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# Contagion of Hate: Epidemic, Pandemic, and Body Politics<sup>1</sup>

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“**W**e fight like Hell and if you don’t fight like Hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore.” These were the words of Donald J. Trump during a rally in Washington, D.C., on January 6, 2021, before his supporters stormed the Capitol in a violent attempt to overturn the presidential election.

In his speech that day to “save America,” Trump also attributed the “fraudulent” election to Democrats “using the pretext of the China virus and the scam of mail-in ballots.” With his repeated references to the virus as “kung flu,” the “China virus,” or the “Chinese virus,” the negative impact of Trump’s divisive words has been palpable for not only Chinese/Americans in particular but also Asian/Americans in general.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I will look at the present pandemic, including its current impacts on Asian/Americans, in light of rather than losing sight of history. After that, I will argue that the scapegoating of Asian/Americans during public health crises is connected with many of the -isms to which Trump is committed, and show in the process that the Trumpian regime, if and when considered with a longer view of context and history, is different more in degree than in kind. I say this not to minimize the harms that Trump has brought about but to maintain that the end of Trump’s presidency will not necessarily mean real change without our persistent resistance. Finally, I suggest that taking this longer view of context and history may also bring about a broader understanding that facilitates solidarity among different communities of color, particularly between Asian Americans and the Black Lives Matter movement.

## **Sickness and scapegoats: A long and continuous history**

According to the Stop AAPI Hate website, over 2,500 anti-Asian

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incidents—including verbal harassments, “shunning,” physical assaults, “potential civil rights violations,” and vandalism—were reported within four-and-a-half months of the website’s launch in March 2020 to register and address the xenophobia and bigotry that have been unleashed against Asian/Americans and Pacific Islanders because of the Coronavirus pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, many of these reported incidents entailed the use of racial slurs and racist rhetoric that betrayed an “anti-immigrant nativism.”<sup>4</sup> Hannah Tessler, Meera Choi, and Grace Kao have also gathered information on vandalisms and physical confrontations at various locations, including an attack on a Burmese American family in Texas, because the attacker “thought the family was Chinese, and infecting people with Coronavirus.” Many of these encounters also involved direct linkages being made to the Coronavirus, with aggressors calling their Asian/American victims “‘coronavirus,’ ‘Chinese virus,’ or ‘diseased,’ and telling them that they should ‘be quarantined,’ or ‘go back to China.’” Perhaps less dramatic but no less harmful would be the loss suffered by Chinese business owners. For instance, restaurants in New York City’s Chinatown experienced an 85% drop in profits from mid-January to mid-March—that is, before any mandate to close down in-door dining. Besides losing business, “phrases such as ‘take the corona back you

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1. This essay is expanded and adapted from my “Virus (of) Fear? Diagnosing the Trumpian Symptom within a Virulent History,” which appears in *Faith and Reckoning after Trump* (ed. Miguel De La Torre; Orbis Books, 2022), 130-45. Used with permission.

2. I am following David Palumbo-Liu’s use of the *solidus* for “Asian/Americans” to underscore that people of Asian descent, because of race and changing diplomatic relations between the United States and Asian countries, can be included or excluded from the society of the United States at various times. See Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1.

3. [https://secureservercdn.net/104.238.69.231/a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Stop\\_AAPI\\_Hate\\_National\\_Report\\_200805.pdf](https://secureservercdn.net/104.238.69.231/a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Stop_AAPI_Hate_National_Report_200805.pdf).

4. [https://secureservercdn.net/104.238.69.231/a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Stop\\_AAPI\\_Hate\\_Anti-China\\_Rhetoric\\_Report\\_201011.pdf](https://secureservercdn.net/104.238.69.231/a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Stop_AAPI_Hate_Anti-China_Rhetoric_Report_201011.pdf).

ch\*nk' ... and 'watch out for corona' ... have been documented on Asian-owned restaurants."<sup>5</sup>

Given Trump's incendiary words during this pandemic period and his refusal to address or even acknowledge the ensuing "bonfires" of harassment and harm, there are good reasons to call him "the biggest 'superspreader'" of anti-Asian racism.<sup>6</sup> Trump is, however, not alone in this. News media was not at all shy in churning out reports about "the hygiene of the seafood market in Wuhan and wild animal consumption as a possible cause of Coronavirus," and many posted "memes and jokes about bats and China."<sup>7</sup> That said, it is essential to note that neither the rhetoric nor the results of anti-Asian racism are new in the history of the United States of America.

