decreased at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first, even as

mass incarceration rapidly expanded across the country in the same time period.<sup>57</sup> A growing body of literature has shown how the responsibility for maintaining social control has rested not just with jails and prisons but with the police, resulting in the treatment of poor and working-class Black, Latinx, and Asian American neighborhoods in New York City as “quasi-correctional spaces.”<sup>58</sup>

The mayor’s law-and-order policies and rhetoric resonated with New Yorkers who believed the city to be falling into disorder. In 1993, Bensonhurst resident Joe Diamond, who worked as an aide for Giuliani’s mayoral campaigns, formed the pro-police organization Take Back New York.<sup>59</sup> Concerned that the city had been overrun with crime, Diamond and other Bensonhurst residents planned a counterprotest when Al Sharpton organized a Day of Defiance march against the new mayor’s policing agenda. Diamond declared, “Most law-abiding citizens of this city support cops. We want them to be able to do their jobs and clear the streets of drug dealers and other criminals.”<sup>60</sup> The counterprotesters prepared blue ribbons that expressed their support for the police, taking inspiration from the yellow ribbons used to support Gulf War soldiers.<sup>61</sup> The police were figured as soldiers for embattled white residents, protecting their neighborhoods in a war over the city.

White residents of New York who had seen themselves on the losing side of a struggle for the city were heartened by Giuliani’s election. Whereas white segregationists in the 1980s perpetrated vigilante violence to maintain the boundaries their neighborhoods, Mayor Giuliani’s quality-of-life campaign in the mid- to late 1990s institutionalized the responsibility of state-sanctioned removal in the police force. Asian Americans were not immune to the escalation of punitive policing in this era. In an analysis of the approximately one hundred fifty cases of racial violence that CAAAV worked on from 1986 to 1995, the organization saw an increase in police brutality against Asian Americans. From 1986 to 1992, 23 percent of the cases involved police officers as the primary offenders of violence, while from 1993 to 1995, that number rose to 48 percent.<sup>62</sup> While in the 1980s many of the hate crimes in southern Brooklyn were committed by ordinary residents, the mid-1990s saw a rise in violent incidents perpetrated by the police.

As more Chinese immigrants began to move into southern Brooklyn, CAAAV documented a series of cases of police violence that occurred against Chinese immigrant women in the area. In 1995, Susan Chan was arrested after attempting to provide interpretation between police and a Chinese couple in a landlord-tenant dispute in Bensonhurst. The police officer referred to her as a “Chinese bitch” and sang “God Bless America”

when she asked why she was being arrested.<sup>63</sup> Similar incidents happened to Kui Fang Lo and Ngan Oi Lee in 1996. Lee, who was visiting an apartment in neighboring Brighton Beach, was told, “Chinese women are all bitches” before being arrested for disorderly conduct.<sup>64</sup> Lo called the police during a landlord-tenant dispute in her home in Bensonhurst. When the police arrived, they reportedly refused to listen to Lo, and as Lo’s friend attempted to take photographs of the police, they pushed her friend to the ground, maced her, and said, “You Chinese animals come to Brooklyn and take all the houses!”<sup>65</sup> When they were arrested and taken to the precinct, the officer confiscated their cash. In an echo of the 1987 flyers’ accusation that the new Chinese immigrant residents were drug dealers, the officer stated, “This is drug money—we’ll take it.”<sup>66</sup> These accounts demonstrate the xenophobic, racialized, and gendered fear of immigrants perpetrated by the police in southern Brooklyn. In the Giuliani era, the police were empowered to act in response to the “yellow peril” idea of invasion put forward by the flyers issued a decade earlier.

Occurring within a year of Yong Xin Huang’s death, these incidents reveal the racial antagonism pervading the neighborhood in which he was killed. By the mid-1990s, the anti-Asian sentiments expressed in the 1980s flyer campaign became sublimated into the police force. Officers from the same precincts that would be involved in the attacks on Chan, Lo, and Lee arrived at the home of Yong Xin Huang’s friend after a neighbor called 911.

### **“This City Is Ours”: A Broad Vision of Justice for Yong Xin Huang**

On March 24, 1995, Yong Xin Huang was playing with two other boys in the backyard of his friend’s home in Sheepshead Bay. That morning, the police received a call from a neighbor who reported that the “Asian males” ages “14 to 16” were playing with a gun.<sup>67</sup> Steven Mizrahi arrived on the scene with other police officers from the sixtieth and sixty-first precincts. From that point on, two versions of the story diverge.

According to police accounts, the officers believed the air gun to be real and Yong Xin did not respond when Mizrahi ordered the teenager to put it down. The two engaged in a face-to-face struggle as Mizrahi attempted to wrestle it from Yong Xin. In the midst of the struggle, Mizrahi lost his balance and fell onto the storm door in the backyard. When he regained his balance, the officer again attempted to take the pellet gun from Yong Xin with one hand when, with the other hand, he “accidentally discharged” his own gun at Yong Xin’s head.<sup>68</sup>

According to Yong Xin’s friends, he never resisted the police. Yong Xin dropped the pellet gun and attempted to flee into his friend’s house, but

Mizrahi then grabbed Yong Xin and slammed him against the glass door, shattering it. Yong Xin was facing the doorway and had his back turned to the officer when Mizrahi shot him point-blank in the back of the head. An autopsy conducted by the city's medical examiner's office, as well as another independently commissioned by the Huang family, revealed that Yong Xin was shot behind the left ear, suggesting that Yong Xin was facing away from Mizrahi when he was killed. The family expressed disbelief that the sixteen-year-old, who was barely over a hundred pounds, would have resisted the six-foot-tall, over two-hundred-pound Mizrahi.<sup>69</sup>

The two contradictory stories between the police and the community members reveal two different understandings of policing. The official narrative described Yong Xin's death as "tragic but accidental,"<sup>70</sup> an exception in a police force that otherwise operates in the best interests of the public. To his friends and family, Yong Xin's senseless murder was part of a system that saw young people of color as already criminal and did not value their lives. From the neighbor who called 911 to Mizrahi pulling the trigger, the fatal shooting of Yong Xin was another example of the police acting on the fear of the intrusion of nonwhite bodies into white spaces, a fear that denies the innocence of boys of color.

