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## Reading with Care: Photography and Anti-Asian Violence

SINCE SPRING 2020, approximately sixty-six hundred anti-Asian racist incidents have been reported, according to a 2021 report from Stop AAPI Hate. Included in these numerical statistics are incidents of verbal abuse, bullying, and vandalism, including threats to “kill all Chinese people” spray-painted on the walls of mom-and-pop stores and restaurants. Supplementing these alarming statistics and reports of anti-Asian violence is the proliferation of images—photographs taken by professional photographers, bystanders, and the victims themselves—reproduced digitally and in print as photojournalism, documentary photography, studio and passport portraits of the victims, family and vacation snapshots, and selfies. Supplementing these photographs are a number of viral videos—a Filipina woman being kicked in the head, a Chinese woman shoved to the ground in front of a bakery—that have served as an alert, a warning that puts all of “us” on notice to put our guard up. Viewing the ceaseless image stream of crime scenes, victim mugshots, and portraits of grief risks succumbing to what Sianne Ngai (2007) conceives as “stuplimity,” a feeling of shock and anomie.

Yet over the last year, the images also seem to register something else: in the aftermath of the 2021 Atlanta spa shootings, Asian Americans took to the streets to express their outrage. United by fear and anger, large crowds of Asian Americans gathered across the country, prepared with their signage and messages to the world. Embedded in photographic coverage of protests and vigils were neatly hand-painted banners pointing out the roots of anti-Asian violence—white supremacy, racial capitalism, and Orientalism—that came in the form of a series of negations: “not your model minority,” “I am not a virus,” “not your China doll.”<sup>1</sup> The global



**Figure 1.** Protest against anti-Asian violence and white supremacy outside City Hall, New York City, March 26, 2021. Credit: STFR/STAR MAX/IPx via AP Photo.

coverage and large turnout of protestors that cut across race and class attracted the attention of the news media in unprecedented ways that seemed finally to make legible Asian Americans as humans and legitimize their status as Americans (Yam 2021).

When the news media covered these acts of violence and the protests that emerged in their aftermath, without any analyses of the specific structural conditions that perpetuate the harassment and oppression of Asian Americans, photographs of the protests threatened to look overdetermined, even redundant, especially in light of our familiarity with the global protests of Black Lives Matter that took place in summer 2020. Despite clear signage demanding direct action to “Stop the Violence” and “Teach Asian American History,” the photographs appear muted, presenting the recent outburst of Asian American violence as recent and exceptional. Absent in the mainstream press were images of cross-racial solidarity, absent was past media coverage of the brutal murder of Vincent Chin in Detroit in 1982 and the mass shooting of five Cambodian and

Vietnamese children in Stockton, California, in 1989 that highlight how anti-Asian American violence is not new but systemic.

As curators and as critics, we bring to this heterogeneous photographic archive of anti-Asian violence our mutual interests in photography and representation, affect and aesthetics. The two of us turn toward what we see as a public exhibition of anti-Asian violence to ask, What does the photograph make visible and obscure? How can we create ways of reading the photograph as an archive of violence that moves beyond tropes of Asian American visibility and invisibility? The images that constitute this archive depict incidents of violence against Asian Americans but also mourn those who have been brutally attacked and murdered. It includes photographs of mass gatherings of Asian Americans amid flowers, candles, handheld posters, and banners; it also includes video stills of Asian immigrants violently targeted on the street, in a subway car, and in their businesses. The accumulation of this archive tells us something we already know—that racialized bodies are targets of violence—but we continue to look at it obsessively, as if it will tell us something else.<sup>2</sup>

While our recent books *Unnamable: The Ends of Asian American Art* (2018) and *Unseeing Empire: Photography, Representation, South Asian America* (2020) explore divergent aspects of Asian American visual culture, what our books share is a critique of liberal recognition and how the desire and politics of representation and what Peggy Phelan (1993) calls the “ideology of the visible” can delimit the way we see persons, places, and events. Over the course of the past year, the photographs we looked at most frequently were those that appeared to be most familiar: a sequence of images defined by site-specific documentation of the immediate aftermath of violence, protests initiated by Asian American community organizations, and individual portraits of victims. While such photographs circulated globally in Asia and are important to global representations of Asian American experience (Ives and Qin 2021), our focus was on potential Asian American viewers of these images in U.S.-based print and social media. In turning to this contemporary archive of anti-Asian violence, we recognize that the mimetic quality of the photograph fails fully to register the ongoing history and suffering of Asian Americans as perpetually foreign and disposable. For example, hateful gestures and racist remarks, such as calling someone “Chinese virus” or “Kung Flu,” do not manifest as outward injury, nor do they materialize on the surface of the image.

