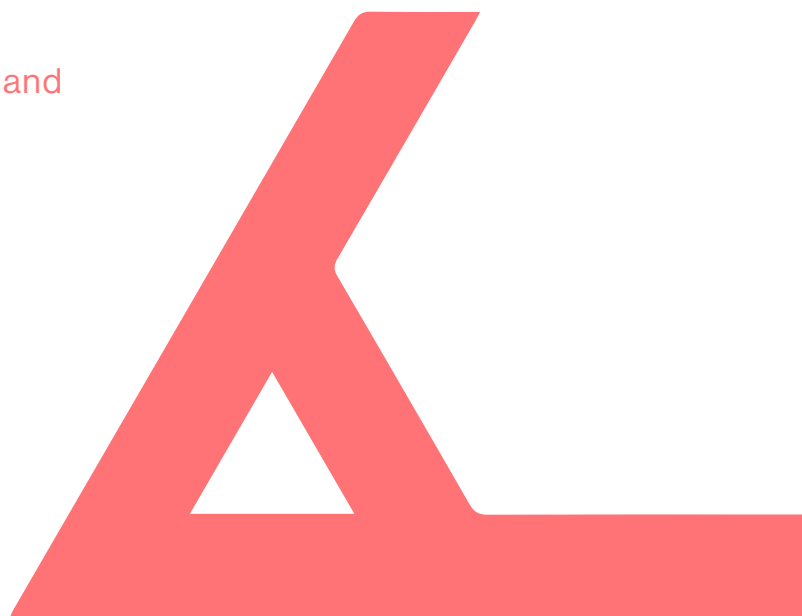


Asia-Art-  
Activism

Experiments  
in Care and  
Collective  
Disobedience

Edited by  
Annie Jael Kwan and  
Joanna Walfarth



KIMBERLY DREW AND ADRIEL LUIS

# **By Nature of Our Togetherness: Integrity Beyond Solidarity**

# When Asia-Art-Activism (AAA) invited me to reflect on global solidarity, I knew I couldn't do it alone. The pandemic has shifted how we move about the physical world, but I've also begun navigating the online realm with new caution.

I've long been dedicated to strengthening coalitions among people of color, but my work has always been done in community. Travel offered contact in ways that challenged my assumptions and expanded my worldview—it was during a trip to Singapore that I met Annie Jael Kwan who introduced me to AAA. When she invited me to London in 2019 for their program *Oceans\*A\*Part*, I met Jo Walsh from In\*ter\*is\*land Collective, who became a crucial part of a show I curated in Auckland. Going distances to make connections was a luxury I took for granted as an expanding world of possibilities.

In 2020 when AAA shared its statement in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, I was inspired that a borderless community of Asians could unite against anti-Black racism worldwide. But despite its reach, I'm weary of relying solely on the internet to understand changing social landscapes. I've craved intimate and generative exchange with people who I trust for candor and care. So I was overjoyed to be joined by Kimberly Drew, who shares my identities as activist, curator, and writer, and who for almost a decade has inspired my practice as all three. In her book *Black Futures*, Kimberly and co-author Jenna Wortham envision a dimension that is "global, atemporal, not dominated by America and the West, not constructed by binaries, and as dynamic as possible." I joined her in that dimension one Friday at the tail end of April 2021 to discuss the many layers of interconnectedness that solidarity only begins to reveal. The following are some of the tasty morsels from over an hour of catching up. It turns out, we aren't ever so far apart after all.

Adriel Luis (A): So, okay. How do I start? I love doing pre-recorded stuff, because the live stuff has just been a lot for me these days.

Kimberly Drew (K): It sucks! Everything sucks. No one chose this. We are all just doing the best we can with what we have, and that's all that really matters.

A: I've been thinking about the choices that I have been able to make that maybe I wouldn't have made in the past. Is there anything you've gained that you'll bring into the future?

K: So much of the work I've been doing this past year has been really personal, working on myself and trying to get into quiet in a real way. One of my college advisors was Kevin Quashie, who writes about the sovereignty of quiet in Black studies, and the importance of quiet and solitude. I've been revisiting Elizabeth Alexander's *Black Interior* and thinking about home space. And I've been thinking about having more in-depth connections with people, as opposed to having a bajillion cups that you're filling and trying to keep up with. How I can get down to a solid group of people, having actual, real conversations about health and family and the realities of life. And most recently I've been thinking a lot about interpersonal violence, and just owning the truth that whenever we're interacting with each other, there is a potential for harm. And I think COVID really was such a physical manifestation of that. You know, even your most chosen people that you feel safe with, you could contract something just by breathing together. And so what does it mean to be accountable to our own potentials for violence?

