

Original Research Articles

Black-Asian Solidarities and the Impasses of “How-To” Anti-racisms

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Abstract

During the 2020 summer of global uprisings in defense of Black life, widely circulated anti-racist reading lists created heightened demand for books that promised to teach readers how to examine their internalized racism. Situated in U.S. racial liberalism’s extensive literary genealogy, anti-racist “how-to” literature has historically swooped in during moments of heightened racialized confusion to restore narratives of American exceptionalism. This literature sustains the tenuous promise that racism is something that one can challenge in interpersonal relationships and by following specific steps toward individualized behavior correction. Building on a broader body of work that has critiqued liberal anti-racisms for detracting from abolitionist struggles against racialized injustice, this article specifically frames the limitations that “how-to anti-racisms” place on transgressive multiracial coalition building. Through ethnographic analysis of discourses and practices that move through various sites of contemporary Black-Asian American activist encounters, I build on Black and radical women of color feminist theorizations of solidarity to show how “how-tos” destabilize coalition building by overdetermining resolutions to conflict. I argue that in “settling” anti-racism into a repertoire of predetermined steps, how-to-ism constrains the contradiction, anger, and uncertainty that is fundamental to forging the radical accountability central to abolitionist work.

Keywords: anti-blackness, anti-racism, Asian Americans, coalition

Despite its immersion in a global pandemic, the world (as I write in summer 2020) is also in the midst of a global uprising in defense of Black life. The murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, George Floyd, and Elijah McClain¹ appear to have mobilized some form of public reckoning with the fact that it is policing itself—and not a few bad apples resorting to an “excessive” use of force—that is the problem. “Excess” is not excessive at all, and that is precisely the point. Judging by the outpouring of corporate statements “in solidarity with the Black community,” it seems as though the opinion that Black lives do indeed matter is an increasingly popular (or at least profitable) one to have. Still, there appears to be in this moment a heightened sense of confusion about how to be a properly anti-racist non-Black person in a world where Black lives do matter. This confusion has led to intense popular debate about the following sorts of questions: Should I say Black, or Black and brown, or people of color? What should I be reading? Am I supposed to like *Hamilton* or not? Am I being anti-Black right now? What about now? These are important questions, but I’m not sure they are the ones that most urgently need asking. After all, as bell hooks writes, “a woman who attends an unlearning racism workshop and learns to acknowledge that she is racist is no less a threat than one who does not” (1984, 54).

This piece interrogates the relationship between “how-to anti-racisms” and multiracial solidarity building, particularly at various sites of Black-Asian American racial justice work. By “how-to anti-

¹I write this list of names of Black people murdered by the state in 2020 knowing that it is incomplete and that, tragically, it will likely grow by the time anyone reads this.

racisms,” I refer to a mode of multiracial justice struggle that focuses on challenging how racism manifests in interpersonal interactions and the subsequent (un)learning of certain behaviors and utterances. This work is not in opposition to but instead often marginalizes struggles that challenge the material and ideological structures that animate the behaviors in question.

I position “how-to-ism” in a longer genealogy of racial liberalism; as Melissa Phruksachart (2020) has put it, “the long tradition of white people thinking they can read their way out of trouble.” This tradition extends back to the post-World War II period when the New Left and anticolonial movements destabilized the certainty of racial meanings housed under white supremacist modernity. The mid-century reorganization of the state into successive “race-liberal orders” was accompanied by the rise of a literary genre oriented toward restoring the “rational” structuring of racial hegemony through a process of white liberal catharsis (Melamed 2011; Singh 2005). A postwar sense that combatting racism in the United States was a question of increasing white racial literacy motivated James Baldwin (1995) to critically examine what he called the “protest novel” genre. Popular works like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Baldwin argued, provided vehicles for white salvation that require a flattening of the three-dimensionality of Black life to facilitate a discourse of paternalistic and sentimental reform.

Put differently, the literature of racial liberalism has always swooped in during moments of racialized confusion to “cast racial equality as the *telos* of American nationhood” (Singh 2005, 135). It restores a sense that racial injustice is a rational aberrance that one can, if they follow the right steps, “do something” about. And it is the very “having done something” about it that recuperates the underlying contradiction exposed in the moment of racial confusion for the restitution of American exceptionalism. In this vein, in summer 2020, as COVID-19 and the renewed popular energy around the movement for Black lives laid bare the racialized – largely anti-Black – inequities that structure US life, anti-racist reading lists flooded in-boxes and social media feeds. In a moment of intense confusion, these lists held out the tenuous promise that one could learn how to not be racist and that meaning could be restored. The problem could be settled.

And yet if there is anything that the excruciating last eight minutes and forty-six seconds of George Floyd’s life should have rendered abundantly apparent, it’s that anti-Black “terror resides in the limits of the socially tolerable” (Hartman 1997, 63). The facile restorations how-to anti-racism offers allow us to avert our eyes from the ways that anti-Blackness always already determines “rational” constructions of “normality, whiteness, and functionality” (Muhammad 2010, 7), order and safety (Camp 2016), and progress (Shange 2019). The cops and the judges are not confused. They’re doing their jobs precisely as intended. As such, the very assertion that anti-Blackness can be “settled” through a series of how-to behavioral or legislative reforms within the material and ideological scaffolding of US racial capitalism *as we know it* might be considered a tool of liberal counterinsurgency (Rodriguez 2020).