With Yong Xin's death, the Huang family was thrust from their ordinary working-class life to the center of a burgeoning struggle for police accountability. The family was first introduced to CAAAV when organizer Hyun Lee approached them to offer the organization's support with the case. The Huangs had been largely unaware of the issue of police brutality, or the existence of Asian American political organizations, until tragedy struck their family. They worked with CAAAV and lawyer Elizabeth OuYang of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) to pursue the legal case and create broader structural change in the NYPD. Yong Xin's sisters Joyce and Qing Lan Huang became organizers by necessity, bringing the force of their grief to bear on a policing and criminal justice system that criminalized their brother and refused to hold the officer who killed him accountable. The Huang sisters joined an ever-expanding group of family members who lost loved ones to police violence.

The families, supported by grassroots organizations like CAAAV and NCPRR, were at the center of a movement for racial justice in 1990s New York City. Iris Baez, mother of Anthony Baez, began organizing for justice for her son after he was killed three days before Christmas in 1994. She met Margarita Rosario, the mother of Anthony Rosario and aunt of Hilton Vega, after Rosario's son and nephew were fatally shot by police on January 12, 1995. Each time the mothers heard of a new case, they would find the address of the bereaved family and knock on their door, offering their

consolation and bringing them into the movement.<sup>71</sup> Nicholas Heyward Sr., father of Nicholas Heyward Jr., and Milta Calderon, mother of Anibal Carrasquillo Jr., were also among the family members who supported one another through their grief and in their struggles for justice, from collaborating on direct actions to attending memorial services. Their tireless work meant that other victims' families had somewhere to turn as they struggled with the loss of their loved ones. As Qing Lan Huang reflected, "We feel like we're on the same boat. You feel like you're not fighting alone."<sup>72</sup>

CAA AV and the Huang family attempted to subvert the entrenched beliefs among many Chinese and other Asian immigrants that policing was not an Asian American issue. The ILGWU, of which Yong Xin's mother Qiu Xin Huang was a member, mobilized their members to various events and rallies in support of the family. CAA AV also connected the case to instances of police violence and harassment against Asian immigrants in their pan-ethnic membership, including South Asian taxi drivers and Chinese youth and Vietnamese street vendors in Chinatown.<sup>73</sup> Still, as in the 1980s, they confronted the perception within Asian immigrant communities that, in CAA AV cofounder Mini Liu's words, "nobody thinks they're going to be the next one."<sup>74</sup> While their ability to mobilize Asian immigrants in their case was limited, the Huang family found their closest allies in other communities of color.<sup>75</sup>

From the beginning, the Huang case was tied to a struggle broader than the indictment of Mizrahi. The family led and participated in direct actions that confronted Giuliani's revanchist regime and aimed to build the power and unity of those who were criminalized. Journalist Andrew Hsiao asserted that the families of police brutality victims "[kept] direct action protest alive in the late nineties," and that in the era "no other community movement has endured as long, produced equally explosive political protests, kept its grassroots nature, remained as radical—connecting racism, the war on the poor, and government manipulation of state violence."<sup>76</sup> In a period of conservative backlash in New York, the families supported by NCP RR and CAA AV kept opposition to police violence alive and visible as part of a movement reclaiming the city for poor and working-class people of color.

The families and organizations demonstrated their connection to this broader struggle on April 25, 1995, one month after Yong Xin was killed. That evening, thousands of protesters brought rush hour traffic in the city to a halt. Protesting Giuliani's policies on policing, health care, employment, housing, and public education, a diverse coalition of New Yorkers coordinated the citywide shutdown for the day before Giuliani would announce his budget that proposed cutting social services and bolstering the police





Figure 2. Yong Xin Huang's mother and three sisters, center, at a memorial in Chinatown, July 1995. Supporters also carried cardboard tombstones of other Asian Americans who had "died of racism." CAAAV Archive, New York, NY.

force. Holding banners that read "Rudy: It's Our Quality of Life" and "The City Is Ours," they simultaneously converged on four major bridges and tunnels between Manhattan and the outer boroughs.<sup>77</sup>

CAAAV and NCPRR organizers connected police violence to a range of issues affecting the city's poor and working class. They worked with a broad coalition of groups, including ACT UP, Disabled in Action, Housing Works, StreetWatch, City Shelter Advisory Council Board, CUNY Coalition Against the Cuts, and health care workers. One hundred eighty-five members of these groups were arrested as they blocked the major arteries into the center of the city while thousands more rallied at legal protests nearby.<sup>78</sup> Representing their unified message as well as the need to focus on a spectrum of specific concerns, the protesters distributed four versions of the same flyer. On one side, the flyer detailed the issue that was the focus of that location's protest: police brutality at the NYPD headquarters, accompanied by a shutdown of the Manhattan Bridge; health care and HIV/AIDS treatment at Bellevue Hospital and Queens Midtown Tunnel; jobs, housing, and public assistance at Cadman Plaza and Brooklyn Bridge; and public education at City Hall and Brooklyn Battery Tunnel. On the other side, the flyer contained a unity statement that brought together the four protest sites. It proclaimed,

