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## #Asians4BlackLives: Notes from the Ground

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### Introduction

This article was collectively written by four autonomous Asian American grassroots organizations inspired by the #Asians4BlackLives activist formation that emerged in the Bay Area at the end of 2014 in direct response to a call for solidarity by Black comrades through a crisscrossing constellation of Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) groups. In July 2018, one of the editors of this piece issued an open national call inviting radical Asian American groups working in solidarity with Black liberation and beyond to consider collectivizing our voices for a shared piece to submit. The anchoring commitment was to center active sites of struggle within the discourse of contemporary Asian American studies by profiling summary reflections from the ground. To do this, we formed an editorial collective comprised of organizers from the Bay Area, Twin Cities,<sup>1</sup> New York City, and San Diego to co-generate a set of questions designed to illuminate how organizers across A4BL activist formations understood Asian-Black solidarity and sought to realize it in our work. We brought these questions back to our local groups and curated summarized responses from our respective formations – all of which we have attempted to stitch together here. Within our groups and on these calls, we shared our political commitments, strategies that inform our ongoing organizing efforts, and key lessons learned based on the different sets of material, time, and space conditions within which all of our groups are organizing. We discussed the parallel and unique challenges that each locale faced, especially around capacity, internal development, contexts for Asian-Black relations, countering anti-Black racism within our communities, and solidarity building. This article is a snapshot in time of what continues as an ongoing conversation, our own gesture of commitment to staying networked and building together as we also build within and beyond our formations.

We share this not as an authoritative text, but as a reflection of our political commitment toward dialog, reflection, and action. This work-in-progress marks our own defiance to the countless obstacles that make it impossible for those of us doing the work on the ground to also think out loud and reflect together so that our organizing reflects active strategic questioning coming from lived experience. We felt it critical that those of us

doing this work should have a mode by which to speak for ourselves – to name what the work is and how and why we do it. Surely, we have only just begun! These notes are the start of what we hope marks a space for our very own living archive. These notes also aim to function as an invitation to other sibling formations, the communities within which we mobilize and the communities with which we stand in solidarity, to join us as we think, write, organize, and fight together with a fierce aspiration for building a more liberatory world for all.

## How and why did A4BL form in your city?

### *Bay Area*

#Asians4BlackLives emerged in Oakland as a rapid response affinity group in December 2014. The group formed in response to ongoing anti-racist and anti-police brutality activism that re-galvanized after the August 9, 2014 police killing of unarmed Black teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Using the hashtag #Asians4BlackLives, members of this group, all longtime community members and activists who loosely strategically identified as “Asians,” joined a multi-racial formation to support Black comrades in shutting down the headquarters of the Oakland Police Department on Monday, December 15. Initially, #Asians4BlackLives was intended to be a temporary hashtag used for this specific direct action to shut down the Oakland Police Department. It wasn’t necessarily intended as a moment of naming. We needed a banner that was large enough to cover the hands and chains of locked-in Asian comrades, as to not distract media from the main focus of the action – Black folks taking up space and being in their power. However, the hashtag stuck.

On January 16, 2015, organized under the hashtags #Asians4BlackLives and #3rdWorld4BlackPower, dozens of people, many of whom now make up the core membership of the Third World Resistance Coalition, shut down Oakland’s Federal Building in response to the Ferguson call to reclaim Martin Luther King, Jr.’s legacy of militant direct action. When #Asians4BlackLives first came together, almost everyone had political homes in other formations in the Bay Area, so the direct-action affinity group model (coming together when needed to respond to moments of struggle and crisis) was an instinctual and organic process. Through direct action, the group magnetized many more people seeking to be part (see [Figure 1](#) for an example) of a formation where they could not only participate in direct action, but also find some sort of political home – which has since informed the ongoing evolution of the group’s sense of core purpose.