Thus, the ways “how-to” anti-racism constrains political horizons into the domesticated terrain of liberal reformism are well documented. My specific contribution with this essay, however, is to problematize the relationship between “how-to” anti-racism and multiracial coalition. I show that the consolidation of coalition work into a predetermined repertoire of how-to-isms can impede the messy, and at times anger-inducing collective struggles that Black and radical women of color feminists have argued are necessary to build revolutionary coalition (Lorde [1981] 1997; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Reagon 1983). Though the literature of racial liberalism has largely been directed toward newly awak-

ened white people, I want to show how how-to-isms circulate in largely nonwhite racial justice spaces. While the how-to-isms that move through these spaces diverge and converge with popular anti-racist literature, they still consolidate into a parallel discursive repertoire focused on individual behavior correction and interpersonal relationships. Given the fraught history of Black and Asian American coalition and conflict, I am particularly interested in how how-to-isms move through and overdetermine certain contemporary sites of Black-Asian organizing.

To that end, I start with a brief review of ongoing debates about conflict and solidarity between Black and Asian Americans² and the dynamics that have made these encounters particularly fraught. I then build on my virtual ethnography of a series of online Black-Asian solidarity panels organized throughout mid-2020 to help me identify three dominant logics — *indebted*, *transactional*, and *self-reflexive* — that circulate in contemporary Asian American efforts to express solidarity with Black struggle more broadly. My argument in this section is that these logics have become part of a repertoire that overdetermines sites of Black-Asian organizing. In other words, the performance of the repertoire *becomes* the organizing.

Turning to my ethnographic work with Asian American racial and immigrant justice organizers in Southern California, I then show how these logics played out in a series of events that prompted the sole two Black participants of a multiracial community organizing school in Orange County, California, to leave the 2018 program. The central analytic of this section is the uncertainty the organizers experienced when, for the 2019 summer, they attempted to restructure the program to center anti-Blackness more prominently in the curriculum. The point is to show how their well-intentioned efforts to eliminate anti-Black behaviors and statements from the organizing space forged shortcuts to a tenuous resolution. Yet the resolution skipped *over* what Cherríe Moraga calls the “pain and shock of difference, the joy of commonness, the exhilaration of meeting through incredible odds against it” that is coalition work. Building on Moraga’s declaration that “the passage [to coalition] is *through*, not over, not by, not around, but through” (1981, xiv), I show how how-to-ism gets us *around* coalition but not *through* it.

Black-Asian Conflict and Coalition

In the aftermath of the 1992 LA Uprising, certain progressive scholars and Black and Korean LA-based activists formed a nebulous consensus around a progressive framing of the events. This framing contended that the media’s interpretation of the uprising as resulting from long-standing interpersonal conflict between Black and Korean Americans falsely pits the two communities against each other, distracting from the true enemy of capitalism and white racial hegemony. Korean American storeowners, recently migrated to the United States and putatively unaware of the nuance of its racialized conflict, were caught unwittingly in the crossfires of a Black-White battle that had nothing to do with them

²“Asian American” originated as an oppositional political identification. Yet, its cooptation as a state-defined demographic category has allowed it to group peoples of vastly different lived experiences under an incoherent mantle. Nonetheless, popular discourses about ostensibly universal Asian American success disproving structural renderings of anti-Blackness make navigating relationships to Black liberation struggles complicated for all Asian Americans, even if their actual lived experiences vary widely.

(Abelmann and Lie 1995; E. Kim 1993). There were two innocent victims who needed to come together to seek justice.

This framing fits squarely within dominant definitions of multiracial solidarity as overcoming white supremacy's investments in dividing and conquering "people of color" (POC). Yet, "POC" as a unifying political identity comes under stress as activists and critical theorists argue that conflating Asian American and Latinx struggles with that of Black and Indigenous communities results in several violent erasures: "POC" papers over the foundational and particular nature of Black and Indigenous struggle and fails to account for how non-Black, non-Native people can both benefit from and express complicity with anti-Blackness and settler colonialism (C. J. Kim 2018; Sexton 2010a; Wolfe 2013). What Jared Sexton (2010a) theorizes as "people-of-color-blindness," then, names how multiracial solidarity work that fancies itself as transgressive is actually in cahoots with fantasies of post-racial liberalism. Was it white supremacy casting its spell on Korean American storeowner Soon Ja Du when in 1991 she shot Latasha Harlins—a fifteen-year-old Black girl—as the child was *leaving* the store following a spat over an allegedly stolen bottle of orange juice? What forces allowed for Korean Americans to own stores in Black neighborhoods in the first place? How does leaning into the uncomfortable work of identifying elements of race/class power on the part of Korean Americans mess with the neatness of the progressive post-1992 narrative (Sexton 2010b)? These are not easy questions.

When we dare complicate the neat white/nonwhite binary, the "us" and "them" of coalition becomes infinitely more complicated. Given that since the late nineteenth century, processes of Asian American and Black racialization have evolved in a tense dialectic in the service of smoothing the contradictions of US racial liberalism, Black-Asian solidarity work is a particularly fraught terrain. For example, the concurrent processes of Reconstruction and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act forged an uneasy dialectic between naturalization debates regarding formerly enslaved Black Americans and Chinese immigrants whose laboring bodies were no longer of use after completing work on the Transcontinental Railroad. An orientalist narrative that painted Chinese laborers as "perpetually foreign" disease-and-vice-ridden subjects who were intractably loyal to China counterposed the paternalistic notion that enslavement's Christian civilizing mission had been "good" for the enslaved (Jun 2011). Chinese unfitness for citizenship indexed Black eligibility for naturalization, yet it did so to the end of recuperating enslavement's horrors for liberalism's triumphant march (Wong 2015).