Trump's personality aside, the connection that he and many people make between people of Asian ancestry and the infectious virus that endanger the nation—similar to Trump's policies on the economy, on the military, and race in general—in many ways are continuations of past practices and symptomatic of a deep-rooted white supremacy. Asian-raced bodies as foreign, undesirable, diseased, and harmful is just another trope to reinforce and intensify the imagined threat of the "yellow peril." Sadly, even a prestigious university listed xenophobia as one of many "common reactions" to the COVID crisis.<sup>8</sup>

### *Cholera*

Given the prevailing assumption of the time that diseases were caused and spread by miasma or "bad air" or "bad vapor," the link was immediately made during the cholera epidemic of the 1850s, between cholera and the West's notion of the "unsanitary" living conditions and "filthy" habits of Chinese people, who in 1849 arrived in larger numbers in Hawaii and the West coast. Because Whites did not feel at ease with the different looks, smells, and cuisines of Chinatown, they conveniently collapsed what they saw there, including the sickness and poverty, with the moral corruption of the entire Chinese population.<sup>9</sup> Instead of considering if and how racism and economic inequality might have led to the living conditions and infection rate of the Chinese, those of the dominant culture quickly categorized Chinese bodies as diseased. It made sense, therefore, that (1) the location of San Francisco's

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first pesthouse, built for cholera, ended up being the area of the city's Chinatown; and (2) the new pesthouse that the city built in 1861 was nicknamed "China House."<sup>10</sup>

### *Smallpox*

With the smallpox epidemic of the late 1860s and the 1870s, San Francisco's Chinatown was once again portrayed as the "plague spot," a "cesspool," or a "moral purgatory." However, the virus could have been brought there by rail travelers from the east coast.<sup>11</sup> Again, the Chinese, lacking the strength of those of European stock, were seen to be particularly susceptible to smallpox because of their "racial inferiority."<sup>12</sup> Separating a "true" and "healthy" San Francisco from the "hell" of Chinatown underground, city officials justified and carried out "sanitary" raids of Chinatown and aggressive segregations of the Chinese population, but no other crowded space (such as the city dockyards) or social group was identified as a health threat.<sup>13</sup> As Nayan Shah explains, three words may summarize the negative connotations that Chinatown communicated to the dominant population at that time: "dens, density, labyrinth."<sup>14</sup> With what he calls "emotology," Guenter B. Risse highlights how emotional manipulation functions with and through the threat of diseases for the purposes

5. Hannah Tessler, Meera Choi, and Grace Kao, "The Anxiety of Being Asian American: Hate Crimes and Negative Biases During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 45 (2000): 639-640.

6. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-anti-asian-racism-covid-19\\_n\\_5f905c0fc5b62333b24133f5](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-anti-asian-racism-covid-19_n_5f905c0fc5b62333b24133f5).

7. Tessler, Choi, and Kao, "Anxiety of Being Asian Americans," 637, 639.

8. Allyson Chiu, "'Stop Normalizing Racism': Amid Backlash, UC-Berkeley Apologizes for Listing Xenophobia under 'Common Reactions' to Coronavirus," *The Washington Post*, January 31, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/01/31/berkeley-coronavirus-xenophobia/>.

9. Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 21-22.

10. Guenter B. Risse, *Driven by Fear: Epidemics and Isolation in San Francisco's House of Pestilence* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 18, 79, 81.

11. Joan B. Trauner, "The Chinese as Medical Scapegoats in San Francisco, 1870-1905," *California History* 57, no. 1 (Spring, 1978), 75; Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 1, 11, 58.

12. Risse, *Driven by Fear*, 25.

13. Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 6, 43, 53-54; Risse, *Driven by Fear*, 119.

14. Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 18-19.

of stigmatization and discrimination.<sup>15</sup> To stoke fear, Thomas Logan, who became president of the American Medical Association during this epidemic, “popularized the eye-witness journey into Chinatown’s dens” to show (off) how “‘hereditary vices’ or ‘engrafted peculiarities’ preordained the Chinese to chronic and unusual illness.”<sup>16</sup> Some even promoted the idea that Chinese had a “virulent strain of smallpox that was ‘unknown among the Caucasian race.’”<sup>17</sup> Dissatisfied with raids and segregation, some members of the city’s health board even suggested something more drastic:<sup>18</sup>

The Chinese cancer must be cut out of the heart of the city, root, and branch, if you have any regard for its future sanitary welfare ... it is a shame that the very centre [of the city] be surrendered and abandoned to this health-defying and law-defying population.

15. Risse, *Driven by Fear*, 10, 12, 19, 21.  
 16. Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 28-29.  
 17. Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 57-58.  
 18. Trauner, “Chinese as Medical Scapegoats,” 74.



We, therefore, recommend that the portion of the city described here be condemned as a nuisance; and we call upon the proper authorities to take the necessary steps for its abatement without delay.

It’s clear from this comment that the cancer refers to both a location and a people. It’s little wonder that the first and only race-based law passed in the history of the United States so far was the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882.

