

Racialized Disease

The Reemergence of Yellow Peril Rhetoric in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The rise in hate speech and violent attacks against Asian bodies as a perceived result of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has shaken Asian diasporic communities' sense of belonging and social stability. In this paper, I posit that the reemergence of Yellow Peril rhetoric is indicative of the ethnic hierarchies and intolerance for Asian bodies ingrained in Western countries, further exacerbated by politicians' weaponization of anti-Chinese rhetoric. Analyzing historical texts and using published statistics I will investigate several interrelated questions¹: How is the current violence against Asian Americans reflective of ethnic hierarchies in Los Angeles and broader America? How does recognizing the history of the racialization of disease contextualize heightened associations of Asian bodies with COVID-19? How is the reemergence of 'Yellow Peril' rhetoric affecting how members of the Asian American community engage in activism? In investigating these questions, I suggest that the trauma and insecurities associated with current experiences of racist attacks and anti-Asian rhetoric will affect Asian Americans for years to come, as they navigate the current prejudice amplified by politics, social insecurities, and disease.

¹ Particularly data from the Angus Reid Institute and STOP AAPI HATE reporting organization.

*Anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy have often been framed by an explicitly medical language, one in which the line between perceived and actual threat is slippery and prone to hysteria and hyperbole.*² –Markel and Stern

Introduction- *How we got here.*

*I feel scared to let my grandparents go out in fear that they may be harassed. I feel anger and confusion since society has normalized it so much that when we try to speak up about it, people still try and joke around about it.*³ –Anonymous, 13-year-old

The ongoing worldwide pandemic brought on by COVID-19 has caused detrimental consequences to various facets of daily life– economically, socially, and emotionally– as the rapid spread of the virus has limited how people are able to work, travel, and physically interact with others in their communities. One of the hardest hit populations in terms of social repercussions is that of the Asian diaspora in Western countries. Since the onset of COVID-19, Asian Americans have been blamed for the origin of the virus, and subsequently been made victim to increased instances of violence including verbal harassment, physical assault, and denials of service.⁴

Government responses to the virus have further escalated the issue, as President Trump has repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as Kung Flu, the Chinese virus, and Wuhan coronavirus. This has led many to believe we are seeing a return of “Yellow Peril” sentiment, as Asian Americans are being scapegoated for the economic, health, and social consequences of the

² Howard Markel and Alexandra Stern, “The Foreignness of Germs: The Persistent Association of Immigrants and Disease in American Society,” *Milbank Quarterly*, 80, no. 4, 757.

³ STOP AAPI Hate Youth Campaign, “They Blamed Me Because I am Asian: Findings from reported anti-AAPI youth incidents,” (Accessed November 1, 2020). <https://stopaapihate.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Stop-AAPI-Hate-Youth-Campaign-Report-9-17.pdf>

⁴ Erin Donaghue, “NYPD makes two hate crime arrests for attacks against Asian-Americans amid coronavirus pandemic” March 16, 2020, (Accessed May 20, 2020). <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/nypd-makes-two-hate-crime-arrests-for-attacks-against-asian-americans-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/>

pandemic. As rates of discrimination and harassment have spiked since the beginning of 2020 and are only continuing to increase, so too are the anxieties and insecurities among the Asian diaspora.

Several hate crime reporting sites have been developed by nonprofit organizations in North America to survey the extent of discrimination targeted at Asian bodies.⁵ The Stop AAPI Hate reporting center, founded on March 19th 2020, received over 1,100 cases in the site's first two weeks of operation, and as of July 1st there were over 800 reported incidents in California alone.⁶ From results such as these, it is clear that Asian populations are experiencing increased fear of going out in public and virtual spaces, as "Asians and people of Asian descent around the world have been subjected to attacks and beatings, violent bullying, threats, racist abuse, and discrimination that appear linked to the pandemic."⁷ As leaders of Western countries continue to deflect blame of the virus onto China and Chinese bodies, Asian Americans' understandings of national belonging and safety have been upended.

While some may suggest that these trends of discrimination are newly developed and unique to COVID-19, the history of Yellow Peril rhetoric and the active scapegoating of Chinese immigrants is evidence of an ingrained intolerance for members of the Asian diaspora in Western countries. Powerful politicians' adoption of such rhetoric further fuels public outrage and is

⁵ Serena Chow, "Documenting Hate: Asian American Nonprofits Create Websites to Monitor and Report Discrimination Linked to Coronavirus" March 19, 2020, (Accessed July 22, 2020). <https://asamnews.com/2020/03/19/two-websites-launched-today-to-report-hate-crimes-against-asian-americans-in-wake-of-coronavirus-outbreak/>

⁶ The STOP AAPI Hate center was created by the Chinese for Affirmative Action, San Francisco State University, and the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council
Nicholas Turton, "New Report: 800+ Reported Incidents of Anti-AAPI Hate in California Since COVID" <http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/CA-Report-Press-Release-7.1.20.pdf>

⁷ Human Rights Watch, "Covid-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide: National Action Plans Needed to Counter Intolerance" May 12, 2020, (Accessed August 15, 2020). <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide>

normalizing the violence and abuse targeted at Asian bodies.⁸ The increased hate is “reigniting old strains of racism and xenophobia that frame Chinese people as uncivilized, barbaric ‘others’ who bring with them dangerous, contagious diseases and an appetite for dogs, cats, and other animals outside the norm of Occidental diets.”⁹ The experiences of the Asian American diaspora in the COVID-19 pandemic continue to shed light on the politics of health and national belonging, and are necessary to contextualize today’s violence targeted towards minority communities.