Relatedly, as the United States poised to fashion itself as the world's beacon of liberal democracy during the Cold War, several contradictions in the country's domestic and imperial practices stood in the way (Lowe 1996). Chief among these contradictions was the US internment of its own Japanese American citizens during WWII and increasingly powerful Civil Rights and Black Power movements drawing international attention to the continued oppression that structured Black life in liberal democracy's putative global center. It is in the postwar moment, Ellen Wu (2014) argues, that Japanese American "recovery narratives" shaped and substantiated *Moynihanian* "cultural" explanations for Black impoverishment. These recovery narratives marveled at how just twenty years on from internment, so many Japanese Americans had transitioned to the middle class and, putatively, refrained from protesting "past hardships" while doing so. The message was that if Japanese and other Asian Americans could pick themselves up by their own bootstraps, then Black failure to do the same must be no one's fault but their own. Under these multiculturalist logics, racialized oppression becomes a question of individualized rather than structural responsibility and the Asian American "example" becomes putative evidence of Black pathology. As such, "racial inequalities have nothing to do with politics or power,

we are told, but only with differences in group values. Asian Americans are thus wise to ignore politics in their pursuit of prosperity and Blacks would do well to follow their example” (C. J. Kim 1999, 121).

This brief historical excursion helps frame the particular set of tensions that inform Black-Asian social justice encounters. Processes of Black and Asian American racialization have evolved in a perpetually shifting dialectic to sustain illusions of US racial liberalism, thereby creating a difficult dynamic whereby Asian and Black American interests are often imagined as antagonistic to one another. Still, Black and Asian/Americans have an extensive history of revolutionary solidarity, rooted in anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and internationalist visions of collective liberation. From David Fagen’s defection from the US Army to fight with Philippine guerillas during the Pilipino-American War to Black antiwar protestors declaring that “no Vietnamese ever called me [expletive omitted] (Taylor 1973),³ Black and Asian/Americans have imagined and collectively struggled against US imperialism abroad and racialized injustice at home as one unbroken line of oppression. From Black Power looking to Maoism as a model of global class revolution (Kelley 2002) to the Red Guard’s modeling its form, content, and demands in the Black Panther’s image (Maeda 2009; Pulido 2006), there is a long legacy of revolutionary Black/Asian intellectual exchange.

And yet in many sites of contemporary Black-Asian coalition building these revolutionary internationalist visions are curiously absent. Instead, as Bae and Tseng-Putterman (2020) have lamented, this radical legacy has been transformed into “a domesticated version of Asian American solidarity modeled on a template of white allyship.” Ethnographically examining the two sites of contemporary Black-Asian coalition I discuss below allows me to show how allyship, or “how-to” templates create escape routes around the revolutionary genealogies of Black-Asian coalition and the generative contradictions inherent to that work.

Indebted, Transactional, and Self-Reflexive Solidarities

The confluence of COVID-19-related anti-Asian hate incidences, the outrageously disproportionate rates of infection and death in Black, Latinx, Pacific Islander, and Indigenous communities, and the relentless police killings that gave rise to the 2020 iteration of the movement for Black lives has lent a renewed urgency to Black-Asian solidarity efforts. Given the limitations of the pandemic, online panels became the central channels for these discussions. Indeed, from March to July 2020 there was such a deluge of Asian American organizations, journalists, public intellectuals, and activists hosting these discussions that I often found myself having to hop between several at the same day and time.

The profiles of the host organizations, invited panelists, and intended audiences of these panels varied widely, representing deeply divergent ideological orientations within Asian American social justice worlds. Still, a discursive consistency traversed these conversations. For example, the profiles of the Center for Asian American Media and WETA’s “Digital Town Hall: Asian Americans in the Time of COVID-19” (CAAM + WETA) or Define American’s “Black and Gold Forum” (Define American) differ drastically from that of the “Asian Americans + M4BL Call” hosted by M4BL and several anti-imperial, abolitionist Asian American organizers across the United States (Asian Americans + M4BL).

³This phrase is often attributed to Muhammad Ali, but it was used more generally by Black anti-Vietnam war protestors.

The CAAM + WETA and Define American panelists were a somewhat random mix of Black and Asian American elected officials, and relatively high-profile artists and journalists. Directed mostly at reform-minded progressives, these panels framed the problem as individualized experiences of interpersonal hate, and exclusion from white-dominated institutions. The solutions offered were primarily focused on greater representation in politics and popular culture. Alternatively, the Asian Americans + M4BL call featured Black and Asian American organizers from across the country who are deeply rooted in abolitionist work in their respective communities. Directed mostly at other similarly oriented activists, these panelists insisted that the “problem” was precisely the structures into which the CAAM + WETA/ Define American panelists sought inclusion.

A decade of racial and immigrant justice organizing and five years of ethnographic work in Asian American racial justice spaces has allowed me to identify three dominant logics that move throughout many contemporary Black-Asian American organizing spaces. These logics – what I classify as *indebted*, *transactional*, and *self-reflexive* solidarities – showed up consistently in the online forums. Solidarity rooted in *indebtedness* names the ways that Asian Americans are deeply indebted to Black liberation struggles historic and present. It often looks like quoting Black theorists, highlighting the origins of certain organizing tactics in Black resistance movements, or paying homage to the ways Asian Americans have benefitted from Black struggles. This vital sense of indebtedness leads to a second *transactional* logic that implies that Asian Americans should show up for Black-led protests, bump relevant social media content, or fight against anti-Black policies because we might need Black folks to show up for us one day. A third *self-reflexive* logic centers Asian American reckoning with anti-Blackness within ourselves and our communities. *Self-reflexivity* focuses on unlearning anti-Black behaviors and ways of thinking, while also acknowledging the ways Asian Americans benefit from Black oppression.

