Visible Solidarities: #Asians4BlackLives and Affective Racial Counterpublics

Rachel Kuo*

Abstract

This article examines how uses of '*Asian-ness*' as racial presence becomes used discursively and visually to form affective racial counterpublics around #Asians4BlackLives/#Justice4AkaiGurley and #SavePeterLiang/#Justice4Liang. Specifically, I look at how Asian American racial positioning becomes deployed in order to produce feelings of solidarity. Approaching hashtags as both indexical signifiers of solidarity and as an indexing system that archives together an array of media objects, I track media objects across multiple sites in order to examine visual modes of storytelling that affectively mobilize publics and investigate solidarity as discursively mediated, embodied, and affective phenomena. I closely examine how #SavePeterLiang protestors create narratives of victimization in response to the singularity of Liang's racial body and how the #Asians4BlackLives selfie project uses representational visibility to activate affective politics.

Key words: race, activism, affect, Asian American, digital media.

On November 20, 2014 in New York City, Akai Gurley, a 28-year old Black man was shot to death by NYPD officer Peter Liang. Two facts about Liang are widely circulated by US national media: 1) he is Chinese American and 2) he became the first New York City officer in over a decade to be convicted of shooting in the line of duty. It is also known that Liang and his partner waited at least 4 minutes to report the shooting and failed to provide any medical aid in response. On February 2016, Liang was indicted of second-degree manslaughter, criminally negligent homicide, assault, reckless endangerment, and misconduct—while he faced up to 15 years of prison, he was sentenced to 800 hours of community service (Fang, 2016). Since the end of November 2014, drawing on a longer history in which Asian American movements have benefited from Black-led social justice movements, local New York City and national Asian American organizations across the country worked with Black Lives Matter activists to address police violence and demand justice for Gurley. Many of these efforts were indexed under the hashtags #APIs4BlackLives and #Asians4BlackLives[1].

Yet, other Asian Americans, predominantly members of the Chinese American community, saw Liang's indictment as also unjust. They asked, why was Liang convicted of manslaughter when the murderers of so many others go free? They evoked the lack of accountability in the murders of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, and Rekia Boyd where so many Black lives continue to be taken by police, and where no justice is given. While there should have been indictments and convictions in all of these cases, including the indictment of Liang, they challenged Liang's conviction as a pointedly racist act against Asian Americans, revealing anxieties about historical and current anti-Asian discrimination. In Brooklyn, New York, nearly 15,000 people protested Liang's conviction, chanting "*No selective justice!*"—there were more than forty protests throughout the nation, with protestors being mostly Chinese American. These protests

*   E-mail of corresponding author: rachel.kuo@nyu.edu

1   Throughout this article, I use '*Asian Americans*' as a way to collectively address heterogeneous ethnic groups. 'Asian American' as political formation (and as an academic field of study) emerged out of racial justice movements in the 1960s and 70s as a way to organize Asians across class, nation, religion, language, class, and ethnicity. This article focuses primarily on Asian American and Black solidarity across race, but I also want to note there are multiple negotiations and positioning of racial meanings in relation to solidarity, such as between East Asian, Southeast Asian, and South Asian and also the relationship between Asian and Pacific Islander communities.

have been criticized as both perpetuating and exposing anti-Black racism within Asian American communities.

Mainstream news coverage framed Gurley's murder and Liang's indictment as an '*issue*' that left Asian Americans '*divided*' and '*fractured*'. This presumes two problematic tensions: that Asian Americans have always been one collective unit and that Asian American politics is inherently corrupted by internal diversity. Pan-ethnic racial groups, when understood as a political category, are presumed to share a unified collective consciousness and that their political embodiment should reflect this idealized consensus. Yet, as Cristina Beltrán (2010) suggests, this "command logic of unity" (p. 73) conceals ongoing political conflict as well as the agonies, instabilities, and complexities of racial solidarity.

The particular case of protests around Liang's indictment reveal a contentious politics of racial identification, where state-sanctioned racial violence has mobilized Asian Americans in different, yet parallel directions. These protests further expose contending visions of freedom and justice within Asian American publics as well as ideological and affective attachments to these different freedoms. Such affective attachments serve as both barriers and opportunities towards building cross-racial solidarities in racial justice movements.

This article examines how the visual uses of Asian '*racial presence*' produces affective frames that shape political formations. I examine ways affective racial counterpublics around #Asians4BlackLives (also #APIs4BlackLives) /#Justice4AkaiGurley and #SavePeterLiang/#Justice4Liang discursively and visually produce and circulate racial meaning to construct ideas around '*Asian American-ness*'. Extant scholarship has established the historical and ongoing shifting discursive uses and constructions of 'Asian-ness' in the realm of the state, law, and economy (Lowe, 1996; Kang, 2002; Ngai, 2004)—thus, this paper takes up the contradictions and complexities of Asian American racial positioning in our present moment. Focusing on #Asians4BlackLives and #SavePeterLiang offers insight towards how '*Asian-ness*' becomes visually deployed as a political argument for both multiracial coalition and conflict.

