ROOTED IN THE RADICAL POLITICS of the late 1960s and early 1970s, pan-ethnic Asian American identity first emerged from within the Asian American movement. Seeking to transcend the ethnic divisions that had characterized prior decades, activists of the movement generation forged a new “Asian American” consciousness by linking the experiences of Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, and Korean Americans. In order to build such bridges, two key historical and ideological connections were stressed: (1) a shared resistance to Western imperialism, inspired by anti-colonial revolutions in Viet Nam and China; and (2) a common struggle against American racism, in many ways modeled after black and Chicano revolutionary nationalism.2

Originating in this same era, pan-ethnic community organizing was developed by Asian American activists seeking to extend movement organizing from the campus to the community by building “Serve the People” programs targeting sectors such as youth, seniors, and workers. Similar programs had been popularized by the Black Panther Party, which viewed them not as a band-aid response to crises, but an integral step towards exposing societal injustices and mobilizing mass political involvement. However, the changing climate of the late 1970s and 1980s led to a reframing of Asian American pan-ethnicity. Asian American identity came to be seen less as a political condition of structural oppression and more as a vehicle to promote the institutionalization of service and advocacy programs by linking the interests of Asian American professionals.3
As pan-ethnicity became increasingly divorced from radicalism, the construction of anti-Asian violence as a social “problem” became an important vehicle for promoting what Yen Le Espiritu calls “reactive solidarity.” 4 Through the production of “reactive solidarity,” Asian Americans of diverse ethnic, national, class, gender, sexual orientation, ideological, and geographical backgrounds are united by the common burden that racist antagonists can’t tell us apart. Indeed, last year’s random, deadly attacks by white supremacists on Korean American student Won-Joon Yoon in Indiana and Filipino American postal worker Joseph Ileto in Los Angeles remind Asian Americans across the country that any one of us could be the target of racist violence.

While such instances of blatant racism, reminiscent of the murder of Vincent Chin, deserve to be fully publicized and brought to justice, my contention is that such “random” instances must be understood alongside more patterned forms of racist violence and oppression that strike Asian communities. For instance, the New York City-based Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, a pioneer in its field of work, defines racist violence as “the repression, exclusion, and disciplining of people of color by the state in order to control labor in the interests of capital accumulation, as well as to consolidate a white, male, heteronormative citizenry.” 5 Although “reactive solidarity” has been absolutely crucial to the construction of movements for justice in the legal arena, my investigation focuses on proactive efforts to draw together working-class Asian Americans from diverse backgrounds at the grassroots level through pan-ethnic community organizing against anti-Asian violence.

Is there a material basis for such organizing efforts? What are the strategies employed by grassroots community activists, and how do these strategies compare and contrast with those used by professionals, social service providers, politicians, and college students? Is class exclusively a site of cleavage among Asian Americans, or can the concerns of working-class Asian Americans unite the grassroots with class-conscious members of the intellectual strata? 6 Can organizing in response to anti-Asian violence be used to promote solidarity by addressing the underlying social, political, and economic roots of racist violence rather than just symptomatic outbreaks?
Through a study of Asian Americans United (AAU), a pan-ethnic community-based organization in Philadelphia, this article begins to address questions of this nature. AAU’s work has sought to transplant the movement-era model of community organizing into contemporary conditions. By developing both service programs and activist campaigns, the organization has built a pan-ethnic base among inner-city Asian Americans, primarily more recent immigrants and refugees. Founded by veterans of the Asian American movement, AAU has in many ways thrived by its situation at the geographical and conceptual margins of the Asian American experience. Although its work has yet to attain its far-reaching goals of social justice, important lessons abound from an examination of both its organizational successes and the contradictions it has struggled to overcome.

The article revolves around the community work AAU did among Vietnamese and Southeast Asian refugees in the Southwest Philadelphia neighborhood during the early 1990s after the “McCreesh Playground incident.” The irony of the particular incident that provoked this work was that the murder victim was white and the killer(s) presumed Asian. Thus, the outrage that erupted in response was directed not at an individual white supremacist assailant like Benjamin Smith or Buford Furrow but at all Asians of the community as an enemy “race.” Because AAU stood up to defend Asian youths (and ultimately an entire community) who were viewed not as victims but as perpetrators of violence, they were forced to begin from a position that was extremely unpopular outside of the Asian community.

AAU’s campaign against anti-Asian violence thus extends our conception of community organizing beyond traditional methods of “seeking justice” which rest mainly on claims to equal protection under liberal, judicial institutions and remain within parameters of thought and action deemed acceptable by the state. Activists in AAU took on the herculean task of developing an alternative reading of the McCreesh Park incident that was opposed to the dominant interpretation produced by local white residents and adopted by the state. As a result, they were challenged to redefine anti-Asian violence as a product of structural oppression and everyday encounters. While not glorifying the murder,
AAU argued that this unfortunate incident must be properly viewed as a product of self-defense. They pointed to the long history of racist attacks against Asians and other people of color in Southwest Philadelphia and argued that systematic forms of exclusion precluded Asians from seeking any traditional forms of redress.

Though their work did not produce an “outright victory,” AAU successfully built not only a discourse of opposition but a counter-hegemonic structure, as well. Such work rested on its ability to define Asian American identity as one of resistance—an identity through which activists educated at elite universities could share common ground with inner-city youth. Such an identity of resistance also served to link veteran activists of the 1960s and 1970s with youth activists of the 1990s and to promote inter-ethnic ties to the struggles of other people of color.

While my study is framed by material conditions, its decided emphasis is not on the “objective” factors which delimit human agency but on the role of activists as subjective forces of social change. Ultimately, deliberation of whether or not a radical Asian American identity can once again lay at the center of a social movement transcends the study of economics and social norms, per se, and must engage issues of political consciousness and will. Although the socio-political landscape of Asian America has changed immensely since the early 1970s, assessing the relevance of the ideology of the Asian American movement, as Arif Dirlik argues, is “not an abstract question of ethnicity, it is a deeply political one.”

