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The Politics of the Anti: Beyond Victimizing Hate Through State Recognition for Asian Americans

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4t26k7fb>

Journal

Amerasia Journal, 50(3)

ISSN

0044-7471

Author

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Publication Date

2024-09-01

DOI

10.1080/00447471.2025.2596175

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To cite this article: Lee Ann S. Wang (2024) The Politics of the Anti: Beyond Victimizing Hate Through State Recognition for Asian Americans, Amerasia Journal, 50:3, 340-353, DOI: [10.1080/00447471.2025.2596175](https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2025.2596175)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2025.2596175>



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Published online: 02 Feb 2026.



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The Politics of the Anti: Beyond Victimizing Hate Through State Recognition for Asian Americans

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ABSTRACT

The essay discusses the pro-policing agendas of anti-Asian hate political frameworks. Abolition feminist theory and community advocacy practices have shown that policy solutions today primarily rely on policing to save women from gender and sexual violence. These political approaches are largely embraced by white feminist carceral agendas, but end up criminalizing survivors of color and their communities. Drawing on these insights, the essay centers its critique around the discursive production of the “hate-crime-victim” in Asian American political responses to incidences of harm during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 September 2024

Accepted 24 November 2025

KEYWORDS

Anti-Asian violence; anti-Asian hate; policing; Asian American politics; abolition feminisms

In 2020, anti-Asian Hate emerged as a set of politics launched by Asian American organizations and individual leaders. The political discourse sought to raise national visibility on behalf of elder Asians, youth, and children who were experiencing harassment, physical assaults, and verbal retaliations due to President Donald Trump’s racial scapegoating of Asians (in particular, Chinese bodies) for the global COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Although Chinese people were debunked as being any kind of cause of the pandemic, the racial figure of foreignness was continually blamed. Trump slowed down information, cut federal funding to cities and neighborhoods, and downplayed healthcare needs, while continually amplifying the “kung flu” as a political marker of the purported threat of Asianness.² Local and national news media outlets reported on the physical and verbal acts against Asians that mimicked anti-Chinese COVID-19 narratives.³ White supremacist and anti-immigrant ideologies were dominant anchors reflected simultaneously by state structures and individual incidences. Because these two levels between the systemic and the interpersonal occurred together, Asian American responses ranged widely in their responses to the people, objects, and ideologies they targeted and criticized for violence against Asians. One of the main political tensions among community responses centered on the role of police and the reliance on law enforcement practices as solutions to address violence. For those who focused on individuals and personal hate, the reliance on policing for punishment became equated with beliefs of safety for Asian Americans. For others, this pro-policing agenda invited the already harmful presence of law enforcement into Asian spaces

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and communities, targeting Asian youth, those suffering from mental health, the unhoused, and youth of color. Thus, this political moment desperately reminds us that Asian American communities still struggle to theorize and talk deeply about violence, and, like for the rest of the nation, this struggle is ongoing when we are faced with developing political responses that seek recognition from the state via protection and punishment.

This essay looks inward and reflects on the emerging difficulties of Asian American politics that diverge between talking to the state, talking like the state, and talking to each other within community spaces and beyond them. For example, when the state expands police power, it does not wait for someone to decide if they are comfortable and willing to speak as a victim, or when they are comfortable criminalizing others and punishing them. Even further, state enforcement of punishment is one thing, but it does not necessarily equate to *safety* for the person who has experienced harm, the places they are from, or the communities they may belong to. This is perhaps the most glaring issue.

On March 16, 2021, a white male who frequented Asian spas and massage parlors in Atlanta returned to these locations to target and kill the women who worked there. Eight people were killed, six were Asian workers, and the loss of their lives was a result of both racialized and sexualized violence reproducing state structures of imperialism and the affective violence onto migrant women's bodies tied to sexuality and sex work. In response, Asian American rallying cries called for more visibility and recognition as victims of hate crimes, buttressed by the slowly emerging politics of organizations such as #StopAAPIHate. Gender and sexuality are very much a part of how "victimhood" is understood in the U.S., yet this particular anti-Asian hate political framework provided almost no analysis or critique against the policing of sexuality, foreignness, and women's bodies. Butterfly, a national organization supporting migrant sex workers, has emphasized that migrant sex worker survival is not predicated on eradicating individual prejudices of hate, but rather on eradicating policing at the intersection of "criminal laws, immigration laws, and municipal bylaws [that] are used against migrant sex workers." In their report on survival during the COVID-19 pandemic, they do not frame migrant sex workers as victims of hate, but rather as survivors of ongoing state structures, reporting that 60 percent of the Asian and migrant sex workers they surveyed experienced harassment and abuse by law enforcement.⁴

