

9

FROM BLACK BROTHER TO BLACK LIVES MATTER

PERCEPTION OF BLACKNESS IN VIET NAM

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On a Friday morning in May 2020, a news report filled the screens of major news channels around the United States: *George Floyd, forty-six-year-old African American male, killed by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota*. The news reports continued over the weekend, playing a bystander's video in a loop that we would come to know as a critical piece of evidence in the murder trial of the police officers involved. For many, footage of the suspects was unsettling: an Asian officer was part of the police squad that confronted Mr. Floyd.

A year on, as we started writing this essay in the summer of 2021, we know now that this event marked a critical point in racial history, not just in the United States but also around the world. The murder of George Floyd, and the overwhelming, renewed attention to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that followed, meant an opportunity to reflect on anti-Black racism within Asian and Asian diasporic communities. During protests against anti-Asian racism in America in 2020 and 2021, many shouted, "Asian Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter," signifying that they go hand in hand. Many of us within these communities had our first serious dialogues with parents and grandparents about race and our relationships with our Black friends. We passed out pages and pages of educational resources on the

history of the Black Lives Matter movement and its cultural significance. All over the popular social media website Instagram, we saw countless infographics—a method of sharing information via text overlaying pictures—on how to be a better ally and address anti-Blackness within your own communities. Each tiny square being shared was a glimmer of hope for a more racially informed social circle. The events of May and June 2020 had, hopefully and ideally, forever changed our understanding of our nuanced historical relationship with our friends of African descent.

Back home in Viet Nam, we observed a division in the media space. On one side, Vietnamese youths voiced support for the BLM movement on their social platforms, explaining the intricacies of racial relations and existing racial tensions that brought about the protests. Some rallied to host fundraising events for the global movement. A suite of activist platforms and groups were created in the form of social media public accounts to share educational resources and translate race-related terms that were virtually nonexistent in the Vietnamese daily vocabulary. On the other side, news coverage of videos showing the violent encounters between the police and protesters in American cities was received with anger and disgust. Many Vietnamese netizens flocked to those social media accounts to question the authority and validity of the BLM movement, while dismissing the need for Vietnamese to care about such matters.

This essay unpacks some of the tensions seen during the period of heightened BLM activities and the strongly opinionated—yet fleeting—responses from the Vietnamese public to this movement. Against the backdrop of the cultural, political, and historical meanings through which Blackness is understood in Viet Nam, we dissect the responses to an awareness-raising campaign on social media and the representation of BLM in the media space, while including perspectives from Vietnamese activist groups and other social commentators. We argue that while racism is usually considered nonrelevant in Vietnamese society, subtle forms of discrimination against darker skinned groups still exist as a result of a combination of factors: a long history of practiced and normalized colorism shared with other Asian cultures, colonial legacies, and the lack of exposure to racial dialogues in a largely homogenous population. By highlighting the short yet heated debate about BLM in 2020 in the Vietnamese media space, the essay will show that there is potential for the young Vietnamese generation to start addressing our own racial biases and connecting global movements like BLM to issues closer to home.

A Note on Methodology

This essay is primarily based on interviews with community activists and organizers involved in the Black Lives Matter movement in Viet Nam. During the

course of writing this paper, we engaged with the three most eminent, youth-run organizations in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City: Viet Activism, Viets for Change, and Black Lives Matter Hanoi.¹ We employed semistructured interviews to understand their experiences when executing their information campaigns and to gauge the overall attitude of the Vietnamese population that they observed at the time. Before starting to work on this chapter, we had been following these groups for a period of time out of an informal interest in Vietnamese activism. We then decided to formally reach out to schedule online interviews with them as neither of us (nor some of the interviewees) were physically in Viet Nam. In the end, we interviewed three of them and also talked to a few others who were vocal during this period.² From these three organizations, we focused on dissecting the public comments posted to the Facebook page named “Black Lives Matter Hanoi.”

We considered the ethical dimensions of using the names of these organizations. Even though they have public pages on social media, presenting their names could trigger hostile new media traffic to their sites, especially considering the public outrage examined in the latter half of this chapter. However, with the groups’ consent, we decided to retain the organizations’ names and to use pseudonyms for our interlocutors/interviewees, having explained the risk of disclosure of their identities. This ensures that we can honor these groups’ important work as Vietnamese youth activists who are raising awareness on racial issues in Viet Nam. We humbly intend for this small contribution to motivate a longer conversation and a call for more extensive research into race in Viet Nam and in Asia more broadly.

Whiteness and Blackness in Viet Nam

From Colorism to Racism

Growing up in Viet Nam, we were taught that white equals beauty. Every skin care product advertised on television tells us that the best skin care is one that helps your skin to be “trắng hồng rạng rỡ,” radiant blushy white, or “trắng chuẩn Hàn Quốc,” white by Korean standards, so you would never worry about having dark skin again.³ “White beauty”—as written on these skin-brightening cream jars—means your face now has a head-turning effect, unlike those of the women whose skin is just a few shades darker!