This study joins a limited amount of scholarship in the area of Asian American digital media activism, namely Lori Kido Lopez's (2016) foundational work on ways Asian Americans use media to fight for '*cultural citizenship*.' I also build on scholarship examining digital media content, political expression, and collective formation, particularly Zizi Papacharissi (2015)'s work on ways online media facilitate political formations of affect and how publics are activated and sustained by feelings of solidarity. I draw upon hashtags as indexical signifiers of '*solidarity*'—through hashtags, solidarity circulates as an act of visualized and visible claims-making. By studying hashtags as sites where counterpublics negotiate racial positionality (Brock, 2012; Jackson & Welles, 2016), this article also elucidates upon how racial ideologies are mediated through technological design and information practices (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2012; Tynes & Noble, 2016).

I focus on how hashtags function as discursive spaces towards "collectively constructing counternarratives and reimagining group identities" and function as an "indexing system in both the clerical sense and the semiotic sense" (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, p. 5-6). For my analysis of this case, I look at different communicative forms of online media indexed by the hashtag. By taking hashtags as an indexing system that assembles together different media, I look at tweets, videos, images, and articles circulated through the hashtag in order to examine modes of storytelling that affectively mobilize publics and also investigate solidarity as discursive, embodied, and affective phenomena. Specifically, I closely examine how #SavePeterLiang protestors create narratives of victimization in response to the singularity of Liang's racial body and how the #Asians4BlackLives selfie project uses representational visibility to activate affective politics.

Historical context: anti-blackness and Asian America

Akai Gurley's murder and Peter Liang's conviction is situated within the historical context of US racial formations, and the discourses produced about this case work as 'racial projects', the co-constitutive ways racial meanings are translated and organized into social structures and become racially signified (Omi & Winant, 2015). Asian-ness, particularly the banned, the barred, the excluded '*Asiatic*' has historically been in flux as the U.S. state determines the barometers for inclusion/exclusion. The challenge has been how to simultaneously grapple with Asian identity as both a political formation yet also in collision with state and institutional power and interests.

Asian Americans have an ongoing history of struggle in order to belong politically and culturally in the US (Lowe, 1996). However, the reliance upon the nation-state as a site of material struggle and guarantor of '*rights*' has enabled some communities to thrive at the expense of others. The constraining terms of the '*race for citizenship*', as bids for national inclusion, compels racialized subjects to produce narrow, developmental narratives in order to achieve political, economic, and social incorporation (Jun, 2011, p. 4). Claims towards '*citizenship*' tend to consolidate axes of privilege—thus promoting an "ascendancy of whiteness" (Puar, 2007)[2]. Whiteness becomes a significantly problematic object of desire that produces feelings of attachment across racial lines, while also compromising particular conditions of possibility. For both white and non-white people, reproducing whiteness becomes oriented around a politics of return, where distributing whiteness gives particular bodies and things '*affect*' and '*value*' (Ahmed, 2006). This distribution requires an investment into political and affective economies of anti-Blackness.

After the 1965 Immigration Act, the Asian American population in the US rose from 1 million to 10 million people within three decades; most who immigrated during the earlier part of this period were from educated elite and middle classes, and working class migration didn't begin until later (Prashad, 2015). Class divisions in migration patterns contributed to the racialization of Asian Americans as '*model minorities*'. The model minority myth was created as a rhetorical tool during 1950s Cold War liberalism and popularized during the late 1960s and 70s. The economic successes of some Asian Americans could be the evidence the nation needed that the American Dream was attainable. These narratives promoted a myth of meritocracy directed towards Black Americans demanding racial justice—the lesson was that hard work alone could supposedly erase struggles caused by racial injustice.

The myth of the '*model minority*' figure functions as a form of human capital, governed by market values and embodying infinite capacities for self-development (Jun, 2011). The '*model minority*' myth, as an interpretive frame about racial exceptionalism deployed as popular narrative and cultural practice, has been one way Asian Americans gain proximity to and power from whiteness and in conscious and unconscious participation in anti-Black racism (Yang-Stevens & Quan-Pham, 2016). Asian-ness thus functions as a wedge category—from plantation enslavement[3], when the Asian contract labourer as figure functioned as a tool to '*replace*' slave labour to the historical and present uses of the model minority myth.

We also find the creation of new interracial dynamics given the migration of diverse populations of Asian immigrants. Conditions of globalization transformed the Black working poor into a surplus population and indexed foreign Asian capital as a force of gentrification in Black displacement (Jun, 2011; Gilmore, 2007). The Red Apple Boycott in Brooklyn, New York and L.A. Riots at the beginning of the 1990s —conflicts between Korean small business owners and Black community residents—marked two historical flashpoints that exposed the difficulty of multiracial coalitions

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[2]   For example, the cases of *Takao Ozawa vs US (1922) and US v. Bhagat Singh Thind (1923)* demonstrate the 'construction' of race and implicate Asian American quests for citizenship as a quest for whiteness and repudiation of blackness. Both Ozawa and Thind' sought access to US citizenship by pronouncing a measurable difference and distance away from racialized subjectivity.

