All That We Are We Carry With Us: Stories and Possibilities of Southeast Asian Organizing

ERICA KAUNANG
This thesis is a labor of love, not just of my own work, but of those who resisted before me, those who nurtured my growth and learning, and those who continue to shape my vision of a free world. I’m grateful for everyone who has been part of my journey so far, especially the women of color who teach me to honor my experiences, feelings, and histories. While there are many people to thank for where I am today and how this project turned out, I hope this will be a good start.

To Shiza, Cass, Sinta, Dena, Carolyn, Sarah, and Claire; Thank you for offering your time, energy, and wisdom to this project. Thank you for the work you do to care for our neighborhoods, to fight for all of us. Each of you continues to amaze me with your art, your voice, and your visions for a liberated future.

To Emily Hong; Thank you for your guidance in making this project happen, for encouraging me to follow my instincts and create something new, and for reining me in when I needed it.

To Ebony Graham; Thank you for all your help sifting through my brain, for your affirmations, and for your friendship.

To Kimarlee Nguyen, Elena Guzman, and Cynthia Dewi Oka; Thank you for teaching me invaluable lessons about the power of storytelling and how to move through the world with love for myself and my community.

To Asya and Micha; I’m grateful for all of the memories we have in these neighborhoods, and grateful for the memories to come. P.S. Thank you for being my photographers for this project.

To Mohona, Chloe, and Tirtho for being my chosen family for so many years.

To those who've helped me find home in these past four years and kept me fed, sane, and loved. Thank you for your endless support and for memories of joy and laughter that I will carry with me forever. Zarahy Rivas, Zakiyyah Winston, Brandon Pita, Roy Simamora, Luigie Febres, Nameera Bajwa, Annette Lee, Brandon Alonso.

To Ali Ho; Thank you for being part of this project for every step, from the dance breaks in the library to the moments of writer’s block and frustration. I would not have gotten through the past two years without you. I am so grateful to be your friend.

To my mom; Thank you for your stories of home, for sharing your gift of writing with me. My most favorite memories are hearing your poems.

To Elizabeth, my first and most treasured role model; Everything I am today is because of you. Thank you for being my best friend, most trusted peer-reviewer, and my number one cheerleader. There are not enough words to express how grateful I am to be your little sister.
Thank you to everyone who has reminded me that you never walk alone, that there is no liberation without community. Endless gratitude for everyone who has entered my little universe and made it bigger with your wisdom, dreams, and love.
“Everything about the world has felt different in the past few years. From the moment Elmhurst, Queens became the epicenter of Covid-19 in the first few months of 2020, everyone in my neighborhood has felt on edge. Vigils and memorials were virtual as members of our community passed from different violences of gentrification, healthcare, and poverty. Now, in these first few months of 2022, our community is experiencing more forms of violence and I’m not sure where to go from here.”

My interests have always been rooted in the topics and issues relevant to the communities I’m part of, and this thesis is no exception. This project goes beyond simply exploring theory from the ivory towers of academia. I am collecting stories and oral histories from various leaders, organizers, and storytellers from the Southeast Asian diaspora and diving into the local histories and contexts of Philadelphia and New York. While the term Southeast Asian encompasses many different countries and ethnic groups, the stories in this zine come from community members of Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Lao descent. As an Indonesian born and raised in Queens, of Batak and Manadonese descent, many of my reflections are rooted from this particular perspective.

As a teenager, my activism was fueled by a craving to make sense of my lived experiences and to find connections with those who might also understand. Over the years, I found youth organizing spaces where I could connect with other young women of color across the city or with Asian-Americans who wanted to generate meaningful change. Spaces like Communities Against Asian American Violence (CAAAV) gave me an outlet for learning more about gentrification, uplifting my Indonesian identity, and taking direct action in my neighborhood. My mentors and peers gave me a sense of community, and strengthened my bond to other Asian Americans and to my home city. While my years in these youth spaces and activist organizations don’t feel too long ago, the roles have shifted and I’m now a College Organizer at Vietlead, where I facilitate political education workshops and mentor young Southeast Asian organizers in Philadelphia. Although I have felt immense grief, frustration, and disorientation in the past few years of the pandemic, holding space with other Southeast Asians has been grounding and energizing. The youth and my peers have reminded me that, not only is there history of Asian American resistance, but there are also other generations of our community to learn from and nurture.
This project is one of deep love, rooted in the knowledge, care, and work of the mentors, organizers, and friends that I have met over the years. I’ve met these people from organizations I’ve worked with and community circles I’ve been in. Feminist approaches to anthropology, specifically that of women of color, emphasize working through difference, grounding personal experiences in greater context of structures and history, and – above all – collaborating with others and prioritizing care and intimacy. Instead of a traditional thesis that is limited to other academics and limited to the institution, my project is a zine that aims to make these stories and histories accessible to the public. Zines have historically been rooted in highlighting marginalized voices and movement building, and continue to be important in organizing. Examples include Asian American Feminist Collective’s To Us and Ours and Asian American Feminist Antibodies: Care in the Time of Coronavirus, which also have served as inspiration texts for this project. Generally, anthologies and creative writing have been tools for women of color to explore identity and community—such as the anthology This Bridge Called My Back.

This project emerged from many questions and emotions I’ve grappled with through my lived experiences, but are particularly relevant today. As more anti-Asian violence has garnered the attention of people worldwide, it is important now more than ever to explore the complexities of the Asian communities in the U.S. and how we’ve endured multiple layers of violence. Current discourses surrounding Asian communities emphasize the importance of stopping hate— but what does hate mean? Some even touch upon the importance of stopping Asian violence, but the reality is that these interpersonal acts of violence are rooted in historical patterns of white supremacy, gender violence, and capitalism. And like much of Asian discourses in the US, the experiences and histories of Southeast Asians are homogenized, if not outright erased.

We cannot work through these greater structures of violence without recognizing how these structures manifest in particular ways depending on our local contexts and spaces. We must start with our homes, the people around us, and the spaces we move through everyday in order to build a better future for ourselves.
How can we trace our various Southeast Asian communities’ histories to better understand our needs and potential for organizing?

How can we look at Queens, NY and Philadelphia as sites of tensions and transformation for Southeast Asians?

How do we process, heal, and organize around the different forms of violence Southeast Asians face in the age of Covid-19?
There are many gaps within the greater Asian American community and discourse that force Southeast Asians to create alternate spaces of community cognizant of our varied lived experiences and backgrounds. These spaces are methods of self-determination, storytelling, and healing. In struggling with our differences, we can grapple with our anger and pain to uproot the structures that suppress us.

Hashtags like #StopAsianHate only do so much to create generative, radical change for our communities. In this age of sensationalized interpersonal violence, we must pay attention to the various forms of immediate and slow violence in our communities, including deportations, gentrification, worker exploitation, media & educational suppression/erasure, surveillance, physical and sexual violence. These are rooted in legacies of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, imperialism, and colonial patterns of displacement.

Engaging with Southeast Asian stories prove that conditions, structures, and dynamics from origin countries follow our communities here that are compounded with their experiences navigating these structures in the U.S. context. Along with the local context of the spaces they navigate, we can better understand the nuances between and within various Southeast Asian groups. These structures and experiences influence everyday material decisions and (in)actions, especially with how they relate to investing in structures of the U.S such as anti-Blackness and capitalism.

These stories and reflections have truly emphasized the importance of developing nuanced connections between communities & general histories/roots to work on specific, local action. We can understand our various communities and build shared knowledges and leadership to form a collective. As we use our past to contextualize and navigate our current issues, these factors also contribute to a deeper foundation rooted in care, transformative justice, and feminist solidarities. We can nurture spaces of storytelling to form multigenerational connections and work towards coalition building.

We cannot understand the violences and issues Southeast Asians face today, especially in the era of Covid, without critically engaging with the histories and ongoing effects of colonialism and US imperialism. Gentrification, exploitation of labor, and deportation are all forms of violence we need to examine for the survival and liberation of our communities.