In this paper, I argue that the current abuse against Asian Americans is a symptom of the reemergence of Yellow Peril rhetoric and sentiments, as the Asian body has become a politicized arena in which to assign blame and debate the maintenance of boundaries of identity. Informed by current news media and emerging reports on hate crimes against Asian Americans, in addition to published material by scholars including Deenesh Sohoni, Roger Keil, Harris Ali, and Erika Lee, this paper aims to contextualize current racial tensions in the history of anti-Asian sentiment in the United States, shining a light on the dangers of Othering mass communities of people and the risks of imagining connections between the spread of disease and a population’s racial background.

Theoretical Methodology

⁸ For example, Carl Samson, “89-Year-Old Chinese American Woman Set on Fire in NYC” July 17, 2020. <https://nextshark.com/fire-89-year-old-chinese-american-woman-nyc/>

⁹ Jenny G. Zhang, “Pinning Coronavirus on How Chinese People Eat Plays Into Racist Assumptions” *Eater.com*, January 31, 2020, (Accessed June 30, 2020). <https://www.eater.com/2020/1/31/21117076/coronavirus-incites-racism-against-chinese-people-and-their-diets-wuhan-market>

*As I walked home, a man passed by and yelled "Get the f**k out of here, Chink!" I lived in Harlem for more than three years and had never heard racial slurs until the Coronavirus.¹⁰ – Anonymous, New York, NY*

This project is theoretically informed by Michael Omi and Howard Winant's racial formation theory. Omi and Winant argue that race is treated as a central axis of social relations, determined by changing politics, economies, and national boundaries.¹¹ This gradual and ongoing process of racial formation involves various institutions including media, education, legislative and governmental bodies, and these racializations serve to assume perceived internal and external differences. These assumptions of difference thus allow us to imagine race and ethnicity as fixed and unchangeable.

Asian bodies become inconvenient in maintaining these racial norms, resulting in crises of identity not only in Asian American individuals but in larger social and national constructions, especially when "we encounter someone whom we cannot conveniently racially categorize—someone who is, for example... of an ethnic/racial group with which we are not familiar."¹² Omi and Winant argue that race is a preeminently socio-historical concept, invented partly to prevent biological facts from intruding into groups' collective racial imaginations.¹³ Despite race being an epistemological category, it has very real ontological consequences, as perceived differences are used to justify distinct treatment of certain individuals and collective groups.

Omi and Winant argue that, at the time of their publication, the stakes of subscribing to such limited perceptions of race consciousness included allocating people of color property and

¹⁰ Russell Jeung, "Anti-Chinese Rhetoric Employed by Perpetrators of Anti-Asian Hate," http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/REPORT_ANTI-CHINESE-RHETORIC_EMPLOYED_10_08_20.pdf

¹¹ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, (Milton Park: Routledge, 1986), 12.

¹² Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, 12.

¹³ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, 11.

political rights. What might we consider as the stakes of such racializations in today's political atmosphere? I would suggest that the central stakes we are currently risking with the reemergence of Yellow Peril rhetoric include the mental and emotional health of POC, physical safety and well-being of Asian bodies— particularly youth— and political ability in advocating for anti-racist legislation.

Specifically concerning the media, Omi and Winant's theory asserts that "the power of the media lies not only in their ability to reflect the dominant racial ideology, but in their capacity to shape that ideology in the first place."¹⁴ This shaping of the collective imagination and criteria of belonging is thus constructed and used to limit how people treat Asian Americans, and consequently limit how this population is able to articulate themselves. In particular, this limiting of identity and groupness lends itself useful when a racial group is deemed inconvenient to the collective body.

By deliberately excluding Asian bodies from constructions of the nation, it becomes easier to Other Asian American groups, thereby dehumanizing them and, in this case, easily assigning blame to them for the origin and continued spread of the coronavirus. Media, therefore, is an instrumental tool in continuing the spread of misinformation and racist sentiment, further cementing the racialization of disease to many who engage in such media.

Arif Dirlik's complication of diasporic theory in his article "Asia Pacific Studies in an age of global modernity" is also key to thinking about how the Asian diaspora as a population struggle to define themselves within the context of the United States. He writes:

Diasporas easily lend themselves to racialization—both by societies of arrival, and by the diasporic population itself. This exacerbates divisions in societies of arrival, where the

¹⁴ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, 13.

persistence of diasporic identification leads almost readily to underlining their foreignness, more often than not expressed in the language of race.¹⁵

As Dirlik states, race is employed to reconfigure groupness and demarcate boundaries of acceptance. Diasporic communities, thus, are situated in the limited space between a site their ancestors may have called home, and their current site of residence that demands proof they belong. Dirlik's article shows that engaging with diasporic studies in this way can prove to be difficult in toeing the line between "exacerbating divisions" and connecting communities across borders. Both Dirlik's conceptualization of diasporic theory and Omi and Winant's racial formation theory help center this project in larger conversations of foreignness, multiplicity of identity, and media participation in racist trends.

Literature Review

*Last week my resolution condemning anti-Asian sentiment passed the House. After that, I got many racist voicemails saying the very things we collectively condemned... Words and actions have consequences.*¹⁶ – Congresswoman Grace Meng, Queens, NY

Before delving into this project, a review of the existing literature regarding Yellow Peril rhetoric and anti-Asian discrimination is necessary to recognize the intellectual gap this project fills. In "The Foreignness of Germs: The Persistent Association of Immigrants and Disease in American Society" (2002), Howard Markel and Alexandra Stern investigate how immigrants have historically been stigmatized as a source of disease and illness in the United States, viewed

¹⁵ Arif Dirlik, "Asia Pacific Studies in an age of global modernity," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 6, no. 2, (2006). 166

¹⁶ Robert Pozarycki, "Queens congresswoman gets racist voicemails over resolution condemning anti-Asian sentiment" September 26, 2020, (Accessed September 30, 2020). <https://www.amny.com/police-fire/queens-congresswoman-gets-racist-voicemails-over-resolution-condemning-anti-asian-sentiment/>

in three periods of immigration history. After providing a timeline of immigration trends and the formation of racial anxieties, they suggest that equations of disease with immigrants have become ingrained in legislation and contributed to restrictions on immigration. Offering examples through Ellis Island, the film *Panic in the Streets*, and enacted laws, Markel and Stern establish the existence of inherent stigmatization of immigrants in the United States. While they succeed in creating an intellectual foundation, they generalize the “immigrant experience,” not taking into account differences in race that hindered immigrants of color in ways those from East Europe were not.