The body of this article consists of three sections, which may be viewed as thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. First, I analyze the McCreesh Playground incident. After placing the incident within the context of urban segregation and deindustrialization, I focus particularly on the prosecution of the Asian defendants in court to demonstrate how racist attitudes and behavior towards Asians were not limited to white residents of Southwest Philadelphia but were reflected in the dominant discourse of the state. Second, I trace the historical development of AAU, showing how the legacy of the Asian American movement can be seen in the construction of AAU as a counter-hegemonic community organization. Third, I examine AAU’s involvement in the struggles of the Asian community surrounding the
McCreesh Playground incident to study the practical applications of AAU’s politics and the production of new currents of activism by such work.

**The McCreesh Playground Incident**

In the 1980s, Southwest Philadelphia became a neighborhood of secondary resettlement for Southeast Asian refugees in Philadelphia. Known to locals as “Southwest,” the neighborhood began as a white, working-class industrial suburb around 1900. Southwest’s racially homogenous make-up was part of a pattern of racial segregation that developed coterminous with the industrialization of Philadelphia. White neighborhoods clustered around factory work, as white workers and industrialists colluded in the denial of housing and job opportunities to African Americans.8

In neighborhoods like “Southwest,” the identification of race and place became intertwined. For most of the twentieth century, African Americans were the primary target of racial antagonism, as whites sought to keep the neighborhood segregated and secure access to local jobs. However, the deindustrialization of Philadelphia that occurred over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century undercut the economic backbone of neighborhoods like Southwest. Whites with the requisite economic resources and human capital followed the flight of jobs from Southwest to the suburbs. Those left behind waged campaigns of violence and intimidation designed to preclude integration by attacking African Americans directly and intensifying peer pressure against white “traitors” who might consider selling their homes to them.9

When African Americans moved into surrounding areas, whites looking to “escape” from Southwest began selling homes to Asians. The new residents were mostly Southeast Asian refugees, who had arrived after the more connected “first wave” of 1975, and initially settled in even more economically depressed areas closer to the central city. The bulk of them were secondary migrants, who saw an opportunity to purchase low-priced homes and leave behind squalid rentals in the West Philadelphia neighborhood. Between 1980 and 1990, the Asian American population of Southwest jumped 459.2 percent (with Vietnamese accounting for over 60 percent of the growth).10 Whites economically crippled by the decline
of industry in Southwest did not direct their animosity towards capital but instead chose to scapegoat the Asian newcomers for their woes. As racist attacks developed into campaigns of organized terror, “struggling for space,” as Ellen Somekawa points out, became an issue of everyday contestation in Southwest.11

It is in the context discussed above that we must situate what I will refer to as the “McCreesh Playground Incident.” On August 4, 1991, David Reilly, an eighteen-year-old white male, was killed at Southwest’s McCreesh Playground. Just prior to his death, a group of whites in their late teens and twenties, some belonging to a neo-Nazi group called the “White Power Boys,” moved to drive a group of Asian American youth out of “their” park and threatened to harm them if they did not vacate. One of the Asian youth escaped to retrieve knives. A fight ensued, and Reilly, reportedly in an attempt to break up the fight, was caught in the crossfire.12

The response to Reilly’s death demonstrated the degree to which a history of racial exclusion against people of color in the city brought forth a one-sided reading of the situation. In the aftermath of the tragedy, sensationalistic media stories demonizing Asians spread throughout the city. Some whites in Southwest went on violent vigilante campaigns striking randomly at people of Asian descent. Furthermore, the notion that Asians became criminalized as a “race” was exemplified by the arrest of Ty Truong, a twenty-four-year-old Chinese Vietnamese resident of Southwest. Truong had absolutely no connection to the McCreesh Playground incident but was charged with Reilly’s murder and imprisoned for fifty-five days simply because one of Reilly’s friends (and the instigator of the altercation) pointed him out as “one of the mother fucking gooks.”13

The detention and character assassination of Truong was a product of the “racial profiling” endured by Asian youth throughout the area, including many who had been wrongfully arrested after being identified in a racially-categorized police “mug book.” Such encounters with law enforcement were shared by African American and Puerto Rican youth.14

After releasing Truong, authorities promoted the idea that a racial “gang” of Asians was responsible for Reilly’s death. The office of the district attorney charged Minh La, Tho Tran, Dieu Nguyen, Khoa Ho, Manh Hoang, Tuan Huynh, and Khanh Lam with first-degree murder and
prosecuted them in a highly publicized trial stained by the district attorney’s thinly-veiled race-baiting. In the first of two trials, all of the defendants except Khanh Lam were tried together. Assistant district attorney Joseph Casey’s own words make it easier to understand why it was so necessary for the prosecution to exploit the racialization of the trial. Casey admitted to the court that it was “unlikely that I would be able to prove to you who actually killed David Reilly.” Yet, he argued, “regardless of who actually plunged the knives into David Reilly’s body, all, all are guilty as accomplices and conspirators.”

Because the McCreesh Playground altercation had been a quick, frantic episode in the middle of the night, the prosecution lacked eyewitnesses who could state with certainty what had happened. For instance, on top of the wrongful arrest of Ty Truong, attempts by whites to pick the defendants out of a police line-up were a farce. Asian Americans United staff member Neeta Patel attended the line-ups and noted, “The people who were identifying them had no idea. They identified a priest!”