### *New York City*

On November 20, 2014, Brooklyn resident Akai Gurley was shot and killed by then-NYPD officer Peter Liang. Early on in the case, CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities was present to support Black-led organizing by Akai’s family members and Brooklyn-based organizers and activists in planning and helping to coordinate logistics for vigils, protests, and marches demanding Justice for Akai Gurley.<sup>2</sup> A4BL-NYC came together later in April 2016 after a crew of Asian Americans self-mobilized after being frustrated by the

light sentencing of Liang by Korean American Judge Danny Chun despite conviction by a jury, which is what Gurley's family had been demanding. There was also a lot of energy that came from watching other A4BL direct actions staged in Oakland and a desire to translate some of the in-group conversations happening around Asian American anti-Blackness (like Letters for Black Lives) into public-facing, direct action.<sup>3</sup> After Liang's indictment in February 2015, the Chinese community in New York City responded by publicly rallying in support of him. While some local politicians and prominent Chinese American leaders decided to publicly focus and organize around the "scapegoating" of Liang, they were also actively neglecting and dismissing the humanity of Akai – a son, father, partner, brother, and friend – and the larger Black Lives Matter movement that had come to the attention of the broader public after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Given the high-profile coverage of the pro-Liang rallies, there was an urgent sense of wanting to disrupt that narrative and offer an alternative model of Asian American activism, drawing on the history of Asian American indebtedness to the radical Black tradition. The purpose of A4BL-NYC was to support Akai's family, demand justice which was led by Akai's family's desires, and hold the Chinese media accountable for spreading misinformation about the case.

### *San Diego*

On September 27, 2016, Alfred Olango was shot and tasered by San Diego police officers who were addressing a call for emergency psychiatric assistance. Olango's sister had called the police out of concern for her brother's mental health, given that his close childhood friend had passed away only days prior. Olango was distraught and unarmed. Although a psychiatric emergency response team (PERT) was called, non-PERT police officers who were not trained to handle psychiatric emergencies arrived at the scene and fatally wounded Olango. He passed away hours later in a local hospital. A4BL-San Diego, now called the Asian Solidarity Collective, emerged in the fall of 2016 as a response to Olango's murder and in solidarity with the national Movement for Black Lives. The group came together to activate Asian American social justice consciousness, condemn anti-Blackness, identify intersectional affiliations, and build Asian-Black solidarity and solidarity with other communities of color in San Diego.

### *Twin Cities*

The Twin Cities continue to rank near the highest nationally for racial disparities in police interactions and brutality, as well as for education, housing, employment, and health. It is within this local context of glaring systemic oppression that Twin Cities API4BLM activists began coming together in the winter and summer of 2015 in solidarity with Black Lives Matter and in response to an API activist movement calling for a #modelminoritymutiny. In the wake of Ferguson, in November 2015, Jamar Clark was killed by the Minneapolis police, and as BLM-Minneapolis organized the occupation of the 4th precinct, local Twin Cities activists recalled also the murder of 19-year-old Fong Lee by Minneapolis police in July 2006. As murders by the police continued without accountability, we understood that no justice can or will ever be delivered



**Figure 1.** Asians4BlackLives Bay Area built a beautiful altar to Black and Brown victims of SFPD as part of #WakeUpEdLee direct action, January 17, 2016. Photo by Asians4BlackLives-Bay Area.

from the carceral police state. It was during this time that Asian activists organized an A4BL-Twin Cities. Our group grew through our connections via direct action and educational and media work that centered queer women of color activism, police abolition, decolonization, and reclaiming our radical political roots in the fight against imperialism and white supremacy. Militarism and state violence have directly impacted



and shaped all of us, both as individuals and as communities (see [Figure 2](#) for an example). We resist and re-envision together knowing that, though our stories may be different, our fight and struggle are shared.

## **2. How is your organization informed by historical Black liberation and Black Power movements, and the present-day Movement for Black Lives?**

### ***San Diego***

We understand that racist police violence is but one manifestation of the ongoing war against Black people. Mass incarceration, unequal pay, unemployment, gentrification, and inaccessible housing, education, fresh food, water, and healthcare are some of the other manifestations. In standing with Black people in this struggle, we stand not only against racist police violence but also against all anti-Black war tactics. Parallel tactics are also used against our own Asian American and other communities of color. We see police violence, immigrant surveillance, prisons, detention centers, containment, deportation, and genocide as interlocking systems of oppression that criminalize, cage, and remove Black, Latinx, Asian Americans, and American Indians from their communities. We especially acknowledge that we, as Asians and Asian Americans, have often been used as part of a “divide-and-conquer” strategy to uphold white supremacy and disrupt interracial solidarity. We refuse to be used as tools to uphold a racist and violent system. The Asian Solidarity Collective is dedicated to addressing the internalized racism, model minority myths, internalized colonialism, and white supremacy that exist within our communities. We honor the ongoing lessons of past and present Black freedom fighters who risked their lives for collective awakening and transformation.

