

OPINION

Addressing Anti-Asian Attacks With Transformative Justice

Why you can trust us

MICHELLE KIM

10 MIN READ

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Asian shoppers at a street market in Chinatown, Los Angeles, California, on Nov. 10, 2020.

PHOTO BY IRFAN KHAN/LOS ANGELES TIMES/GETTY IMAGES

In recent weeks, there have been over 20 attacks on Asian businesses and people, mostly elders, with little to no coverage from the mainstream news

outlets. Videos documenting such attacks have been circulating, mostly through individual social media accounts of Asian activists, celebrities, and journalists (thank you Amanda Nguyen, Dion Lim, Dr. Kiona, Daniel Dae Kim, Benny Luo, Lisa Ling, and Daniel Wu for being among the first public figures to use your platform to mobilize others). They show a 91-year-old Chinese man being shoved to the ground in Chinatown in Oakland, California, on Jan. 31, just two days before an 84-year-old Thai man, Vicha Ratanapakdee, was pushed and killed in San Francisco, and multiple accounts of robberies targeting Asian-owned businesses in Chinatowns. In New York, a 61-year-old Filipino man was slashed across the face from ear to ear on Feb 3, and on the same day, a 70-year-old Asian woman was assaulted and robbed in Oakland.

Between March and August of 2020, Stop AAPI Hate received more than 2,583 reports of anti-Asian hate crimes nationwide, and these incidents go grossly underreported. The alarming jobless rate of Asian Americans and the high COVID-19 mortality rate among Pacific Islanders, which is double that of White and other Asian people, continue to be left out of mainstream narratives when discussing the disproportionate economic and health impacts of the pandemic on people of color.

The Model Minority Myth running deep in the American psyche is the problematic portrayal of Asians as a monolithic group of quiet, hard-working, politically silent, and therefore “well-behaved” immigrants, which was created in the '60s to position Asians in opposition to the Black community, whose social justice activism was seen as a national threat to the status quo of White supremacy. Over the years, this politically

motivated and fundamentally anti-Black myth has successfully achieved its purpose of driving a wedge between Asians and other people of color groups in America, while simultaneously erasing, making invisible, and even delegitimizing Asian communities' real-life struggles by using the economic success of the few to defend the centuries-old unjust systems rooted in White supremacy, anti-Blackness, capitalism, and colonialism. This wedge continues to be driven even deeper today, where, to my dismay, many of the recent attacks against Asian elders were perpetrated by Black individuals, and the myriad intra- and inter-community reactions have once again exposed the historical and ongoing tension between the Asian and Black American communities.

Today, in reaction to the series of attacks on our elders, many enraged Asians are calling for the immediate arrest of the perpetrators of violence while demanding the most punitive charges be made. "Send a message," they say. And I have to wonder, "Weren't we just demanding we defund the police in solidarity with Black Lives Matter?"

When asked to support the amplification effort and denounce the heinous attacks on Asians, some Black people criticize the anti-Blackness still prevalent in the Asian community. "Asians are anti-Black." "Asians never show up for us." "It's Black History Month." And to that I wonder, "So will you watch us die?"

And the cycle continues. We fight anti-Asian racism with anti-Black rhetoric and tactics, and anti-Asian racism goes unnoticed, or worse justified, in part because of the deep-seated and understandable resentment towards our community, which undeniably has more work to do to eradicate anti-

Blackness, and whose perceived proximity to whiteness is aided through the perpetual and blatant erasure of our historical and present-day solidarity work with other marginalized communities.

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I am exhausted by the continued silence and delayed motions from the mainstream media outlets committed to upholding white supremacy through erasing our struggles while magnifying the myth of the model minority that puts a target on our backs.