Within the specific context of the online forums, panelists articulated *indebtedness* to argue the indispensability of Black liberation struggles toward winning freedoms Asian Americans now enjoy. Speakers in various forums highlighted how the 1965 removal of national origin quotas that facilitated large-scale migration from Asia and Latin America was a direct consequence of the Civil Rights Movement. Others mentioned Frederick Douglass’s denouncement of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the NAACP’s support in bringing Vincent Chin’s murderers to justice. Calling in these debts is vital, but the practice becomes worrisome when deployed to draw ahistorical equivalences between Asian and Black American struggles.

This tension emerged in an incident involving an initiative from the National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association (NAAPIMHA) that seeks to document through photography Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander experiences of racism during COVID-19. After NAAPIMHA announced the project’s title as “Living While Asian,” critics charged appropriation of a central concept to contemporary Black liberation movements regarding the criminalization of every aspect of Black life. One cannot “sleep in one’s own house while Black” (Breonna Taylor, Aiyana Stanley-Jones) or “jog while Black” (Ahmaud Arbery) or even “bird while Black” (Christian Cooper) without being subject to harassment or worse. Critics argued that when non-Black people deploy this “while X subject position” configuration, it glosses the particularity of Black suffering. After renaming the project “Asians* in Focus,” NAAPIMHA issued an apology:

As a team we would like to acknowledge the feedback regarding the project’s name...When discussing what to name our project, the team chose “living while Asian” as a way to show respect and solidarity for and with the “living while Black” and “walking while Black” movement. We fully acknowledge that we did not take the steps to credit the Black

community, whose labor, energy, and pain was the catalyst in creating the phrase “Living While Black.” We wanted to add to the narrative of what it means to live in a country where discrimination and racism continue to pervade the lives of people of color (NAAPIMHA 2020).

This statement suggests that NAAPIMHA’s only fault was not sufficiently arguing their indebtedness to Black models of framing and struggling against racialized existence. The critiques waged against them, however, struck a chord that was artfully sidestepped by the statement -- that Black criminalization is a particular racial formation that does specific kinds of work toward the (re)founding of US civil society and nationhood. NAAPIMHA reverted to an indebted discourse that was readily available to them, but really had nothing to do with the nature of the critique at hand. Doing so allowed them to sidestep much more difficult questions regarding the incommensurability of Black and Asian American experiences of racialized oppression.

The *transactional* solidarity register often manifests in the language of “showing up” for one another. The logic is that Asian Americans need to “show up” for Black freedom struggles because Black people have shown up for Asian Americans in the past and both communities will continue to rely on each other in the future. Yet beyond the vital task of supporting each other’s work by, say, mobilizing people to come to a protest or sharing information on social media and listservs, there is rarely critical analysis of what “showing up” actually means. This uncritical frame is what allowed panelists of an event hosted by the Council for Korean Americans to state that “the Asian American community has not always been great at standing up for the African American or Latino communities,” and that “we should take this moment to learn what makes us all better together...and then also show up when other communities are being attacked.” The Council later asserted that the disturbing incidences of COVID-19-related anti-Asian hate called upon Asian Americans to be “engaged citizens.” Being “engaged,” according to one panelist, meant calling the police at the first sign of harassment. Ostensibly, reporting incidents of harassment would make the problem of anti-Asian racism more visible to the state. This increased visibility, the panelist reasoned, would inevitably lead to greater Asian American representation. If there is anything to be learned from 2020, however, it is that “showing up” for Black communities and emboldening the police state are innately contradictory projects. *Transactionality* allowed the panelist to evade having to struggle with what “showing up” actually means.

Finally, embedded within the *self-reflexive* frame is the assumption that what is keeping Asian Americans from standing in solidarity with Black folks is a sort of false consciousness that makes us think that it is Blackness and not white supremacy that is the enemy. *Self-reflexivity* often outsources anti-Blackness to “problematic” members of a community or to specific, discernible acts and utterances. Nowhere is self-reflexive logic more clearly embodied than in the #AsianLetters4BlackLives (“Letters”) concept. The Letters project was conceived by Chinese American ethnographer Christina Xu, who, after hearing rumors that Philando Castille’s murderer was Asian American,⁴ began to fear a reprisal of the 2014 situation in which some Chinese Americans flocked to officer Peter Liang’s defense after he killed Akai Gurley in a New York City stairwell. Thousands of second- and third-generation Asian Americans collectively edited an open letter addressed to their first-generation elders about anti-Blackness in the United States. The original 2016 letter emphasizes that as English speakers who “have grown up around people who are Black” and for whom “Black people are a fundamental part of [their] lives,” the

⁴Philando Castille’s partner, Diamond Reynolds, identified Castille’s murderer, Jeronimo Yanez, as “Chinese.” Yanez is Latinx; frankly, this is beside the point.

letter writers are positioned to explain the value of Black life to their elders and why they should take a stand to defend those lives. In 2020, after images emerged of Hmong American officer Tou Thao warding off onlookers as Derek Chauvin suffocated George Floyd, the Letters genre underwent a significant revival.

