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Article

Entwined Oppressions: Historicizing Anti-Asian Violence in the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Era

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The emergence of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has been accompanied by a rise of anti-Asian violence that stems from a greater history of racism and xenophobia in the United States and abroad. Names like "China Virus" and "Kung Flu" used for COVID-19 by some state officials were rhetorical attacks with corporeal consequences on bodies racialized as Asian. Hate crimes and discrimination rose across America. Brazen and unprovoked assaults in public places left people injured or dead. Many Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) older adults and women were targeted specifically (Stop AAPI Hate, 2022a, 2022b). Nearly all (98.2%) AAPI older adults who experienced hate incidents between March 2020 to December 2021 believed the United States has become a more physically dangerous place, naming race, ethnicity, and gender as the top suspected reasons for their discrimination (Stop AAPI Hate, 2022a).

Popular responses to anti-Asian violence have been mobilized around the #StopAAPIHate rallying cry. Major policy approaches have coalesced around bolstering hate crimes reporting. In May 2021, President Biden signed the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act, sponsored by Hawaii Senator Mazie Hirono (2021), into law. The bill seeks to create state-run hate crime hotlines, enhance law enforcement responses to attacks, and establish a position at the Department of Justice to expedite review of hate crime cases. According to Senator Hirono, "it was really important to the AAPI community to show that the Senate stood with them to condemn these totally unprovoked discriminatory and violent acts" (Shoenthal, 2021).

Limitations to Hate Crimes Legislation

While passage of the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act is considered a positive step by most policymakers (White House, 2021), 100+ Asian American and LGBTQ organizations (2021) have expressed concerns about the bill's reproduction of harm and racial domination, facilitated by the expansion of the carceral state and surveillance. Little evidence exists to substantiate that hate crimes legislation deters or prevents discriminatory violence (Swiffen, 2018). It also risks furthering violence against those in AAPI communities who live at the intersections of multiple oppressions (queer, trans, migrant, sex-working, disabled, etc.; Hill Collins, 2019) and those in other communities of color who face the brunt of violence by the prison-industrial complex (Davis, 1998). Hate crimes legislation legitimizes the criminal legal system as an arbiter of safety and security, while many people who are working-class, immigrants, and of color have never known the carceral state to confer them protection. Rather, they have known it to be a site and source of violence itself.

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Entwined Oppressions: Origins in White Supremacy

If addressing anti-Asian hate is to be effective, the gerontological community must understand how historic, state, and systemic oppressions, with origins in the ideology of White supremacy, are inextricably entwined to perpetrate racialized violence, impacting the health and well-being of existing and future generations.

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Historic Oppression

Historic oppressions are policies and practices linked to present-day racialized violence against those in the AAPI community. "Race as a planetary system is unambiguously modern. It is European expansionism in the modern period that internalizes race, creating—through colonialism, imperialism, White settlement, and racial slavery—a White supremacy that becomes global by the early 20th century" (Jung & Costa Vargas, 2021, p. 27).

For instance, Chinese coolie emigration was established in 1845 on the ruins of the African slave trade. The word "coolie" stems from the Chinese term 苦力, pronounced kǔlì, which literally translates to "bitter strength" but means "hard laborer." After the U.S. Civil War, the productivity of Chinese workers was pitted against that of emancipated slaves to formulate a regulatory dialectic. Planters praised Chinese workers for outperforming and being less expensive than Black workers (Takaki, 1993). Conditions for the "model minority" myth were established, configuring the unequal status of Black Americans in U.S. society as self-inflicted (Chou & Feagin, 2015).

In 1848, discovery of gold and the annexation of California from Mexico led to the first big migration of Asians to America. In a plan sent to Congress, policymaker Aaron H. Palmer proposed importing Chinese laborers to build the transcontinental railroad and cultivate the land, stating, "no people in all the East are so well adapted for clearing wild lands and raising every species of agricultural product … as the Chinese" (Takaki, 1993, p. 192). Asian immigrants recruited and hired to work in American industries were exploited and met with disdain. For instance, Chinese migrants were hired by the Central Pacific Railroad company because White workers did not sign on in the numbers needed. Hundreds of Chinese workers died from explosions, landslides, or snowstorms, while laying tracks. However, "when the celebratory photo of the Golden Spike was taken, not a single Chinese man was welcome to pose with the other—White—railway workers" (Park Hong, 2020, p. 20).

Degradation of Chinese immigrants into a subservient, laboring class was a dominant ideology that defined White American superiority. Stereotypes of heathen Chinese immigrants were tied to ideas of their moral degeneration and racial inferiority that posed threats to White racial purity and capitalist productivity (Nham & Huỳnh, 2020). "Yellow peril" became a trope to vilify Chinese immigrants as an existential threat to the West. This trope is rooted in orientalist constructions of the East (Said, 1978): a lens that views Eastern "otherness" as primitive, despotic, and weak and the West as civilized, progressive, and superior.

