

The City of Tears: Reproductive Justice and Community Resistance in Hong Kong's Anti-ELAB Movement

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This article examines Hongkongers' decentralized tactics of resistance in response to the government's suppression of political freedom and misuse of crowd-control chemical weapons, especially tear gas. Through the lens of reproductive justice (RJ), this article illustrates the coalition potential between RJ activists and pro-democracy Hongkongers who enact strategies such as citizen science, community medical care, and cross-generational marches to cultivate a safer environment for all. Amplifying the everyday tactics that Hongkongers deploy at the grassroots level, this article also argues that despite the political outcome and measurable success of any grassroots tactics, it is important for researchers to document and analyze these acts as a way of bearing witness. Although they are contingent on specific historical moments and sociopolitical contexts, these tactics can also help inform future grassroots coalitions and activism.

Keywords: grassroots activism / Hong Kong / reproductive justice / social movement / transnationalism

In June 2019, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced that she would proceed with contentious fugitive and extradition law amendments that, if passed, would grant the city's chief executive the authority to decide, on a case-by-case basis, whether to extradite a suspected criminal to a country with which Hong Kong has no formal extradition agreements. Because the chief executive is handpicked by a small, Beijing-appointed committee, many Hongkongers, including leaders of human rights groups, feared that Beijing

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would use the new extradition amendments to intimidate and arrest its political opponents, including journalists, and activists (K. Cheng 2019a).

To challenge the bill, which pro-democracy Hongkongers widely perceived as Beijing's further encroachment on the semi-independent special administrative region (SAR), hundreds of thousands of Hongkongers have been protesting in various ways since June 2019. Scholars and the media refer to this wave of protests as the Anti-ELAB (Extradition Law Amendment Bill) movement (Lee 2020). Protests first took the form of peaceful marches and assemblies, but they have since morphed into more direct confrontations with state power, including vandalism and violent clashes with police in quotidian places like shopping malls, university campuses, and residential neighborhoods.

Between June and December 2019, Hong Kong police have fired about 10,000 rounds of tear gas, affecting more than 88 percent of residents in the city (H. Leung 2019; Prasso 2019). Widespread public anger and anxiety over tear gas use first began when citizen-journalists suspected that the cannisters being deployed had long passed their expiration dates (Hui 2019). Panic suffused the city after independent news reports indicated that the tear gas cannisters were purchased from China and were the same as the ones deployed by Chinese People's Liberation Army anti-terrorism squads (Lo and Leung 2019). Because of widespread public distrust of the Lam regime and the government's repeated refusals to discuss the main components of the new tear gas, many Hongkongers panicked that their health would be irrevocably harmed by the toxic gases—specifically dioxin and cyanide—emitted by the tear gas cannisters under high temperature during explosion (Jim 2019). Some Hongkongers worried that long-term exposure to tear gas in everyday life would lead to miscarriages and infant deformities (Jim 2019). In addition to tear gas, the Hong Kong police also deployed water cannons, albeit less frequently, to disperse and deter protesters. Although the government claimed that the water contained only nontoxic dye and “pepper-based solution” that would cause only momentary discomfort, protesters and journalists who had been sprayed reported rashes, headaches, and eye irritation that lasted as long as a month (Chan, Tsang, and Lee 2014).

In addition to the government's refusal to be transparent about the active ingredients of these chemical weapons, the fact that many pro-democracy protesters, fearing persecution and collusion between medical providers and the police, avoided seeking medical help from established clinics and hospitals compounded the public health panic. These fears were not unfounded: there have been numerous reports that protesters were tortured, unlawfully interrogated, and arrested while receiving medical treatment in public hospitals (Creery 2019; Master 2019). In response to this public health crisis, Hongkongers from different sectors began enacting grassroots tactics of resistance including cross-generational peaceful assemblies, underground medical networks, and citizen science.

Although most of the grassroots organizing took place in 2019, Hong Kong experienced a violent start to 2020 after almost seven months of protests. Despite granting permission for a march to take place on January 1, 2020, the Hong Kong police abruptly told the organizers to end the event shortly after it began. The police then required all participants—more than one million people—to disperse within half an hour, an impossible demand given the city's density and the high number of protesters. The day ended with the police firing tear gas in residential areas, mobilizing water cannons, pepper-spraying a lawmaker at close range, and arresting at least 400 people (SCMP Reporters 2020).

Since February 2020, however, street protests and the use of tear gas in Hong Kong have largely subsided, first due to the pandemic and later to the draconian new National Security Law (NSL) imposed by Beijing that incriminates almost all protest activities as seditious or separatist. Under the NSL, the popular protest slogan “Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times” is illegal. Soon after the law was implemented, a few activists were arrested for possessing stickers and banners that read “Hong Kong Independence” and “Resist Beijing, Liberate Hong Kong” (Marlow and Lung 2020). The NSL's chilling effect, coupled with the government's persecution of pro-democracy activists and lawmakers, brought to street protests and rallies to a screeching halt (R. Wong 2020). In addition, as in other authoritarian regimes, such as the Duterte administration in the Philippines and the monarchy and military government in Thailand, the Hong Kong government effectively weaponized COVID-19 to justify its crackdown against protests and assemblies (Hui 2020a; Yam 2020a).