Colorism, defined by Alice Walker as the “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color,” is no new phenomenon among Asian, Asian diasporic, and other ethnic and racial groups.⁴ Even as whitening products reportedly might include dangerous if not potentially lethal chemicals, they are widely available in every Vietnamese cosmetic market segment, promising to lighten Southeast Asian skin tones to align with the global standards of beauty.⁵



Figure 9.1: Whitening product advertisements are prevalent in the Vietnamese cosmetics market (Photos by author). Ponds, an American brand, has one of the widest ranges of whitening products, which are almost exclusively produced in and marketed for Asian markets. Similar situation is observed with European brands such as L'Oréal. Other influences come from Korean and/or Japanese brands such as Bioré. Most (if not all) of these products and advertisements for them usually use the word “white” or “whitening” in their branding.

This refers to, if not a White Western face shown widely in television commercials, then at least a bright, pigment-free, Korean-like complexion, which is deemed as desirable by many Vietnamese people, especially young women, under the influence of the *hallyu* (Korean Wave).⁶ Han, a representative from Viet Activism, sees this as the Vietnamese’s “white obsession,” the idea that being attached to a white person will move you up in the Vietnamese social hierarchy.⁷

Understanding colorism in Viet Nam and in Asia more generally helps reveal the (hidden) racism in our society. Darker skin tones in Viet Nam are associated with a lower social status: if one works in the field all day under the sun, there is little chance one could have the fair complexion that can be flaunted by the class of intellectuals and royalists sheltered indoors, an attitude which journalist Raymond Zhou calls “an offshoot of class discrimination.”⁸ In their extensive oral history interviews with Asian communities in the US, Joanne L. Rondilla and Paul Spickard offered anecdotal evidence from Japanese, Cambodian, Filipino, Vietnamese, and Thai groups, confirming a common theme of light skin preference.⁹ Researchers explain that the preference for lighter shades of skin does not automatically equate

to wanting to be racially White but rather signals the desire to be part of the wealthy classes of these Asian societies.¹⁰

Colorism has existed across Asia, especially East Asia, long before Western domination.¹¹ Some early literary works and cultural artifacts can serve as a sign of this fair skin preference. Bai Juyi, a renowned poet during the Tang dynasty, penned a famous poem, *Chang hen ge*, in which he described a beautiful woman chosen as one of the king's wives as "warm water from the lake caressing the white skin."¹² The significance of skin color as a determinant of class is believed to have traveled from ancient China to the rest of East Asia—for example, in Japan as early as the Nara period in the late eighth century.¹³ Until quite recently, mid-nineteenth-century Japanese men and women still put on white lead powder to create "ivory-skin that is 'like a boiled egg'—soft, white and smooth on the surface."¹⁴ The Korean Cultural Heritage Administration also sees the obsession with "white" skin in Korea as dating back thousands of years, evidenced in murals depicting pale skin from the Goguryeo kingdom (AD 37–668) era, or in folklore presenting beautiful people—men and women alike—as having "white" skin.¹⁵ Vietnamese folk literature also reserved a special place for the fair skin of the woman, with Hồ Xuân Hương, the Queen of Nôm poetry, writing in the eighteenth century: "Thân em vừa trắng lại vừa tròn," ("My body is white and plump") in *Bánh trôi nước*, one of the most famous poems written in the Vietnamese Nôm scripture.¹⁶ The Vietnamese, descendants of dragons and fairies, with their red blood and yellow skin—as the legends of Vietnamese origins go—take pride in their roots yet also retain an attitude toward fair skin similar to other East Asian neighbors.

The century of French colonization brought new meanings to the black/white (or dark/fair) dichotomy in Viet Nam.¹⁷ The fair skin of Westerners is now the standard of beauty and with it, other physical features associated with racial whiteness, including a high nose arch, large double-lidded eyes, and tall stature. Margaret Hunter sees the establishment and maintenance of white supremacy by colonial rulers as being "predicated on the notion that dark skin represents savagery, irrationality, ugliness, and inferiority" as opposed to whiteness, which is associated with "civility, rationality, beauty, and superiority."¹⁸ In Viet Nam, both of these forces—social class discrimination and the colonial legacy—come together to influence the way Vietnamese see people who are different. As the French colonizers saw the "Annamese" as inferior, the Vietnamese now would see darker skin—whether associated with African-descended people, other Asian groups, or even Viet Nam's own ethnic minorities—as dirty, barbaric, and less desired.¹⁹

Blackness in Vietnamese History

In Viet Nam, most Vietnamese will tell you: there is no racism; that we don't see race because we are all the same; that race is only relevant in multiracial

societies like the United States. There is a general consensus in the Vietnamese academic community that ethnicity—not race—is the key to understanding the Vietnamese people.²⁰ The decennial nationwide census of 2019 confirmed this generally accepted idea of homogeneity, where 85.7% of the population identified as belonging to the Kinh ethnic majority, with a large share of the remaining fifty-three ethnicities concentrated in just a few provinces.²¹ Even with many ethnicities, Vietnamese still look similar overall, and the everyday Vietnamese person is rarely exposed to people who look evidently racially different from them.