Some might say the 1992 Los Angeles uprising marked the pinnacle of the tension between the two communities, where the two groups found themselves facing each other in physical opposition in Koreatown, each fighting for justice, dignity, and survival of their kin. The site of the protest was no coincidence, given it marked the place where Soon Ja Du, a Korean American liquor store owner, just a year prior, shot and killed Latasha Harlins, a 15-year-old Black girl who Du believed tried to steal a bottle of orange juice. There was a righteous public outrage when Du was sentenced to merely five years of probation, 400 hours of community service, and a \$500 fine, and again when the sentencing decision was unanimously upheld in an appeal about a week before the uprising began. When all four White

police officers who brutalized Rodney King were acquitted, the Black community and its allies rose up and swarmed the streets to express their grief and fury, and Koreatown was one of its righteous battlegrounds. University of Southern California estimates that more than 1,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed during the uprising, which stretched for nearly a week from April 29 to May 4, 1992, and more than 60 people died, with more than 2,000 were injured. About half of the estimated \$1 billion in damage was sustained by more than 2,300 Korean-owned mom-and-pop shops, leaving enduring economic and emotional trauma that many are yet to fully recover from. While the LAPD stationed themselves to protect richer White suburbs, Korean business owners, panicked by the reality of having been abandoned by the government, screamed for help while watching their American dreams burn to the ground, while others armed themselves to defend their only means for survival, pointing their guns at Black and Brown faces. “Nothing in my life indicated I was a secondary citizen until the LA riots. The LAPD powers that be decided to protect the ‘haves’ and the Korean community did not have any political voice or power. They left us to burn,” Chang Lee, a Korean American business owner recalled in an [interview with CNN](#). Despite both communities being victims of unjust and racist systems, many believed their opponent to be the traumatized faces in front of them, not the systems of White supremacy that had failed both communities.

Today, White supremacy is acting again, pitting our communities against each other and banking on our collective amnesia about the conditions that have birthed the violence—the government’s utter failure to create any

semblance of financial safety for the most marginalized in the midst of a pandemic; systemic racism permeating every nook and cranny of our medical system that bar access to adequate care for the most vulnerable front-line workers, most of whom are Black and Brown (don't forget, Brown includes some AAPI folks, too); and the institutional robbery committed against the public while corporate billionaires became multibillionaires off a game only they are allowed to play. All of these unjust and exploitative conditions have led to such scarcity among the already marginalized, and our two traumatized communities, once again, find ourselves with our fists up ready to battle for survival, this time in Chinatown.

White supremacy wants us to remember the unhealed wounds we inflicted on each other, historical and ongoing anti-Blackness in the Asian community and anti-Asian incidents perpetrated by Black individuals, but not the stories of solidarity that have existed in equal measure, and are somehow left out of our history books and media coverage. In the aftermath of the LA uprising, volunteers from all racial groups showed up to rebuild Koreatown: "One by one," said Lee, "neighbors came out to help. They were Black, Korean, and Latino. 30 people. They gave me hope. They are my community. And it's time again to stay bound together these next four years." Despite our "mutual ignorance," as activist Helen Zia once described, we have been showing up for each other. And I'm not talking about the performative gestures of posting black squares and BLM hashtags; I'm talking about the work of our ancestors like Yuri Kochiyama, Grace Lee Boggs, and Larry Itliong, who worked alongside the Black

Panthers in the '60s, to the Third Liberation Front, a coalition of Black, Latinx, and Asian student organizations that sustained one of the longest student strikes in the U.S. that resulted in the creation of Ethnic Studies, to the present-day coalitionary organizing to mobilize voters in Georgia, push for prison reform and abolishment, and defund and demilitarize the police. ... The work has been ongoing, with or without the mainstream consciousness or participation, and it is our duty to remember and uplift these stories to seed healing and change.

And truthfully, I am exhausted. I am exhausted by the continued violence against my people and especially our elders, who remind me of my 92-year-old grandpa who died after fighting for Korea's liberation from Japanese colonization and then against U.S. imperialism in our homeland, who cannot seem to find refuge anywhere in their lifetime. I am exhausted by the continued silence and delayed motions from the mainstream media outlets committed to upholding White supremacy through erasing our struggles while magnifying the myth of the model minority that puts a target on our backs. I am exhausted trying to hold both the trauma and pain of my community and steering us all away from the trap of anti-Blackness as the weapon of choice to fight our oppression. I am exhausted by the blatant dismissal and erasure of Asian and Black solidarity work that's been ongoing for decades, and having to justify our ask for the bare minimum acknowledgement of our crisis without being asked to show receipts. I'm exhausted by the internalized oppression of some Asian people who would rather have us die in silence than be confronted by the truth of our positionality as still being oppressed and not-yet-quite-White despite

some's economic success, who would rather appeal to those who want to see us behaving politely rather than politically. And finally, I am torn inside by the incredible difficulty of asking our traumatized families to imagine solutions beyond policing, to redefine accountability and justice beyond the confines of the American legal system that criminalize Black and Brown bodies for profit, while also advocating for their healing and immediate relief.

