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Anti-Asian racism, Black Lives Matter, and COVID-19

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Abstract: This essay charts the professional and personal reflections of Professor Jennifer Ho, president of the Association for Asian American studies and critical race scholar about the rise of anti-Asian racism with the advent of COVID-19. Professor Ho also discusses the intersections between anti-Asian and anti-Black racism, providing historical context for how both are in service to white supremacy and how understanding these shared roots can create a common cause for anti-racism work for all.

Keywords: Asian American, Black, race, racism, anti-racism, COVID-19

I am the daughter of a refugee father from China and an immigrant mother from Jamaica, whose parents were, themselves, immigrants to Jamaica from Hong Kong, and I am writing in my capacity as a scholar of critical race studies, Asian American literature and culture, and the current president of the Association for Asian American Studies. I begin with these credentials because I believe it is important for me to assert both my scholarly and personal connections to the fields I am connected to and because I am neither an Asian studies scholar nor a researcher who studies Japan. I am hopeful, however, that the perspectives I have to share given my professional and personal experiences with race, racism, Asians in the diaspora, and anti-racism work, will be of interest and perhaps even useful to the readers of *Japan Forum*.

Though Asian Studies (and by extension Japanese studies) and Asian American studies have different origin stories and intellectual genealogies, what we do share as scholarly fields is a deep investment in the lives of Asian people—their histories and lived experiences.¹

In the last decade, the turn in Asian Pacific Islander American studies has been to flesh out the transnational and transpacific—to think about the ways that immigration, settler-colonialism, racism, and xenophobia have and

continue to impact the lives of various Asians living outside of their natal Asian lands, whether in terms of multiple generations or recent relocation.² And I believe that the rise in anti-Chinese racism and xenophobia that has emerged worldwide³ in the wake of the global pandemic makes all of us who appear East Asian to be targets, whether we are Chinese nationals, Chinese Americans, or anyone who can be perceived and mistaken to be Chinese.⁴ Because in times of crisis, the pattern has emerged all too clearly and yellow rhetoric has demonstrated all too well: we are all in danger of being victims of violence, verbal or physical, through the flattening of ethnic distinctions in favor of racist and xenophobic ideologies and attacks.

I've often wondered what choices I'd have made if I had been alive during WWII. Very specifically, I've wondered whether I'd have worn a button declaring myself to be Chinese American. There's some debate about whether these buttons, ones that read "I am Chinese" or "I am Korean" were real or fictive, especially since within an Asian American studies frame, the most well-known citation comes from the fictional short story, "Wilshire Bus," written by Hisaye Yamamoto. In this short story a Japanese American woman is sitting on a Los Angeles bus and witnesses a drunk white man harass a Chinese American woman. During the encounter she flashes back on a memory where she saw a fellow Asian wearing an "I am Korean" button and recalls hearing about similar buttons saying "I am Chinese" (Yamamoto 1998, 36).

Would I have worn this pin? Would you if you were me?

I'd like to think I wouldn't have. That I would have protested the unconstitutional incarceration of 120,000 Japanese Americans—that these would have been my friends and neighbors.⁵ That I would have recognized the precarity of their situation because of my own precarious circumstances as a non-white American. Yet during this time of enormous xenophobia and wartime hysteria, would that excuse my complicity and possible cowardice in wearing such a pin—to choose survival over solidarity?

Perhaps I don't have to wait for a time machine to see what kinds of choices I'd make in the face of xenophobia and rampant racism. In the case of our present times, I find myself in the position of being both a target and an ally. As anyone who isn't living off the grid or on a remote island untouched by technology or travel knows, we are living in the midst of a global pandemic that knows no borders nor boundaries. Yet the fact that the COVID-19 virus doesn't discriminate hasn't prevented humans from acts of extreme violence targeting people they believe caused the outbreak: the Chinese. As alluded to above, this has meant that anyone who is perceived to be Chinese—so anyone of East Asian ancestry—is subject to forms of harassment as mild as dirty looks to more direct verbal harassment as well as violent attacks. In the US a Southeast Asian family of four was stabbed outside a Walmart in Texas, including a two-year old toddler (Kennedy 2020). A Korean American woman was

punched in the face while walking in New York City (Bishara 2020). A Filipino family in Carmel, CA was subject to a racist tirade by a drunk British man who told them to go back to their country (Oriol 2020). Two Asian Americans were verbally and antagonistically harassed by the same woman in a single day in Torrance, California (Campa 2020). I, myself, have had a very mild form of racial microaggression happen to me while walking my corgi (a white woman accused my dog of giving her coronavirus because he had chosen to do what dogs do in the median strip of grass between the sidewalk and street opposite her house), and a Japanese American friend was chased in a Trader Joe's parking lot in Boston, MA by a white man who accused him of spreading COVID-19. The racism that Asian Americans in the US and Asian people around the globe are experiencing right now is real and acute in ways that hasn't felt real and acute for decades.