A: It's interesting to hear you talk about this gravitation towards intimacy and small space, while seeing you ascend into this level of visibility over the years. You created Black Contemporary Art on Tumblr to address visibility, and in the process your visibility rose too. But a couple of weeks ago you posted a reminder to people acting out in your comments that you're a human. I've always appreciated that you're constantly bringing people back to the fact that there's humanity connected to these squares that we're scrolling through. So much of that humanity can be lost, especially now that we're in this time where a lot of people are only seeing pixelated faces.

K: I want to make sure that the representation that I'm giving really does represent the magnificence of people who are like me—we are a majestic people, queer people, nonbinary people, Black people, marginalised people, especially in these art spaces where they would, in many ways, rather us not be vocal.

- A: I've been able to live with you through the intimacy of being able to try things out, experiment, make mistakes, be wrong, say the wrong thing. During this time, we've seen uprisings from the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, and so many others, and then also this rise in anti-Asian violence. A lot of young folks are learning the language of anti-Blackness and solidarity for the first time – everybody's coming from different places, but all inputting it into two or three platforms.
- K: I've been doing a lot of personal reckoning, especially in relationship to this rise in anti-Asian violence, because I have been learning so much from incredible API (Asian and Pacific Islander) women in the movement—folks like Grace Lee Boggs who I have been reading and interpreting over time. These are things I found in my personal studies, but never really felt it was my stance to take, because I'm a student and witness to these things. Within a Disability Justice context, I'm just starting to learn and follow Alice Wong with all of my soul and being. I think a lot of us are feeling this tension of: how do we learn, and how do we apply? How do we synthesise these things in a way that is oriented towards the most generative form of sharing, education, and healing?
- A: Yes, we are all so much more than our identity markers. When you and I first met, it was because of your advocacy for Black communities and mine for Asian Americans, but the friendship we developed has become deeper than just solidarity. I grew up in a diverse community of artists and poets, people like Chinaka Hodge and Aja Monet where we used art to float ideas, inspire each other, and learn from our mistakes. I wonder how to have that conversation for folks now realising that they don't have any Black friends or Asian friends.
- K: Solidarity is not based on proximity. I think the most American thing about us is that we feel like we have to see it and be proximate—and potentially own it—to understand it. And it just makes me sick to my stomach. But this is not about sympathy. This is about integrity. This is about living in a way that is virtuous when no one is looking. It's not about having a Black friend or having an API friend or having a Disabled friend. It's about the choices you individually make every day, and being a better human being.
- A: I think it's one of the reasons why so many people look up to you. Even non-Black and non-queer folks have found so much power in how you advocate for those who share identity markers with you. Then

when you shout out Asians and Pacific Islanders, I think that baseline validation is needed and very powerful, especially from someone like you who speaks with nuance and thoughtfulness. It's a different kind of validation than being recognised by an institution.

- K: Yeah, and I feel really privileged to be able to speak about it. It's work I've done in private, it's work that I've done in community. These are things that I'm always constantly thinking about, and I think I just need to be a bit more active in it. Like, I'm obsessed with Jeff Chang. *Who We Be* was such an incredible text because it talks not only about these different groups of intersections, but how we're constructed to see each other and understand each other. There are so many infrastructures that have separated us, and I don't feel a particular responsibility or even ability to do the work of uniting. But I do want to make sure that people understand that I am trying to learn more, and this is a learning that we can all do.
- A: One of the things that is beautiful to me in this moment is seeing Asians learning how to pronounce solidarity with Black folks in a way that people have been working on for decades. Grace Lee Boggs, Yuri Kochiyama, and Jeff Chang were raised in Black civil rights, and a lot of Asian folks are learning to advocate for themselves. At the same time they're shaming themselves or being shamed by others when it seems like they may not be doing it "right." For example, a bunch of really dope art came out with Asians for Black Lives last May—such as the Yellow Peril Supports Black Power meme by Monyee Chau—and then immediately comments about why you can't pair this tiger with this panther, that you're decentering Blackness by advocating for Asians, or if you call out anti-Asian racism without mentioning structural racism against Black folks, then your activism isn't right. It must be so difficult for a young person just trying to contribute something for the first time. Is there any insight you'd offer to those who are trying to experiment but want to make sure that they don't say the wrong thing?
- K: Yeah, just say the wrong thing. But say it in the right space, because there could be some brilliance in your mistake. I would so much rather be wrong and then righted in community, than to be silent. We are sitting with the inheritance of such incredible critical thinking. We are sitting with an inheritance of so many mistakes. And I think that amalgamation will inevitably birth more genius and more mistakes. I mean, I was stoked to see the panther and tiger imagery. I was like, this is kind of cool. It's a little messy, but I'm here for the messiness,

because we're in messy times. And if it helps you to feel seen or if it helps you to feel safe, is it so bad?