As protests in Hong Kong halted, so did the use of tear gas. The exigency to interrogate state violence and the use of chemicals for crowd-control purposes, however, remains. The use of tear gas as a crowd-control weapon is not exclusive to Hong Kong: during the Black Lives Matter uprisings in the summer of 2020, police in several US cities deployed tear gas in large quantities, sometimes violating safety protocol (Amnesty International 2020). A new report from the University of Toronto's International Human Rights Program calls the misuse and overuse of tear gas a threat to human rights internationally, across nation-states. Yet, surprisingly, few US critics have articulated this transnational connection.

By applying a reproductive justice (RJ) framework to analyze and amplify the different ways that Hongkongers responded to the rampant use of chemical weapons during the Anti-ELAB movement, I hope to illuminate the transnational coalition potential between grassroots advocacy in Hong Kong and in the United States. I argue that we can understand Hongkongers' decentralized grassroots tactics of resistance as performances of coalition across social sectors that help strengthen civil society. As a rhetoric scholar and diasporic Hongkonger, I have been immersed in diverse discourses on the Anti-ELAB movement since June 2019, including news reports and commentaries from Hong Kong and Euro-American sources, press releases and commentaries penned by the Hong

Kong and mainland Chinese governments, and grassroots community discourse among Hongkongers on social media and messaging platforms like LIHKG, an internet forum used to organize and discuss Anti-ELAB protests, and Telegram. My analysis in this article is based primarily on publicly accessible sources so as not to compromise any individuals' identities under the NSL.

I seek to accomplish three goals with this analysis. First, by amplifying grassroots tactics deployed by community members from different societal sectors, this article helps to fill a gap in existing scholarship on decentralized social movements. Since the proliferation of decentralized protest movements across the globe in 2009, researchers have begun interrogating the networks and logics that fuel connective actions among participants, focusing in particular on linkages between social movements and digital media technologies (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Castells 2015; Eltantawy and Wiest 2011). Numerous studies in political science and information and communication technologies examine the political efficacy and implications of decentralized social movements by measuring how successful they are in promoting concrete policy changes (Boler et al. 2014; Castells 2015; Sutherland, Land, and Böhm 2014). Research in social movement studies, on the other hand, tends to focus on how participants and key organizations frame the core issue at hand and rhetorically construct and justify a movement's demands (Lee 2020). As Hong Kong communication and media scholar Francis Lee points out, the current body of scholarship on decentralized movements is largely concerned with "how social movements can persuade bystanders to support and join their causes" (Lee 2020, 31).

While these two research trends have generated key insights into what mobilizes participants and what factors allows a movement to gain political traction, few current studies have examined how everyday citizens embroiled in political unrest enact grassroots tactics of resistance that coalesce to foster solidarity and coalitions that ripple beyond the movement's immediate political demands. I argue that, albeit small, everyday decentralized acts of resistance—such as collective art-making in public spaces and underground support networks run by volunteers on social media and messaging apps—warrant our attention. Given how adept state governments have become post-Arab Spring at suppressing grassroots social movements, these tactics may not effectively lead to immediate political change at the state level. Nevertheless, they highlight the ways in which citizens exercise their political agency in ingenious ways despite suppression (Chenoweth 2016). In the case of Hong Kong's Anti-ELAB movement, most protesters and activists are not optimistic that the movement will end in their favor (Tufekci 2019). Because of the likely negative political outcome, some frontline protesters worry that in the future they will either be erased or portrayed as violent rioters in a history authored and perpetuated by the Chinese Communist Party.¹ Their fear is well-founded: the Hong Kong government has been whitewashing incidents of police violence and gang collusion while censoring content about the protests in classrooms and public

libraries (Hui 2020b; Lim 2020; Yam 2020b). As such, I argue that despite the likely political outcome and measureable success of these grassroots tactics, it is important for researchers to document and analyze these acts as a way of bearing witness and an act of resistance against state censorship. Although they are specific to historical moments and sociopolitical contexts, these tactics can nevertheless inform future grassroots coalitions and organizing events.

This article's second goal is to amplify the ingenuity and coalition potential of decentralized actions at the community grassroots level. Online mobilization and nonhierarchical movements tend to be more effective in rapidly recruiting new participants, but critics have argued that decentralized approaches that rely primarily on digital technologies have become increasingly unsuccessful in yielding policy and regime changes (Cheng and Chan 2017; Chenoweth 2016). In particular, social movement scholars point out that nonhierarchical digital mobilization tends to be event-based organization that generates high turnout for protests and assemblies but often fails to build the community networks and trusting relationships necessary for sustainable long-term strategizing (Chenoweth 2016; Gladwell 2010; Klein 2020; Tufekci 2017). Although my analysis in this article cannot be extrapolated to represent most decentralized social movements, by highlighting the grassroots tactics of resistance Hongkongers performed across social strata, I provide counterexamples to illustrate that people do form resilient civil networks and relationships outside of spectacular protest events that catch the media's attention. In addition, by illuminating the relationship between RJ activism and Hongkongers' acts of resistance against government suppression, this article helps enact what Laura Briggs and Robyn Spencer call "radical transnational feminism," which identifies coalition potential across movements "work[ing] to undo the nation and its violences" (Briggs and Spencer 2019, 255). Focusing on how Hongkongers at the grassroots level work toward maintaining their rights to give birth and to parent their children in a safe environment—two of the three main pillars of RJ—I point to opportunities for alliances and solidarity among Hongkongers, transnational feminists, and RJ activists who are actively working to resist state oppression (Ross and Solinger 2017).