Self-reflexive discourses and specific references to the Letters project were both celebrated and criticized in the online forums. During the Define American panel, Nepalese-American fashion designer Prabal Gurung lamented an unwillingness on the part of “our uncles and aunties in the older generation” to discuss anti-Blackness in Asian America. Gurung straightforwardly stated that because of their ostensible internalization “of the narrative that was set by the colonists” he didn’t have much hope for older generations. Yet speakers on the Asian Americans + M4BL call argued for continued investment in educating elders. For example, Hmong and Cambodian American activists emphasized the importance of translating anti-racist terms like “anti-Blackness” and “white supremacy” that don’t currently exist as concepts within our elders’ native languages. Another activist suggested drawing connections between anti-Blackness and histories of oppression in our parents’ home countries. For example, she stated, one could point out how the Japanese imperial practice of taking names and language away from Korean subjects mirrored similar acts of dehumanization against enslaved Africans.

However, other interlocutors had less favorable readings of the *self-reflexive* genre. During an event hosted by GYOPO, an LA-based Korean American artist collective, a longtime Korean American activist offered a scathing critique of the Letters project. She argued that it is mostly a privileged subgroup of college-educated, upwardly mobile East Asian Americans engaging in the Letters work, and who are doing so to scapegoat and distance themselves from non-English-speaking immigrants who do not have access to the same “woke” online conversations and ethnic studies courses they do. Further, she asserted, to use Tou Thao’s complicity with George Floyd’s murder as a jumping off point to demand that “our community needs to do better” reveals “the falsehood of a claim of Pan-Asian solidarity” that ignores the extremely different lived experiences of East and “darker and poorer Southeast Asians that don’t speak English and tend to suffer from more income inequality, institutionalized racism and anti-Asian violence.” For the activist, the Letters concept is akin to Chinese and Korean Americans who wore “I am not Japanese” or “I Hate the Japs More than You Do” pins during World War II Japanese American incarceration. She asserted: “This is in effect what elite East Asian Americans are saying: ‘I hate Tou Thao and those racist and ignorant Asian Americans more than you do.’” Outsourcing anti-Blackness to older generations allowed the letter writers to both evade their own complicities and murkier questions about the uneven distribution of oppression and complicity within Asian America.

None of these discourses are unimportant. Indebtedness, self-reflexivity, and accountability over transactionality are necessary aspects of multiracial struggle. The problem is, however, that exclusive reliance on these forms can overdetermine the range of discursive and strategic possibilities in contemporary Black-Asian solidarity work. By “overdetermination” I mean that mentioning a specific set of historical Black-Asian encounters, of reminding people about the importance of showing up for one another, of urging people to unlearn their anti-Blackness becomes part of a predictable solidarity repertoire. The repertoire, while covering important ground, puts brackets around the beginning and the end of the conversation, such that you come to know how it ends before it even begins. *Indebtedness* so overdetermined NAAPIMHA’s response to criticism about its name that its apology didn’t attend to the actual nature of the criticism. *Transactionality* allowed participants of the Council of Korean Americans panel to avoid having to wrestle with the fact that “showing up” means having to give things up.

Self-reflexive talk overdetermined the #LettersforBlackLives work, such that it could not provide ways to contemplate the nuanced and uneven distribution of effects of class and racialized oppression *within* ethnic groups brought together under the mantle of Asian American. When a moment of tension arises the repertoire provides a release valve to conflict and brings us to provide answers to questions that aren't the ones being asked.

***Isang Bagsak*:⁵ Anti-Blackness in Multiracial Organizing Work**

“Regarding our efforts to center anti-Blackness in our work, we’re not organizing with a specific direction in mind, we’re just organizing out of fear of being called out.” Rebecca reflected on her two summers participating in—and now running—the “*Isang Bagsak* Organizing School.” *Isang Bagsak* is a racial and immigrant justice community organizing school for, activists of color ages sixteen to twenty-four. The school is run by three Korean American, Vietnamese American, and Latinx-serving immigrant and racial justice organizations that for the past few years have been at the forefront of progressive politics in Orange County, California (OC). Throughout the summer, interns meet five times a week to move through a curriculum that employs active learning to introduce different areas of racial and immigrant justice work. All of the coordinators were either Asian American or Latinx, as were all the interns—with the exception of two Black interns in the 2018 cohort. I interviewed twenty coordinators and interns from the 2018 and 2019 cohorts and participated directly in the program throughout summer 2019.

I had asked Rebecca to reflect on her experiences participating in the program the previous summer (2018), and, now as a coleader, how those experiences shaped efforts to restructure the program in 2019 to better reflect the organizations’ commitments to centering anti-Blackness in their curriculum and political visions. The urgency of this task emerged from the fact that the year prior, the program’s two sole Black interns experienced so much hostility in the otherwise Latinx and Asian American space that they left: they demanded and received reparations from the three organizations. Birthed as a collaboration between the activists leading efforts to radically reshape a white, wealthy, and conservative OC politics to reflect the political interests of its large low-income immigrant population, *Isang Bagsak* could not provide a space for Black participants to thrive. For several reasons, I have not yet been able to interview the two women who left and I do not take this absence lightly. I thus refrain here from speculating at length about the majority of the events that pushed them out. I am working to engage with them so that in future writing I can center their experiences and the hurt that brought them to leave.