The only way out of the vicious cycle of violence we continue to find ourselves in is through deep, unrelenting, and principled inter-community solidarity. As Asians, we must interrogate the conditions and narratives we find ourselves in and remember in our core that White supremacy is not our savior. We have an opportunity to reclaim our narratives—and our identity—by being loud, angry, political, defiant, and in lockstep with the Black community to keep our communities safe while denouncing systems that have never protected us.

In light of these complexities, here is how everyone can help:

Acknowledge, amplify, and denounce the ongoing anti-Asian hate crimes. Say it in your own words. Say this is not OK. Say you condemn it. Say you believe it is wrong. Say it personally and organizationally. Make space for our pain because there is always enough space for all of us—all of our pain, healing, and liberation can coexist without diminishing the other.

Interrupt anti-Asian racism and anti-Black racism. Neither is OK, in any context. When you see Asians being called “chinks” “dog-eaters” “disease spreaders” “dirty” or otherwise blamed for the violence we are

experiencing—please shut it down. And when non-Black folks, even if they are Asians who are hurting right now, engage in anti-Blackness by saying “Black people are criminals,” “Black people are dangerous”—please call that out, too. We must be principled in our anger and channel it to dismantling the real enemy: White supremacy culture that creates the either/or binary and scarcity mindset that has left us fighting each other for the scraps.

Interrupt generalizations: If someone says, “Asians are anti-Black,” say “Anti-Blackness is a pervasive issue within the Asian community and many Asians have been working within their own community to address and challenge this. Have you been following their work?” If someone says, “Black people hate Asians,” say, “Your generalization of an entire community based on a few examples is harmful. There are plenty of Black people fighting in solidarity with Asian people right now. Do you know them?”

Interrupt the active and persistent erasure of Black and Asian solidarity work. When Black people say “Asians never show up for us,” or when Asian people say, “Black people don’t care about us,” talk about how throughout history, our solidarity work has been erased deliberately and intentionally by our education system and the media to worsen the divide. We need to amplify these examples of solidarity to heal and build trust together.

Invest in community-based interventions. Contrary to what some may believe, enhancing our contact with the police is not a long-term solution that will keep our community safe. Despite its two-block proximity

to the Oakland Police Department, Oakland Chinatown is not “safe” as evidenced by the increased attacks against its residents and businesses. Just in December, Christian Hall, a 19-year old Asian teen in Pennsylvania, was shot by the state police while having a mental health crisis. Asians are among the fastest growing undocumented populations in the U.S., and those who fear deportation and criminalization will not be safe in the presence of more police. Even when the police are called, our incidents rarely get documented correctly or acted upon with a sense of urgency. Neighborhoods with heavy police presence are not safer. Neighborhoods with access to quality medical and mental health care, financial support, food and shelter, education, are. Rather than calling for more policing, FBI surveillance, and funneling money towards the deeply racist criminalization system that seeks to uphold White supremacy, invest time, money, and energy into creating and supporting community-based interventions that seek to keep all of us safe.

I know many within my community disagree with me on my approach to justice and accountability that do away with government-sanctioned law enforcement. I’ve received plenty of messages of dissent and anger that mistake my message as yet another way to make our pain small, rolling over, and turning the other cheek to continue to be abused. But I’m reeling with anger, too. I’m in pain, and I want justice, too.

A few years ago, my Korean mom, who only knows to smile when someone looks at her, was held at gunpoint, robbed, and punched in the head by a Black man in San Francisco. She did not want me to worry, so before calling me, she called the police. Beyond filing a routine report, they did not offer

any material support that could help her heal from the trauma. She was left to her own devices to figure out how to process her physical and emotional trauma, earn back the rent money she had lost, and protect herself against identity theft. Thinking about that night, and seeing the ongoing violent attacks on other Asian elders, I wake up wailing from the pain, even desiring to inflict physical harm on these perpetrators who remind me of what happened to my sweet mother. But what I'm trying to tend to is the undeniable, fierce, and aggressive love I have for my people that is stronger than my desire for punishment for those who harmed us. That more than I want to hurt them back, I want to keep our people safe. Not just now, but for good.

