Statement from the Asian Pacific American Studies at ASU

Faculty in the Asian Pacific American Studies at ASU have spent the past two months addressing and amplifying the anti-Asian racism mobilized in the U.S. in response to COVID-19 and how this racism reflects the ongoing complexities of racial formations in the United States. The pandemic has exposed how racial and economic differences more heavily affect people of color and working-class people in America, with higher rates of African Americans and American Indians being infected and dying from the virus. This is evidence of ongoing structural inequalities affecting certain people of color and people in poverty.

On May 25, four policemen in Minneapolis participated in the murder of George Floyd. One of the Minneapolis police officers who participated in the lynching of George Floyd, Tou Thao who stood and looked away while Floyd was being restrained by his three colleagues, was Asian American. And we in Asian Pacific American Studies are heartbroken. Our field emerged because of the Black demonstrators who fought and risked their lives for civil rights, and the Black intellectuals who have critiqued the structural racism and intersectional oppressions that plague our nation and invested in creating Black and African American Studies programs in higher education. We look to the Third World Strike and its integrated critique of imperialism, colonization, and racism that united activists of color in solidarity to remind us that our commitment to social justice is focused on racial equality and equity for all persons, not just those in our own communities, who share our identification. And this commitment requires us to reflect upon our positions as Asian Americans in the United States. We cannot simply look away as Black lives are subjected to police brutality and systematically dehumanized by the state. Black Lives Matter.

The Asian American community continually has had to fight exclusion from United States citizenship and belonging from the mid-19th century with the first laws excluding Chinese from entry into the United States and from naturalized citizenship. Frederick Douglass spoke out against Chinese Exclusion laws and spoke for women’s right to vote. Being part of the nation, finding a way to belong, has long held appeal for communities of color, including Asian Americans who long have felt excluded and perpetually foreign. Serving in the military and law enforcement are well-worn routes to respectability in the U.S. settler state for almost every group of persons historically in America. Yet, when we seek belonging, when we want to claim America, that includes claiming and participating in the settler colonial tradition of a nation state that celebrates voluntary immigrant roots at the cost of ignoring Indigenous nations’ sovereignty and the involuntary importation of African slaves, as well as the legacies of these oppressions which have been institutionalized into our legal, political, economic, and educational systems.

What do we do when we are part of the problem? What do we do when we are, in Cherrie Moraga’s words, the oppressed and oppressors? This question literally bleeds into how we in APAS teach about the ways in which Asian Americans are woven into the settler state in ways that are distinct from the genocide of American Indians and the dehumanization of African Americans. We must actively and continuously interrogate and reject how Asian Americans have been and continue to be deployed to undermine other communities of color; we must name and confront racism and homophobia in our communities that divides us against each other against other communities of color. We must stand with other communities of color when they are being targeted by systemic violence. We must actively work to dismantle systemic racism in all its intersectionality, against Black, Latinx, and American Indian
bodies, as well as within and against our communities. We must support Black Lives Matter and engage in dismantling anti-blackness in our family, community and work place. In the words of one of our intellectual and activist foremothers, Fannie Lou Hamer, “Nobody’s free until all of us are free.”

In solidarity,

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