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### At the Crossroads of Asian American Justice and Climate Justice

Born out of an increasing need for inclusivity in environmental discourses, the climate justice movement has long been rooted in the perspectives and narratives of diverse identities. Under this veneer of progressivism, however, lies a stark failure by the movement to celebrate or even acknowledge the contributions of Asian American climate activists. Kim attributes this exclusion to the undervaluing of Asian Americans in society: People are likely to view Asian Americans, particularly low-income and undocumented Asian American immigrants, “as ... improbable mountain movers,” though they have actually been “on the front lines of influential grassroots community movements” of all scales and kinds.<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, Kim proposes that the “scholarship across the board has not been commensurate” with the environmental and climatic realities faced by Asian American communities.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the case, such a deficit in Asian American stories and lived experiences emboldens me to investigate the intersections between climate justice and Asian American justice, with a particular emphasis on how climate justice aims are articulated by the work of Asian American communities and organizations. In this paper, I posit that climate injustices and Asian American injustices are undergirded by the same systems of oppression and that environmentalism is central to the praxis of Asian American organizing bodies; together,

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<sup>1</sup> Nadia Kim, “Fighting for Breath in the Other LA,” in *Refusing Death: Immigrant Women and the Fight for Environmental Justice in LA*, ed. Stanford University Press (California: Stanford University Press, 2021), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Kim, “Fighting for Breath in the Other LA,” 8.

these two claims explicate how the efforts of grassroots Asian American organizations advance climate justice objectives and the movement as a whole.

To initiate an understanding of why (and how) climate justice is impacted by Asian American justice, it is helpful to recognize more broadly that climate justice aims are predicated on social justice aims; put differently, climate-related issues cannot be remedied without equal regard for social issues, and progress toward climate equity presupposes progress toward social equity. To elaborate on this, Thomas explains that the deterioration of the environment is “underscored by societal problems,”<sup>3</sup> that is, by the power relations that perpetuate societal inequities. She squarely repudiates the conception of climate change as a natural, inevitable phenomenon, pointing to social systems of oppression (e.g., the patriarchy, capitalism, colonization, etc.) as an indisputable—and principal—cause of environmental catastrophes. In attempting to promote a climate-just world, advocates seek to address the sources of climate inequities. It is crucial, however, to recognize that these sources are the same sources that underlie social inequities; consequently, climate justice activism must depend on considerations, mechanisms, and frameworks of social justice.

While Thomas speaks broadly of this link between climate justice and social justice, I specify an interconnected relationship between climate justice and Asian American social justice. Chiefly, this relationship arises because the same power structures imbricated in the production of climate harms also underpin harms faced by Asian American communities. In her discussion of the #StopAsianHate movement, Li particularly cites “white supremacy, white nationalism, and capitalism” as institutions that

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<sup>3</sup> Leah Thomas, “Intersectional Theory, Feminism + Intersectional Environmentalism,” in *The Intersectional Environmentalist: How to Dismantle Systems of Oppression to Protect People + Planet*, ed. Hachette Book Group (New York: Brown and Company, 2022), 32.

dually oppress vulnerable Asian American communities and the environment.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Sze, Ong, and Lee add that climate inequalities and Asian American inequalities are “deeply influenced by [the same] power relations,”<sup>5</sup> especially those that exist at the confluences of race, class, immigration status, and gender. Both of these commentaries by Li and Sze and colleagues build toward a shared call to action: the climate justice movement must integrate the praxis of Asian American organizing bodies into its own praxis. Given that the two seemingly disparate movements—climate justice and Asian American social justice—confront the same systems of oppression, climate justice will unequivocally benefit from engagement with the enduring environmental work of grassroots Asian American organizations.

