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Abolish r(ICE): (Dis)ability, Immigration, and Asian American Resistance

Vivian S. Tran

Abstract

In 2021, Minneapolis-based Khmer artist, Kat Eng designed the “Abolish r(ICE)” t-shirt as part of a fundraiser for Southeast Asians and their families experiencing deportation. Inspired by the iconic Three Ladies Brand jasmine rice bag, Eng re-imagined the three ladies as freedom fighters in response to heightened immigration policing and detention of Southeast Asian communities. In this paper, I unpack and contextualize the Abolish r(ICE) t-shirt campaign within immigration debates, the contemporary abolitionist movement, and Asian American resistance. The Abolish r(ICE) shirts also function as a form of political education and an invitation specifically to Asian American youth to learn more about Southeast Asian issues and the larger movements towards abolition. Through a reading of the Abolish r(ICE) campaign I show how Kat Eng along with their collaborator Stephanie Shih draw upon food imagery and branding as part of their larger work to link Asian American cultural formations and urgent political issues. In doing so, the artists unapologetically center Southeast Asian American aesthetics, imagery, and voices as part of amplifying the Asian American community organizing against deportation. The design and imagery of the logo centers Southeast Asian and Asian American experiences and histories within the larger contemporary movement towards abolition and continued debates around immigration and detention policies within the United States.

Applying a disability justice framework, I unpack how we might understand (dis)ability not just as an object of study but as an analytic. Drawing upon feminist-of-color disability studies, I argue for a disability justice approach to unpack immigration, deportation, and imperialism as discourses of state violence. What does disability justice reveal to us about “the refugee”, immigration and the carceral system? How are young contemporary Asian American artists using iconic household goods and foods as a critique of the U.S. Empire? Why does the model minority myth overlook Southeast Asian refugees? How do we understand state violence against Southeast Asians through immigration and detention as an issue of disability justice? In this paper, I explore these questions and make connections around Asian American abolitionists organizing across both national and local scales connecting the Twin Cities. Overall, I argue that by using a feminist-of-color disability studies analysis of the Abolish r(ICE) campaign we can further deepen our understanding of power and resistance that moves us beyond a liberal project of inclusion and representational politics.

Keywords: Asian American, disability, refugee, immigration, abolition, model minority myth, food studies, Southeast Asian studies, resistance

Introduction

In 2021, two Asian American artists, Kat Eng and Stephanie Shih, collaborated on an abolition campaign, entitled, Abolish r(ICE) to raise mutual aid funds to support Southeast Asian deportees and their families. When most people think of abolition, they often think about the larger movement to abolish prisons and policing. This is especially salient in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the subsequent uprising against police violence, and in particular, racialized police violence in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Similarly, when people think about borders and border crossings they are often thinking about the U.S.-Mexico border and the labor crises that continues to exacerbate violence and precarity in the borderlands. In their artist collaboration and fundraiser campaign in 2021, Eng and Shih, drew the attention of thousands to a lesser known but major intersectional issue around the carceral system and immigration in the United States which centers Southeast Asians, the largest refugee community resettled in the United States.

In 2017, around 200 Southeast Asians were deported because of old criminal records originating prior to resettlement, according to the Southeast Asian American Resource Action Center (SEARAC), a national civil rights organization.¹ Since the Trump administration, these deportation orders have only increased. As of 2023, 18,000 Southeast Asians have received final orders for deportation.² Nearly 80% of the deportee orders originate due to old criminal records prior to resettlement. This increase is largely due to Trump Administration policies on immigrants with criminal convictions. The criminal records for these Southeast Asian refugees are from various wars the United States waged across the region beginning in the 1960s. Southeast Asians became the largest refugee community resettled in the United States when nearly 1.2 million people from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam during and in the wake of many different conflicts, wars, and genocide across Southeast Asia in the late 1970s to early 1980s. Much of the precarity that Southeast Asians are facing regarding their political

¹ Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), "The Devastating Impact of Deportation on Southeast Asian Americans."

² Syracuse University, "Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC)."

status is from wartime efforts and conditions in their home countries. Despite the wartime context and support for U.S. efforts in the region, over 2,000 Southeast Asian American community members have been deported back to their home countries, many are unable to speak the language or have memory of the land.

The 2021 Abolish r(ICE) campaign, I argue performed two important functions: it raised awareness and visibility about the history of Southeast Asian political status and the continual legacies of U.S. warmongering in the region and it raised monies to assist deportees who needed extra financial support. Through their fundraiser, Asian American artists, Eng and Shih, have raised mutual funds for 31 deportees and supported countless ICE detainees. In contrast to large national organizations such as SEARAC, mutual aid fundraisers rely on social media networks and visibility to move funds and to engage primarily young people in political education. As part of their work around mutual aid, Eng and Shih not only are transparent about how funds are raised they are transparent on how the funds are spent. Overall, the Abolish r(ICE) campaign raised \$85,586 in 2021. Nearly 70% of the funds, around \$58,808 went directly to the 31 deportees, the Solidarity Fund, the Asian Prisoner Support Committee, and the Southeast Asian Fund administered by the Black Immigrant Collective. The remaining funds were spent on overhead costs like supplies, printing, and shipping. Through screenshots of direct communications with deportees and their families, we can trace the effectiveness of this campaign not only through the amount of funds raised but also through how the funds were spent and whether they went directly to individuals most impacted.