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We have an opportunity to reclaim our narratives — and our identity — by being loud, angry, political, defiant, and in lock-step with the Black community to keep our communities safe while denouncing systems that have never protected us.

As U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio Cortez recently remarked, “Accountability is not about revenge. It’s about safety.” These different community interventions are not a “weaker” form of accountability and justice—they

are part of the most sustainable and holistic solutions to transforming the root causes that continue the cycle of violence among marginalized communities. And countless local organizations and activists on the ground have been modeling for us to follow their lead: Oakland Chinatown Coalition, a coalition of 20 Chinatown nonprofits, associations, and individuals, swiftly brought together a diverse group of volunteers to engage in dialogue and actions to keep Oakland Chinatown safe, creating community-powered and survivor-centered programs like the Senior Survivor Program and collaborating with individuals like Jacob Azevedo to organize volunteers to stroll the neighborhood and accompany elders. Stop AAPI Hate has been gathering hate incident reports independent of law enforcement, using online forms accessible in more than 10 different Asian languages to encourage more diverse participation and ensure we have disaggregated data that does not flatten our different lived experiences under the Asian American umbrella. A coalition of organizations is helping to fundraise to rebuild the Vietnamese American Community Center of the East Bay, which suffered a devastating fire, preventing it from providing its usual 40,000 meals a month to its most vulnerable populations, and other organizations are fundraising and distributing funds to provide care for Asian elders who were assaulted. I am seeing many Bay Area-based, Black-led organizations publicly denouncing anti-Asian hate crimes while supporting community-based solutions that will keep all local communities safer.

I'm still a student of Transformative Justice, a different approach to justice that seeks to address violence without causing more violence, and

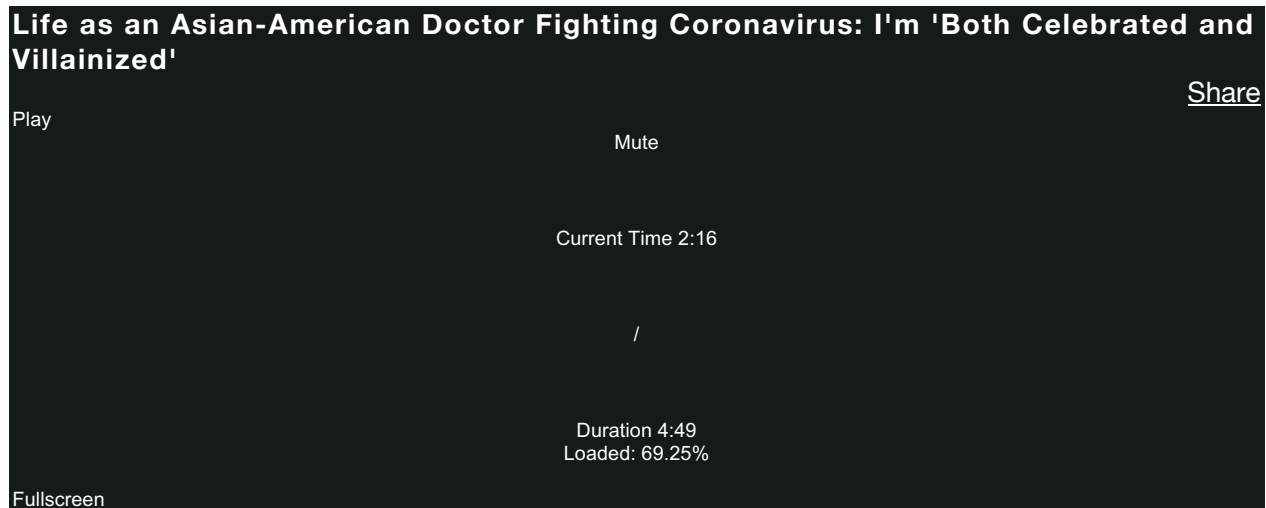
one that does not rely on punitive and carceral consequences that White supremacy has taught us to associate accountability with. I hope many more will join me in learning and practicing it, and amplify and direct resources to community leaders like [Mia Mingus](#), [adrienne marie brown](#), Shira Hassan, Mariame Kaba, and more, who have been teaching and spreading critical knowledge for years in different social justice spaces. The collective and intergenerational trauma Asians hold is vast and painfully deep. The erasure and silence around our struggles, from both of our own community and our allies, only deepen the wound while widening the gap between us and other marginalized communities. At a time when multiple traumas are converging and so much suffering simultaneously witnessed, we need cross-community solidarity more than ever to fight for our collective healing and liberation from all forms of violence.