Ultimately, current discourses are ahistorical both in the local context and the international context. Without these important histories, we obscure the true needs of Southeast Asian communities especially, and how deeply entrenched they are with class, ethnicity, religion, and gender. These not-so-distant “histories” shape our community dynamics and by understanding these histories and structures that our families and community members carry, we can better navigate how to care for each other. We can address the traumas of imperialism, of navigating the U.S., and mobilize ourselves as a collective.
Dena and I found each other on social media through Indonesian circles, and coincidentally went to the same high school but years apart. We have built friendship through Instagram.
CAROLYN TRAN
she/hers, Queens, Vietnamese, first-generation, political organizer
Carolyn led a revolutionary campaign to be District 25’s City Councilmember. She inspired and mobilized working class, immigrant communities who are often left out, which led her to working with Sarah to mobilize Indonesians in Elmhurst and Jackson Heights.
SHIZA RANAMAGAR
she/hers, Queens/Philly, Nepali, FGLI, Adhikaar and Woori Center organizer
Shiza and I met through Horizons, which is the summer program for FGLI students. We work together on campus and have bonded over navigating a PWI and missing Queens.
SINTA PENYAMI STORMS

she/her/dia, Philadelphia, Indonesian, Modero & Co founder, organizer

Sinta and I first met at an event on-campus, but I was able to see her in action when I was as a Modero & Company intern over Summer 2021. She has a ton of different roles across Philadelphia social justice groups.
CASSANDRA MANOTHAM
she/her, Philadelphia, Laos, Fishadelphia

Cass and I met at Haverford and worked together. We bonded during our Black and Asian Foodways class, and continue holding space together through potlucks and dinner.
CLAIRE NGUYEN
she/they, Philadelphia, Vietnamese, queer, Vietlead

Claire and I are both College Organizers at Vietlead. While we are co-leads for the Community Building Fellowship, she is primarily on the Community Defense team, doing anti-deportation work.
Sarah is my older cousin and we’ve grown up together. We’re both Manadonese and have lived in Queens all our lives. She worked on Carolyn Tran’s campaign to help politically mobilize Indonesians in our neighborhoods.
ERICA KAUNANG

she/hers, Queens & Philly, Indonesian, FGLI

My investments in radical change, especially within the API community, were sparked by my own lived experiences and fostered by the wisdom and support from various community spaces around New York and Philadelphia — particularly those of radical women of color, Southeast Asians, and first generation low income (FGLI) folks.
What does Tết mean to you?

is the introduction question, and soon a flurry of names, pronouns, affiliated team, and personal reflections begin flooding the chat. Before I can add my own introduction, I scramble to share my audio and fulfill my role as the event’s DJ. Once I adjust my volume, Ruby Ibarra’s cool voice fills the corner of my study space and I can imagine the music playing through everyone else’s speakers. I click back to the zoom window and see the other staff members’ sage green backgrounds with the pretty white font: PHILLYROOTS TET/LNY 2022. The white outline of a tiger creeps up at the corner of everyone’s screen.

2022 is the year of the tiger, and today is VietLead’s Tết/Lunar New Year celebration. I was told that traditionally, this is one of VietLead’s biggest events of the year where community members come for food, activities, and other festivities and the teams can work on different community engagement projects—whether voter registration, coalition building, or recruitment. However, due to Covid and staff capacity, this year’s event is virtual and closed to just the Philly youth and staff members.

The two teams I’m on – Community Building and Civic Engagement – have planned two different activities. Both are light-hearted and meant to share people’s music taste or different hidden talents. The Civic Engagement team is a smaller cohort of less than ten youth with a range of different experiences in Vietlead, while the Community Building cohort is made up of around 15 youth who have been involved with Vietlead in the past and continue to take on more responsibilities and leadership. The Food Sovereignty team hosts an activity centered on sharing the different traditions each person has for big celebrations like the Lunar New Year.

In my smaller breakout room, I’m with three Vietnamese fellow staff members, an Indonesian youth, a Filipinx youth, and we’re led by an Indonesian youth. We go around sharing stories of the different songs, games, and clothing we remember growing up with. While my family doesn’t technically celebrate Lunar New Year, I grew up going to a Lunar New Year dinner celebration because of my mom’s friendships.

Before I started high school, my mom worked in a predominantly Chinese office setting as an airline agent for almost a decade. There was a yearly office party where every employee could bring two family members to the Chinese restaurant in the office building. There’d be zodiac-themed decorations and toys, raffles, and lots of food. But on the actual night of Lunar New Year, her Chinese-Malaysian co-worker would invite my mom to her house for Asian variety shows, karaoke, and dinner. Even after they stopped working together, we would always get an invitation.
I eventually stopped going after leaving for college, but out of habit I would text my mom a Happy Lunar New Year and wait for pictures of the decadent spread of chicken curry, noodles, and dumplings. Somehow, Lunar New Year began to carry a new significance for my family, who struggled to maintain a sense of community and tradition outside of work and church.

My mom immigrated to the U.S. with her aunt and uncle when she was 17, finishing her last year of high school in Staten Island before moving to Queens a few years later. She met my dad in 1999, and settled in a street nestled on the borders between Sunnyside and Woodside. When she immigrated here in 1983, there were few Indonesians in the country. However, my dad immigrated in the late 1990s, as part of a huge wave of Indonesian immigrants coming to the US—particularly Christians, Chinese–Indonesians, and those attempting to evade the financial crisis. Above all, Indonesia was grappling with the four decades of President Suharto’s authoritarian rule. Neither of my parents are Chinese–Indonesian, but they’re both Christian, and I grew up hearing them allude to some of the tensions of being Christian in Indonesia. It wasn’t until I was older that I learned most of these historical moments, and it wasn’t until I was in college that I learned about the U.S’ involvement in the coup of Indonesia’s first post-colonial revolutionary leader Sukarno in order to bring Suharto to power.

These moments in Indonesian history are often brushed aside by my parents, family members, and miscellaneous elders. My mom’s stories of home are rooted in childhood memories and cravings for street food. She always tells me how lucky we are to have three Indonesian restaurants and two Indonesian groceries in our neighborhood. For the past five years, we’ve spent Christmas eating at Sky Cafe, the Indonesian restaurant nestled on a street in Elmhurst. But growing up, the only place we would eat Indonesian food would be at church or at different celebrations at other Indonesian families’ houses. Coincidentally, all these families were connected through church. Whether HKBP or GKI, most Indonesians in my parents’ lives—in my life—had been Christian growing up. In a sense, all of my mom’s Indonesian friends were from church, and all of her other friends were from work.

As our little break-out room talked about the different gambling games or off-key karaoke songs our families played, I found myself reflecting on other memories that popped to my head, like wearing batik on Christmas or dancing the poco poco at events on my dad’s side of the family. I thought about how intertwined these memories were with church or religion, and how I never really questioned why, despite Indonesia being the world’s biggest Muslim-majority country, most of the Indonesians I knew were Christian.

This Tết celebration was the first time in a long time I was able to reminisce on these Lunar New Year memories, and build my own association with the event. I worked with folks from a variety of backgrounds—Vietnamese, Khmer, Cambodian—and Tết was a moment of community connection, joy, and healing. I was left thinking about these experiences navigating Indonesian spaces, and wondering how I had never truly questioned these dynamics before. The more I talked about these observations or heard from other family and friends my age, it was increasingly clear that there are so many divisions and biases being repeated, rather than being questioned and worked through. For me, most questions begin with family.
FAMILY TIES

As Southeast Asians, our families and migrations are often closely intertwined with the histories and conditions of the countries they migrated from. We are often times not far removed from legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and war as they are intrinsically connected to immigration patterns. Families are institutions that serve as an entry point for our lived experiences, interests, and connections to community. A core motivation for organizing is often those around us. Southeast Asian experiences and histories are often homogenized, if not simply silenced, and a key step to mobilizing Southeast Asians lies within understanding the conditions, structures, and dynamics that follow our communities.
Searching for familial connection and shaping a personal narrative is often the most immediate catalyst to organizing, especially considering the nuances within Southeast Asia. Who is centered in Asian discourses? Southeast Asian discourses? We cannot let these stories die, because they’re so vital to understanding the effects of violent structures and forming connections across the globe.
Southeast Asians have been more established in recent years, as different forms of migrations and visas have become available. While early generations of Southeast Asians in the 80s lacked the familiar foods, the familiar holidays, and the familiar languages, it’s cool to see how by the late 1990s, there were bigger pockets of different Southeast Asian groups. Pinpointing when our families immigrated often connects to some of the bigger structures and events happening, as well as influences how (dis)connected we can feel from this identity. Sarah was able to build her connection through an already established Indonesian community after the wave of migration in the 1990s. However, Shiza and her family, as well as the person she talked to, were part of those settling in for the first time.