Scholars of photography have reminded us that photographs have no meaning without words, that they need context (Sontag 1977; Barthes 1981; Barrett 2006). In the case of anti-Asian violence, the context is

complicated; or as Hua Hsu (2021) writes in a caption for an image of an Asian American protestor in New York City, “it’s difficult to describe anti-Asian racism when society lacks a coherent historical account of what it actually looks like.” In general, photographs of anti-Asian violence tell us too much as well as too little. News media photographs continue inadequately to document the dead, violated, and abject Asian American body precisely because media conglomerates and federal hate crime legislation limit the functionality and visibility of these images. We see this archive as evidence of what Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) calls a “complex of visibility” that seeks to naturalize and aestheticize an identification with the social order, as well as a cataloging of the afterlives of violence. And yet, following Mirzoeff, we have a “right to look” as well as a “right to the real.” We must continue to look critically at this photographic archive of violence and approach it as a living document, for the archive itself risks being imminently co-opted by the state. Responding to the call that “Asian Lives Matter,” Congress’s passing of the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act promises to persecute anti-Asian perpetrators to the fullest extent of the law. But such legislative acts in fact make the hate crime individualized, obscuring systemic patterns of violence and police brutality against Asian *and* BIPOC racialized bodies, including the death of Angelo Quinto in December 2020, murdered after an officer knelt on his neck for five minutes. At stake in this essay is our attempt to thwart the state’s activation of the photographic archive’s repressive function and to prevent archives of anti-Asian violence from being mobilized for antiabolitionist purposes.

As Tina Campt (2017, 9) reminds us, although photographs do not speak, this does not mean images are mute. In *Listening to Images*, she encourages us to be attuned to photography’s “affective frequencies.” Such frequencies elicit a wide array of messy and ambivalent emotions through which we “feel photography,” to use Elspeth Brown and Thy Phu’s (2014) phrase. In alliance with Black and feminist scholars of visual culture, we attempt to listen to and re-view contemporary images of anti-Asian hate by way of juxtaposing several models and methods of looking at photography in and through different framing strategies of display. We bring contemporary photographs of anti-Asian violence alongside artwork by Asian American artists in a potential exhibition with the following aims:

1. We contend that images that accompany news reports are doing something beyond documentation, asserting that what an image documents extends far beyond its frame. We also emphasize that

the temporality of the photograph is in excess of acts of violence captured in the document.

2. Keeping in mind that images are not fixed in their meaning, we offer alternative interpretations, contextualizations, and ways of seeing the photograph that go beyond the index and the intentions of the photographer and the state.
3. We propose a set of juxtapositions between photojournalism, documentary photography, and fine art that elicits another kind of reading: one that unsettles the hermeneutics of photography and the aesthetics of affect. In doing so, we open up the photograph as a space for collective reflection and work through trauma and grief.
4. We suggest that reading a photograph is as important as taking a photograph. The anonymity and distance of surveillance videos threaten to replace the camera in a way that has disturbing consequences, as Jane Hu (2021) has incisively pointed out. The proliferation of smartphones means that we all have the potential to be there at the “right” place and time to witness a racist confrontation by taking a picture. We suggest otherwise: that we can also bear witness by looking at and reading an image and considering the conditions leading up to this encounter.

We bring together these photographs as an exhibition that is a work in progress—not as a representation of a specific form of anti-Asian violence or even of a specific Asian immigrant group but as images that illustrate how photographs contain both a boundary limit and structures of potentiality. Given that the photograph is always incomplete and the archive open ended, we underline the importance of the viewer in showing up and stepping up to unlearn how to look at these images, a venture that we are in the process of learning too.