Today we join together—people, communities, and organizations that have never worked with one another before—to make an unmistakable statement: THIS CITY IS OURS, and we do not want it left in ruins. We want a city rebuilt. We want a healthy city, a community in which all of us have the right and support to live lives of hope and opportunity, regardless of whether we are healthy or sick, abled or disabled, documented or undocumented; Latino, Asian, African American, or whites; gay, lesbian, or straight; young or old. We want this for ourselves, but moreover, we want this for each other.<sup>79</sup>

Their statement and slogan “This City Is Ours” spoke to the hopes that all those impacted by Giuliani’s quality-of-life policies, including criminalized people of color, public university students, those affected by HIV and AIDS, and the homeless, would come together to determine the city’s future for themselves. They articulated the idea of a collective “we” in a majority-minority yet segregated city, one that had only a few years earlier seen major conflicts between communities of color. They came together against the tendency to blame each segment of the city’s marginalized populations for the crime, unemployment, budgetary, and education issues that New York faced. The organizers planned the mass disruption of traffic to provoke reflections on the question, “What kind of society is going to be built in our name?”<sup>80</sup>

While about twenty-five members of CAAAV and NCPRR linked arms and blocked traffic at the foot of the Manhattan Bridge, the families of police brutality victims and their supporters rallied several blocks down at the New York Police Department headquarters. AALDEF lawyer Elizabeth OuYang recalled walking beside Mrs. Huang in the demonstration that day. Only a few weeks after the death of her son, Mrs. Huang’s pain was still raw as she wept, following the protesters who marched in a loop and chanted, “No Justice, No Peace!” OuYang recalled the reaction of the protesters to Mrs. Huang:

People don’t know what to do. They turn, they don’t want to look at her because they don’t want to embarrass her. She’s weeping, going around in the circle formation, very obvious. Like a zombie, she just knows she needs to be there, she’s just walking in circles, carrying a plaque with [Yong Xin’s] middle school graduation picture on it. All of a sudden an older Latino man cuts the formation of the circle and hands Mrs. Huang a Kleenex. . . . That older man was Anthony Baez’s dad.<sup>81</sup>

OuYang noted that the moment was the meeting of two people who would otherwise not have interacted in a segregated city: a Chinese immigrant mother who lived in Brooklyn and a Puerto Rican father who lived in the Bronx. In this moment of solidarity through shared grief, Ramon Baez crossed the boundaries of race, language, geography, and the structure of the protest itself. The interaction between the parents of Anthony Baez and Yong Xin Huang exemplified the tenor of the burgeoning movement against police violence in the mid-1990s. Through their insistence on coalition building across difference, the movement imagined and practiced a vision of the city that centered on care for those impacted by state violence.

CAAAV and NCPRR were two organizations that fought the reinforcement of urban segregation in southern Brooklyn in the 1980s. They carried the struggle for the right to the city through the Giuliani era into the twenty-first century. Against Police Commissioner Bratton's promise that he would "take this city back for the good people who live here," they proclaimed "This City Is Ours" in a reminder that attempts to remove the city's racialized poor would be met with organized resistance. At the April 25 protest and in their activism in the years to come, the families and organizations showed how their struggle against removal surpassed any individual case, community, or neighborhood, and even the issue of police violence. The protesters built multiracial, cross-issue coalitions that aimed to both transform the city and change the nature of the relationships between those who lived in it.

### **Building a Citywide Movement Against Police Violence**

The April 25 protest was just the beginning of the Huang family's struggle for accountability for the death of their son and brother. In a fight that was characterized by persistence and multiracial solidarity, the Black, Latina, and Asian American family members continued to support one another as they demanded justice for their loved ones, in many cases long after they exhausted traditional routes for legal recourse. Among the Huang family's immediate goals was the suspension and indictment of Officer Mizrahi, who was placed on paid sick leave and returned to work just two weeks after he fatally shot Yong Xin.<sup>82</sup> Legal action against Mizrahi would have brought a sense of closure for the Huang family, who were left in the lurch looking for answers after their son and brother's death.<sup>83</sup> In her call for an indictment in April 1995, Qing Lan Huang stated, "We can't ask for his life back; all we can ask for is some measure of justice."<sup>84</sup>

That measure of justice was denied on May 16, 1995, less than two months following Yong Xin Huang’s death, when Brooklyn district attorney Charles Hynes announced that a grand jury voted not to indict Mizrahi.<sup>85</sup> Claiming that the medical examiner’s autopsy and witness statements corroborated Mizrahi’s account of the story, Hynes published a statement that the shooting was accidental and that Yong Xin was holding onto the air gun and facing the officer when he was shot.<sup>86</sup> As a result of the grand jury verdict, Mizrahi would not face trial for his role in the death of Yong Xin. A week after the decision was released, the family led a protest of three hundred supporters on the steps of the district attorney’s office to express their outrage.



Figure 3. CAAAV, ILGWU, Yong Xin Huang’s family, and supporters at a protest at the Brooklyn District Attorney’s office, May 1995. CAAAV Archive, New York, NY.