Finally, this article participates in ongoing discussions about the merits and limitations of decentralized social movements. Some argue that spontaneous and mostly nonhierarchical movements may fall short in achieving long-term political success because participants, unaccountable to any formal leadership structures, hold "uncompromising" attitudes toward their demands (Cheng and Chan 2017, 235). Regarding the Anti-ELAB protest, some critics argue that protesters were either unable or unwilling to concede to the government when the government offered compromises, which risked jeopardizing the interests of the city (Bush 2019; Mok 2019). Critics who hold this view believe that a hierarchical movement that will strategically negotiate and compromise with a sitting regime will be more successful in the long run (Bush 2019). Young Hong

Kong activists, however, found bottom-up activism and decentralized actions more empowering as they are less likely to be co-opted or contained by the regime (E. Cheng 2016). As Hong Kong researchers Edmund Cheng and Wai Yin Chan observe, “horizontal and voluntary engagement fostered spontaneous actions that induced a resilient occupation” (Cheng and Chan 2017, 233). Such resilience, I argue, illustrates the coalition potential that germinates from the voluntary acts of resistance that Hongkongers performed.

Hence, instead of evaluating the value of grassroots tactics based on how effective they are in initiating immediate political changes, I examine these community responses through the lens of RJ to illustrate how these tactics of resistance not only effectively subvert the status quo but do so in a way that activates the potential to create meaningful, multi-issue coalitions across different social sectors and positionalities. Because examples of grassroots resistance during the Anti-ELAB movement are vast, I limit this article’s focus to community organizing and resistance to the tear gas public health crisis.

It is important to note that feminist scholars in Hong Kong have also critiqued the decentralized structure of the movement. For example, Susanne Choi notes that while she has observed an increase in Hong Kong women’s participation in protests, many women protesters trivialize the sexism and misogyny that they have experienced in movement spaces (cited in X. Su 2019). Similarly, Petula Sik Ying Ho argues that in masculinist organizing spaces such as the online forum LIHKG, where misogynist and sexist tropes are often left unchallenged, feminist concerns are often dismissed as inconsequential or as distractions from the movement’s primary political goals (Ho 2019). By adopting an intersectional feminist lens to analyze grassroots tactics during the protest, I seek to make clear that anti-authoritarian struggles and coalitions are intimately connected to a feminist vision of justice.

The Reproductive Justice Framework

Founded in 1994 by a coalition of women of color, the RJ framework centers three pillars of rights: “The right *not* to have a child; the right to *have* a child; and the right to *parent* children in safe and healthy environments” (Ross and Solinger 2017, 9). When taken together, these three pillars demonstrate the interconnectivity among different systems of power and oppression. For instance, whereas police brutality may, at first glance, not fit within the scope of reproductive politics, it is in fact a matter of reproductive justice as it hampers marginalized people’s rights to raise their children safely. The RJ framework recognizes that in order for marginalized people to secure the three pillars of rights, we must concurrently address the different sociopolitical and environmental components—such as air and water quality and access to health services—that inform communities’ well-being. By highlighting the intersections and constellation of forces that make it difficult for people to “live, birth, parent, and sustain their

families,” RJ urges activists and researchers to take an intersectional, multi-issue approach to social change (Jolly 2016, 167).

Centering the experiences of those who are most impacted by the interlocking systems of domination, the RJ framework focuses on grassroots organizing and coalition building across difference rather than on advocacy at the policy level (Ross and Solinger 2017). As RJ cofounder Loretta Ross astutely points out, the intersectionality in RJ “make[s] visible the web of apparently disparate politics that form a totalizing containment system” (Ross 2017, 291). As such, the RJ framework brings together communities and people who are differentially affected by social, economic, political, cultural, sexual, civil, and environmental injustices, encouraging tactics of resistance that interrupt the status quo and dominant logics of institutional power (Felice 1996). While participants and stakeholders may not all share the same positionality, they invent and enact complementary forms of resistance that address different facets of institutional oppression.

Although the RJ framework was founded by and has traditionally focused on women of color in the United States, recent scholarship has begun to explore how the framework can be used to address transnational inequities and national systems of oppression outside the United States (Fixmer-Oraiz 2013, 126; Jolly 2016). As Jallicia Jolly argues, prioritizing a transnational approach to RJ allows us to “craft and expand interventions aimed at maintaining the conditions necessary for safe and healthy lives and living conditions globally” (2016, 174). Whereas they do not explicitly evoke RJ in their organizing, examples of transnational feminist coalitions—such as the alliances among Texas shrimp farmers or the victims of Bhopal, and the lone white Australian woman who chose to fast alongside asylum-seekers detained in the infamous Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre—can enrich the RJ framework by illustrating how marginalized communities cultivate and enact solidarity across cultural and national differences through their shared interests in overcoming systems of oppression (Gandhi 2006; Visweswaran 2010).² Since the RJ framework recognizes the intimate linkage between reproductive freedom and other social justice issues such as environmental justice and police violence (Price 2010), articulating transnational connections based on common concerns and interest can foster what Karma Chávez calls “coalitional moments” (2013, 9), allowing for organizing events that mobilize RJ and other activists from disparate social movements.