In 1875, the Page Act became the first restrictive federal immigration law in the United States. It was designed to prohibit "undesirable" immigrants, effectively barring Chinese women from immigrating under the pretense of preventing prostitution. Chinese women were perceived as a sexual threat to American morality and monogamy, stereotyped as promiscuous and spreading diseases. A skewed gender ratio and miscegenation laws restricted Chinese immigrants' ability to form families. The "Chinese Problem," as President Hayes warned in 1879, was "pernicious and should be discouraged" (Takaki, 1993, p. 206). The Page Act paved the way for the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the only law to explicitly prevent immigration by race or national origin. The Chinese Exclusion Act remained in effect until fully repealed by the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, but laid the legal foundation for the emergence of the "illegal alien" concept that occupies much political debate concerning immigration today.

Historic oppressions continue into present-day violence against the AAPI community, who remain viewed as "perpetual aliens in our midst" (Nakano Glenn, 2015, p. 64). The violence is patterned. It emerges in moments of crisis, when the capitalist mode of production fails to generate profit and threatens the imagined sense of order and safety for those in power. Insecurity is expressed through violence directed at those deemed "alien," who need to be restricted or expelled (Shah, 2001).

For instance, "yellow peril" has been central to formation of the U.S. settler colonial state and expansion of racial capitalism on a global scale through war and conquest in regions serving Western geopolitical interests, like Vietnam, Korea, the Philippines, Hawaii, American Samoa, and more. Racial capitalism recognizes that "seemingly race-neutral archetypes of capitalism are in fact thoroughly racialized" (Jenkins & Leroy, 2021, p. 2). This has been consequential for the health and livelihood of AAPI communities throughout history by maintaining and promoting destructive and extractive practices against them, such as through labor exploitation, massacres, and sexual violence (Nakano Glenn, 2015).

State Oppression

State oppression is unjust treatment or exercise of power, often wielded under the guise of governmental authority. While the U.S. Supreme Court is the legal apparatus in determining what is "the law of the land," it wields "illegitimate authority" given its power to make judicial rulings that may run counter to public interests and human rights (Polychroniou, 2022). For instance, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II was constitutionally upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court, even for families whose members were in military service. Japanese Americans were dispossessed of their property, including homes and businesses. Although President Reagan signed the 1988 Civil Liberties Act, issuing an apology and cash reparations to Japanese Americans, the African American reparations movement has had less success for their ancestors' enslavement or other crimes committed against them (Howard-Hassmann, 2004).

Public health institutions also operate as arms of the state in positioning Asian bodies as diseased and virulent (Nham & Huỳnh, 2020). For instance, between 1910 and 1940, arriving Chinese immigrants were inspected and detained at Angel Island for communicable diseases that American officials claimed were "prevalent among aliens from oriental countries" (Chang, 2003, p. 147). Phenotypical indications of racial differences, such as facial features or skin color, were named as markers of illness in and of themselves (Shah, 2001). Chinese immigrants in the community were treated as "vermin" that needed extermination.

The United States has a long history of racializing and pathologizing immigrant bodies as the etiology of disease and a threat to national health to maintain nativist sentiments of an "America for Americans." This has been the experience of Chinese and Mexican immigrants, among others (Markel & Stern, 2002). These practices produce a biomedicalization and surveillance of patients and populations considered unworthy and even feared by race, giving emergence to a virulent biomedicalization of hate (Estes & Binney, 1989).

Formation of the U.S. nation-state entailed a history of institutionalized exclusions of AAPI immigrants and citizens alike. Historicizing AAPI racial subordination generates a perspective of the immigration system as a key site of state-sanctioned xenophobic violence. These examples underscore how race and citizenship are managed by the state to control and restrict flows of AAPI labor and capital. Recently, thousands of refugees and immigrants, particularly from Southeast Asia, have been detained, deported, and separated from family by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Rubio, 2021). These practices have been built up and sustained by U.S. legal apparatuses and state institutions for centuries, producing psychic and physical trauma encoded in gene-body interactions as intergenerational stress (Epel, 2020).

Systemic Oppression

Systemic oppression is violence that incorporates *all* actors in conscious and unconscious ways habituated by norms, culture, and collective practices. Racism is systemic because "we are all participants because we are all racialized" (Bonilla-Silva, 2021, p. 520). Capitalism is systemic because we are all participants, and it relies on mechanisms of racialization that structured the feudal orders preceding it (Robinson, 1983).

For instance, after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, the second big migration of Asians to America occurred with a focus on the technical skills of college-educated immigrants. This spurred a "brain drain," giving momentum to the model minority myth, which identifies Asian American achievement "precisely as the result—rather than something that occurred despite the lack—of equal opportunity in the United States" (Eng & Han, 2019, p. 41). Racialization of Asian Americans as the model minority functions as a national tool to inhibit interracial solidarities by contrasting purportedly successful Asian Americans against other communities of color (Chou & Feagin, 2015).