In this paper, I analyze the 2021 Abolish r(ICE) campaign and provide important historical and political context to help unpack its significance and form. How are young contemporary Asian American artists using iconic household goods and foods as a critique of the American Empire? Why does the model minority myth overlook Southeast Asian refugees? How do we understand state violence against Southeast Asians through immigration and detention as an issue of disability justice? In the section, *Pantry Politics*, I perform a close analysis and reading of the Abolish r(ICE) campaign to talk about its significance within Asian American art and forms of resistance. Kat Eng

and Stephanie Shih draw upon food imagery and branding as part of their larger work to link Asian American cultural formations and urgent political issues. In doing so, the artists unapologetically center Southeast Asian American aesthetics, imagery, and voices as part of amplifying the Asian American community organizing against deportation. The design and imagery of the logo intentionally centers Southeast Asian and Asian American experiences and histories within the larger contemporary movement towards abolition and continued debates around immigration and detention policies within the United States. In the section, *r(ICE) r(ICE) baby*, I provide both a historical context of the wars in Southeast Asia, the emergence of ICE as the immigration agency in the United States, and current immigration legislation. The Abolish r(ICE) campaign significantly functioned as a form of political education and an invitation specifically to Asian Americans and abolitionist organizers to learn more about Southeast Asian issues and histories. In the section, *Disability Justice is Abolition*, I argue that a feminist-of-color disability studies analysis of the Abolish r(ICE) campaign allows for a deeper analysis of immigration and state violence that move us beyond representational politics and liberal inclusion towards abolitionist organizing and futures. In the conclusion of the paper, I expand on these futures through an exploration of Eng's 2023 Abolish r(ICE) campaign to raise funds and awareness on the U.S. sponsored genocide in Gaza and the continual occupation and war against Palestine.

Pantry Politics: Asian American Food, Art, and Resistance

I first encountered the Abolish r(ICE) campaign, in June 2021, when a friend sent me a link to the Instagram mutual aid fundraiser. The post featured a t-shirt of a rice bag with the Three Jasmine Ladies Brand stating "ABOLISH ICE" on Stephanie Shih's Instagram.³ Shih is a well-known Taiwanese-American artist who creates ceramic sculptures of food and household objects of the Asian American diaspora. My friend and I had been fans of both Shih and Eng who feature Asian American food and radical politics centrally in their work. My friend knew this campaign was in my wheelhouse of

³ Stephanie H. Shih, "Instagram @stephaniehshih • 📞 UPDATE: SOLD OUT."

interests and instantly I was drawn to the design because of the familiar packaging. I immediately hit the link to order. The campaign fundraiser was so popular that it closed within days. Determined not to miss another chance to get the shirt, I followed Kat Eng, the artist behind the design. Additional release of the t-shirt happened because of its popularity and demand. It was so popular online it proved impossible to obtain a shirt until the end of the year when I attended a local pop-up hosted by Eagle Screen Printing in Minneapolis. It was only by chance that I was able to finally obtain a t-shirt. However, through my experiences over the last couple of years navigating mutual aid spaces, the Abolish r(ICE) campaign stood out to me as an anomaly amidst abolitionist campaigns. I argue that this is primarily due to the intentionality of the artists Shih and Eng made in capitalizing on nostalgic representations of food and food imagery in Asian American culture. In this section, I offer a close reading of the Abolish r(ICE) campaign to unpack the aesthetics and techniques of protest art, and in this particular instance, a form of Asian American resistance. Culture jamming is widely understood as a form of popular resistance, it is defined by Naomi Klein as “the practice of parodying advertisements and hijacking billboards in order to drastically alter their messages.”⁴ I am using the term culture jamming in this context to describe how Asian American organizers are altering familiar and common pantry items to raise awareness on the issues of immigration and deportation.

For the Asian American diaspora, creating art using food and common household objects has been a repeating theme for many artists. These foods and objects are a way for artists to tie in and connect with their experiences. The familiarity of brands, colors, and patterns in the art resonate and connect with Asian Americans. The memory and intimacy at the table and in the kitchen, is often the first space for Asian Americans to connect with their family and heritage. In the Abolish r(ICE) campaign, the design uses the Vinh Sanh Trading Corporation’s Three Ladies Brand jasmine rice and is reimaged to center Southeast Asian deportees, a demographic within Asian Americans that is overlooked. The design is by Kat Eng, they collaborated with Stephanie Shih in 2021 to raise funds for Southeast Asian deportees. Kat Eng is a

⁴ Klein, *No Logo*, 280.

mixed Khmer filmmaker, community organizer, and multimedia artist based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Stephanie Shih is a Taiwanese-American ceramic artist in Brooklyn, New York, she creates everyday objects that are part of the Asian American diasporic experience. For Eng and Shih, their art is tied to activism.⁵ To be clear, art alone isn't activism, it is how it's engaged and used as part of social movement that it can be activism.

The Abolish r(ICE) t-shirt sold in 2021 is a rice bag outline using the Three Ladies Brand jasmine rice and are reimagined as freedom fighters for Southeast Asian deportees. The design uses the same font and colors as the brand. The text, sticker, and Three Ladies are changed for the design. The text on the rice bag from the top down are: 2021; FREE THEM ALL; END DEPORTATION AND INCARCERATION; "FREE THEM ALL" is translated into Burmese, Hmong, Khmer, Lao, and Vietnamese; ABOLISH I.C.E. (held as a sign by the Three Ladies); PRODUCT OF MINNEAPOLIS; and NET WT. 25 LBS (11.4 KGS.). The design is screen printed on a white or sand shirt with red and green ink (see figure 1).

The Three Ladies Brand is from Vinh Sanh Trading Corporation (see figure 2). It was created in the mid-1980s, in the midst of the largest resettlement of Southeast Asians to the United States. The logo features three women dressed in traditional wear from Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam, the primary locations for their jasmine rice. Vinh Sanh Trading Corporation's most popular product is the Thai jasmine rice sold across the United States, most Asian grocery stores will have a product (or many) with the Three Ladies Brand.⁶ Because the design resembles many elements of the Three Ladies Brand Jasmine Rice, there's an association made when people see it. The differences are subtly added, and make a statement regarding the issue of deportation and ICE. I argue that It is a form of Asian American protest art and culture jamming that should be understood both within the larger work of art and artists in the contemporary

⁵ Bhabha, "For Ceramist Stephanie Shih, There's No Such Thing as Art Without Activism"; "A Conversation with Kat Eng, Mixed Khmer Artist and Organizer."

⁶ *ORDER by Judge Charles R for Vinh-Sanh Trading Corporation v. SFTC, Inc.*



Figure 1. The Abolish r(ICE) t-shirt in the 2021 campaign on Instagram. (Photograph by Kat Eng, posted on Instagram June 2021.)⁷

⁷ Kat Eng, “Instagram @k4t3ng • ***Sign up for Updates at the Link in My Bio!***.”