Regarding historical background, in her book *The Making of Asian America* (2016) Erika Lee asserts that “from Orientals, to Yellow and Brown people, to Asian Americans, to Asian Pacific Americans, and, finally, to Asian American and Pacific Islanders, racial malleability has been part of the struggle for self-definition.”¹⁷ After providing background on immigration rates of different Asian groups, she looks to answer questions of what effect did immigration legislation have on Asian Americans’ social agency, and how did different Asian communities create a pan-ethnic identity while also maintaining their cultural distinctions. While she does provide a thorough background on Chinese immigration to America and Canada, she does not connect issues of discrimination to current tensions today.

David Cook-Martín and David FitzGerald (2010) investigate the trajectory of immigration law throughout the Americas, and claim that “the United States and Canada [were] leaders in the spread of racially oriented policy restrictions in the Americas during the early twentieth century.”¹⁸ They suggest that liberal states have implemented more racially based

¹⁷ Erika Lee, *The making of Asian America a history*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015) 119

¹⁸ David Cook-Martín and David FitzGerald, “Liberalism and the Limits of Inclusion: Race and Immigration Law in the Americas, 1850-2000,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 41, no. 1, (2010), 24.

policies precisely because of their liberal status as they present conclusions from a broader study conducted on immigration legislation in twenty-two nation-states in the Americas. Focusing on Cuba as their main investigative site, where the “Chinese were the principal target of discrimination,”¹⁹ Cook-Martín and FitzGerald suggest four mechanisms to explain how especially liberal countries have diffused their racist ideologies throughout the Americas—parallel development, coercion, reciprocal adjustment, and cultural emulation.

Deenesh Sohoni’s article “Unsuitable Suitors: Anti-Miscegenation Laws, Naturalization Laws, and the Construction of Asian Identities” (2007) gives an in-depth background of anti-miscegenation laws in the United States. Sohoni effectively explores how legislation embodied racial tensions and provides many examples that seem to answer his hypothesis. His research shows that “in creating and expanding anti-miscegenation laws, state legislatures sought to forbid the racial mixing of whites with all Asians regardless of their nativity status.”²⁰ While Sohoni provides insight into laws specifically targeted at Asian populations, a gap remains regarding how these laws have contributed to disease rhetoric in American society.

Roger Keil and Harris Ali investigate the racialization of disease in the context of SARS. Analyzing within the context of Toronto, Canada, Keil and Ali focus on the impacts of increased anti-Asian sentiment on multicultural society. Asking how multiculturalism is challenged by understandings of viruses and races, as well as how collusion plays a role in the public perception of diseased bodies, Keil and Ali assert that there are social, medical, and political consequences to the multicultural fabric, as the Othering of Chinese bodies in this case threatened the structure of Toronto’s global city formation.

¹⁹ Cook-Martín and FitzGerald, “Liberalism and the Limits of Inclusion: Race and Immigration Law in the Americas, 1850-2000,” 23.

²⁰ Deenesh Sohoni, “Unsuitable Suitors: Anti-Miscegenation Laws, Naturalization Laws, and the Construction of Asian Identities” *Law & Society Review*, 41, no.3, (2007), 609

Although the existing works I have delved into have made considerable contributions to the scholarly world, there has been an overall lack of research that intersects Chinese immigration with present-day issues. Much of the literature is either focused solely on the historical background of immigration or centered around legislation that inhibited Chinese Americans from enjoying certain rights. However, questions of power hierarchies, embedded racism, and stereotypes still remain. Focusing on Yellow Peril rhetoric in the present pandemic, my project aims to fill the gap left by previous scholars, and expand understandings of identity in relation to economic, health and social consequences of disease.

A Brief Immigration History of the Chinese Diaspora

*My classmate said that the pandemic is due to bad decision-making by Chinese people (referring to their eating bats) and aimed this comment at me because I was the only Asian student in that table. They also stated that pandemics and global issues are always the fault of Chinese people.*²¹ –15-year-old

Chinese immigrants began entering the United States in the 1800s. Many first found work in mines, performing jobs “especially needed in western states to tap natural resources and build a transportation infrastructure.”²² Chinese immigrants would become actively sought after to take over “jobs that were believed to be too dirty, dangerous, or degrading for white men,” thus making clear the distinctions of Chinese immigrants from ‘typical’ Americans in terms of status, position, and perceived worth.²³

²¹ STOP AAPI Hate Youth Campaign, “They Blamed Me Because I am Asian: Findings from reported anti-AAPI youth incidents,” (Accessed November 1, 2020). <https://stopaapihate.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Stop-AAPI-Hate-Youth-Campaign-Report-9-17.pdf>

²²Lee, *The making of Asian America a history*, 66.

²³Lee, *The making of Asian America a history*, 66.

As Chinese began to envision a long-term life in the United States, large numbers of Chinese women began immigrating in order to start families and help establish businesses. As a result, “between 1900 and 1940, the U.S-born Chinese population quadrupled.”²⁴ This notable shift in demographics displayed the permanency of the Chinese diasporic community, which concerned White Americans, whose carefully crafted definition of ‘American’ did not include the Chinese population.

One notable group in particular that grew to consider Chinese immigrants with disdain were the socioeconomically poorer White Americans. As Chinese immigrants were willing to perform the same labor for a fraction of the pay, poor Americans began losing work opportunities, and instead of taking out their frustrations on their employers who financially thrived on such exploitation, they equated their loss of work with the steady influx of Chinese immigrants.