At the same time, the coalitional histories of RJ—its focus on grassroots organizing and storytelling from the margins—can shed light on questions of praxis and ethics that have preoccupied transnational feminist researchers. For instance, “can notions such as solidarity and responsibility, trust and hope, vulnerability and reflexivity serve a useful purpose in ethically navigating the forms of epistemic violence in which metropolitan academics are, and will always remain, complicit?” (Nagar 2014, 3). Because RJ was first created by women of

color in the United States as a theoretical framework and grassroots organizing response against interconnected injustices—such as racism in the pro-choice movement and eugenic practices against Puerto Ricans, Black, and Indigenous women—it offers a productive lens to interrogate how researchers can ethically study and enact solidarity alongside grassroots activists.

Given the fertile connection between transnational feminism and reproductive justice, in this article, I take on Jolly's call for a transnational turn in RJ by focusing on the framework's second and third pillars: the right to have a child and the right to parent in a safe and sustainable community. Because the third pillar in particular encompasses a variety of interconnected issues that affect families' and communities' well-being, it allows for space to cultivate coalitions not only across different communities within the same locale but also across social movements around the globe. In the following section, I conduct an "RJ-informed rhetorical analysis" (Yam 2020, 4) to understand the various grassroots responses in Hong Kong to the government's rampant deployment of tear gas and other toxic chemicals. Driven by this methodology, I seek to amplify the tactics invented and enacted by community members who were most affected. I also pay attention to coalition moments from the margins in response to this shared crisis.

In my analysis, I demonstrate that there is a productive connection between decentralized anti-authoritarian movements and the reproductive right for people to raise their children in a safe environment. Whereas activists who struggle against oppressive state regimes may not invoke RJ or make overt arguments related to reproductive freedom, the diffuse nature of RJ's third pillar calls on RJ scholars and activists to cultivate productive transnational alliances with movements that are trying to make their local communities more livable spaces for all. By applying the intersectional lens of RJ to transnational politics, we can cultivate, as Chandra Mohanty suggests, "a notion of political solidarity and common interests" that bring together activists from "across class, race, and national boundaries that is based on shared material interests" (Mohanty 2003, 145).

Everyday Tactics of Resistance

Violent clashes between Anti-ELAB protesters and the police intensified during the summer of 2019 after the government's repeated refusal to answer the movement's core demands, which included establishing an independent committee to thoroughly investigate alleged police brutality and collusion with pro-Beijing gangs (H. Chan 2019). During early August, many peaceful assemblies ended with militant actions that dispersed into residential areas. In response, anti-riot police conducted arrests in those areas and deployed copious amounts of tear gas in densely populated residential districts. During these sieges, many community members and peaceful protesters who had never engaged in militant actions were

physically and verbally abused by police. As police fired tear gas indiscriminately into enclosed everyday living spaces like malls, subway stations, and dense housing complexes, many civilians in the vicinities, including pregnant women, children, and elderly, were inadvertently harmed by toxic gases and residues (Mahtani et al. 2019; McPherson and O'Donnell-Lamb 2019). Although police deployed water cannons less frequently and primarily outside dense residential areas, pedestrians and journalists were struck. The most notable case involved two members of the South Asian community and the executive director of a minority rights group, who were struck and harmed by the pepper-based blue solution while standing in front of the largest mosque in Hong Kong, not engaging in any confrontation against the police (K. Cheng 2019b).

These dispersed and everyday incidents of police violence and misuse of force fostered a deep sense of solidarity among Hongkongers who otherwise belonged to different communities. As Francis Lee observes, police violence in residential areas has created among residents and different camps of protesters “a feeling that everyone was in the same boat” (Lee 2020, 26). Because the Hong Kong public no longer trusted the government, police actions were widely deemed illegitimate (K. Cheng 2019c). According to Karl-Dieter Opp and Wolfgang Roehl, state suppression that is perceived to be unjust tends to activate “micromobilization” that spurs disparate acts of resistance (Opp and Roehl 1990, 521). The decentralized and nonhierarchical nature of the Anti-ELAB movement prompted previously undeployed tactics of resistance from different strata of Hongkongers. As David Snow and Dana Moss argue, nonhierarchical movements tend to foster “openness, innovation, and experimental forms of collective actions” (Snow and Moss 2014, 1128). In what follows, I examine three tactics that Hongkongers engage in—cross-generational family marches, underground medical networks, and citizen science—in response to the toxic chemicals released by police weapons that threatened to undermine the community’s health and well-being. This analysis illuminates the local and transnational coalition potential created by these grassroots actions in their shared common goal of cultivating and sustaining a safe communal environment for all amid state suppression and political unrest.

Families and Mothers against State Violence and Biopolitical Hazards

Police violence against protesters began escalating in June 2019, after protesters surrounded the Legislative Council to prevent the second reading of the extradition bill. In response to the eighty-one injuries caused by police clearance, about 6,000 mothers dressed in black participated in a peaceful sit-in. In addition to distributing carnations (a flower that symbolizes motherhood), these mothers also held up signs that read “Don’t Shoot Our Kids” and “Hands Off Our Kids” (Tong and Grundy 2019). Later, in November and December 2019, hundreds of protesters—most of them parents with young children—participated in peaceful marches against the police. Yelling the slogan “No tear gas,” protesters marched

with signs that read “Protect Our Kids,” “Tear Gas on School Campus,” and “Are You Brave Enough to Take Your Kids to the Park?” Some of them held up images of children who had developed severe allergic reactions to tear gas residues that lingered on spaces like park benches (K. Leung 2019).

