Viral Fear:
The Outsized Impacts of COVID-19 on Manhattan Chinatown’s Sze Yup Cantonese Elderly

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公公，婆婆，

Thank you for everything you have done for our family. Rest in power
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As a son of immigrants, I have always been keen to the existence of health disparities and barriers to care in America. You see, like many children of immigrant families, since a young age, I have assumed the role of Translator for my family members who speak little to no English. This was no exception when my great grandparents were admitted into the hospital after falling ill to COVID-19. This time was especially sorrowful for me because although I did not live with them, they served as my secondary mother and father in many ways—especially my great granduncle who served as a father-figure after my dad died of nasal cancer when I was 3.

After being admitted, I made daily calls to the hospital requesting to see my great grandparents. In the 59 calls that I had made to the hospital over the span of three weeks, I was only successful in connecting with my great grandparents (via a nurse on FaceTime) three times. Despite being one of the most elite, private hospitals in one of the most diverse hubs in America, nurses were unable to find a practitioner who could communicate directly with my family members to arrange FaceTime calls, let alone to discuss the condition of my great grandparents. You see, my family is part of the Sze Yup Cantonese population residing in New York City—one of the largest yet equally underserved, invisible migrant communities in America. In a hospital full of practicing doctors, nurses, and social workers, I was the only one who could communicate and translate the English-to-Taishanese language between doctors and family. In that way, I was the sole bridge of information.

At the end of the Summer 2020, my great grandparents both, unfortunately, died from COVID-19 and COVID-19-related complications: my great grandaunt, 84, and my great
granduncle, 97, who recovered from the virus but died from coronavirus-induced pneumonia. While I was unable to say goodbye to my great grandaunt at the hospital, I still remember the day prior to my great grand uncle's death: being geared up in a hazmat suit, helplessly standing teary-eyed at the foot end of his hospital deathbed in an intensive care unit. While on the ventilator, all he could do was move his eyes. As I said my goodbyes and thought back to happier times, I could see my great granduncle holding back tears. At that moment, I could not help but think that he had not heard anyone speak in his native tongue for days since our last call. I could not imagine what it must have felt like for my great grandparents in the days leading up to their last, trying to understand their doctors whilst separated from family and separated from each other.

At their end of life, language was a barrier to not only care, but their quality of care. That is my great frustration...

As I reminisce back to a time when the coronavirus vaccine was first announced and distributed to New Yorkers 65-and older at the start of January 2021, a great majority of the American public—including my great grandparents—were reluctant to take the vaccine due to how seemingly quick it was produced. Concerned that the side effects would do more harm than what the vaccine was intended for, my great grandparents refused to be sold like guinea pigs or subjected to an experiment for Big Pharma, or the global pharmaceutical industry. Such idioms, whether in Chinese or English, are part of a global phenomenon of vaccine hesitancy that has increased over recent years—so much so that the World Health Organization has considered it as one of the top 10 global health threats in 2019 (The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health 2019, 1669). A discussion must be had on the topic of medical mistrust and healthcare systems across the general public, and how to ameliorate the disconnection. Are elderly less willing to take the
vaccine despite greater hospitalization and higher mortality rates (Freed 2021)? Why are certain demographics less trusting of the medical system than others?

During the same time, amidst a rise in COVID cases, there was a rise in Anti-Asian hate crimes both nationally and world-wide. Even as a World War 2 veteran, my great granduncle was seemingly shaken from the violence that erupted across the US. I remember, there was one early morning in late March that I was sitting adjacent to my great grandparents watching the news when a breaking news alert popped up on the screen that read “Two brutal new attacks on Asian Americans.” Already, I could see that my great grandfather frowned, gazing intently on the television screen that showed a surveillance video of a 65-year old woman falling to the ground, before being stomped on several times by an unidentified man outside an apartment complex on West 43rd street in New York City. The video ends with the woman lying motionless on the ground, whilst the man casually walks away. Following the video, the news anchor stated that on the very same day, an Asian man was left unconscious during an attack aboard a busy J-subway train in Brooklyn at the Kosciuszko Street Station. After the news story, there was a solemn pause, during which I saw my great grandfather holding back tears.