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Hate Crimes Against Asian Americans Are on the Rise. Many Say More Policing Isn't the Answer



BY **CADY LANG**

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hen Amanda Nguyen saw the video, she was horrified. In the Jan. 28 security footage, 84-year-old **Vicha Ratanapakdee** was shoved to the ground while taking his morning walk in San Francisco; just two days after the assault, he died. (Nineteen-year-old Antoine Watson has since been charged with and pleaded not guilty to murder and elder abuse.) It was one of several incidents of physical violence against Asian American elders in recent weeks across the U.S., but Nguyen had yet to see coverage by a major news outlet about the concerning increase in violence towards the Asian American and Pacific Islander community, following a year of **xenophobic rhetoric** and **racist attacks amid the pandemic**.

“I was mad, like blood boiling through my veins now, watching my community get slaughtered,” says Nguyen, a civil rights activist who was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for her work in advocating for sexual assault survivors. “How many more people need to be killed in order for the news outlets, especially mainstream ones, to think that we’re worthy of a story?”

In response, Nguyen made an Instagram video where she implored her viewers to speak out about Ratanapakdee’s death, as well as the assault of a 64-year-old **Vietnamese grandmother who was assaulted and robbed** in San Jose, Calif., and the attack on a 61-year-old **Filipino man whose face was slashed with a box cutter on a New York City subway**. Nguyen’s video went viral as more reports of violent attacks and robberies emerged, including one of a 91-year-old man who was caught on camera **being thrown to the ground in Oakland Chinatown**, where there have been upwards of **20 violent attacks and robberies reported** since January.

Since the start of the pandemic last spring, **Asian Americans have faced racist violence at a much higher rate than previous years**. The **NYPD** reported that hate crimes motivated by anti-Asian sentiment jumped 1,900% in New York City in 2020. **Stop AAPI Hate**, a reporting database created at the beginning of the pandemic as a response to the increase in racial violence, **received 2,808 reports** of anti-Asian discrimination between March 19 and December 31, 2020. The violence has continued into 2021, and President Joe Biden signed **an executive order denouncing anti-Asian discrimination** shortly after taking office in January. While anti-Asian violence has taken place nationwide and particularly in major cities, the uptick in attacks in 2021 has been particularly focused in the Bay Area, especially in San Francisco and Oakland’s Chinatowns.

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Many attribute the 2020 uptick to the xenophobic rhetoric of Biden's predecessor; former President Trump repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as "**the China virus,**" blaming the country for the pandemic. In doing so, Trump followed in a long American history of using diseases to justify anti-Asian xenophobia, one that **dates back to the 19th and 20th centuries** and has helped to shape perception of Asian Americans as "**perpetual foreigners.**"

"There's a clear correlation between President Trump's incendiary comments, his insistence on using the term 'Chinese virus' and the subsequent hate speech spread on social media and the hate violence directed towards us," says Russell Jeung, a co-founder of Stop AAPI Hate and a professor of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University. "It gives people license to attack us. The current spate of attacks on our elderly is part of how that rhetoric has impacted the broader population."

Why the 'model minority' myth is harmful

Many have pointed out that racial violence against Asian Americans often goes overlooked because of persistent stereotypes about the community. "There is a stereotype and an assumption that Asian Americans have class privilege, that they have high socioeconomic status and education, and that any discrimination doesn't really happen or feel legitimate," says Bianca Mabute-Louie, **a racial justice educator**. "There are these assumptions about ways that Asian Americans have 'succeeded' in this country."

Mabute-Louie cites the pervasiveness of **the model minority myth** as a large contributing factor to the current climate. That false idea, constructed during the Civil Rights era to stymie racial justice movements, suggests that Asian Americans are more successful than other ethnic minorities because of hard work, education and inherently law-abiding natures. “This contributes to erasing the very real interpersonal violence that we see happening in these videos, and that Asian Americans experience from the day-to-day, things that don’t get reported and the things that don’t get filmed.”