### *Syphilis and Leprosy*

Like smallpox, contagious diseases such as syphilis and leprosy were viewed in the late nineteenth century as “essentially Chinese,” with the former being labelled “Guandong boils” or “Chinese ulcer,” and the latter “Mongolian leprosy” or “disease of the semi-civilization” that afflicted all of China.<sup>19</sup> In fact, these two sicknesses were often linked, with many seeing “leprosy among the Chinese [as] ‘simply the result of generations of syphilis.’”<sup>20</sup> Again, we see this kind of emotional and sensational scapegoating coming from popular media and reputable professionals.

As clergy and missionaries referred to the Bible to talk about leprosy and provoke panic among Whites and to emphasize the need for “heathen Chinese” to convert to Christianity, medical doctors blamed Chinese prostitutes for spreading syphilis—even though prostitution was not a monopoly of the Chinese and syphilis could be spread to Chinese prostitutes from their solicitors.<sup>21</sup> Dr. H. H. Toland, who founded the Toland Medical College that eventually became the University of California Medical School, ridiculously suggested that White boys at 8 to 10 years of age were contracting syphilis from Chinese prostitutes, because these women “do not care how old the boys are, whether five years old or more, as long as they have money.”<sup>22</sup> Chinese spreaders of these poisonous viruses were not limited to prostitutes, however. Chinese service providers, including domestic, laundry, or food services, were also blamed, because they shared pipes to smoke opium, or supposedly used a “dangerous mouth spray” to soak or dampen their customers’ clothing before ironing it.<sup>23</sup> Beyond the location and the population, therefore, Chinese contamination could also occur by touching what they had touched, so we see a physician pronouncing in 1897 that he would not “wear a Chinese-washed garment” to avoid contracting contagious diseases. The same would be true for touching towels at home, dishes in a restaurant, or smoking a cigar anywhere that had been washed, handled, or wrapped by Chinese hands.<sup>24</sup> Another physician, Dr. Mary Sawtelle, made the Chinese not only the source but also the

19. Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 99; Risse, *Driven by Fear*, 68, 49, 129, 149.  
 20. Cited in Trauner, “Chinese as Medical Scapegoats,” 75.  
 21. Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 80-81; Risse, *Driven by Fear*, 51-53.  
 22. Cited in Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 86.  
 23. Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 68-69, 95; Risse, *Driven by Fear*, 27.  
 24. Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 68-69, 100; Risse, *Driven by Fear*, 53.





embodiment of syphilis and leprosy when she wrote in a medical journal: “every ship from China brings hundreds of these syphilitic and leprous heathens. They sit in the streetcar beside our wives and daughters. They are a stench. Their mean stature, their ugly faces and their imbecile nastiness mirrors to us what syphilis will do for a nation.”<sup>25</sup> Additional measures, including arrest, confinement, deportation, were hence employed to protect the (White) people of the nation.<sup>26</sup> Worse than Logan’s “eye-witness” Chinatown journeys, a Dr. Charles C. O’Donnell kidnapped and paraded a Chinese with leprosy around San Francisco before the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act; the Act’s passing also did not stop O’Donnell from embarking on a multistate tour with a portfolio full of terrifying pictures of Chinese being ravished by leprosy.<sup>27</sup>

### *Bubonic Plague (Black Fever)*

Fearing the spread of the bubonic plague, steamship companies in the summer of 1899 openly refused Chinese passengers who could only afford to buy the cheapest tickets.<sup>28</sup> When black fever finally broke out in Hawaii and California in 1900, it was once again labelled as an “oriental disease” for “rice eaters” (including this time those of Japanese and Indian ancestry), so non-Asians

enjoyed greater freedom to travel, for instance.<sup>29</sup> A broader category of so-called “Asian foodstuffs” was considered to contain and carry the virus, with newspapers in Honolulu reporting that the first White person who died of the plague in Honolulu “had been eating Chinese candy she bought at an Asian market shortly before she came down with plague.”<sup>30</sup> In Honolulu, attempts to disinfect Chinatown ended infamously with a fire on January 20, 1900, that ended up, whether wittingly or unwittingly, burning down the entire Chinatown. Worse, an armed city police force, joined by civilians picking up anything that could be used as a weapon, formed a blockade “to prevent the dispersal of a potentially plague-carrying population throughout the city.” As if that was not enough, arsonists burned another block near a Chinese theater in the city precisely a week later.<sup>31</sup>

When the plague erupted again in San Francisco in May 1907, it became more challenging to make Chinatown the culprit because (1) the outbreak was citywide; (2) more Whites died from the plague than Chinese; and (3) medical understanding had changed with the advent of bacteriology and the plague was understood to be carried by rats.<sup>32</sup> Bigotry, however, has seldom let such details get in its way. Some suggested that the broken sewage from the 1906 earthquake made it possible for “infected rats” or “refugee rats” from Chinatown to infect the city with the plague.<sup>33</sup> At a banquet celebrating the end of the outbreak on March 31, 1909, the honoree Dr. Rupert Blue (who later became the fourth Surgeon General of the United States), publicly declared: “We have vanquished the foes of the Orient.”<sup>34</sup>

### *Trachoma and other contagions*

The dominant culture in the twentieth century continued to connect other less lethal but equally contagious diseases with Asia. When trachoma, an eye disease that can lead to blindness, became a threat in the early decades of the twentieth century, it was either seen as endemic only among Asians because of the “poor physical state of the average Oriental,”<sup>35</sup> or it was considered to be no longer threatening exclusively to Asians because Asians had been exposed to it for generations. Either way, Asians were once again seen as the disease’s primary carriers and spreaders. As a result, having it *and* not having it were both reasons for denying them entry into the United States.