Participants in these rallies and marches explained that they felt compelled to speak out against the police because they feared that there were no longer any safe space for children in the city. One teacher lamented that he found tear gas debris and canisters around his school weeks after a series of police actions nearby (L. Wong 2019). Some parents divulged that not only were they afraid to take their children to public places, but they also felt powerless in keeping their children safe at home because tear gas permeates through windows (Green Earth Hong Kong 2019).

These marches were direct responses to the public health panic generated by police misuse of tear gas. Because the government had not clarified the chemical content of the tear gas, rumors began spreading online that people affected by the chemical should avoid getting pregnant for two years lest they risk fetal deformities and miscarriages. Doctors were unable to resolve public suspicion because they too were kept in the dark by the government about the exact content and health impacts of the tear gas canisters (Jim 2019). A nursing mother who breastfed after she was exposed to tear gas reported that her physician was at a loss when her newborn daughter broke out in hives afterwards. When she shared her experience on social media, she realized that many parents had had similar experiences (*Hong Kong Connection* 2019b).

In response to these community health concerns, the grassroots environmental organization Green Earth Hong Kong published several op-eds calling for the government to conduct extensive research and explain to the public the toxicity and health effects of tear gas; to provide sufficient protective gear to frontline workers—especially street cleaners, who were exposed to toxic particles but who are among the most marginalized in society; and to enact specific policies to ensure that schools and parks affected by tear gas were completely free of toxic residues (Chu 2019). As the RJ framework illustrates, the rights to have children and to parent one’s children safely cannot be separated from interlocking systems of oppression that affect most negatively people who occupy multiple marginalized statuses. In this case, families, pregnant people, and parents who are poor were subjected to the most harm because they tend to live in dense areas and could not escape the toxic gas emitted by tear gas canisters.

By withholding information about the content of the canisters, the Hong Kong government enacted political suppression through body politics: not only did the tear gas function as a deterrent for protesters the moment they were deployed, but they also continued to suppress people’s freedom of speech and assembly by creating public anxiety and panic over its lingering toxicity. By organizing marches that centered the everyday struggles parents were facing to protect their children, Hongkongers made clear that the Anti-ELAB

movement was not only about the extradition bill, which had since been formally withdrawn—rather, the movement challenged the way the government exercised biopolitical control over the citizens' right to raise a family in a safe and sustainable environment. This cross-generational performance of resistance demonstrates that an anti-authoritarian movement must simultaneously address different systems and strategies of suppression enacted by the state.

Under the banner of “Protect Our Kids,” the mothers' rally and family marches successfully mobilized Hongkongers who otherwise might not have attended protests: parents with toddlers in tow, teachers, housewives, and retirees. These participants directly challenged Beijing and the Hong Kong government's portrayal of protesters as militant rioters who did not care about Hong Kong's future (Lam 2019). By pointing out how children—the future citizenry of Hong Kong—had been harmed by the police force, protesters turned the government's argument on its head to illustrate that there could be no prosperous society if the government did not allow families to live in a safe community, free from police brutality, toxic gases, and chemical weapons.

Hong Kong protesters were not alone in mobilizing the maternal appeal to condemn violence, or in connecting state policies with environmental justice and reproductive justice. Abby Dubisar has examined how African American mother-activists perform “public mothering” and “buffer rhetorics” to unify communities against violence (Dubisar 2018, 196). By centering their identities as mothers and the injured protesters as their children, Hong Kong women enacted what Dubisar calls “buffer rhetorics” as they occupied local public spaces and condemned state violence while expressing love and support to another (196).

Just as maternal activism connects state violence to RJ, reproductive justice is also intimately tied to struggles for environmental justice. As legal scholar Angie McCarthy (2013) argues, both justice frameworks recognize the rights for people to have healthy pregnancies and to raise healthy children; both movements also encourage grassroots organizing and social actions from those most negatively impacted by policy decisions. At the height of the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States, a reproductive justice organization called the Colorado Doula Project was the first to call tear gas “an abortifacient,” noting its impact on people's reproductive organs in Chile, Palestine, and Bahrain (Martínez 2020). The family marches in Hong Kong serve as an example that highlights both local and transnational coalition potentials between environmental and reproductive justice movements.

Underground Medical Networks

Because of widespread mistrust of the government, Hongkongers were suspicious not only toward the police force but also toward medical institutions. People who were injured during clashes avoided visiting hospitals and clinics in fear that established medical institutions would succumb to governmental pressure and release their personal information to the police, resulting in retaliation

(*Hong Kong Connection* 2019a; *Apple Daily* 2019). Because of the Anti-ELAB movement's decentralized and fluid nature, confrontations frequently occurred in highly populated spaces like shopping malls and subway stations. As a result of the police's indiscriminate use of force, many pedestrians who were in the proximity but did not participate in the protests suffered physical injuries, primarily from batons and pepper sprays (*Hong Kong Connection* 2019a; Mahtani et al. 2019). Even though they did not participate in what the government considered unlawful assemblies, victims of police violence were still hesitant to seek medical treatment from mainstream clinics and hospitals.