Pervasiveness of the model minority myth denies the hybridity and heterogeneity of Asian American individuals, facilitating erasure of repressed Asian American identities. The "unenviable task has been to try to walk a tightrope" (Duster, 2006, p. 488). The Asian American psyche is cleaved and caught in an untenable bind between demonstrating allegiance to the norms of abstract equality and collective belonging and understanding one's own disenfranchisement from these democratic ideals of national inclusion (Eng & Han, 2019). "In the popular imagination, Asian Americans inhabit a vague purgatorial status: not White enough nor Black enough; distrusted by African Americans, ignored by Whites, unless we're being used by Whites to keep the Black man down. We are the carpenter ants of the service industry, the apparatchiks of the corporate world. We are math-crunching middle managers who keep the corporate wheels greased but who never get promoted since we don't have the right 'face' for leadership" (Park Hong, 2020, p. 9).

The term "Asian American" emerged in 1968, originating with University of California Berkeley students inspired by the Black Power Movement, American Indian Movement, and Vietnam War protests. It was a pan-Asian political identity to signal a shared commitment toward equality, antiracism, and anti-imperialism. Over the last 50 years, people with ancestry from the Asia-Pacific region, which includes over 30 countries and territories and about 15 island nations, have become the fastest growing group in the United States, making up 7% of the nation's current population (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). The term "Asian American and Pacific Islander" has been taken up in attempts to encapsulate a fuller diaspora of many racial and ethnic groups with different languages, cultures, histories, and disparities in education, income, and poverty levels. The utility of the term AAPI has mixed reviews, with questions about the appropriateness of using an aggregate classification for purposes of coalition-building, research, or policymaking (Flanagin et al., 2021; Teranishi et al., 2014).

Ways Forward

Interventions that fail to consider the dynamic histories and realities of AAPI oppression will ultimately fall short. Extending equitable policy approaches to anti-Asian violence cannot come at the expense of those furthest in the margins of AAPI communities and other communities of color, who are subject to violence at the hands of the state. AAPI communities should seek to resist political maneuvers that use them as pawns of White supremacy to uphold an anti-Blackness status quo (Jung & Costa Vargas, 2021). The following select suggestions hold promise to uplift tenets of social justice, community care, and abolition.

> **Extending equitable policy approaches to anti-Asian violence cannot come at the expense of those furthest in the margins of AAPI communities and other communities of color who are subject to violence at the hands of the state.**

Federal or State Efforts

- Teach AAPI history. New York Congresswoman Grace Meng (2020) introduced a federal bill mandating that higher-education institutions include AAPI content in their teaching of U.S. history to be eligible for certain Education Department grants. Illinois, New Jersey, and Connecticut are among the first states with legislation requiring AAPI studies in public schools (Liu, 2022).
- Prevent street harassment on public transit. Senator Dave Min (2022) introduced a bill mandating that California transit districts plan initiatives that address root causes of sexualized and racialized attacks of AAPI women and other vulnerable riders. Initiatives should be community based and not seek to expand surveillance and policing.
- Improve economic security for AAPI older adults. The Senior Community Service Employment Program (https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/seniors) is the largest federally funded program for low-income older adults seeking employment and training assistance.

Local or Community Efforts

- Build grassroots power in AAPI communities. The Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (https://caaav.org) is a New York City–based movement founded by working-class Asian women to build power for institutional changes in housing, racial, gender, and economic justice.
- Support AAPI youth. AAPI Youth Rising (https://aapiyouthrising.org) is an organization founded by middle schoolers that raises awareness of untold stories through art activism and supporting legislative action.
- Honor legacies of AAPI activists. Yuri Kochiyama, widely known for the photo of her holding Malcolm X after his assassination, modeled interracial solidarity though organizing efforts to address reparations, anti-imperial politics, and rights of political prisoners. Grace Lee Boggs fostered a vision of community solidarity through nonviolent strategies in her advocacy for civil rights and labor rights. She was such a noted figure in Detroit's Black Power movement that Federal Bureau of Investigation files on her assumed she was "probably Afro Chinese." Janice Mirikitani embodied values of radical inclusivity and unconditional love as the poet laureate of San Francisco and a crusader to end poverty and homelessness through programs at Glide Memorial Church. She and husband Reverend Cecil Williams allied with AAPI older adults in antieviction rallies at the I-Hotel.

Individual or Personal Efforts

- Engage with AAPI older adults by volunteering your time or talents at community organizations that serve them, such as by delivering meals or facilitating language, art, exercise, or technology classes.
- Learn about AAPI history in the context of race and capitalism. A Different Asian American Timeline (https://aatimeline.com) is a resource.
- Learn about Black-Asian solidarity. The Cross Cultural Solidarity History Project (https://crossculturalsolidarity.com/black-asian-solidarity-in-u-s-history) is a resource.

Research or Academic Efforts

- Involve AAPI community members in research to identify concrete steps to reduce and eliminate health inequities and inform policies (Yellow Horse & Patterson, 2022).
- Use a reflexive gerontological imagination and critical qualitative or participatory methods to illuminate the nuances of AAPI lived realities (Estes et al., 1992; Reyes et al., 2022; Yeh, 2022).

- Address racial inequities in federal grant funding by revamping how underrepresented populations are determined in the U.S. biomedical, clinical, behavioral, and social science research enterprises (Taffe & Gilpin, 2021).

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