Sarah:
I was very involved in the Indonesian community growing up. My dad was the head of one of our Indonesian organizations for the East Coast for 15 years. Since I was born, I grew up going to all these events. That was the only way I was able to really get in touch with Indonesian culture. Out of a lot of my friends who are first generation, I’m one of the few that can speak fluent Indonesian because of how I kept going to these events– including dancing or organizing them. When I say community, it was mostly the Indonesian community, but then because of Carolyn’s campaign I started getting involved in my Elmhurst community, the place where I was born and raised.

Shiza:
I know someone who immigrated in the 1980s, 1990s. He told me he felt like he and his friend were the only Nepalis in Queens. They came through with a student visa. He said, “I was so miserable, there were no momo places, it was just such a sad few years.” Most Nepalis came through the student visas to just study here, but these visas usually get revoked. That one person I spoke to, he’s now undocumented because his visa got revoked, so he can’t really leave the country. He has not gone to Nepal since. In the early 2000s, that’s when most people started immigrating. My parents immigrated here in 2005 and I stayed in Nepal for two years without them. But they came here because they got this thing called the diversity visa. A lot of Nepalis came through and they started to become more established in the country. In 2015, Nepal had this huge earthquake and the U.S. granted them TPS status, which is temporary protective status. But then recently the United States, especially the Trump administration, started to revoke that. Most of these people became undocumented. The Nepali, especially Adhikaar, have been trying to fight to grant TPS holders permanent visas.
Cass has an intimate interest and connection to Laos, the war, and refugee migrations through her parents. Searching for familial connection and identity is the most immediate catalyst to organizing. We cannot let these stories die, because they’re so vital to understanding the structures of violence across the globe and within our communities. As we work through the nuances within Southeast Asia, we must constantly interrogate who is centered? And why?

I started asking my parents about their own stories. They would tell me their experience in the refugee camps and they actually stayed at the same refugee camp, which is so interesting because they only met in Philly. They didn't know that each other existed then in Laos which is pretty cool. The world is actually really small. They stayed at the same refugee camp called Sewanee Nepal. I've always heard that growing up and one day Googled ‘refugee camp in Laos to Nepal’, and it's actually in Thailand. That's where all the Laos immigrants went before coming to the U.S. if they could. Thailand was the place where most refugees went, because during that time it was Vietnam and other neighboring countries that were targeted and Thailand wasn't. My mom would talk about it and it's weird to see the American version of things vs their actual experience of things.

It's really interesting to think about my dad's life as a young man, because he's 60 now. He's been in the U.S. since he was 18. He came by himself and then brought his whole family over. He's had a lot on his back his whole life. But I just like to imagine what he was like as a young boy or young man. He would tell me, when he first was escaping from Laos, he got on a raft with his friend to go to Thailand and it was really dangerous. People were shooting at the time. He doesn't really talk about much. So it's weird that he would tell me these things.

A lot of people maybe don't ask their parents, but I was just curious and I wanted to know because, if I didn't ask, no one would, and then it would just die. He got on the raft and it was dangerous. People were shooting and his friend was actually shot. But yes, he was able to make his way to Thailand. I can't imagine— for me, someone born here with so many privileges— to seek something, but it's so dangerous and unknown, and very much a source of hope for him to live life over here. They've lived full lives, but I don't think I can ever really talk about much. Most of its imagination, which is fine. I think that's how most of us survive as people in this world and especially as first-gen second-gen.
**Sinta:**

When I was in Indonesia in college, I was really active in doing protests with the students. At the time, the second Indonesian president Suharto was in office. There was a lot of corruption, collusion, nepotism, and just a lot of injustice. I went to Universitas Kristen Indonesia and I was really inspired by my seniors who were on the streets, sharing their thoughts and the struggle that Indonesians were experiencing. That inspired me to just get involved. Even until the Suharto regime fell, I was there with the students. I was there with the students when the shooting happened in Atma Jaya. So I went through a lot of trauma. I understood the importance of supporting this kind of movement for the people. When I moved to Philadelphia, I found the Indonesian community in South Philly. I thought, what can I contribute? I love dancing. I grew up dancing, performing-- so this is what I can contribute. It opened doors for the community to get to know me and vice versa. I started hosting free dance classes for the community, and I got to know community members, their lives, their challenges, their struggles. In Indonesia, there's the saying called gotong royong-- which means mutual assistance, teamwork-- and is one of the Indonesian values that I still hold near and dear to my heart. We have to always support each other. You hear from mothers how hard it is to even go to the doctor because their English is not that great. So I get involved a little bit more, not just by teaching dance, but becoming an interpreter if they need to talk to someone in the city. I also love doing events. Modero and Company grew from just being a traditional Indonesian dance group into sort of like a cultural group that organizes events, but also conversations, listening sessions and more for the community.
When Sinta came to Philly, one thing that stayed with her was gotong royong. Mutual aid might be familiar, but the way she talked about how everyday acts of assistance are part of a bigger Indonesian commitment to community care— it reminded me of other practices and considerations among Indonesians. It reminded me of Indonesians community who would provide a place for others to stay, resources to get them on their feet, and a place to feel home. In my upbringing, similar to Dena and Sarah, there was an emphasis on arisans with potlucks to share meals, to offer prayers and emotional support, to share resources with each other — whether it was employment opportunities or childcare. To name gotong royong is powerful, because it establishes how community care is something intrinsic within Indonesian communities, that we can carry with us to other generations. It is something we can practice outside of our smaller Indonesian circles, to mobilize and create those Indonesian spaces in Queens that we lack right now.

She brings up the legacy of movement building as not part of a distant past, of not just from generations before, but from generations still with us in the here and now.

By recognizing the struggles and ‘people power’ of our peoples before -- both in context of South east Asian struggles against capitalism and colonialism, as well as Asian American political organizing -- we are reminded that collective survival and resistance has been done before. There is a foundation that we can reclaim and nurture.
Cass:

I used to be so weighed down by the weight of the work that our ancestors did because they are revolutionary people in Southeast Asia—damn, they fucking did it. But here I am in the U.S, a graduate of a small liberal arts college while my parents do their jobs 70 hours a week. What do I do for them? I think it's okay to take things one step at a time and to meet the needs of people who you care about first, because no matter what you do, it's still a part of making life better for people we care about, people in our communities. The community that I would say is closest to me is the Laos community. And the thing about the Laos community is that it seems like no one really wants to talk about their issues. There's a sense of pride in being quiet about it. I see that now too, in my area of work, where we help Laos elders. The needs are very basic: food, shelter, stable heat, things like that. So I wonder, those needs seem like they're always going to be present as long as we live in this country where those things are considered commodities. The needs will always be there. So how do we change that?
As Southeast Asians, our families and migration stories are often closely intertwined with the events and conditions of the countries from where they migrated. Legacies of colonialism, war, and suppression are not far removed from the generations among us. These lived experiences from living in these structures are carried into today. By understanding how these structures inform the behavior and interactions amongst our community members, we can better assess how to help and mobilize each other.

We can also tap into the legacies of resistance that the adults among us carry, because many of them were witnesses to -- or even part of -- these movements for liberation from colonial powers or oppressive governments.

Cass brings up an important question about positionality. This is something I think about often as someone born in the US, who speaks fluent English, who has (or is on track to have) a bachelor's degree. How do we still join the conversation and continue the story? Structures of violence cross boundaries of time and space because they have been omnipresent, albeit in different ways. Part of building community is centering the leadership and stories of those most impacted by these systems and issues. There are many ways we can leverage our various privileges and access to resources for the greater community.
It is important to delve into the tensions, complications, differences, and why they exist. These institutions and ideologies have shaped many community members' decisions to perpetuate and be complicit in certain structures of oppression themselves.