Prosecutor Casey’s racialized discourse sought to portray the six defendants as acting in conspiracy so that he did not have to be concerned with details like who actually stabbed Reilly. Casey pinned mug shots of the defendants on a board to resemble a gang, even though it was some of the white youth and not the Asians who had belonged to a gang. Furthermore, the prosecution collected a large assortment of kitchen knives from the houses of the defendants. Although the prosecution could never pinpoint the exact weapon that was used, Casey continually waved this array of knives in front of the jury’s watchful eyes for dramatic purposes. In fact, while he spoke of David Reilly being hacked to death, Casey even had the gall to brandish a meat cleaver repeatedly, in spite of published coroner’s reports which ruled out the possibility that Reilly’s wounds were caused by a meat cleaver.

Asian Americans who attended the trial considered Casey’s closing argument to be his most shameful episode. The prosecutor hit upon the theme of “us versus them” reminding the jury that “we, Americans” hold ourselves to different standards than the Asian defendants. Casey dismissed the testimonies of the defendant’s teachers, whose concern for their former students led them to show up in court voluntarily as character
witnesses. He remarked, “There’s a difference between reputation and character. Reputation is what people think of you. Character is what you really are. The true character of all those defendants was spread out before the world at McCreesh Playground on August third of 1991….”

Casey further implied that the defendants were outside of the “American” circle of humanity when he stated:

I want you to think about what mindset, what has to be in a person’s mind for them to take a knife, first of all, to approach another human being with that knife, and after approaching that other human being who is standing in the manner I’m indicating (with his hands behind his back), to plunge it into that person’s chest, to plunge it into the person’s chest.22

Finally, the prosecutor’s demagoguery reached a crescendo in his final remarks, when he held up a picture of David Reilly, stood behind each of the defendants and stated in a “loud” and “angry” tone, “You are guilty!”23

Casey’s pandering to hegemonic racial discourse proved successful for the prosecution. Three of the defendants were found guilty of third-degree murder and six, of criminal conspiracy. This was in spite of the fact that the court never identified who actually stabbed David Reilly. For instance, Khoa Ho was convicted of criminal conspiracy and sentenced to one to ten years in prison, despite court findings that he never picked up a knife. Minh La, who testified that he retrieved knives, was convicted of third-degree murder, aggravated assault, criminal conspiracy and possession of an instrument of crime. Of all the defendants, he received the longest sentence of twelve to thirty years. The judge denied the six defendants appeal for a new trial.24 Because the predominant citywide opinion had judged the entire Asian American community of Southwest guilty of David Reilly’s death, the jury had found the simple presence of the defendants in McCreesh Playground sufficient for conviction. The importance of the prosecution’s framing of the defendants’ suspicion and guilt in group terms was later confirmed when Khanh Lam—the only defendant to be tried and judged as an individual—was found not guilty. The assistant district attorney’s reliance on suggestions of conspiracy could not overcome his lack of hard evidence that Lam had individually committed any wrongdoing.
STRUCTURING COMMUNITY RESISTANCE: THE FORMATION OF ASIAN AMERICANS UNITED

As Asian residents of Southwest Philadelphia faced trying times both before and after the McCreesh Playground incident, the hostile conditions served as a challenge for community activists in Asian Americans United. AAU had developed as a grassroots organization with a mission to fight institutional racism and empower Asian American communities. The organization focused particularly on youth organizing to advance its goals.

Since the height of the Asian American movement in the late 1960s and 1970s, the development of community organizations has reflected bipolar trends. Some organizations, particularly those which professed to be “radical” or “left,” splintered, faltered, or were dismantled. Simultaneously, a number of community organizations, particularly those in areas with large concentrations of Asian Americans, have established themselves into large service providers with relatively stable staff and funding. Many of these organizations have proven less likely to espouse consciously oppositional politics, instead getting caught up in what Espiritu calls the “funding game”—whereby community organizations spend increasing resources, as well as alter their mission and function, in order to reproduce funding.25

Asian Americans United (AAU) is somewhat unique in that it has been able to buck both of these trends.26 Started by a handful of people who met over a kitchen table and did what they could in their spare time, AAU has grown by leaps and bounds into a 501 C-3 organization with a permanent location and full-time staff. Yet, the growth of AAU has not meant abandonment of the progressive politics established in the organization’s founding mission statement. Instead, AAU has used its increased resources to project its politics over a wider area and range of issues. Furthermore, the institutionalization of AAU has been accomplished without the organization losing its original grassroots activist approach. From its origins, AAU has filled its board positions with activists (including youth) and vowed not to pander elected officials. In fact, AAU has been instrumental in developing a new generation of activists.
In the discussion below, I trace the development of AAU’s grassroots, community-based approach to Asian American advocacy that was on display in their response to the McCreesh Playground incident. From this I will try to extract some lessons from the organization’s history and its major accomplishments. Through this analysis, I highlight the irony of AAU’s development “from the margins” which today distinguishes it from most contemporary Asian American organizations. In the 1980s, Asian Americans in Philadelphia were marginalized both relative to other racial groups in the city and to other Asian American communities like those in San Francisco and Los Angeles. At the same time, the disenfranchisement of Asian Americans and relative lack of established Asian American institutions made Philadelphia a relatively hospitable spot for the development of progressive activism reflective of the Asian American movement.

I begin with a brief description of the pre-history of AAU. Some of the founding members of AAU first became active or first became aware of Asian American community activism in Philadelphia through their connection to a pan-Asian collective called Yellow Seeds. Founded in 1971, Yellow Seeds sprouted at a time when urban centers experienced a proliferation of Third World revolutionary organizations like the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords, the I Wor Kuen, and the August 29th Movement. Inspired by Mao Zedong thought, Yellow Seeds developed “Serve the People” programs in Philadelphia’s Chinatown, such as services for the elderly, tutoring, legal aid, and recreational and cultural events. The organization proclaimed its internationalist stance by declaring that “Yellow Seeds aligns itself with the liberation struggles of people all over the world against all forms of imperialism and colonialism.”