Such a moment made me wonder, first and foremost, what was the basis for the surge in hate crimes against Asian Americans and the Asian diaspora? It also made me think more deeply about the intersections of race, disease, and healing: how does the social perception of disease impact treatment of that disease, and simultaneously, how does that treatment impact the way people heal and recover emotionally and physically? Could social perceptions influence the distribution of resources (such as vaccines) and how could this hypervisibility hinder or promote effective care? It also begs the question whether lumping Asian, as a monolithic racial category, obscures larger issues. Pandemic data surrounding the Asian (American) diaspora is derived
mainly from inaccurate categorizations of race and ethnicity, and outreach limited by language and other research barriers. There needs to be a reevaluation of methods for data collection to fully discern who within the community is most at risk and to reconcile long-standing health disparities within the broader Asian community, especially during the pandemic and beyond.

- Kent Chen, 9/10/21
He’s asking to be treated like an American. A real American. Because, honestly, when you think American, what color do you see? White? Black? We’ve been here two hundred years. The first Chinese came in 1815. Germans and Dutch and Irish and Italians who came at the turn of the twentieth century. They’re Americans. (points at himself) Why doesn’t this face register as American? Is it because we make the story too complicated?

Charles Yu

Interior Chinatown (2020)
Customarily, in the days leading up to a new year, we look to the future with optimism and joy, and make resolutions. But, for many, December 2020 was very much the exception. Simply put, “I just want the year to end” was a shared sentiment that echoed across humanity—regardless of individual national or socio-political affiliation. In a call to reinvigorate the public to abide by safety measures in the upcoming year, the World Health Organization (WHO) forewarned of pandemic fatigue, an expected and natural response to an extended public health crisis. Pandemic fatigue, an explanation for a population overwhelmed and exhausted by the demands of safety protocols during a pandemic, was but another symptom added to a growing list of consequences brought by the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

A year has since passed; In December 2021, the pandemic and the fatigue persist…

And there exists a wafting sense of déjà vu as we wait for yet another pandemic year to pass. Yet, this coronavirus pandemic—two viral variants later—is far from over. What seemingly started as an abrupt, temporal pause to our everyday function has progressed into a new permanent. And all the while, as insecurities, angst, and grief about the ongoing coronavirus mount worldwide, so too have crimes against peoples of Chinese and other Asian descent: an epidemic of Hate amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Faulting China for the origin and spread of the coronavirus, former President of the United States Donald Trump unabashedly dubbed the virus the “Chinese Virus.” In one fell swoop, “the coronavirus—and Trump’s blithe description of it—reanimated a century-old racist trope that...
Asians are vectors of filth and disease, and exposed the precariousness of their status” (Lee and Yadav 2020). *Beaten. Bullied. Harassed. Murdered. Pushed. Spat on. Stabbed.* In the past year, Asian Brothers, Sisters, and Non-binary siblings have been scapegoated and vilified based on the false pretenses that they are to blame for the spread of COVID-19. To that end, while xenophobia and Sinophobia are not new, multiple layers of harm against Asians living in America—the virus itself, barriers to care, socioeconomic and health disparities, and the acts of racism—have, in fact, been resurfaced, intensified, and exacerbated since the start of the pandemic (Lu 2021; Ma 2021; Zhou 2021).

And it is in this time of grief that I write this ethnography—my one, peaceful moment. Why now, you may ask. I am motivated by cultural anthropologist Didier Fassin who once asserted, “One always has profound reasons for entering into the long and painful process of writing a book” (Fassin 2007, xii). For me, it is the will to acknowledge that current efforts collecting pandemic information, nationally, are not enough to understand the needs of the many vulnerable identities grouped under the monolithic racial categorization, *Asian.*

**Introduction to COVID-19 and Pandemic Data**

COVID-19, a severe acute respiratory syndrome, is a global disease pandemic that emerged in the region of Wuhan, China in 2019. In January 2022, 370 million confirmed cases were reported worldwide, with 73 million of those in the United States (John Hopkins, Coronavirus Resource Center 2022). In January 2020, California, Texas, Florida, and New York State remain at the top of national charts regarding highest number of total number of cases and highest death tolls (Thompson 2020; Dorn 2020); these statistics remain as of May 2022 (Coronavirus in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count, New York Times, 2022).
Specifically, New York State, alone, has borne the brunt of the pandemic since 2019. Since their first reported case on March 1, 2019, in a month’s time, New York State had garnered 195,031 confirmed cases; New York City represented 106,763 of those cases, reporting 7,349 known COVID-19 associated deaths (Dom 2020). Three years later, New York City, alone, continues to break state records racking up a total of 2 million COVID-19 confirmed cases (Elfein 2022). While these numbers suggest that anyone can be impacted by the pandemic, COVID-19 certainly does not affect everyone equally (Crossley 2020; Wark 2021; Smith 2021). Efforts to identify the extent to which the pandemic is affecting each community have become a growing field of research.

