

Toward Thick Solidarity

Theorizing Empathy in Social Justice Movements

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My brother and I call each other that day to commiserate about an email from our mom asking us to “Pls support Peter Liang”—the Chinese American police officer indicted for killing Akai Gurley, an unarmed Black man. “What did you do with it?” I ask him. “I deleted it,” he replies, sounding resigned. “What did you do?” he asks me. “I was gonna write back . . . but I didn’t know what to say.” A week later, we are walking through the plaza near the Brooklyn courthouse. My mom points to a grassy patch and proudly tells us that was where she, along with ten thousand others, protested in support of Peter Liang. They were joined by thousands of Asian Americans across the country, marking the greatest show of political engagement from the Asian American community in decades.

My mom, like many others who were there that day, was angry that Liang was a scapegoat for the legions of white officers who have escaped indictment for their murders of Black and Latinx people. They also expressed what some refer to as empathy. In an article interviewing supporters of Peter Liang, one woman said in Cantonese that she was “heartbroken that an innocent man has died and a young cop’s career has been cut short. ‘I feel very sad. It’s bad for both sides.’”¹ The crux of this sentiment was advertised on protest signs at the Brooklyn courthouse that read: “One tragedy, two victims.” The slogan asserts *both* Gurley *and* Liang were victims of an unjust system. It is emblematic of broader attempts to forge toward Black-Asian solidarity that rely problematically on an erasure of the specificities of anti-Blackness and anti-Asianness. Though supporters of Liang argued that there

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was “one tragedy, two victims,” only one of those victims was actually killed. Solidarity based on notions of shared suffering often creates a false equivalence between different experiences of racialized violence. Our position is that this leads to a kind of empathy that is genuine, but “thin.” We’re interested instead in forging toward notions of what we conceptualize as *thick solidarity*—that is, a kind of solidarity that mobilizes empathy in ways that do not gloss over difference, but rather pushes into the specificity, irreducibility, and incommensurability of racialized experiences.²

Thick solidarity is based on a radical belief in the inherent value of each other’s lives despite never being able to fully understand or fully share in the experience of those lives. Exploring the role that empathy plays in forming solidarities is an attempt to understand the “personal and affective dimension to . . . political commitments.”³ In this article, we practice thick solidarity as we flow back and forth between the personal dimensions of one author’s family (Liu), and our collaborative musings on their implications for political and scholarly commitments (Liu and Shange). We built this piece in response to one set of historical and ethnographic events, but it is the product of several years of working alongside one another. After meeting while taking coursework together at the University of Pennsylvania, we deepened our relationship by thinking in tandem about the dilemmas of multiracial coalition revealed by our respective fieldwork sites. As we write together from our embodied experiences as Asian American (Liu) and Black (Shange), we understand more fully the specificity and irreducibility of these racialized experiences, and yet our relationship as friends and colleagues induces us to care and empathize despite incommensurability. Our practice of thick solidarity makes our theorizing more incisive. Though the issue of Black-Asian solidarity that we explore in this piece is situated in US racial politics, by introducing the concept of thick solidarity we offer an affective approach toward thinking about the challenges and potentials of cultivating global south solidarities more broadly.

African Slavery and Indentured Chinese Labor as “the Same”

Many months after our jaunt through Brooklyn my mom and I are at a wedding together. I’ve been wanting to address her support of Peter Liang. I say to her, “Mommy, do you know how a lot of Black people in this country got here?” “No,” she says, looking quizzical. I tell her about the Transatlantic slave trade, its brutality, and its severance of kinship ties. This is the first time she’s ever heard of this. I tell her how slaves were treated “not like humans, but like dogs,” appealing to a phrase I’ve heard her say in Cantonese when she is indignant about the mistreatment of people. She seems to know what I am getting at. She says something like, “Well that’s not right. . . . But a lot of time has passed and they need to work hard to improve their lives.” My mom summons the well-worn Horatio Alger bootstrap ideology that denies the afterlife of slavery. I attempt to rebuff her by explaining Jim

Crow laws, redlining, and racially restrictive covenants, but I cannot figure out how to say all that in Cantonese.