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Because the model minority myth suggests upward mobility, it creates a fallacy that Asian Americans don’t experience struggle or racial discrimination, a stereotype that’s been bolstered by limited (and in some cases, flawed) media representation like the film *Crazy Rich Asians* and more recently, Netflix’s *Bling Empire*. In reality, the community is America’s most economically divided: **a 2018 study by the Pew Research Center** found that Asian Americans experience the largest income inequality gap as an ethnic and racial group in the U.S. and a **2016 report** from NYC Mayor’s Office of Operations found that Asian immigrants have the highest poverty rates in the city.



Posters against racism towards Asian Americans, by artist Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya, are seen at the subway station at Barclays Center in Brooklyn, Jan. 1

STRF/STAR MAX/IPx

Why more policing isn't the answer

High-profile Asian Americans have helped draw attention to the recent surge in hate crimes: actors Daniel Dae Kim and Daniel Wu shared the video of the 91-year-old man being pushed down in Oakland Chinatown on Twitter, offering a \$25,000 reward to anyone who could provide “information leading to the arrest and conviction” of the attacker, who had also pushed down a 60-year-old man, as well as a 55-year-old woman, who was left unconscious from the attack.

“The skyrocketing number of hate crimes against Asian Americans continues to grow, despite our repeated pleas for help,” Kim wrote in the tweet, going on to reference a Chinese American man who was beaten to death in 1982. “The crimes ignored and even excused. Remember Vincent Chin.”

The Oakland police later charged 28-year-old Yahya Muslim with assault, battery and elder abuse; he was already in custody for unrelated charges when he was identified. As a result, Kim and Wu **donated the \$25,000 to community organizations** aimed at stopping anti-Asian hate.

Kim’s tweet brought up mixed feelings for many in the AAPI community. On one hand, Kim identified a longtime grievance for many Asian Americans—that violence against them has often been dismissed and that their struggles and even their existence often feel invisible to others in this country. Kim’s reference to the 1982 murder of Chin was a poignant reminder of a hate crime that led to a major mobilization for Asian Americans in the Civil Rights discourse, creating a significant wave of Asian American activism and a memorable point of solidarity with Black racial justice organizers.

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At the same time, however, Kim’s offer of a reward for identifying the person who attacked Asian American elders underscored another problem with addressing racial injustice in the U.S.: how to tackle anti-Asian violence without relying on law enforcement institutions that have historically targeted Black and brown communities. Many in the AAPI community were troubled by the actor’s social media post, given that the

alleged attacker was a Black man. Kim Tran, a consultant and writer, voiced her disagreement with this tactic on Twitter.

“Listen, if you don’t understand why it’s problematic to offer 25k for information about a Black man in Oakland, I need you to stay off all the goddamned panels,” Tran wrote in [a series of tweets](#). “This is the moment we need to ask ourselves, to what end? If it was for an accountability process, okay, but I highly doubt that. Lastly, this looks a lot like a bounty on a Black person funded by Asian American celebrities. I have major, major doubts.”

Tran’s tweets reflected a larger sentiment online from many Asian Americans that keeping their community safe should not mean turning to increased policing—especially in the wake of a national reckoning this summer with systemic police brutality and the disproportionate harm it causes Black and brown communities, who often share space with Asian Americans.

That perspective is informed by [a long and complicated history between the Asian American and Black communities in the U.S.](#), which has included both solidarity—like the Third World Liberation Front, which helped create equal education opportunities for students of color and the [creation of ethnic studies](#)—as well as interracial conflict. Mabute-Louie makes the case that fostering anti-Black sentiment or focusing on interracial conflict in this moment takes away from recognizing that racism is a result of white supremacy.

“If the bigger problem is anti-Asian sentiment, putting someone in jail doesn’t solve that problem,” she says, calling for an approach that allows perpetrators to be both held accountable and encouraged to change. “All of

us really need to do work into our communities to unlearn these harmful narratives about each other.”

Solidarity and community-led efforts

Many community leaders have therefore taken a vocal stance on interracial solidarity. Oakland City Council president Nikki Fortunato Bas **called for solidarity while condemning pitting communities of color** against each other or increasing the police presence.