### ***Bay Area***

We join the decades-long lineage of Black-Asian solidarity. Oakland, the birthplace of the Black Panther Party and a movement touchstone for Black liberation and power formations across the world, has always been a lightning rod for self-determined struggles. These struggles inspired radical Asian American resistances, from the Red Guard, Asian American Political Alliance, Third World Liberation Front, and Chinatown organizing in the Bay Area, to I Wor Kuen (New York), Yellow Brotherhood and Asian American Hardcore (Los Angeles), and countless other formations. Several of us in A4BL-Bay Area have had long-standing relationships with organizing veterans from across these formations. Of the Black Panther Party alone, Emory Douglas, Ericka Huggins, Aaron Dixon, and many others continue to walk with us today as next generations.

### ***Twin Cities***

Although the immediate catalyst for our organizing was to support the queer Black-led Black Lives Matter-Minneapolis, we were inspired by a deeper history of Black, Indigenous, and people of color organizing against police and carceral violence in the Twin Cities. Black youth rebelled in 1967, burning down businesses along the Northside’s Plymouth Avenue in response to police inaction and support for white vigilante violence. One year later, the American Indian Movement (AIM) formed in Minneapolis to protest police mistreatment,



**Figure 2.** Rad Azns member Anh-Thu Pham speaking at a protest against the Muslim Ban held January 17, 2017, in Minneapolis, MN. Photo by Patty O'Keefe.

treaty violations, and housing and education discrimination. One of AIM's first programs was the AIM Patrol to confront police brutality and to provide alternative mediation for community conflicts, modeled, in part, on the similar Soul Patrol on the Northside. These are powerful antecedents to our work and also point to the influences and confluences of racialized and colonized communities in the Twin Cities, where no community of color is predominant.

### **New York City**

A4BL-NYC is not an organization. We were influenced by CAAAV and the understanding that our work needed to uplift demands of Black communities' organizing without being a burden on Black-led organizing. When A4BL-NYC formed to coordinate an action to hold the Chinese-language *Sing Tao Daily* newspaper accountable for misinformation around the killing of Akai Gurley, individuals came together with different levels of political knowledge around historical Black liberation, Black Power movements, and the present-day Movement for Black Lives (Figure 3). After the *Sing Tao* action, there was an attempt to develop and deepen political education, but unfortunately due to diverging interests and capacities, it did not happen as a group. A4BL-NYC was critical in removing some of the heat off CAAAV, as the organization was receiving threats for supporting Gurley's family. As an organization with a base of older new immigrants, with programs full of folks who received their information

from sources such as *Sing Tao*, CAAAV needed to develop a comprehensive ideology with Chinese tenants in Chinatown, and also Bangladeshi, Korean, and Chinese tenants in Queens. Part of that work happened later with the development of the Asian American Racial Justice Toolkit.<sup>4</sup> A4BL-NYC functions as a placeholder for Asian and Black solidarity organizing to happen. It is significant to note that during this time there were also other political currents and coalitions within the city, particularly CAAAV's long-standing work with Communities United for Police Reform. The Justice for Akai Gurley campaign was a pivotal moment for many young Asian Americans in New York City, including people who recently joined the A4BL-NYC chapter, to think about where we stood in relation to systems of policing and the Black Lives Matter movement.

### **3. How has your organization grown and changed through this work? How is your group “serving the people,” i.e., responding to everyday community needs and struggles?**

#### ***Twin Cities***

Recognizing that abolishing the police state is work that must extend across communities, one of the first projects of A4BL in the Twin Cities was the door knocking campaigns that came after the shooting of Jamar Clark. We talked to Asian residents to build awareness about the occupation of the 4<sup>th</sup> precinct in particular and to talk to the community on the issue of police brutality. Through engaging our community members, we learned to challenge our own beliefs that Asians were all anti-Black or unsupportive of the Black liberation struggles of their neighbors. In order to learn that, we first had to work with and talk to people not as activists but as one person to another. We changed our initial surveys and questions to be more open and inclusive in its language.

