

INTERWOVEN



INTERVIEWS

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Through this interview series we invited five Black and/or Asian leaders from racial and environmental justice spaces to reflect on several topics that emerged through our solidarity workshop series. Our intention was to cultivate fertile grounds for discussion, discovery, and understanding. Some of the topics, include: abolition, racial violence and healing, indigenous land sovereignty, student-led organizing, accessibility, and more. This section includes excerpts from each interview.

Interviewees

- Aisha Fukushima
- Anayi Jackson
- Deseree Fontenot
- Lin Lin
- Lisa Doi

To learn more about the contributors, please see their bios on p.57-58.

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interviews**

q:

What does solidarity between Black and Asian people mean to you?

What's a connection or contention between Black and Asian communities that feels alive for you right now?

a:

One connection between Black and Asian communities that feels very alive to me is how much we prioritize joy. While you might be very angry and passionate about what is happening to you, and though those feelings might be driving the work, if you don't also have hope or joy for a better world, it will get very hard and you will feel burned out. Me and my peers have dealt with many stages of burnout. Joy has allowed us to come as far as we have.

- Lin Lin

Solidarity to me means working in concert with one another, collectively, to take action towards creating a more just world. The piece that I submitted to the zine is called "Solidity." It plays on this connection between solidity and solidarity. Solidity meaning the quality or state of being firm and strong in structure. We can be strong, we can be cohesive, and at the same time, in my humble opinion, also be agile, adaptive, evolve, find many different modes in that collective strength that we hone with one another. So in addition to solidarity being a word that people might view as being static, I view it as a word that moves. A word that has momentum. A word is just as dynamic as the movements that we are building here, now, everyday, and in the movements that have preceded us. It is a practice, if you will.

- Aisha Fukushima

I have seen a lot of solidarity between Black and Asian folks, but I have seen more hate in the media. I remember when an Asian man got arrested for shooting a little Black boy. The Shade Room posted it. People in the comments flipped, and it was mainly Black folks. They were saying we should not protect Asian people, because "look at what they are doing to us." And it was really sad for me to see because, you know, we are all people of color. We haven't gone through the same struggles, but we have gone through struggles and we should use that to stick together. We should be in solidarity against the main enemy that is putting us in pain. Who is really in the middle of our conflict? I have learned through my work with Vietlead, that most of the tension between Black and Asian folks came from the history of white people putting us against each other. I wish people would understand this history and realize "why am I growing up with all this hate" for people I don't even know.

- Anayi Jackson

Asian Americans are often the buffer racial community between Black and White neighborhoods. On the one hand, there are long histories of solidarity, and on the other hand there are long histories of antagonism. In my mind, the antagonism is maybe the more frequently occurring experience. If it is not overt antagonism it is certainly, on the part of Japanese Americans and Asian Americans, a desire to get out of neighborhoods that they perceive to be "undesirable" or "unsafe."

Ultimately to me, the antagonisms between Black and Asian American communities are parts of White Supremacy that allow Whiteness to dominate without White people being present, or allow ideals of Whiteness to dominate without White people being present. Moments of solidarity are even more special because they are working to undermine this greater system of White Supremacy that folks are participating in whether or not they realize it.

For example, Janice Mirikitani, who was Sansei (3rd generation Japanese American) just passed away last week, and she and her husband Cecil Williams, who is Black, co-founded Glide, a social services organization in the Bay Area that provides comprehensive social services, was especially active during the AIDS crisis, and has a long history of political activism.

In Chicago specifically, there was a Nisei (2nd generation Japanese American) woman named Setsuko Matsunaga Nishi who resettled in Chicago. One of the original [Japanese American] organizations in Chicago, called the Chicago Resettlers Committee, really got off the ground because of the support of a Black sociologist named Horace R. Cayton Jr., who helped to support a lot of the early Japanese American organizations in Chicago by providing physical space, guidance, and resources for people coming to a City where they had never lived before. The friendship between Setsuko and Horace, which is sort of a footnote in history, was a really strong example of Black and Asian solidarity, and one that gets overlooked in the small world of Japanese American history in Chicago.