Others have turned to local organizations to show their support for the community during this painful time. For example, the Black Bay Area, an anti-gentrification group, **raised funds** to support Asian-led support organizations in San Francisco and Oakland. And the Anti-Police Terror Project, the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights and the Asian Pacific Environmental Network have joined forces on initiatives like recommending that people show their support by frequenting Chinatowns and their merchants and showing solidarity by wearing yellow. For the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, supporting the AAPI community has been part of a longstanding relationship with the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, with whom they’ve worked with for over a decade to provide mutual aid to both communities in Oakland—an example of solidarity that’s long existed, but isn’t always highlighted.

“The reality of Black and Asian solidarity has a long history inside the Bay Area,” says Zach Norris, the executive director of the Ella Baker Center. “We want to remind folks of that and really look to the solutions that we think will be helpful in healing harm and moving forward in a way where all communities can thrive.”

Jeung, the Stop AAPI Hate co-founder, says community efforts and solidarity are the only ways to curb racist attacks. He participated in a racial peace rally in San Francisco and Oakland and is helping to organize strolls through Chinatown, where locals walk to provide a sense of safety and security for merchants and senior citizens,

“We know we need that this is an issue that affects all our communities, and we have to break the cycle of violence,” Jeung says. “And we’re calling not necessarily for more punitive measures but restorative justice models that break the cycle of violence, ethnic studies to teach people about racial solidarity, community mediation efforts to not only hold people accountable, but to work together to resolve issues.”



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OPINION

Ignoring The History Of Anti-Asian Racism Is Another Form Of Violence



BY CONNIE WUN
MAR 1, 2021



GETTY IMAGES

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there's been a significant uptick in violence against Asians and Asian Americans. The organization Stop AAPI Hate collected more than 2,800 reports of verbal abuse, harassment, and physical assaults against Asians in the United States from March to December 2020. These reports depict a disturbing reality, especially for Asian women, who experienced violence nearly 2.5 times more than their male counterparts. However, the numbers do not tell the full story: They don't include many of the unreported and increasingly normalized incidents of violence that started as soon as the Trump administration began to unapologetically

characterize the global pandemic as the “Chinese virus.” Since then, Asians and Asian Americans have shared countless accounts with one another, privately describing the challenges of everyday life in the U.S.

As an example, early last March, my aunt came home from the grocery store visibly upset. She explained that she had been chased out of a local Bay Area supermarket by another shopper because he insisted that she was carrying the virus. My uncle then suggested that perhaps dying his hair blonde could save him from the anti-Asian harassment.

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Hate Crimes Against Asian Americans Are Rising

These stories are painful, but they are also part of a larger, and often dismissed, history of violence. In addition to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the assaults against Filipino farmworkers in the 1930s by white mobs, and the Japanese internment camps of the 1940s, there’s a longstanding history of racialized colonial wars that shaped our communities’ histories before we even arrived to the United States.

In my undergraduate Asian American studies courses, I learned—for the first time in my life—about the Philippine-American war, where more

than 20,000 Filipino soldiers died in combat, and 200,000 Filipino civilians died from war-induced famine and disease. During this time, Filipinos were characterized as savages in need of civilization, and these depictions were used to justify the colonial war and its casualties. I also didn't learn, until much later in life, about Corporal David Fagen, a Black soldier who defected and joined the Filipinos to fight against the Americans.

As a Vietnamese woman born in Oakland, California, I was never taught about the effects of the Viet Nam War or how, in the aftermath, refugees and immigrants spent indefinite amounts of time in various camps across the globe. I didn't know about the estimated two million civilians and more than one million Vietnamese soldiers who were killed. I did not understand the enduring impacts of the chemical Agent Orange, which U.S. troops used during the war, until I visited my mother's homeland in the early 2000s. And it wasn't until later that I learned about the massacres or the racist characterizations of Vietnamese people used to legitimize millions of deaths. It was then that I also learned about the anti-war protests across the globe, including those led by Black civil rights leaders, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Dr. Angela Davis, and Muhammad Ali. These leaders also fought hard for our rights as new immigrants and children of immigrants in the United States.



Participants staged a demonstration on the steps of the Iowa capitol and called for peace in Vietnam in November 1968.