That is not to say that, historically, Vietnamese society is totally ignorant about race or about Black people, especially considering its colonial struggles. At the Fifth Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1924, President Ho Chi Minh—then Nguyen Ai Quoc—delivered a report, *On Lynching and the Ku Klux Klan*, announcing solidarity with the struggle of African Americans—the very race he called “the most oppressed and the most exploited of the human family”—against white supremacy in the US.²² His 1925 book, first published in Paris as *Le Procès de la colonisation française (French Colonialism on Trial)*, draws strong similarities between the struggle against colonial rule of Black peoples in African nations and that of the “Annamese.”²³ In this revealing text exposing the crimes of the French, Ho Chi Minh’s call was loud and clear: to survive and to thrive, the Vietnamese need to sympathize and unite with other oppressed groups around the world (for example, other colonized peoples like those of African descent) against the system of white supremacy and colonialism. Both of these texts authored by the country’s first president had a great influence on Vietnamese political thinking that continues to this day.

The First Indochina War between French troops and the Việt Minh-led revolutionary forces in the 1940s and 1950s brought the first wave of Black soldiers onto Vietnamese soil in modern history.²⁴ The Senegalese officers who were recruited from Africa to fight on behalf of the imperial power in Indochina were subject to violent attacks due to both the French’s fear mongering rumors about the *tây đen* (for example, that these Black westerners “ate their enemies’ dead bodies”) and the Vietnamese’s anti-French, anti-colonial rhetoric.²⁵ Meanwhile, Việt Minh military leaders engaged in psychological warfare tactics to “convinc[e] African soldiers that they were fighting on the wrong side . . . to join the anticolonial movement and forsake their colonial oppressors.”²⁶ Part of this war’s legacies still exists in everyday life in Africa today—for example, as told through generations of family (hi)stories of how *nem* (springroll), a traditional Vietnamese delicacy, found its way to becoming a favorite street food in Dakar thanks to the migration of these Senegalese officers’ Vietnamese wives to West Africa.²⁷

The Second Indochina War, known more commonly as the Vietnam War and, in Viet Nam, as the War against American Imperialists, once again brought



Figure 9.2. A photo of the encounter between the famous Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King was a prominent figure in Vietnamese history associated with the anti-war movement in the 1960s (Photo copyright: Plum Village Community of Engaged Buddhism via Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation).

another wave of soldiers of African descent to Viet Nam. While the Vietnamese battled with the idea of fighting yet another “invader”—as often mentioned in Vietnamese official history books—Americans in their own accounts grapple with the fact that “Vietnam was the first major conflict in which the armed services were fully racially integrated, and the first conflict after the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and early ’60s.”²⁸ Once again, Black soldiers were in the position wherein they felt like they were fighting the wrong war, the white man’s war, against the backdrop of the civil rights movement back home.²⁹ During the racial reckoning of 2020, material including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1967 “Beyond Vietnam” anti-war speech and Muhammad Ali’s quote, “No Vietnamese ever called me n****r,” were passed around by Vietnamese and Vietnamese American youths together with our own translation of the *Letters for Black Lives*.³⁰ They serve as reminders of the historical significance that Black American and Vietnamese communities shared in the decades of violence and war. To the Vietnamese, Black soldiers were a part of the enemy in the war era, yet they were simultaneously an ally in the fight against imperialism.

The legacies of over a century of continuous wars against Western powers left Viet Nam with a generation of mixed-race children, including the children of Black US soldiers and Vietnamese women, who faced discrimination not just during wartime but also to this day. In presenting a “Black Testimony” on their displacements, Bernard Scott Lucious considered this group of Afro-Amerasians to have “experienced the most discrimination because their black skin was perceived as relatively darker than the skin color of other Vietnamese people (especially White Euro-Amerasians) . . . because their black skin made them physically conspicuous” and made them stand out from the rest of their generally homogenous Vietnamese communities.³¹ From being the “children of the enemy” to being seen as “dirty” due to their dark skin, journalistic accounts have recorded the struggles of this generation of “children of the dust” stuck between two worlds and belonging to neither.³² It is easy to attribute the discrimination either to “the color-line” or colorism. In the Vietnamese context, anti-Black racism is an amalgamation of a myriad of factors: the association of lighter skin with higher social class ideals rooted in ancient history, and the imposition of Western and white standards of beauty through decades of colonization and occupation, compounded by both local and white people’s prejudiced narratives against Black people, who are seen as brutal and inhumane in war.

Blackness in Viet Nam Today

Fast-forwarding to 2020, Viet Nam has moved beyond its primary association as a country synonymous with the wars of the twentieth century. Globalization and the opening of foreign businesses in Viet Nam allowed the migration of thousands of expatriates. From 2004 to 2021, the number of foreigners working in the country increased from 12,000 to over 100,000, concentrating mostly in Hanoi and especially Ho Chi Minh City.³³ According to the General Office of Population and Family Planning, two-thirds of these foreigners come from East Asia (China, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan, due to the dynamics of trade and investment) and therefore can largely pass as locals.³⁴ Nonetheless, the movement of new migrants from overseas has definitely contributed to the Vietnamese’s understanding of the world outside of its borders. This is, however, still very much influenced by stereotypes delivered through the entertainment business and media that the country has access to. When asked about where they think the source of our people’s understanding about Black people comes from, all of our interviewees would cite the influx of Western media that has accompanied this process of globalization. This is evident in the consumption of popular culture, most eminently Hollywood movies that are often produced by white artists, which usually depict people of African descent as either dangerous criminals or weak characters who are ameliorated by white saviors.³⁵