Threatened by the newly established Chinese communities, “From the Workingman’s Party that organized white laborers around an anti-Chinese campaign in California in 1877... there is an unbroken line of poor and working Americans turning their anger and frustration into hatred of Asian-Americans.”²⁵ Demanding that “The Chinese Must Go!,” the beginning of anti-Chinese sentiment, therefore, was a result of socioeconomic, political, and legislative stresses culminating in the scapegoating of Chinese immigrants. To combat this threat, businesses created advertisements that depicted Chinese as unclean and aggressive in an effort to create a negative public perception of the Chinese population. These would represent some of the first signs of the Yellow Peril sentiment in North America.

²⁴Lee, *The making of Asian America a history*, 81.

²⁵Song H, “We Will Not Be Used: Are Asian-Americans the Racial Bourgeoisie? November 14, 2016 (Accessed June 29, 2020). <https://medium.com/@heysong/we-will-not-be-used-are-asian-americans-the-racial-bourgeoisie-964cf8e7c93d>

In Canada, too, Chinese workers began immigrating in the 1850s with the initial prospect of striking gold. They were soon recruited to work on a railway to connect the Pacific coast to other regions of Canada. Paid much less than their White counterparts, Chinese railroad workers saved the Canadian government between 3 and 5 million dollars.²⁶ However as a result of poor working conditions, many died from fatigue, dynamite accidents, and drowning.²⁷ Although they were once appreciated for taking on jobs that jeopardize their health and safety, Chinese in both Canada and the United States would grow to be resented by their White counterparts, as they viewed the influx in Chinese immigrants as a threat to their social status and financial stability. This would begin a series of anti-Asian legislation in both the United States and Canada with the intent to eventually prevent Chinese from settling in the West.

Articulating Anxieties: The Introduction of Anti Asian Legislation

*"A person followed two university employees and persistently questioned them about their race. He said, "Are you Chinese or Japanese? If you are Chinese or Japanese, I'm going to kill you." He then lifted his shirt to reveal a handgun."*²⁸ (New Orleans, LA)

Threatened by the rapid establishment of Chinese communities, U.S. government officials made concerted efforts to prevent further immigration. In 1882 the U.S. government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, "the country's first immigration law that singled out an

²⁶ Paul Yee, "History of Canada's early Chinese immigrants," (Accessed August 15, 2020.) <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/immigration/history-ethnic-cultural/early-chinese-canadians/Pages/history.aspx?wbdisable=true#whyb>

²⁷ The estimated death count of Chinese immigrant workers in Canada is between 600 to 2200. Yee, "History of Canada's early Chinese immigrants" <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/immigration/history-ethnic-cultural/early-chinese-canadians/Pages/history.aspx?wbdisable=true#whyb>

²⁸ "Anti-Chinese Rhetoric Employed by Perpetrators of Anti-Asian Hate," http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/REPORT_ANTI-CHINESE-RHETORIC_EMPLOYED_10_08_20.pdf

immigrant group for large-scale exclusion based on race.”²⁹ This act set a precedent for future laws directed at specific groups, and would give government officials the confidence in the future to refuse immigrants based on perceived differences and threats.³⁰ The early 1900s would see multiple bills being introduced to Congress with the goal to “disfranchise citizens of Chinese ancestry,” including the Barred Zone Act in 1917, the 1922 Cable Act, and the Immigration Act of 1924. Despite Chinese Americans being born and raised in the United States, their citizenship and national identity would also be frequently contested and treated as conditional.³¹

Parallel to the U.S., Canada embarked on its own anti-Chinese movement, as government officials perceived Chinese Canadians as undeserving of citizenship and residential rights. With the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885, the government began taking steps to remove Chinese immigrants, as they were no longer needed to fulfill dangerous labor positions for cheap wages. The first Chinese Immigration Act in Canada was introduced in 1885, whereupon a head tax of fifty dollars was imposed on each immigrant, and a database of every Chinese was maintained in an effort to deter other potential immigrants.³² The same tax was not directed at any other ethnic group entering the country, centering efforts to limit immigration on only the Chinese population. The government would soon increase the tax to one hundred dollars, and finally to five hundred dollars in 1903 in response to “calls to keep British Columbia a ‘white man’s province’ and to rally around a ‘white Canada forever.’”³³ These legislative measures would all build up to July 1, 1923, the day the government introduced an updated

²⁹ Erika Lee, *The making of Asian America a history*, 90.

³⁰ Vahid Niayesh, “Trump’s travel ban really was a Muslim ban, data suggests,” September 26, 2019, (Accessed October 27, 2020). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/09/26/trumps-muslim-ban-really-was-muslim-ban-thats-what-data-suggest/>

³¹ Erika Lee, *The making of Asian America a history*, 88.

³² Yee, “History of Canada’s early Chinese immigrants,” <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/immigration/history-ethnic-cultural/early-chinese-canadians/Pages/history.aspx?wbdisable=true#whyb>

³³ Erika Lee, *The making of Asian America a history*, 103.

Chinese Immigration Act that officially banned Chinese immigrants except for students, merchants, and diplomats.³⁴ This ban would be maintained for twenty-four years, until being repealed in 1947.

The introduction of some of the first racially-charged legislation in both the United States and Canada signaled the anxieties that government officials felt towards this group of immigrants that was quickly settling and establishing its own concentrated communities, businesses, and transnational identities. Here we can see the process of racialization through legislation that Omi and Winant detail, as this population was singled out as an Othered group, unworthy of the same rights of other immigrants and second-generation individuals because of their race.

The Emergence of Yellow Peril Rhetoric and Equations with Disease

I was sprayed with a body spray by a white kid who commented, 'the Coronavirus.' Shortly thereafter, he headbutted me and caused my head to strike a wall.³⁵ –Anonymous, 13 years old, New Kent, VA

While Chinese immigrants were considered threats to White men's economic security, they soon came to represent additional images of uncleanness and disease. As Chinese immigrants were paid poorly and not given access to clean, safe housing, many were forced to live in dilapidated, concentrated communities. Structural inequalities in various facets— health, housing, work— inhibited Chinese communities from living in safe environments, and resulted in

³⁴ This legislative measure has also been known as Humiliation Day by Chinese Canadians.