Claire:
A lot of people like to say that their elders are traumatized and that makes them Trumpies. But I also think that they make very concrete material decisions that impact our community, that align with hegemonic values, with criminalization. It feels really important to be in the broader Southeast Asian movement against deportation, to make the Viet community understand what’s happening. Since 2002, deportation work has always been led by Cambodian folks when the first deportations began. The Cambodian community has been disproportionately impacted by these deportations. Viet folks who came to the US before 1995 as refugees were protected from deportation, whereas Cambodian or Laotian folks were not. That's changed. Now everyone's deportable. But that speaks to how the narrative about the Vietnam War is so Vietnam-centric and how Vietnamese voices dominate these narratives about refugee experiences in the U.S. when they're actually much more multifaceted. Viet people need to learn more about these deportations and have the vocabulary to articulate the experiences because there is this culture of yes, silence– but also gratitude for the U.S. for resettling Viet folks here. I say this, I have been using this metaphor. I think I’m just going to keep using it because I think it works and no one has pushed back against me so far. So if you push, you have any criticism, let me know. But I say that Viet folks were groomed to be refugees. The CIA had been in Vietnam since the 1940s, doing propaganda work in Vietnam, grooming them to know American values, anti-communism-- All these things in a way to dissuade the revolutionary movement in Vietnam that fought off the French and was fighting against the Americans and the South Vietnamese. The people who ended up in the U.S. were the people who fought alongside Americans, and who staunchly believed in these values that came back to hurt them once they came to the US and that neoliberalism took over. That story needs to be known in the Vietnamese community because of the role of Viet folks have played in positioning themselves to align with the hegemony of the model minority myth, of neoliberal values. That’s a real, concrete material reality in the Viet community that more folks need to talk about. They have traditional Viet clothes that have like Trump 2020 written all over it. It’s a real thing. I’ve seen it with my own eyes. It’s my aunties. I know. Yeah.
Claire brings really important insight to how refugees uphold and invest in hegemonic anti-Blackness and neoliberalism. We need to recognize the harm our communities have cause, to explain the nuanced ways it is not simply violence happening to us, but violence we are perpetuating. US interventions and propaganda has very literally affected the ways members of our communities think and act. We can develop frameworks for them to name them as part of a structure without absolving them of responsibility.

Dena brings an intimate insight to how cisheteropatriarchy and government has been carried through generations in their family. The 'histories' of these countries are not so far away, but rather right here in our families, home, and neighborhoods.

Dena: My mom and my aunt live together and I realize every single aspect of how they talk about their upbringing and about the people in our family has significance. I used to be very frustrated because they wouldn’t tell me anything about what happened during the 90s Suharto dictatorship, but everything is in that context. By no means does this absolve them from any harm, when they say these things, it is always influenced by the country and the system they were brought up in. For instance, my mom tells me about how she was always afraid of the concept of divorce because divorce always meant a broken family. I had to tell myself “OK, there was some significance in the discourse of divorce for her” and then ask, “Is there a particular reason as to why?” She leaned into the story about how my grandmother married a secretary in the army, but there wasn’t any documentation because Indonesia just formed as a country. He had multiple families in different islands and she didn’t know about it. He cheated on her and moved money around behind her back, leading to their divorce. But through understanding how during the 1950s and 1960s where documentation lied, how the military benefited from the lack of documentation present was significant not just systematically but interpersonally, in our families.
Cass described a desire to understand her parents' stories, one that I and many other Southeast Asians have shared. There are often silences and taboos that are often carried throughout generations, that are often shrugged off. These silences must be complicated and cannot be simplified to ‘cultural’ patterns, but rather connected to histories of generational experiences of surviving under imperialism, colonial transitions, capitalism. These experiences are compounded with the violences of living in the U.S. and again, contribute to a particular set of material and emotional needs that cannot be generalized with those of other people.

Carolyn
My parents were refugees who came during the war in 1975. My mom escaped Vietnam by boat, which is like the stories of thousands of Vietnamese people, and some died at sea. But my mom found her way to Thailand at a refugee camp, and my dad was at a refugee camp in Guam. They were relocated to Hawai'i, where they met each other. That’s really where my family's migration story began because I was born in Hawai'i with my older sister. My parents decided to leave Hawai'i for California because they felt like there was not a Vietnamese community there. They were new immigrants and refugees didn't know anything, and they felt like they were isolated and that there was only so much that they could do to survive in Hawai'i. So they moved to California, where there was a larger Vietnamese community. So my family's history in America starts with war. That’s why they came here. But if there was no war, I'm 100 percent sure that they would have never come to the United States. And I think because that is the start of their migration, there comes a lot of trauma. There comes a lot of even personal family trauma that they carried here. But on top of that, they're also then dealing with racism, sexism, classism, not being seen as a whole person, not being able to navigate their children's school. It’s a compounded trauma and because it’s so taboo in our communities to talk about mental health or seeking help my family really have had to carry that and that trauma.

Sarah
There's this area in New Jersey called Avenel, and that’s where a lot of undocumented Indonesians live— especially people from my parents city. It's a group of houses that were 99 percent Indonesian. When I was very young, there was a huge ICE round up. ICE would wait in the parking lot, and when people would go to work or come back from the factories together, ICE would be there to pick them up. There was a huge round up. They deported 20 to 30 fathers. A lot of them were my friends' fathers around my age. We don't talk about it. That's never been a conversation. I see how it becomes this whole collective distrust of government and police because they're undocumented, there's this fear. They don't want to do anything really that will increase their chance of being pulled over or something. A whole community living together with all their dads being deported within a night.
Sinta
For some of us, it was a very traumatizing experience. During the Suharto regime, You couldn’t criticize the government– you could disappear the next day. We don’t talk about it because our culture is not very expressive in that way. We were taught to just accept it, because of colonization, we were taught that this is just the way things are. So how can that experience really help the next generation? What’s important here is the people. When that protest happened and thousands of students were on the streets-- that's people power right there. We can actually make a difference. The fight can only happen when we get together and we really work together to reach this certain goal. For the younger generation, if you do care about certain issues, what you need to do is not fight it alone. What you need to do is reach out to others who are going through the same things. A bunch of the students were rakyat miskin, poor people. They were really struggling, like we gotta come together and do this together. They were amplifying the people’s voices. For a younger generation to continue holding those Indonesian values: gotong royong, mutual assistance, I think that's super important.

This historicization of the structures our communities come from and pass down to us or experience among us is important. From violence abroad to that here in the U.S. [resource deprivation, racism, xenophobia], there are survival strategies that, while not excused, can be understood. We can recognize differences to heal and care as a collective, and this care must be rooted in patience and be considerate to the intergenerational silences, histories, and survival strategies we all carry. Emotional intelligence and community circles are vital forms of maintaining boundaries and maintaining trust. With tenderness & grace, we do not necessarily forget or excuse complicity, but recognize these patterns to hold each other and ourselves accountable.

This international context is important, but we must also recognize the lens of local contexts and how they merge with the experiences people carry throughout their migration story. Sarah and I have only alluded to the experiences of undocumented friends and family in our circles, but very rarely do we directly talk about it. Many Indonesians from Queens have moved to Avenel over the years, but overall the early 2000s were times of immense grief, anxiety, and fear for many Indonesians. Especially for Muslim Indonesians who were surveilled, and for undocumented Indonesians who were detained or deported. The violences that Southeast Asians experience, even and especially in the U.S, are forms of terrorism that re-traumatize our communities.

In many contexts, like Sinta’s experiences in Indonesia, silence was a deliberate tool of sup/oppression, that was only combatted through mass people power. As we navigate these silences and traumas, we can also be assured in the power of resisting these violences and the role of building and mobilizing coalitions.
A lot of Asian American history and much of today's Asian American discourse shift between spaces across the country, trying to create a monolithic, unified picture of Asians in this country. But there's so much rich history in our own neighborhoods that is often overlooked despite how relevant they are for our immediate communities. Everything about how we move through our own streets and the people around us—these are all things we can learn from. While national movement-building is definitely important, we cannot lose sight of what's needed in our neighborhoods.

In my time learning from people like Cass who have intimate connections to Philadelphia or from spaces like Modero and Vietlead, I've always thought back to Queens. There's extreme value in understanding our immediate contexts, but also another important step is learning from spaces similar to ours. Philadelphia and Queens have interesting parallels that can be helpful to imagine new tools and approaches to Southeast Asian movement-building. Understanding the nuances and differences are the key to adapting these tools and approaches to our neighborhoods.
Up until this past year, I’ve never been in formal political or community spaces for Southeast Asians, where we specifically form connections and share stories together. So while hearing from Cass during class or learning from Sinta and comrades in Vietlead, I can’t help but feel a certain sense of tenderness.