In response to the high demand for professional medical advice and treatment, teams of doctors, nurses, physical therapists, and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) practitioners set up underground networks through the messaging app Telegram to provide pro bono services to injured protesters and community members. According to one voluntary medical team, they received on average six cases a day, mostly young people in their teens and 20s. More than two-thirds of these cases were caused by police violence, including tear gas, water cannons, and physical assault. The youngest patient this team treated was six months old; the baby showed signs of skin irritation after exposure to tear gas, and the parents felt safer contacting the underground medical network than seeking help from mainstream clinics (*Apple Daily* 2019). In a different case, a pregnant woman was on her way to dinner when a clash broke out between frontline protesters and the police in a subway station. She was hit with a police baton when she tripped and fell amid the chaos. Even though she was only a passerby who did not participate in any protest actions, she was too worried to seek medical treatment at a public hospital; instead, she sought help from a voluntary group of TCM practitioners through Telegram (*Hong Kong Connection* 2019a).

Because TCM, which does not involve any controlled substances, is less tightly regulated and surveyed by the government than Western biomedicine, many Hongkongers who were caught up in protest actions felt less leery seeking treatment from TCM practitioners. While Hongkongers have historically viewed Chinese medicine as inferior to Western due in part to a colonial mentality that privileges Western knowledge production and technologies, the Anti-ELAB movement prompted the public to seek care outside established medical institutions and instead rely on ancestral health knowledge and practices (Chan and Tsang 2018). The alliance between pro-democracy activists and TCM practitioners during the Anti-ELAB movement illuminates the coalition potential between anti-authoritarian movements and efforts to decolonize medical knowledge and practices.

Cases of frightened Hongkongers seeking treatment outside the formal medical system illustrate that by providing voluntary community care out of the purview of state-regulated institutions, underground TCM networks helped craft an environment in which people felt safe to take care of their own health and to raise a family. A local TV documentary titled "Between Doctors and Patients"

followed a TCM practitioner named Dr. Lee who coordinated the Telegram group for one of the underground medical networks (*Hong Kong Connection* 2019a; A. Su 2019). In addition to consulting with anonymous patients via Telegram, Dr. Lee also saw patients in his clinic. Because TCM clinics are less tightly surveilled by the state, he had the liberty to omit certain personal information from patients' records in order to protect his clients' privacy. By respecting patients' privacy and supporting them in their physical and emotional health, Lee's clinic and others like it played an integral role in maintaining a livable environment for Hongkongers amid ongoing police violence and state suppression of political freedom.

The documentary shows Dr. Lee consulting with a female patient, Kay, in person. Never showing her face to the camera, Kay disclosed to Dr. Lee that after inhaling tear gas in close range a few months earlier, she had been experiencing severe coughs and menstrual irregularities. Kay was afraid to visit a public hospital for her cough because it was a telltale sign of tear gas exposure; she worried that the medical staff would report her to the police. During her consultation, she told Dr. Lee that she had previously sought help from another TCM practitioner but did not reveal that her menstrual issue was related to tear gas exposure. Dr. Lee chuckled and said, "in here, you can tell me everything, even if you have been exposed to nuclear bombs" (*Hong Kong Connection* 2019a). That comment evokes a popular protest slogan for solidarity: "No severing of ties [with protesters], not even during a nuclear blast" (Lee 2020, 27). The slogan took on a new meaning in the context of medicine: Dr. Lee was making a promise to his patient that his allegiance to her as her doctor would always take precedence.

The alliance between TCM practitioners and Hong Kong activists exemplifies how the Anti-ELAB movement created coalitions across social groups to mobilize marginalized ancestral knowledge to help protect citizens' health and give the community a sense of safety. While doctors who practice Western medicine were at a loss to treat tear gas exposure cases because the government refused to release the ingredient list of the tear gas canisters used, TCM practitioners mobilized their knowledge of herbal medicine, acupuncture, and bone-setting to give comfort to their patients (*Hong Kong Connection* 2019b). A group of TCM practitioners called the "National Calamities TCM Doctors," for example, concocted and distributed ointments and tonics to treat common tear gas exposure symptoms, such as nausea, chronic cough, anxiety, and skin irritation (*Hong Kong Connection* 2019b; A. Su 2019). In two months, that group treated 2,500 patients through donations and pro bono work (A. Su 2019). As the coordinator of the group said, "We help treat [victims of police violence]. We don't take any money. And if we can, we also help them get rid of that fear" (A. Su 2019). The practitioners' attunement to their patients' fear and anxiety was significant, as an increasing number of Hongkongers now suffered from immense stress, depression, and trauma (Master 2019). Because

of political sensitivity and ongoing stigma against mental illness, many felt that they could not seek help through the dominant medical system. By listening to Hongkongers about their experiences and treating their bodies in a respectful and private manner, these underground TCM practitioners provided care that connected the physical, the emotional, and the communal to make the city a bit more livable amid interlocking systems of governmental suppression.