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“Photography is an event,” Ariella Azoulay (2012, 26) writes. “The event of photography is subject to a unique form of temporality.” In her description of the historical and political relations that compose the image, Azoulay draws our attention to the encounter between the photographer, those who are photographed, and ourselves as viewers. Our juxtapositions expand on the photographic encounter by considering the long temporality of the photographic event, a temporality that runs beyond the surface and border of the image itself. What we see when we look at

photographs of anti-Asian violence is not the shock of something new. Instead, the accumulation of images within this archive acquires the force of repetition. For many Asian American viewers, this archive of images may already appear deeply familiar. Our familiarity with images of violent abjection is a measure of how we are haunted by such photographs—that they conjure, in the act of seeing, another set of images where we already know what we see.

A case in point: the mass shooting at a FedEx facility in Indianapolis on April 15, 2021, left eight people dead, including four Sikh Americans: Jaswinder Singh, Jasvinder Kaur, Amarjeet Kaur Johal, and Amarjit Sekhon. (Four other employees who were killed were white and/or multiracial.) The visual documentation of their deaths in the news includes identificatory photographs from their workplace and social media; photographs of the Sikh community in Indianapolis coming together in prayer, as well as preparing meals for the communal *langar*; and family photographs that memorialize the dead. Yet, despite the density and specificity of images that document the murder of South Asian Americans, an uncanny quality of repetition marks this archive. In form and in content, what we see emerging from Indianapolis in 2021 reproduces the photographs that circulated in the aftermath of the massacre of six Sikh Americans at a gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, on August 5, 2012. It also replicates the sequence of photographs that proliferated after the death of Balbir Singh Sodhi in Mesa, Arizona, who was misidentified as Muslim and murdered in one of the first race-based hate crimes documented after September 11, 2001. If photography is an event, the archive of images generated by acts of anti-Asian violence that mark each one of these deaths in 2001, 2012, and 2021 dispels the fiction of the event's singularity. What Azoulay (2012) calls the "unique temporality" of the photograph lies in the fact that what the image records—death, loss, grief, mourning, protest—replicates itself, over and over again.

In "Members of the Sikh Community during a Vigil for the Victims of the FedEx Shooting in Indianapolis, Saturday Evening," taken by AJ Mast for the *New York Times* (Figure 2), a Sikh man centered in the image stands with his eyes closed, looking downward in prayer in quiet solidarity with three other people. This single image contains at least two other photographs. The women to the right and left of the frame each holds a portrait of one of the murdered FedEx employees, Amarjit Sekhon, taken from a family photo. By contrast, the unnamed man's hands are empty. But his T-shirt holds another black-and-white photograph: pixelated and faded, it looks like a photo of three Black people, perhaps a reference to the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. Mast's photograph of



**Figure 2.** “Members of the Sikh Community during a Vigil for the Victims of the FedEx Shooting in Indianapolis, Saturday Evening.” Credit: AJ Mast/The New York Times/Redux.

mourners gathered at a vigil captures at least three different genres of image making: photojournalism, family photography, and studio portraiture.

In turn, this single image recalls another photograph taken nearly twenty years earlier: the iconic photograph of a turbaned Sikh man draped in an American flag, by the Asian American photographer Corky Lee (Figure 3). In Lee’s photograph of Sikh Americans at a vigil in New York City after September 11, 2001, a young man drapes himself tightly in a U.S. flag, looking directly at the camera. The flag’s colors reverberate across the surface of the image: in the man’s dark red turban, in the bold stripes that frame the right foreground of the picture frame, in the miniature flag clutched by a young girl next to him. There is such a profusion of stars and stripes in this photo that there is no room to call the subjects of this image un-American. Taken in the aftermath of the death of Balbir Singh Sodhi, the tight framing of Lee’s photograph, his portrayal of a dense crowd of Sikh Americans who gather in protest, produces an image that insists on Asian American belonging.

Corky Lee’s photographic practice and archive are central to our visualization of Asian immigrants *as* Americans: as Hua Hsu (2021) writes



**Figure 3.** “Sikh Man with U.S. Flag.” Credit: Corky Lee.

in the aftermath of Lee’s death from COVID-19 in 2021, his photographs “helped generations of Asian Americans see themselves.” What Lee’s photograph of the 2001 vigil makes available to us is a way of seeing mass gatherings of Asian Americans as the work of crafting solidarity. If Mast’s documentation of the vigil in Indianapolis affirms loss and death, Lee’s photograph underscores the capacity of Asian Americans to gather in protest, to affirm their own presence, and to take up space in public.