Figure 2. The Three Ladies Brand jasmine rice that the Abolish r(ICE) design is referencing. (Photograph by Vinh Sanh Trading Corporation.)⁸

abolition movement but also within the realm of Asian American art, specifically, around food. The Three Ladies Brand has become a popular culture signifier amongst Southeast Asians. Much like the status of Huy Fong Foods Inc. Sriracha Hot Chili Sauce, Hormel Foods' SPAM®, and other commodities associated with Asian American cuisine, the Three Ladies brand is often applied to tote bags, t-shirts, and other items of everyday wear, as a symbol of cultural pride. Eng's culture jamming technique was to take a symbol of Southeast Asian culture and pride and turn it into a political statement protesting deportation. This logo of welcoming Asian women in traditional wear defies

⁸ Vinh Sanh Trading Corporation, "3ladies* 25# JASMINE RICE."

the stereotype of meek submission⁹ by boldly declaring the abolition of Immigration and Criminal Enforcement (ICE) office. The messaging here is around the flow of capital and commodities and people as well as the political and racial imaginary.

This campaign stands out because it is part of a larger social movement surrounding immigration and deportation and is rooted in coalitional solidarity. The design for Abolish r(ICE) emerged in 2019 when there was an increase in deportation of Cambodian Americans at the peak of the Trump administration. Eng reimagined the Three Ladies from the Three Ladies Brand as freedom fighters. The design was for the Free Them All campaign in collaboration with the FANG Collective, the Alliance to Mobilize Our Resistance (AMOR) Network, and others working to shut down county and state collaborations with ICE.¹⁰ The FANG Collective is based in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, they lead direct action campaigns targeting oppressive structures and resisting fossil fuel projects.¹¹ The AMOR Network is an alliance of community-based grassroots organizations creating spaces for healing after experiencing violence within the community.¹² These organizations are not exclusively for Southeast Asian issues, they are community organizations actively working in the northeastern United States on various issues that impact their community, which includes Southeast Asians. It's important to have coalitional solidarity across different communities because there is power within our communities coming together. The issues of incarceration and deportation affect all communities and working together against state violence is significant. In 2021, the Abolish r(ICE) campaign had three runs on Instagram. Eng and Shih worked together for the first two with McKenzie & Co. Screen Printing in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma and Shih featured her ceramic piece "Three Ladies Jasmine Rice" during this collaboration. In the last campaign of the year, Eng partnered up with Eagle Screen Printing in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Eng and Shih's collaboration raised \$45,456 for deportees, approximately half of the funds went to the Southeast Asian Fund which was administered and supported by the Black Immigrant Collective in Minnesota and

⁹ See Mukkamala and Suyemoto, "Racialized Sexism/Sexualized Racism." for how race and gender impact the discrimination that Asian American women face.

¹⁰ Kat Eng, "Abolish ICE Shirt."

¹¹ The FANG Collective, "Our Vision."

¹² Alliance to Mobilize Our Resistance (AMOR), "About Us – AMOR."

the other half was directly sent to 13 individuals who have been deported. The December run raised \$13,352, majority of the money went to 18 individuals deported by I.C.E., \$500 to the Solidarity Fund, and \$3352 to the Asian Prisoner Support Committee in Oakland. In 2021, the Abolish r(ICE) campaign raised \$85,586 and \$58,808 (almost 70% of the funds) directly supported 31 Southeast Asian deportees and the remaining funds went to incarcerated Southeast Asian community members. The rest of the funds went to supplies, shipping, and administrative costs. While the initial design was printed for a FANG collective demonstration, I argue that Eng and Shih's audience for this campaign was targeting Asian American community members and drawing attention to the issue of deportation that Southeast Asians face.

I argue the audience of this campaign and fundraiser is the Asian American diaspora, people who work within immigration issues, and people who are interested in art that ties food and household objects to social justice. Because of the vast wealth gap within the Asian American diaspora and the model minority myth, many would not think of deportation as a major issue. The model minority myth is a stereotype designed to depict Asian Americans as the "good minority" weaponizing it against Black and brown communities labeled as "problem minorities." It assigns positive indicators of "success" like income, education, working hard, and not complaining while ignoring the disparities that affect the 40+ ethnic groups that are categorized under "Asian American."¹³ In the United States, income inequality is now at the greatest for Asian Americans where the top income earners earned 10.7 times more than the Asian Americans who are the lowest income earners.¹⁴ This fundraiser is for mutual aid efforts to support Southeast Asians and also redistributes the wealth between Asian Americans. The success of this campaign would not have been possible without the support of other community organizations and the audiences of Eng and Shih. The Minnesota 8, VietUnity, and other grassroots organizations supporting Southeast Asian families targeted by ICE

¹³ Densho, "Inventing the 'Model Minority'"; Petterson, "Success Story, Japanese-American Style." This article by Petterson uses Japanese-Americans as the "successful" ethnic minority and uses it as the comparison to Black communities. The model minority myth at its roots, is anti-Black and pushes Asian Americans to be against Black and brown communities rather than working in solidarity with each other.

¹⁴ Anthony Cilluffo and Rakesh Kochhar, "Key Findings on the Rise in Income Inequality within America's Racial and Ethnic Groups." This comic on Vox explains the wealth gap for Asian Americans and how the model minority ties in. Siu and Noguchi, "The Asian American Wealth Gap, Explained in a Comic."

have used the design to get their communities involved in anti-deportation work.¹⁵ The community of Southeast Asian refugees who are facing deportation is often invisible, in the next section I explain how and why this is an issue.

r(ICE), r(ICE), baby: A Brief History of Southeast Asian Refugees & Immigration Debates

In June 2019, the FANG Collective, a direct-action group based in northeastern U.S., led an action that blockaded the Massachusetts Department of Corrections (DOC) headquarters. Organizers chained themselves to teal tires and sat in front of the Massachusetts DOC for hours. They wore black shirts with a design in teal ink that said “SHUT DOWN ICE”, “END DEPORTATION AND INCARCERATION”, and had the Three Ladies Brand holding a sign with “FREE THEM ALL” (see figure 3). The FANG Collective demanded Massachusetts DOC end their intergovernmental service agreements (IGSA) and 287(g) agreements with ICE.¹⁶ These agreements allowed law enforcement to act on the duties of ICE officers including, changing prisons into ICE detention centers.