Many studies have shown that immigrant families are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19—as indicated by higher rates of infection, worse morbidity, and higher mortality rates. The concern, however, is that current reports utilizing aggregate data have generally ostracized and obscured the problems faced by vulnerable communities, exacerbating long standing racial and ethnic disparities within health (Bibbins-Domingo 2020; Wang 2020). Aggregate data suggest Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) represent “4.4% deaths across the USA during the pandemic, below their population share of 5.7%” (Wang 2020). However, such data is misleading. Disaggregated data reveal underlying problems with face-value interpretations fostered by aggregate data; generalizing findings from one subgroup to another within the Asian category or from an aggregate Asian subgroup does not accurately reflect the burden of health across subgroups:

In New York City, Asian-Americans account for 7.9% of deaths from COVID-19, while comprising 13.9% of the population. Similarly, in California, Asian-Americans make up 13.2% of deaths compared with 14.5% of the population. Yet disproportionate mortality rates have been noted in Nevada (15.4% of deaths versus 8.1% of the population), Utah (5.5% versus 2.4%), and Nebraska (5.9% versus 2.4%) (Wang 2020).
Just as the Asian American population is not uniformly spread across America, the needs and circumstances of regional subpopulations differ. Simultaneously, aggregate data on “Asian” populations group together 43 distinct ethnic groups into one monolithic identifier. Each of these ethnic groups possess unique linguistic, cultural, and sociodemographic backgrounds and immigrant histories that cannot be separated from discourses surrounding health and health management (Wang 2020; Weng 2018; Kim 2010). Put simply, while many of these studies are doing admirable work, the legacy of national data representations in the US and of current COVID-19 data run the risk of obscuring the pandemic’s specific effects on more marginalized identities within the broader Asian community. Such efforts thereby undermine efforts for addressing healthcare access and erect further barriers to quality care (Chiu 2021). To optimize the resource allocation of prevention and treatment tools, elucidation of these disparities through disaggregate data is critical. Thereby, to disaggregate pandemic data is to understand and assess the challenges of specific subpopulations to better improve the health outcomes in the future.

Hate Crimes in AmeriKKKa
Simultaneous to concerns for pandemic care, according to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, San Bernardino (CSHE) in 2020, Anti-Asian hate crime increased 146% across 26 of America’s largest jurisdictions—comprising over 10% of the nation’s population. New York, Boston, and Los Angeles alone accounted for 12% of all hate crimes enumerated nationally by the FBI in 2019. Whereas the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the United States defines a hate crime for police reporting purposes as a criminal act “motivated in whole, or in part, by the offender’s bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender or gender identity” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reporting), Canada’s equivalent—the
Canadian Security Intelligence Service—utilizes a more expansive definition. Under its Criminal Code that includes three extensive sections involving intimidation, harassment, physical force or threat of physical force, the CSHE identified a 532%-increase of anti-Asian hate crimes in four of the nation’s largest cities since 2019. The nuances of charging a racist act in America as a hate crime thereby becomes a greatly contested issue; so, while violence and harassment against Asian Americans continues, most of those attacks will never be tried and recorded as hate crimes. According to Deputy Legal Director Scott McCoy of the Southern Poverty Law Center, prosecutors in America must prove that a perpetrator is associated with an extremist hate group, or otherwise risk a jury refuting that the victim was chosen because of their identity, despite clear, racially charged verbal harassment. Moreover, as these cases often require laborious hours with low funding, McCoy argues that law enforcement systems will not prioritize hate crime investigations – with prosecutors even going as far as saying: “Why should I stretch and go the extra mile when there's a lot of risk to whether I might lose on the hate crimes charged part?” (McCoy 2021).