We note that the forms of Mast’s and Lee’s photographs differ considerably. In Mast’s image, the lone male figure’s eyes are cast downward as if in prayer; in Lee’s photograph, the man who covers himself with an American flag insists on meeting our gaze. But we also emphasize the fact that even as Mast and Lee differently frame their images, both do so by foregrounding the turban, the object that led in part to the murder of Sikh Americans in Indiana, Wisconsin, and Arizona. As Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai (2002, 137) write, “the turban is a complex and ambivalent signifier of both racial and religious community as well as of the power of masculine heteronormativity.” That is, the visibility of Asian Americans in both images is indexed by the very object that marks these immigrants simultaneously as “terrorist” subjects, as heteronormative and patriotic citizens, *and* as targets of violence.

How, then, can we work to see ourselves in relation to these images of anti-Asian violence, when the photograph itself can codify our position as racialized objects on display? Juxtaposing Mast's photograph in relation to Lee's moves us closer to understanding what it means for Asian Americans to, as Hsu puts it, "see themselves" in this long archive of anti-Asian violence and, equally, to reflect on what we feel in the act of seeing ourselves through these images. Within the archive that we have compiled, the accumulation of photographs like these—images that record those who are murdered and those in mourning—produces a sedimented reading. We cannot see a single photograph of anti-Asian violence without remembering what we have already seen elsewhere. In 2021, as in 2001, the vigils that Mast and Lee record—the original "events" documented in their photographs—are direct responses to the deaths of Sikh Americans who were targeted in race-based hate crimes. This is the "unique temporality" of the image: the fact that, even as we look at Mast's image of Asian American mourners in Indianapolis following the FedEx shootings, what we remember when we see that photograph are vigils that occurred twenty years earlier, in the aftermath of Sodhi's death. Both photographs document the fact that Asian immigrants are Americans, and yet both images do so by reminding us that Asian Americans are always subject to racial violence.

As we recall Lee's photograph of immigrants protesting against racial violence in 2001 via Mast's image of immigrants mourning in Indianapolis in 2021, our objective is not to insist on an unbroken historical continuity between one photograph of anti-Asian violence and another. Rather, we emphasize how the act of seeing visual representations of anti-Asian violence always carries with it the feeling of seeing another archive, a set of photographs of anti-Asian violence in another place, in another time. Even the kinds of images that enter the archive twenty years apart are similar: first the documentation of the crime; then photographs of the grieving family; followed by the protests that move Asian Americans to organize locally, nationally, and transnationally. Repetition structures the form, the content, and the sequence of the photographic archive.

And yet, we hold on to the capacity of the photograph to move us into action, to remind us that the image may yet surprise us. In "Outside an Indianapolis Hotel, People Waited for News on the FedEx Shooting," taken by Stacy Able for the *New York Times* (Figure 4), an elder Sikh man sits cross-legged on the curb of a parking lot, peering down into his cell phone. Alone and dwarfed by cars parked around him, he is strikingly solitary. What we hear if we lean in toward the photograph is the hush of quiet. Camp (2017, 9) writes that listening to the image requires us to



**Figure 4.** “Outside an Indianapolis Hotel, People Waited for News on the FedEx Shooting.” Credit: Stacy Able/The New York Times/Redux.

recalibrate “vernacular photographs as quiet, quotidian practices that give us access to the affective registers through which these images enunciate alternate accounts of their subjects.” In Able’s photograph, the strip of grass near where the man sits is not nearly enough space to see his grief. But we see that the man is deeply engaged in what he is reading: perhaps a stream of texts, or the news, or a video. Against the symmetry of cars parked behind him, we realize that one of his arms is amputated; he holds his cell phone with his remaining arm. Reading, thinking, corresponding, contemplating: despite the stillness of the scene, this man suggests a course of action, a way to break out of what we are seeing.