- Lisa Doi

q:

What is your vision for healing within and between Black and Asian communities?

a:

All healing has to come from being able to let go of your pride and let go of thinking you are right all the time, because there is so much we all don't know. I do hope that folks take the time to learn about the very people they hate. And to also learn about their own history. A lot of Black people do not even know their own history. There is so much I have learned this year that is not taught in schools about our history, and just how brutal it is. [Healing] is also about learning the starting point of the tension between Black and Asian folks. If people learned that history they would see that they have a common enemy. We need to take the time to learn, reevaluate, get to know about [ourselves] and [our] history, and realize who [we] are.

- Anayi Jackson

For me healing looks like building deep relationships - close circles of community that can ripple out through our regions and spaces. We need vulnerable conversations, artistic creations, and spaces to share our histories, experiences, and struggles navigating capitalism and racism...

- Deseree Fontenot

Duncan Williams, a Buddhist minister who works with Tsuru for Solidarity, points to the root of the word reparations: "to repair." What does it mean to repair? It is not just cash payments to people. It is also reckoning with the history of racial violence.

My vision for healing starts with internal healing. Once you are able to show up for yourself, you can then show up with and for others. It also means unlearning a lot of things, particularly unlearning ideas of scarcity and isolation—which may not always feel like scarcity and isolation in the moment. For example, I was in a meeting, and we were about to run out of time. Someone from my team kept talking, and I was panicking a little bit. I was panicking about taking up people's time, and I was embarrassed because I have learned to not impose on people.

When I envision healing, I envision that the feeling within myself—that I have to make myself small—is not there anymore.

- Lisa Doi

A lot of our communities have intergenerational trauma. I like to tell my parents about my organizing, what is happening at school, and to get their advice, because I know that they have wisdom that I don't have. Of course certain things I won't listen to them about, because that is the teenager in me. But intergenerational conversations are so important overall to both communities, because the older generations dealt with something different than the way we deal with it.

I was talking to my mom, and she was surprised that I deal with microaggressions. She feels I assimilated well, because I speak English better than she does, so she expects me to be respected. But I am like, "no mom, it doesn't work that way." I know that even my children are still going to deal with that. It has helped her rethink the reality of the American Dream. I think that was a very important conversation that me and my mom had. I think talking to her face to face about [my] trauma and harm was important, and allowed us to move through some of our struggles.

- Lin Lin

This feels like a particularly resonant question--especially given the intensity of all of the things that have happened during these COVID times. First of all, I think that we can find some space for introspection, exploration, and rumination within the terms Black and Asian. Sometimes I think that the way that they're used, especially in mainstream media, can really flatten the terms. When in reality, being Black, and/or being Asian, can have such a huge multifaceted and complex set of meanings, assumptions, connectivities, and heritages that these words are meant to codify, in a very succinct way. [These terms] don't always capture the complexity of many different Asian experiences, or many different Black and African diasporic experiences. So exploring the depth of those terms might be a helpful step on a pathway to collective healing.

Second, not in order of importance, I can't help but think about the voice of Fred Hampton, who said, "you don't fight fire with fire, you fight fire with water." To paraphrase him, we aren't going to fight racism with racism, we fight racism with solidarity. So I think at least one step towards our healing is understanding, centering, and remembering the pieces, the things that we all need and care about. Remembering the common values that we might share, and using that as a platform to build more just healed futures ahead. We have common interests, common things that we want to see manifest in the world, that can benefit not just our respective communities, but our connected communities.

Grace Lee Boggs put it another way, she said that the only way to survive is by taking care of one another. And I want to thrive. So I think it's about continuing to come back to the common goals that we have, perhaps re-examining those goals, or dreaming up new ones that haven't been on the table yet. Also understanding, examining where the inequality has existed, and the ways in which it pits us against one another, or creates hierarchies for people to fight over crumbs, rather than realizing that the table wasn't built for any of us. Finding a way for us to build a whole new vision, a whole new garden, a whole new system that will care, support, nourish, and truly uplift us collectively, because we know that our wellness is deeply connected. We know that our ability to shine, to live, at the very core, is so deeply connected. Covid has highlighted that fact in a way that we know, and we knew, but is perhaps even more palpable. So how can we use the data from this time, including the data from the tensions that exist, and compost the things that are no longer serving us, in order to hopefully nourish what we want to grow ahead. We truly need each other. Hopefully that's a starting point. Through honesty, through relationship building, true solidarity, partnership and deep radical listening, I have hope that we can build an even greater future together.