The absence of justice in the courts compounded the grief of the family members. Qing Lan stated, “If he left us in any other way, we probably would have accepted the way it is.”<sup>87</sup> Unable to accept the decision of the grand jury, the family brought the case to the federal level. CAAAV mobilized a massive petition drive in the summer of 1995 that collected ten thousand individual signatures and forty organizational endorsements for a civil rights case against Mizrahi.<sup>88</sup> On October 10, 1995, they brought those signatures and endorsements to their meeting with Zachary Carter, U.S. attorney of the Eastern District of New York, and demanded a federal investigation. AALDEF provided legal representation for the Huang family in their civil suit against the NYPD, alleging that the officers used excessive force and that the NYPD did not properly train their officers in the use of the nine-millimeter Glock pistol, the weapon that Mizrahi fired at Yong Xin.<sup>89</sup> In March 1996, the city settled the lawsuit for \$400,000. Still, Joyce Huang stated, “No amount of money can bring my brother’s life back. We still believe Police Officer Steven Mizrahi did something wrong.”<sup>90</sup>

On March 23, 1996, the day that the settlement was announced, the Huang sisters demonstrated that their fight for justice was far from over. Together with CAAAV, NCPRR, and Milta Calderon, the mother of Anibal Carrasquillo Jr., they returned to Brooklyn district attorney Charles Hynes's office and staged a sit-in. One protester ran into the building, and while the security guard chased him, the other protesters flooded into the office. Blowing whistles and chanting, they demanded that the DA reconvene grand jury hearings for both the Huang and Carrasquillo cases. The press was shut out of the demonstration and forced to stand behind a glass partition as the DA's staff covered the glass with paper, blocking any photographs or video recordings.<sup>91</sup> The DA's office refused to speak to the reporters whom the organizations had called to the event, instead sliding press releases under the partition stating that there was no need for additional hearings.<sup>92</sup>

After three hours, police in full riot gear stormed the office and arrested twelve protestors. Among those arrested were Joyce Huang, Qing Lan Huang, and Milta Calderon. They were charged with obstruction of governmental administration, criminal trespass, and disorderly conduct and prosecuted by the same office that refused to indict the police officers involved in the killings of Yong Xin Huang and Anibal Carrasquillo Jr. The protesters' attorney, Ronald Kuby, stated, "The purpose of the demonstration was to give Hynes a choice. He could have put the cops behind bars or he could have put the family members. He chose the family."<sup>93</sup> The family members and protesters were arrested and tried, facing greater consequences for their act of civil disobedience than either of the officers responsible for the deaths of their loved ones. The actions of the DA's office highlighted the state conceptions of who was law-abiding and who was criminal—police were authorized to shoot and kill sixteen-year-old and twenty-one-year-old young men of color, yet the family members of the victims were arrested for a nonviolent protest to demand accountability. Under Giuliani's revanchist regime, protesters were criminalized as "disorderly" while the police as enforcers of order were granted latitude in the use of deadly force.

Even after the settlement of the civil suit for the Huang family, the protesters continued to bring attention to these cases. CAAAV emphasized the importance of remembrance in a press release for the protest:

Charles Hynes, Rudolph Giuliani, and Police Commissioner William Bratton would like to erase the state-sanctioned murder of Yong Xin and Anibal from our minds and memories. Approximately one year since the murder of both youths, the families and friends of Yong

Xin Huang and Anibal Carrasquillo Jr. have occupied Charles Hynes' office so that no one will forget the names of these two young men.<sup>94</sup>

The demonstration and statement were part of CAAAV and NCPRR's fight against the erasure of both the lives and memories of Yong Xin and Anibal. The organizing was focused on not only winning concrete demands of the state but also remembering their sons and brothers. In the years that followed, the organizations and families would hold numerous memorials for their loved ones. Holding mock tombstones and photos of Yong Xin Huang, Anibal Carrasquillo Jr., Anthony Baez, Hilton Vega, and Nicholas Heyward Jr., they insisted on remembrance as an act of resistance in the face of the state's deliberate forgetting.

The family members and organizers laid the foundation for mobilizations that would occur in future prominent cases. On February 4, 1999, twenty-three-year-old Amadou Diallo died in a hail of forty-one bullets in the entranceway of his building in the Bronx. NYPD officers claimed they mistook him for a rape suspect and his wallet for a gun. The Diallo case precipitated citywide outrage as it revealed another instance of the brutality of Giuliani-era policing. Black community leaders including Al Sharpton, Charles Barron, and Herbert Daughtry called for consecutive days of civil disobedience until the four officers involved in the Diallo shooting were arrested. For two weeks, protesters blocked the entrance to police headquarters, resulting in twelve hundred arrests and a major political crisis for the Giuliani administration.<sup>95</sup> At a march across the Brooklyn Bridge that drew ten thousand people on April 15, 1999, protesters carried signs declaring "Diallo, Louima, Huang, Rosario, Baez, Bumpers [sic]: Enough!"<sup>96</sup> The names situated the Diallo case in a pattern of police violence in Black, Latinx, and Asian American communities, from the killing of sixty-six-year-old African American grandmother Eleanor Bumpurs in her Bronx apartment in 1984 to the Giuliani-era police brutality cases.<sup>97</sup> The presence of the names Huang, Rosario, and Baez was a result of the families' years of organizing labor to highlight the systemic nature of police brutality and keep the memories of their loved ones alive.