According to the International Association of Chiefs of Police, many minority groups targeted by hate crimes do not have faith or trust that American legal system would protect them, and as a result do not report their assaults. When there is a lack of reports, the scale of the problem is not recognized and resources are not allocated toward addressing such issues, leading to what McCoy describes as a “vicious cycle” of underreporting and underfunded investigations (and failed prosecution) (Ibid). This vicious cycle is simply a continuation of the “turning of a blind eye” mentality and inaction by the government under former POTUS Trump to combat the rise in coronavirus-related hate incidents against Asian Americans.
So, while not all bias incidents are documented as hate crimes due to the restrictive definition of hate crime in the United States, it may be helpful to look more generally at self-reporting data on anti-Asian bias incidents. Amidst the peak of the pandemic in March 2020, Stop AAPI Hate, a nonprofit organization and coalition formed out of San Francisco State University, established the Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center to track nationally reported incidents of hate and discrimination against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the United States. Analysis of those reports has revealed that in the span of the initial 15 months of the pandemic, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders reported more than 10,000 incidents – 4000 of which occurred in the span of only four months (Jeung 2021). The types of incidents in those reports include harassment (68.1%), shunning or deliberate avoidance (20.5%), physical assault (11.1%), civil rights violations, i.e., workplace discrimination, refusal of service, etc. (8.5%), and online harassment (6.8%) (Ibid). Of those incidents, over 10% target Asian elderly. Given that elder abuse is known to be significantly underreported, especially for minority populations that experience language and institutional (i.e., citizen status) barriers (National Center on Elder Abuse 2021), this data is likely only indicative of fraction of the number of hate incidents that actually occur. Finally, as California and New York remain at the top of the list of states with the highest number of hate incident reports—together accounting for 65% of all reported cases, my research and focus in NYC will offer findings that can be extended to the broader AAPI community and diaspora.

It is in this way, my thesis examines the social construction of the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) body as contagion and to understand the implications of such interpretations on the lived experience of the Asian diaspora. My thesis explores the ways by which illness, racial stigma, and economic instability related to the COVID-19 pandemic affect the efficacies of
resource distribution and treatment of elderly within the AAPI collective. Specifically, my research was guided by the following question: **how does anti-immigrant sentiment and racism affect health and health resource management?** And to address this overarching research question, my project focused on the experiences of elderly within the distinct Sze Yup Cantonese population in New York City through a consideration of three interrelated sub-questions: (1) how has increased racial stigma and violence exerted on AAPI in the United States impacted the efficacy of resource distribution to Canton elderly; (2) how have impacts of compounding external stressors such as racism, illness, and socio-economic instability been amplified by the ongoing pandemic and how has this affected the relationships that Canton elderly have with their families, with their peers, and within their communities; and (3) how are community-based organizations (CBO) and activists mobilizing to combat anti-Asian rhetoric to provide relief to Canton elderly?

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Many existing studies explore the intersection of illness and racial politics. Such investigations reveal how society understands disease not simply as biology, but a manifestation of political affiliation, (dis)connection, and difference on material bodies. Moreover, they evaluate why social constructions of contagion are more likely to be ascribed to minority, underserved groups.

**Constructing Race in America**

To begin our multi-level discourse analysis assessing how a hate epidemic was reinvigorated during the COVID-19 pandemic, I draw on a plethora of previous anthropological and sociological work surrounding the conceptualizations of race and the processes of racialization.
in America. Scholars have long agreed that race is not a “natural” category, but rather a socially constructed one which reflects, supports, and maintains broader social relations of power. Race, thereby, remains essential to the process of othering – a phenomenon whereby certain groups are labeled as deviant within dominant (hereafter hegemonic) social categories – in postmodern discourse. A modern phenomenon, the concept of race promotes a culture through which unequal distributions of wealth and power are naturalized—“justified in the language of biology and genealogy” (Lee 1999, 2). As a result, physical characteristics regarding physiognomy, such as “skin color or hue, eye color or shape, shape of the nose, color or texture of the hair, over- or underbites” become socially defined markers that flag racial differences (Ibid). The body therefore becomes the site of racialization, collapsing social categories of race into assumptions about biological difference. Political and legal anthropologist Virginia Dominguez explains that:

Racialization takes place when differences between human beings are simplified and transformed into Difference, overvaluing particular bodily differences by imbuing them with lasting meaning of social, political, cultural, economic, even psychological significance. Racialization is produced and reproduced through ideological, institutional, interactive, and linguistic practices that support a particular construction of Difference (Dominguez 1994, 334).

Put simply, concepts of race predispose bodies to racialization, and the processes of racialization, ultimately, are the products of embodied experiences cultivated over time and through space (McCallum 2005, 100). In a similar analogy, the (colored) body is precisely the site where the

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2 Postmodern discourse: a skepticism toward the grandiosity of narratives that center the essential influences of human interference on human destinies (Forghani 2015).