This action is a part of The FANG Collective’s Shut Down ICE campaign, which started in August 2018 to pressure counties in Massachusetts to end their IGSA and 287(g) agreements with ICE. As of 2023, the FANG Collective has supported the end of *all* IGSA contracts in Massachusetts—Suffolk County in 2019, Franklin County in 2020, Bristol County in 2021, and Plymouth County in 2022. The only Massachusetts counties and agencies with 287(g) agreements remaining are Barnstable County and the Massachusetts DOC.¹⁷ In 2019, the Free Them All and Shut Down ICE campaign led by the FANG Collective and the AMOR Network, Eng first adapted the Three Ladies

¹⁵ Kat Eng, “Abolish ICE Shirt.”

¹⁶ The FANG Collective.

¹⁷ The FANG Collective, “Shut Down ICE.”



Figure 3. A member of the FANG Collective sits on the ground in front of the gates at the Massachusetts Department of Corrections. Their right arm in a tube with foam, bolted to a teal tire and steel chains come out of the other tube linking to a second teal tire with another member (not seen in image). (Photograph from FANG Collective, June 2019)¹⁸

Brand logo for their local direct action campaign. The shirt was worn in the direct actions led by these organizations demanding an end to ICE agreements in Massachusetts, in turn the end of law enforcement having additional power to act as an ICE officer.

Building coalitional solidarity between organizations, artists, and across different issues is important to continue resistance within social movements. The direct action work The FANG Collective does in Massachusetts is aligned with the work that the Minnesota 8, a Southeast Asian American led community organization does in Minnesota. The Abolish r(ICE) campaign is a link that draws people together to how the work to end structural violence like ICE affects all marginalized people. As of 2023,

¹⁸ The FANG Collective, "Instagram @fangcollective • June 2019 Blockade at Mass DOC."

18,000 Southeast Asians have received final orders for deportation.¹⁹ Nearly 80% of the deportee orders originate due to old criminal records prior to resettlement.²⁰ This increase is largely due to Trump Administration policies on immigrants with criminal convictions. The Southeast Asian refugee community is often overlooked due to the model minority myth.²¹ The model minority myth makes Southeast Asian American social issues invisible, overlooking how poverty, incarceration, and deportation are poignant issues that the community deals with. For Southeast Asian Americans, their stability is precarious and conditional regardless of how long they've been living in the United States due to ICE.

In order to understand the relevance of the Abolish ICE campaign we need to understand the historical background of Southeast Asian resettlement and the U.S. wars in Southeast Asia alongside the emergence of ICE within the immigration apparatus of the United States. Prior to 1975, there were less than 20,000 immigrants²² from Southeast Asia in the United States.²³ By 1995, more than 1.25 million refugees from Southeast Asia have been resettled in the United States, the largest refugee group to arrive in U.S. history.²⁴ To understand how more than three million people fled their home, here's a brief overview of the major conflicts occurring before, during, and after 1975.²⁵ The Secret War in Laos (1964-1973) was led by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the United States. The CIA recruited more than 30,000 soldiers, majority were Hmong, in Northern Laos to fight the war against "communism". In addition to recruitment, the U.S. military dropped two million tons of cluster bombs on Laos--the equivalent to a planeload of bombs dropped every eight minutes, 24 hours a day, for

¹⁹ Syracuse University, "Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC)."

²⁰ Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), "The Devastating Impact of Deportation on Southeast Asian Americans."

²¹ Densho, "Inventing the 'Model Minority.'"

²² In the context of United States citizenship, I use immigrant as people admitted with Permanent Resident Cards, also known as "Green Cards" and refugee/refugee status for people who have left their home country in fear of persecution. Refugees can switch status to permanent resident later on in the process to obtain citizenship.

²³ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, "Refugees and Asylum | USCIS"; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, "Chapter 4: Who Is Eligible for Naturalization?"; Gordon, "7."

²⁴ UCI Southeast Asian Archive, "University of California Irvine Southeast Asian Archive."

²⁵ Dave Roos, "How the End of the Vietnam War Led to a Refugee Crisis."

nine years.²⁶ In 1975, the Vietnam War ended at the Fall of Saigon after two decades and American forces left the country. The Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia from 1975-1979 and carried out the genocide in which approximately 1.747 million people lost their lives, a quarter of the population of 1975.²⁷

The resettlement of over a million Southeast Asian refugees was done under the auspices of the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 which accepted refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.²⁸ In October 1977, Public Law 95-145 passed and allowed refugees who arrived between 1975-1979 (before the Refugee Act of 1980) to change their immigration status from refugee to permanent residence and get their Green Card after living in the US for two years.²⁹ The process of naturalization for a permanent resident is a minimum of five years.³⁰ The first wave of refugees in 1975, were welcomed warmly by the American public. Most of these refugees were educated and spoke some English. The second wave started arriving 1978, known as the “boat people”, generally were poorer and less educated than the first wave. By then, the US economy sunk into a recession and the majority of Americans didn’t want the refugees here seeing them as an economic burden and a reminder of a lost war.³¹ As refugees arrived in the US, they were often in living conditions similar to what they left behind.

In addition to an unwelcoming environment, Southeast Asians experienced the same violent state structures that other communities of color face, including economic insecurity and over-policing. As a result, many Southeast Asian youth were funneled into the school to prison to deportation pipeline.³² From 1977 to 1997 in California,

²⁶ The White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks of President Obama to the People of Laos”; Convery, “US Bombs Continue to Kill in Laos 50 Years after Vietnam War.”

²⁷ Ewa Tabeau and They Kheam, “KHMER ROUGE VICTIMS IN CAMBODIA, APRIL 1975 - JANUARY 1979,” 70.