Unlike our neighbor China, whose legacies of violent anti-Black policies throughout history remain evident to this day, Viet Nam's racism and racial issues are more subtle.³⁶ Minh, an informant who worked with a Western country's embassy in Hanoi, revealed to us the hierarchy in English-teaching communities in which most (non-Asian) foreigners are engaged in Viet Nam. Guided by a natural law of supply and demand, as most parents prefer for their children to be educated by a *Tây trắng* ("Western white"), English centers would—whether secretly or openly—advertise and pay white teachers a higher salary compared to those of other races, if they hire them at all, regardless of whether the employee's native language is actually English. This is corroborated by anecdotes told elsewhere. For example, Angee Floyd, an African American former English teacher who is now an entrepreneur and comedian living in Ho Chi Minh City, says that in this country, "white is king."³⁷

For the past two decades, Vietnamese consumers enjoy and support Black entertainers and profit off of Black humor, likenesses, and culture. One prime example is the anonymous but popular Facebook page "Anh Da Đen" ("Black Brother"), which posts daily, translating memes and videos featuring Black people to its audience.³⁸ The page boasts a following of almost 2.9 million people as of December 2021—almost 3 percent of the Vietnamese population—and was "liked" more than 800,000 times, making it prime real estate for on-demand paid commercial advertising and promotions.³⁹ On a cultural zeitgeist level, a genre of music recently attracted mainstream Vietnamese attention: rap. Two reality show contests recently dedicated to finding the best rapper in Viet Nam—*Rap Viet* and *King of Rap*—are among the most successful entertainment shows in Vietnamese television history, attracting millions in viewership each week and with *Rap Viet* voted the "TV Show of the Year" in 2020.⁴⁰ The judges on the shows are popular rappers, with coaches who have been rapping since the early 2000s. The only female coach in *Rap Viet*, Suboi, has been dubbed "Queen of Hip-hop" in Viet Nam by the international media. The rise of rap and the popularity of these TV shows have sparked controversy surrounding cultural appropriation among Vietnamese netizens, but those have gone unaddressed, as commenters voiced that there are more important domestic issues to worry about in Viet Nam than cultural appropriation. Despite the link to Black culture, these popular entertainment programs did not mention anything about the history of their inspiration, as well as the BLM movement, in any of their posts or shows.

There are also Black people who attach their image to their art and use their Blackness to differentiate themselves and offer a new perspective in Viet Nam. One example is entertainer Nnadozie Uzor Nadis, who adopted the Vietnamese name "Nam." Nadis broadcasts his daily life in Ho Chi Minh City to his 71,900 subscribers on a YouTube channel called AfroVietTV. He is widely known by

his fans as *Nam Đen* or “Black Nam.” His channel’s purpose is to bring together the beauty of African and Asian cultures, with his most popular videos being the series “Welcome to Vietnam,” which attracted millions of views. Nadis is among a group of foreign entertainers from Africa who are experiencing a rise of fame in Viet Nam. The entertainment space that was occupied mostly by white people before is opening up, albeit slowly, to Black artists like him.

Black Lives Matter in Viet Nam

Through the Media Looking Glass

In the political and news sphere, the Vietnamese media coverage of the global protests in the wake of George Floyd’s death and the BLM movement, like elsewhere in the world, was extensive. Of course, it did not take up the front pages as much as it did in the United States, but it was prominent enough on online newspapers’ homepages to grab the Vietnamese audience’s attention.

The online newspaper *Dân Trí*, one of Viet Nam’s most respectable online news sources, covered the protests from May 28, 2020, and published a total of seventeen articles in June 2020. The newspaper focused on neutral, fact-based reporting, sometimes translating already published articles from international sources such as Reuters, the AP, the BBC, or Sputnik. All the articles covering the protests and the incidents with American police were tagged with “người da màu”—Vietnamese for “people of color”—as Vietnamese do not consider themselves to be “of color.”⁴¹ The articles during this period attracted two camps of thought, at least by the people who cared enough to type comments on online news articles: support for Black people and condemning the police for their use of force, and in contrast, condemning Black people for committing crimes and condemning the protests for being an opportunity for looting.

Vietnamnet, the official newspaper of Viet Nam’s Ministry of Information and Communications, published thirty-three articles tagged “biểu tình ở Mỹ” (“protests in America”) in June of 2020. The articles are mostly neutral original content, as the ministry has reporters on the ground in the US. The tag “phân biệt chủng tộc,” or “racism,” on the other hand, mostly focused on the racial violence Asian people faced during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, with three articles detailing racism against Asians and only one article about Black Wall Street. *Vietnamnet* also allows comments on its articles, but the articles did not attract any from its readers.

The official website of the Communist Party in Viet Nam published an article at the height of the protests in America on June 15, 2020. The article was titled “‘Black Lives Matter’ and the dream of eradicating racism in America,” in which the author discusses the history of racism in America and ponders if racism could

really be eradicated despite America having had its first Black president.⁴² The overarching sentiment from official Vietnamese media outlets seemed to be that of a neutral tone with fact-based reporting, letting readers draw conclusions for themselves and voice their opinions if they felt the urge to.