³⁵ STOP AAPI Hate Youth Campaign, "They Blamed Me Because I am Asian: Findings from reported anti-AAPI youth incidents," (Accessed November 1, 2020). <https://stopaapihate.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Stop-AAPI-Hate-Youth-Campaign-Report-9-17.pdf>

disproportionate rates of illness and death. Ellen Wu suggests that “[Racial ideas] are consciously concocted and disseminated– if not always accepted without challenge– and are tied to structural developments.”³⁶ The inaccessibility for Chinese immigrants to clean areas was a deliberate decision by officials who denied such services, thus forcing them to live in high-risk areas dangerous to their health, and thus the imagined linkages between disease and Chinese bodies continued to support the dissemination of Yellow Peril rhetoric.

As a result, “Chinese were often accused of carrying diseases, the men leprosy and the women various venereal diseases. At the same time, the Chinese were deemed a social disease infecting the American body politic.”³⁷ Thus the Yellow Peril did not only describe the Chinese diaspora as physically dangerous, but also suggested that the Chinese population had the potential to negatively influence the American society.

Chinese populations became a dehumanized threat that was fundamentally incapable of assimilating to White notions of America. Equations of Chinese people with filth and disease have continued to permeate within Western society, enabling the scapegoating of COVID-19 seen today. The social disease Wong alludes to can also be seen in how Asian Americans are being blamed for factors other than just the spread of disease, including the economic and personal issues that have arisen in many Americans’ daily lives. We have seen manifestations of the Yellow Peril sentiment in this case through the murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American mistaken for Japanese and murdered by two White men who resented the rise of Japanese

³⁶Ellen Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*, (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2015). 8

³⁷ K. Wong, *Claiming America: Constructing Chinese American Identities during the Exclusion Era* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011) 7.

automobile industries in the midst of a U.S. recession.³⁸ Accusing an entire population of carrying health and social diseases allows a perceived interrelationship between Asian bodies and disease to become ingrained in images of the Chinese community.

The early 1900s saw the exposure of the deadly bubonic plague, which attacked the Chinese community in San Francisco. Without access to health care, the first Chinese immigrant succumbed to the disease, leading to a mandated two-day quarantine of exclusively Chinatown, in which White people were able to freely come and go, but the Chinese population's mobility was halted.³⁹ Only demanding that Chinatown be quarantined rather than the whole city, health officials suggested that the disease originated from Chinese bodies and a lack of community hygiene, promoting the deepening of Yellow Peril tropes. This quarantine would lead to Chinese communities becoming ghettoized as Chinese bodies came to be associated with the plague and representing the xenophobia many Americans felt.

The emergence of a novel coronavirus, SARS, made world news in 2003, as claims that the virus originated in China led to higher rates of discrimination towards the Chinese diaspora. Eerily similar to today's situation, Toronto especially saw an almost immediate uptick in anti-Asian rhetoric hurled at Chinese bodies, as well as an alarming increase in physical assaults. This racialization of disease posed severe implications for the mental health of members of the Asian diaspora.

Those of East Asian ancestry "were subject to racism on a daily basis, and Chinese restaurants and shops suffered immediate and long-lasting economic consequences as customers

³⁸ Naomee-Minh Nguyen, "This is similar to Vincent Chin": Intertextuality, referring expressions, and the discursive construction of Asian American activist identities in an online messaging community," *Discourse & Society* 32, no. 1, (2020).

³⁹ Cassandra Basler, "Virus of Hate: Plagues And Anti-Asian Racism, Then and Now" July 16, 2020, (Accessed July 31, 2020).
<https://www.wshu.org/post/virus-hate-plagues-and-anti-asian-racism-then-and-now#stream/0>

shunned neighborhoods, which were considered to be frequented by people from Asia who could be possible carriers of the virus.”⁴⁰ Not only were their physical bodies racialized, but Chinese restaurants and community buildings also came to be associated with disease. Thus, a racialization of space also took place, limiting how spaces could serve multiple purposes for different groups of people. Racializing spaces and bodies, the Chinese Canadians in Toronto suddenly faced a severe and mass Othering by other Canadians who may have once considered them fellow residents, but now saw their level of belonging as conditionally stripped because of SARS.

Chinatowns in Toronto and Vancouver were shunned as a result, leading to economic distress in Chinese communities that relied on income from their businesses. When people in North America first became aware of the virus’ existence in their countries, Chinatown’s were immediately⁴¹ avoided, alluding to the association of San Francisco’s Chinatown with the bubonic plague. While shunning was the most common form of discrimination in the SARS crisis, today we are seeing that verbal harassment has skyrocketed to encompass almost 70 percent of all cases. This equation of Asian bodies with disease is a result of Yellow Peril sentiment that clearly has not dissipated, and despite it possibly declining over the years, has become stronger and more rampant in the COVID-19 pandemic.

A Brief Note on Term Usage

⁴⁰ Roger Keil and S. Harris Ali, “‘Racism is a Weapon of Mass Destruction’: SARS and the Social Fabric of Multiculturalism,” 159.

⁴¹ Lauren Aratani, “‘People are scared’: New York City’s Chinatown takes hit over coronavirus fears” February 21, 2020, (Accessed July 8, 2020).