Similarly, the fish diet of Asians, especially Chinese and Japanese, supposedly made them more liable to host parasites. Still, they could be “healthy carriers” who endangered Whites

29. Trauner, “Chinese as Medical Scapegoats,” 78-79; Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 155; Risse, *Driven by Fear*, 56.

30. James C. Mohr, *Plague and Fire: Battling Black Death and the 1900 Burning of Honolulu’s Chinatown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 118; see also p. 175.

31. Mohr, *Plague and Fire*, 133, 159.

32. Trauner, “Chinese as Medical Scapegoats,” 80; Mohr, *Plague and Fire*, 12; Risse, *Driven by Fear*, 57.

33. Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 153; Risse, *Driven by Fear*, 28-29.

34. Cited in Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 156.

35. Cited in Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 188.

25. Cited in Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 88.

26. Trauner, “Chinese as Medical Scapegoats,” 75-76; Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 102; Risse, *Driven by Fear*, 122.

27. Risse, *Driven by Fear*, 119-20.

28. Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 127.

without any built-in resistance that Asians had built up over the generations. *Clonorchis sinensis* which causes clonorchiasis was (and still is in some circles) also called the Chinese liver fluke.<sup>36</sup>

Asians of different ethnicities quickly became suspected carriers of contagious diseases as they began to come into the United States in more significant numbers and when debates flared about Asian immigration during these early decades of the last century. Complaining against the dangers of “Manila cigars,” a William Backner wrote in 1909:<sup>37</sup>

Now every soldier knows the uncleanness of the average Philippino, and if you ask him he will tell you that many a poor fellow came home in a box by too close association with them, as they are poison to the white man. They are all affected with a skin disease and a large majority are covered with open sores and scars. Leprosy, beri-beri, cholera, bubonic plague and other infectious disease, are, as everyone knows, prevalent there.

Five years later, a health director named Charles T. Nesbitt testified before the House of Representatives by claiming that “Asia was the ‘fountain’ of the ‘most destructive pestilence’ in recorded history and that Asians have consequently ‘acquired such a high state of immunity to [its] effects that they have been unconscious carriers.’”<sup>38</sup> Once again, it’s a no-win situation for people of Asian ancestry. They were—and are—assumed to embody contagious diseases that endanger the health and safety of the United States, whether they were/are seen as susceptible or immune to these diseases that they apparently spread.

### *Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)*

Despite the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 and the removal of the quota system by national origin with the implementation of the Immigration Act in 1965, Asian/Americans have often continued to be targeted immediately whenever there is an outbreak of a contagious virus. During the SARS scare of 2003, the Center of Disease Control (CDC) felt the need to state that SARS “is not in any way related to being Asian.” A health official in California tellingly referred to the bubonic plague in 1900 and said, “[W]e are back where we were a century ago in dealing with an emerging infectious disease.”<sup>39</sup> After all, while the nature of the virus is different, the same race of people was profiled and stigmatized. A study that sampled over half of the calls made to the CDC’s Public Response Service in May 2003 that had to do with SARS-related concerns shows that the major problems have to do with “fear of buying Asian merchandise,” “working with Asians,” “living near Asians,” “going to school with Asians.”<sup>40</sup> Fourteen

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percent of people in the United States reported avoiding “Asian businesses.”<sup>41</sup> Even without a single suspected case in Chinatown, “one bus driver still wore his facemask while driving through the district.”<sup>42</sup> According to an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “SARS has put Asians and Asia in the public consciousness in an undeserving way. It all harks back to the hysterical Chinatown bubonic plague scare of yore.”<sup>43</sup> The passing of a century was not able to change some deep-rooted xenophobia, even if some of the people are fellow citizens of and residents in the United States.