A Tale of Two Cities

Political sources and news outlets aside, the court of public opinion took to social media to voice their thoughts on the BLM movement. On June 11, 2020, a Facebook page was created by a group of young Hanoians, called *Black Lives Matter Hanoi*, with the specific mission to voice support for the BLM movement and “raise awareness and educate Vietnamese youths on the issues of systemic racism and police brutality,” as written in their page description. However, what stood out about this campaign was not the uplifting fact that Vietnamese youths are now talking about race but the tsunami of negative responses to a Black Lives Matter, awareness-raising effort. Besides the blatantly racist and derogatory commentary, some argued that anti-Black racism has nothing to do with Vietnamese and that it is meaningless to push a BLM agenda in Viet Nam. One commenter summed it up:

The page is hypocritical. Injustice [against] people in the country [Viet Nam] [is] abundant. Police violence in the police station. Discrimination among classes, regions, and ethnicities is piling up. . . . But be busy-bodies. Indeed, the entire population supports hypocrites.

In Ho Chi Minh City, or Saigon as many of its dwellers and adorers still call it, on June 21, 2020, an event titled “Saigon is Listening: Black Lives Matter” was hosted by Viet Activism in collaboration with other groups, attracting a large following from the expat and Vietnamese communities. The event received surprisingly positive responses with a huge turnout, despite happening on a rainy Sunday summer evening.⁴³ It created a safe space for reflection and encouraged the groups involved in expanding their activist work and connecting them with one another to elevate their voices.⁴⁴

Despite the two wildly different responses from the audience in these two cities (we do not consider these voices to be representative of entire cities), we noted the two opposite reactions to a BLM campaign in Viet Nam.⁴⁵ Due to the volume of responses to the Black Lives Matter Hanoi Facebook page, we choose to focus on this platform while also situating our understanding of the activism landscape in Viet Nam during this period with input from other groups and individuals. The next section integrates these data sources with the social content from Black Lives Matter Hanoi as our primary point of departure.

A Social Echo Chamber

Black Lives Matter Hanoi was created in June 2020, at the height of the Black Lives Matter protests around the world. Their aim was to help create conversations and raise awareness among Vietnamese netizens about systematic racism and police brutality. Two of Black Lives Matter Hanoi's most popular posts were its first profile-picture change to a logo, and its first post indicating the organization's purpose and mission. The logo incorporates the Black power fist with an illustration of the Temple of Literature in solidarity. The Temple of Literature was Viet Nam's first ever university, and it is a temple dedicated to Confucius. The choice to include this Vietnamese symbol of a place with deep history, and arguably one of Hanoi's most recognizable landmarks, seems to signify the activists' intentions that they as Hanoians support BLM. Unfortunately, this inclusion drew backlash from some of the page's passersby, and some of them called the logo offensive because it depicted the power fist coming out on top of the temple as though it had punched through the roof. Some went so far as to ask the activists to remove the word "Hanoi" from the page name as they did not think this page represented all the people of Hanoi.

We extracted the comments from these two posts and parsed through them to glean the common themes or keywords that these comments shared, using "web scraping" techniques by manually downloading, copying and pasting the content, and then removing personally identifiable details.⁴⁶ Harvesting the publicly available comments in these two most popular posts, we employed a process that Franz et al. designated as "passive analysis" to unpack the thematic grouping of the comments (it is "passive" because the commenters are not involved in our analyzing process) by color coding the comments in Vietnamese, cross-checking among the authors, and then translating important texts into English.⁴⁷

Three key themes emerged from the 898 comments we collected: (1) the observation that there are no Black people in Viet Nam as we are a homogenous society, and therefore, there is no need for BLM; (2) the whataboutism that there are bigger issues in Viet Nam and we should focus on internal affairs; and (3) the ignorance that Black people "had it coming" as they are no good. The scarce comments supporting the page were drowned out by a sea of negativity, with dogpiled comments questioning why Vietnamese people in Viet Nam care about a movement that is halfway across the globe, and why the page is fundraising for such a cause.

The sentiment that Viet Nam is homogenous and the whataboutism go hand in hand, as evident by their frequency of appearances in the comment section. The commenters pondered if Hanoi and Viet Nam had a big enough population of Black people for this topic to be of interest, asking, "Oh? Does Viet Nam have Black people? And if we do, who cares about them?" and, "What a joke, when did Hanoi discriminate against Black people?" The commenters failed to acknowledge

the existence of Black Vietnamese, anti-Black racism, as well as discrimination that Black people faced in Viet Nam with employment. These comments were made despite the recent surge in interest in shows like *King of Rap* or *Rap Viet* as mentioned above.

After asking these questions, the next crop of commenters suggested that activists should care about what is currently happening at home first, pleading “Why aren’t you doing something nice for your own homeland, your fellow countrymen, who are dying? . . . Humbly change the page name to VIETNAMESE LIVES MATTER?” Some resorted to questioning the page’s motive, asking who they were fundraising for or who they were fighting for when people in Viet Nam were still facing many problems. One retorted:

[Dear] dozens of page admins. Innocent people lost their land, lottery ticket sellers lost their jobs during the pandemic⁴⁸ and did not receive any support. China occupies the sea and islands. Why don’t you guys demonstrate these things but protest for a Black criminal overseas? Are the people of Vietnam happy and prosperous?