Importantly, Hyejin Shim argues that while a chorus of Asian American voices expressed a sense of *shared* fear when the Atlanta spa shootings were nationally televised, those voices who spoke loudly about their terror did not actually share the economic, migrant, or social conditions of the women who were murdered. In critiquing #StopAAPIHate, Shim suggest that "reminiscent of the troubling, incomplete analyses of white feminism, the politics of Stop Asian Hate were predicated on these critical erasures – erasures made possible only by viewing the erased as too victimized to have their own voices, let alone able to speak for themselves."⁵ I attended gatherings, spoke on webinars, and witnessed Asian Americans selectively attaching themselves to the visibility of the Atlanta spa shootings in the very ways that Shim describes, "sanitizing" violence by reframing Asian women as "good victims" while shaming sex work and sex workers as "bad victims" in the same breath. Even when nationally reported, public interest in who the spa workers were did not merely seek demographic information about the ethnic, gendered, or racial identities of those who lost their lives, but proof of whether they were sex workers or not.⁶ Searching for the visibility of sex work is never a neutral move, particularly

because heteropatriarchal moral panics drive how the public calls upon the state to respond to sex workers, by using policing practices rooted in antiblack, anti-immigrant, and transphobic logics.⁷ Community organizers and advocates from Survived and Punished and Red Canary Song further argue that when Asian American politics narrowly embrace hate crime solutions, they fail to address the fact that such solutions enhance sentencing, a legal structure that has long resulted in the criminalization of survivors of gender and sexual violence by the criminal legal system that purports to rescue and save them.⁸

We might turn to political lessons from abolition feminist thinkers to think through the pitfalls of pro-policing hate crime laws and policies that reinforce the good/bad victim paradigm. If the state is more willing to respond to Asian elders when white nationalists successfully and intentionally hate them, what is at stake when Asian Americans reproduce these limited state responses as if they are community responses? For example, abolition feminist thinkers have shown that alliances between mainstream white feminist “violence against women” politics and law enforcement agencies invested in the rescue of white women have expanded policing at the cost of criminalizing survivors of color.⁹ The historical figure of spectacularized violence anchored in white domesticity becomes the linchpin to unfurl more policing in the name of “public safety.”¹⁰ In this way, anti-Asian hate frameworks run the risk of politically reflecting and reproducing crime-fighting narratives that do not begin with Asian American community agendas, but, rather, serves the needs of pro-policing agendas already exemplified in alliances launched by mainstream white anti-violence politics.

Anti-Asian hate relies on the common move to seek state recognition for Asian Americans as *victims of hate crimes*; safety is largely defined as personal, individual safety and less focused on community safety. Under this framework, Asian Americans become visible only as individual victims of hateful feelings, but never as communities that continue to suffer from the violence of larger state institutions and structures impacting immigrant and refugee families. When community members see a threat of racial violence that is real and increasing, hate-based frameworks appear useful to develop practical solutions. But we should not render this initial response as the only response. It is important to think through the terms that are in place to construct political narratives as seemingly practical and to critique how they become normalized and necessary but for whom, and what cost?

Do we want hate to be the dominant way through which public perceptions are willing to accept that violence is a part of Asian American experiences with the state? What kind of victim-figure best fits law’s expectations and whose experiences are submerged or erased? “Hate crime” is not an organic or grassroots term created by Asian Americans; it is a legal definition derived from law and it grants power to law enforcement agencies, not power to people. Thus, any political claim that relies on hate crime frameworks to make a community’s needs visible cannot avoid the racial violence that established policing and surveillance in the United States. The political discourse of anti-Asian hate and its centering of the subject of the hate-crime-victim faces these difficult challenges that so many others grapple with under a nation-state that is what Beth Richie has called a “prison nation.”¹¹ That is, if U.S. systems of policing are already structured against Blackness, queerness, disability, Indigeneity, and foreignness, so too are state systems of protection and the promise attached to the legal subject of the hate-crime-victim.¹² If we believe that

police violence exists along racial and gendered lines, then we must contend with the difficult tensions of pro-policing agendas that underline much of contemporary Asian American political calls for the recognition of the subject of the hate-crime-victim.