In *Enter My Burning House* (2021), the artist Rajkamal Kahlon also produces ways of seeing South Asian Americans differently. Creating a memorial to those seven men and women murdered by white supremacists at the Oak Creek Gurudwara on August 5, 2012, Kahlon recreates their photographic documentation as portraits that she paints onto pages from the environmental conservationist Madison Grant’s 1916 tome *The Passing of the Great Race* (Figure 5). Grant’s ecological fascism linked directly to his promotion of eugenics; his work continues to be widely circulated among white supremacist groups. Each of Kahlon’s painted portraits is accompanied by the name of the subject, their birthdate, and their date of death, the latter relentlessly repeated across the series. Kahlon’s intimate identification with photographic images of those who were attacked—

Prakash Singh, Sita Singh, Ranjit Singh, Paramjit Kaur, Satwant Singh Kaleka, Suveg Singh, Baba Punjab Singh—emerges through the density of her brushstrokes, which bring these men and women to life, even as the work archives their deaths. Collectively, the portraits deliberately obscure in large part Grant’s narrative vision of an America populated only by “Anglo Saxons” and those of the “Nordic race.”<sup>3</sup> And yet, Kahlon’s choice to overlay these portraits across Grant’s text draws our attention to how it is this vision of white supremacy, stretching from the early twentieth into the twenty-first century, that structures the massacre of Sikh Americans at Oak Creek. What Kahlon’s work contests are precisely the so-called exceptional conditions of violence that determine photojournalistic representations of Sikh Americans as targets. Instead, *Enter My Burning House* produces Asian American portraits as a structure of possibility, as a memorial that functions as a living document, one that exceeds and contests that state’s repressive activation of the photographic archive.

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While our archival focus is not on social media, its impact on journalism and news organizations cannot be disputed in regard to the dissemination of the news, immediate coverage of local events by witnesses on the ground, and the way we see and interpret an event. What has not changed is the presence and role of the photograph when we read the news, whether on social media or in traditional print, taken by a photojournalist or bystander who was at the scene. In addition to Facebook and Twitter, Instagram has been for some a primary news feed with controversial implications and consequences.<sup>4</sup> It has also become a democratic and low-cost means to curate images of one’s own art and other artists’ works for a global audience. Following Instagram’s grid layout, one possible idea in curating an exhibition on anti-Asian violence is to present as much of this archive as possible. That is, if the archive is a container of submerged and subordinated histories, the exhibitionary space is an opportunity to upturn this archive, upset the order, and reframe the categorical parameters of the history and its telling. By presenting the archive salon-style, or in a grid from floor to ceiling alongside rolls of StopDiscrimAsian’s Excel sheets of antiracist incidents posted like wallpaper, such an exhibition would affectively immerse the viewer in the archive’s excess.<sup>5</sup> Using the

**Figure 5.** Prakash Singh (November 1, 1972–August 5, 2012), opposite, from the series *Enter My Burning House*, 2021. Credit: Rajkamal Kahlon.





**Figure 6.** After dropping off flowers, Jesus Estrella, *left*, and Shelby S., *right*, stand in support of the Asian and Hispanic communities outside Young’s Asian Massage, where four people were killed, March 17, 2021, Acworth, Georgia. Credit: Curtis Compton/Atlanta Journal-Constitution via AP.

same logic, however, this exhibition-making thought experiment might also be too overwhelming, blur discrete events, and risk abstracting the violence, compounding an already embedded feeling of psychic numbing.

Returning to Brown and Phu’s assertion of the affective dimensions of photography and its different degrees of intensity and intimacy, we want to pull out an image from the archive: Curtis Compton’s Associated Press photograph of Young’s Asian Massage (YAM), taken the day after what we now know as the Atlanta Spa Shooting, and offer a close reading (Figure 6). Located on Highway 92, in a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia, YAM at first glance is unremarkable, one of many Asian businesses in nondescript strip malls embedded in the American landscape—sites that artist Catherine Opie has described as all “about the American dream . . . fragile [that can] change almost overnight, and are often forgotten about, just like the freeways” (Goel and Use All Five 2019, 146–47). First published

in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the image pictures YAM the day after the shooting. Specifically, the image pictures Jesse Estrella standing in front of YAM, holding a green sign with “#STOPASIANHATE” in black ink and all caps, with each letter underlined twice, and Shelby Swan holding up a poster that lists the names of those who were killed and the words “SAY THEIR NAMES!!” Behind them are an assortment of bouquets and stuffed animals. Posted on the blacked-out reflective glass windows are two posters: one of them pictures an Asian couple receiving a spa treatment by two pairs of disembodied hands. A lotus blossom is photoshopped on the bottom right-hand corner, in front of the woman’s rolled-up towel-pillow. Behind Swan, another poster pictures an Asian American woman lying on her stomach, blissfully smiling, her eyes wide open, looking at something to her far right. Beside the lower half of her body is a pool of water, some candles, and stargazer lilies. On the glass door is posted a note requesting that customers who have COVID-19 symptoms not enter and return another time. Below the note is a sign listing a phone number and the business hours: open 7 days a week, 8:00 AM to 10:00 PM.