Weeks later I visit my family in New York. My mom brings up the conversation we had at the wedding and says to me, “You know, you said that Black people were treated badly—well they did the same thing to Chinese people.” “They,” in this case, were white Americans, British, and Spanish colonialists, and “the same thing” referenced indentured Chinese laborers who, through subterfuge and kidnapping, were sent to work on plantations in the nineteenth century. “You and your brother only care about helping Black people,” she finishes. Caught off guard, I retort, “Well if they did the same thing to Chinese people shouldn’t you care more? I mean, that was bad, but it’s not the same.”

There are obvious connections between the Transatlantic slave trade and the coolie trade, since the abolition of the slave trade by Britain and the United States in 1807 and Spain’s abolition of slavery in 1811 prompted the need for Asian labor. To prop up the highly profitable plantation economies of the United States, the Caribbean, and other parts of the New World, slave masters looked to the East to replace chattel slaves, creating similar conditions on ships and on plantations leading to high mortality rates among Asian laborers. This has led some scholars to question whether Asian indenture was a form of slavery closely associated with Black chattel slavery.⁴ It also led Wong Chin Foo, a late nineteenth century Chinese American writer and activist, to “mobilize the deep figurative associations between coolieism and chattel slavery for political effect.”⁵ Imitating the style of slave narratives, Wong wrote a short story of a “fugitive coolie”⁶ to draw attention to the struggles of Asian indentured laborers. While refusing to “assert equivalence between the New World slave and coolie . . . [Wong] directs readers toward a political critique of Asian indenture by way of its structural likeness to enslaved labor.”⁷ Likewise, politicians who sought to abolish indentured labor drew on a comparison with the slave trade and drew on highly publicized instances of ship rebellions to show the involuntary nature of the coolie trade.⁸

Thus, my mother’s association of Asian indenture with Black chattel slavery has historical antecedents. However, unlike Wong who refused to “assert equivalence” between the slave and the coolie, my mother counts them as “the same,” leading her to not only draw attention to the injustices perpetrated against indentured Chinese but to also decenter the position of Black chattel slavery in race-making projects.⁹ Instead of viewing slavery as pivotal and as the *raison d’être* for national and transnational projects of race-making from which other racial formations would follow,¹⁰ it is simply viewed as one among many forms of racial domination. Yet for all the historical connections and “structural likeness” between slavery and indentured labor, asserting that they are “the same” simply erases basic facts about the scale and scope of these events.¹¹ About half a million indentured Chinese

were transported from the ports of British Amoy and Portuguese Macau (incidentally where my mother was born and raised) to Cuba, Peru, and the United States south during the nineteenth century,¹² while the Transatlantic slave trade thrived from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century and transported twelve million enslaved Africans from such a large number of ports that dotted West Africa that it was commonly referred to as the “Slave Coast.”¹³

Moreover, my mother’s readiness to count indentured Chinese labor as “the same” as the African slave trade lays bare the insufficiencies of drawing on shared histories of oppression to evoke empathy. Although my mom asserts that “they did the same thing to Chinese people,” she fails to use this as a point for standing in solidarity with ongoing Black struggles. In fact, the point of the statement is to highlight the position of Chinese victimhood by showing that we were treated just as badly as African slaves. She attempts to create parity between these histories as a way of getting my brother and me to care more about Chinese victimhood because, as she perceives it, we “only care about Black people.” Here, my mother downplays and even completely ignores different forms of exploitation to the extent that indentured Chinese labor and chattel slavery are seen as “the same.” Yet as Jared Sexton points out, it is both curious and telling that the experience of racial injustice is only conveyed most potently when Blackness is used as “the grounding metaphor of social misery.”¹⁴ This was the case with politicians who sought to abolish the coolie trade, and it was the case with Wong Chin Foo even though he refused to create equivalence between the coolie and the slave. In both instances, increasing public empathy *toward indentured laborers* was effective by associating the coolie trade *with the slave trade*. Curiously, the reverse is not true. Even though “they did the same thing to Chinese people”—an appeal to our shared history of oppression—this failed to mobilize my mom’s empathy for Blacks. This is made apparent in the exasperated tone in which I question my mom, “if they did the same thing to Chinese people shouldn’t you *care* more?” The answer, apparently, is “no.”