Furthermore, Yellow Seeds’ militant politics led the group to confront both the capitalists and the traditional ethnic community leadership over the issue of redevelopment. Asian Americans United founding member and former Yellow Seeds member, Mary Yee noted:

Yellow Seeds was a major force within Chinatown pushing some of the other civic organizations such as Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation and the Chinese Benevolent Association to take more aggressive stands against urban renewal, which was really threatening to wipe out Chinatown altogether.
Yellow Seeds had established a progressive, grassroots vision and practice for pan-Asian politics in Philadelphia, and its eventual decline set the stage for the birth of AAU. Around 1976, Yellow Seeds began to break apart as members’ political orientation led them away from community-based activism and into the factories to organize workers from the inside. As a result, Philadelphia’s Asian American community became disconnected from the national Asian American movement, and thus, largely beyond the realm of its influence. This occurred as the Asian American population experienced a tremendous growth both in size and diversity. Some of the new immigrants were educated professionals falling under the preference categories of immigration law, yet due to the bipolar nature of the new immigration, thousands of poor immigrants and Southeast Asian refugees settled in Philadelphia. A plethora of social ills plagued these fledgling immigrant and refugee communities, notably eye-catching acts of racist violence, problems with public education, and poor housing conditions. Founding member Debbie Wei noted that when AAU was in its planning stages, “the major area of concern for us was the rising tide of anti-Asian violence nationally and in Philadelphia in particular.”

Unlike in Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area, Philadelphia’s Asian American community did not develop a large circle of social service agencies, elected officials, and university institutions. Consequently, by the 1980s, Asian American activists began to feel a void, a sense that there was no recourse for the problems of working-class Asian American communities. Because the largest community growth and the biggest problems with adjustment occurred in the refugee communities, the founding members of AAU felt that working with these communities was the proper place to start. At the time, there was only a small assemblage of United Way-sponsored service agencies set up to aid Southeast Asian refugees with the resettlement process.

Mary Yee commented that she and other activists acknowledged the role the service agencies had to play but recognized their insufficient response to the situation.

I think that we thought that they were certainly organizations that were valuable to interact with and to cooperate with, but they certainly weren’t
going to take the aggressive stance that we were in the face of racial incidents that happen in the city or in the face of combating institutional racism in the schools or in city government or in the criminal justice system. I don’t think that we felt that they didn’t have their place. We were there to fill a vacuum and to give another voice to the Asian community.32

Asian Americans United was founded in the summer of 1985. Initially, AAU lacked incorporation as a non-profit organization. It had no permanent location or paid staff although the members planned to have these in the future. At its genesis, AAU had ten to twelve members, seven to eight of whom attended meetings on a consistent basis. The members aged from their mid-twenties to mid-thirties. Broken down by occupation, the group included a public school teacher, a librarian, an attorney, two graduate students, a labor organizer, a college professor, and a paralegal. The board was comprised mainly of educated Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans, who recognized a need to get involved in Philadelphia’s Southeast Asian communities.33

In order to fill the “vacuum” of Asian American community activity, the founding members of AAU felt that there needed to be a return to the progressive politics of the Asian American movement. Even a majority had not been part of the Yellow Seeds collective, the members shared both the political vision and concrete experience of the radical movement days. Yee noted:

It was an organization where those who felt solidarity with other Third World communities and progressive white folks could come together. We also had a common understanding of how institutional racism worked, and to a certain degree, we were also somewhat sophisticated in knowing how to deal with the system because practically all of us had been active either on campus, in the anti-war movement or in the labor movement, and some of us in all three of them.34

Because none of the founders were professional service providers, the concept of “Serve the People” carried decisively political tones within AAU. The activists in AAU did not view the group as the bearer of social revolution, but they saw themselves as organizers. They were not content simply to ameliorate the suffering of Asian Americans. They were people seeking to transform the relations of power in Philadelphia, the conditions
of the city’s Asian American communities, and the consciousness of Asian Americans in the city.

Working on the margins meant that there were less physical resources to develop community programs but that there was more political space to foster oppositional culture. First of all, the relatively small Asian American population in Philadelphia meant that it was a practical necessity for the organization to be pan-Asian. This stands in contrast to the Los Angeles area, for instance, where over the past two decades numerous community organizations have emerged that are fragmented not only along ethnic lines but even further in terms of geography and function. In identifying a pan-Asian basis for unity, AAU developed a political definition of Asian American identity that drew strong parallels with the racial experiences of other communities of color. Furthermore, the fact that virtually no one in power was addressing the issues of Asian Americans gave a sense of urgency to the work of AAU. Because of the marginalization of Asian American communities in Philadelphia and the lack of resources the organization had at its inception, the founding members decided that AAU’s work needed to begin by digging in at the grassroots level.

Due to the lack of an established Asian American community infrastructure in Philadelphia, AAU was able to emerge as the voice of the Asian American community and to put a progressive face on Asian American politics. Two significant victories increased the organization’s prominence in its early years. First, AAU put its principles into action by working with low-income, Southeast Asian tenants to organize a successful rent strike at the Admiral Court apartment complex in West Philadelphia. Second, AAU was party to a victorious lawsuit against the Philadelphia Public School District for bilingual education. Neeta Patel, who signed on as AAU’s first staff member in 1990, commented that AAU caught her eye because it was the first Asian American community group that was “out there” in the public spotlight.

Another breakthrough for the organization came when it launched its youth leadership program in the summer of 1987. The thinking behind this program (which is still active) represents AAU’s political approach to community work and its attempt to work with people from the community in a collective and empowering way. The board of AAU felt a
necessity to build relationships with working-class Southeast Asian communities and decided that the best possible way to do this was to reach out to youth. Funded by modest grants from small foundations, the summer youth program featured high school-aged youth hired to tutor elementary school-aged children. However, the tutors did not simply teach basic school subjects. Instead, AAU adult members engaged the tutors in consciousness-raising sessions as a requisite part of their training. The whole endeavor, therefore, became an attempt to develop the tutors’ understanding of institutional racism by exposing them to politically progressive concepts of pan-Asian identity and politics. The tutors would in turn bring this heightened consciousness to their sessions with the young kids. One can sense the counter-hegemonic environment AAU was trying to construct in the youth program by reading the ground rules on the wall of the AAU office stating that “racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and other forms of oppression will not be tolerated.” Being the “only game in town,” AAU’s work attracted Southeast Asian youth troubled by questions of racial identity and not finding any solutions from school or society.