In “The Rhetoric of the Image,” Roland Barthes (1964) reminds us of how all photographs consist of denoted and connoted messages. Whereas the preceding description is an example of the former, stark media images of YAM wrapped around with yellow tape, marking it as a crime scene, connoted it as a disreputable site in correspondence with the murderer’s alleged motivation—a quick reading of the photograph that was reinforced by multiple news reports. Too often, we leave this simple but useful exercise of identifying certain details and formal elements and interpreting the content of a photograph to the photojournalist, the news editor, and their inadequate captions, informed by money, time, and politics. Often what is forgotten is a reminder that these kinds of photographs are reportage not only of the present moment but of the past, as we all bring to the photograph our individual histories, experiences, and knowledge. How might another reading of the photograph, informed by Asian American studies, racial capitalism, visual culture, and Black feminist studies, shift the way we read the blissful couple juxtaposed with the sign of YAM’s business hours and highlight the stark inequalities and contradictions of the self-care industry, with its low wages and grueling hours of precarious labor? While the massage parlor may signify as a site of Oriental fantasies filled with submissive hypersexualized Asian women, it also serves as one of the few workplaces Asian immigrant women are able to find employment and financial autonomy.

It’s easy to dismiss Compton’s photograph or find it “boring,” as it was one of many generic images taken in the aftermath of the murders.

Barthes (1981, 27) characterizes such images as *studium*, in contrast to those singular photographs that possess a *punctum*—an unexpected disturbance, a detail beyond what is represented and linguistically signified, “an accident which pricks me (but also bruises me).” But the excess of details in Compton’s photo is too important to bypass. Within this crisis of visibility and anti-Asian violence, Barthes’s theory of the *punctum* falls short in helping us collectively grasp the “situation”—which Tom Holert (2019) writes is “replete with presences and subjectivities, visible and invisible, that need to be taken into account in order to overcome the standard histories [and structural conditions] construed from the single photograph.”

Rather than hope that one photograph from the archive will arbitrarily “touch” and “move” a viewer to action, Azoulay (2012) reminds us to see beyond the frame and the physical print of the photograph, thereby destabilizing the photographer’s sovereign eye and performativity. Were we to pull out the frame of Compton’s photo, what we would see is a cordon of police and press, the surveillance cameras and the Department of Homeland Security. How might we stretch Azoulay’s hermeneutics of reading photography by applying exhibition-making strategies of display, including juxtaposition and sequence? Consider how displaying Compton’s photo next to an array of family snapshots or drawings of the victims would open up the photograph’s interpretive possibilities to make palpable the impact of their deaths on their families and communities.

On March 18, 2021, Chanel Miller shared a series of six drawings on her Instagram—a fervent response to the mass shooting in Atlanta. The posting included a list of “important” questions posed to victims Xiaojie “Emily” Tan, Daoyou Feng, Soon Chung Park, Hyun Grant, Suncha Kim, and Yong Ae Yu about their everyday routines, including “What songs did they know by heart? What is their most worn piece of clothing? What did they have for breakfast that morning? What photos sit on their nightstands?”—inquiries that remembered these victims had full lives and were part of a community. In another post, Miller renders the women as “uniform, nondescript bowling pins,” indexing the media’s flat and dehumanizing portrayals of each victim—in contrast to the murderer, whose motivations were portrayed and psychoanalyzed in detail by the news media. In correspondence with her poignant memoir, *Know My Name*, Miller (2019) unapologetically renders her raw feelings of rage and helplessness, as in her drawings of a bloated yellow gold coi and the “bulging bruises” on Xiao Zhen Xie in a palette of magenta, purple, and blue.<sup>6</sup>