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/feb/21/nyc-chinatown-coronavirus-fears-business>

While I have discussed the struggles of Chinese immigrants in both the United States and Canada, moving forward in this paper I have chosen to also employ the broader term “Asian American” to describe the population currently facing heightened violence. Although anti-Chinese rhetoric is being used to incite such violence, the hate crimes and Yellow Peril rhetoric is being targeted not only at Chinese Americans, but also Japanese, Korean, and Southeast Asian populations, rendering these groups also susceptible to the consequences of racialization. As it is necessary to understand the xenophobic history of Chinese diasporas, I have chosen not to detail immigration trends of other populations, given the scope of this project. As this project researches how historical trends have contributed to current tensions in the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of “Asian American” in the remainder of this paper is appropriate in describing today’s trends.

Disease and Othering

As I passed, he told me how being forced to wear a mask (he wasn't wearing one) makes him 'want to kill Asians.'”⁴² –Justin Tang, Ottawa

These histories of Chinese bodies being smeared with images of disease, decay, and dilapidated health environments have spurred on hate towards Asian bodies, as “such issues as the materialization of racialized identities in negotiation with the borders of the nation clearly have contemporary currency.”⁴³ There is no coincidence that the Asian body is being attacked and blamed for the spread of COVID-19; it is precisely because of this history of Chinese bodies

⁴² Carl Samson, “Asian Men Targeted by Racists in Wave of Hate Crimes in Canada,” (Accessed November 1, 2020). <https://nextshark.com/spit-racist-want-to-kill-asians-ottawa/>

⁴³ Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003), 83.

being blamed for past plagues and viruses that it has become easy to expand the bounds of this racialization of disease to include COVID-19.

The SARS outbreak offers multiple lessons to contextualize current conditions in the COVID-19 pandemic. Roger Keil and Harris Ali asserted that “racism against the perceived carriers of the virus, mostly Chinese-Canadians, developed into the potential ‘weapon of mass destruction’ capable of the unhinging of the carefully crafted, albeit profoundly fragile, community relationships of the multicultural Canadian city.”⁴⁴ The once-proudly diverse city was now threatened by the destructive properties not just of the virus, but of the capabilities of people to Other groups of people.

This fear of foreign bodies, has perpetuated for generations, as in the U.S., too, “fear of the foreigner within shapes at least in part the contemporary terrain of U.S. culture and politics, as does the continuing concretization of the nation’s juridical and geographic borders against certain bodies.”⁴⁵ Because viruses are invisible to the naked eye, people are all the more willing to associate Asian populations with the disease, so if they actively try to avoid or push down such bodies, they theoretically can avoid the virus.

These links to infectious disease suggest the maintenance of biopolitical spaces in which to police mobility and movement, seen in the abuse of Asian Americans when they enter public spaces. As some non-Chinese Asian Americans have actually tried to distance themselves from Chinese Americans in an effort to avoid such assaults, panethnic potentials of solidarity have been reduced and racial boundaries within the Asian diaspora have been further demarcated.

⁴⁴ Roger Keil and S. Harris Ali, “‘Racism is a Weapon of Mass Destruction’: SARS and the Social Fabric of Multiculturalism,” 153.

⁴⁵ Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origin of the Model Minority*, 84

Seen in such lines, “deconstruction of racialized identity emerges as a crucial critical orientation for contesting the material effects of racism.”⁴⁶

Inciting Violence Through Media

*I feel angry and disgusted on how people treat us Asians, specifically old Asian people because they get beat up easily from racists, even Trump called the flu the “Kung Flu.”*⁴⁷ –Anonymous 14-year-old

President Trump has publicly used China as a scapegoat for his failure to contain the spread of the virus in the U.S., and has alluded to China to place blame, suggesting that “it’s nobody’s fault, unless you go to the original source.”⁴⁸ Trump began using terms like Wuhan virus, Kung Flu, and the China virus to refer to the virus. Seeing effects from his frequent tweeting, on March 8th, researchers found a “650% increase in Twitter retweets using the term ‘Chinese virus’ and related terms.”⁴⁹ The next day there was an 800% increase in the use of these terms in news media. Trump’s blatant use of xenophobic terms to replace ‘COVID-19’ or ‘novel coronavirus’ have influenced how media users also refer to the virus in their own personal lives.

Research suggests that consuming media that “depicts stigmatized groups in a stereotypical or threatening manner can increase racial bias,” while also stereotyping Asian Americans as ‘perpetual foreigners.’⁵⁰ Not only can seeing such media increase racial bias, but it

⁴⁶ Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, 69

⁴⁷ STOP AAPI Hate Youth Campaign, “They Blamed Me Because I am Asian: Findings from reported anti-AAPI youth incidents,” (Accessed November 1, 2020). <https://stopaapihate.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Stop-AAPI-Hate-Youth-Campaign-Report-9-17.pdf>

⁴⁸ Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Briefing, (Accessed November 15, 2020). <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-3/>

⁴⁹ Sean Darling-Hammond, “After ‘The China Virus’ Went Viral: Racially Charged Coronavirus Coverage and Trends in Bias Against Asian Americans,” *Health Education & Behavior*, 47(6), 870.

⁵⁰ Darling-Hammond, “After ‘The China Virus’ Went Viral: Racially Charged Coronavirus Coverage and Trends in Bias Against Asian Americans,” 871.

can also heighten worries in the Asian American community, especially as many have reported increased fear for the safety of their families and loved ones. Just as Omi and Winant also suggested, the media's capacity to shape racial imaginations has resulted in higher uses of such Yellow Peril rhetoric, consequently stratifying Americans because of an imagined connection between Asian bodies and the coronavirus.

Interestingly, when Trump revealed he was diagnosed with COVID-19, anti-Asian hate notably spiked along with a surge in conspiracy theories about the virus being man-made. Researchers at the Anti-Defamation League collected about 2.7 million tweets posted in the twelve hours following Trump's announcement. From this data set, they found that "the rate of language linked to anti-Asian hostility... rose by approximately 85 percent."⁵¹ In addition, the ADL found that anti-Asian sentiment remained at notably elevated levels for days after Trump's initial tweet.⁵² This surge in anti-Asian hate speech may also be partly attributed to the September 29 presidential debate, in which Trump continued his inflammatory remarks, referring to the virus as the "China plague."