[3]   Brought to the Americas to supplement and '*replace*' slave labor, the Asian contract worker occupied an ambiguous, intermediary position that obscures the labor performed by enslaved people while also differentially distinguished from enslavement. Portraying Asian contract workers a '*free race*' disguised how freedom continued to be foreclosed for indigenous and enslaved people. See Lowe, L. (2015) *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

to engage conflict within and between communities of colour (Zia, 2000; Kim, 2000). These events marked tensions within Asian American pan-ethnic solidarity and also brought up questions on how to build and maintain relations with Black communities and other communities of colour while also advancing '*equal rights*' for Asian Americans (Zia, 2000).

The formation of the '*Black/Asian racial tandem*' (Jun, 2011) reproduces ideologies of U.S. neoliberal citizenship that uplifts the '*self-enterprising subject*' and pathologizes the '*dependent*' and/or impoverished subject. Asian globalization occurs alongside the expansion of the carceral state, which renders Black and Brown people of colour disposable (Kelley, 2016, p. 25). Further, as Jared Sexton (2010) writes, the terms of the debate around U.S. Black-Asian relations must attend to the intersection around both race and class hierarchies and also for Asian Americans to take on the question of agency in organized, state-sanctioned violence that structures anti-Blackness. In this vein, Asian American-ness functions as a key site for better understanding the discursive mediation of solidarity between and across communities of colour.

Hashtags as field site and discursive intertextual chain

Hashtags such as #Asians4BlackLives and #SavePeterLiang serve as speech acts—performative language that actualizes a particular relationship or affinity towards a community. Such claims-making towards racial identity is focused on positioning race as a relation rather than an essence (Lowe, 1996). Hashtags can also function as a collective action framing tool (Goffman, 1974 in Benford & Snow, 2000) to help enable a shared understanding of a problematic social condition and mobilize action through the circulation of discourse (Kuo, 2018). Given their capacity to 'frame', hashtags serve as a digital site that can enframe and re-frame race as information.

This project examines hashtags as a field site (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015) to examine Asian American politics, where hashtags '*performatively frame*' racial meaning. Additionally, hashtags work as discursive spaces where racial relations and encounters happen. As participants connect their own experiences, identities, and perspectives to the hashtag, the hashtag also archives and links together racial discourses as part of an "intertextual chain" (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). At the time of study, tweets were only allowed to be 140-characters max. By constraining the word count, Twitter affords a particular kind of discourse that needs to be "linguistically economical" (Chen, 2012). In order garner and sustain attention, tweets may also need to be affectively saturated. However, users can extend the limited textual content within a tweet by attaching an image or video, and/or embedding shortlink that connects to another body of text.

Nathan Rambukkana (2015) writes that hashtags are "hybrids in the taxonomy of types of information /…/ both text and metatext, information and tag." In this way, the hashtag's indexing function connects together multiple communicative forms. Further, hashtags extend beyond Twitter—they're used on other social media sites, news articles, and even on handwritten signs. Their function can be used across different platforms to produce an extensive discursive network. This study looks at an array of multi-sited media objects archived together under one given hashtag, which allows for examining different sites of social formation and also the networked spread of racial information. For example, while #Asians4BlackLives may use Twitter as a primary platform for circulating discourse, #SavePeterLiang is less active on Twitter itself, instead using Facebook as a primary space for discussion and also using Chinese-language media sites such as Weibo and the text-messaging app WeChat (Poon, 2018).

To examine the words, phrases, and images that construct racial meaning, I sample the '*top*' tweets and content archived under #Asians4BlackLives, #Justice4AkaiGurley, #SavePeterLiang, #FreePeterLiang, and #PeterLiang between February 10, 2016 and April 19, 2016—the time period between Liang's indictment and his sentencing by Brooklyn Supreme Court Justice Danny Chun. I also sample these tweets alongside content archived under #BlackLivesMatter (used alongside #Asians4BlackLives) and #AllLivesMatter (used by those supporting Liang); because of the quantity of content archived under those two hashtags, I only examined posts in February 2016, following

Liang's indictment. Further, because counterpublics tend to be both multi-sited and follow accounts that centralize discourse, I closely examine the @Justice4Liang and @Asians4BlkLives Twitter handles and 'Justice for Peter Liang' Facebook group as well as #APIs4BlackLives Facebook page. I also cross-referenced this content alongside mainstream media articles that also circulated through these hashtags.

I use critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) (Brock, 2012) to study the hashtag's discursivity. While I examine the broader thematic of Asian American racial positioning and subjectivity circulated via #Asians4BlackLives and #SavePeterLiang, I focus specifically on the role of visual images and visibility in forming affective counterpublics. Thus, I also draw upon Lisa Nakamura's (2008) uses of visual culture as methodology, where she examines ways racial bodies circulate as visual capital in order to better understand how digital modes of cultural production contribute to digital racial formation. This method also best allows me to examine power relations in and between networks, platform aesthetics, and also genealogies of media use.