Hue Tran was one of the first high school students to work on the youth leadership program staff. She related the following experience:

In high school I wrote in my journal for my English teacher, “It’s really strange. I don’t feel like I belong here.” And, she couldn’t understand what I was talking about. And then I met Debbie and AAU and they put into words what I felt. So that’s what it was like for me at that point. Everything just became really clear, and I just felt a lot stronger. I felt like I had a lot to invest in an organization and in people like Debbie. 37

AAU experienced tremendous growth in the years immediately after its 1985 founding. By the early 1990s, the organization had a staff and a highly visible storefront office, located in Philadelphia’s Chinatown and near the major Center City mall. AAU’s membership grew from 10 mostly Chinese and Japanese Americans original members to over 400 members of diverse ethnicities, predominantly Chinese and Southeast Asian, by 1996. Moreover, while the initial members were primarily American-born, middle class and educated, AAU’s current membership is largely immigrant or refugee and working class. A significant portion of the
membership is comprised of youth, a segment of the membership which has grown with the expansion of the youth leadership program from summer-only to year-round. Beyond its membership, AAU reaches 1,700 people through its mailing list. In sum, AAU’s continued commitment to grassroots, community-based activist work, its focus on building youth leadership, its emphasis on organizing working-class, Southeast Asian communities, and its role as the most prominent Asian American voice in Philadelphia all served to place AAU in position to respond to the McCreesh Playground incident.

LESSONS IN STRUGGLE: THE ACTIVIST RESPONSE

The racial discourse pervading the McCreesh Playground trial was decisively stacked against the six Asian American defendants tried together and convicted of criminal conspiracy (all six) and third-degree murder (three). Hundreds of hours of work by AAU staff and volunteers were insufficient to reverse the decisions of an entrenched system of state institutions, yet, at the risk of a cliché, I want to point out that much can be gained in defeat. What is important in the long run for progressive activists is not just the grouping of people into organizations, but the construction of an oppositional culture based on a transformative vision that identifies society’s structural flaws and seeks wide-sweeping changes to address them.

The practice of Asian Americans United in building community resistance to the racial injustices of the McCreesh Playground incident demonstrated the organization’s ability to serve as a subjective agent in the construction of oppositional culture. Building upon the spontaneous development of a pan-ethnic identity among Asian youth in Philadelphia, AAU cogently argued that the problems of racist violence and discrimination facing Vietnamese, Cambodians, ethnic Chinese, and other Asians in Southwest were not incidents of ethnic conflict, but the product of a peculiarly racial condition tied to structural oppression. Out of the marginalized conditions of Asian American community existence in Philadelphia, AAU fostered a pan-Asian identity of resistance, demonstrating the liberatory potential of anti-racist practice. While structural conditions
always define the environment in which organizers operate, I want to stress that hegemonic and oppositional cultures are not part of a “superstructure” that arises in linear fashion from a structural “base.” They emerge dialectically through social practice.

While the ability to get all of the defendants acquitted was beyond the powers of the community activists at Asian Americans United, it is worth examining their noteworthy accomplishments. With regards to the trial itself, AAU pointed out specific incidents of inconsistency and bias within the judicial process and intervened where it could. In addition, it built a bond of trust with the defendants, their families, and communities. This relationship of trust not only served to make AAU’s advocacy work on behalf of the defendants more effective, it also gave AAU the legitimacy to move forward and press their concerns over the trial in public.

On a more general level, by raising awareness of anti-Asian violence and the problems of Asian American communities, AAU accomplished three things. First, it validated the concerns of Asian Americans in Southwest Philadelphia and others whose everyday lives were structured by a climate of racism and hostility. This is a necessary step in the formation of organized community resistance. Second, while AAU could not immediately prevent injustices from occurring against Asian Americans, it set a precedent by stating that “Asian lives are not cheap.” AAU’s work demonstrated that Asian Americans in Philadelphia would organize, fight, and resist when threatened or attacked and that the Asian community’s passivity could not be taken for granted. Third, as more and more Asian Americans learned about the McCreesh Playground incident, AAU became a base for activists and a vehicle for grassroots organizing. This led to new currents of activism (particularly among college students) and gave rise, in general, to a greater sense of organization among Asian Americans across class-lines in Philadelphia. Throughout all of these processes, the activists in AAU were themselves transformed by their work and their heightened consciousness.

Initially, AAU members only knew of the McCreesh Playground incident through the sensational stories that bombarded the electronic and print media. Even then, AAU had some insight into Southwest due to the work it had done two years earlier in response to a boycott of a Korean American-owned store. As Neeta Patel pointed out, “Things became clear only through time. We just knew that there was one man arrested that
night, and just through the grapevine, we knew that this person had nothing to do with it.” The initial response of AAU then was to combat what they perceived as the media’s inflammation of racial tensions and its implications for Asian American residents in Southwest.

Patel commented:

You have to understand that while all of this was going on, this case was also being tried in the media in a very public way. A lot of assumptions were being made that weren’t necessarily true but that were just whipping up hysteria and anger and blame—so that not only those who were eventually tried were worried, but the whole community was under lockdown for two to three months.