From these findings, we see that there is a strong correlation between Trump's rhetoric and increases in anti-Asian hate speech and escalations of violence. Seeing the President of the U.S. freely using such explosive terminology and refusing to apologize for offending Asian Americans, it is no wonder that many in America feel they can also publicly employ Yellow Peril terminology to refer to Asian Americans as dirty, less-than, and dangerous. During the SARS health crisis, social media was not as developed as it is today in 2020. Researching

⁵¹ Anti-Defamation League, "At the Extremes: The 2020 Election and American Extremism," <https://www.adl.org/blog/at-the-extremes-the-2020-election-and-american-extremism-part-3>

⁵² Kimmy Yan, "After Trump's Covid-19 diagnosis, anti-Asian tweets and conspiracies rose 85%: report," October 15, 2020, (Accessed October 30, 2020). <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/after-trump-s-covid-19-diagnosis-anti-asian-tweets-conspiracies-n1243441>

various crises in today's climate now demands a look into social media trends, as it is largely through these platforms that we are able to witness the ever-changing uses and deployments of Yellow Peril rhetoric and other hateful language incited in part by divisive individuals in positions of power, such as Donald Trump.

Trump has even gone so far as to demand the expulsion of Chinese graduate students in the United States, jeopardizing critical ongoing research for the U.S., and reminding many of the Chinese Exclusion Acts that barred Chinese populations from entering the country.⁵³ In his recent bid to maintain his presidency in the 2020 presidential election, Trump funneled millions of dollars into ads referencing and blaming China for the continued virus in just one and a half months.⁵⁴ From April 1st to May 15th, the Republican party spent over \$8.3 million in television ads referencing China, and only \$64,000 on non-China related ads. After much criticism, Trump offered a single tweet showing appreciation for Asian American frontline workers yet made no attempt to condemn the active harassment and violence against their communities. Deflecting blame, the Trump administration has allowed the Asian American community to take the brunt of others' mounting frustrations, resulting in future psychological trauma, increased levels of fear, and a displacement of the community's sense of belonging.

Pushing Back: *What is being done?*

It is important that we call out this kind of behavior when we see it. Anti-East Asian racism, and racism and discrimination of any kind is harmful and has lasting negative impacts on the mental

⁵³ Edward Wong and Julian E. Barnes, "U.S. to Expel Chinese Graduate Students With Ties to China's Military Schools," May 28, 2020, (Accessed July 8, 2020).

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/28/us/politics/china-hong-kong-trump-student-visas.html?referringSource=articleShare>

⁵⁴ Amanda Terkel, "Demonizing China Dominates GOP Political Ads During Coronavirus Pandemic," May 19, 2020, (Accessed July 15, 2020).

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/china-issue-2020-election_n_5ebec495c5b64fe2e88489c7?guccounter=1.

*health and sense of belonging felt by our city's East Asian community.*⁵⁵ –Mayor John Tory, Toronto

What then, if anything, is being done to combat the increased violence against Asian populations? While there have not been any national policy changes, some individual states have, after seeing an influx in hate crime reports and calls for action, implemented task forces to assist victims of hate crimes and incidents of discrimination. In San Francisco, the newly created task force plans to offer tip lines for non-English speakers, and “improve communications with monolingual residents through the use of WeChat.”⁵⁶ On the other side of the country, New York also created an Asian Hate Crime Task Force to combat the surge of anti-Asian hate crimes. Staffed by twenty-five detectives of Asian descent who speak a combined nine languages, the group is tasked with guiding victims of hate crimes through the justice system, from reporting the crime up to the point of pressing charges and pursuing prosecution.

The NYPD has promised that the task force will remain in place even after the pandemic may dissipate.⁵⁷ According to the Chief of Detectives Rodney Harrison, attacks on Asian New Yorkers spiked in every borough throughout the city, with much of the abuse taking place in public transportation, restaurants, and victims' own neighborhoods.⁵⁸ Acknowledging these disturbing trends, cities like New York have been able to take steps to creating stable networks of support for Asian Americans, especially immigrants who may not speak English well.

⁵⁵ Carl Samson, “Toronto Launches Campaign on How to Fight Racism Against East Asians,” (Accessed November 1, 2020). <https://nextshark.com/toronto-launches-campaign-on-how-to-fight-racism-against-east-asians/>

⁵⁶ Carl Samson, “New SF Police Unit to Tackle Hate Crimes Against Minority Communities,” (Accessed September 28, 2020). <https://nextshark.com/sfpd-unit-hate-crimes-against-diverse-communities/>

⁵⁷ Shan Li and Ben Chapman, “NYPD Forms Asian Hate Crime Task Force,” October 18, 2020, (Accessed October 30, 2020). <https://www.wsj.com/articles/nypd-forms-asian-hate-crime-task-force-11603040400>

⁵⁸ Carl Samson, “NYPD Forms Asian Hate Crime Task Force After Months of COVID-19 Racism,” (Accessed October 30, 2020). <https://nextshark.com/nypd-forms-asian-hate-crime-task-force-after-months-of-covid-19-racism/>

The Asian American community has also seen an increase in activism efforts. As the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless other Black Americans mobilized thousands across the country to public demonstrations and protests over the summer, the phrase “Yellow Peril supports Black Power” began to surface in Asian American communities. While this move was meant to show transracial solidarity for Black communities, Asian American activists were quick to condemn the use of such a term, not only because it detracts from the movement, but also the limitations of reclaiming terms like ‘yellow’ and ‘perilous.’ These terms continue to Other Asian populations, and with Asian Americans continually being referred to as ‘yellow people,’ it may be best to recognize the significance of Yellow Peril and its reemergence in abuses today, while also choosing to show solidarity to Black communities in alternative ways. Despite the problematic term being employed, the mobilization of more Asian Americans is significant the pushback against model minority tropes of political neutrality and docility have been replaced by calls to report abuses and advocate for change in state and national policies.