Hashtags function as a discursive form that links together streams of information that allows people to '*feel their way*' into politics. By looking at the broader media ecology archived through the use of hashtags, I can locate how racial publics are both produced and consumed through the presence of racialized bodies. Miranda Joseph (2002) articulates a performative theory of social relations by discussing how consumption is site of performance for both the collective and also for the individual subject. Identity and community can be constructed by products that flow through the marketplace—this can be located as well in the distribution of digital 'activist' media, such as tweets, selfies, etc. that all circulate within a highly regulated attention economy. Social formations circulate vis-a-vis media objects intended for wide circulation and consumption in the digital media space.

Racial presence: representing affective racial publics

WNYC radio host Brian Lehrer opened his February 23, 2016 show "*Chinese Americans Express Frustration over Liang Conviction*" with the observation, "*For something you don't see in the streets every day, hundreds of thousands of Chinese Americans protesting a jury verdict.*" Lehrer remarks upon the visibility of Asian American political action as exceptional. Similarly, other news articles have written that this case has '*awoken*' Asian American activism, as if it had been dormant. Jay Caspian Kang's New York Times article, "*How Should Asian Americans Feel about the Peter Liang Protests*", while inaccurate in its discussion of Asian American political silence, also draws attention to the affective politics of this case. Kang (2016) writes, "*All these anxieties, born out of these small but crucial referendums on our place in America, have been reignited by Liang's conviction.*" The political responses to Gurley's murder and Liang's indictment are shaped around public displays of emotion and demonstrate ways affect can be mobilized towards political purposes.

Asian American political formations in this case can be defined as affective racial counterpublics, connecting what Zizi Pappacharissi (2015) calls '*affective publics*', or "networked public formations that are mobilized /.../ through expressions of sentiment" (pp. 125-126), with Catherine Squire's (2002) conceptual framework of Black counterpublics. Squires' approach engages the socio-political and historic contexts of racialized groups who circulate counter-discourses to create different interpretations and representations of racial positioning (Squires, 2002). Existing scholarship on Black and feminist digital counterpublics (Steele, 2018; Jackson & Welles, 2016; Clark, 2015) demonstrate ways that hashtags can be used as to build and maintain community as well as organize collective action on and offline. While racialized online publics tend to pursue particularly defined racial interests, using racial identity as a common ground (Byrne, 2008), discussions of Asian American political formations should be attentive to differences as well as ways these differences are socially constructed to create one singular identity. The significance of understanding both the construction of '*Asian American*' identity as well as the community response to this construction offers the potential to "mobilize otherwise disparate groups around shared experience" and the formation of these identities as a "political instrument" (Collet & Koakutsu, 2009).

As a way to better understand the role of 'coherence', the emotional dimension of racial solidarity bears closer attention. Emotions create the effect of boundaries, thus securing collectives through the way in which they read bodies of others (Ahmed, 2004). How we feel about others aligns us with a collective, which paradoxically '*takes shape*' only as an effect of such alignments—"it is through how others impress upon us that the skin of the collective begins to take shape" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 54). Affect mediates between the individual and social, negotiating boundaries between self, others, and community. The vague, tangled messiness of affect becomes more tangible and also more significant in that they are part of collective swells of feeling—such as alienation, confusion, frustration, and anger.

The affective responses to Liang's racial presence are "related to the histories, political practices, and experiences that give them resonance" (Beltrán, 2014). Liz Lin (2016) reflects on the complicated affective landscape around the indictment. While she positions herself as desiring justice for Gurley and agrees that Liang should be indicted, she also expresses ways she cares for Liang and his family and ways she feels tied to him personally:

> *When I first see a picture of Peter Liang...my reactions are all over the map. He looks so familiar, he could be one of my brother's friends. One of my friends, even ... His parents — probably immigrants like mine. They must be so sad. (Lin, 2016)*

The aesthetics of Liang's race and ethnicity mark him as intimately familiar to Lin, reminding her of friends and family. Visuals of Liang's tearful reaction after the indictment circulate as a symbol of grief and generate feelings of confusion, unrest, and frustration. Images of Gurley's murder are not circulated in this way—and, they should not have to be. The circulation of Eric Garner in a chokehold saying, "*I can't breathe*" or the circulation of Cedrick Chatman's shooting turn Black trauma and state violence into viewer spectacles (Noble, 2014). Yet, what is clear from these circulations and public responses is that feelings around what is unjust are often directed towards racial presence.