As AAU members received more information, they became more concerned with the immediate safety of Southwest residents. Debbie Wei, who had been out of town when the controversy first broke, received a phone call from a former student upon her return. Executive director of AAU at the time, John Fong recalled:

That woman [Debbie Wei’s former student] lives in Southwest Philly. Basically the message was she’s scared to death right now because of the tension in Southwest. So that’s when we realized OK we have to refocus our attention. School was about to start then so we had to start thinking about some safe routes for the kids going to school, also just talking about protection in general for Asians in that neighborhood.

After Ty Truong was released and the seven defendants were arrested, Wei immediately recognized that five were former students of hers. She knew of the racial hostilities in Southwest and also knew that the defendants were “good kids.” For instance, Wei wrote of Dieu Nguyen:

He was well respected and well liked by his classmates. He worked hard at school—so hard that he pulled all As and B’s and was a White Williams scholarship winner.... He had near perfect attendance—only missing one day on the Vietnamese New Year.

Yet, none of the defendants’ life stories came out in the media, which only lionized Reilly as a “scholarship student” and “basketball star” while continuing to allude to the defendants as gang members.

The combination of Wei’s insights and personal contact with the defendants convinced activists at AAU of the injustices that were involved.
A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Engineering and Wharton School of Business, Lawrence Lee worked on staff for AAU during the McCreesh Playground campaign. He remembered a dinner meeting arranged by the activists to discuss the case and attended by the only defendant able to post bail. Lee stated, “What I remember really distinctly was Khoa, one of the defendants, was there. And the way he said it, it just sounded obvious that the white guys started it. That really made a big impression on me.” But the more the activists became convinced of the defendants’ innocence, the more frustrated they became with the improprieties of the authorities.

In early 1992 as the trial approached, they concluded that they would have to take immediate action. A handful of activists formed the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence within AAU to address the McCreesh Playground case. They became inspired by the committee’s rapid growth, as Thoai Nguyen recounted:

Instead of feeling hopeless, we decided to empower ourselves. First we had a small group of like five or six people. And we decided maybe we could outreach and recruit. Sometimes it was great. A couple of nights before a meeting I would just call everyone I knew from AAU and say, “This is what we’re going to meet about on Friday. It’s really important.” And that helped a lot of people understand why there’s a meeting and what they could do to help. A lot of people said, “If you hadn’t called I wouldn’t have come.”

The newly formed Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence set out to balance the public’s understanding of the McCreesh Playground incident by raising awareness of the racist environment in Southwest. Members of the committee wrote op-ed pieces for the city’s newspapers, produced topical shows on a local public television station, and initiated their own multi-lingual newspaper, *Asian American Justice Watch*, in order to speak directly to the community. Furthermore, they hammered away at the contradictory treatment Asian Americans received from the district attorney’s office and drew parallels between the injustices experienced by Asian Americans and other communities of color with the legal system. For instance, the committee developed solidarity work between AAU and a Puerto Rican organization which was fighting a case similar to the
McCreesh Playground case. After district attorney Lynne Abraham refused to meet with them, the activists sent her an “open letter” which pointed out the inconsistencies between her office’s handling of the McCreesh case and the murder of Heng Lim two years prior, wherein AAU had fought unsuccessfully to bring white assailants to justice for a fatal act of hate. They followed up the open letter with a public rally at city hall right before the trial was to begin. Slowly, more reports on the white supremacist climate in Southwest began to appear in the mainstream media.48

The committee’s furious level of activity helped to consolidate a core of mass activists at AAU and provided an avenue for many to get involved in community activism for the first time. May Yee [no relation to Mary Yee] was a Bryn Mawr College student at the time and later became a staff member at AAU. Her work with AAU strengthened her commitment to community while providing her with a more secure sense of self. She related:

> When I was in New York growing up, we didn’t live in Chinatown, so I didn’t feel like that was my community. I never had a sense of community. When I started working at AAU and particularly in the summer, we were organizing in Chinatown. And because I speak Cantonese and that’s their main dialect, I finally felt like I found a community I could function in.49

By building a counter-hegemonic structure and stressing the political dimensions of Asian American identity, AAU created a mechanism to organize students like Yee, who might otherwise view attendance at an elite college as a step away from community involvement. Like many Asian American college students, Yee was wrestling with issues of self-identity, and race became the language through which broader feelings of alienation were understood and expressed. However, by engaging college students in community work, AAU’s work ensured that such “identity-based” politics would not be confined to existential angst, academic exercises, and “multiculturalism” programs but would be connected to practical activity designed to confront structures of inequality.

Once engaged by AAU’s work, Yee recognized a commonality between the injustices endured by the McCreesh defendants and the Asian American community in Southwest and her own experiences growing up
in the Lower Eastside in New York City. She noted, “Asians were a minority, and it was like that in elementary school, too. Every time I went to the bathroom, if there were two girls there already, they probably picked on me, pushed me around a little bit, threw water on me.” She approached working in the committee cautiously as she attended a meeting and “picked what seemed to be the easiest” task—writing a letter to the defendants in prison. Soon thereafter, she found herself coordinating a group of ten women from Bryn Mawr for a tutoring program serving seventeen Asian Americans in Holmsburg prison. The program was designed to help the defendants and other prisoners study for their GED because they could not attend public school and would soon be too old to attend.

As the court proceedings began, AAU was able to influence the judicial process in small ways that ameliorated the bias against immigrant and refugee communities. For example, they pointed out the shoddy handling of translation by the court, in one instance, recognizing that a Laotian woman who spoke broken Vietnamese was asked to handle major translating duties. Furthermore, AAU intervened on behalf of the defendants after learning of several occasions of miscommunication with their lawyers or failure to hear from them at all. The court-appointed defense attorneys failed to recognize that their clients’ English-deficiency was a large source of the miscommunication. AAU members pointed this out to the lawyer and assisted in finding translators. AAU members attended the trial regularly and attempted to stand by the families of the defendants literally and figuratively. They kept family members with limited-English skills abreast of the courtroom developments and served as mediators of information between the families and the defense attorneys.