- A: When George Floyd was murdered and the demonstrations began, I just completely went silent on social media, instead doing a lot of the intimate work with the people close to me offline. I recognised that it may have come off as silence or apathy, but I didn't want to come out as anything less than a hundred percent genuine.
- K: It sounds like you were taking care of yourself. I think every single one of us deserves the right to choose when and how we show up, even shuttering ourselves in is something that we should have a right to. It all circles back again to Disability Justice—we have been taught that action is action. And that is so ableist that we have to see action as this really public, bombastic thing. The decision to care for yourself is equally an action step. It has to be considered to resist this larger capitalist white supremacist way of being that we're pushed into.
- A: I think solidarity, or anything having to do with race, oftentimes gets vacuumed into the U.S. and the UK, which is one of the reasons I cherish work that forces me to think globally. I'm curating a show with 3AM, a performance art group in Myanmar, and what they're going through right now is so deeply interconnected with what we're going through here—not just state-sanctioned violence, but racism through the eradication of Muslims, and so much of that is tied with anti-Blackness. In your travels and global network, is there anything that you've seen that folks in the U.S. and the UK can draw from?
- K: Oh my gosh, I miss the world so much. I was on a panel for Vanderbilt University about pigmented futures in the global South with Tabita Rezaire, who is in Cayenne, French Guyana—an artist who does a lot of work oriented around healing. At the top of the pandemic, Tabita was like, "I can make all this work that I want to, but I've lost my relationship to the land. I've grown so proximate to the structures that I'm critiquing in my work, so I need to return to the land." And so Tabita's building a farm and wellness space. That's integrity: I'm preaching all this. I'm going to make it a reality. And curator Diana Campbell Betancourt was working in Bangladesh, in a space that is so deeply impacted by climate apocalypse, and thinking about what it means to work with local communities in biennial cities in the interest of climate consciousness. I think that there's so many more examples outside of the global North that we all need to pay a lot more attention to. The last international biennial that I went to was in Kerala, India.

Anita Dube, who is a lesbian was curating this queer biennial (which is wild in Kerala, where they don't play that shit), putting up gigantic portraits of gender-queer South Africans in the street.

I really appreciate every opportunity that I've had to go elsewhere just to understand that the issues that we all face are ever-changing. It's not an absolute "anti-Blackness has to be at the top of your list in every single conversation." There are some things that are appropriate to certain spaces and others that are not. All these things are modal, and we have to stay responsible and reflexive. I think being a person who can navigate the world in the way that I've been privileged to has really taught me that humility. And so I think that that ability to learn and to translate across language, across issues, is the greatest superpower, that I think all of us should be oriented towards.

- A: Thank you so much, Kimberly. I love you. I admire you so deeply. My heart grows every time I think of you and every time I come across the incredible life work that you do.
- K: Anything for you, any time. You are so special in this really strange world, I just appreciate the way that you are such a supreme advocate for so many people. And I'm so thankful for it.



**Kimberly Drew** is a writer, curator, and activist. Drew received her B.A. from Smith College in Art History and African-American Studies. She first experienced the art world as an intern in the Director's Office of The Studio Museum in Harlem. Her time there inspired her to start the Tumblr blog Black Contemporary Art, sparking her interest in social media. Drew's writing has appeared in *Vogue*, *Glamour*, *W*, *Teen Vogue*, and *Lenny Letter*, and she has executed Instagram takeovers for Prada, The White House, and Instagram. Drew recently left her role as the Social Media Manager at The Met. Her book, *Black Futures*, which she co-edited with Jenna Wortham, was published in 2020.

**Adriel Luis** is a community organizer, artist, and curator who believes in imagination as a pathway toward collective liberation. His life's work is focused on bridging artistic integrity and social vigilance. He is a part of the iLL-Literacy arts collective, which creates music and media to strengthen Black and Asian American coalitions; is creative director of Bombshelltoe, which works with artists to highlight marginalised communities affected by nuclear issues; and collaborates with dozens of artists and organizations through his curate and design engine, Phenomenoun. Adriel is the Curator of Digital and Emerging Practice at the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, where he advocates for equitable practices in museums and institutions.

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