To think about the aesthetics of Liang's racial identity through an affective framework demonstrates the significance of racial presence and visibility (Beltrán, 2014). Liang's '*Asian-ness*' and '*Chinese-ness*' generates a political response. Networked affective counterpublics have opportunities to bring together activist discourses with mainstream media narratives in order to create an "affective flow of information" (Jackson & Welles, 2016, p. 399). In organizing alongside #BlackLivesMatter[4], some activists recall Asian American victims who have been murdered and beaten by police (Linshi, 2014). Some of these victims include 57-year old Kuanchung Kao was shot to death in 1997 because an officer was scared of his '*martial arts moves.*' In 2003, 25 year-old Cau Bich Tran was shot by police while holding a vegetable peeler—she is described as 4-feet and 9 inches tall and 98-pound mother of two. In 2006, 19-year old Fong Lee was shot and killed by an officer, and an all-white jury ruled that the officer did not use excessive force. The details circulated about these victims also invoke affective images of family and friends. Qinglan Huang, whose brother Yong Xin Huang was killed by NYPD in 1995 for playing with a BB gun, writes:

> *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 ... (Huang, 2016).*

Huang bridges the connection between mobilizing around those who merely *look* Asian towards a shared sense of affective experience. Moving past racial aesthetics, here the appeal is to think about family and loss of family.

Liang's sentencing has mobilized Asian Americans either to work with Black Lives Matter and prioritize ending anti-Black racism, or has mobilized Asian Americans to seek '*justice*' for Liang by '*freeing*' him from the judicial system. Asian American politics "hinges on a balance between

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4   The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was started by three queer Black women—Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors—and has become a critical framing tool that centered Blackness when discussing racial injustice.

individual loyalties to ethnic/ancestral communities and a periodic sense of identification with a racial coalition in the presence of discrimination" (Collet & Koakutsu, 2009). As affect is "historically constituted and publicly and politically shared even when they are interpreted as personal experiences", legitimacy circulates among political subjects as a "common feeling of rightness" (Anker, 2014). In this way, legitimacy can work to generate more intense affective responses and also determine what representative claims can be made about justice. The different responses to affective experiences expose contestations over claims to legitimate representation.

Representation as performative claims-making 'creates space for creative normative work on radicalizing our notions of who, and what, may count as representative politically' (Saward, 2006, p. 299). The representative claim reveals the capacity of a potential representative and functions as a political gesture of recognition—who we think and talk about, who we form connections with, the narratives we use or don't use to incorporate other people into our lives (Rodriguez, 2014). Consider this quote by Reappropriate blogger Jenn Fang, who has written multiple, widely circulated articles covering the case:

> *Liang is the sole police officer in recent memory to be convicted for killing an unarmed, innocent black person. Asian Americans, regardless of our politics on Liang's conviction, share outrage over this fact. Given this perspective, we can either fight for special treatment for Asian Americans along the margins of a racially unjust system, or we can work with other communities of colour to dismantle this systemic injustice outright. (Fang, 2016)*

Fang points out that the 'outrage' shared by Asian Americans over Liang's indictment is politically incentivizing. Both #Asians4BlackLives and #SavePeterLiang rely on the uses of racial presence as an affective political frame; in the examples that follow, I look at the different ways '*Asian-ness*' as racial presence becomes used discursively and visually to form affective counterpublics.

'*One tragedy, two victims*': affective productions of Liang as rookie and scapegoat

The '*save*' Peter Liang campaign singularly focuses on Liang's racial presence to "evoke the represented" (Saward, 2006) and create affective political formations. They discursively construct Liang as a victim of the justice system through the narrative frame of '*one tragedy, two victims*' and also '*accident not tragedy*.' In order to do so, they rely on racially positioning Liang as a '*rookie cop*' and as a '*scapegoat*', both of which are also corroborated through mainstream media coverage. Reports of the shooting consistently refers to Liang as an unexperienced, rookie officer. Below are headlines and opening sentences from local New York City news sites in initial coverage of the shooting:

> Panicked rookie NYPD officer fatally shoots unarmed 28-year-old man in Brooklyn's Pink Houses project - *"A panicked rookie cop in a pitch-black housing project stairwell killed an unarmed man ... the officer fumbled around in the darkness ..."* (New York Daily News, 22 November 2014)

> NYPD rookie calls fatal shooting of unarmed man an 'accident' - *"A rookie cop working the most dangerous beat in the city killed a man in an unlit housing-project stairwell in Brooklyn — firing off an "accidental" shot ..."* (New York Post, 21 November 2014)

> Rookie Officer Fatally Shoots 'Total Innocent' in Pink Houses, NYPD Says - *"A rookie police officer fatally shot an unarmed man late Thursday in a "pitch black" Pink Houses stairwell ..."* (DNAInfo, 21 November 2014)

Supporters of Liang use these media frames to construct the image of Liang as innocent and the narrative of the shooting as '*one tragedy, two victims*'. By drawing attention to the '*pitch-black*' and

'*unlit*' stairwell, they claim that the shooting was unintentional. References to Liang as a '*rookie*' cop uses his inexperience as cause for '*accident*':

> It is a shame to throw a rookie under the bus. (@cindy1067, 15 Feb 2016)

> I feel sorry for the victim, but I also feel sorry for the unlucky rookie Peter Liang. One tragedy, two victims! (@meizhang18, 15 Feb 2016)

> We need to stick to correct legal terms here if we want to come across as effective and not discriminatory ourselves … We believe Peter Liang should not be criminalized. Because the legal definition of criminal is to have INTENTION in the action. Liang is also a victim. He was a rookie police with no adequate training. (Helen Yue, 22 Feb 2016)

Liang as the unlucky, fumbling, and inexperienced '*rookie cop*' is used by media, the justice system, and also protestors who were against his manslaughter conviction. When applied to Liang, the term '*rookie*' becomes a racially coded and indirect way of applying a passive and infantilizing stereotype of Asian men as "slit-eyed, buck-toothed buffoons" (Yang-Stevens & Quan-Pham, 2016).