In its wake, organizations attached to anti-Asian hate have received state funding for data collection toward increased resources for law enforcement and ultimately, the promise of more police presence in Asian American spaces as well as broader spaces of the public.¹³ Yet, because anti-Asian hate became visible at the height not only of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the global movement to defund police and address police violence against Black communities, how do these sets of politics predicated on being hated versus being policed, relate, and diverge?¹⁴ While anti-Asian hate has achieved visibility in the last several years, we might also ask, what is the relationship between the state's words and how Asian Americans speak for ourselves? When state governments or agencies suddenly place funding in support of Asian Americans as hate crime victims, we must ask how this investment in our communities is enforced and at what cost to those within our spaces and outside them. This essay will ask that we pause and think through what determines the proper victim of a crime and what happens to those who fall outside the law's expectations. I am not suggesting that hate does not exist as an affective, emotive, or psychological condition with material effects and historical formations. But I am arguing that a victim as a legal subject of a state-determined crime is never neutrally produced: thus, when they serve as a vehicle for Asian American political visibility, hate crime laws and policies determine not only who and what counts as "hateful," but who and what is allowed to be properly legible as a "victim" as well.

We might consider how anti-Asian hate frameworks foreclose the possibility of an Asian American politics that can address racial and gendered state structures of violence in our contemporary moment. The most successful cases of "anti-Asian hate" are exemplified by white intentional hate opposite the violation or death of Asian bodies. But when intention, behavior, and an emotion transfer into a *political claim* under the banner of anti-Asian hate without an actual political theorization of violence or a critique of policing, the politics which are supposed to be meaning-making for individuals becomes entirely beholden to the state's terms, its rules, and the language of law. Are we saying that state institutions should respond to Asian Americans only when others hate us, but not when state institutions are deeply rooted in the racial and gendered violence of policing that disparately impacts welfare, wellbeing, health, housing, and resources?

This essay offers a small conversation away from anti-Asian hate and a reorienting toward frameworks of anti-Asian *violence*. We might turn our attention toward examples that do not meet the demands of the state's interest in Asian Americans only when they are properly hated. First, I discuss emerging (but certainly not exhaustive) differences between "anti-Asian hate" and "anti-Asian violence" political frameworks, and the possibilities that are opened when abolition feminist theories are engaged to think through the shooting and deaths at Star Ballroom in Monterey Park, California, in 2023. Second, the essay will summarize and highlight the critiques queer studies has made possible against hate crimes discourses. I conclude with a discussion of abolition feminist frameworks that challenge the figure of the "victim" centered in political responses that overlap with state laws and institutions rooted in the racial violence of policing.

Proper victim

What a horrible tragedy for the Asian American community to experience during Lunar New Year, a time that is supposed to be about celebration ... National and local news reporters repeated this phrase on January 22, 2023, the morning after 11 people were killed and 10 injured at Star Ballroom Dance Studio in Monterey Park, California. Situated in San Gabriel Valley, Monterey Park is a two-thirds Asian immigrant city in southern California often called the “first suburban Chinatown.” That morning, I turned on the local Los Angeles news and called my aunts and cousins who lived 15 minutes away in Monterey Park. Before anyone knew details of the events, local and national coverage asked a particular set of questions – “Was this another example of hate crimes in the Asian American community?” At press conferences and televised interviews throughout that morning, Congresswoman Judy Chu and her staff stated they were not sure if the deaths and injuries that day were cases of anti-Asian hate crimes.¹⁵ Chu is a longtime elected official representing the San Gabriel Valley (SGV).

Eventually, media coverage unfolded the story of Huu Can Tran, a 72-year-old Vietnamese immigrant from SGV. It was later reported that Tran went to a police station a week earlier displaying signs of paranoia that his family was trying to poison him, and friends that were interviewed shared Tran’s prior feelings of alienation from the dance studio.¹⁶ On January 22, he went to Star Ballroom and later drove to another dance studio in the nearby city of Alhambra. Tran was found in his van that afternoon; he died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound after his vehicle and location had been televised throughout the day on local and national news.