The family members continued their relentless activism in the years after the deaths of their loved ones. Even after exhausting avenues for traditional legal recourse, they continued the public remembrance of their sons and brothers. Reporting on a memorial held months after a grand jury ruled that Officer Steven Mizrahi would not face trial, a news anchor called it "the case that will not die."<sup>98</sup> For years after the Huang family won their settlement, they continued their struggle for justice for Yong Xin and other victims of police brutality. When asked what kept her going, Qing Lan

Huang responded simply, "He was my brother. He was my only brother. This is more than enough to push me to do something for him."<sup>99</sup>

The leadership of family members, particularly mothers, has been central to movements against state violence, from *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, the Argentinean mothers who protested the disappearance of their children during the country's Dirty War from 1974 to 1983, to *Mothers Reclaiming Our Children*, a group of mothers who organized in Los Angeles on behalf of their incarcerated children beginning in the early 1990s. Regarding *Mothers ROC*, which helped broker a truce between gangs in Los Angeles and bridged urban neighborhoods with the rural communities in which prisons were located, Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes, "The ability to reach across social and spatial divides came from the Mothers' use of the ideological power of motherhood to challenge the legitimacy of the changing state."<sup>100</sup>

In the case of the family members organizing with CAAAV and NCPRR, they included not only mothers but fathers, sisters, and others who cared for the young men before and beyond their deaths. Not only was the care they provided for their loved ones transgressive—as Loretta Ross has written, "it is a radical act to nurture the lives of those who are not supposed to exist"<sup>101</sup>—but their care for one another across their own social and spatial divides was a process of movement building, from Iris Baez and Margarita Rosario knocking on the doors of recently bereaved families to Milta Calderon's arrest alongside the Huang sisters. They reached across segregated geographies, as in Ramon Baez's gesture of solidarity toward Qiu Xin Huang during the April 25, 1995, demonstration, and when protesters at the DA's office infiltrated a space of power. Their transgressions were temporal as well as spatial, refusing to let cases die and keeping the names of their loved ones alive even beyond the realm of legal possibilities for justice. Against carceral regimes of confinement, removal, and erasure, they built a multiracial movement across a segregated city and laid claim to the spaces and future of New York on behalf of their loved ones and their communities.

## Conclusion

Two visions of New York's future came into conflict in the last years of the twentieth century. One, represented by the Giuliani administration, relied on punitive policing to enforce the removal of people of color, while the other, embodied by the multiracial group of protesters who shut down four Manhattan bridges and tunnels on April 25, 1995, asserted the right of criminalized people to live and thrive in the city. This conflict was the

culmination of over a decade of violent backlash against the city's changing racial demography, as white vigilantism in defense of the city's neighborhoods in the 1980s developed into revanchist policing to reclaim New York for the white middle class in the 1990s. Based on a long history of their racialization as an invasive threat, Asian Americans were among those subjected to these regimes of state-sanctioned removal. They were also among those who resisted. Led by families who lost loved ones to police violence, organizers not only demanded justice for individual victims but also fought for a city that centered care for and between marginalized communities.

Our current moment has seen the continued exclusion and removal of Asian Americans based on enduring racial and gendered tropes of the foreign, threatening pollutant. The anti-Asian violence that pervaded southern Brooklyn in the 1980s and 1990s resurfaced at the time of the writing of this article. In August 2018, at least seven buildings in Bensonhurst, including a Chinese grocery store, were spray painted with the message "Chinese Cunts Stink Like Fish."<sup>102</sup> The graffiti marked the spaces of the neighborhood with old tropes of Asian women as sexually deviant and unsanitary. A few months later, Arthur Martunovich killed three Asian immigrant men at the Seaport Buffet in Sheepshead Bay. These contemporary hate crimes in southern Brooklyn are reminders that Asian Americans are not exempt from the racist and misogynist violence that has been emboldened in the Trump era.

In recent years, however, one of the most prominent cases of police violence was an instance in which the perpetrator was a Chinese American—who is also from Bensonhurst. In 2014, NYPD officer Peter Liang fatally shot twenty-eight-year-old African American Akai Gurley in the stairwell of a Brooklyn public housing unit. CAAAV, continuing its legacy of organizing alongside families of police violence victims, forged a relationship with the Gurley family and supported their call for Liang's conviction. In contrast, other Chinese Americans across the country viewed Liang as the scapegoat for broader demands for police accountability while the white police officers involved in the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner were never indicted. The nationwide mobilizations for Liang were part of a new wave of Asian immigrant conservatism that has fueled recent opposition to data disaggregation and affirmative action.<sup>103</sup>

These contemporary cases revolving around Chinese Americans in Brooklyn demonstrate how the age-old yellow peril trope persists alongside the model minority narrative. In the case of the graffiti and hammer attack, Asian immigrant gender relations are pathologized and viewed as an unassimilable threat to what was once a white neighborhood. In the Gurley



case, reactions to the indictment and conviction of Liang demonstrated the model minority desire of achieving the privileges of whiteness to the continued detriment of Black communities. CAAAV and the Huang family, however, have moved toward a third possibility of Asian American politics.

Qing Lan Huang reinvoked the lessons of the past in a statement she wrote in response to the Gurley case: "Twenty-one years ago, my family was denied justice for the killing of my brother. I can't stay silent when I see that our justice system is about to let another police officer off the hook for killing another young man. I can't stay silent when I know how painful it is to not only lose a beloved family member, but to have our country's justice system tell your family his life doesn't matter."<sup>104</sup> Moving from her family's personal experience with state violence, Huang emphasized how Asian Americans also have a stake in confronting the system that devalued Akai Gurley's life. It is that same system that devalued Yong Xin Huang's.