In addition to his description as the inexperienced '*rookie*', Liang is also described as a '*scapegoat*'. The term scapegoat here has been defined in a several different ways: 1) "someone who doesn't do anything wrong or didn't do anything wrong. And in this case, [Liang] did do something wrong: he killed Akai Gurley" (Dang, 2016); and 2) "somebody who's being blamed for far more than he's actually being guilty of" (Liu, 2016). Again, this framing is deployed by both protestors and also mainstream media. For those organizing on behalf of Liang, the term '*scapegoat*' generates fear and anxiety over the precariousness of Asian American subjectivity.

> Minority officer is the scapegoat, an excuse for white privilege and police brutality. #Justice4Liang (@GraceLongisland, 25 Feb 2016)

> #justice4liang Peter Liang should NOT be a scapegoat! Tragic Accident   Manslaughter! Unfair… (@zuzu2007, 20 Feb 2016)

> We showed up for equal justice 4 Peter Liang because we don't want to be the next scapegoat. Selective justice is no justice! #Justice4Liang (@ujchen, 20 Feb 2016)

> NYPD is responsible for the killing of Akai Gurley. Liang should take responsibility, but he should not be made a scapegoat. #Justice4Liang (@rosiewoo2, 22 Feb 2016)

The term scapegoat invokes a history of xenophobia and racial violence directed towards Asian Americans that has included hate crimes, state-sanctioned exclusion and surveillance policies, and internment[5]. By claiming Liang as the scapegoat for other previous non-indictments of white officers who murdered Black people, supporters of Liang affectively draw upon and respond to racial anxieties. Many protestors supporting Liang demonstrate affective attachments to the fantasy of the '*American Dream*', and the framing of Liang as '*scapegoat*' illuminate the failures of this dream.

As Liang's case is tied to racial and ethnic affiliations, one must be attentive to the additional complex intersections of social identities that make up these organizing groups. Language, generation, class, and education all play a key role in ways communities have oriented around this case—however, views casting all Liang supporters as under-educated or misinformed because they lack capacity to understand systemic racism is inaccurate. Some of the more vocal supporters of 'freeing' Liang deftly use language that critique white supremacy and anti-Black racism—they

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5   For example, during World War II, Japanese Americans were interned for national security purposes after Japanese military bombed Pearl Harbor; or after the September 11 attacks, Muslims—or those who "look" Muslim—have become targets of hate crimes and also state surveillance.

invoke ways that the model minority myth is used as a lever for anti-Black racism and retell historical narratives around Asian and Black racialization.

Figure 1: Fusion video interview with 22-year old Jess Fong

For example, one widely circulated and watched video features a Chinese American woman who says, "*We are angry, because we are also hurt by the systemic injustices and the structural oppression and the racism that continues to pervade this country*"[6]. She goes on to express that as "*Asian Americans, we feel deeply sorry*" for Akai Gurley and his family and that '*we*' understand that Black lives matter. She also defines white privilege and distances Asian Americans from the "*sense of superiority and supremacy*" that defines whiteness. She describes the protest as about critiquing an '*unfair*' criminal system, in which Liang "*took the fall for the sins of a country*". Viewed almost 4 million times, her interview was also translated and shared on internationally on Chinese-language media.

Other key spokespeople of the movement have been former New York City comptroller and 2013 New York City mayoral candidate John C. Liu, as well as Dr. Frank Wu, who was the first Asian American professor at Howard University, a historically Black university. Wu's scholarship has examined histories of Asian-Black racial relations and ways the model minority myth is used as a lever of anti-Black racism. However, in his op-ed on Huffington Post (2016), Wu refers to Liang as a scapegoat in '*black and white*' racial dynamics: "How strange, how wrong, it is, that the face picked to represent police brutality toward blacks is yellow."

Historically and currently, the ways Asian American identities have been constructed as '*model minorities*' and '*perpetual foreigners*' has created unjust conditions for Asian American communities as well as created fraught Asian-Black racial dynamics. Wu's attention to these racial inequities is still directed individually on ways the State has failed Liang because of his '*Asian-ness.*' Wu's frustration with the ways Asian Americans have been racially cast, while valid, overshadow his ability to see a larger picture, where injustice reaches across communities of colour. The individuated, narrow focus on Liang reveal a failure to consider justice on a broader scale. The framing of Liang as a scapegoat ignores the larger problem of how anti-Black state violence is institutionalized and legitimated by local police. As Soya Jung (2015) points out, racial and ethnic identity holds a deep meaning for Asian American communities as a space for mutual recognition

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6   Fusion video interview with 22-year old Jess Fong.

and empowerment, thus we may form solidarity with 'those who look and talk' like us. However, such forms of solidarity may also obscure capacities to identify across difference.