After the door knocking campaigns, we started thinking more concretely about transitioning to an identity that centered radical Asian politics instead of an ally model.<sup>5</sup> To truly be in solidarity with the Movement for Black Lives, we needed to conceive of the work as our own, beyond allyship. The 2016 shooting and death of Map Kong, a Cambodian man in a Burnsville parking lot and subsequent attack of Choua Xiong, an elderly Hmong woman in her backyard in Coon Rapids, reinforced that police brutality is an issue that Asians not only need to be in allyship with, but one that we should be intrinsically invested in fighting. When the day-to-day organizing of A4BL-Twin Cities grew to encompass more than outreach to support BLM, the need to transition was an organic process necessitated by the needs of our own members and community. A4BL-Twin Cities became the RadAzns collective in response to a need to center radical Asian politics and organizing. We were already doing work around ethnic studies and immigrant rights in addition to our prison abolition work. As Asian Americans who were organizing in a mixed community, we were used to working in coalition with other voices. What was important was finding our own voices and that of our own communities through struggle and relationship building.

#### ***New York City***

We are more of a rapid-response direct-action group and have been in communication over the years. We organize with different yet overlapping focuses and tactics. Though we often organize



in different places around the city we keep in contact and come together when needed. Some of the original A4BL-NYC members have since been involved in other grassroots campaigns around the city, including the fight against Chinese conservatism around issues of affirmative action and the city's proposal to create four new prison sites in Downtown Brooklyn, Queens, South Bronx, and Manhattan's Chinatown. A number of other members have focused on the immediacy of language justice in our communities and have been involved with new formations like the Gòngmíng Collective for Language Justice.<sup>6</sup>

### **San Diego**

San Diego has a very particular history and context due to its proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border, and its relationship to the U.S. military as the site of multiple military air stations, military bases, naval bases, and recruiting depots for the Marine Corps, Navy, and Coast Guard. It is also home to the U.S. Border Patrol. San Diego County receives the most international refugees out of any county in California. At the same time, neighborhoods are racially and class segregated with staggering differences in jobs, services, and resources. As a long-time conservative, anti-immigrant, and Republican city, opportunities to do grassroots organizing and movement building are ripe but challenging. San Diego has a number of solid organizations that focus on advocacy, electoral politics, labor, immigration, and other social justice issues but only a few of them focus on grassroots organizing and movement building. There were none that focused on Asian American organizing, interracial solidarity, and, especially, anti-Blackness. We wanted to address and fill that gap in our communities. The first thing we did was to conduct one-on-one Community Dialogues with longtime grassroots organizers as well as community organizations that were addressing Asian American issues. We reached out, introduced ourselves, and were graciously welcomed by over a dozen groups in the community. We learned about the formation of their groups, the work they are doing on the ground on up to policy, challenges around capacity building, the holes they saw in the work that we could perhaps fill, and how we could work together.

We wanted to slowly build an Asian American base to focus on anti-Blackness and build Asian-Black relations, but we realized that we needed to first organize and mobilize Asian Americans in a critical and political way. At the same time as we were having these conversations, Filipinx and working-class elders and families were fighting an eviction struggle in Rancho Penasquitos, a wealthy suburb north of San Diego. A 900-unit low-income housing unit called Penasquitos Village was going to be demolished and replaced with luxury housing amidst a debilitating affordable housing crisis in San Diego. The Asian Solidarity Collective helped to convene an all-volunteer group called Allies for Penasquitos Village to work with residents to fight the eviction. It reminded so many of us of the 1970s struggle to save the International Hotel in San Francisco's Manilatown. In our first year, then, we focused on two priorities: supporting Filipino American elders in an anti-eviction campaign and building relationships with Black folks and organizations.