Our current moment demands a nuanced political analysis to understand the contradictions of Asian American racial positioning. Asian Americans today are living in a set of conflicting realities that are only partially captured by the notion of "Asian American privilege."<sup>105</sup> These contradictions are evident in my own experience: my childhood home was several blocks away from the backyard in Sheepshead Bay where Yong Xin Huang was killed. My Chinese-Vietnamese refugee family later moved to Bensonhurst as part of the growing population of Asian immigrants that generated so much racist backlash. Much of my extended family lives about a mile from the restaurant where Fufai Pun, Kheong Ng-Thang, and Tsz Mat Pun were killed. And yet my parents were among the tens of thousands who protested Peter Liang's conviction in 2016. At the heart of this study has been an attempt to make sense of my family's simultaneous proximity to violence and their support of the systems that perpetuate it.

How do we talk about the police killings of Asian Americans like Yong Xin Huang within an analysis of an institution that has enacted such devastating violence on Black communities, especially when Asian Americans like Peter Liang have taken part in perpetrating that violence?<sup>106</sup> Fred Moten's assertion in *The Undercommons* may offer an answer. Interpreting the legacy of Black Panther Fred Hampton, Moten states, "The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us. I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly."<sup>107</sup> Rather than a sympathetic model of coalition that encourages Asian Americans in a position of relative privilege to "help" Black communities facing the brunt of state violence, we need to recognize how we are both impacted by and imbricated in these struc-

tures. This is not to say that we are affected in the same ways—inherent in Moten’s idea of coalition is an acknowledgment of difference. Examining the effects of racial and police violence on Asian Americans is not about conflating the experiences of Asian Americans and Black people or simply claiming that we are oppressed, too. Rather, it is an effort to understand how a system that has resulted in the deaths of so many Black people is killing us “however much more softly,” and that dismantling that system is critical for our collective liberation.

### Notes

1. David K. Li, “Man Indicted for Hate Crime and Murder in Grisly New York Hammer Attack,” *NBC News*, February 1, 2019, [www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/man-indicted-hate-crime-murder-grisly-new-york-hammer-attack-n966121](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/man-indicted-hate-crime-murder-grisly-new-york-hammer-attack-n966121).
2. See Larry Celona, Tina Moore, and Aaron Feis, “Hammer Killer Thought He Was Defending Chinese Women with Buffet Attack,” *New York Post*, January 16, 2019, <https://nypost.com/2019/01/16/hammer-killer-thought-he-was-defending-chinese-women-with-buffet-attack/>; “Brooklyn Man in ‘Racist’ Hammer Attack That Killed Malaysian Restaurateur Is ‘Crazy,’ Says Mom,” *Straits Times*, January 21, 2019, [www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/brooklyn-man-in-racist-hammer-attack-that-killed-malaysian-restaurateur-is-crazy](http://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/brooklyn-man-in-racist-hammer-attack-that-killed-malaysian-restaurateur-is-crazy).
3. Li Yakira Cohen, “Hate Crime Charges Sought in Deadly Sheepshead Bay Hammer Attack,” *AM New York*, January 25, 2019, [www.amny.com/news/hammer-attack-brooklyn-1.26431689](http://www.amny.com/news/hammer-attack-brooklyn-1.26431689).
4. David Harvey, “The Right to the City,” *New Left Review* 53 (2008): 23.
5. Eric Tang, “State Violence, Asian Immigrants, and the ‘Underclass,’” in *States of Confinement: Policing, Detention, and Prisons*, ed. Joy James (New York: St. Martin’s, 2000), 231.
6. Sunaina Maira, *Missing: Youth, Citizenship, and Empire after 9/11* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Junaid Rana, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
7. Soo Ah Kwon, *Uncivil Youth: Race, Activism, and Affirmative Governmentality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
8. Karen J. Leong and Myla Vicenti Carpio, “Carceral States: Converging Indigenous and Asian Experiences in the Americas,” *Amerasia Journal* 42, no. 1 (2016): vii–xviii.
9. Dylan Rodríguez, “Asian-American Studies in the Age of the Prison Industrial Complex: Departures and Re-narrations,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 27, no. 3 (2005): 241–63; Anita Mannur, ed., “Editor’s Forum: Black Lives Matter in an Age of Asian American Studies,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 20, no. 2 (2017): 265–97.

10. Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics and Society* 27, no.1 (1999): 105–38.
11. As Lisa Lowe writes, "Asian American culture . . . is a site that shifts and marks alternatives to the national terrain by occupying other spaces, imagining different narratives and critical historiographies, and enacting practices that give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of human life by the national state." This tradition of Asian American critique allows for a reconceptualization of the meaning and function of policing in the United States. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 29.
12. CAAAV has changed its name twice to reflect the nature of its work. It began as the Coalition Against Anti-Asian Violence in 1986, when it was composed of Asian American organizations that came together to address racial violence in the aftermath of the Vincent Chin case. By 1988, the leaders of CAAAV felt that it was becoming its own organization rather than a coalition accountable to its constituent groups and changed the group's name to the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence. In 1998, the organization took on its current name, CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities, maintaining the acronym while reflecting the organization's shift from its initial focus on individual cases of racial violence to organizing communities to address systemic injustices, including South Asian taxi drivers and Filipina domestic workers for labor rights, Chinatown youth and vendors for police accountability, Vietnamese and Cambodian residents in the Bronx for access to social services, and Chinatown and public housing residents for affordable housing.
13. Inspired and mentored by movement leaders, including Japanese American camp survivor Kazu Iijima, Mini Liu and Monona Yin founded CAAAV with a commitment to a panethnic, multiracial, and intersectional ethos. The organizations involved in the initial coalition included the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, Coalition of Labor Union Women, NY Chapter, Japanese American Citizens League, NY Chapter, Khmer Association in the United States, Korean Americans for Social Concern, Korean American Women for Action, Organization of Asian Women, Organization of Chinese Americans, NY Chapter, and Young Korean American Service and Education Center.
14. CAAAV and NCPRR had parallel histories: they were both founded in the 1980s, focused their work on issues of hate crimes and police violence, and had roots in the Third World movements of the 1960s and 1970s. NCPRR was founded in 1981 at a Bronx convention that strove to unify Puerto Ricans against discrimination. Some of the members and leaders of the New York chapter, including Vicente "Panama" Alba and Richie Pérez, were former members of the Young Lords Party. Over the years, CAAAV and NCPRR developed a model of community organizing that foregrounded