Affective visibility: selfies for black lives

On December 15, 2014, a solidarity statement was published under the hashtag #Asians4BlackLives:

> As Asians, we recognize the ways in which we've been used historically to prop up the anti-Black racism that allows this violence to occur. We are an extremely diverse community. Some of us have been targeted, profiled, and killed by U.S. government institutions. Many of us came to the U.S. as a result of the devastation and displacement caused by the US military and its "partners" in Asia, only to find a country uses police to devastate and displace black communities. However, we also recognize the relative privilege that many of us carry as Asians living in the U.S. (#Asians4BlackLives 2014)

The statement draws attention to the uses of Asian-ness as a tool to '*prop up*' anti-Blackness and acknowledges the specific racial hierarchy created by white supremacy that gives Asians '*relative privilege*.' In addition to this statement, #Asians4BlackLives indexed many articles on an array of online media, including *Salon, Huffington Post, NPR, Quartz, Everyday Feminism, Yes Magazine, Colorlines* and more, with appeals to the larger Asian American community to be in solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter rather than standing with Peter Liang.

The description for the #APIs4BlackLives Facebook page says, *"#APIs4BlackLives brings visibility to the ways Asian and Pacific Islanders have stood and are standing in solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter."* The use of solidarity here implies a defined relationship between two publics and is also a claims-making gesture of recognition. This form of solidarity claims a '*we*' alongside a plural '*you*', however does not reveal the reciprocity that solidarity seeks—how '*we*' become accepted and understood by '*you*'. As a response to the visibility of Chinese Americans responding to Liang, the Committee against Anti-Asian Violence (CAAAV)[7], created a selfie campaign as a way to raise the visibility of Asian Americans supporting Black Lives Matter and justice for Akai Gurley (see Figure 2) and also show community support of Black-led organizing. In addition to demonstrating the visibility of Asians in support of Black Lives Matter, the campaign also intends to respond to mainstream media coverage that framed Asian American as '*divided*'. The campaign uses visual representations of '*Asian-ness*' as a way to activate politics. The call for selfies asks people to a) take a photo holding a sign with the hashtags #JusticeforAkaiGurley, #holdALLcopsaccountable, and #BlackLivesMatter b) write a short, text-only paragraph with the prompt, 'I am a _____, and I demand Justice for Akai Gurley because_____'; and c) share the action on social media (Tom, 2015). The call invites participants to perform solidarity by displaying one's body alongside text.

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7   CAAAV has been working alongside both Akai Gurley's family, community organizers in East New York, Brooklyn, and other groups since the shooting. As an organization, they have worked for many years on the issue of police brutality and participated in ongoing coalitions for police accountability and reform. My analysis of the selfie campaign is by no means a critique on the organization's decades of community-based organizing, but rather an analysis of the affordances and constraints of digital media and visible representation in racial politics.

Figure 2: #Justice4AkaiGurley selfie campaign

All of the submitted photos show either individual or multiple participants who place their bodies behind a handwritten sign. The photos are meant to circulate on the individuals' networks across platforms including Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, but are also assembled together in the #APIs4BlackLives Facebook group's photo album; the album itself currently has 79 photos. Together, the photos work as a way to communicate shared politics, visibly represent 'Asian-ness', and also position Asian Americans alongside the Black Lives Matter movement, rather than in opposition. Most of the photos have the same text (#Justice4AkaiGurley, #Asians4BlackLives, #BlackLivesMatter), and several of the photos show different people in the same location and background with the same handwritten sign. User-generated media allow individuals the means to self-create identities that challenge dominant ways of seeing and knowing and also produce alternative public visibilities by drawing on the conceptual relationship between representational visibility and political power (Pham, 2015). These selfies use forms of self-presentation and self-promotion for purposes beyond self-interest.

In several of the images, the person covers their face with the piece of paper holding hand written text. The aesthetics of the selfies—the body alongside text—evokes another genre of digital self-representation: the confessional notecard video (Chun, 2016). The logic of revealing and 'outing' in making oneself seen—this shift from the seemingly invisible to visible—depends on the singular confession as a reaching towards community. The selfies produce a '*we*' through exposure and repetition—communicating a feeling of community. As a visual archive, the campaign itself evokes a long-standing desire among Asian Americans for representational visibility as a means towards cultural and political recognition (Kido Lopez, 2016). Further, the address of this image collection signals a call for participation and recognition towards other Asian Americans, while simultaneously reflecting a desire for Black recognition and coalition.