### **Bay Area**

In the past year, our focus has consciously broadened to take on an intersectional, international, and systems-based approach to our work, looking at how indigenous



**Figure 3.** *Sing Tao Daily* protest march held on Wednesday, May 18, 2016 in New York City. Photo by Diane Wong.

people, undocumented people, and poor people of color are all targets of white supremacist heteropatriarchal imperialist capitalism. We continue to serve as comrades to a variety of groups that ask for our support through direct action (i.e., #NODAPL, #NoBanNoWall, #StopICE, #FeedThePeople) and additionally have begun to focus more on political education and deeper (internally and externally-facing) community building. We have spent a healthy amount of time focusing inwardly, to ensure the sustainability of our group as we have seen many other groups burn out or fragment. We do this in a variety of ways: by building community through potlucks and deepening our internal relationships rather than focusing on expanding by numbers, through reflection and discussion about our structure, purpose, strategy, and goals, and through building up our own skills and knowledge – everything from how to create windproof banners for rallies to practicing transformative justice in our communities. This internal work allows us to sustain and continue to respond to current issues and build toward larger goals. We want to practice a culture of liberation now, while we fight for full liberation for all people.

#### **4. What brings you to this work? How do you understand the work? What are the motivations and ideologies that inform your actions?**

##### ***Bay Area***

Our liberation, as Asian (Americans), depends on Black liberation, period. Our deep commitment to undoing anti-Blackness in our own communities (and beyond) is not just us responding to a call to action by our Black comrades or about refusing the way we, as immigrants/descendants of immigrants have been used as a “wedge” by conservatives to advance white supremacist goals, but rather it is first, and foremost, a commitment to radical

healing. Our Principles and Protocols statement, which we circulated publicly in January 2015, elaborates how we understand our work and strategic commitments: <https://a4bl.wordpress.com/who-we-are/>. Since then, transformative justice has been a political framework that is inspiring many of us to understand our work against all forms of state-sanctioned violence. We actively interrogate how violence at the everyday level is inextricably linked to violence from the state, and in so doing, we have become much more intentional about the ways we interact with each other: practicing care, humor, accountability, as skillfully as we can, to challenge all forms of oppression that cause harm and trauma.

### *Twin Cities*

Most Asians living in Minnesota are newer to the community, having been brought into the state to settle in historic Black neighborhoods by government programs after the wars in Southeast Asia. Our communities are connected by the struggle for dignity and basic human rights. Due to the small size of the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) populations compared to the white population in the state, we've always been stronger when we've worked together.

We came together to build community on the basis of solidarity with BLM for prison abolition. We desired to be co-conspirators in the struggle against settler colonial capitalism. Many of us saw the constraints that held Asian activists as model minority activists – that is, always showing up and only being in support of other movements, never speaking out for our own communities or issues. By recognizing that being allies to other movements was the very least we could do, we began to hold ourselves truly accountable to our beliefs. We are better activists in the movement as collaborators (not just allies), when we recognize that our liberation is intrinsically connected to the liberation of other oppressed peoples. Only in finding our voices can we work toward true transformative justice.

### *New York City*

We come to this work as Asian Americans who care about and are committed to fighting for freedom, dignity, and justice. The work is complex, nuanced, and not so black and white. We understand that our struggles are deeply connected with the struggles of indigenous, Black and Brown folks here. We know this country was built on stolen indigenous land and created in a capitalist, imperial system of white supremacy. In New York City, the Black community has shown up over and over again for the Asian community, as evidenced by how Black and Latinx communities showed up for the family of Yong Xin Huang, who was killed by an NYPD officer in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn in 1995. We understand that we must also show up for the Black community not because it's tit for tat, but because the system loses its power when we love and support each other. We organize to reject this system and the many institutions established to maintain itself, which includes the NYPD, corporate real estate developers, and other actors we can name. We know we can learn a lot from those before us and that we can achieve amazing things when we share and build together.

## San Diego

We understand that Asians and stereotypes about us have often been used as a way to divide communities of color and uphold white supremacy. We also understand that many of our communities have experienced state violence and surveillance in the U.S., including those of us who are refugees, undocumented, or targeted post-9/11 (particularly those of us who are Sikhs, South Asians, Arabs, and Muslims). We recognize that we are targeted differently from Black people, while also recognizing the parallel systems of state violence that harm our communities. We honor Asian movement elders like Yuri Kochiyama, Grace Lee Boggs, and others who have always stood in solidarity with Black and Brown people and against anti-Black racism. These elders stood in struggle with Black communities, and we aspire to follow in their footsteps, committed to advancing their visions in ways relevant to our times.