Hongkongers are not alone in developing a justifiable distrust toward dominant medical institutions, and subsequently devising grassroots networks and tactics to circumvent oppressions that could be dangerous or fatal. These networks demonstrate the ways that marginalized communities can mobilize their knowledge and resources to protect their right to birth, parent, and live in a safe environment. Such instances are not isolated to Hong Kong during the Anti-ELAB movement. In response to the huge racial disparities in maternal and infant mortality in the United States, in which Black women are four times more likely than white women to die in childbirth, Black midwives have begun supporting more home births (Allen 2019; Akitunde 2017). While Black granny midwives have a long cultural lineage—like TCM—they have been systemically undermined by the institution of Western biomedicine practiced primarily by white men (Bonaparte 2015; Chan and Tsang 2018). In her historical study, sociologist Alicia Bonaparte describes the racist and sexist campaigns that male physicians in the 1900s deployed to discredit practicing Black midwives, even though the midwives were often the matriarchal figures in their communities who had long been serving poor Black women in rural areas (Bonaparte 2015). By reclaiming and mobilizing traditional knowledge in medicine to care for community members who do not feel safe in mainstream medical institutions, Black home birth midwives and the underground TCM practitioners in Hong Kong are similarly enacting reproductive justice at the grassroots level.

Like Hongkongers who feared being reported or discriminated against by medical professionals in public hospitals, many Black women do not trust that hospital staff has their best interests in mind because of the long history of medical racism and the ongoing stigma against Black mothers (Oparah et al. 2018; Owens 2018; Roberts 1998). Not only are home births mostly safe for low-risk pregnancies, they also help shield Black birthing people from obstetrics and institutional racism that has cost the lives of many (American College of Nurse Midwives 2016; D. Davis 2019; Oparah et al. 2018). As Black midwife Asasiya Muhammad explains, “a lot of it is a trust issue. All systems, not just healthcare, we have experienced oppression and micro-aggressions. It feels better being with someone who feels like a mom, an aunt, someone you can relate to. Our relationship is ingrained in our care” (Allen 2019).

Hong Kong’s underground TCM network and Black midwifery are both examples of community care as a form of grassroots resistance. While existing discussions and performances of community care tend to focus on the US context, Hong Kong’s underground medical network illustrates transnational

coalition potential through the shared interest of fostering communal well-being amid state oppression. Muslim community organizer and researcher Nakita Valerio defines community care as “people committed to leveraging their privilege to be there for one another in various ways” (Dockray 2019). People of color activists in the United States argue that community care is a grassroots form of resistance for marginalized people because it mobilizes collective resources and support to counter the shared trauma that people at the nexus of oppression experience (T. Davis n.d.; Dockray 2019). In the Hong Kong context, TCM practitioners who are on the margin of a healthcare system dominated by Western biomedicine step up to provide care to activists and everyday citizens when they feel too threatened by state suppression to seek necessary care. By encouraging people in marginalized communities to organize, support, and care for each other through their respective knowledge and expertise, community care is intimately connected to the intersectional and feminist orientation of reproductive justice.

Citizen Science

Since September 2019, an increasing number of Hongkongers reported lingering symptoms on their and their children’s bodies after exposure to tear gas. While the government insisted that tear gas would not cause any long-term negative health or environmental impacts, the public remained doubtful. Chemistry professors and netizens on LIHKG hypothesized that the high heat released by burning tear gas canisters produced dioxins—toxic environmental pollutants that can cause cancer, hormonal disruption, and changes in one’s reproductive and immune systems (*Hong Kong Connection* 2019b; Ma 2019). The public’s fear was reinforced in November when a frontline journalist was diagnosed with chloracne, a rare skin disorder caused by long-term exposure to dioxins (Ma 2019).

Despite ongoing public pressure for the Hong Kong government to disclose the contents of its crowd-control chemical weapons, the government refused to comply. By obscuring the ingredients and actual health impact of police weapons, the government continues to enact a biopolitical form of suppression: the unknown health risks and anecdotal reports of lingering severe symptoms associated with tear gas can serve to deter protesters from taking to the street.³ This suppressive strategy is a reproductive injustice because it takes away the peoples’ right to make fully informed decisions about whether it is safe to get pregnant and to parent their existing children. In order to fully understand the health risks that their community was exposed to, teams of Hongkongers began engaging in citizen science, collecting data on the street during police clashes. Like the underground medical networks, these grassroots research teams mobilized to help create a safer and more sustainable environment where the government had fallen short. By participating in citizen science and rendering their findings digestible for the public, these Hongkongers advanced the second

and third pillars of reproductive justice: the right to have children and the right to parent children in a safe environment.

Recent research conceptualizes citizen science as “the emerging practice of using digital technologies to crowdsource information about natural phenomena,” in which everyday citizens volunteer to collect and transmit field data to formally trained scientists for analysis (Wynn 2019, 2; Paulos, Honicky, and Hooker 2009). This framework assumes that while they rely on the citizen-science networks to accomplish research objectives, the projects and methods are primarily designed and led by scientists. The citizen science in Hong Kong, however, challenges this definition and assumption. Because the universities in the city were embroiled in the political struggle with the government, many research initiatives were designed and undertaken by citizen volunteers who had some scientific training but were not all professional scientists.

In response to the public concern that Chinese-made tear gas canisters burned at a higher temperature and hence released more toxins, a group of science graduate students volunteered to collect field data. With a handheld device capable of measuring up to 1,000°C, they visited various protest sites and collected temperature data in real time during police actions (*Hong Kong Connection* 2019b). Triangulating their findings with secondary research, the team found that Chinese-made tear gas canisters tended to reach higher temperatures than those made in the United States, and hence were more likely to release more environmental pollutants. The team also measured a high concentration of cyanide at protest sites where many rounds of tear gas were fired (*Hong Kong Connection* 2019b). By conducting this research and notifying Hongkongers of the health risks they were being exposed to, this team of citizen scientists countered the government’s suppressive strategy and allowed the public to make more informed reproductive and parenting decisions.