In the aftermath of the Monterey Park shooting, a range of Asian American authors published their reflections and responses, political analyses, and public outcries. State legislators and Congress members introduced bills to provide Asian language informational aids about gun sale restrictions based on a person’s behavior, the monitoring of gun control laws, and a call for increased police presence.¹⁷ Others emphasized mental health resources for the San Gabriel Valley and a collective effort to destigmatize therapeutic services rather than calling for more policing.¹⁸ Vigils for healing and remembrance took place online and in person, and community spaces held free mental health services, support groups, and movement-based classes for survivors and their families.¹⁹ Hate was not necessarily the prime focus. What would it take to shift state interests in hate to be equally invested in Asian American communities regardless of whether people hate us? The violence at Star Ballroom unfolded between a former spouse and member of a community. Here, conditions of isolation, mental health, and retaliation in public spaces are all symptomatic of broader welfare, trauma, or health needs.

If Asian American political responses to the deaths in Monterey Park engaged with abolition feminist approaches to gender-based violence, whose stories would we turn to, what questions would we ask, what would we refuse, and what would we imagine and create? At its core, this moment pushes many of us to think about how we approach violence in our lives. How do we think about the people who are already a part of our personal histories and members of our communities who cause harm? Most people do not turn immediately to an authority, an institution, or state agency for most struggles in their lives. Thus, in our difficulties with violence both small and large, both exceptional or mundane, who or what do we already turn to for support? Who are we already accountable

to and who is accountable to us? That is, what occurs already under or beyond the state? Who are the people who already support relatives, neighbors, and friends to find care practices and to address those who cause harm? How have we already lived with violence and how do we understand all of this?

These are all questions that abolition feminists have long grappled with, particularly those working within social movements, social services, and legal advocacy efforts to support survivors of gender and sexual violence. For migrant, refugee, and immigrant communities, the act of simply removing a person who causes harm may result in punishments related to legal consequences far beyond what a survivor may even want or anticipate. More broadly, leaving violence or removing a person who causes harm are both actions that are not only far more difficult to enact than most want to believe because they are driven by larger law enforcement goals and often do not “resolve” or end violence and conditions of harm in the lives of survivors or their communities.

The subject of the hate-crime-victim

At the core of anti-Asian hate is a call for Asian Americans to obtain stronger representation as victims of crime. The presumption argues that individualized hate is the cause not only of injury, but the basis upon which the state is invited into people’s lives. The broader politics of liberal hate crimes frameworks ignore the vast scholarship and social movements that have already documented how racialized violence against Blackness sets the terms upon which “criminal” and “crime” are state-funded, institutionalized, and produced. Thus, the hate-crime-victim formulation naturalizes the legal subject of “criminal” by sidestepping its historical racial production on the one hand, and opening up multicultural alternatives that present seemingly new possibilities that eventually end up reinforcing antiblack references of who and what counts as a “criminal” on the other. To call for more Asian representation as hate-crime-victims does not challenge the existing racial logics of criminalization. Even further, hate crime laws propose a relatively weak policy solution that merely promises to correct the behaviors of an individual and leave structural and systemic forms of state violence unchecked. Despite the reference to “crime” in hate crimes rhetoric, there is often little experience, analysis, or engagement with the broader research agendas and political movements already in conversation with radical or even reformist discussions on the criminal legal system, criminalization, policing, and prisons.

Long before anti-Asian hate emerged as a political discourse, queer and trans scholars have critiqued federal hate crimes legislation for promoting homonormative subjectivity that attempted to sanitize queer life. They demonstrated how hate crimes legislation actually promoted the policing of gender and sexuality by rewarding “good” behaviors and punishing deviance. In their analysis of mainstream gay rights agendas that supported the passage of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Act, Dean Spade and Craig Wilse argue that gay rights agendas driven by upwardly mobile nonprofit organizations garnered support for the act by uplifting assimilationist narratives of queerness in order to gain legitimacy with the state.²⁰ This is particularly troubling when we consider how assimilationist narratives of normality have been the very anchors that drive the policing and surveillance of sexuality in American society and the targeting of queer bodies and communities.²¹ Jin Haritaworn further argues the injury of hate is global and requires

a transnational critique against its circulation. For Haritaworn, assimilation is a problem not only because its ideological and material impact structures a homonormative subject, but because a particular form of punishment is often developed by state governments targeting racialized others through pathologized and behavioral correction.