We believe that real power comes from the ground up, not from the top down. Grassroots organizing means that local folks are at the center of their struggle as well as their liberation. As a brand-new organization, we are planting seeds that will sprout a local movement that not only activates Asian American consciousness in San Diego, but also connects our communities to a broader movement of social justice warriors across the country and globe. Being connected to A4BL members across cities, the conversations we've had, and even the writing of this article, has given our work more context, purpose, and inspiration. It reminds us that we are part of an ongoing, dynamic, and grassroots commitment to transforming and ending anti-Blackness in Asian American communities.

## 5. Please share a critical lesson to pass on.

### New York City

When people think of social justice they think of large movements with big rallies. But before any of that happens, organizing is about loving and protecting community. In NYC, a lot of the people who were supporting Peter Liang were getting their information from Chinese-language newspapers and Chinese-language platforms like WeChat that propagate right-wing narratives. Online pieces in English are great for reaching a younger, perhaps already left-leaning group of Asian Americans. However, right-wing Chinese use WeChat to organize, and a lot of Chinese elders use WeChat to communicate with their old friends, colleagues, and family members. It probably would have been easier for us to have written a think-piece in English about anti-Black racism among the Asian community. But while that's helpful, who is that piece reaching?

Even though we didn't organize over WeChat, we looked for what other media the Chinatown community reads and relies on, and decided to focus our attention on addressing how *Sing Tao Daily* newspaper was writing about the Gurley case in a way that perpetrated anti-Black narratives. *Sing Tao Daily* was particularly influential because it is one of very few options for Chinese immigrant communities to receive local news. Our organizing as A4BL crystallized the importance of intergenerational dialogue, deep community engagement, and language capacity. At the same time, we were limited by our own language abilities and relied heavily on one or two native Mandarin speakers to monitor the Chinese press coverage of the case and to liaison with the *Sing Tao* employees we were in conversation with. There's a lot more intergenerational dialogue that needs to

be done to create the groundwork so that when there is another moment of crisis and tension, we have more established relationships and trust to work off of.

Liang supporters were invoking moments in Asian American history – i.e., the murder of Vincent Chin, Chinese exclusion, and Japanese American incarceration – to build a narrative of victimhood for Liang. In leftist Asian American spaces, we often repeat the truism of “know history, know self.” The Justice for Akai Gurley campaign brought home the importance of radical political education in order for Asian American history to be connected to a systemic analysis of power, oppression, and solidarity, rather than a simple narrative of victimhood that can be exploited toward reactionary and political agendas rooted in anti-Black racism.

### *Twin Cities*

For us, accountability and transformative justice work has helped tangibly clarify what it means to be police abolitionist and work toward local and global demilitarization and decolonization. If we say that we want to fight police brutality up to the abolition of the police state itself, then we need to also think about what that means in times of crisis where the most vulnerable in our communities need support. Internally, in RadAzns, addressing sexual assault, abuse, and misogyny was ongoing, demanding work that was not visible on the public side. In each reported instance of harm within RadAzns, the person who did the harm was a cis-man, and the labor of organizing the accountability process was held by trans/queer non-cis and cis-women. Transformative justice takes time and commitment, and in the end, the women in the group who were holding the accountability processes in place could not sustain the level of work it took to maintain the operational aspects and emotional labor of the collective.

We know the majority of harm people face (particularly women and femmes) is at the hands of people we know, people who are in our homes and communities. We must center consent culture in our homes, organizing, work, and activist spaces. We have the right to say no and to have boundaries with each other. Inclusion cannot be uncritical, or at the sacrifice of personal or group safety. Processes need to be in place to handle incidents and reports of assault and abuse so that they do not just become a part of the whisper network without creating visible and tangible practices for accountability and transformative justice. Our care for community does not equate to the right to extract endless reproductive labor. We have the right to say this may not be the right space/group/container for you, and still lovingly hope for you to find your place elsewhere. As we have learned from the book *The Revolution Starts at Home*, police abolition, too, starts at home.