Between SARS and COVID, we had the Hollywood movie, *Contagion*, in 2011. In ways that are perfectly understandable but perhaps less forgivable, the movie about a worldwide pandemic locates the origin of the virus in China and attributes its spread to a White family in the United States to the female lead’s business trip to Asia. As if that is not enough, the movie portrays China as corrupt in managing the outbreak. Not only do we see Chinese men kidnapping a White female epidemiologist who works for the World Health Organization to ensure by extortion that the vaccine for the virus would be available to them, but we also see Chinese officials being agitated and impatient with the investigative work done by this foreign epidemiologist in Hong Kong. This latter scenario brings to mind the accusation made against the Chinese during outbreaks of various viruses in the nineteenth century: Chinese had secret diseases, but they would try to hide the sickness and keep it from being known.<sup>44</sup> Finally, depicting a blogger and conspiracy theorist who takes advantage of the pandemic to make money by promoting a plant used in traditional Chinese medicine (*Forsythia*) as an effective cure but ends up causing a mass infection with people rushing to pharmacies to purchase the plant, the movie brings back memories of the conflicts between western and traditional Chinese medical practices in earlier outbreaks of cholera, smallpox, and the bubonic plague.<sup>45</sup>

36. Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 190, 198-99.

37. Cited in Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 175.

38. Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 196.

39. Cited in Risse, *Driven by Fear*, 195, 196.

40. Bobbie Person et al., “Fear and Stigma: The Epidemic within the SARS Outbreak,” *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 10, no. 2 (February 2004): 360.

41. Tessler, Choi, and Kao, “Anxiety of Being Asian Americans,” 640.

42. Risse, *Driven by Fear*, 196.

43. Cited in Risse, *Driven by Fear*, 197.

44. Risse, *Driven by Fear*, 24, 28.

45. Mohr, *Plague and Fire*, 9, 31-37, 76, 103; Shah, *Contagious*

## Trump as symptom: A web of “Traditional National Values”

In the last 150 years, people of Asian ancestry in general and of Chinese ancestry in particular have repeatedly been the scapegoats when there is a public health threat involving contagious diseases, and individual infections among them were turned into a generic or genetic condition of the entire race. While Whites who contracted these infectious diseases are seen as victims and unwitting spreaders of the diseases, Asian/Americans who don't even have the virus are often seen as culprits and deceitful predators who bring about the virus to harm Whites and endanger the nation. Therefore, Trump's reference to the Coronavirus as the “China virus” is merely running a play that has been repeatedly run out of the United States' political playbook.

As we see from Nesbitt's testimony above, characterizing a contagious disease as foreign partly expresses a fear of alien invasion. Similarly, many were anxious that if the 1900 bubonic plague would kill hundreds daily, as it was doing in Hong Kong, Honolulu would face “the prospect of appearing to be, or perhaps even becoming, ‘Asian.’”<sup>46</sup> Trump is, of course, known for his promise to build a wall against illegal immigration.

Besides his problematic insistence on giving the Coronavirus names that associate the virus with China and the Chinese, Trump has signed and implemented various policies and executive orders between January and October 2020 that “explicitly target China or disproportionately impact Asian Americans” by, for example, limiting (immigrants and refugees from Asian nations) and barring (researchers and students from China) entry into the United States of America.<sup>47</sup>

Trump's “China virus” rhetoric and anti-immigration emphasis are both blame-game politics in times of trouble. Besides virus outbreaks, blaming the other as the threatening cause is often employed in face of economic uncertainties. China is widely expected to overtake the United States as the most major world economy. According to Trump, illegal immigrants exploit the benefits and drain the resources of the United States without contributing anything. Conceptualized a year after the 2008 recession, *Contagion's* plot revolves around China's growth as an economic power. The female lead was in Asia for the opening of a factory of her transnational corporation. While this may seem like a celebration of trans-Pacific cooperation, the subplot of the Chinese holding a White female epidemiologist as (a willing) hostage to get the vaccine shows the underlying tension and competition between China and the West.<sup>48</sup> The movie's closing scene, which reveals the origin of the virus to be the deforestation in China that destroys an infected bat's natural habitat, further puts China's economic

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development negatively.

Racism, xenophobia, and white supremacy cannot be separated from capitalism and imperialism. The United States is always reaching overseas to extract cheaper resources (including labor) and expand. Economic concerns that kept Trump from ordering any kind of nationwide lockdown were also at play in these other contagious outbreaks in the history of the United States. Politicians and businesspeople worried that news of any epidemic or pandemic would cripple commerce and devastate the economy. Just as Trump waited to inform the nation about the severity of the Coronavirus and occasionally disputes the statistics about its infection and mortality rates, California's Governor Henry T. Gage during the 1900 bubonic plague also, out of fear that San Francisco's commerce and tourism would be negatively affected, refused to acknowledge at first that the plague was present in the city, and later the findings of a national commission about the plague.<sup>49</sup> In other words, both Trump and Gage were doing precisely what they accused the Chinese of doing by not being forthcoming about a contagious virus. One should not forget that the Marine Hospital Service's role as a major player in addressing infectious diseases as a federal agency resulted from the passing of the National Quarantine Act of 1878 and from “federal obligations for the regulation of interstate and international commerce.”<sup>50</sup>

Pointing to “four elements of the neoliberal project: ‘post truth,’ disaster capitalism, individualism, and the dumbing down of society,” Wesley C. Marshall declares “Donald Trump as man of his times, in many ways a singularly precise personification of today's neoliberal inspired zeitgeist.”<sup>51</sup> Despite Trump's populist and protectionist rhetoric, there is a repeated implementation of the neoliberal project in every sphere of life, both within and beyond United States soil. As Maria Ryan points out, “Trump's most ostensibly radical commitment ... to economic protectionism ... was not a wholesale rejection of neoliberal trade in all circumstances.”<sup>52</sup> As Trump's comments about taking or keeping

*Divides*, 55-56, 213.