Of course what is also real and acute is anti-Black racism—though the severity, violence and duration of anti-Black racism has been around for centuries not months or decades.⁶ One could argue that anti-Black racism is as old as the concept of racism—after all, racism beget racial classifications⁷—at least in the way that race is generally understood in the twenty-first century, a division of bodies based on phenotypical characteristics, ones that are socially constructed but that initially were thought to signal either differences in “blood” or the divine will of God.⁸ The anti-Black racism that has permeated the United States from before its founding as a nation is so pervasive that it's hard to know how to address and stop the violence, epistemic and literal, that Black people in the US have had to endure and are enduring. And though the link between COVID-19 and the US national and global protests surrounding George Floyd's death may not be obvious, one could argue that when you have a population of people who have been sheltering in place and who all are receiving the same news at the same time, video footage of a Black man pinned under the knee of a white police officer, who for eight minutes is begging for his life saying “I can't breathe,” well it's easy to understand that this was the last straw. This was the senseless and unprovoked death of yet another Black person by yet another police officer that had people saying ENOUGH.

Black Lives Matter. This should be evident, but it's not. It's the reason the Black women organizers who were responding to the murder of Trayvon Martin felt they needed to say this and to create a protest movement.⁹ Sadly, the history and culture of the United States has indicated and still indicates that Black lives do not matter—or they mattered and accounted for 3/5 of a person according to the framers of the US constitution. They mattered and accounted for numbers in a ledger used by slaveowners. They mattered and accounted for a prison population that could be used on chain gangs in the US south to build the infrastructure of cities and towns.¹⁰ We need to say and believe that Black Lives Matter because so many countries throughout the

millennia have treated and still treat Black people as if their lives are expendable—as if their lives are not worth as much as the lives of white European descended people. Anti-Black racism in the US has been so real and so rampant for so long that many of us have simply thought that this is the way that it is—so much so that before Barack Obama’s election there were serious debates about whether a Black person could ever be elected to be President of the United States. That this would be considered a serious issue warranting serious debate shows how deeply entrenched anti-Black racism is and has been, because when you think about what this debates means, it means that we somehow are still wondering whether the US nation is so racist that it will be unable to elect a Black person. And behind that reasoning is the belief that Black people are somehow so different, so inferior, so incapable of being a leader that we have to have this debate.

So what does anti-Asian racism during COVID-19 and the US national and global protests against anti-Black racism have in common? They are both fighting against white supremacy. And just so I’m clear, because oftentimes phrases like “white supremacy” are imperfectly understood or misinterpreted, I’m talking about the ideology of white supremacy and not the class of people I call “professional racists”—meaning members of the KKK, people who are neo-Nazis, and self-avowed white nationalists like Richard Spencer, the man who organized a hate rally in Charlottesville, VA. Spencer and others are of the professional racist class—those who, if not exactly deriving their livelihood from racism are certainly defining their entire selves through a commitment to racist causes and beliefs. The white supremacy I’m talking about is in the air we breathe and the water we drink. There is simply no escaping the reach of white supremacy—as noted above, it was enshrined into the foundational laws of the US by counting enslaved Black people as $3/5$ of a person, and it was codified in the Naturalization Act of 1790 in which only free white men who owned property could apply for citizenship. An analogy I heard once from Tim Tyson, noted southern historian and author of *Blood Done Sign My Name* and *The Blood of Emmet Till*, is that racism is like a river and we are all in it. Some of us are up to our necks in the river of racism. Others are trying to wade to shore. But even if we make it to the banks of the river, we still have the river water on us. Racism and white supremacy are not exactly the same thing, though in the US they act in mutually beneficial ways. I agree with critical race scholar Ibram Kendi, that racism is a condition and therefore whether one is racist is about positionality and context rather than immutable identity. In his best-selling book *How to Be an Anti-Racist*, Kendi talks about the numerous times he espoused racist beliefs and did racist things—that he is not immune to perpetuating racist acts or saying racist things because he is Black, because to be racist is not about one’s identity but about one’s actions. Similarly, to be

anti-racist is not exclusive to a racial category or political orientation: any one of us can be racist and any one of us can be anti-racist—but more on that later.