The recent presidential election saw an enormous increase in voter participation from the Asian American community. In the thirteen swing states, AAPI early voting and absentee mail-in voting increased by almost 300% compared to AAPI participation in the 2016 election. This might be due in part to the disdain many have felt watching Trump continue to use language that incites anti-Asian discrimination. Nevertheless, due to the efforts of voter mobilization campaigns, fact-checking, and text and phone banking, Asian Americans increased their participation in politics, something many scholars may not have expected before the virus pandemic.

Spurred on by the continued social tensions, many are also calling for the implementation of Ethnic Studies curriculum in universities in order to create spaces in which students can learn about how racism is manifested and how racial attitudes become ingrained over time. In addition, calls for more access to reporting sites and counseling have surfaced, as much of the current anti-Asian hate is taking place in online platforms. As campaigns to protect AAPI members are continuously established, we are seeing trends of activism and resistance to racist movements taking place.

Conclusion: *As we look towards an uncertain future*

A YouTube commenter/creator wanted to call the disease "Chinese virus" and said he hated Chinese people. When I mentioned I am an American of ethnic Chinese descent, the commenter told me to go back to China. He said that I'm not an American and that America was made for Europeans and there should be 'no Chinese mafioso' in the USA.⁵⁹ –Anonymous, San Francisco

Since the world has been thrust into the ongoing health crisis, official government responses to anti-Chinese rhetoric have differed tremendously depending on the country. Since President Trump's inauguration in 2016, he has repeatedly stood by as people of color have been verbally and physically assaulted and has allowed the continued abuse of Asian Americans as a consequence of COVID-19. In addition, since Trump's participation in anti-Chinese rhetoric has increased substantially in interviews and on social media, there has been a correlated increase in Yellow Peril rhetoric, associating Asian bodies with the spread of the coronavirus. As a result, many Americans are choosing to equate the virus to Chinese and East Asian bodies, contributing to the racialization of disease.

⁵⁹ STOP AAPI Hate California Report, "Over 800 Hate Incidents in 3 Months," June 30, 2020, (Accessed July 12, 2020). <https://secureservercdn.net/104.238.69.231/a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Stop-AAPI-Hate-CA-Report-200630.pdf>

The years leading up to 2020 saw a steady decline in anti-Asian bias, further supported by a new emergence of Asian representation on television shows and movies. With *Parasite* becoming the first foreign language film to win an Oscar for Best Picture, and other media like *The Farewell*, *Crazy Rich Asians*, and *Fresh Off the Boat* increasing Asian bodies on such platforms, Asian Americans were possibly becoming more stable in their understanding of belonging in America. As the pandemic has continued, however, anti-Asian bias has persisted and Yellow Peril rhetoric has reemerged. Recognizing that Asian American doctors and nurses are on the front lines of the virus battle, and are consequently dying at disproportionate rates, we must reckon with the racist history that has plagued the stability of the Asian American racial and national consciousness.⁶⁰

As this conclusion is being written, Asian bodies continue to be targeted in the United States. With the cautious reopening of schools next year, many have voiced concerns of potential increases of bullying of Asian children, and the fear caused by witnessing online attacks will be manifested as “racism can cause psychosocial trauma and maladaptive coping behaviors, and worsen physical health and health inequalities.”⁶¹ As Chinese Americans aim to reconcile their place in society with increasing hate, many are choosing to speak out against discrimination by sharing their stories, holding rallies and protests, reporting instances of hate to reporting centers, and calling for increased educational resources about racism and health.⁶²

Questions that remain, and may not be answered until some time has passed, include:

How can Asian Americans use reporting sites and other social media avenues to call for not only

⁶⁰ Brandon W. Yan, “Asian Americans Facing High Covid-19 Case Fatality,” July 13, 2020, (Accessed November 19, 2020). <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20200708.894552/full/>

⁶¹ Jiun-Ruey Hu, Margaret Wang, Francis Lu, “COVID-19 and Asian American Pacific Islanders” June 12, 2020. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*.

⁶² Ryan General, “Hundreds Join China Mac in Second New York Protest for Grandmother Set on Fire” *NextShark*, August 17, 2020. (Accessed August 19, 2020). <https://nextshark.com/china-mac-second-protest-nyc-chinatown/>

increased awareness of anti-Asian rhetoric being used, but also for legislation that protects minoritized communities in these cases? How do ideas of the model minority myth contribute to the lack of outspokenness from the Asian American community? Perhaps with the close of the pandemic in the future, scholars will be able to research lasting impacts of this year that saw the reemergence of Yellow Peril rhetoric.

Renowned scholar Lisa Lowe suggests that “Asian American culture is the site of more than critical negation of the U.S. nation; it is a site that shifts and marks alternatives to the national terrain by occupying other spaces, imagining different narratives and critical historiographies, and enacting practices that give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of human life by the national state.”⁶³ We are witnessing the shifting of one such site through the reevaluation of Yellow Peril tropes, disease rhetoric, and racial imaginations.

With the onset of compounding crises—the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and the heightened global awareness of trends of brutality against Black communities—Americans have been forced to recognize national tensions of race, gender, and identity. This current epidemic of hate speech and Yellow Peril rhetoric can serve the American population as a point of departure to call for the recognition of the United States’ history of structural racism, discrimination, and racial hierarchies.

While some see the upcoming inauguration of President Biden as a turning point for hate speech and such Yellow Peril rhetoric, we must be careful in assuming that the general population will change their beliefs overnight just because the leadership changes. “Trumpism” has been inculcated in American society for the past four years, and has allowed these racial

⁶³Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, (Duke University Press: Durham, 1996).

formations to solidify, and the racialization of disease to affect Asian populations. As we transition into 2021, we must simultaneously call for change while remembering the historical legacies of violence that find Asian Americans still fighting for their right to occupy space in America.

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