Working with other Indonesians, working with Vietnamese, Lao, Cambodians has been transformative. For these reasons, Philadelphia has always been particularly interesting to me and I was excited to use this zine to understand the city a bit more.
Claire:
Southeast Asians—namely Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian folks—were resettled in the US between 1975 and 1995, which coincides with the war on drugs. Given that folks are resettled into extremely poor neighborhoods with legitimate resource deprivation, these folks were also swept into mass incarceration and the youth criminal hysteria of the 90s, especially young Southeast Asians who joined gangs. In listening to their experiences, about why the gangs formed, what their schools and neighborhoods were like—it’s even more evident to me of how much the US fucked over not only Southeast Asia, but also the communities where these folks lived at every level—federal, state, and city. The neighborhoods these folks were resettled in had so many issues because of the neoliberal resource deprivation and the assumption that they would just pull it together and make it happen. The neoliberalization of Philadelphia is what caused racial tensions to heighten in the city, particularly between Black folks, white folks and Asian folks, with Asian folks often being at the brunt of racial violence. During my first interview, one of our impacted leaders said, “We joined the gangs because we were 12 years old and got picked on every single day. So much so that we started carrying knives to school. We joined gangs out of self-protection because we were getting bullied and harassed.”

People think of bullying and harassment as these benign things, at least in the refugee community. The reality is all of that is intimately bound to the same resource deprivation that folks experienced in their communities upon coming to the US and how the US just dumped these refugees into these neighborhoods and expected them to make it. For other campaigns that Vietlead does, like anti-gentrification or healthy schools, all of these things are the continuation of work that has been done, that has been needed to be done because of the effects of resource deprivation in Philadelphia neighborhoods. This pushed our folks into prison and now into deportation. So in the U.S., if you are a green card holder, but are in prison for over a year, you can be deportable. So that’s why our folks are swept into that pipeline. It’s really clear to me that all of the issues that Southeast Asians face today are the same issues that folks faced then that pushed them into the prison to deportation pipeline. I know and fear that this will continue so long as our communities remain deprived of resources so long as migrants and refugees continue coming to the US and find themselves in these resource deprived neighborhoods, which they often do. It speaks to a larger, systemic problem that is not just deportation—it’s also food insecurity, the lack of welfare, toxic schools, gentrification. It’s all of these linkages that create conditions where people experience the ultimate exile of deportation or life incarceration. In talking about deportation, you can also talk about all of these other things because of how these issues are intimately tied.
We're going into year three of the pandemic. That's something that we have to consider on top of the decades of shit we've been asking for but never got accomplished— not on our ends, but because the systems in place that don't allow us to accomplish these things. Burnout is the only thing we can feel right now. We got two stimulus checks, four COVID tests, so how do they expect us to feel right now? Most of America received two stimulus checks and four COVID tests, but what about the people who aren't working 40 hours a week, making $15 an hour, which is above minimum wage, which is $7.25 here in this fucking state. What about people who are undocumented? What about people who don't have jobs? What resources do they have? Within organizations like nonprofits, there is not enough staff to help them. There's not enough money to help them. Working with what little we have, and we want to help these people. We also want to help ourselves at the end of the day, coming home, making something to eat, paying our own bills. It's a lot.

Claire points to a long history of how resource deprivation has affected Southeast Asians. Philadelphia was a site for refugee resettlement in under-resourced, predominantly Black communities. As Southeast Asian refugees arrived, they did not receive the resources to survive and these different forms of precarity created racial tensions across the city. Southeast Asian youth faced poor conditions in their schools and neighborhoods, as well as interpersonal violence and harassment. As Cass points out, access to resources has always been a struggle as Southeast Asians especially struggle to navigate necessities of heat, housing, and even internet access. As communities continue to struggle economically under racial capitalism, particularly in the age of Covid when the government has not given us nearly enough support or resources as we need to survive, the same patterns of racial tensions and interpersonal violence have been pushed to the forefront.
QUEENS
Sarah:
A lot of the Indonesians here, they're in the service based economy. They're taxi drivers, nannies, babysitters. It's very easy for employers or other people to take advantage of them in those settings. I remember during Covid, at the beginning, there was an Indonesian family who got COVID. It was because the dad was an Uber driver and he couldn't stop working. He probably got it from one of his passengers. He went home, he gave it to his whole family. He passed away. That just shows how working class people were literally at the forefront of the pandemic. Not everyone had the luxury to work from home. It's like it's very classist, too. I think that's part of a bigger issue as well. The people who are at the front lines of this pandemic, they're always the undocumented people of color who are always getting left behind. Also one thing, Elmhurst Hospital changed COVID testing hours. I went after work one day. They usually end at seven o'clock and they end at four o'clock. What about people who work all day? Their hours are only from nine to four, and that's so unfair, because four o'clock-- who gets out of work at four o'clock. That was something little that just happened this morning when I found out they closed early.
Shiza
There's so much exploitation, because of the language barrier and then being an immigrant. My dad works two jobs– he works a day job in an office and then he works as an Uber driver. He used to work 17 hours a day, six days a week. I would tell him, “Dad, that's too much, you need to rest.” But he didn't, always explaining “No, if I don't work, who's going to pay the bills.” I don't understand how people can do work for 20 minutes a day and get a six figure salary. The people who are taking you to work or feeding you, they're not getting paid anything. They can barely survive. My parents have been in the same position work wise for the past 15 years since they immigrated. My dad has not moved up from his position, no promotion, nothing for the past 15 years. When I ask why, he points to the language barrier. He says there's so many new people that come in and they just use this as a stepping stool to get somewhere higher. But he's the only one that he's one of the very few who's been there for a long time. I wish they had access to these networks because that's how you get jobs these days, through networking. The network is mostly service jobs and beauty salons–that's where my mom has worked all her life.
Sarah:
I see these white vlog influencers coming to the streets, eating at our restaurants, but they don’t want to wear a mask. You guys are coming into our neighborhood, eating our food, fetishizing us, our people, our restaurants— but you can’t even follow common courtesy? Like hey, wear a mask when you’re outside because we don’t know your vaccination status or even talking down on the service workers here. Everyone always romanticizes Queens as the world’s borough, the most diverse place, where the food is great. Yeah you come for the food, but you’re not respecting the people here. You’re calling the cops on street vendors but you’re in our neighborhood. Especially with rent and gentrification— they glamorize Jackson Heights but end up pushing out the people who can only afford to live here. For Queens, I hope to change the way people acknowledge the diversity that we have without colonizing this place. For Indonesians, because the Indonesian community is so divided, I would love to have at least a community center. We had an Indonesian community center by the library for a bit, but that was a church-run organization that functioned as a part of the church— it wasn’t inclusive. Somewhere where they’re able to ask for resources, ask for help because a lot of our people don’t want to ask for help and don’t even know who to ask for help. They don’t want to call the cops, but they’re being taken advantage of at work, and they don’t know what else to do about that. Having a space with people they can trust and get resources from would help our community a lot.

Dena:
From people outside of New York, there is this assumption of a particular tax bracket that I have never touched in my life. I’m born and raised in Queens, but there was a brief moment where I lived in the Lower East Side of Manhattan before my parents and I got evicted because of rent. Every time I came back to New York City, there were people that I knew who were either evicted or and they disappeared or they passed away. There is always this weird juxtaposition of someone romanticizing New York talking about how they want to live, then coming back home and someone else gets kicked out because of gentrification. It was my first experience with anticipatory loss of going back to the city and just expecting to hear news that someone passed away or someone is gone. Then navigating that especially in the context of knowing that several of these folks were also Southeast Asian.
Queens, particularly Elmhurst and Jackson Heights, are spots that have faced extreme pressures in these past few years. In the era of Covid-19, resources for our health have fluctuated from the moment we became the epicenter in March 2020. The sheer amount of people we have lost in the past few years has been a reminder of how many of our working-class, undocumented community members are seen as disposable in the eyes of the government. There's so much precarity as many work in these easily exploited positions as domestic or service workers, as so-called ‘essential workers’ who receive little to no legal or economic protection. Gentrification continues to be a new form of colonialism, where predominantly white, predominantly upper middle class people can enter our spaces, enjoy our food and aspects of our culture, while also displacing us from our own neighborhoods. As the NYPD police budget continues to skyrocket, gentrifiers are more emboldened to weaponize their power by calling the police on our neighbors. All of these dynamics are underscored by a romanticized version of New York as a liberal utopia, safe and inclusive of everyone—but the reality is that our spaces of joy, vibrant culture, and connection continue to be against a backdrop of racial capitalism.
BRINGING IT HOME

Philadelphia has a very particular history as an area for refugee resettlement with various forms of resource deprivation. Throughout history, there's been a pattern of Southeast Asians, particularly youth, lacking resources and having a precarious relationship with other races, especially Black folks. However, in these instances of tension and violence, Black youth are often the most criminalized and policed. In 2009, a group of Asian students in South Philadelphia were attacked after a build up of harassment and bullying. In 2021, a group of Asian students were confronted on a SEPTA train and one Asian student was physically hurt. In both instances, Black youth were immediately criminalized as Asian communities and public figures condemned their actions. But rather than addressing these instances of interpersonal violence as part of a bigger structure of precarity as well as racial prejudice, they are treated as individual instances of ‘hate’.