²⁸ Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress, The Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975.

²⁹ House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress, Public Law 95-145, 95.

³⁰ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, “Chapter 4: Who Is Eligible for Naturalization?”

³¹ Dave Roos, “How the End of the Vietnam War Led to a Refugee Crisis.”

³² Lee, “APIs Behind Bars.”

arrests of Asian American and Pacific Islander youth increased by 726%.³³ Youth were only able to become citizens if their parents received citizenship because they were minors, or due to their interaction with the legal system as a youth, they were barred from seeking citizenship.³⁴ Deportation jumped after 1996 when Congress passed the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act.³⁵ These laws created mandatory deportation for noncitizens who have encountered the legal system at any point.³⁶

Under the newly formed U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in 2003, the deportations of Southeast Asians further spiked. Created in 2003 as part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), ICE was a direct response to the events on September 11th, 2001, and the escalating Global War on Terror. Prior to ICE, immigration enforcement was led by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) as part of the Department of Justice (DOJ). ICE's goal is to aggressively enforce immigration laws for who were seen as a "threat" to national security or public safety. The two primary branches are Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) and the Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO). HSI investigates international criminal operations and organizations and ERO enforces immigration laws.³⁷ As of the fiscal year 2023, ICE has spent \$9.14 billion, the highest in its creation.³⁸

Southeast Asian Americans were impacted significantly by ICE facilitated deportations during the Trump administration. On January 25, 2017, the Executive Order No. 13768 "Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States" was issued by the Trump administration prioritizing all undocumented immigrants for

³³ Lee. The Bureau of Justice Statistics uses "Other" to classify American Indians, Alaska Natives, Asians, Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, persons of two or more races, or additional racial categories. The term "AAPI" comes from the U.S. Census in the 1980s that lumped Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, it was changed in the late 1990s but AAPI, APA (Asian Pacific American), or API (Asian Pacific Islander) have stuck. These terms erase the experiences of Pacific Islanders as indigenous people who have been displaced due to colonization. See Ishisaka, "Why It's Time to Retire the Term 'Asian Pacific Islander'" for an overview.

³⁴ Ho, "Like Becoming a Refugee Again."

³⁵ Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), "Southeast Asian Americans and Deportation Policy."

³⁶ Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC).

³⁷ Department of Homeland Security, "ICE 20 Year Anniversary Timeline."

³⁸ U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), "ICE Budget Overview FY24."

removal at any time.³⁹ This was a drastic shift from the Obama administration's tiered priority categories of undocumented immigrants that would be prioritized for arrest and deportation. In the first 14 months of Trump's administration, "... ICE arrests of immigrants without a criminal record more than tripled compared to the final 14 months of the Obama administration, growing from 19,128 to 58,010."⁴⁰ From 2017-2018, deportations of refugee community members from Vietnam, Cambodia, Iraq, Myanmar, and Laos increased by 86%. As of June 2018, most of the Southeast Asian immigrants detained have lived in the US for more than 20 years: 43% of Vietnamese Americans, 86% of Lao Americans, and 46% of Cambodian Americans.⁴¹ Executive Order No. 13768 states that enforcing immigration laws is "critically important to the national security and public security of the United States."⁴² How does the arrest and deportation of immigrants who have a criminal record and have served their sentence threaten national security and public safety? And what has been the organized response from Asian American activists and abolitionists to Southeast Asian deportations?

In August 2016, eight Cambodian Americans were detained by ICE to be deported to Cambodia. The Cambodian refugee community alone "suffered a 279% increase in deportations from 2017 to 2018."⁴³ The grassroots campaign #ReleaseMN8 based in Minnesota, one of the major Southeast Asian refugee resettlement sites, was organized by their families, an intergenerational movement by people who have not organized before. The campaign reached national attention and was able to get three of eight men eventually released in 2017. #ReleaseMN8 eventually evolved into the organization Minnesota 8 (MN8). Over the past several years, MN8 continues to support

³⁹ Office of the Press Secretary, Department of Homeland Security, "Fact Sheet: Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States | Homeland Security."

⁴⁰ Asian Americans Advancing Justice—Los Angeles and Asian Americans Advancing Justice—AAJC, "Inside the Numbers: How Immigration Shapes Asian American and Pacific Islander Communities," 60.

⁴¹ Asian Americans Advancing Justice—Los Angeles and Asian Americans Advancing Justice—AAJC, 64.

⁴² Office of the Press Secretary, Department of Homeland Security, "Fact Sheet: Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States | Homeland Security."

⁴³ Asian Americans Advancing Justice—Los Angeles and Asian Americans Advancing Justice—AAJC, "Inside the Numbers: How Immigration Shapes Asian American and Pacific Islander Communities," 64–65.

Minnesotan Southeast Asian communities targeted by ICE in tandem with education and policy work.⁴⁴

The Abolish r(ICE) campaign has continued to evolve from 2019 to now. In addition to grassroots direct action mobilizations, much of the work for immigration organizations had focused on legal reform and federal legislation through three significant presidential administrations from Obama to Trump and to Biden. From Obama to Trump, there was an escalation of deportation across all “noncitizens” and Southeast Asian American refugee communities were one of them. Under the Biden administration, three new acts have been introduced to protect Southeast Asian Americans and all communities impacted by deportation and immigration. The *New Way Forward Act* was first introduced in December 2019, and reintroduced in March 2023. The bill will end mandatory detention and implement a five-year statute of limitations for removal based on old criminal convictions instead of the current 1996 laws that require any person to be deported who have been in the legal justice system.⁴⁵ The *Reuniting Families Act* was introduced in 2019, and reintroduced in September 2023. The bill will set an absolute time limit on visa processing, so no applicant has to wait more than 10 years for a visa.⁴⁶ The *Southeast Asian Deportation Relief Act* of 2023 was introduced in August 2023. The bill will forbid the detention and deportation of Southeast Asian refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam who arrived in the United States before 2008; permanently authorize employment for individuals with final orders of removal; establish virtual check-ins with ICE every-five years, ending in-person ICE check-ins; and ensure Southeast Asian Americans who’ve been deported to be able to return home to the United States.⁴⁷ As of 2023, over 18,000 Southeast Asian Americans have received final orders for deportation.⁴⁸ Eighty percent of total deportation orders for Southeast Asian Americans are from past criminal records

⁴⁴ MN8, “What We Do.”