Reeling from the grave mistakes of the previous year, the *Isang Bagsak* organizers enacted several programmatic changes in 2019. Responding to arguments that the single day of anti-Blackness workshops in 2018 was woefully inadequate in the context of a summer-long program focused on multiracial organizing, the organizers expanded the 2019 anti-Blackness module to a week. Much of this week did important work in the indebtedness and transactional registers. For example, in a room where the walls were covered in cardboard signs displaying Audre Lorde and June Jordan quotations, interns participated in a “theater of the oppressed” activity in which they created and performed sketches

⁵All names in this section, including the name of the organizing school and its constituent organizations, are pseudonyms. “*Isang Bagsak*” refers to the Tagalog phrase “one rise, one fall” that, because of its use by Pilipinx and Latinx organizers in the Delano Grape Workers Strike, is often considered a symbol of Asian-Latinx unity.

based on historic moments in multiracial youth organizing. While one group acted out key moments in the 1968 student strike at San Francisco State University, another created a skit that outlined how contemporary movements employ tactics originally conceived by Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, and other members of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. In another activity, interns learned of the importance of showing up for the movement for Black lives. Given that many of the interns were undocumented and/or from mixed-status families and communities with large undocumented populations, they learned that their investments in destabilizing the deportation regime were inextricable from police and prison abolition.

Yet when I asked organizers what they thought had gone wrong the previous year, and how that affected their planning for 2019, the majority of their frustrations focused on what they described as their inaction around holding interns accountable to anti-Black statements and behaviors. As such, most of their efforts to improve the program in 2019 operated in the self-reflexive register. I briefly outline some of these events less to criticize the organizers than to provide context for why so much of their revised 2019 program centered on self-reflexive praxis. For example, much of the organizers' regret centered on the difficulty keeping in check one particular intern, who I'll call Tommy. According to all the interns and organizers I interviewed, Tommy was the author of several misogynistic and racist statements throughout the program. However, things came to a head in the context of a conversation unpacking Asian American mobilizations in defense of Peter Liang, a Chinese American NYPD officer who shot and was eventually convicted for killing Akai Gurley.⁶ Tommy claimed that he was "proud to be Asian American" and so "as a POC he had the right" to assert that Liang should not have been convicted because it was "an accident." He made similar comments about Korean American storeowner Soon Ja Du's murder of Latasha Harlins in 1991. Shocked by Tommy's comments, some interns and coordinators attempted to intervene but he continued.

This incident took place in the context of a larger debacle involving an anti-Blackness workshop. After a last-minute cancellation left the organizers in a lurch, they found a replacement facilitator from the local chapter of AAPIs for Black Lives. So, the workshop was facilitated by an Asian American man who thought it appropriate to establish his authority on the subject of anti-Blackness by declaring that he had a Black girlfriend. After this, the two Black women, who I call Charlotte and Jael, were still invested enough in the program to write the organizers a letter explaining their hurt at having been excluded from the workshop organizing process, and for having felt abandoned when the organizers stood silent in the face of Tommy's comments. Charlotte and Jael even put in the labor of creating a new presentation for their peers and finding a qualified Black facilitator for a new workshop. Yet during their carefully crafted presentation, some of the interns started to doze off, while others got up to walk around the room and stretch. Faced with such disrespect, the two women left the room in tears, cutting their presentation short. When the interns were confronted about their behavior during a healing circle held immediately after the presentation, one person said that it was "a long day" and if Charlotte and Jael wanted their undivided attention, they should have just presented before the professor. That day, Charlotte and Jael, decided to leave the program and demand monetary reparations for their emotional and intellectual labor. The host organizations conceded to these demands. Their decisions might be read as an act of what Savannah Shange calls "willful defiance," or a "mode of Black refusal that rejects the terms of the progressive promise" (2019, 140). Charlotte and Jael would not allow their pain to be resolved and swept up into a feel-good narrative of multiracial overcoming.

⁶Though it should be noted that Liang did not serve any actual jail time.

As the organizers and interns attempted to engage in a process of reflection and self-critique after Charlotte and Jael's departure, they invested much of their energy in trying to bring Tommy to account for his blatant anti-Black behaviors. This reckoning culminated in what was ultimately a failed transformative justice process that ended in the organizers forcing Tommy to leave the program. In every interview I conducted with interns and organizers alike, failure to speak up when Tommy made a problematic remark, or regret about having initiated the transformative justice process so late in the game occupied centerstage in their critical self-reflections. Yet many also felt ambivalent about the amount of time and energy the group invested in trying to bring Tommy to account. No one questioned the soundness of the decision to make him leave, but there was little agreement as to its significance. While some felt his dismissal served some degree of justice for Charlotte and Jael, others felt that it was an overblown distraction. The latter group interpreted it as a way for organizers to point to the dismissal and render the problem fixed rather than having to wrestle with larger uncertainties about what exactly, beyond getting rid of Tommy, should be done. As such, Tommy's presence in the group was damaging in more ways than one. In manifesting anti-Blackness in such overt ways, Tommy's behaviors and utterances became symbolic of the kinds of actions that needed to be corrected. The "how-to" of anti-anti-Blackness then was to not do and say things that Tommy did and said. Managing individual behavior became the beginning and the end of the work.

On the first day of the 2019 program, coordinators made it a priority to let the interns know that they would "not tolerate any anti-Blackness in the space." As the summer progressed, they reminded interns to not appropriate African American vernacular, to not use the n-word, or erase Black narratives from myriad social issues. They also created opportunities for interns to reflect on their own anti-Blackness. Such conversations took the form of "fishbowls," where participants sit in two concentric circles and rotate between the larger outer circle and the smaller inner circle. Those in the inner circle engage in an intimate conversation about the given topic while those on the outside listen quietly and take notes. On this occasion, the inner circle was told to reflect on the ways they perpetuate anti-Blackness in their daily lives. Rebecca questioned the assumed link between solidarity and what she characterized as false displays of atonement that rarely lead to meaningful action:

Looking back now, it was not so much a productive conversation where it was like "Hey we acknowledge anti-Blackness and these are the ways I've acted on it."...For me it's like how do we shift the way we talk about it away from like pointing fingers and being like "Hey, you better not be anti-Black!" But more so like doing the necessary work. And then to frame it in a way that's like "Hey we acknowledge this but like we can do something about it." But even then, I don't even know what that looks like, right?...So like our planning in relation to last year was preventative, but not productive.