Queens, NY, as part of NYC, is home to the largest police force in the U.S. Housing, healthcare, and employment are all intimately connected, especially as resources consistently get redirected into policing. As the NYPD funding continues to grow and COVID-funding shrinks, it’s impossible not to wonder– where are the police when someone decides to shoot up a subway platform of people on their way to work? Where are they when Asian women are pushed into train tracks? They’re always there to skulk around subway stations to latch onto fare evaders, push houseless folks out of subway cars, and harass street vendors. The NYPD has a very particular role in shaping the lives of Southeast Asians in Queens, of harming and instilling fear into many. By emphasizing violences against Asians as ‘hate crimes’, institutions of police and the carceral logic of punishment continue to be upheld. These events are reduced as individual actions to be surveilled by police, rather than as part of structures to be uprooted.

Class is a huge factor in both cities, and reflects a greater pattern of how class particularly impacts Southeast Asians in the U.S. While Philadelphia has this history of Southeast Asian refugee communities, Queens has different migration contexts– from TPS holders to student visas to diversity visas.
Philadelphia has many notable Southeast Asian spaces. Some have been established since the 80s, while others are more recent—Modero was founded in 2011 and Vietlead in 2015. There are Southeast Asian organizations in the greater NYC area, but the most notable Queens-specific organization is Adhikaar. Founded in 2005, it directly focuses on some of the most pressing issues that the Nepali community in Queens face, as well as on uplifting impacted adults as the leaders of the movement. This parallels Vietlead's emphasis on collecting the stories of formerly incarcerated folks and mobilizing youth on some of the most pressing issues (healthy schools, transformative justice in schools, among others).

Throughout these spaces is a focus on intergenerational work. As Southeast Asians, we cannot simply think through past or future generations, but about those among us, learning from each other—whether youth, elders, impacted adults—as much as we ‘lead’ them. In Queens, there are many multi-racial, multi-generational coalitions focused on respective neighborhoods. However, there is a clear need for more Southeast Asian organizing spaces. Especially as Asian violence becomes increasingly sensationalized, the contexts of local policing and displacement are increasingly lost and obscured, between both Philadelphia and Queens.
It would be a lie to say that I've never felt unsafe on the train. I've had my share of anxiety-inducing moments, as many women have for simply walking, sitting, or existing in public. I've waved away all the moments in crowded trains when men will inch closer, assuring myself that it's not worth putting myself in danger for a little invasion of space. My friends and I laugh off the slurs and catcalls we've endured. Sometimes I'll remember times I've been followed through stations and forced to take a train that'll make me 20 minutes late to curfew. There are other moments I try not to think about, focusing only on the lessons of being safe in public.

Avoid eye contact with strangers. Keep your headphones in, but don't play your music loud enough to not hear what's going on around you. Don't walk home alone at night. But if you have to—be on the phone with someone and have your keys ready.

There are other lessons I instinctively and subconsciously do, but I don't actively feel afraid. Being on guard has become second nature, and is something that many of the women in my life agree is just a fucked-up reality.

But in the past year, something has shifted. As cities around the country have reported increased violence towards Asian people, it feels like grief and anxiety have risen in New York especially.

Asian elders and Asian women have faced the brunt of assault and violence. As of March 3rd, some of the top Google suggested searches for “asian women nyc” are “pushed”, “stabbed”, “train”, “killed”, “metro”, and “murdered”.

Michelle Go. Christina Yun Lee. GuiYing Ma. Three women who were killed in New York City in the span of five months.

61-year-old GuiYing Ma was in Jackson Heights sweeping the sidewalk when she was attacked. A lot of people spend time outside cleaning the steps of their house or clearing the sidewalk of trash and leaves. My dad used to spend a lot of time cleaning the property for our landlord before he retired. GuiYing Ma was at Elmhurst Hospital for almost five months before she died.

Michelle Go was 40 years old when she was pushed onto the tracks at Times Square-42nd Street. She was just standing, just existing. Links to self-defense kits circulate my family group chats. Instagram posts for vigils and hotlines flood my feed. Calls to my naturalang and my sister end with “Be safe, be careful.”

Everything about the world has felt different in the past few years. From the moment Elmhurst became the epicenter of Covid-19 in the first few months of 2020, everyone in my neighborhood has felt on edge. Vigils and memorials were virtual as members of our community passed from different violences of healthcare and poverty. Now, in these first few months of 2022, our community is experiencing more forms of violence and I'm not sure where to go from here.

I fluctuate between carrying an underlying concern for my loved ones, and being frustrated with the rhetoric around StopAsianHate. Like many Asian American discourses, there are similar narratives that focus on investing in and joining the fabric of violent institutions. Whether it's #Representasian in politics as an official who enables the deportation of entire communities or Asian cops and military officers forming a 'hate crime taskforce', many of these goals and accomplishments simply advance the oppression and violence against our community and other marginalized communities. Many of the people and leaders I see on my timelines taking pictures or speaking at these protests are often absent in community spaces with other people of color, in rent strikes, in deportation protests.

Over the years, I've struggled with feeling left behind by many Asian spaces. While I've grown to find my own spaces of belonging, with other Southeast Asians, in first-generation low-income spaces, with women of color – I can't help but see how commodified Asian activism and history is. I can't see a world where we can save our communities with more police, with more Asians in white supremacist institutions, or with more infographics that seem to only post about Black-Asian violence. My fears of being in the subway have shifted in the past few years, at first just out of fear of violence, then out of fear of contracting covid, and now finally compounded with the anxiety of seeing police with high-grade weapons at every stop, at every station. What exactly are we stopping?
MTA ES UNA MIERDA
With these contexts in mind, we can think about the structures that continue to affect the violences at the forefront of our particular communities. Southeast Asians in Philadelphia and Queens experience these structures of white supremacy, capitalism, and incarceration, but in nuanced ways. StopAsianHate, AsianLivesMatter, and similar discourses are ahistorical and essentialist in their attempts to combat interpersonal anti-Asian violence. They have instead perpetuated cycles of sensationalizing violence, perpetuating anti-Blackness and the criminalization of Black communities, as well as diminishing the role of class and ethnicity in how ‘Asian hate’/anti-Asian violence manifests.

Are these movements really creating generative, radical change for our communities? In this age of sensationalized violence against Asians, particularly women and elders, we must pay attention to the various forms of immediate and slow violence contributing to our communities. These violences include deportation, gentrification, worker exploitation, resource deprivation, media & educational suppression/erasure, physical and sexual violence.

These violences are rooted in ongoing legacies of white supremacy, cisgender patriarchy, and capitalism. Our communities are not new to some of these structures, and have experienced some of the other ways these structures manifest. In order to generation change, we must be led by those who are impacted by these structures and carry the knowledge of the contexts of these communities.
**Dena:**
Queens is its own borough—not in the corny “It’s the world’s borough” way—but there’s such a different upbringing here. There’s an intersection between Asian identity and class that comes into play especially in New York City. The city right now is this hotspot, looked under a microscope when it comes to anti-Asian violence. I definitely want to support as much as I can, but at the same time it feels very isolating. For instance, here’s a rally against anti-Asian violence. Why is the NYPD commissioner here? Why are all these people who have said very anti-black things present in these rallies right now? Why is this politician here and why is the senator here? Why are we fine with this? Why are they present? Especially with #StopAsianHate, there’s this lack of understanding of how the NYPD and the police system overall have harmed communities of color. When you were born and raised in New York, you know that very well. Southeast Asian communities in Queens know that very well, especially when it comes to sex work, trafficking, and those who have been surveilled for years. Our families have known way before the StopAsianHate movement about the ways the police system has harmed us. But oftentimes this movement and these rallies are led by Asian Americans who were not from the city, often from an upper middle class background, and came from a completely different state in which they don’t have the contextual or personal understanding of the ways the NYPD harm our communities. It’s very frustrating, but there is this pressure to still show up, despite the fact that systemically they are not helping our communities whatsoever.