3 While having roots in “nationhood” during the sixteenth century, modern understandings of race were acquired in the seventeenth century to justify colonialism and practices of slavery (Bournea 2021).

4 Reliance of racial differences to assign of people to different racial groups.

5 The distinction of race and racialization herein lies in the process. As biological notions of race become discredited within frameworks of postmodernist thought, social and cultural ascriptions define the process of racialization. Racism, an ideology that directly asserts a group as inherently superior, directly fuels and relies on the processes of racialization.
“violence of racialization is exerted, experienced, and performed” (Fassin 2011, 428) – a medium through which cultural symbolisms are imbued, thus conceiving the racialized body figure (Ahmed 2002, 46).

The racialized body is a central concept in critical race studies, a body of theory spearheaded by Black activists and scholars — most notably Gloria Jean Watkins (bell hooks). hooks’ understanding of the racialized body as one that is culturally and socially created comes from a larger work, Black Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary America. Rather than promoting counter-hegemonic thought, she argues that the representations of colored bodies in popular media perpetuate the subjugation of Black peoples. hooks evinces how the “psychohistories of white racism have always called attention to the tension between the construction of the black male body as danger and the underlying eroticization of that threat that always then imagines that body as a location for transgressive pleasure” (hooks 2003, 131). That is to say, in the framework of white supremacy, the black male identity is subjected to devaluation, limited to more body than mind, and reduced to racist and sexist iconographies of the black phallus: “an embodiment of bestial, violent, penis-as-weapon hypermasculine assertion” (Ibid). The materiality of the black phallus hence transmutes into a cultural symbol that discriminates against and otherizes the black body, sets up a spectrum of good and evil, and frames a black-white binary.

While the black-white binary is essential in addressing the implications of racialized black bodies, my thesis hopes to redress a shortcoming in race studies that is perpetuated by this binary: the erasure and exclusion of the Asian experience within racial discourse (Iwamoto and Liu 2010). Rather than separate, my thesis runs hand-in-hand with previous Black, Brown, and indigenous activists and scholars who marched towards racial justice, healing, and freedom before me. Drawing on Lee, Dominguez, McCallum, Fassin, Ahmed, and hooks who establish the frameworks
of race, racialization and the racialized body in America, this thesis interrogates American media’s historic usage of Yellowface: a caricature weaponized against East and South East Asian bodies. The conflation of physical features characterized as Oriental—i.e., mustard-yellow skin color, slanted eyes, and overbite—with subjective notions of racial identity have rendered the Asian body as Other: perpetually foreign. My analysis therefore evaluates the legacies of Yellowface, how the caricature has forever changed the social perceptions of “Asian” peoples in the American gaze, and how it is defining the Asian identity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Purity and Danger: Existing at the Boundaries of (In)Visibility**

Expanding on the conceptualizations of race, processes of racialization, and constructions of the racialized body in America, scholars have also begun the work of addressing how these active social processes reproduce and maintain inequality across immigrant communities. Cultural anthropologist Teresa M. Mares’ analysis of borderland and immigration experiences describes this experience as existing at the boundaries of (in)visibility: simultaneously “rendered invisible...but all too visible” (Mares 2021, 12). As I argue throughout my work, existing as an “Asian” in America is a lived experience of knowing how to navigate the dilemmas of simultaneously being oppressed while being used as a scapegoat to oppress: the dilemmas of being hypervisible, yet invisible all to the benefit for a dominant group. On one hand, cultural ascriptions fostered by fallacies of the larger Success and Model Minority myths propagate notions of presumed economic and educational achievement that distance the Asian body from other minority groups, placing “Asians” in proximity to whiteness (Lee 2006; Sakamoto 2018). Yet simultaneously, Asians are marked as inexplicably foreign, Other, within American society; such notions are exacerbated during COVID-19.
In an addition to Mares’ concept of (in)visibility within immigration experiences, I’ll also be applying Mary Douglas’ framework of danger and purity to understand how a group is forcibly moved across liminal states of (in)visibility. Douglas asserts that danger (pollutants) are “objects or persons perceived to be out of place,” providing the example of how soil is viewed as a pollutant (dirt) when it is on a dining-table but fertile (pure) Earth when in a garden (Douglas 1966, 37). Dirt, in this context, thereby is the “by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting” that which is perceived to be inappropriate; simultaneously, it is the nature of dominant systems to “condemn any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict [itself or its] cherished classifications” (Douglas 1966, 38).