46. Mohr, *Plague and Fire*, 56.

47. [https://secureservercdn.net/104.238.69.231/a1w90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Stop\\_AAPI\\_Hate\\_2020-Candidates-and-Anti-Asian-Rhetoric\\_201021.pdf](https://secureservercdn.net/104.238.69.231/a1w90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Stop_AAPI_Hate_2020-Candidates-and-Anti-Asian-Rhetoric_201021.pdf).

48. Aaron Baker, “Global Cinema and Contagion,” *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (Spring, 2013): 12.

49. Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 121, 125, 145-46; Guenter B. Risse, *Plague, Fear, and Politics in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 168-69, 171-173.

50. Risse, *Plague, Fear, and Politics*, 99-100.

51. Wesley C. Marshall, “The Trump Administration and the Neoliberal Project,” *Theory in Action* 11, no. 3 (July 2018): 58.

52. Maria Ryan, “Stability Not Chaos? Donald Trump and the



the oil in Iraq and in Syria show, military might and money are interrelated if not precisely interchangeable. After all, the “freedom” that the United States is protecting and promoting in these times is still the freedom of capital to move around the globe and the freedom to consume mindlessly.

The basic blueprint for the Trump regime—including neo-liberal privatizations, corporatization, deregulation, subsidies of transnational businesses but withdrawal from the service sector by the state, suppression of labor unions, predation of public and common goods, emphasis on “individual responsibility,” and elevation of the market as the ultimate standard for measuring and organizing societies—was already laid out by Friedrich Hayek and the Mont Pelerin Society in the 1940s, and actively implemented later by Margert Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980s as well as through the so-called Washington Consensus of the mid-1990s.<sup>53</sup>

Risse insightfully points out that using the war metaphor against threatening diseases is understandable but problematic, since it is likely to “elicit aversive emotions that translate into demands for belligerent responses.”<sup>54</sup> We have undoubtedly seen the allusions to war with Trump when he called himself a “wartime president” and the Coronavirus “kung flu,” as well as the results of those allusions. Citing the 2006 amendment of the National Defense Authorization Act that gives authority to the United States President to deploy the National Guard for “natural disaster, epidemic or terrorist attack, or serious public health emergencies” and referencing the movie *Contagion*, Risse further suggests that utilizing the military against threatening diseases has become a “new normal.”<sup>55</sup> Again, while the size and scale of military involvement may be different today, resorting to military forces was not exactly new. Writing about San Francisco’s Chinatown during the bubonic plague of the 1900s, Risse himself states that measures to contain the public health threat “were achieved through the employment of police and military forces,” and, describing the Marine Hospital Service as “a paramilitary organization,” identifies public health as having an “early martial character.”<sup>56</sup> National guards were called out to enforce the quarantine of Honolulu’s Chinatown during the bubonic outbreak, and “men were taken as if prisoners of war by lines of military guards” whenever a site was condemned, with one person remembering on that fateful day when Chinatown was burned down that it was “just like a war zone.”<sup>57</sup> In San Francisco, health department inspectors were not only accompanied by “club-wielding police escorts,” but they also “broke down the doors with their axes and sledgehammers” if

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they were not granted admission by the Chinese residents there.<sup>58</sup> Even earlier, when syphilis was becoming a public health threat, there was a movement to follow France and administer a kind of “police medical regulation,”<sup>59</sup> or government-enforced inspection that would be compulsory for prostitutes. In San Francisco, where syphilis was immediately attributed to Chinese prostitutes, the editor of *California Medical Gazette* wrote in 1869 that San Francisco should “be the first city in our broad Union to adopt the French police system of examination of prostitutes.”<sup>60</sup> A prominent New York physician, Dr. William Sanger, even suggested that the compulsory inspection of prostitutes for syphilis should be done by “a special medical department of the police.”<sup>61</sup> Note that this movement eventually failed not because people were opposed to the use of police and force but because of the “moral outrage” that such inspection would end up “legalizing and licensing” prostitution rather than working to eliminate it as an avoidable social evil.<sup>62</sup> Backner’s worries about “Manila cigars” and “the average Filipino” are themselves inseparable from the Philippine-America War (1899-1902), and hence from the aggressive imperialism of the United States.