**Claire:**
The racism in Philly is rooted in history. It goes back to Southeast Asian gang formation in Philly and the racism that those folks experienced. That racism is a direct result of the neoliberalization of institutions in Philadelphia, specifically the school districts, housing, welfare, all of these things. Philadelphia is a great case study to see exactly how poverty creates the conditions for crime and for racism and tension. Philadelphia offers a huge grand narrative. When the SEPTA incident even happened, I was like, “Yes, racial epithets were thrown during the incident.” But also having familiarity with the 2010 South Philly high incident and now the familiarity with the stories of impacted folks who came here as refugee kids—it’s all the exact same story. Is it really anti-Asian violence motivated in a very specific sinophobic way? It is to some degree that, but also the impact of resource deprivation of poor communities in Philadelphia where Asian folks end up, where other poor immigrant folks end up? Because the people, the Asians who are living in Philly are not the Wealthy Asians I’m shitting on those also in the suburbs. They’re living in their happy private school suburban households. they’re living their best lives out there not worrying about anything. The folks who are experiencing that racism in Philly are the poor folks who are living in these communities and who also don’t have the vocabulary to express that. I don’t think a lot of folks have that vocabulary. And that’s not their individual fault for not knowing that kind of thing, because that’s not something we’re encouraged to think about.
Dena:
The response is really turning into, “Oh my god, New York is so dangerous, so should I move out of New York or should I stay here?” This comes from people who are of a particular class and socioeconomic level to even have a privilege of just ‘moving out’. I don’t have that option. My family doesn’t have the option to just simply move out. When it comes to anti-Asian violence in New York City, what’s so frustrating about it is the lack of class analysis. I’ve had people tell me, ”These elders could be mine. This could be yours or anyone’s elders.” But would it be anyone’s Asian elders? In the beginning of the broadcasted attacks on Asians, they were often Southeast Asian. No one paid attention to that aspect but there’s significance. Where do the Southeast Asian communities reside? What is going on within these communities? What is going on within their actual area? Oftentimes these are areas that are heavily gentrified or at risk of being gentrified. There’s no lack of regard for that in New York City, where gentrification is so present. We need to defend that intersection as much as possible when it comes to organizing, addressing these issues, and trying to raise awareness on aspects of anti-Asian violence that aren’t just direct attacks. We need to focus on the ways those harms are so present on a systemic level. For example, in the fight against gentrification, in the fight against increased police surveillance, and beyond.

Claire:
StopAsianHate and how it has blown up in the past two years connects to the commodification and de-fanging of radical Asian-American movements, the de-fanging of Asian-American history, the corporatization of diversity, equity and inclusion, and representation—or-die attitude. It’s very flattening and it makes all of these different violences that happen to our communities seem like another statistic. Tamara Nopper has this really great essay called Safe Asian-Americans that talks about how, when we talk about the model minority myth, a lot of these radical or abolitionist organizations point to Black-Asian solidarity as a way to dismantle the model minority myth or talk about abolition as a way to dismantle the model minority myth when in reality, they’re still reinforcing the concept that Black folks are committing these hate crimes against Asian people. They emphasize we need to understand each other but—do Black folks really need to understand the issues better, or do Asians and other people need to understand anti-Blackness more? When you talk about it in that way, always positing Asians as the victims of crimes, you’re erasing the fact that Asians are also murderers, rapists, criminals, thieves and all of these things. The impacted folks I work with are all formerly incarcerated people. They are criminals. Do we continue to dispel the model minority myth by relying on some utopia that is solidarity? Or do we look to our own community to understand how these systems of oppression that are involved in mass incarceration, deportation, also impact our community as well and also harm our community in drastic ways as well. There’s a way of talking about StopAsianHate that can address these systems, but people always choose the arguments of how the model minority myth has always created Black-Asian tension. Is it the model minority myth or is it Asians being anti-black? Because anti-Blackness is the mainstream and these examples of solidarity we have are great. Yuri Kochiyama and Malcolm X are a great example of Black-Asian solidarity. But Yuri Kochiyama is one person for the ten thousand other Japanese folks in the Greater New York City area who are anti-Black. That’s a reality. So when we’re talking about StopAsianHate, we need to move away from what we think is dispelling these myths and look at the reality of it. We need to really look at our material conditions and think about class as a true site of resistance. Class disparity is what reinforces the model minority myth and creates a reality of it. That is exactly what it intended to do. So I think we have to also talk about class. We have to talk about a lot of different things.
Dena brings up an important point our how many all for further criminalization and punishment, and rely on the hate crime framework which is limited and regressive. These discourses of StopAsianHate continue to lack class analysis, where simply pointing out the poverty rates of Asians in New York as a counter to the model minority myth are not enough. We need to consider our own relationship to gathering resources and wealth, and how we can protect our neighbors from displacement. The language of hate crimes and these current discourses promote policing, anti-Blackness, and erasure of institutional violences.

Claire also brings up a vital tension to address, which is the ways that radical Asian movement building is often commodified and calls to action carry anti-Black frameworks that further disproportionately punish and criminalize Black people.

Around social media, whether the 2021 Philadelphia SEPTA incident or the various deaths of Asian women in New York, there is a constant narrative of blaming houseless folks, of sensationalizing violence like calling New York the 'new Gotham', and above all-- there's a constant circulation of Black and Asian incidents. As a response, there is an over-emphasis on Black-Asian solidarity. While this model is important to coalition building and furthering general efforts to combat these issues, in the context of Asian violence, it often places labor on Black people to prove their solidarity without critical engagement in how Asian people are complicit in not just interpersonal anti-Blackness, but in the systemic criminalization of Black people.
Cass

In high school I was in a youth group called be BPSOS where we would go to south Philly to learn about Southeast Asian experiences in the U.S. I did that because I've always been curious about my parents' stories and their own histories-- coming to the U.S. and before they came here. I signed up for BPSOS as a youth to learn more about the general experience but it was focused mostly on the Vietnamese population in Philly and not so much as the Laos perspective. I still feel like that's something I'm looking for.

In talking about organizing and the realities of our communities, we need to complicate clean narratives and calls to action. We need to lean into the different, messy, conflicting realities of different communities.

There are different forms of dissent within and between Southeast Asians. Claire and Cass have both shown the effects of Vietnam-centrism in conversations about deportation, about the Vietnam War & Southeast Asian wars/conflict. The Laos and Cambodian experiences are absorbed into a greater Vietnamese history, rather than understood critically as their own.

In thinking about how these over-generalized conversations fail our communities, we can also point to how we can credit and honor the work others have done, organize in our neighborhoods, and how we can assess the potential for coalition building in our communities.

Unity is an important rallying cry, but we need to look at where our communities are right now. Where are we divided? What language and knowledge do we need to build amongst ourselves in order to build and work towards a shared vision of liberation?
Carolyn
We have to connect why policing our way out of violence and out of problems is not going to give us the results that we want right now. It requires us to take that risk and dream of the world that we want. I hope that one day in my lifetime, we don't have prisons, we don't have jails, we don't really have police. But that's work that's ongoing. You have to continuously do that and you have to connect people's lives to why they should care. I'm glad because we live in capitalism where we're trained to only think about individuals, but we often don't become aware until something happens to us. In community building where we can understand our history, we're coming from and how our history is actually really connected to each other is how we can start talking about abolition. Right now on federal immigration issues like Title 42, which is a year like an old policy that didn't allow asylum seekers to enter the country because of viruses, and they let the CDC pick which country they won't allow to seek asylum—but then that that policy was waived for Ukrainians. Whereas just a couple of months ago, Haitian immigrants were being whipped by Border Patrol agents. For folks to realize like, hey our communities also are being impacted by this policy or maybe how do folks who are TPS holders like folks from Nepal— How does our immigration status also connect to Haitian immigrants who are also T.P.S. holders? I think like connecting our stories and learning about our migration, our community struggles actually brings us closer together to then really do those nuances around abolition.

The beauty of Carolyn and Dena's stories is how they show radical possibility. In remembering the ways government and police have continued to be forces of sup/oppression, we begin building ways to talk about the violence of policing in this country. it is not enough for them to simply acknowledge it, but these conversations are vital to creating a future shared with other Southeast Asians on what a world without police, without prisons, without borders would look like.