⁴⁵ Rep. Garcia, H.R.2374 - 118th Congress (2023-2024): New Way Forward Act.

⁴⁶ Rep. Chu, H.R.5560 - 118th Congress (2023-2024): Reuniting Families Act.

⁴⁷ Rep. Chu, “H.R.5248 - 118th Congress (2023-2024).”

⁴⁸ Syracuse University, “Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC).”

compared to 29% of all immigrants who receive final deportation orders from past criminal records.⁴⁹

Given the historical and political context of Southeast Asian resettlement and deportation, we know that the protectionist measure of the federal legislation will only provide temporary relief. Furthermore, I argue that the increased deportations faced by Southeast Asian was not simply a misunderstanding or an exceptional state of ignorance. A feminist-of-color disability studies analysis in discourse and state violence, is necessary to understand framing the Southeast Asian deportation crisis beyond a politics of inclusion and reform. It necessitates the abolishment of the carceral system including ICE and its detention centers. How is abolition connected to disability justice? How is immigration a disability issue? In the following section, I map how a feminist of color disability studies analysis, moves us towards a more radical and liberatory future for us all but most especially for Southeast Asians.

Disability Justice is Abolition

I first became interested in disability justice, when I started reconciling my disability and how that has impacted how I engage with the world. I started exploring concepts and works by disabled people, Alice Wong, Mia Mingus, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Talila A. Lewis, and so many more. Disability justice is at the core of their writing and activism. As Mingus writes, “we need to think of access with an understanding of disability justice, moving away from an equality-based model of sameness and “we are just like you” to a model of disability that embraces difference, confronts privilege, and challenges what is considered “normal” on every front. We don’t want to simply join the ranks of the privileged; we want to dismantle those ranks and the systems that maintain them.”⁵⁰ Through an independent study, I began reading the work of Jina B. Kim and Sami Schalk who argue that feminist-of-color disability studies is both a method and site of analysis that moves away from studying the medicalization

⁴⁹ Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), “Southeast Asian Americans and Deportation Policy.”

⁵⁰ Mingus, “Changing the Framework.”

and legal regulations of the disabled body to analyzing the structures of power themselves. In this section, I argue that using a feminist-of-color disability studies framing is necessary to understand Southeast Asian deportation beyond representational politics and inclusion.

Jina B. Kim and Sami Schalk outline feminist-of-color disability studies as “simultaneously acknowledges existing critical race work in feminist disability studies, claims work in feminist-of-color scholarship not recognized as disability studies, and sets forth an agenda to transform feminist disability studies by drawing attention to how its unacknowledged whiteness has shaped the boundaries and methods of the field thus far.” The domains of feminist-of-color disability studies are discourse, state violence, health/care, and activism. Scholars that are already producing work considered feminist-of-color disability studies include Their A. Pickens, Cindy Wu, Mel Chen, Michelle Jarman, Jess Waggoner, Ally Day, Juliann Anesi, and Lezlie Fyre.⁵¹ Scholars in feminist-of-color disability studies are in various fields and work on interdisciplinary projects. Kim has published writing on disability studies and ethnic U.S. literature. Her current manuscript analyzes how multiethnic U.S. literature in post-Raegan cities recover the destructive condition of public dependency. She positions dependency as a vital analytic for ethnic American cultural critique and uses feminist-of-color, feminist disability, ethnic literary, and urban sociological studies.⁵² Schalk has published work on film, literature, disability, and material culture. Her first book, *Bodyminds Reimagined*, uses Black feminist theory and disability studies to analyze “how black women’s speculative fiction complicates the understanding of bodyminds—the intertwining of the mental and the physical—in the context of race, gender, and (dis)ability.”⁵³ In *Black Disability Politics*, Schalk looks at how central disability has been and continues to be in Black activism from the 1970s to the present.⁵⁴ Mel Y. Chen has published on racialization and transing of pollution, cognitive disability and method, trans media,

⁵¹ Kim and Schalk, “Integrating Race, Transforming Feminist Disability Studies,” 32–33.

⁵² “Jina B. Kim.”

⁵³ Schalk, “Critical Disability Studies as Methodology.” Schalk uses (dis)ability to refer to “a system of social norms which categorizes, ranks, and values bodyminds.” Disability is defined “as a historically and culturally variable category within this larger system.” I’ll be using (dis)ability and disability as Schalk defines throughout this section.

⁵⁴ Sami Schalk, “About – Dr. Sami Schalk.”

gender pronouns and linguists. Their first book, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, “explores questions of racialization, gender, queering, disability, and affective economies in animate and inanimate “life” through the extended concept of animacy.” Their recent book, *Race, Disability and Chemical Intimacy Across Empire*, “concerns the conceptual territories of toxicity and intoxication and their involvement in 19th century archival histories of the interanimation of race and disability.”⁵⁵

In the Abolish r(ICE) campaign, I look at the domains of discourse and state violence. From Kim and Schalk, “Discourses of (dis)ability, that is, rhetoric about ability and disability encompassing discussions of mental, physical fitness, normality and abnormality, and biological superiority, have been used to create, maintain, and justify racial and gender hierarchies (and the various injustices and violence that result from such hierarchies) in numerous ways across various historical moments.”⁵⁶ Feminist-of-color disability studies analyzes discourses on disability because it can expose “the ideology of ability in situations that do not appear immediately to be about disability.”⁵⁷ The impacts of discourse “operate beyond/outside bodyminds and identity, yet they nonetheless result in striking social, political, and material consequences on populations whose oppression and exclusion are justified through such discourses.”⁵⁸ For Southeast Asians, the discourse surrounding immigrants has impacted the treatment of Southeast Asians from the day of their arrival. Most Southeast Asian refugees arrive after 1978, by the American economy is in a recession and the guilt that the American public had for pulling out of the war in Vietnam has faded. The refugees were a reminder of a lost war and being an economic burden for the country.⁵⁹ In *Accessible Citizenship*, Julie Avril Minich argues that “the face that the image of the unauthorized immigrant as a danger to the health of the national body carries such rhetorical force is a direct result of the ideology of ability; it is because bodies deemed unhealthy or disabled are seen as unsuited for political inclusion that the invocation of a disease attacking the body politic is so effective at mobilizing anti-immigrant sentiment.” Minich focuses on the discourse

⁵⁵ Mel Y. Chen, “Mel Y. Chen | Gender and Women’s Studies.”