Throughout US history white supremacy, the de facto law of the land, has given advantages and privileges to white people, whether they have wanted those advantages and privileges or not. White privilege and white supremacy means that even if one is a poor white person or a disabled or gay white person, one's overall life outcomes, statistically speaking, is still better than a Black person's—white people are less likely to be incarcerated (Gramlich 2020), have longer life spans (CDC 2017), and greater accumulated wealth than Black people (McIntosh et al. 2020). In the US we constantly and consistently see white people, especially white men, in positions of power, from the president of the United States to the president of most local organizations. If you are in a majority white nation, just look up who sits on your city councils and school boards, chances are the majority of them are white. In popular culture there are countless movies and television shows that star white people. And in advertisements white people have and continue to dominate the pages of magazines and newspapers as well as on television. White people are simply everywhere, and in the US as well as in many predominantly white nations, we believe white is a norm to which all others will be held against either for assimilation into honorary whiteness or vilification as anti-white and therefore un-American.

This pervasiveness of white normativity, white privilege, and white supremacy has meant that any threats, real or imagined, to the body politic of the United States, a body politic that in reality was never white but that in our political, cultural, and social imaginations remains overwhelming white, are dealt with forcefully and without much forethought. Meaning, anytime there has been a threat to the United States from an Asian nation (and the history of the twentieth century in the US is a history riddled with foreign wars against Asian nations), people in the US have directed their anxiety, fear, and ire against any subjects associated with the Asian-enemy, whether they are actually from that nation or not. Hence why some Korean and Chinese people may have felt the need to wear buttons distinguishing themselves from the Japanese during WWII. In 1942 there were accounts of a Chinese American man being dragged off a bus in Chicago and badly beaten because the angry mob thought he was Japanese. And most infamously, in 1982 a Chinese American civil engineer, Vincent Chin, was beaten to death with a baseball bat by two unemployed white auto workers who had initially mistaken him to be Japanese and hence responsible for the auto-industry slump.¹¹

And the body politic of the US has always resisted the incorporation and embrace of Black Americans—through violently policing every border it could. White supremacy is found through the many anti-miscegenation laws preventing Black people from freely marrying across the color line, especially in

preventing Black people from marrying white people, and white supremacy is pronounced in laws preventing Black students from attending white schools or Black families living in white neighborhoods. White supremacy created separate train cars, water fountains, and bathrooms.¹² And when these laws were struck down there were de facto laws, cultural taboos, and social norms that kept Black people from being fully embraced into the fabric of the US.

This history is important for understanding why there were so many Black Lives Matter protests in the US and around the world in June 2020—it's a history imperfectly understood and undertold in the United States. The US's focus on freedom and liberty has often obscured a darker and more nefarious history of oppression and restriction. And as a friend from the UK recently opined, in Europe people talk about freedom from—from fascism for example, while in the US people talk about freedom to—the freedom to say whatever we want, to carry a gun, to not wear a mask.

We also have an imperfect history and understanding of cross-racial solidarity and coalition work, particularly between Black and Asian Americans in the US. In fact, more often than not, I would assume that if you asked the average person in the US about Black and Asian American relationships, most would cite moments of tension, discord, and violence. Landmark examples would include boycotts of Korean grocery stores in New York,¹³ the death of Latasha Harlins, a black teenager, at the hands of Soon Ja Du, a Korean shop owner in Los Angeles,¹⁴ images from the LA Riots showing armed Koreans guarding their property against Black and Latinx people,¹⁵ Peter Liang's manslaughter conviction in the death of Akai Gurley,¹⁶ and most recently the arrest of Tou Thao, one of three officers who did not help George Floyd when Derek Chauvin's knee was on his neck for eight minutes.¹⁷ Some Asian Americans, in turn, will share stories of being bullied and harassed by Black Americans, and during our COVID-19 times there are disturbing images of an Asian American woman being attacked by Black teens on a bus in NYC (<https://youtu.be/S8fnBTjtwZU>), images of an Asian woman on a St. Paul, Minnesota train platform being kicked by three Black teenagers (Sacks 2020), and an Asian woman being threatened and harassed on the subway by a Black passenger (Wong 2020).