Shannon, another organizer, also questioned the efficacy of what they described as a "public shaming" strategy. First, they said, it presupposes that the coordinators themselves, by virtue of having more social justice experience had so thoroughly unlearned their own anti-Blackness that they were always capable of seeing and naming its manifold manifestations in others. Second, it led interns to construct these teleological narratives that followed, in Shannon's words, an "I used to be anti-Black because I would say the n-word when it came up in songs, but now I don't so I'm good" kind of logic.

Given that the "Anti-Blackness Workshop" debacle was the tipping point in the 2018 program, the organizers were extremely deliberate in designing the 2019 workshop. Thus, they invited Dr. Nina, a Black African American Studies professor at an OC university, to do a daylong training. Yet so intense

was the coordinators' fear that the interns would say or do something offensive that they decided to do a pretraining to the training. On the day of the workshop we met a half an hour before Dr. Nina's arrival to go over ground rules. The coordinators were visibly anxious. One coordinator sternly announced to the group: "If any of y'all fall asleep I swear to God I'll kick you out." Another coordinator followed up: "Don't be saying weird shit, people." One intern recalled this moment in an interview, noting that she resented the coordinators chastising them as if she were unruly children.

As Dr. Nina went through the training, the interns – an otherwise outspoken and hilarious group – remained mostly silent. When Dr. Nina asked if they had any questions, the few interns who did speak prefaced everything with qualifying phrases like "I'm still unpacking this as I'm speaking" or "I think I need help articulating my thoughts still." More directly, one person said "don't hate me if what I say comes out shitty." Having grown accustomed to a fearless and deeply engaged group, I was taken aback by the interns' timidity. Instead of asking questions about the content of the presentation, almost everyone stuck to safer yet somewhat irrelevant queries like "What made you want to become a professor?" or "Can you share some of your poetry with us?"

During the lunch break, I drove some of the interns to Burger King. Gazing out the window one intern remarked: "Oh man, there's so much silence in that room." I asked him why he thought that was, and from the middle seat another intern chimed in: "Because anti-Blackness is such a sensitive topic I think people are afraid to say the wrong thing. Especially because the professor is Black *and* a woman." The interns' comments made me reflect on my own behavior during the workshop. For fear of appearing disrespectful, I had been too afraid to check my phone to make sure everything was okay with my in-laws, who had arrived from Argentina just two days before, and with whom I had left my five-month-old son with for the first time. I also was anxious about needing to leave the workshop briefly to go pump breastmilk. Checking in on my son and leaving to pump are not things that in my brief tenure as a mother at that point I had felt obligated to explain to anyone. And in my anxious worry and physical discomfort – about wanting to know how my son was doing but not wanting to check my phone, about needing to pump but not wanting to look rude by leaving the workshop – I missed what Dr. Nina was saying entirely.

Through Solidarity

Language and behavior have real power. My intention is not to diminish the hurt that might have been caused by texting during Dr. Nina's presentation or suddenly leaving the room with no explanation. Nor do I want to suggest that changing behavior and holding people accountable to interpersonal relationships formed within social justice structures is unimportant work. The very premise of the transformative justice pod (Mingus 2016), for example, is to identify and build relationships that allow individuals to be held accountable for interpersonal harm by their communities rather than the police. If you are going to commit to not calling 9-1-1, the well of trust you need to have in the people you call instead can never be deep enough. If you are going to invest in mutual aid work, you have to believe that your community will be there to protect you against material vulnerability, just as sure as they need to believe you'll be there to do the same (Spade 2020). Envisioning and enacting such alternative modes of community accountability *is* social justice struggle.

The problem that the coordinators ran into, however, is that an environment that is so heavily focused on anti-Blackness as a question of individual behavior actually shut off potential opportunities for developing the wells of trust that are the necessary preconditions of radical accountability. Getting rid of Tommy or ridding the room of anti-Black behavior could not but be read within a progressive register that marked anti-Blackness as being “settled.” They did the repertoire of what they were “supposed” to do and they still came up short. Shannon rolled her eyes as she said of the anti-Blackness fishbowls: “The end result felt like a bunch of people walking away and saying ‘Oh, I used to be anti-Black but now I learned what to do.’ I’m not sure that’s what we want.”

In addition to removing Tommy and restructuring the curriculum to concentrate more on the intertwinement of Asian American, Latinx, and Black racial justice struggles, another major change was to divide the program into two tracks. The organizers argued that part of the problem with last year’s cohort was that the differences between interns in degrees of experience with social justice work was too drastic. They believed that a hostile environment formed because those recently introduced to organizing did not yet have the language to understand why certain statements or ideas were problematic. The more veteran activists, in turn, were unforgiving of newer folks. Splitting the group by degrees of experience would allow greener interns to feel more comfortable learning at their own pace.

