

## How translation has opened the door to allyship

By: Ariana Thao

The death of George Floyd has prompted a global movement against racial injustice in many domains of society. Communities, corporations, government agencies, and non-profit organizations are being challenged with new ways to face and address injustices that Black Americans experience every day. Among these discussions, new questions are being raised about the current role of law enforcement practices and how they contribute to practices that reinforce systemic racism. Some of these discussions, revolve around how the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement extends beyond the Black-White binary of race relations. One of the policemen charged with abetting the murder of George Floyd, Officer Tou Thao, was a HMoob American police officer. Furthermore, the person who called the police on George Floyd, was an Indian American shop owner in Minneapolis. The involvement of these two men has sparked conversations within non-Black communities of color around anti-Blackness and the role they play in the Black Lives Matters movement.

Throughout history, communities of color have been pitted against one another and activists have been working to unpack these narratives as the BLM movement remains at the forefront. Across social media, at home, and in other social spheres, discussions in communities of color rest in two realms. Some communities of color are calling for solidarity with the BLM movement, while others are criticizing protestors for the unrest that is coming onto the country. Alongside the BLM movement, Black activists across the country have tasked non-Black individuals to go home and have tough conversations with their families surrounding racism and anti-Blackness. Therefore, activists are working within their own communities to challenge and uproot belief systems that perpetuate anti-Blackness.

A specific example of this lives within Asian American communities. As Tou Thao and the Indian American store owner played key roles in the death of George Floyd, Asian Americans have been working to confront how Asian Americans play a role in sustaining systems of anti-Blackness and how anti-Blackness lives in the Asian American community. This anti-Blackness persists through simple every day practices such as using whitening cream to maintain an appearance of Whiteness to perpetuating criminalizing stereotypes of Black Americans. Activist and author Mai Neng Vang shares in a stanza of *To all the uncle Tou's out there*:

“I hear you  
toss around the “n-word”  
ever so casually  
as if you own the rights  
to use this word,  
not caring for the weight it holds  
because you will never  
know what it means

to be owned as property,  
but valued less than dirt”

This stanza is one of the examples in where HMoob American men have perpetuated anti-Blackness through their everyday language in their usage of the n word. Through each of the stanzas of this particular poem, Vang confronts each way HMoob communities perpetuate anti-Blackness in their everyday actions. Her poem works to challenge the social media “trolls” who have emerged as a result of the BLM movement.

For many Asian Americans, though, the conversations surrounding the BLM movement look and sound different. Due to language barriers, many Asian Americans do not know how to have these conversations about the BLM movement with their parents and grandparents without losing meaning or miscommunicating what was intended in the conversations. Thus, to bridge this gap, one of the earliest movements was the creation of the Dear Asians Initiative.

The Dear Asians Initiative is a list of 12 letters developed by Asian Americans across the United States in 12 languages (Arabic, Chinese (Simplified), Chinese (Traditional), English, Gujarati, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Malay, Tagalog, Thai, Urdu, Vietnamese) to help better initiate the conversations surrounding the Black Lives Movement. Through these letters, the authors touch upon the relationship that Asian Americans have to the systems in the country, of the injustices that happen everyday to Black Americans, and the feelings of those who authored this letter.

This letter has circulated throughout Asian American communities across social media and in the home. Because of this initiative, conversations have spawned surrounding information sharing and language access in the BLM Movement and has facilitated further conversations. Asian Americans are drafting their own letters in their respective languages, glossaries have been created on specific terms related to BLM, and unrepresented language groups have been working to translate the letter for their own communities. These letters and other forms of translated written text has allowed Asian Americans of all different language levels to have discussions with their circles about the BLM movement, deconstructing how Black-led movements have helped pave the way for civil rights for all groups, and how the experiences of Asian Americans are intertwined with Black Americans. Essentially, these letters helped better bridge the gap between the Asian American and Black American communities in the United States.

As the HMoob American Studies Committee has stated, “We must acknowledge that we have benefited off of Black activism and understand that our liberation is tied to theirs – that we cannot be free until all of us are free.” Anti-Blackness exists within multiple communities and the BLM has brought conversations confronting these ideals to the forefront – to challenge our own communities and our own thinking. Initiatives like the Dear Asians Initiative has allowed for Asian American activists to do this confronting and work to disrupt and counteract anti-Blackness in spaces that extend beyond the Black-White binary of issues. These initiatives have allowed activists to critically analyze how mitigating language barriers helps further missions in support of solidarity of BLM.

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