I don't doubt that there are many more examples of Black people who have perpetuated anti-Asian racism. Just like there is real anti-Black racism in many Asian communities. The entire concept of skin lightening creams prevalent in South Asian and Filipino cultures suggests that fair skin is privileged over dark—and that colorism is as real in these Asian communities as they are in other ethnic communities (Lasco 2019). Anti-Black racism is a global phenomenon—its manifestation in the US has particularities to American culture and society, but Asian nations and cultures have been and are guilty of anti-Black racism now and in the past. Case in point: the scapegoating of African

immigrants in China where they have been accused of spreading coronavirus and discriminated against in housing and employment (Vincent 2020). The treatment of mixed-race Black and Korean (Agence France-Presse 2017), mixed race Black and Japanese people (Saber 2015), and mixed-race Black and Vietnamese people (Gonzalez 1992), in Korea, Japan, and Viet Nam, are further evidence of entrenched anti-Black racism. While one may argue that Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese cultures privilege ethnic purity over multiraciality of any mixture, first-hand accounts of mixed-race Black-Asian people in Korea, Japan, and Viet Nam tell a different story, especially when juxtaposed with white-Amerasian people.¹⁸

While stories of strife and mutual racism may be real, there are other stories of solidarity and coalition work that should also be known, told, and shared, both because they provide a counter-narrative to the prevailing wisdom of strife between Black people and Asian Americans and because if we are going to encourage and envision cross-racial solidarity to end racism, we need stories, real stories, to motivate and inspire us. We also need stories, real stories, to show that being an anti-racist and working cross-racially is not a heroic task but one that everyday people—not politicians or people in power—can do. Knowing the stories of cross-coalition work that happened and continues to happen inspires us to think beyond the conventional wisdom that so often holds us back to dream bigger.

One such inspirational figure is Yuri Kochiyama, a Nisei born in San Pedro, CA, incarcerated during WWII in Jerome, Arkansas who became politically active (along with her husband Bill) when they moved to Harlem in 1946. The Kochiyamas held open house nights where they invited activists to come speak at their home. One such open house had Malcolm X coming to talk with Japanese Hibakusha—survivors of the atomic blasts in Nagasaki and Hiroshima. That meeting led to a friendship between the Kochiyamas and Malcolm X, as well as a deepened commitment to anti-Black racism on Yuri's part (there is a famous photograph from *Life* magazine of Yuri cradling Malcolm X's head in the immediate aftermath of his assassination in the Audubon ballroom in NYC). She advocated for the rights of vulnerable and disenfranchised people and for cross-racial solidarity, most famously in her later years in advocating for the release of Mumia Abu-Jamal, an African American activist on death row for the shooting of a white police officer. Yuri Kochiyama's life work was as an activist who built bridges between various communities, most especially between Asian Americans and African Americans. She did this grassroots work from her home without benefit of a grand media platform or funds. She did this coalitional work because she was committed to social justice and lived her values.¹⁹

In our present day there are Asian Americans such as Helen Zia (Carroll 2020), Bill Ong Hing (Rebellious Lawyer n.d.), and Dale Minami (Densho n.d.)

who routinely advocate for Asian Pacific Islander Americans, African Americans, Indigenous, and Latinx people. Franklin Odo has worked with Tsuru for Solidarity (Tsuru for Solidarity n.d.), a Japanese American social justice organization that advocates for refugee and immigrant communities that has been front and center at protests at ICE detention centers, particularly those on the US southern border that have been incarcerating children and teens over the last few years. And a recent initiative of the Asian American Writers' Workshop is a Black and Asian Feminist Solidarities project meant to foster cross-racial collaborations by sharing stories, histories, strategies, and tools for mutual liberation (AAWW n.d.). And as I sit here writing this piece, news of former Vice President Joe Biden's running mate has just been announced. Senator Kamala Harris, the daughter of a Black Jamaican immigrant father and an Indian immigrant mother will make history as the first female Black and South Asian vice-presidential nominee. For people like Senator Harris, solidarity and coalition is as localized as their families of origin, reminding us that the personal can indeed be extraordinarily political.

There is so much to mourn and grieve in our present reality. So much loss, pain, and suffering. But like with other moments of trauma and transition, there are things we can do and lessons we can learn to alleviate suffering, to lessen pain, and to fight ignorance and fascism in whatever forms they take—as small as the slurs that come out of the mouths of political candidates to as large as the executive orders that want to ban people from coming into countries because of the color of their passports or their skin. I have studied and researched and written about Asian American and Asian diasporic issues my entire academic career. And I have made mistakes as an anti-racism educator and ally, but it is work I continue to do because I am a committed anti-racism educator. Doing the work of anti-racism is not easy. But it is open and available to us all. The only requirement for being an anti-racism educator and ally is the will to make this choice. And once you have made this choice, you next need to educate yourself about the history of race and racism in your local community, which is an education that is constant and ongoing because race and racism mutate over time, and race and racism are incredibly localized phenomenon, even though there are elements that are universal (such as the persistence of anti-Black racism).²⁰ And after educating yourself you need to then act and speak as an anti-racist ally and educator. Anti-racism is like a muscle—if you have never exercised it before, it will hurt, and you will feel pain. But doing the work of anti-racism is so vital—now more than ever. I am the daughter of a refugee father from China and an immigrant mother from Jamaica whose parents were, themselves, impoverished immigrants from Hong Kong. I can't not speak out against racism – I hope you can't either. Because anti-racism requires all of us to be in this together.