Creating Parity between Michael Brown and Vincent Chin

In 2014, *Time* magazine published an article by Jack Linshi entitled “Why Ferguson Should Matter to Asian Americans.”¹⁵ The article took on an apologist’s tone, attempting to convince Asian American readers to stand in solidarity with those fighting against systemic racism and violence toward Blacks. To rally Asian Americans, Linshi drew parallels between the deaths of Michael Brown and Vincent Chin, a Chinese American Detroit man who was beaten to death in 1982 by disgruntled white autoworkers. He wrote that in the cases of Michael Brown and Vincent Chin, their attackers were “both white, both uncharged in a racially-motivated murder; [and both] unified [their] communit[ies] to demand protection under the law.”¹⁶ According to Linshi:

The Asian-American experience was once a story of racially motivated legal exclusion, disenfranchisement and horrific violence—commonalities with the African-American experience that became rallying points in demanding racial equality. That division between racial minorities also erased a history of Afro-Asian solidarity born by the shared experience of sociopolitical marginalization.¹⁷

He provided further examples, focusing on Asian Americans fatally shot at the hands of the police. These included the 1997 death of Kuanchang Kao, a Chinese American man who police said were threatened by his “martial arts moves”;¹⁸ C  u Bich Tr  n, a Vietnamese American killed in 2003 because police misidentified the vegetable peeler she was holding as a cleaver; and Fong Lee, a Hmong American shot dead in 2006 by police who thought he was carrying a gun. Linshi marshaled these examples to make shared experiences of police violence a point of solidarity between Black and Asian American communities.

In an effort to promote multiracial unity, Linshi referenced the “history of Afro-Asian solidarity” and went on to name key figures like Yuri Kochiyama and Grace Lee Boggs, who are emblematic of third world solidarity.¹⁹ That history, though, begins before 1965 when Kochiyama knelt alongside Malcolm X’s dying body in the Audubon Ballroom, and even before Boggs’ decades-long collaboration with CLR James beginning in 1951.²⁰ The Council on African Affairs (CAA), founded in 1937, was committed to international anticolonialism and linked the struggles of Black Americans to colonized people worldwide, including Asians living in Asia and in the diaspora. For instance, the CAA, which counted W. E. B. Dubois and Mary McLeod Bethune among its membership, formed an alliance with the government of India to protest the mistreatment of Indians in South Africa.²¹ On a transnational scale, the 1955 Bandung conference was a germinal event for the development of Afro-Asian solidarities. The gathering brought together hundreds of nonwhite political leaders and intellectuals from twenty-nine nations. Bandung attendee and Black American novelist Richard Wright remarked that “the agenda and subject matter had been written for centuries in the blood and bones of the participants.”²² Grace Lee Boggs herself helped coordinate the event in which Malcolm X delivered his “Message to the Grassroots” speech, in which he affirms the need for unity between Asian and African diasporas as they fight their common enemy: white supremacy.²³ The internationalist commitments to diaspora reached a peak with vocal opposition to the Vietnam War echoing across the Black political sphere, with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and of course Martin Luther King, Jr. each linking systemic racism at home to military aggression abroad.²⁴

Bandung’s bloodstained agenda was taken up a generation later by organizations like the Bay Area’s Third World Liberation Front that formed in 1969 to

mobilize Black, Chicano, Asian American, and Filipino students, as well as by Asian-led organizations that were deeply allied with the Black Panthers, like Los Angeles's Asian American Political Alliance and the Yellow Brotherhood. The latter was particularly resonant with the Panthers because the Brotherhood organized young, working-class Asian Americans, some of whom were affiliated with gangs and street economies.²⁵ On the East Coast, I Wor Kuen was a radical Chinese American formation that pursued leftist organizing and alliances with Black and Puerto Rican movements in New York's Chinatown in the 1970s. More recent nodes of Black-Asian solidarity include the Bus Riders Union, which uses public transit as a site of anti-imperialist, antiracist organizing of Black, Asian American, and Latinx bus riders in Los Angeles, and the national strategy think tank Race Forward, based in Dallas.²⁶