### *San Diego*

As a new organization, we had a lot to learn about the political landscape of San Diego, especially as Asian Americans. After receiving a grant a few months into our formation, we focused much of the first year on internal development, such as defining our mission, creating principles of unity, and learning what it meant to be a collective. We struggled to move forward as an Asian American organization when we didn’t know the local history of our own communities. We realized that we were trying to forge new relationships with Asian Americans at the same time that we were building relationships with Black folks.





**Figure 4.** Buttons from the “Yuri & Malcolm Taught Us: Forging Revolutionary Asian-Black Solidarity” event held on May 15, 2018, in San Diego, CA. Photo by Asian Solidarity Collective.

Our questions included: How do we show up for Asian Americans? How do we do this work without a lot of capacity? How do we create our own affinity space without decentering others? How do we do this work in ways that balance the need to collectively care within and across our groups?

Because we are a new group, we are also new to each other. We have never worked with each other before, so we are still learning how to be in accompliceship with each other. Getting to know each other as whole persons, building trust, growing, and struggling together in and through this work is one of our most critical lessons. What are each of our strengths and weaknesses, and how does that impact the group and the work? Where are we in our political development? What are our communication styles? How much time and energy can we give to the group? We are learning how to do this at the same time we are learning how to do this across communities. We created a guiding document with our mission, principles, and vision that has been really helpful, but the real work is in the day-to-day work we do together and the revelations that happen along the way. Changing the world really does start with changing ourselves.

### **Bay Area**

Everything is about relationships. Relationships are at the foundation of everything we do and trust is the compass for how those relationships are forged. For many of us, whether we came into A4BL with direct action experience or not, taking that kind of risk together, putting our bodies, our safety on the line, has both come out of deep trust and has been a way to build trust quickly. These relationships might be forged through crisis moments, but they endure by the way we are with each other between the protest moments, how we show up for

reach other – from feeding each other, chipping in to help a comrade make rent, to taking care of each other’s kids, attending birthday parties, and backyard gatherings, etc. As important as it is to be on the line or chanting in the streets, we also need to be building relationships before the crisis hits. Oh, and margins! One critical lesson we’ve learned is to make sure our banners have margins and that we use a legible font and fix our kerning.

## 6. What have you learned about solidarity?

### *Twin Cities*

Coming back to the Asian-to-Asian door knocking campaign in North Minneapolis, we remember that staying in conversation and meaningful relationship is what will create conditions for change. Since RadAzns, the three collective members with relationships to higher education have facilitated conversations with local Asian American organizers and critical race and abolition scholar-activists in the U.S. and Canada to develop an Asian American framework of demilitarization. Taking seriously the charge by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang that “decolonization is not a metaphor,” our thinking on demilitarization acknowledges Asian immigrant and refugee participation in anti-Blackness and settler colonialism, but deeply considers the collective possibilities for struggle if Asian American organizing was re-envisioned through a demilitarization lens that could address the imperialism experienced by our own people as well as other communities. What would it mean to demilitarize in relation to our community accountability and transformative justice work? How might we foster dialogue given intergenerational trauma from war and imperialism and imagine new narratives for collective and relational liberation?

### *San Diego*

Working with Black folks, supporting each other’s work, and building solidarity isn’t the same as addressing anti-Blackness. While we were waiting for BLM San Diego to form in early 2017, we got really involved in supporting Filipino American elders in an anti-eviction campaign. We looped Black folks into that work, and they showed up and spoke in solidarity at our various events. In spring 2018, we organized a community dialogue with BLM around Asian-Black solidarity, but we barely scratched the surface of addressing anti-Blackness in Asian communities (Figure 4). The collaborations were cool, but we began to realize that building solidarity doesn’t necessarily mean you’re confronting anti-Blackness on the ground.

Relationship building, internal development, and critical reflection require a lot of intention, energy, and time. Our work has been good but slow going, because we had to learn about the political landscape in San Diego and figure out our place as Asian Americans in the already existing conversation. It also takes time and patience to learn about each other, define the work, develop strategies, and build trust.