This group of citizen scientists belonged to HKGETV, a volunteer-run online TV platform that produced and circulated research-based educational videos and infographics about the movement. Because of social divisions and widespread public distrust of the government, many Hongkongers had fallen victim to fake news on social media (Banjo and Lung 2019). In the context of public health, disinformation and rumors hindered Hongkongers’ ability to make fully informed decisions about their and their family’s health and well-being. By conducting on-the-ground research and releasing evidence-based content on social media, the journalists and citizen scientists at HKGETV were simultaneously cultivating public media literacy and ensuring the safety of the community.

HKGETV’s research effort was not the only example of citizen science during the Anti-ELAB movement. The Hong Kong-based Citizens’ Press Conference initiative conducted and released the largest citizen-led survey on the health impacts of tear gas; a team of forty-five chemical engineers collected and examined remaining tear gas particles on the campus of Chinese University of Hong Kong after a police siege; and a former university biology major risked

personal safety to tape Tupperware containers at clash sites to collect samples from the police water cannon (Citizens' Press Conference 2019; *Hong Kong Connection* 2019b; Yongxin 2019). These examples highlight not only that citizen science can bring about social transformation by promoting a more symbiotic relationship between scientists and laypeople, as existing research suggests, but that it is also an immensely powerful tool in fostering solidarity amid political divide through the mutual interest in fostering a safe environment for all (Dickinson and Bonney 2015).

The citizen science enacted during the Anti-ELAB movement echoes most recently the collaboration between Flint, Michigan, resident LeeAnne Walters and scientist Marc Edwards who, together with other health professionals and community members, exposed that city's water crisis (McQuaid 2016). In both cases, the systemic suppression of information by state agencies threatened the community's well-being and the people's rights to reproduce and parent safely. A transnational turn to RJ would invite us to understand these cases not as disparate examples of grassroots resistance to environmental toxicity, but as community networks and tactics that carry coalition potential across societal and national differences through their shared interests in cultivating a safe and sustainable environment.

Conclusion

In this article, I have highlighted community tactics that Hongkongers deployed at the grassroots level in response to the public health crisis posed by crowd-control chemical weapons. By adopting the lens of reproductive justice to understand these tactics and community networks as Hongkongers' ways to protect their rights to give birth and parent in a safe environment, I illustrate that seemingly disparate acts of resistance and community care across social strata can coalesce to form coherent responses against state suppression and willful negligence of public health. Although the communal acts of resistance I examine in this article are local to Hong Kong, they echo resistance tactics and social movements in the United States and beyond that all seek to create a more sustainable environment for one to safely give birth, parent, and live. There is, therefore, immense transnational coalition potential between RJ activists and pro-democracy Hongkongers in the Anti-ELAB movement.

The lack of government concessions and substantial police changes toward universal suffrage tends to encourage an overall pessimistic view of the Anti-ELAB movement, or of decentralized grassroots organizing writ large. By amplifying everyday acts of resistance that Hongkongers have engaged in and illustrating their social significance and coalition potential, this article provides an alternative framework to analyze and understand nonhierarchical social movements. Rather than focusing on their effectiveness in causing regime or substantial policy changes, we can examine the ways that people engage at the

grassroots level in ingenious acts of resistance, forming coalitions across difference through shared interests and concerns for their communities.

Hong Kong and the United States are not the only places where everyday citizens are engaging in a variety of nonviolent civil resistance against state oppression. Countries such as Chile, Iraq, and Bolivia have also been embroiled in protests against corruption, inequality, and state suppression of political freedom (BBC News 2019). Activists across nation-states share similar political goals and often demonstrate solidarity with one another by deploying similar protest tactics. Organizers in Barcelona, for instance, borrowed Hongkongers' strategy to protest at their local airport; Catalan activists, on the other hand, distributed infographics made by Hongkongers that detailed how protesters could protect themselves from tear gas and police water cannons (BBC News 2019). Such transnational grassroots coalitions are necessary because incidents of state violence in different countries are interconnected with one another. Just as the Hong Kong police have received training from the US State Department, Nigeria's infamous police unit SARS was funded and trained by the UK government (W. Chan 2020; Forrest 2020). By paying closer attention to the organizing strategies and everyday acts of resistance and healing that people engage in to make their communities more livable, not only can we see transnational coalitional moments and solidarity, but we can also actively imagine a more livable world in which grassroots organizing can effect social change from the bottom up.

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Notes

1. This insight was gathered from my personal communication with Hong Kong activists who must remain anonymous because of state persecution.
2. Shrimp farmers and fishermen in Seadrift, Texas, held a hunger strike in solidarity with the victims of the 1984 chemical plant explosion in Bhopal, India, as they protested against Dow/Union Carbide. Both communities were affected by the environmental destruction caused by the corporation. The Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre (IRPC) in Australia was used to detain undocumented immigrants. It was closed in 2003 after repeated accusations of human rights violations.
3. Even after the street protests subsided, the Hong Kong government has continued to suppress crucial biopolitical information. For example, when the Chinese government sent in a team of medical personnel to conduct COVID-19 testing in Hong Kong, Hongkongers were concerned that the DNA samples the team collected would be used

for state surveillance purposes, and the two governments were unwilling to make the process more transparent to dispel such worries (Wee and May 2020).

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