Lafayette, Colorado, August 2020

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Notes

1. For an excellent historical account of the origins of the Asian American studies movement see Daryl Maeda's (2011).
2. The theme of the 2021 Association for Asian American Studies conference is "Unsettling Transpacific Ecologies" (<https://aaastudies.org/calls-for-papers/>); both conference co-chairs, Dr. Aimee Bahng and Dr. LeiLani Nishime are scholars whose work looks at the transpacific and transnational connections within Asian American studies and among the Pacific Island diaspora.
3. Though the focus of this article is on anti-Asian racism in the United States, incidents of anti-Chinese and anti-Asian xenophobia have arisen globally, such as in Australia as this article outlines (<https://www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/asian-australian-groups-report-surge-in-racist-abuse-assaults-during-pandemic-20200512-p54s6f.html>) and in various European nations (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide>).
4. Between March and June 2020 there were over 2,100 reported cases of anti-Asian harassment (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/anti-asian-american-hate-incidents-up-racism/>), which only accounts for the incidents reported and not the overall number of anti-Asian harassment.
5. An excellent history detailing the incarceration of Japanese American during WWII is Greg Robinson's (2003).
6. For a concise and incisive overview of anti-Black racism in the United States see Carol Anderson's (2016).
7. In *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Paul Gilroy avers that "'Race' would then become an eternal cause of racism rather than what it is for me—its complex, unstable product" (14), arguing that racial classifications emerged out of systemic racism.
8. Michael Omi and Howard Winant's (2014) explains how race is an epiphenomenon separate from ethnicity, nation, or class that is socially constructed.
9. Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi organized both a hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter, and a global movement to protest anti-Black racism in 2013. For more see the BlackLivesMatter Herstory page: <https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>.
10. Ava DuVernay's documentary *13th* explores the rise of mass incarceration through the lens of the 13th Amendment of the United States, which post-emancipation resulted in great numbers of Black people to be used in chain gangs (<https://www.netflix.com/title/80091741>).
11. The documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* By Christine Choy and Renee Tajima-Peña explores the 1982 murder of Detroit civil engineer Vincent Chin by two white autoworkers.

12. As already referenced above Carol Anderson's *White Rage* provides a concise overview of racist state practices that prevented Black people from living in white neighborhoods, attending white schools, marrying non-Black people, and other forms of discrimination, segregation, and bias. For a valuable on-line resource see the National Museum of African American History & Culture: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/>
13. In January 1990 a dispute between a Haitian immigrant and Korean store owners in Brooklyn led to the Red Apple boycotts in which Black New Yorkers called on a boycott of Korean owned stores: <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/05/07/nyregion/black-korean-who-pushed-whom-festers.html>.
14. For more about Latasha Harlins and Soon Ja Du see this Ebony article: <https://www.ebony.com/news/25-years-later-la-remembers-latasha-harlins/>.
15. You can see images of Korean shop owners during the Los Angeles riots in this CNN piece: <https://www.cnn.com/2017/04/28/us/la-riots-korean-americans/index.html>.
16. For varied Asian American responses to Peter Liang's conviction see this NPR piece: <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/04/23/475369524/awoken-by-n-y-cop-shooting-asian-american-activists-chart-way-forward>.
17. This NBC news piece about Tou Thao exemplifies the way that journalism has often depicted the relationship between Asian American and Black Americans as one of historic tension: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/officer-who-stood-george-floyd-died-asian-american-we-need-n1221311>.
18. For more on the history of mixed race Amerasians, particularly Black and Vietnamese Amerasians, see Chapter 3, "Cablinasian Dreams, Amerasian Realities: Transcending Race in the Twenty-First Century and Other Myths Broken by Tiger Woods" in my monograph *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture* (Jennifer 2015).
19. Two sources that detail the life and activism of Yuri Kochiyama are Diane Fujino's (2005) and the Rea Tajiri and Pat Saunders documentary *Yuri Kochiyama: Passion for Justice* (1994).
20. One resource for anti-racism education is a free, on-line, three-week, self-paced course, Anti-Racism I on Coursera that I co-developed along with Shawn O'Neal, a PhD student in the Ethnic Studies department at the University of Colorado Boulder: <https://www.coursera.org/learn/antiracism-1#syllabus>.

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