### *New York City*

Solidarity is not inevitable or easy, but we are powerful when we come together. The work is so necessary – it’s about critical connections and consistently showing up for one



**Figure 5.** Multilingual #A4BL I-Ching logo that reads “Black Lives Matter.” Designed by Civic Design Studio.

another. The purpose of solidarity is to transform to a vision greater than what exists now. It isn't just to win for one community or one campaign, it is meant to change a system. The quote that was helpful during this time is Fred Hampton's "You don't fight racism with racism, you fight it with solidarity." Solidarity is also about dreaming together to imagine that another world is not only possible, but that ordinary people are already building that vision.

### Bay Area

Solidarity is not a slogan. Solidarity is about relationships forged through political struggle that seek to challenge forms of oppression. Solidarity is intersectional, not just in a personal way, but across struggles/movements. But more critically, "solidarity" cannot be the only root of one's political consciousness or the center from which people take action. Although A4BL-Bay Area is a group that often works in solidarity with other organizations, it's been equally important for us, as Asian Americans, to understand our own positionality, our fights, our histories, our traumas, and our oppressions. Working in solidarity, without a larger contextual understanding of the interconnectedness of oppression, can turn really quickly into savior-dom, or an erasure of self to do "what's right" for others. This is becoming more visible in rising "Asian American activism" discourse – the notion that, as Asian people, we are so incredibly privileged in all that we do, that we need to sit down and shut up and do the work of unlearning anti-Blackness. This discourse reifies essentialist understandings of group identity, homogenizing the heterogeneity of Asian American experiences, and minimizing the centuries of struggle and resistance that has informed radical Asian American movements. Self-growth, in-community work, and solidarity are ALL necessary components of meaningful political action.

### Conclusion

Solidarity is, at its heart, about building relationships with each other, within our community, and across lines of difference (Figure 5). At the same time, we humbly acknowledge that our experiences in building solidarity with each other, with Black communities, and other oppressed communities are not monolithic, but complex, contextual, and contentious. Simply put, showing up in solidarity is not enough. Mobilizing around solidarity cannot be the main point of political consciousness, because countering anti-Black racism isn't the only work to be done. We must recognize our own struggles and do a deep dive into our own communities to ground and guide our political development, while also building outwards. Beloved movement elder and Bay Area A4BLer Pam Tau Lee has observed that there is little awareness of Asian American participation within liberation history. Asian Americans are invisible in radical histories of the United States; yet, we have always been on the frontlines of liberatory struggles, past to present. Asian Americans, Lee reminds us, are not simply adjacent to struggle but have been and are still very much *in* struggle against white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism, by both necessity and choice.

Solidarity is also a call to action. We, as radical Asian Americans that straddle activist and academic sites of struggle, call on scholars, academics, educators, and researchers to take concrete action steps toward building Asian American political consciousness and

capacity: conduct community-centered research, show up at public actions, facilitate political education workshops, share and channel institutional resources into grassroots community work and with workers, create space in classes for grassroots organizers to share their knowledge, pay organizers and organizations to speak on campuses, and, most of all, inspire and encourage young people to become involved in community movement spaces for the long haul, not just as a “phase” in college. The field of Asian American studies emerged from struggle and a commitment to justice. With this legacy comes the responsibility to advance present-day struggles for liberation with all the beauty, brilliance, fierceness, devotion, and radical imagination we can mobilize.

## Notes

1. Twin Cities includes Minneapolis and St. Paul.
2. Founded in 1986, CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities is a pan-Asian organization that builds the grassroots power of low-income Asian immigrants and refugees across New York City. CAAAV used to stand for Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence. When its work shifted to address the violence of low-income tenants being pushed out of their homes due to gentrification in Manhattan Chinatown and support street vendors being harassed by police during the Giuliani era, the organization changed its name to CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities.
3. Letters for Black Lives is a set of crowdsourced, multilingual, and culturally-aware resources aimed at creating a space for open and honest conversations about racial justice, police violence, and anti-Blackness in our families and communities.
4. <https://www.asianamtoolkit.org/the-toolkit>.
5. Allyship is where you work to support other political struggles or movements versus being a co-conspirator where you believe your liberation and the liberation of your community is tied to the liberation of those you are working in community with.
6. Gòngmíng Collective for Language Justice is a group of New York City based individuals from the Chinese diaspora who aim to provide interpretation, translation, language capacity building, and community spaces in Chinese languages with a social justice and community-based perspective.

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