⁵⁶ Kim and Schalk, “Integrating Race, Transforming Feminist Disability Studies,” 40.

⁵⁷ Minich, *Accessible Citizenship*, 98.

⁵⁸ Kim and Schalk, 41.

⁵⁹ Dave Roos, “How the End of the Vietnam War Led to a Refugee Crisis.”

around the U.S.-Mexico border and refugees and immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries. Minich's argument can be applied to how Southeast Asian refugees were treated and viewed when they started arriving in the United States from 1975 onwards.

Immigration is the platform that Trump ran on that got him elected in 2017, his anti-immigration stance and building a U.S.-Mexico wall led to an influx in public narratives on how Americans felt about national security. Trump's campaign was so successful in its mythologizing of the U.S.-Mexico border wall that many often think that he has become synonymous with the project. So much so that many Americans do not know that the border wall was originally built by the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration (1933-1945) and has continued to expand to the present day.⁶⁰ The expansion of immigration criminalization and deportation policies has often focused on the U.S.-Mexico border and on racist discourses and policies towards Central American migrants in particular. It would be all too easy within the realm of immigration debates to argue for the occlusion of Southeast Asian immigrants from the debates and other large demographics of immigrants, many primarily, from Africa or Afro-Diasporic communities. However, as Minich significantly argues that the immigration crisis itself is a disabling event that sorts people into those deserving bodies who will improve the health of the national body politic and those who will further degrade or pollute the economic health of the nation through their social welfare demands and needs.⁶¹ Therefore, I argue that mediating the Southeast Asian deportation through recent federal protectionist measures can only be a short-term solution. I am not arguing against federal legislation but simply recognizing that liberal inclusion or reformist measures will not solve the larger and deeper issues around Southeast Asian deportation because these issues are ingrained within ICE and immigration policy itself.

This brings me to the 'Abolish ICE' movement, abolition has been associated with the ending of policing and prisons and has expanded to end all systems that punish people by isolating, surveilling, and locking them away. The Illegal Immigration Reform

⁶⁰ Mendoza, "Biden's Border Wall Is a Bipartisan Tradition."

⁶¹ Minich, *Accessible Citizenship*, 98.

and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 backed by the Clinton administration laid the foundation for ICE'S creation in 2003 after 9/11. ICE came under major public scrutiny when the Trump administration ordered for the mandatory deportation of all noncitizens and the separation of immigrant families that began in 2018.⁶² The #AbolishICE hashtag is credited to Sean McElwee who tweeted in 2017 and wrote an article in *The Nation* about the abolish ICE movement.⁶³ Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez popularized the idea of abolishing the agency challenging the mainstream Democrats who were asking for reform.⁶⁴ McElwee or Representative Ocasio-Cortez are not the first to talk about abolition within immigration. Advocates working in immigration, like the Detention Watch Network, a national coalition organizing around the abolition of immigration detention, have been critical of ICE since its inception twenty years ago.⁶⁵ The movements for abolishing ICE and the police are intertwined, it's different sides of the same coin. ICE, the police, and prisons all operate as a punishment and a solution for "safety" within the U.S. legal system.

In the domain of state violence, feminist-of-color disability studies "would prioritize considerations of state violence attending to the intersection of disability politics with abolitionist and anticarceral frameworks."⁶⁶ This paper has focused on ICE as a structure of state violence against Southeast Asians Americans and the history of its existence. Schools and prisons are tied with deportation for Southeast Asian Americans through the infamous school-to-prison-to-deportation pipeline. Abolition is integral to the organizing around immigration and incarceration. For the FANG Collective in Northeastern United States, their organizing around immigration and incarceration are interconnected. The campaign, Shut Down Wyatt, led by the AMOR Network (which the FANG Collective is part of) is working on shutting down the Wyatt Detention Center in Central Falls, Rhode Island. The Wyatt Detention Center holds people detained by ICE and is the first private prison in the United States.⁶⁷ The 1998

⁶² Narea, "How 'Abolish ICE' Helped Bring Abolitionist Ideas into the Mainstream."

⁶³ McElwee, "It's Time to Abolish ICE."

⁶⁴ Narea, "How 'Abolish ICE' Helped Bring Abolitionist Ideas into the Mainstream."

⁶⁵ Detention Watch Network, "About Detention Watch Network."

⁶⁶ Kim and Schalk, "Integrating Race, Transforming Feminist Disability Studies," 43.

⁶⁷ The FANG Collective, "Shut Down ICE."

conference “Critical Resistance: Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex” offered abolition as a strategy for the 21st century in response to the startling rise of incarcerated people across the globe. In 2001, Critical Resistance formed as a national organization directing public attention to the prison crisis and shifting the discourse away from prison reform towards prison abolition and the same logic applies to other violent carceral structures.⁶⁸ Abolition moves away from a focus only on prisons and “is a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment.”⁶⁹ Disability justice needs to be in conversation when we talk about abolition.⁷⁰ From the Abolition and Disability Justice Coalition, “...we believe it is necessary to name the ableist and sanist roots of strategies that rely on forced medication, institutionalization, surveillance and monitoring.”⁷¹ Abolition calls for an end to all carceral practices and structures as solutions for social issues, this includes the medical industrial complex that also disproportionately impacts marginalized peoples. And it asks us, how do we reimagine life that allows us to thrive, reducing crisis, and not needing punishing solutions as a response to a crisis? As Ruth Wilson Gilmore points out, “Abolition is about presence, not absence. It’s about building life-affirming institutions.”⁷² Feminist-of-color disability studies is a method to analyze structures of power and it invites imagining of new possibilities and spaces for all of us. The Abolish r(CE) campaign invites personal narratives and personal connections through this process of mutual aid. Eng continues to share communication they’ve received from deportees and their families who’ve received aid.