A day after the Atlanta mass shooting, seventy-five-year old Xiao Zhen Xie became known to the world as the “badass” Chinese granny

who fought back her attacker with a stick on the streets of San Francisco and as the elderly lady who gave back a million dollars to the Asian American community. In a photo posted on her GoFundMe page, we see Xie's soft face injured, the bridge of her nose and eye socket area deeply discolored with her left eye swollen shut, and the bruise across her face spread out in such a way that it looks like she is wearing a pinkish-purple eye mask, recalling Miller's drawing. Many of the anti-Asian racist encounters have been at close range—interactions that figure the victim as a vile object that needs to be cut, kicked, punched, burned, maimed, or destroyed. On February 3, 2021, a perpetrator slashed Noah Quintana's face with a box cutter on the morning L train in New York City. Despite bleeding profusely, Quintana reported that no one called 911 or came to his rescue, and so on his own, he had to get off the train and seek help from an MTA employee. Taken to Bellevue Hospital by the authorities, Quintana got approximately one hundred stitches—a jagged diagonal line that cuts across his face from cheek to cheek. Analogous to how visual discourse of trauma “often gets expressed through the figure of the bodily mark, wound or tattoo” (Hirsch 2002, 72), Quintana's selfie, which was published on his GoFundMe page, evokes a mix of wincing discomfort, visceral fascination, and bystander guilt. Why did he have to take his own picture? Why did no one come to his aid? Her mother still recovering from her assault, Dong-Mei Li, Xie's daughter, described her mother as feeling “very traumatized, very scared” (Bacon 2021). Likewise, Quintana continues to experience extreme “psychological distress” and has been unable to take the subway and go to work (Ma 2021). At stake are the long-term effects of this distress, not only on Xie and Quintana, but also on the Asian American community, that threaten to become encrusted like a scab—a thick shell that should cover and protect the wound but instead exposes it to fester and rot.

Historically, photography has been “spurious[ly]” instrumentalized, in the words of Susan Sontag (2003, 85), to trigger “collective guilt,” but can it truly offer “collective instruction” when we consider the case study of Quintana and in light of the protests after the filmed murder of George Floyd? The photograph remains important in its role as documentation and to bear witness. Too often, the reasons why anti-Asian racist incidents are not seen or taken seriously is because there is no “evidence,” and so one photograph is better than none. Delimiting in inciting action and going beyond the bystander effect, there remains nevertheless a power of photography in its force to recall and call upon others to imagine and care, as in the case of Kahlon's *Enter My Burning House* series and the subsequent photos of YAM, days after the shooting in Atlanta.

In another photo of Jesse Estrella, taken at twilight and published in another newspaper, we see him still standing tall, holding a sign in front of YAM. The day after, Estrella is no longer there, but the piles of flowers in front of YAM have tripled in size, now framed with lit votive candles on the ground and a dozen posters taped to the windows with all kinds of messages. The photograph pictures not only a crime scene but an impromptu memorial and also an outline of a group portrait, an absent presence of those who worked and died there, as well as a possible response to Estrella's summons and the photograph in the *Atlanta-Constitution*.

Kaja Silverman (2015) suggests severing the photograph's indexicality and bracketing the intentions of the photographer but departs from Azoulay's (2012) hermeneutic approach to photography by ontologically figuring the photograph as "disclosive" and a "gift." She writes how photography is a "summons to relationality" (25) that is contingent on the viewer, or in the words of critic Stephen C. Pinson (2015) in his review of Silverman's *A Miracle of Analogy*, "to heed its call . . . photography offers us redemption from solitude through a positive response to the world's demand that we care, a call that we otherwise constantly deflect." How might we see Azoulay's plea to approach looking at a photograph as a civic responsibility in the same spirit of Silverman's conceiving of photography as photographic care? That is, central to re-viewing the photograph is the need for the observer to use their imagination, especially when an event is not photographed. When this occurs, Azoulay (2012, 118) suggests, "other sources can be used to bear witness to the photography-event," including engaging in affect and drawing from and using our "civil imagination." By bringing in Miller's figural drawings and—as we demonstrate later—Byron Kim's abstract paintings, as examples of "other sources" and placing them in juxtaposition with news media photography, we do not offer a replete contextualization of the structural underpinnings of anti-Asian violence but instead attempt to renew our investment in photography and create space in which we can collectively begin to act, beginning with the project of healing.

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The display of Quintana's selfie does not alleviate the trauma and pain, nor will it take care of his expenses. Who has the right to look at the other's pain? No one. But Silverman's reimagining of photography as a summons and means to reestablish a deep connection to the world and each other by helping us learn to think analogically is one way to justify the request



**Figure 7.** Byron Kim, *Blue Lift Sandalwood Fall*, 2016. Dyed canvas, 62 1/4 × 48 in. (158.1 × 121.9 cm). Image courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, New York.

to reproduce or display his selfie and halt the ways Asian Americans have been subject to an endless “cruising for a bruising.”