q:

What does it mean to be a “model minority”? How have you been seduced by, resisted, or problematized this identity?

a:

I place the start of the Model Minority Myth in the 1966 NY Times article, “Success Story: Japanese American Style,” which sort of compliments Japanese Americans for being able to overcome racial violence in 20 years. It points to Japanese Americans having White Collar jobs, moving into White communities, and achieving the “American Dream.” At the same time, William Peterson (the author) turns it against other communities of color, and pointedly asks Puerto Rican and Black communities, “why can’t you do the same thing?”

In the Japanese American redress movement era, Chris Iijima wrote an article about redress being the payout for being “good,” and being “the model minority.” When I think about Japanese American relationships to the “model minority myth,” I like the term “seduced by,” because there is a part of me that is very understanding of why people made the choices they made, even if they are not the choices I wished they had made. I also recognize that I have not experienced being forcibly removed from my home, or the precarity of having parents who are not US citizens. As much as I am frustrated and upset with the choices, I want to recognize why they made them.

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Being able to have this conversation is really hard. I was just talking to my mom actually. Out of the blue, she was like, "it never occurred to me that being the model minority was harmful to other communities—until March of 2021." That is a big step. Maybe she could understand it is problematic because of what it means for Asian Americans who do not fit that stereotype. And to also see that there is an implicit statement within the model minority myth that this is what other communities should strive for.

These are really important conversations, and [it is important] to be able to have them within the Asian American community. One of the things that I am convinced of is that people need to be able to make mistakes, and be able to not understand, and to grapple with their own internalized racism, and to be pushed to struggle with that. When I think about what Tsuru does, and the difference between organizing and activism—as folks who are much smarter than me have said before—organizing is moving at the speed of relationships.

If we stick to [our] principles, but we lose buy-in, I don't think that is good organizing. Good organizing is saying that these are our principles, and we need to do a lot of relationship building to make sure people are coming along with our principles, that we are not shutting doors on people if they stick a toe out of line. That is part of unlearning White Supremacy, and unlearning policing. Otherwise, you are just self-policing. You are [conducting] internalized surveillance within the community. Unlearning model minority and internalized racism [means] that we can create spaces where people can have challenging conversations, and that they don't have to be right the first time.

-Lisa Doi

Q:

Most of us, if we are not Indigenous, are living on stolen land. What does belonging to land—specifically in the United States—mean to you, as a Black and/or Asian person?

How can our relationships to land inform our solidarity as Black and Asian people with movements seeking to return land to Indigenous people?

a:

Reflecting on some of my African American heritage, and thinking about the way in which people were treated as property, enslaved, can open the door for us to question certain ideas around property. What belongs to whom, and why? What has been claimed, and who has been claimed as property? All the meanwhile, taking note of the historical patterns of oppression and exploitation. Informed by that shared history, I strive to help manifest futures that replace far reaching systems of inequality with pathways towards collective liberation.

Japanese-American history also comes to mind, including the history of internment and people being uprooted from their homes. How many people from different heritages in the U.S., and around the world, have experienced a sense of longing for home? Have experienced being displaced, ripped from the places we have known, and our relationship to those places? Many Black people, for instance, can relate to this feeling too.

Perhaps these reflections can be one small point of resonance as we remember to listen deeply, and make sure that we are being abundantly supportive of the incredible Indigenous activists who are already leading the way. I have hope that the historical experiences we have gone through can remind us of how crucial alliances are towards making a better world possible.

And perhaps these thoughts are just a small glimpse at a constellation in the vast sky of our solidarity-building. A gentle reminder of the myriad of ways in which our struggles are deeply connected.