Through social media, the Abolish r(ICE) campaign offers an intimate portrait and mode of storytelling and personalizing experiences of deportation. To find out more about the Southeast Asian deportees and detainees assisted through the Abolish r(ICE) campaign, you can visit the website or Instagram account. Eng provides personal narratives of these individuals and their families, and how they have had to navigate

⁶⁸ Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now*, 46, 48.

⁶⁹ Davis et al., 59–60.

⁷⁰ For a closer analysis of abolition, decarceration, and deinstitutionalization see Ben-Moshe, *Decarcerating Disability*.

⁷¹ Abolition and Disability Justice Coalition, “Crippling Abolition.”

⁷² Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now*, 60.

ICE. The virtual platform of their fundraiser creates a wider network for mutual aid and visibility. The abolition of ICE therefore is not just about the destruction of structural violence vis-a-vis immigration policies but also the affirmation of life for Southeast Asians and many others targeted by the carceral system. Disability justice moves us beyond the critique and abolition of state violence systems and structures towards a practice of more holistic and radical approaches to collective care.

Conclusion

Beyond the nostalgic cultural imagery of everyday food, the Abolish r(ICE) campaign was an important intervention in uplifting Southeast Asian community organizing and making connections to the larger movement for the abolition of all carceral systems including borders, prisons, detention centers, and ICE. In this paper, I have argued for a feminist-of-color disability studies framework and analysis to unpack the significance of this campaign substantively. To make this argument, I have provided historical and political background on U.S. wars in Southeast Asia as well as federal policies enabling resettlement and deportation. I have also argued that the artists, Shih and Eng, were able to create such a successful mutual aid campaign by intentionally drawing upon humble, nostalgic and everyday food and Asian American food culture aesthetics. Through their use of the iconic Three Ladies Brand, Shih and Eng were able to educate larger communities about the importance of deportation as well as the specific historical context of Southeast Asian resettlement. I am working to build out an analysis of Asian American food aesthetics, (dis)ability, and resistance in my forthcoming American Studies Honors project.

The Abolish r(ICE) campaign in 2021 is a snapshot in the transition between the Trump and Biden administration. Biden's campaign vowed to reform immigration detention, however, in his first year in office, private prison companies have increased their earnings from ICE contracts. The GEO Group, a private prison company, "saw its revenues from ICE contracts for detention centers and remote monitoring of immigrants jump to a record \$1.05 billion in 2022, up nearly 40% from the previous year." These

private prison companies run the detention facilities to hold people that ICE brings in so in effect the Biden administration has not only continued Trump era policies and practices but expanded upon them.⁷³ Currently there is pending legislation at the federal level to provide relief for Southeast Asian Americans who have been targeted by these immigration criminalization reforms, I have also shown how these are short term strategies and forms of relief. However, within the context of a rapidly expanding ICE system, these policy measures must be accompanied by radical actions and demands to abolish and defund ICE for the long-term safety and security of refugee, asylee and immigrant communities.

⁷³ Hesson et al., “Biden Vowed to Reform Immigration Detention. Instead, Private Prisons Benefited.”



Figure 4. The Abolish r(ICE) campaign in 2023, a limited-edition design of Abolish r(ICE) printed in white on a long sleeve black shirt with floral motifs on the arms. (Photograph by Kat Eng, posted on Instagram November 2023.)⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Eng, "Instagram @k4t3ng • *SOLD OUT!!!* psFree Them All Means Free Palestine Too!"

One might ask, what is next for Abolish ICE campaigns? Aside from documenting and protesting current ICE practices, the Abolish r(ICE) campaign ran in the spring of 2022, a limited-edition tote was available with the design on it. In November 2023, Eng releases a limited-edition Abolish r(ICE) shirt to raise funds in solidarity for Palestine. The limited-edition design is a black long sleeve shirt with white ink, the rice bag design, and floral motifs on the sleeves (see figure 4). The original Abolish r(ICE) t-shirt is sold as well for the fundraiser with 2023 and “MADE IN LONG BEACH” instead of Minneapolis. For many, the connections may not seem apparent. How is Southeast Asian deportation and ICE connected to the latest siege in Gaza? Yet when we contextualize these movements about abolition within a global or transnational framework, we understand that as abolition of ICE is also part of broader movements against U.S. militarization and imperialism. For Southeast Asians refugees, many are survivors of U.S. genocide in their home countries, the experiences of extreme violence from war are not far in memory. Since Oct 7th, 2023, when Israel’s genocidal siege on Gaza began, Israel has dropped more than 25,000 tons of explosives on the Gaza strip, the equivalent of two nuclear bombs.⁷⁵ There are many parallels between the genocidal techniques of violence and displacement between Palestine and Southeast Asia. What is happening in Gaza and Palestine is an all too familiar story of imperialism and war and illuminates the interconnectedness of historic abolitionist movements with anti-imperial and demilitarization struggles. As Eng writes, “It took a mass popular movement to throw a wrench into the machines of the Vietnam War. Black power groups, Indigenous and Chicano movements, labor organizers, and so many more communities came together for our liberation. Now it’s our turn to stand with the people of Palestine and fight in solidarity until we are all free.”⁷⁶ They emphasize the coalitional solidarity between numerous communities in the antiwar movement that led the masses to start questioning the conditions that produced war.⁷⁷ The Abolish r(ICE) campaign work continues not only until ICE is fully dismantled but until new worlds are built and when we are all free from these imperialist regimes.

⁷⁵ Asrar, “Israel’s Attacks on Gaza.”

⁷⁶ Eng, “Instagram @k4t3ng • A Little Bit of Context...”

⁷⁷ Kindig, “Pacific NW Antiwar History Ch 4: Vietnam War.”

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