The image of Black people or the idea that darker skin is bad had been perpetuated in Viet Nam through the country’s history with colorism and a desire to align with whiteness, as analyzed in the earlier section. One commenter repeatedly posted what they deemed “evidence” of Black people engaging in illegal activities, insinuating that the page was applauding bad behaviors and that Black people had it coming to them when they chose to commit crimes. They belittled the page and its supportive commenters, saying, “[these are] your African American idols,” suggesting that the supporters were actually idolizing criminal activities. As our interlocutor Minh noted, the Vietnamese, who generally valorize a respect for authority, would likely have had a “mental struggle” upon seeing images of protestors—rioters and looters as the media portrays them—and trying to empathize with them, a message that Black Lives Matter Hanoi was pushing. These commenters, although only a mere group of around three hundred, voiced their attitude toward Blackness in Viet Nam loudly and clearly. They do not care about Black people in Viet Nam, much less all the way across the world in the US.

The racist and bullying commentaries got so bad that the page’s administrator had to put up a post saying a comment would be deleted and the author privately messaged if it contained violence, reactionist sentiment against the government, or hate speech. Despite their warning and subsequent deletions, hate speech was still rampant, with comments calling Black people *lũ da đen phá hoại* (“Black people [are] wreckers of havoc”). The comments we found in Vietnamese were coated with a layer of disdain, a hatred so deep like the kind you would find in the depths of forums like 4chan or r/TheDonald (a Donald Trump-supporting, alt-

right subreddit). They found like-minded, albeit racist and ignorant, individuals, and formed their own echo chamber on post after post of a page dedicated to show Vietnamese support for BLM. They resorted to calling Black people *lũ*, a quantifier in Vietnamese to signify the resentment reserved for enemies and trivialities. After a month of defending themselves against almost three hundred hostile and persistent commenters, the dozen administrators of the Facebook page for Black Lives Matter Hanoi became inactive in July 2020.

Conclusion

So, are Vietnamese people in Viet Nam racist against Black people? The answer is more complicated than a simple yes or no. Anti-Blackness in Viet Nam comes from both colorism and its colonial legacy to form a subtle, subconscious form of bias rather than a painful history of institutionalized discrimination based purely on race. Due to the common national sentiment that we don't have "race" in Viet Nam, Vietnamese people are largely "racially" homogeneous; and while the presence of other ethnic and racial groups is growing, that is not happening fast enough for the country to adjust its attitude. Interwoven with colorism, as well as imperialism and its colonial legacy, "racial" issues in Viet Nam appear in the form of subtle discrimination against darker-skinned groups, including the country's ethnic minority groups.

Race education in Viet Nam is limited to historical rather than contemporary events. Racism is thought of as an issue of the past, eradicated after Black people were freed from slavery and no longer an embedded institutionalized problem. Therefore, except for those with foreign exposure through traveling and staying abroad where these issues are evident, it remains a blind spot for many. As one of our informants remarked, "If we don't go out of the place where we're the majority, how do we know we're also marginalized and discriminated against?" This majority status is sometimes reflected in the desire to align with whiteness, which further deepens prejudice against Black people. To alleviate the issue and change the outlook of Vietnamese in Viet Nam, we need more diverse representation of people of all races through cultural exchange, conscious media reporting, and nationalized education. It also helps Vietnamese to understand discrimination against ourselves when we go abroad, be it for business or pleasure.

Racial movements like BLM have sparked heated discussion but are often short-lived because they are viewed as not directly relevant to the life of the average person in Viet Nam. Our essay briefly shows how successful activist groups started out discussing BLM but branched out and sought to educate Vietnamese audiences on a suite of directly relevant issues. This includes connecting anti-Black racism with discrimination against ethnic minorities in Viet Nam, an effort that might intersect with issues of gender and sexuality. To be sustainable in their growth,

these groups chose to hit closer to home, addressing problems in Viet Nam's backyard. This shows some hope that the next generation of young Vietnamese are taking the lead in addressing the unspoken biases that exist in the country, opening the space for the Vietnamese people to have an honest conversation about complex and nuanced issues in a globalized world.

NOTE: In an effort to reclaim the spelling of our country's name, Viet Nam, in the English language, this has been how we write in this chapter instead of the more commonly seen "Vietnam". Vietnamese is a mono-syllabic language, where each sound has its own meaning. According to the late photojournalist Philip Jones Griffiths, the shortening of *Viet Nam* into *Vietnam* in the 1940s and 1950s (and subsequently other Vietnamese geographic names) was due to a cost-saving reason when transmission via telex was charged by the number of words. To borrow the words of the American historian Ted Engelmann in a letter to the OAH, writing Viet Nam "help[s] readers, mainly Americans, realize that Viet Nam is a country, not a war." Aside from the fact that our government has been advocating for the official name of the country to be written so, we encourage a gradual change in accepting "Viet Nam" as the correct way to write the country name in English, to remind everyone of our roots, the beauty of our language and the identity that we write to ourselves.

Notes

¹ We only engaged with Black Lives Matter Hanoi via written Facebook messages on their page as the group had been inactive for over a year by the time we reached out and the administrators did not want to be interviewed as Black Lives Matter Hanoi.

² Interestingly, the people we interviewed and those involved in these initiatives are mostly, if not always, those who have been abroad and/or are part of Generation Z (those born in or after 1996). Their backgrounds are similar: most are current or former students at international schools or "high schools for the gifted," which are designated specialized public high schools for students gifted in the study of natural sciences, social sciences, and foreign languages. Many students in these magnet high schools would then go on to study abroad. The educational backgrounds of these activists are important, as they highlight the potential exposure to people of different races and ethnicities they would have encountered in their school curriculum and their social circles. This contrasts with their circle of friends doing their studies in Viet Nam who usually tend to see issues motivating the BLM movement as international matters that are not relevant to their lives.