Hate crime laws often require an actual intention of hate to first be proven in order for violence to be legally recognized as a hate crime. Not only does this reduce violence to a narrow individual's prejudice, it often rewards the most assimilable figure as a proper victim of this type of hate crime. The racialized other as a figure of foreignness, queer migrants of color for example, will have a much harder time becoming legible to the legal construction of the victim of a hate crime. Thus, as Haritaworn argues, the "hate/crime" paradigm is not only carceral but biomedical. Further, the hate-based framework is a formulation which conveniently allows us to ignore how violence is often reproduced not only through hate, lack of empathy, or intolerance, but *also* and even *often* through seemingly nonviolent moments of "glee, indifference or solidarity."²² Such moments will never be accounted for under the hate crimes framework. For example, Haritaworn argues that paradigmatic to hate crimes discourse is the repeating figure of the "white queer lover" whose seemingly more proper injury becomes suitable grounds for inclusion into the civic body, whereas the injured foreign immigrant of color can only be disciplined, individualized, and "dealt with privately."

We might think differently about some Asian American political responses that have asked for cultural understanding to ameliorate white America's unfamiliarity with the neighborhoods, people, and culture of Asians in San Gabriel Valley.²³ As Leti Volpp has argued, all too often when culture is invoked as an explanatory force in response to violence, tropes of the modern versus the traditional are reproduced, which runs the risk of essentializing culture to explain behavior.²⁴ As a critique against hate-based framework, the focus that some scholars have proposed aims to orient political debate toward the longer history of violence against Asians within the trajectory of Western imperialism, war, and racial capitalism. Scholars writing in this vein argue that incidences of violence against Asian communities during the COVID-19 pandemic must be understood not as singular isolated events, but as part of U.S. global history exemplified by events such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, the forced internment of Japanese communities, ongoing U.S. wars in Asia, and international forms of racial capitalism.²⁵ Without a concerted and deliberate critique of policing, these insights risk unintentionally naturalizing the racial logic which propels the political trajectory of "crime" in U.S. history.²⁶ Thus, when anti-Asian violence is proposed as an alternative framework to hate (as this author has also suggested), what are the actual political critiques of anti-Asian violence? This essay has proscriptively suggested relations with abolition feminist politics to address the racial violence of punishment and the gendered politics that defines proper victimhood, while ultimately offering a critique of policing as relevant to Asian American experience. Anti-Asian violence frameworks, in my view, can dare to imagine safety without policing and challenges the entanglement of state structures with the interpersonal relations.

Ren-Yo Hwang's writing on the carceral state and the punishment and refusals of trans communities of color brings forward a careful rethinking of what constitutes the claims and promises of anti-violence politics broadly speaking. While policy reforms are by nature always limited in their scope, Hwang argues that reformist efforts to improve the failures of existing rights-based solutions are structurally reproducing racial violence. So long as hate

crime discourses maintain reliance on a pro-policing and pro-punishment reliance, there can never be any affirmation of trans life. Without centering a critique against the carceral state, reforms inevitably, and continually, establish the safety of some over the punishment of others. Gender normative rules and regulations will continue to establish multicultural promises of inclusion and safety that render the policing and incarceration of trans folks of color as exceptions to the broader category of anti-violence state programs rather than a loss of life endemic to the nation-state. Further, as Hwang has traced, state investments in establishing multicultural hate-crimes legislation has rewarded nonprofit structures that siphon funding and agendas that divide Asian Americans long before the “kung flu” exemplar.²⁷

When I think about the rallying call for a new and improved Asian inclusive hate crime law, I think about the voices of Hwang, Haritaworn, Spade, Wilse, and many others. As they argue, existing federal hate crimes legislation (Shepard and Byrd Act) results in discursive and material consequences for queer and trans communities. Why would we think that the category of Asian would be the exception somehow shielded from the rest? Further still, Soniya Munshi and Pooja Gehi question whether Asian Americans are even invisible minorities silenced by existing hate crimes discourses. They highlight the historical formation of policy and public debates that narrated Asian personhood as possessive of cultural characteristics of a “model minority.”²⁸ A large body of literature in Asian American studies critiques the essentialist rendering of culture promoted by this myth and rejects the assimilationist outcome against the heterogeneity of Asian lived experiences.²⁹ For Munshi and Gehi, the political discourse of hate crimes relies on a similar racial assemblage they call the “model minority victim,” which recognizes violence only when behaviors and characteristics are deserving of rescue via reform. The only successful victim is the universal subject operating through the racial logic of colorblindness, and the model minority victim is the mythical placeholder which continues the promise of racial inclusivity that is never achieved. Whereas some might view anti-Asian hate as a political opportunity to finally allow for Asian Americans to be seen as worthy victims ostensibly like other communities of color, Munshi and Gehi argue that the model minority victim allows no one to materially occupy this position to begin with. In my reading, what Munshi and Gehi suggest is that the model minority myth has a parallel existence when it comes to political responses that engage in victimhood. We might consider their analysis to call for a different kind of politics that refuses proper victimhood, rather than attempting to include Asians into the victim narrative. Highlighting Asian communities who are *more* poor, more criminal, more unsafe, or more vulnerable can fall within the same political formation of the *more* victim narrative that leaves state investments in the model minority myth unchallenged. There is no way to move through this difficulty without theorizing and strategizing the relationship between the racial violence of both criminalization and victimhood undetached from each other.