While calling himself a “wartime president,” Trump’s war was not only against the Coronavirus. Trump was continuing this long national tradition of global militarism—whether through military aid and training or direct military interference—under the pretext of promoting “development” and protecting “democratic freedom.”<sup>63</sup> Besides authorizing bombings in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen (though often without releasing any Airpower Sum-

58. Risse, *Plague, Fear, and Politics*, 127.

59. Cited in John C. Burnham, “Medical Inspection of Prostitutes in America in the Nineteenth Century: The St. Louis Experiment and Its Sequel,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 45, no. 3 (May-June 1971): 203.

60. Cited in Burnham, “Medical Inspection of Prostitutes,” 205.

61. Burnham, “Medical Inspection of Prostitutes,” 205.

62. Burnham, “Medical Inspection of Prostitutes,” 211.

63. See Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

World—An Early Assessment,” in *The Trump Presidency: From Campaign Trail to World Stage*, ed. Mara Oliva and Mark Shanahan (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 214.

53. Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 17-18.

54. Risse, *Driven by Fear*, 11, 200.

55. Risse, *Driven by Fear*, 198-201.

56. Risse, *Plague, Fear, and Politics*, 2, 3, 99.

57. Mohr, *Plague and Fire*, 57, 95, 133.

mary), military operations of the United States in Trump time also followed a long-established pattern and took place within United States soil. In ways similar to the militarization of the police in its (anti-black and anti-brown) war against drugs, the Department of Homeland Security's wars against undocumented migrants and terrorists (and often, undocumented migrants *as* terrorists) have been militarizing its agents to fight—and terrorize—“enemies within.” It is little wonder why Trump and his supporters have continued to condemn Colin Kaepernick's kneeling gesture as disrespecting the national flag and the United States military.<sup>64</sup>

### Remembering history and building solidarity

A national narrative of development and progress enables the powerful to emphasize closure and their ability to get over and move on from, perhaps even transcend, a less-than-desirable past. As Joseph R. Winters writes, “[T]he pervasive commitment to the idea of progress in American culture . . . mitigates experiences and memories of racial trauma and loss.”<sup>65</sup> We see this, for example, in the white and dominant perspective that slavery is “over,” that the internment of (Japanese American) citizens is “no more,” that affirmative action is “obsolete,” or that the Cold War has “ended.”

Referring to this cultural habit to “repress” and “forget troublesome details of the national memory,” Ralph Ellison proposes that “more than any other people, Americans have been locked in a deadly struggle with time, with history.”<sup>66</sup> By denials, disguises, or deflections, various wreckages and numerous wounds are written out of our country's narratives and collective memories, even or especially if those damages are fundamental and foundational to the building of our “forgetful nation” and its myths.<sup>67</sup> With what Diana Taylor calls “percepticide,”<sup>68</sup> we as part of the general population may willfully blind ourselves to disavow or (dis)miss not only sights and scenes of past and present injustice but also the continuations of past discriminatory tactics into the present.

With Trump's defeat in the November election and disgrace after his failed attempt to incite a coup in January, there will be those who want to celebrate and say that we can finally move on from a bad chapter of United States history. However, Trump's practice of making those of Chinese or Asian ancestry scapegoats for the Coronavirus pandemic has a long history; the ideologies associated with this practice are in the DNA of this nation. The close connection among capitalism, militarism, and racism in

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the United States—a kind of “unholy trinity,” if you will—have long been recognized by people of color, so Trump's regime in the United States is more a symptom or a mutated virus than a new virus. These ideological forces will not disappear even though they may function differently and subtly with a different person in the White House.

Akin to the threat of terrorism's so-called invisible enemies and of the pandemic's unsuspected contagion, white supremacy, neoliberalism, and imperialism—by portraying Blacks as a menace, widening the wealth gap, and weakening national sovereignty with permeable borders—trigger a social sentiment of fear that also allows a more authoritarian culture of oppression, colonization, and exploitation to develop. As many media pundits have pointed out, Trump's election in 2016 had partly to do with his self-projection as a “strong man” who could alleviate people's anxieties about terrorism, offshoring job loss, queer sexuality, *Roe v. Wade*, and/or illegal immigration (though media is itself by no means innocent when it comes to the spread of fear with its many infotainments).

Trump's rally cry—“you're not going to have a country anymore”—is, like the “emotionogy” at work in scapegoating people of Asian ancestry for a host of contagious diseases such as the Coronavirus, a symptom of a syndrome that Martha C. Nussbaum calls “the monarchy of fear.”<sup>69</sup> From scapegoating of Chinese/Americans to his manipulation of a general politics of fear and of division, Trump's tactics were not new. Neither were his specific policies that promoted white supremacy, neoliberalism, and militarism. He was merely the *extreme* or the *most explicit expression* that proves the rule.