the leadership of those directly impacted by racial violence. NCPRR, now known as the Justice Committee, continues to organize the family members of police violence victims. The relationship between CAAAV and NCPRR / Justice Committee is a testament to their commitment to multiracial coalition-building and efforts to carry the radicalism of Third World left into the twenty-first century.

15. Emily Thuma, *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 3.
16. Grace Hong, "Comparison and Coalition in the Age of Black Lives Matter," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 20, no. 2 (2017): 275.
17. Among recently published texts discussing CAAAV's role in the Gurley case are Wen Liu, "Complicity and Resistance: Asian American Body Politics in Black Lives Matter," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 21, no. 3 (2018): 421–53; and Shireen Roshanravan, "Weaponizing Our (In)Visibility: Asian American Feminist Ruptures of the Model-Minority Optic," in *Asian American Feminisms and Women of Color Politics*, ed. Lynn Fujiwara and Shireen Roshanravan (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 261–81.
18. See Scot Nakagawa, "Asians Are the Wedge," *Race Files*, May 29, 2012, [www.racefiles.com/2012/05/29/asians-are-the-wedge](http://www.racefiles.com/2012/05/29/asians-are-the-wedge).
19. Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for Large Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005), 81.
20. One of CAAAV's first actions as a newly formed coalition was to mobilize Asian Americans to demand justice for Michael Griffith. Monona Yin, "Howard Beach Aftermath—Asian Americans March in Queens Protest," *New York Nichibei*, January 8, 1987, box 12, folder 3, Japanese American Newspaper Collection, Tamiment Library, New York University.
21. Jonathan Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 353. Goetz was convicted for possession of an unlicensed firearm.
22. Joshua Freeman, *Working Class New York: Life and Labor since World War II* (New York: New Press, 2000); Joseph Berger, "Well, the Ices Are Still Italian: Immigration Patterns Shift, Altering the Old Neighborhood," *New York Times*, September 17, 2002; Roger Stone, "What Really Happened in Bensonhurst," *New York Magazine*, November 6, 1989. The anti-Asian campaign was not the first attempt at maintaining the whiteness of southern Brooklyn. In 1982 about twenty white men beat Black transit worker Willie Turks to death in Gravesend, and in 1987 seven white youths attacked two Black brothers, Sylvester and Steven LaMont, in Bensonhurst.
23. Peter Kwong and Paul Mak, "Asian Communities in Bensonhurst Brooklyn" (Brooklyn Historical Society, April 14, 2016), YouTube, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0Stch6CIDg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0Stch6CIDg); First Korean Church of Brooklyn, Church History, [www.fkcb.org/?page\\_id=75](http://www.fkcb.org/?page_id=75).

24. New York Department of City Planning, *Demographic Profiles: A Portrait of New York City's Community Districts from the 1980 and 1990 Censuses of Population and Housing* (1992), 130.
25. *Ibid.*, 146.
26. The number of flyers cited by news reports and activist groups was 700,000, though this number may have been inflated as the total population of the neighborhoods of Bensonhurst, Gravesend, and Sheepshead Bay numbered only approximately 300,000. Charles Seaton, "Asians Ask Action vs. Hate Fliers," *New York Daily News*, March 7, 1988; Asian Americans for Equality, "South Brooklyn Residents Say No to Hate Fliers," newsletter, Spring/Summer 1988, Mini Liu Papers, CAAAV Archive, New York; New York Department of City Planning, *Demographic Profiles*.
27. Council of Business and Concerned Homeowners of Bensonhurst, "Urgent Message to All Bensonhurst Home Owners and Residents!!!" (1987), box 212, folder 6, Ed Koch Papers, New York City Municipal Archives.
28. "Moonies" is a derogatory term used to describe members of the Unification Church of the United States, founded by Sun Myung Moon.
29. Gravesend Coalition of Neighborhood Associations, "Urgent Message to All Gravesend Home Owners and Residents!!!" (1987), box 212, folder 6, Ed Koch Papers.
30. "Coalition Against Anti-Asian Violence Initiates Program to Combat Bensonhurst Flyers," press release, January 18, 1988, Mini Liu Papers.
31. Rita Giordano, "Anti-Asian Biased Linked to Incidents," *Newsday*, December 15, 1987.
32. Among the local groups were the Council for Unity, consisting of students and teachers of the local John Dewey High School, and the Black-Asian American Network, consisting of Bensonhurst residents and tenants of Gravesend's public housing complex Marlboro Houses. Thomas Waite, "Blunting a Poison Pen in Bensonhurst," *New York Times*, March 6, 1988.
33. Katie Quan, phone interview with the author, April 22, 2019.
34. Michael Young, Martha Mann, Sandy Roberts, Paul Herzfeld to Doron Gopstein, Memorandum, December 4, 1987, box 212, folder 6, Ed Koch Papers.
35. Monona Yin, Letter to District Attorney Elizabeth Holtzman, January 11, 1988, Mini Liu Papers.
36. Letter to Asian American organizations, 1988, Mini Liu Papers.
37. The reference to a national white supremacy was not just rhetorical—the area was later discovered to be a target for recruitment to the Ku Klux Klan. See Julian Barnes, "A Hint of the Klan, and a Community Hits Back Hard," *New York Times*, February 7, 1999.
38. Mini Liu, Letter to Mayor Ed Koch, May 5, 1988, Mini Liu Papers.
39. Eva Tan, Letter to Mini Liu, May 18, 1988, Mini Liu Papers.
40. Gretchen Lang, "Racial Bias Quieter, Residents Tell Koch," *Bay News*, May 16, 1988, Mini Liu Papers.