By highlighting Asian American deaths at the hands of police and by referencing a few threads of this intricate tapestry of Afro-Asian alliance, Linshi attempted to recuperate the understanding that, despite the model minority discourse that sought to divide and conquer, Asian Americans shared a *similar history* and experience of oppression with African Americans. He attempted to mobilize those shared histories and experiences as a way of summoning empathy among his Asian American readership and to serve as the basis for uniting Blacks and Asians.

But not all social suffering is created equal. Sexton refers to this refusal to parse out the historical, social, subjective, and embodied differences among racial minorities as *people-of-color blindness*.²⁷ While colorblindness denotes the refusal to acknowledge a system of privileges and marginalization based on race, people-of-color blindness refuses to acknowledge the systematic privileges and oppression that exist among different people of color (POC). There's no doubt that non-Black POC also experience forms of structural violence. But, according to Sexton, "it is the specific genealogy that links slavery to Jim Crow to the ghetto to the prison that warrants my claim about the singularity of racial domination of blacks."²⁸ Other racial minorities in America come out of "profoundly different historical processes and trajectories."²⁹ These profound differences make it difficult to cultivate solidarity based on empathy that is conjured up through an appeal to our shared oppression. So, where else can we start? What strategies can communities and scholars draw on to build a just and sustainable multiracial solidarity?

Toward Thick Solidarity

Though Linshi insists on empathy for Black suffering and my mother resists it, it is significant that both employ a framework of parity for thinking across race. Vincent Chin is Michael Brown, and like my mom said, "they did the *same thing* to Chinese people." In contrast to this racial equivalence, Asian American and Asian Canadian organizers are developing other models of solidarity that do not rely on people-of-color blindness. The Letters for Black Lives project centers their work

on the very differences that Sexton brings up. The crowdsourced project, started by Christina Xu in New York, is a set of letters translated into more than twenty-three languages that initially targeted the Asian community. Since then it has been adapted by Latinx, African immigrants, and other communities of color to try to address anti-Blackness across generations. The Letters project states:

It's true that we face discrimination for being Asian in this country. Sometimes people are rude to us about our accents, or withhold promotions because they don't think of us as "leadership material." Some of us are told we're terrorists. But for the most part, nobody thinks "dangerous criminal" when we are walking down the street. The police do not gun down our children and parents for simply existing.³⁰

Here, the Letters project highlights the differential distribution of life chances under white supremacy and draws a bold red line connecting the dots between criminalization, police, and Black death. In other words, the Letters project acknowledges the "singularity of racial domination of blacks."³¹

While Letters for Black Lives refuses to conflate anti-Blackness with anti-Asianness, it nevertheless hinges on empathy as the engine for action. The authors ask their elders to "try to empathize with the anger and grief of the fathers, mothers, and children who have lost their loved ones to police violence." Yet this is an empathy paired with responsibility, because it accounts for differential histories and political economies of state violence. Moreover, they assert, "the American Dream cannot exist for only your children. We are all in this together, and we cannot feel safe until *ALL* our friends, loved ones, and neighbors are safe" (emphasis original). Ultimately, the project is one geared toward an empathy that is inclusive *and* intersectional—an empathy that acknowledges our interconnectedness *and* our interstices.³² This is the dance I was trying to begin with my mother, one that highlights the missteps of the "one tragedy, two victims" logic while moving us toward responsible and consequential empathy.