Abolition feminist frameworks

In the following section, I turn to the insights of organizers and writers focused on addressing the racial violence of both punishment and protection by centering the criminalization of survivors of gender-based violence. To be clear, critical theorization against the politics of hate-crime discourses are not attempts to disregard the deaths, harassment,

physical attacks, and verbal abuse sanctioned by the nation-state and encouraged toward Asian bodies. Quite the opposite. All of the writers whose words I have relied upon in this section, including myself, have been deeply engaged for decades in community work and writing with policed and incarcerated communities and criminalized survivors of gender-based violence. The need to name violence is not lost on any of these writers; instead, the point here is that naming can be coopted and can be violent. We must carefully and critically address the discursive conditions held in place between interpersonal violence and structural systemic violence in policing, prisons, and immigration that do far less to establish safety than they do to promote agencies and institutions of punishment as our rescuers.

Abolition feminist frameworks oriented in Black feminisms have provided the most salient and transformative critique against laws and policies designed to rescue and save feminized victim figures. In many ways, this framework provides the opening for much of the radical political organizing and theorizing work against liberal reforms that rely on the logic of punishment to promise safety which undergird contemporary hate-crimes rhetoric. Abolition feminisms imagines worlds without punishment, which is to say, a beingness beyond punishment would necessarily be beyond heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism, war, imperialism, settler colonialism, ableism, and the carcerality of bodies marked, marginalized, erased, or submerged by it.³⁰ But what I want to engage specifically for this essay is abolition feminist critiques of the victim-subject, and this critique is possible because of the past and ongoing work of organizers working in survivor-centered movements to address gender and sexual violence.

Dominant white feminist voices from within early anti-violence movements in the U.S. sought responses from the state to address domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, and gender-based violence in public and private spaces. The majority of these efforts were pro-policing and resulted in laws and policies that relied primarily on punishment via law enforcement, policing, and prisons as the solution to ending violence against women. Historians of this period have shown that the political agenda of lawmakers invested in increased funding for military spending, the building of prisons, and the expansion of law enforcement paralleled and co-opted the political agendas of the anti-violence movement.³¹ Political discourses invoked the rescue of women as an abstract public safety goal used to justify neoliberal economic spending toward the expansion of police, prisons, military arms, and the catastrophic reduction and reorganization of public welfare programs.

It was during this era of the early 1990s that the first federal piece of legislation, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), was created to comprehensively fund and create federal agencies to oversee and manage programs to address violence against women.³² At the same time, VAWA was lodged within the newly legislated Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (VCCLEA) at the height of the neoliberal era of racialized punishment and the growth of the U.S. prison industrial complex.³³ The VCCLEA created an unparalleled number of programs for more federal funding toward policing, prisons, and the expansion of law enforcement partnerships with local communities.³⁴ Still, today, an overwhelming majority of VAWA funds go directly to police, while a very small fraction supports women's shelters, trauma informed programs, and community driven programs. In some cities, women's shelters are inside police stations. Feminist of color anti-violence movements have for documented the dominant framework of policing and punishment to protect women

underpins resources and funnels those resources in different ways that certainly do not prioritize community-driven responses for survivors of gender-based violence.³⁵ But because communities of color, Indigenous peoples, migrants, queer, and gender non-conforming communities were already heavily policed and punished, the promise that women would be saved and rescued by police was not only a myth, but submerged the lived experiences of survivors of color and the political organizing efforts of grassroots social movements as well.