41. Claire Jean Kim, *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 88.
42. Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City*, 385–86.
43. Manuel Perez-Rivas, “150 in Bensonhurst Anti-Racism March,” *Newsday*, September 17, 1989.
44. National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights, letter to supporters, n.d., box 3, folder 8, Richie Pérez Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, CUNY.
45. Perla Guerrero, *Nuevo South: Latinas/os, Asians, and the Remaking of Place* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 153.
46. Kim, *Bitter Fruit*.
47. Clarence Taylor, *Fight the Power: African Americans and the Long History of Police Brutality in New York City* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).
48. Rudolph Giuliani and William Bratton, *Police Strategy No. 5: Reclaiming the Public Spaces of New York* (New York: New York City Police Department, 1994), 5.
49. Neil Smith, “Giuliani Time: The Revanchist 1990s,” *Social Text* 57 (1998): 1–20.
50. William Bratton and Peter Knobler, *Turnaround: How America’s Top Cop Reversed the Crime Epidemic* (New York: Random House, 1998), [www.nytimes.com/books/first/b/bratton-turnaround.html](http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/b/bratton-turnaround.html).
51. George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson, “Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety,” *Atlantic*, March 1982.
52. New York Police Department, “Complaints and Arrests,” 1994, 40, Special Collections, Lloyd Sealy Library, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY.
53. Themis Chronopoulos, “The Making of the Orderly City: New York since the 1980s,” *Journal of Urban History*, OnlineFirst (2017): 16.
54. Giuliani’s first term in office saw a 75 percent increase in civil rights suits against the police for abusive conduct. In Giuliani’s first year in office, complaints filed against the NYPD increased 37.8 percent from the year before. See Taylor, *Fight the Power*, 168; New York City Civilian Complaint Review Board, “Status Report,” January–December 2001, [www1.nyc.gov/assets/ccrb/downloads/pdf/policy\\_pdf/annual\\_bi-annual/2001\\_annual.pdf](http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/ccrb/downloads/pdf/policy_pdf/annual_bi-annual/2001_annual.pdf).
55. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010), 2.
56. *Ibid.*, 40.
57. Alex S. Vitale and Brian Jordan Jefferson, “The Emergence of Command and Control Policing in Neoliberal New York,” in *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*, ed. Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton (New York: Verso, 2016), 157.
58. *Ibid.*, 164. Other recent scholarship on policing includes Risa Goluboff, *Vagrant Nation: Police Power, Constitutional Change, and the Making of*

- the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Max Felker-Kantor, *Policing Los Angeles: Race, Resistance, and the Rise of the LAPD* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); and Simon Balto, *Occupied Territory: Policing Black Chicago from Red Summer to Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).
59. Merle English, "An Effort to Take Back NY," *Newsday*, October 30, 1994.
  60. Paula Katinas, "Hey Sharpton, B'Hurst Group to March!," *Brooklyn Spectator*, December 21, 1994, box 15, folder 2, Richie Pérez Papers.
  61. Ibid.
  62. Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, "Police Violence in New York City's Asian American Communities (1986–1995)," report, March 12, 1996, Mini Liu Papers.
  63. CAAAV, "RALLY Against Police Brutality!," flyer, September 15, 1996, CAAAV Archive.
  64. Ibid.
  65. CAAAV, "Chinese Woman Calls Police to Mediate Landlord-Tenant Dispute—And Gets Maced and Beaten by NYPD," *CAA AV Voice*, Winter 1997, CAAAV Archive.
  66. Ibid.
  67. Amnesty International, "United States of America: Police Brutality and Excessive Force in the New York City Police Department" (June 26, 1996), 47.
  68. Jane H. Lii, "Disputing the Account by Police, a Friend Says Slain Youth Did Not Resist Officers," *New York Times*, March 27, 1995.
  69. Ibid.; Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, "Police Brutality in the New Chinatown," in *Zero Tolerance: Quality of Life and the New Police Brutality in New York City*, ed. Andrea McArdle and Tanya Erzen (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Lii, "Disputing the Account by Police."
  70. Police Commissioner William J. Bratton to Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, Weekly Report, May 19, 1995, Giuliani Records, microfilm, reel 60887, New York City Municipal Archive.
  71. Andrew Hsiao and Deirdre Hussey, "Mothers of Invention," *Village Voice*, April 6, 1999.
  72. Qing Lan Huang, interview with the author, February 23, 2018, New York.
  73. For a more thorough examination of these connections, see Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, "Police Brutality in the New Chinatown."
  74. Mini Liu, interview with the author, Sabrina Jalal, and Kyla Cheung, July 2, 2016, New York.
  75. Qing Lan Huang, interview with the author, February 23, 2018, New York.
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  77. Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, "Cop Bullet Ends Teen's Life," *CAA AV Voice*, Spring 1995; N. R. Kleinfeld, "Rush Hour Protest Causes Gridlock," *New York Times*, April 26, 1995.

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