Similar to Letters for Black Lives is Asians for Black Lives, a collective started in the Bay Area. Inheriting the legacy of I Wor Kuen and the Yellow Brotherhood, which mobilized four decades ago alongside the Black liberation movement, both the Letters for Black Lives and Asians for Black Lives campaigns acknowledge the centrality of fighting anti-Blackness in their organizing work. The title of one of the Asians for Black Lives guiding protocols is "Embrace Frontline Leadership, Center Blackness"—an unequivocal rejection of the "one tragedy, two victims" parity frame. They go on to say, "We understand that the path to liberation for all communities travels through the liberation of Black communities in America, and when Black people have justice and liberation, we all move one big step closer to real freedom." The clarity of the Asians for Black Lives platform is an antidote to people-of-color blindness. This was made concrete in December 2015, when members of the

collective organized a series of actions to call attention to the disproportionate state violence faced by the Black community. These included shutting down the Oakland Police Department for 4 hours and 28 minutes, the same amount of time that Mike Brown's dead body languished in the street in Ferguson.

In lieu of the widespread practice of thin notions of solidarity, both the Letters for Black Lives project and the Asians for Black Lives collective offer a robust, polyvalent approach to crossracial coalition building—what we might think of as a thick solidarity. Thick solidarity layers interpersonal empathy *with* historical analysis, political acumen, and a willingness to be led by those most directly impacted. It is a thickness that can withstand the tension of critique, the pulling back and forth between that which we owe and that which we share. We offer this concept as a way of thinking more broadly about the kinds of activism and solidarities that can be forged among those in the Global South. Indeed, as ethnographers of multiracial communities, we work towards thick solidarity as a research methodology, one that we begin to practice in this paper as we think and write together across race and toward justice. Activists on the front lines have already laid out the stakes of this work—it is up to us as scholars to take them up on it, even if our mothers think we only care about Black people.

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Notes

1. Wang, "Awoken."
2. Liu, *Intimate Differences*.
3. Lee, *Frantz Fanon*, 29.
4. Hu-DeHart, "Chinese Coolie Labor in Cuba"; Hu-DeHart, "'La Trata Amarilla'"; Jung, *Coolies and Cane*.
5. Wong, "Storytelling," 110.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 112.
8. *Ibid.*, 114.
9. *Ibid.*, 110.
10. Settler colonialism and the concomitant dispossession and genocide of indigenous people is also pivotal to understanding the "triad structure of settler-native-slave" (Tuck and Yang 2012), but it is beyond the scope of this article.
11. Wong, "Storytelling," 112.
12. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade*.
13. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*.
14. Sexton, "People-of-Color Blindness," 47.

15. Linshi, "Why Ferguson Should Matter to Asian Americans."
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ward, *In Love and Struggle*.
21. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire*.
22. Wright, *The Color Curtain*, 14.
23. Marable and Felber, *The Portable Malcolm X Reader*.
24. Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*.
25. Ogbar, "Yellow Power."
26. Mann, "Building the Anti-Racist, Anti-Imperialist, United Front."
27. Sexton, "People-of-Color Blindness."
28. Ibid., 54.
29. Ibid., 54.
30. We acknowledge the problematic way in which different experiences among Asian Americans becomes flattened in an attempt to build a broad-based Asian American coalition to support the Black Lives Matter movement. Specifically, the observation that "nobody thinks 'dangerous criminal'" is simply not true for Muslim Asian Americans and Southeast Asian groups.
31. Sexton, "People-of-Color Blindness," 54.
32. Lee, *Frantz Fanon*. Our conceptualization of empathy includes elements of what Christopher Lee refers to as "radical empathy." An area of contrast is the way in which difference is treated. While we advocate for a kind of empathy that recognizes the different sets of experiences created by processes of racialization, Lee's notion of radical empathy articulates a "transcendence of identity" (Lee, *Frantz Fanon: Toward a Revolutionary Humanism*, 32) and difference. His de-emphasis of difference is an attempt to avoid reifying colonial distinctions and constructions of social hierarchy. However, both conceptualizations of empathy acknowledge a productive dialectical tension between recognition of, and moving beyond difference.

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