Dena
When it comes to forming a Southeast Asian lens to abolition, it's mainly reminding my family that transformative justice, or certain forms of abolition, have always been present within our communities. We are a part of generations of people, including our families, who have dealt with corrupt police and government in their lifetime. Something I've had to emphasize with my family – and it's still frustrating, but they're getting there – is that just because it's not this overt dictatorship, that doesn't mean that corruption is not present. For my family, they say we need the police, but then whenever we talk about their own upbringing, they're always very quick to say "Oh, you can't trust the police in Indonesia, because this corruption is present, these biases are present, these people benefited based on certain ethnicities", and more. Exactly– It's here in similar ways too. One of the main things that I've had to do is have them understand that the same systems that were present in Suharto's dictatorship and colonialism in general– they are the same ones here and affect not just us, but other marginalized communities. It is also them understanding that in the same ways police models were not reliable in Indonesia, they're also not reliable in the US. Not that my family necessarily believes in the American dream, but they have this notion about America, that American Government systems are more efficient or safer. But if the U.S. backed this dictatorship, they're not going to be here for us in this country. Especially if they made us report ourselves in the early 2000s, they're not going to help us or any marginalized group. There's not a lot of acknowledgment of the ways U.S. militarization and the US police are hand in hand. We've all already experienced the effects of US military intervention and state sanctioned violence instilled by the US. By that logic, the police models here are not good or reliable. Any police model is not good– any system that relies strictly on punishment and systemically benefits from punishment is not an ideal system. So that's my best way of navigating how our lenses can be added in.
Dena:

Our current models of passing knowledge down to other generations and creating networks of support are vastly different, yet still mirror how we were brought up. The internet and social media is so integral to breaking down a lot of barriers that are present within the Southeast Asian community. Religion is not a basis anymore. We're very good friends now. We grew up in Queens and probably had a couple mutual friends, but we didn't know each other. It's mainly because Muslim Indonesians and Christian Indonesians don't really come together. Those barriers aren't as present anymore because of the internet and social media. It's how I've gotten closer with you and other Indonesians. There's that instant communal connection: “If you're Indonesian, I'm Indonesian, I will help you out.” If someone asks for something and they are also Indonesian or Southeast Asian, I'm very inclined to go, “Yeah, sure, no problem. What do you need?” At first, I thought it didn't mean much, but it's similar to how my parents navigated community in the early 2000s. In Queens, if anyone called them up and they said, “Hey, I just saw your name on the phone book and your last name is Indonesian”, that person ended up staying at our apartment while they got settled into the country. Today, our community still helps each other out in similar ways. How we gather and how we act is also just very similar to arisans. A lot of our networking will look like a communal process of bringing our stories together, of adding the Southeast Asian lens to organizing, art, and music.

What I've learned over time is learning to imagine solidarity. What I continue to find is this very tender balance of breaking away from harmful cycles in which, community doesn't automatically equal surveillance and hyper vigilance in a way that does harm, but also acknowledging at the same time that a lot of forms when it comes to reimagining transformative justice and solidarity. A lot of models of community and a lot of models of deep interpersonal care have always been present within our communities. Leaning to kind of tap into those while also not repeating the same harmful cycles of structural and ideological violence. So it's not like we're just starting from scratch.
Sinta:

This is very simple to me because there's a saying in Indonesia, and I think you've heard it before:

**tak kenal mak tak sayang, to know is to love.**

I get to know a lot of people because I spend the time to build these relationships, cultivate these relationships, and get to know them and really care for them. If they need help, I ask, “What's wrong? What can I do to help?” I build my network by showing up to other communities’ events— not just the Indonesian community, but Cambodian events, for example. I really get to know people on a personal level, because it's important. You let yourself be vulnerable and you let people understand. We may be sharing the same challenges, which is why we should talk. Because maybe you have a resource that I don't have, or maybe it's vice versa that can help me or somebody else in the community.
Over the first two years in college, I realized that Philadelphia had a lot of Indonesian restaurants. The Indonesian community was a lot bigger than I had thought. It was comforting to know that there would be opportunities to eat and talk with other Indonesians, even if I was a few hours away from home. This was one of those opportunities. I made my way towards the orange pin on my phone's map, and slowed once my blue dot had overlapped with the pin. I looked up at the building in front of me and tentatively looked around. The restaurant was nestled on the corner of the street, with yellow awning and white framed windows contrasting the blue-gray exterior walls. As a Modero intern, I had reached Cafe Seulanga to gather content for a social media spread promoting the restaurant.

While the summer of 2021 was hectic, interning at Modero was one of the most fulfilling experiences I've had, immersed in the organized chaos of throwing events and the familiar sounds and scents of Indonesian gatherings with satay and loud conversations among tantes.

From the beginning of my time here, I admired how Philadelphia had so many Indonesian-focused events, spaces, and groups. Modero has held so many events to support local Indonesian restaurants and businesses, Indonesian youth are politically involved in groups like Vietlead, and a new Indonesian community center named Gapura has recently opened. I've always felt a small disconnect in Queens, where it feels like there aren't enough spaces carved out for Southeast Asians specifically.

Throughout these interviews, my conversations with Dena and Sinta reminded me of ways I grew up with my parents, aunts, uncles, elders focused on church gatherings and how a lot of our gatherings are rooted in forms of gotong royong. In these arians, we have food buffets & potlucks where everyone brings and makes what they can, people are quick to extend homes, resources, and knowledges when possible.

However, these conversations also provided spaciousness for me to reflect on how deep the religious and ethnic divisions run in the Indonesian community. Not only are there the divisions between Indonesian Christians and Indonesian Muslims, but there are also differences in ethnic group. As someone of Batak and Manado descent (aka BATMAN aka BATak MANado, as my mom would say), I've seen how even the different churches are often divided on ethnicity. Divisions surrounding Indonesian with Chinese heritage are also present. These divisions here in Queens are all intimately tied to structures in Indonesia. Furthermore, among these divisions and hierarchies of religion and ethnicities, there are harmful institutions and practices within the Indonesian community.

As an artist, Dena emphasizes the power of creative storytelling, as well as cultivating alternative spaces for connection. They've emphasized how Southeast Asians around us, such as biological family, can pass down violations of cisheteropatriarchy—while family can be a site of connection and discovery, there's also a tension of the harm they are capable of causing. Dena points out the importance of finding community that allows for self-determination. A lot of this goes back to what Cass said in the beginning, and what has become an important pattern throughout these conversations. There's immense power in being able to return to a collective, whether a [chosen] family, friendship networks, or cultural spaces. Here, we can pass stories down and develop spaces of connection, safety, and intimacy.

My friendship with Dena, as well as my discovery of a network of femme and queer Indonesian diasporic artists, create a vision of hope—social media, internet, and virtual spaces are ways to find connection and continue interrogating these histories and structures with other Indonesians from different backgrounds. I was able to hear about Sarah's vision of a centralized space to support Indonesians in Queens and, with her experience mobilizing Indonesians for events (which is not an easy task), there's hope to make that vision a reality.

But something that really grounds me is Sinta's powerful intentions on creating spaces of inclusivity and her ability to follow through on them. Sinta directly named gotong royong and tak kenal mak tak sayang, which has stayed with me through this project. While these structures of violence loom over us, there is always room and possibility for radical change.

By tapping into these radical histories and realities, I'm reminded that we can create connections outside of divisions and patterns of violence that are intentional about working through and breaking them.
There was so much beautiful knowledge shared during these conversations with Shiza, Cass, Sinta, Dena, Carolyn, Sarah, and Claire. These are just snippets of some of their rich insights into these neighborhoods and groups of Southeast Asians. They’ve shown me how critical it is to understand the history of the places our community members come from and the history of the spaces we occupy.

There are so many more threads that hopefully others can continue to follow and unravel. I’ve been reminded about how little I know about the history of Indonesians in Queens, about the other divisions that exist within this community. While there is a lot more work to be done, as Dena and Sarah have shown, there is hope to mobilize an Indonesian collective in our generation.

As much as we are reminded of the structures of violence that continue to affect us, we are also grounded in the work and values already within us. I hope to see more generations of Southeast Asians join the organizations (or start them!), embody the values of mutual aid and anti-imperialism before us, and generate change in their own backyards.
We can create sites of self-determination, for all generations among us today, where we have outlets to complicate hegemonic views and expanding our political consciousness. Storytelling and art are some of the most important tools to build community connections. Social media, familial networks, and local institutions are places to find care and collectives. In struggling with our differences, we can grapple with our anger and pain to uproot the structures that suppress us. Community spaces nurture us, ground us, help energize and heal and mobilize us!
This zine will have a digital home online at
https://tinyurl.com/seaorganizingzine