AAU detected other abuses that proved beyond the reach of their efforts. For instance, the district attorney’s office and the police exercised coercive tactics to force the defendants’ girlfriends to cooperate with the prosecution. Neeta Patel noted:

They had to be on call all the time. And one was threatened. . . . Once the DA tried to find her and he couldn’t get in touch with her, so then a police officer came and said that she was going to be arrested. He needed to be able to have contact with her whenever he wanted to, so if she
wasn’t going to be able to do that, then she was going to be held in contempt of court and to be arrested. Out of the three women, they did this with two that I know of.  

Despite the unfavorable verdict in the McCreesh trial, community activists at AAU saw the fight against anti-Asian violence as something that transcended any one particular case. They broadened the scope of their struggle by organizing the East Coast Coalition Against Anti-Asian Violence Conference in November 1992. Over 250 participants attended the event, building ties among activists across the eastern United States. On a personal level, involvement in organizing the community response to the McCreesh Playground incident transformed the lives of many of the activists, who witnessed first-hand white supremacist racist practice, the structures of institutional racism, and the Asian American youth defendants whose lives were forever altered. Lawrence Lee summed up this sentiment best when he stated, “Over the course of the past year, it’s really changed me a lot in terms of what I feel my priorities are in this point in my life.”

**Conclusion**

Because AAU’s successful organizational development set the stage for its important work surrounding the McCreesh Playground incident, we should assess the degree to which AAU may be seen as a model Asian American community organization.

First, AAU was able to maintain a core of experienced activists from the Asian American movement who possessed the vision and commitment to build the organization and the ability to work collectively to make it happen. Asian American communities in other cities have experienced a much greater rupture between the Asian American movement and the present. There are few organizations which can trace their lineage back to the late 1960s and early 1970s, while also maintaining a stable core of organizers holding to a common ideological orientation.

Second, AAU has had to bridge the generation gap between the veteran activists of the earlier movement and student and community activists of today who have been raised within a very different political culture. This
means the sixties and seventies generation has had to find ways to relate to students who are products of the eighties and nineties, and that American-born Chinese and Japanese Americans have had to work to gain the trust of Southeast Asian community residents. Though AAU has been relatively successful at bridging these gaps, there have been many bumps in the road, such as high turnover rates of staff.55

Third, the “big fish in a small pond” status of AAU is obviously not attainable in cities like Los Angeles, which seems today to have a specialized pan-Asian or ethnic-specific organization for every conceivable grouping of people. In these places, activists who wish to build oppositional grassroots organizations cannot rely solely on “community need” to rationalize their existence but must define their mission in explicitly political terms and win over segments of the community to progressive politics. This is a difficult but achievable task.56

While it must be conceded that the conditions that gave rise to AAU do not exist in every community, political activism is ultimately about expanding the bounds of what’s possible. Thus, to provide the proper appreciation for the work of organizations like Asian Americans United, I will close by sharing an idea recently conveyed to me by Grace Lee Boggs, possessor of sixty years of community activist experience. Boggs argues that activists working at the grassroots level are best served by a conception of society guided by quantum rather than Newtonian physics. From a Newtonian perspective, work that fails to make headlines or shape major policy decisions is of minimal importance because change is never consequential until it reaches a “critical mass.” In contrast, the quantum view stresses the interconnected nature of systems. Hence, the key is to develop “critical connections,” each of which contains the potential to reverberate through the entire matrix of relations.57

Through the efforts of organizations like Asian Americans United to develop such “critical connections,” the seeds of hope for a future without tragedies like the McCreesh Playground incident are being planted.

Notes
1. I would like to acknowledge Kyeyoung Park, Emily Lawsin, and the guest editors of this issue for their insightful comments, and the UCLA Institute of American Cultures for a research grant. I would especially like to thank
the members and staff of Asian Americans United, particularly Debbie Wei and Ellen Somekawa, for their cooperation and assistance. For more information on Asian Americans United, write to 913 Arch Street, Philadelphia, PA 19107, or go to http://www.aaunited.org/.


3. Omatsu, “Four Prisons,” 38-42; Espiritu, Asian American, 53-111. While as Espiritu points out Asian American social service providers generally depart from the “confrontational” politics of the Asian American movement, radical activists have yet to reach a consensus position on the role of service providing within struggle. The question of whether or not to provide social services and the related question of whether or not to accept funding from the state have formed an ongoing dilemma for activists since the federal government initiated War on Poverty programs in the mid-1960s. For instance, within the Black Panther Party, Huey Newton argued that service programs were consistent with the revolutionary theory of “mass line” organizing, while Eldridge Cleaver, leader of a rival faction, rejected them. While the Black Panthers as a rule denounced governmental funding, many other activists within the African American community used these resources to build community programs. A discussion of the Black Panther programs, largely sympathetic to the Newton position, can be found in JoNina M. Abron, “‘Serving the People’: The Survival Programs of the Black Panther Party,” in The Black Panther Party Reconsidered, edited by Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998). Parallel debates of this nature emerged within the Asian American movement. However, other than Wei’s Asian American Movement, which in the main proceeds from the a priori assumption that
institutionalization of programs within the system is the end goal of activism, there are few scholarly treatments of this crucial subject.


5. See the organization’s mission statement at http://home.dti.net/caaav/mission.html.

6. I use the term “intellectual strata” here to mean those of us connected to the academy (as students, faculty, staff, etc.) but also in a broader sense all “professional” intellectuals, whose work is rooted primarily in mental labor and requires advanced education, technical skill, and/or credentials. I believe that this designation best characterizes those who have been most active in Asian American community organizing (e.g., activists originating from campuses, social workers, non-profit agency staff). However, I also use the term “intellectual strata” to recognize the fact that progressive Asian American organizations like Asian Americans United view as central to their mission the goal of linking their work as “professional” intellectuals to the ideas and actions of “organic” intellectuals produced by working-class communities. This concept is developed by Antonio Gramsci, Selections From the Prison Notebooks (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 5-23.