³ A good selection of these television commercials can be found here: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLza6wDkW7daGn_vlso7TueCfGKdV0sKO.

⁴ See Walker, *In Search*, 290; Chou, *Asian American Sexual Politics*; Norwood, *Color Matters*; Wahyuwidaya, *Colorism*. Cultural influences from East Asia, predominantly through the *hallyu* (Korean Wave), arguably have the most impact on Vietnamese's beauty standards. Kim ("Understanding 'Koreanness'") wrote from within the Korean society,

where Vietnamese is the second-largest migrant group of foreign residents, assigning the Vietnamese into the “Collective Dark”/“Collective Blacks” category.

⁵ Khan, “Skin-lightening creams.”

⁶ The Korean influence in Viet Nam started in the early 2000s with the introduction of Korean television dramas and pop music (K-drama and K-pop). See Jang, Nguyen and Kwon, “Women’s empowerment.” In addition, Japanese influence is also significant in the skincare product market.

⁷ All informants’ names in this chapter are pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity; however, we decided to keep the real names of the platforms so that their work can be elevated and reviewed (with the teams’ informed consent).

⁸ Zhou, “Seeing.”

⁹ Rondilla and Spickard, *Is Light Better?*

¹⁰ Jones, “Significance”; Lee, “Lessons”; Rondilla and Spickard, *Is Light Better?*

¹¹ Dixon and Telles, “Skin Color”; Li, Hyun and Belk, “Skin Lightening”

¹² This is a rough English translation from the original text: 春寒賜浴華清池 / 溫泉水滑洗凝脂. We read from the Sino-Vietnamese/Vietnamese translation by Tân Đà (“Xuân hàn tứ dục Hoa Thanh trì / Ôn tuyền thủy hoạt tẩy ngưng chi” or “Tiết xuân được tắm ở hồ Hoa / Nước ấm vuốt da trắng mịn màng” [English word-by-word translation: ‘In springtime bathing in Flower lake / Warm water caressing white smooth skin’]).

¹³ Wagatsuma, “Social Perception,” note 3.

¹⁴ Glenn, “Consuming Lightness,” 179.

¹⁵ Yoon, “Tracing.” It is also interesting to note that during the ancient time in Joseon (as well as in other parts of East Asia), westerners were not called or seen as white.

¹⁶ The name of the poem is literally the name of the sweet dish “glutinous rice ball,” which is eaten across Viet Nam and East Asia. It acts as a euphemism for the woman’s fate and dignity through the ups and downs of life. It is believed that in this period, the ideal standard for women included a plump body (presenting fertility) and white, pale skin (presenting beauty).

¹⁷ Black/white (the race) and dark/fair (the skin colors) are described with the same word pair, *đen/trắng*, in Vietnamese.

¹⁸ Hunter, “Persistent,” 238.

¹⁹ Annam is the pejorative term French colonialists used to call the land that is now Viet Nam (though sometimes specifically central Viet Nam during some periods). Discrimination against people with darker skin in Viet Nam now is obviously less blatant and more subtle compared to French treatment of its colonial subjects. Some examples of this tendency include stereotypes of Black people as dangerous, or a preference for lighter-skinned East Asians over other darker-skinned Asian groups in South and Southeast Asia as standards of beauty, or the treatment of the ethnic minority groups as needing to “catch up” with Kinh people as evidenced in government programs (a popular mantra is “Đưa miền núi tiến kịp miền xuôi,” or bringing the mountainous areas—inhabited

by many ethnic minorities—on par with the plains, which are mostly populated by the Kinh majority). Nonetheless, in our opinions, these unaddressed biases and this subtle discrimination could lead to deep social issues and unfettered racism—the tiniest manifestation of which is through the response to BLM discussed later in this essay.

²⁰ Vương and Vũ, “Nhân học.”

²¹ Dang, “Does Horizontal Inequality”; Huy Thắng, “Công bố.” The majority of Vietnamese ethnic minority population live in the northwest regions, northeast mountains, and central highlands, with other (very densely populated) regions largely inhabited by the Kinh majority. Pischedda et al. (“Phylogeographic”) explains from a different perspective the genome-based ethnic origin makeup of the present-day Vietnamese population, arguing that while there are genetic variations among different ethnic groups in Viet Nam, they all belong to the geographic location of and around the Indochinese Peninsula and southern region of China. It is also worth noting that Viet Nam’s reports to the OHCHR Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) have focused on ethnic minorities as the subject of discrimination in question, while acknowledging the discrimination that Vietnamese citizens face overseas (Duy Ly, “Công tác”).

²² A full record of the English translation of this essay as well as other related texts can be retrieved from a recently published selection introduced by Nguyen Dai Trang (see Nguyen, “The Black Race”).

²³ Ho Chi Minh described the Vietnamese using this pejorative term in a sarcastic sense. An excerpt of the Vietnamese translation of this text (titled “Bản án chế độ thực dân Pháp,” or “The Sentence of the French Colonial Regime”) has been widely taught in the modern Vietnamese secondary school curriculum until now. It serves as a reminder for the young generation of the country’s colonial past while positioning the Vietnamese struggle in a bigger world picture, especially in its relationship with African nations that were then French colonies.