BETTMANNGETTY IMAGES

Fortunately, I've been able to seek out knowledge and learn directly from Asian American leaders, including Yuri Kochiyama, a Japanese internment camp survivor who was friends with civil rights leader Malcolm X. She spent much of her life highlighting the issues impacting Asians and Asian Americans and working in racial solidarity to end

police violence and systemic racism against Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color.

Most people, however, do not know, or have failed to grasp, the horrid and racist details of wars that helped bring many Asians to this country. Our experiences, including those of Southeast Asian refugees, are rarely told or acknowledged. Instead, distant family members recount their refugee stories to one another, sharing harrowing narratives of escaping pirates at the sea or famine and starvation. These same communities have been and are facing detentions and deportations. Even in recent years, as mainstream society has begun to acknowledge the need to address white supremacy and systemic racism, Asians and Asian Americans are often left out of the conversation. As Dr. Mimi Kim, who works on community accountability and transformative justice, once said about the Korean War and its impacts: “The violence is also in the forgetting.”

Many conveniently imagine that our communities are unscathed in a white supremacist world. They are wedded to the “model minority” fantasy, which characterizes all Asians as economically successful and well-off. In reality, more than 12 percent of the Asian American population lives below the federal poverty level, “ranging from 6.8 percent of Filipino Americans to 39.4 percent of Burmese Americans.” Additionally, according to the National Women's Law Center, Hmong and Cambodian women earn 61 and 57 cents, respectively, for every dollar white, non-Hispanic men make. These numbers, sadly, do not account for Asians who work in the informal economy, including domestic labor and sex work. This fantasy also does not account for our 1.7 million undocumented community members, many of whom don't have access to economic relief payments, health care, or public attention.

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The Invisible Victims of the Pandemic

The myth that we have not been impacted by white supremacy also ignores our diverse communities' experiences with Islamophobia and anti-South Asian violence, especially post-9/11. It dismisses the lived realities of disabled and LGBTQ Asians and Asian Americans, as well as our youth. And it often fails to account for the experiences of our Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander counterparts, whose stories are often conflated with that of Asians in the category of API, Asian Pacific Islanders. Yet, with all of these ongoing needs, less than one percent of philanthropic funding goes to our communities.

No matter how hard Asians, Asian Americans, and our allies try to get mainstream society and media to hear us, most of the violence that we experience at institutional levels remains invisible. Last December, police killed 19-year-old Chinese-American teenager Christian Hall and 30-year-old Filipino immigrant Angelo Quinto, both while they were experiencing mental health crises, yet there's been minimal coverage of either case. We hear little about Tommy Le, a 20-year-old Vietnamese-American student who was killed by law enforcement in Washington in 2017. Instead, most of the attention is focused on interpersonal acts of violence. Politicians have then attempted to use these acts of violence to undermine Black-led movements and call for even more policing. Meanwhile, our communities continue to suffer and go without proper resources or support.

But instead of this support, Asian communities are being scapegoated for the virus.

I've asked community ambassadors and organizers in Oakland, who know our neighborhoods intimately, what they think about the recent incidents of assault and harassment. They shared that the violence is much more systemic than what's on the news: It's about poverty, the impacts of gentrification, including displacement and homelessness, racial profiling, mental health needs, limited health care, and other social services. But instead of this support, Asian communities are being scapegoated for the virus.

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When I ask them how they have been remedying these concerns, they tell me they've relied on local organizations and neighbors to help with community accountability, culturally-specific health clinics to provide mental and physical care, and cross-racial violence prevention programs. More recently, they've responded to acts of violence against elders and women with collective action and organizing for healing and racial solidarity. They're addressing the housing crisis, and demanding more city and state funding for communities in Chinatown and across Oakland. They are also organizing with Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color to end white supremacy and anti-Blackness. Community groups, working in solidarity, have increased

their presence around the city, with one resounding understanding: “We keep us safe.”

We’ve been hurting for a long time, and we’ve been working to create solutions for just as long. Now, finally, our stories are getting some attention. Hopefully, resources will come next.

Regardless, this moment is a reminder to build together, to continue to share our stories, to provide resources, to help one another address immediate needs and create long-lasting change. Our lives depend on it—and each other.

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