10. U. S. Census, 1980, 1990. Philadelphia’s Asian Pacific Islander population grew 145.0 percent between 1980 and 1990. Such growth reflected the emergence of post-1965 immigrants and refugees, who far outnumbered the American-born, such as Japanese Americans whose presence was largely the result of World War II-era nisei resettlement. While the Chinese American community predates 1965, it has been dramatically reshaped in recent
decades. According to 1990 Census counts, there were 43,522 Asians and Pacific Islanders in Philadelphia, or 2.7 percent of the population, and 82,035 when the four counties surrounding Philadelphia are included. Vietnamese comprise 13.1 percent of the Asian Pacific Islander population in Philadelphia. Vietnamese are the fourth largest Asian group behind Chinese (11,691), Koreans (6,969), and Asian Indians (6,293).


12. For a more detailed discussion of these events, see Kurashige, “Locating Oppression and Resistance.”


18. I witnessed this at the trial of Khanh Lam (February 11, 1993).

19. Testimony of the coroner at the trial of Khanh Lam.

20. Neeta Patel also observed how the racialized atmosphere of the trial extended to outside the court room. As a large crowd gathered for the trial, Asian Americans trying to attend felt that special privileges were granted to white observers. Moreover, Patel noticed specific instances where prosecution attendees exhibited hostile behavior toward Asian Americans. “The sister would walk past the people waiting in line and say, ‘Fuck you chink.’ Once she was smoking a cigarette and she flicked ashes at the sister of one of the defendants. There was constant staring, like this battle of the wills.”


22. Ibid., 2195.

23. Ibid., 2218-2219. This brought repeated defense motions for a mistrial, all of which were denied.


25. Espiritu, Asian American, 82-94.

26. In his superb analysis of the changing nature of Asian American politics, Glenn Omatsu also cites Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates in Los Angeles, Asian Immigrant Women’s Advocates in Oakland, and Chinese Progressive Association in Boston as examples of dynamic community organizations who stand out due to their commitment to progressive activism.
and the working-class communities in which they are based. See Omatsu, “Four Prisons,” 54-59.
29. Ibid.
32. Interview with Mary Yee.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. As Mary Yee noted: “AAU saw as one its goals educating young people to understand that they were Asian American as well as being Vietnamese American, Japanese American, [etc.]. And we tried to do that mainly by having people start to understand institutional racism because as far as most people are concerned they can’t tell the difference between most of us anyway. The other reason was because if you look at all of us as Asian American we do have a history in this country. Basically our histories all revolve around the same things: racism, economics and international politics.”
36. Interviews with Mary Yee and Neeta Patel.
37. Hue Tran, personal interview, September 15, 1992.
39. Asian Americans United was not the only Asian American organization involved in Southwest Philadelphia and the McCreesh Park incident. The Asian American Youth Association and its president, Hoang Tran, played an important role in mediating between whites and Southeast Asians in Southwest. Because the organization was based in Southwest, it was forced to adopt a conciliatory tone towards the racial conflict and thus did not expose the racial contradictions in Southwest in the same manner as AAU. As such, Tran’s role was characterized by a mainstream newspaper as “building bridges.” Sandy Bauers, “Putting Himself on the Line,” Philadelphia Inquirer, September 8, 1992.
40. Of course, concrete victories and reforms can impact the material conditions of a community in the short run and are necessary to keep those involved in political activism from lapsing into total despair and defeatism. However, immediate gains can also be temporary. The classic statement of the relationship between and reform and revolution comes from The Communist Manifesto, where Marx and Engels point out, “Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever-expanding union of the workers.” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in The Marx-

41. Interview with Neeta Patel.
42. Ibid.
43. John Fong, personal interview, September 14, 1992.
44. Debbie Wei, “A Teacher’s Account,” Asian American Justice Watch 1:2 (July 1992): 1, 3. The notion of the McCreesh Park incident defendants being characterized as “good kids” in part plays into the “model minority” stereotype of Asians. Yet, we can see from the trial that the district attorney’s office found no utility for such notions as it sought to portray inner-city Asian youth as criminal elements. This point was further stressed by Debbie Wei through the course of my interview with her, as she emphasized how structural inequality and disenfranchisement sought to condemn all inner-city Asian youth to failure. The idea that the state would prosecute the “good kids” not only convinced her that the criminal justice system had committed a serious error of judgment but demonstrated, moreover, the pervasive nature of structural oppression endured by inner-city Asian youth.
46. This committee formed by AAU should not be confused with the New York City-based activist organization which shares the same name.
47. Thoai Nguyen, personal interview, September 14, 1992.
50. Ibid.
51. Interview with John Fong.
52. Interview with Thoai Nguyen.
53. Interview with Neeta Patel.
54. Interview with Lawrence Lee. Lee moved to a job in community relations after serving on AAU’s staff for a year.
55. This has occurred for a number of reasons including geographical relocations, philosophical differences, career changes, staff going back to school, and personal reasons. The general problem is that those most attracted to the demands and wage levels of community organizer jobs tend to be the most mobile sectors of the population.
56. On the East Coast, such work is exemplified by organizations like the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence and the Chinese Staff and Workers Association, both in New York City, and the Chinese Progressive Association in Boston. Not only are the politics of New York’s Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence and AAU compatible, the former has implemented a youth program modeled on that of AAU. General information about the
organization can be obtained by subscribing the organization’s newsletter from CAAAV, 191 East 3rd Street, New York, NY 10009 or http://home.dti.net/caaav/. The work of Chinese Staff and Workers Association will be highlighted in Miriam Ching Louie’s forthcoming book on immigrant workers’ centers. Glenn Omatsu discusses the Chinese Progressive Association in Omatsu, “The Four Prisons,” 52-59.