²⁴ We understand that how we define who “Black people” are historically can be slippery. For example, it may include groups inhabiting marine Southeast Asia or the Pacific Islands in ancient and current times. In this section, we focus on more recent history with the movement of African and African-descended mercenaries into Viet Nam through wars.

²⁵ Ginio, “African Troops,” 99.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁷ Peyton, “How Spring Rolls.”

²⁸ Goodwill, “Black and White.”

²⁹ Chow and Bates, “Da 5 Bloods”; Terry, “Bloods.”

³⁰ We are aware of accounts that say this quote has been misattributed to Mr. Ali and that it probably wasn’t him who said it, but we find that its significance still stands in the Vietnamese/Vietnamese American rhetoric during the awareness campaigns in 2020.

³¹ Lucious, “In the Black Pacific,” 133.

³² Emerson, “Part Vietnamese”; Winn, “Vietnam War Babies.”

³³Người Lao Động, “Hơn 100,000”; Viet Nam News, “Number.” As these statistics are from official MOLISA reports, they did not take into account the population of migrants into Viet Nam that stay on quarterly tourist visas (or commonly known as “visa runs” in the community). Recently, the Vietnamese government has started imposing more stringent restrictions on foreigners working in Viet Nam to avoid loopholes in labor laws (see Decree 152/2020/ND-CP).

³⁴Tổng cục, “Lao động.”

³⁵Superhero movies are usually very popular in Vietnamese cinemas, and most of the time, they feature white protagonists, especially against Black antagonists (the *Kingsman* franchise is an example). DC’s *Suicide Squad* was also popular, next to the suite of movies that make up the Marvel cinematic universe. While the film industry itself has improved on diversity in recent years, it is worth mentioning the impact of some of these stereotypes, especially in a society not racially diverse itself, like Viet Nam.

³⁶Ouassini, Amini and Ouassini, “#ChinaMustExplain”; Sautman, “Anti-Black Racism.”

³⁷The Black Experience Japan, “You Have Freedom,” 13: 52.

³⁸While the page name is still “Black Brother,” recent publications in the last few years have stopped featuring Black people exclusively, and the page has become a more common “meme” page for entertainment, though contents featuring people of African descent are still the most abundant and prominent.

³⁹This is one of the most common transactions for social media content creators and advertisers in Viet Nam, with branded content on Facebook created on demand for payments (with Facebook being the most common social media platform in Viet Nam at 65 million users in 2021, according to Statista. The “Black Brother” administrator team mentions it accepts requests via direct messages to the page.

⁴⁰Bell Shino, “Vì sao.”

⁴¹In Vietnamese colloquial as well as formal language, the word “người da màu” (“people of color”) is usually used as a euphemism to refer to people of African descent and less likely for Asian groups, even darker-skinned South Asians. This might be seen as a more polite way of saying “người da đen” (“black-skinned people”), but it also means Vietnamese people are unlikely to count ourselves as people of color.

⁴²Hoài Hà, “Black Lives Matter.”

⁴³From the event’s Facebook record, over five hundred people showed interest in participating (i.e., by clicking “Going” or “Interested”). From the event photos published by Saigon is Listening afterward, the event looked like it was attended by around one to two hundred people. It’s critical to note that Saigon is Listening was created by a group of foreigners of African descent, mostly African American, living in Ho Chi Minh City, but according to their event description, the event engaged with Vietnamese youth activist groups to facilitate conversations between the communities. The organizers also reported having to change to a bigger venue due to an overwhelming audience. We only engaged with Viet Activism and not Saigon is Listening when writing this essay. See event page: <https://www.facebook.com/events/1189259914753185/>.

⁴⁴For example, Viet Activism and Viets for Change (formerly Viets for BLM) recently hosted a joint event on understanding ethnic minorities biases by Vietnamese.

⁴⁵These groups all started around the same time of heightened BLM activities globally and were all initially focused on BLM/anti-racism content, but Viet Activism and Viets for Change eventually expanded their coverage to stay relevant for longer. Our interlocutors also attributed the positive responses to their campaigns to the dominant platform they were using (Instagram instead of Facebook, where the number of Vietnamese well surpassed the former).

⁴⁶Mancosu and Vegetti, “What You Can Scrape.” While we acknowledge the slippery nature of using pseudonyms to call the commenters (see Gerrard, “What’s in a (Pseudo) name?”), and in our cases using no names at all, we see that this is a public platform that any (Vietnamese-speaking) person on or outside of Facebook can access, and therefore, the scraping process did not violate the limited ethical and legal general guidelines in academic literature. During the scraping process, we could not access some of the comments that were deleted and turned off by the Facebook page administrators, and this caused some disruptions to the comment threads, which we see as a limitation to our research.

⁴⁷Franz et al., “Using Facebook.”

⁴⁸Viet Nam employs a wholesale system for lottery tickets, which big lottery ticket companies sell to wholesalers in big cities, who sell the tickets to local stores, who then sell the tickets to individual sellers. Those individual sellers then go around the cities to sell the ticket to anyone who would buy it before it expires (see Anton Abroad, “Vietnam’s Lottery Wholesale”). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Viet Nam entered strict lockdowns, which caused these street sellers to lose their jobs.

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