The nexus between climate justice and Asian American justice, as described above, involves mutually beneficial interactions in which the two movements can (and do) positively affect one another. As such, the reverse of the aforementioned call to action can be proposed: Asian American communities and grassroots organizations should incorporate climate justice aims into their own justice efforts. This, however, is already a long-standing reality; Asian American experiences have been, presently are, and continue to be heavily informed by ideals of environmentalism, rendering Asian American justice praxis by grassroots bodies inherently climate-focused. Through a robust survey of Asian American voters, the California League of Conservation Voters found Asian Americans to be “strongly proenvironmental overall.”<sup>6</sup> Another survey by

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<sup>4</sup> Leah Thomas, “Who’s Affected: The Reality for BIPOC Communities,” in *The Intersectional Environmentalist: How to Dismantle Systems of Oppression to Protect People + Planet*, ed. Hachette Book Group (New York: Brown and Company, 2022), 99.

<sup>5</sup> Julie Sze, Paul M. Ong, and Charles Lee, “Asian American and Pacific Islander Environmentalism: Expansions, Connections, and Social Change,” *AAPI Nexus* 11, no. 1 & 2 (Fall 2013): 85.

<sup>6</sup> Paul M. Ong, Loan Le, and Paula Daniels, “Ethnic Variation in Environmental Attitudes and Opinion among Asian American Voters,” *AAPI Nexus* 11, no. 1 & 2 (Fall 2013): 91.

ecoAmerica delved deeper, discovering that Asian Americans maintain greater support than the general public for “[climate-related] policy solutions at the national ... and community level” and that Asian Americans “show an in-depth understanding of climate impacts” and, by extension, a fervent willingness to mobilize politically.<sup>7</sup> Cultural standards and patterns contribute to this emphasis on climate justice. Family values, for example, are extensively woven into Asian American kinship structures, obliging Asian Americans to protect their families from environmental harms. Moreover, the collectivist nature of Asian American communities prioritizes and promotes concern for the well-being (whether environmental, physical, or otherwise) of the public.<sup>8</sup> In sum, Asian Americans are actuated by considerations of environmentalism and, more precisely, by the cultural values that engender these considerations in the first place; this translates to a deliberately-placed significance on climate-related issues in community-led Asian American justice praxis.

As we finally arrive at an understanding of how climate justice aims are articulated by the efforts of Asian American grassroots organizations, it is necessary to synthesize the previous two arguments: Asian American injustices and climate injustices are undergirded by the same systems of oppression, and Asian American communities (and, by extension, Asian American grassroots organizations) are informed by principles of environmentalism. These claims identify two intersections of Asian American justice and climate justice that, in tandem, comprise the mechanisms and motivations by which Asian American grassroots bodies perform environmental

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<sup>7</sup> Meighen Speiser and Kirra Krygsman, “Asian Americans,” in *American Climate Values 2014: Insights by Racial and Ethnic Groups*, ed. Keya Chatterjee et al. (Washington, DC: Strategic Business Insights and ecoAmerica, 2014), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Speiser and Krygsman, “Asian Americans,” 25.

work. To elaborate, community-based Asian American organizations successfully engage in environmental activism because their efforts address structural issues that also propagate climate injustices; on top of this, the cultural emphasis on environmentalism in Asian American communities serves as a particularly salient motivating force, steering Asian Americans toward environmental consciousness and political mobilization. When taken together, these points explicate (at least partly) how and for what reason Asian American communities participate in climate activism. It is worthy to recognize that the interrelations I have presently drawn between climate justice work and Asian American grassroots organizations may feel largely speculative; nevertheless, such interrelations are reflected and embodied in numerous examples of Asian American climate justice praxis. I move to a few of these cases in turn— with locales ranging from East Coast Chinatowns to low-income Asian immigrant urban centers.