While not at all a direct response to anti-Asian violence, one of Byron Kim’s paintings from his series *Mud Root Ochre Leaf Star* might be the object of choice to place next to Quintana’s portrait. Inspired in part by Carl Phillips Alba’s poem “Innocence,” including a line about how the sunlight illuminates a bruise on the body of his sleeping lover, Kim’s paintings evoke love and pain, abuse and violence, and, in the words of critic Ryan Wong (2016), “radiate tenderness and hurt.” In *Blue Lift Sandalwood Fall* (2016) (Figure 7), against a flesh-colored background, Kim renders on the canvas the beginning flush of a bruise or a pinkish nebula. A bruise emerges in an instant upon impact to the skin, creating a rush of blood within the blood vessels that then implodes or ruptures, leading to bleeding under the skin and, on the other side, discoloration. In Kim’s paintings, splotches and shades of pink, fuchsia, and brown merge and suffuse into a range of tones, an outcome of a simultaneous methodical and indeterminate process. After dyeing a canvas numerous times with natural pigments including indigo, sandalwood, and ochre, Kim then rubs the canvas with rags soaked in hide glue and oil to create a series of stains that result in a material that is distressed and appears to look like a tender bruise or, from the artist’s point of view, a celestial body.

Wong (2016) describes Kim’s painting process as akin to “the care it takes to render something as minute and universal as a wound.” Ideally, a bruise and the discoloration of the skin fade over time. The harm inflicted against Quintana and others during this recent resurgence of anti-Asian violence, however, will not fade any time soon, nor can it be repaired or resolved by the Asian American community alone. How do we address the political but also psychological and societal needs that require time and care, just as the body requires time to repair and heal itself? How might we read these photographs of violence with intention as a way to make *all of us* feel accountable: not via guilt by association but by looking carefully at these images and examining the various associations they signify and evoke? By juxtaposing Quintana’s work with one of Kim’s paintings, our aim is not to position Quintana as representative of anti-Asian violence but rather to underscore how we are “bound to the world and each other through similitude” (Laxton 2016).

We come to these photographs knowing that the curation and context of images will never be complete, but we hope at the very least to engender a space to recognize the injury, collectively share the burden of the trauma, and begin to repair the recent harm that has afflicted our community. The Atlanta mass shooting and the assaults against elderly Asian

Americans over the past year and a half cannot be viewed as exceptional. Rather, they are part of a continuum of epistemic violence against the Asian American community that has created a noxious situation, one in urgent need of tending.

To look at and read these images tenderly is to be attuned to these wounds as a means of restoring our faith in the potential of photographs to disrupt narratives. By focusing and at times forcing unexpected juxtapositions, we shift and subvert the signifying function of photographs that are tied to their simple descriptive captions. The selection of images and artworks that we make is less about filling in the gaps of these stories of anti-Asian violence than it is about recharging the possibilities of photography as an ethical, conceptual, and political medium. We continue to look at this archive of violence because these images matter to us and, we hope, to you.

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## ■ NOTES

1. Select images of protests are available at <https://www.vogue.com/article/fashion-leaders-on-the-importance-of-standing-up-against-anti-asian-racism> and <https://politicsny.com/2021/03/22/editorial-put-an-end-to-ignorance-in-new-york-city/>.

2. We frame the archive as a living, open-ended corpus of documents and images that, as Ann Laura Stoler (2010) contends, has a “pulse.”

3. See “Madison Grant publishes *The Passing of the Great Race*,” <https://eugenicsarchive.ca/discover/tree/53eea903803401daea000001>.

4. <https://www.vox.com/22374175/anti-asian-violence-images-instagram>.

5. [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1J\\_\\_LXydwifaPR6kSxS5lnOchVytLMe8NMczekKQegg4/](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1J__LXydwifaPR6kSxS5lnOchVytLMe8NMczekKQegg4/).

6. See images at [https://www.instagram.com/chanel\\_miller/](https://www.instagram.com/chanel_miller/), <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMIUbRngsfu/>, and <https://m.facebook.com/CuriousTheatreCompany/photos/a.418100504220/10158482130604221/>.

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