In visually communicating solidarity across the "distance of extreme inequality" (Sexton, 2010), the selfie functions within what Kara Keeling describes as the "digital regime of the image" (Keeling,

2011). The selfie indexes and puts into circulation a common sense of coalition and belonging. Digital identity politics, predicated on the notion of difference as a 'collective logic of belonging' and characterized through the formulation of '*I=Another*' attempts to facilitate a mode of engagement through representation. In a discussion on Asian America and performative solidarity, Pakou Her (2014), wrote about the ease of publicly proclaiming solidarity, to "publicly announce to radicals around us that we're not like the other apolitical model minorities /…/ Public-facing actions also make it easy to perform solidarity in an enthusiastic attempt to prove that – despite our preassigned racial script – Asians are here for the struggle, too." While the selfies themselves make visible claims towards solidarity, they do less to directly confront internal and collective anti-Blackness within and amongst Asian Americans .

Conclusion: affordances and uses of Asian American racial positioning

The informative and communicative capacities and limitations of digital media become crucial in relation to racial justice movements. In addressing the relationship between digital platforms, cross-racial solidarities, and the pursuit of racial justice, this article focuses on the role of affective visibility in how and why communities coalesce—more specifically, how the organization of visual information can also organize experiences, meanings, and feelings that form (and inform) communities, claims, and practices around racial solidarity.

Peter Liang has often been incorrectly compared to Vincent Chin, a Chinese American who was beaten to death in Detroit by two white men, who had been laid off after the increasing marketshare of Japanese automakers. The two men were sentenced to 3 years of probation. Liang has also been compared to Private Danny Chen, a Chinese American from Manhattan's Chinatown who committed suicide after being physically, emotionally, and mentally tortured for his racial identity by other soldiers. Shirley Ng (2016) wrote an opinion piece for the *New York Post* that stated, 'Whether the name is Chin, Chen or Liang, Asian-Americans have long been told that their pain and humiliation don't register.' Ng pulls these names together to claim that Chinese Americans have historically never had justice, using Chin and Chen's deaths as rationale to support Liang. However, as Annie Tan, Chin's niece responded, Vincent Chin and Akai Gurley have far more in common than Chin and Liang (Tan, 2016). Like Gurley, neither Chin nor Chen received justice for their deaths.

Liang's only commonality with Vincent Chin and Danny Chen is that he is also a Chinese American man who is similar in age. Aesthetically, Liang "looks like" Chin and Chen. For some, this is enough to provoke feelings of kinship with Liang that can be mobilized politically. Affective solidarities and ties to community based solely on racial aesthetics and on ethnic or national identity alone are limited. For example, many that felt so affectively tied to Liang based on racial aesthetics alone, didn't feel affectively compelled to hit the streets and seek justice for 57-year-old Sureshbhai Patel, a man who was visiting his son in Alabama from India. Patel was slammed to the ground by a police officer and left partially paralyzed. Here, the concept of '*who*' is part of '*Asian America*' remains narrow.

In a speech at the Asian Law Caucus, Mari Matsuda (1990) declared "*We will not be used.*" The uses of Asian-ness, both by Asian Americans and also by dominant groups, can be used to sustain and also subvert white supremacy. In order to better understand the relationship between digital media technologies and social movements, there must be more clarity around '*race*' as a connective tissue towards forming solidarities, given that race is not a "fixed singular essence" but rather a locus in which "contradictions converge" (Chun, 2009). Racialization processes are mutually constitutive, thus cannot happen in a vacuum but must occur relative to and in interaction with other racial positions and dynamics. Race shapes what bodies '*can do*' (Ahmed, 2006), thus, revisiting processes of racialization, racial identification and claims-making pushes for a rethinking of justice. In organizing across '*difference*', '*difference*' becomes a contradictory, political, and representational strategy that brings together and holds in suspension the conflicting goals of self-preservation and the needs of those who bear the cost of that preservation (Hong, 2012).

Across Asian American groups, racial justice includes a desire to be seen as a visible political entity. For example, groups like 18 Million Rising emphasize the sizable population represented, recognized, and connected under the Asian American umbrella to create racial presence. However, this doesn't necessarily mean that visible politics are a unified politics. These different protests work as 'embodied action' among Asian Americans that "actively constructs communities and solidarities within the public realm" (Beltrán, 2010, p. 17). Through different communicative modes, Asian Americans discursively position themselves politically within their own communities and in relation to others. Further research might examine the discursive shifts in #Asians4BlackLives as the hashtag continues to index new flows of information, including political education events, such as work-shops and teach-ins. For example, discourses have shifted from demanding 'solidarity' towards confrontations of anti-Blackness. Or, network analysis of #Asians4BlackLives may also be a way to examine the potential and limitations of cross-racial solidarity in digital spaces of encounter.

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Rachel Kuo is a PhD student at New York University in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication studying at the convergence of critical race and digital studies. Centering the perspective of queer, feminist of colour organizing, her research focuses on solidarity within and across communities of colour by examining the politics, affects, and aesthetics of online social movements. Her work has been published in *New Media and Society and the Routledge Companion to Asian American Media.*