In the early 1990s, the bustling Chinatown of Sunset Park, Brooklyn found itself the site of a proposed sludge treatment plant. A multiracial organizing crusade immediately followed suit, composed mainly of Asian American and Latine American community leaders. While the activists were concerned with the environmental implications of the proposed plant, they principally framed their campaign as a struggle against environmental racism and the white supremacist structures that uphold environmental racism; only (environmentally) racist political agents, they insisted, would subject minority communities to detrimental health risks and a poorer quality of life. Operating under this social justice framework still allowed the Sunset Park organizers to promote climate justice: Their grassroots efforts ultimately caused the sludge treatment

plant proposal to be withdrawn, halting a potential source of air pollution emissions and other toxic byproducts.<sup>9</sup> A deeper dissection of the Sunset Park campaign yields two insights: (1) The opposition against white supremacist structures ultimately advanced climate justice aims, for Asian American social injustices and climate injustices are underscored by these same systems of oppression; and (2) Although the activists did not situate environmentalism at the fore of their movement, they were nevertheless actuated by a collectivist impulse to protect the community from prospective climate-induced harms. Together, these insights clarify the interactions at play between Asian American justice and climate justice— and substantiate the connections drawn earlier between climate justice work and Asian American grassroots organizations.

A second example looks at the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN), an extensive grassroots organization with various organizing sites across the Bay Area. Most principally, APEN aims to address the range of environmental injustices faced by low-income Asian American and Asian diasporic communities. Of particular importance to the praxis of APEN is the environmental injustice of gentrification: Although a traditionally social issue, APEN characterizes it as an environmental one in response to the rhetoric of “improving the environment” as used by many “affluent [non-Asian] residents to move out” Asian American residents and businesses. In 2003, APEN, along with other grassroots networks, formed the Stop Chinatown Evictions Committee (SCEC); as suggested by its name, SCEC worked to halt the forced displacement of Asian American tenants, specifically those in Oakland. Committee members were especially galvanized into action by the alarmingly disproportionate number of evictions

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<sup>9</sup> Julie Sze, “Asian American Activism for Environmental Justice,” *Peace Review* 16, no. 2 (June 2004): 153.

given to vulnerable demographics, such as the elderly and low-income immigrant residents. Furthermore, many recognized the environmental burden that gentrification places on the city through increased housing construction and renovation.<sup>10</sup> Again, two overarching insights can be extracted from this example of Asian American climate activism: (1) Asian American injustices and climate injustices are inextricably tied by the same systems of oppression; in fact, APEN expressly delineates this connection in its theoretical framework; and (2) Asian American communities are impelled to mobilize against climate inequity as a means to protect themselves and marginalized populations from burgeoning environmental harms. Crucially, the similarity between these insights and those produced from the Sunset Park case study is not coincidental; the climate activism of both grassroots bodies, though different in context, intention, and scope, derived from the same fundamental mechanisms and motivations— both of which were posited earlier.

In this paper, I propose that Asian American injustices and climate injustices stem from the same systems of oppression; moreover, I argue that environmentalism plays a prominent role in Asian American communities and grassroots organizing. These claims ultimately coalesce into an understanding of how climate justice aims are articulated by the efforts of grassroots Asian American organizations. In constructing a discourse on Asian American climate activism, it is important to note that my research and analyses are not exhaustive; within the bounds of this paper, I do not fully communicate the intricate intersections and relationships that exist between Asian American justice and climate justice. Such a task is difficult to accomplish not necessarily because I am limited in space and time but more so because Asian

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<sup>10</sup> Sze, “Asian American Activism for Environmental Justice,” 154.

American climate justice is rarely studied or even recognized in the sphere of climate justice. Put simply, comprehensive research is difficult to execute in an information-deficient environment. Scholars have recognized the hypocrisy in climate justice being branded as “multiracial and multiethnic ... [when few] would be able to cite examples of Asian immigrant environmental justice activism”<sup>11</sup>; in other words, we see an urgency to extend the scholarship of Asian American climate justice, especially by Asian American figures and community members. Yet progress is minimal, at best. Asian Americans continue to be excluded from imperative conversations, perpetuating climate harms and assaults against our communities. Now, more than ever, it is crucial that we foster even more investigations of the connections between Asian American justice and climate justice. Doing so not only offers credence to the environmental work of Asian American grassroots organizations and communities— but it also ensures a more inclusive climate justice movement that sticks true to its original tenets of diversity, sustainability, and equity. It is my sincerest hope that my work is not the last of its kind.

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<sup>11</sup> Sze, “Asian American Activism for Environmental Justice,” 155.



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