Contrary to public perception, many survivors are not eager to call police, and if they do, often do so under intense duress and crisis. What could change for our communities by calling a different kind of support, a different resource, and a place of aid that was not police? Abolition feminist thinkers, in particular, have documented the long history of public safety campaigns that use the rescue of women as victims to drive the need for more policing of streets. Mimi Kim has argued that the reach of carceral logics is wide and manifests into a “fetishization of safety” within forms of community organizing and advocacy work that are otherwise critical of policing, yet nonetheless find themselves facing what Kim calls the “carceral creep” within collective political formations.³⁶ Beth Richie’s writing and work have shown that implementing policing as the means by which women are saved from violence has not resulted in the ending of violence in lives of Black women and girls, but instead has produced our contemporary prison-nation.³⁷ Her work has shown that policing to achieve “public safety” has resulted in further violence against already heavily policed and punished Black communities whose lives are never counted as properly of “the public” to begin with.

The U.S. has experienced unparalleled growth in funding for law enforcement agencies, police officers, and prisons. Yet, violence against women is nowhere near its ending, nor have we seen a reduction in interpersonal violence locally or nationally. Additionally, as a result of the neoliberal policy reform, a number of states such as California passed mandatory sentencing laws that encourage police to always seek out arrests when responding to domestic violence calls.³⁸ As a result, police who respond to domestic violence calls have arrested survivors rather than the person causing harm. Heightened enforcement at borders, the prison to detention pipeline, harsher grounds for removal and increased cooperation between local police and federal immigration agencies all mean that the overall punishment of migrant communities – which survivors already belong to – has increased. Currently, the incarceration of women in prison has increased 585 percent in the last four decades as a direct result of federal and state funds to build police presence in cities and neighborhoods, the creation of harsher sentencing laws and stricter parole boards disproportionately targeting race and gender, and the reinforcing of racialized and gendered limitations to access and eligibility for life affirming needs upon release – all forms of criminalization that cannot be ignored when we consider the differentiations of those incarcerated.³⁹ An overwhelming majority of incarcerated women are survivors; over four-fifths of women in jails report experiencing sexual violence or intimate partner violence prior to being in prisons and jails.⁴⁰ Sexual violence and reproductive violence by police and immigration detention officials continue to be underreported, widespread, and unrecognized forms of both state violence and interpersonal violence. Thus, the critique against victimhood is a foundational aspect of feminist anti-violence insights, while a critical theorization of the racial violence of criminalization as reliant upon the proper victim figure comes from abolition feminists.

Conclusion

Connie Wun has argued that political responses focused on hate crimes have largely failed to address white supremacy and antiblackness.⁴¹ Sherene Razack has written that hate presents itself as the originator of violence rather than the state, thereby restricting responses only to the most “tolerable” of which colonized peoples can never be a part.⁴² Similarly, Dylan Rodriguez writes that anti-Asian hate focuses on Asian legitimacy in only the most exceptionally legible forms of violence.⁴³ Bao Lo advocates for abolition feminist writings, feminist praxis, and Indigenous feminisms to critique the carceral propositions put forward by organizations under the banner of anti-Asian hate.⁴⁴

In this essay, I asked what might change if we approached the Monterey Park deaths not as a shaky example of anti-Asian hate, but as a site of violence that would benefit from the insights of abolition feminist thinkers and approaches to gender-based violence. I suggest that the politics of the “anti” is a moment for Asian American political expressions, however defined, to consider what will be refused and what those refusals work against. The larger questions at hand are how we will create safety, where do we stand on multiple forms of interpersonal *and* state violence in the lives of Asian Americans, and what relations do we build within ourselves and others? If, as the abolition feminist thinkers in this essay have shown, legal and policy mechanisms available to us rely on the use of policing and punishment to administer resources, then these mechanisms continue to reinforce racial hierarchies and reproduce racial and sexual violence. What then do we need to refuse in order to think through and respond to violence (or perhaps beyond it)? The problem is not hate, but rather the legal subject of the crime-victim from which political claims originate. Why should we continue down this path to seek visibility through the hate-crime-victim? This was never made for us.

There is a path that presents itself to the wide and varying range of political efforts that have chosen to anchor their expressions in Asian American voices. We can either talk like white mainstream anti-violence politics and their police allies, or take this moment to lift up the work and lives of Asian Americans working within abolition feminist thought. One path will be funded, give us recognition, and make us legible. The other will require transformations that we cannot do without relations with others and addressing tensions with others beyond that of state recognition.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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