-Aisha Fukushima

As Black and Asian people building solidarity on Indigenous land, we have a beautiful opportunity to build relationships with one another that de-center whiteness. So often, we as groups of racialized peoples spend so much time dissecting, healing from, and negotiating our relationships to whiteness and the myth of white supremacy that we don't actually get to drop in very much on understanding and shaping our relationships to each other. Our relationships to place are rooted in the last 500 years of european colonial violence, and there's a sea of nuance, dialogue and understanding we can hold together.

We are both communities of survivors from millions of people being severed from our ancestral lands, disrupting centuries of biocultural diversity, and creating both fragmentation and resistance in so many ways. We have so much shared healing to do, and that starts with reshaping our relationship to place, to land.

I was born a descendent of enslaved Africans on Atakapa land, and raised between there and Tongva land for most of my life. I have lived on Chochenyo-Ohlone land for the last 10 years. As a queer Black farmer, lover of ecology, and organizer the question of Native Land Sovereignty is a living and constant inquiry for me. Supporting repatriation, the process of restoring a people to their rightful place in sacred relationship with their ancestral lands—is part of belonging in right relationship to place for me as a person of Afro-indigenous descent on this land.

This nation-state project we call the US was built on stolen land and stolen labor, and has led to a complex history of both solidarity and intentional siloeing/division of Black and Native movements and communities. I think the big picture for true reparations—repairing our relations—is to align our visions for Black Liberation on Indigenous Land with visions for repatriation, native sovereignty, and a sense of belonging based on those traditional fluid, flexible ecological boundaries that Indigenous peoples have co-evolved with for millenia, over the arbitrary political boundaries and systems of our extractive economy.

- Deseree Fontenot

q:

What does abolition—as a movement, as an ideology, as a practice—mean to you? What do you think it would take to abolish prisons in the United States? The police? The US military? Other punitive institutions? What would replace them?

a:

As someone who studies abolition, I do not call myself an abolitionist. I call myself a student of abolition, because I think this is something you practice, not just a theory you believe in.

I think a lot of young people are learning about these things through Instagram posts. I am not a huge fan of Instagram posts because they are often not well cited. Sometimes [they use the word “abolition” but] they include carceral solutions, and it is really problematic. Being students of abolition allows us to have the imagination to dream of a better world. This world has a lot of problems, but I hope our work can take us one step closer to that better world.

- Lin Lin

If internally we are not enacting values that are abolitionist, we can show up at [Cook County] Jail all we want, but in some ways we are defeating the point.

What are the internalized narratives that are really going to impede living into ideals of abolition? Yes, [abolition] is showing up at Cook County Jail and saying we want everyone released, and it is also an internal ideology and practice that we need to live on a day-to-day basis.

Ultimately, abolition means changing our economic structures and eliminating the systems of capitalism that exist that mean we can fund the US military at an insane amount of money per day, but we can't have health care, or feed people, or house people. Even before you touch the police and prison system, changing things like childcare, healthcare, housing, nutritious food, would wildly change what carcerality looks like in the US.

It doesn't have to be a dollar-to-dollar swap; it doesn't have to be a zero sum game. It is "both and." You have to fund schools, and eventually you have to defund the police. But it doesn't have to be so tied together.

- Lisa Doi

q:

What would a truly accessible world for all Black and Asian folks be like?

a:

One thing I have learned from Disability Justice activists is that differences or impairments only becomes pathologized as disabilities when we choose to structure our society in ways that don't accommodate those differences, when we name some bodies as "normal," "valuable" "functional" or "productive" and others not—often along the lines of whose bodies most easily generate profit in our global economy.

[A truly accessible world for all Black and Asian folks would] honor all the complexities of our communities. It would be a world where we value every form of being, care, and labor. From the labor of just breathing, to care work, to being a lover, a healer, etc.

Access is about reclaiming our understanding of diversity. The term diversity has been commodified and used to flatten our identities, histories, and cultures into neat little boxes to be checked off and put on display as a token of progress. It serves a form of multiculturalism that obscures the vast complexity of life on this planet. Part of the work of building intersectional movements is to propagate a very different understanding of the biological and cultural diversity of this planet. It is expansive and complex and nonstatic, and most importantly, diversity assures resilience in living ecological systems. We build radically inclusive movements and visions for our future with this in mind.

- Deseree Fontenot