Part of this ongoing politics of scapegoating, fear, and division involves the myth of Asian/Americans as “model minority.” This myth has, of course, been created to triangulate communities of color within the United States, even though Asian America has many ethnic groups that are struggling on both the economic and educational fronts. By remembering this virulent history of virus and fear, Asian/Americans will gain a better understanding of white supremacy. Instead of internalizing the infectious virus

64. Brown, *Ruins of Neoliberalism*, 14.

65. Joseph R. Winters, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2106), 4. Commitment to this progress idea is, for example, consistently present in the rhetoric of President Obama, Trump's predecessor; see Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, 187-207.

66. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 250.

67. Ali Behdad, *A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

68. Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's “Dirty War”* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 119-138.

69. Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).



of white supremacist hate against other communities of color, Asian/Americans should recall various models of being in solidarity with others who live under white supremacy, such as Pat Sumi's involvement with the Black Panthers, Yuri Kochiyama's activism alongside Malcolm X; Grace Lee-Boggs's partnership with her husband, James Boggs, in Detroit; Bill Lann Lee's work with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund; or Harold Hongju Koh's work on behalf of Haitian refugees.<sup>70</sup> Asian/Americans should also not forget that the Asian American Movement itself was indebted to the civil rights struggles of African Americans and had from its beginning an emphasis on multiracial solidarity.<sup>71</sup> During this COVID crisis, one must look at not only who gets blamed for causing the virus but also who must report to work despite the virus and whose lives are disproportionately extinguished because of the virus. Just as African Americans and Latinx have supported Asian/Americans in protests against anti-Asian acts during the pandemic of the Coronavirus, Asian/Americans should keep in mind another pandemic that has been ravaging the world for much longer but similarly downplayed by Trump: namely, the contagion of anti-black hate.

Asian Americans rightly challenge discriminatory rhetoric and practices during the current pandemic. We must be on guard against falling into the trap of reinforcing anti-black sentiments, especially when the news and social media repeatedly show Black men as attackers or suspects. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic have insightfully explained that "divide-and-conquer" strategies work by promoting "exaggerated identification" with Whites by one minority group at the expense of other minority groups, as well as simultaneously providing token "proofs" for Whites to deflect the charge of racism.<sup>72</sup> To prevent this divisive and deflective strategy from working, it is essential to acknowledge that racism against Asian Americans and racism against African Americans are not necessarily the same. Rather than assume that there is a "striking continuity ... between perceptions, policies, and practices"<sup>73</sup> of racism against both groups that end up not ringing

70. For more information on the life and work of some of these important Asian/Americans, see Editorial Board, "An Interview with Pat Sumi," *Roots: An Asian American Reader* eds. Amy Tachiki, Eddie Wong, Franklin Odo, Buck Wong (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 1971), 253-264; Ryan Masaaki Yokoda, "Interview with Pat Sumi," *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment*, eds. Steve Louie and Glenn Omatsu (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2001), 16-31; Yuri Kochiyama, *Passing It On: A Memoir* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2004); Grace Lee-Boggs, *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Diane Carol Fujino, *Heartbeat of Struggle: The Revolutionary Life of Yuri Kochiyama* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). See also Frank H. Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 330-334.

71. See, for instance, Daryl J. Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

72. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 71-73.

73. Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2003), 72-73.

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true to experience, it may be helpful to think more carefully about how the racialization of different racial/ethnic minoritized groups work and intersect each other. As Kandice Chuh suggests, "differences do not exist independently of each other. Rather, they converge and conflict and thus participate in each other."<sup>74</sup> A comparative understanding of racism is essential since it is often through a more extensive typology that contradictions can be created, and hence ideological alibis are provided.<sup>75</sup> This requires different racial/ethnic minoritized groups to listen and learn actively from one another.

Reading racism against Asian Americans vis-à-vis racism against African Americans, critical race theorist Neil T. Gotanda proposes that in contrast to Blacks who are being racialized as "inferior," Asian Americans are being racialized as "foreign."<sup>76</sup> The question asked of almost every Asian American, even if they were born in the United States and their families have been here for generations—"Where are you from?"—is much less likely to be posed to an African American.

There are, of course, other ways to read and compare how different racial/ethnic groups are being racialized in the United States since we know that Asian Americans are racialized as "perpetual foreigners" as well as a "model minority." While we must be careful about generalizations, delineating some theoretical convergence and divergence in the racialization processes of various minoritized groups can facilitate and perhaps even necessitate the forging of a coalition, both intellectually and politically. Doing so can also underscore that people don't have to share precisely the same experience of solidarity.

Establishing understanding and solidarity across different minoritized communities is indispensable, even though it may take on different dynamics and power differentials at various points in time.

74. Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 148.

75. Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 127-28; see also John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 11-13.

76. Neil T. Gotanda, "Citizenship Nullification: The Impossibility of Asian American Politics," *Asian Americans and Politics: Perspectives, Experiences, Prospects* (ed. Gordon H. Chang; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 79-101.