Creating a space where interns felt like they could make mistakes without being called out is vital, and the organizers made this decision to protect them from potential harm. But in putting a literal wall between those with more and less experience, they also constructed an artificial barrier to potentially painful yet generative conversations. Further, though it was not an explicitly deliberate decision, there were no Black interns in the 2019 cohort, nor had anyone even applied. Part of the reason why some organizers thought there were no Black applicants was merely a reflection of the fact that OC’s population is under two percent Black. When I asked the coordinators whether they thought the inclusion of Black interns was necessary for achieving their visions of racial justice, they all unequivocally said yes. Still, the coordinators doubted their ability to create a generative space for Black interns. More broadly, they were unsure whether it was another sign of their own anti-Blackness to presume that they, as non-Black organizers, should be doing that work, rather than, say, giving up some of their own resources to facilitate Black organizers creating Black spaces for Black people. I am unsure, however, how to reconcile this important admission with the question of how you can coalesce without any Black people in the room. I am unsure of the answers to all of these dilemmas.

In an April online panel entitled “Asian-Black Solidarity in the Time of COVID-19,” abolitionist Bay Area organizer Dr. Connie Wun stated the following:

Racial solidarity work is not about us getting along. That needs to be destroyed. It’s about us being in struggle with each other, if and how we’re going to relate and be held accountable to each other...I want us to toss out the idea that solidarity means that you and I are gonna just be cool...I need to respect you enough to struggle with you, and I hope you respect me enough to struggle with me...Freedom may not be a friendly struggle. In fact it will probably be the opposite of it.

Wun is drawing on a long lineage of Black and radical women of color feminists who have always told us that coalition work is not supposed to look or feel good (Lorde [1981] 1997); Reagon 1983). The task of accommodating individuality within difference is necessarily like fitting a square peg into a round hole. As Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983) argues, there is a need for political spaces one thinks of as a home—

prefigurative spaces where you “check everyone at the door” to ensure that their vision of how the world should be aligns with yours. But “the problem with [that] experiment,” Reagon asserts, “is that there ain’t nobody in there but folks like you, which by implication means you wouldn’t know what to do if you were running it with all of the other people who are out there in the world” (1983, 358). As such, people invested in justice work must leave their “home” spaces and venture out into uncomfortable “coalition” space:

I feel as if I’m gonna keel over any minute and die. That is often what it feels like if you’re *really* doing coalition work. Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don’t, you’re not really doing no coalescing... You don’t go into coalition because you just like it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that’s the only way you can figure out how to stay alive (Reagon 1983, 356–57).

The necessary discomfort of coalition often leads to anger among people invested in social justice struggle. Yet that anger is generative. As Audre Lorde writes, “when we turn from anger, we turn from insight, saying we will accept only the design already known, those deadly and safely familiar” ([1981] 1997, 283). Anger is useful because it helps us work through the contradiction and pain necessary for revolutionary work rather than settling for fragile connections that crumble at the first sight of trouble.

What I’ve sought to demonstrate here is how, in its attempts to rectify a series of anti-Black injustices, *Isang Bagsak* inadvertently formed a culture that foreclosed opportunities to wrestle with the anger and pain and contradiction inherent to coalition building. In “settling” anti-Blackness through individual behavior correction and removing a problematic individual, in adapting a climate where silence emerged from fear of saying the wrong thing, in physically separating people with potentially divergent views of racial justice, the organizers and interns could not venture into the murky waters of coalition as a *practice* – as something that is not given, or ever settled, but constantly fought for (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983). Their frustration demonstrates that when we narrate anti-racism as a “bildungsroman of racial literacy,” (Phruksachart 2020) we cannot let the practice generate something *else* because we already know where we’re supposed to go before setting foot outside the door.

Abolitionist Inquiry and Refusal of the “How-To”

I ended all of my interviews with *Isang Bagsak* interns and coordinators with the same question: “What does AAPI-Latinx-Black solidarity look like to you?” I would save this question for last because it invariably made both me and the interviewees uncomfortable. It seemed like they felt that in their capacity as racial justice organizers they were supposed to have the “right” answer to this question. I also felt that in my capacity as a former organizer and now an emerging scholar of activism and racialization I was supposed to have an answer as well. I think the tension emerged from a desperate desire to believe that one of us knew something the other didn’t. We were both looking for a “how-to.” But we didn’t and don’t know how-to, so what should we do with that? Following Black leadership is a must, but we are all responsible for putting in the work. Too often the imperative to center Black voices leads to a passive deflection of responsibility. I am not sure this is generative.

“How-to” anti-racism operates within a register of reformist inquiry. It asks: How can we do a bit “better” within structures that we know aren’t working? As such, it is an insufficient framework for pursuing the broader abolitionist work pursued by the three organizations that comprise *Isang Bagsak*.

Because, as Savannah Shange notes, the “space of abolitionist inquiry” lies in “the ellipses and question marks...the pause, the adagio, *the doubt* antecedent to the formation of our questions” (2019, 155). Abolition is the refusal of the “how-to.” Abolition refuses the impulse to quickly resolve dissonance into the feel-good major chord of progress. Coalition, in its refusal to ever be a settled state or to emerge after a smooth ride, hums along in the same cacophonous register. The how-to-isms of Black-Asian coalition and anti-racism I’ve identified here do important groundwork in the “home” spaces Reagon (1983) identifies. We need to name our indebtedness, our obligation to mutual reciprocity, and our internalized anti-Blackness, but we also need to venture out into the “keeling over and dying” space of coalition. Because coalition, like abolition, “is not an outcome.” The safety of the “outcome” that how-to-ism promises distracts from the need to attend to the “everyday practice” and “collective labors of freedom” (Rodriguez 2020) that is abolition and coalition. How can we refuse the “how-to” imperative to resolve what might be the irresolvable, and nonetheless continue on in an abolitionist register – one that has no road map but urges us to trudge on *as if* we knew what the answers were?

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