Douglas’s framework clarifies a point that is essential to discussions regarding how Asians are situated within the social fabric of American society. As I demonstrate later, while Asians are portrayed to be politically obedient and economically productive citizens (pure) to scapegoat black bodies, they are simultaneously characterized as the perpetual foreigner, incongruous threats (pollutants) to social harmony. In many ways, the Asian body disrupts the black-white paradigm (Lowe 1998). As the yellow skin color does not fit within the binary of the pure white body and its racial opposite (black body), the Asian body poses a danger to the power and social dynamics and symbolic structures of Eurocentrism. The yellow body complicates existing notions that inferiority is associated with darker skin pigments. Consequently, “a polluting person is always in the wrong. He [sic] has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed over some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone” (Douglas 1966, 114). Despite their lack of conscious intent to create disorder, Asian peoples who solely wish to exist as equals within a black-white dominated space are instead classified as pollutants for merely embodying yellow skin color and for their presence in the wrong place (America). The
conviction that colored bodies are misplaced in white-dominated society persists as a vital tenet of American thought.

**Scapegoating and Geographies of Blame During Epidemic Disease**

My thesis was also inspired by a large strain of medical anthropological research that examines how epidemics both reflect and often deepen social inequalities. One prominent example is Paul Farmer’s study which emphasized the influence that “the geographies of blame” had on compromising treatment efforts surrounding the human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) epidemic in Haiti (Farmer 1992). In it, Paul Farmer investigated the key accusation narratives and stigma against homosexuals, Haitians, hemophiliacs, and heroin users — paranoia fostered by the scientific community and subsequently adopted by the American public. As esoteric views of Haiti (and her bodies) have been used in its demonization as a source of AIDS, we understand the distribution of disease as structurally built “by historically given processes and forces that conspire . . . to constrain agency”6 (Farmer 2003, 40). Speaking to the disparities in the distribution of AIDS, Farmer explained that structural violence7 leads some to be more vulnerable than others, contra the dominant public health strategies of individual behavior changes to prevent acquisition. In parallel to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the suffering of Asian bodies during COVID-19 – whether physical or mental from hate or disease – has been exacerbated by long-standing histories of racial discrimination and hidden

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6 Agency, another term from social science theory, indicates the ability for a human being to determine the specifics of her or his existence through the practice of choice.

7 Structural violence, coined by Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, refers to the social forces that oppress groups of people, whilst simultaneously producing and reproducing inequality in health; such forces are driven by social, economic, and political structures that lead to social exclusion (Galtung 1969, 171).
economic divides. Didier Fassin expanded on these politics of blame after desperate attempts made by scientists to blame HIV/AIDS on Africans:

The history of AIDS in South Africa constitutes a web of meaning that extends well beyond country borders and the disease itself. It recounts a political world order composed of social configurations and symbolic arrangements on the one hand, relations of knowledge and power and representations of the self and discourses on the other. Political and moral self-identification transcends national borders and often takes on a racial dimension, precisely the dimension along which the African continent and its American diaspora are coming closer today. (Fassin 2007, 271)

Building off of Farmer and Fassin’s work surrounding the ways in which epidemics build on, illuminate, and exacerbate pre-existing social inequalities and racial ideas, I add Celia Lowe’s understanding of the politics of borders and nationhood from her studies of the avian influenza in Indonesia. Lowe describes a phenomenon where when there is concern for national or frameworks of security, contagion prompts paranoia, resentment and mistrust for origins of disease, exacerbating processes of racialization and discrimination. Political discourse leads to conflict between nations; In the midst of these accusations and counter accusations, little attention was paid to the larger social and ecological context in which the influenza type A virus had emerged and flourished. While I demonstrate that these concepts can be fostered within landscapes of physical distancing – between Chinatown and surrounding neighborhoods or China and America – the COVID-19 pandemic relied on that social distancing for disease control. However, a gap that exists in her work is: how can theories of hate be circulated and enhanced during times of global social distancing?

Thereby, my thesis also draws on Ruben Andersson’s concept of the “landscape of fear”: an analysis of paranoid psychogeographies or the landscapes by which the Self projects its fear of disease onto the body of the Other. This can be fostered by psychopolitical technologies of power

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8 Psychopolitical refers to the inseparable nature of cognitive and behavioral (psyche) responses under political influences: “We cannot explain the development of individuality or subjectivity apart from its social context. But
that “mobilize fear on a massive scale via Big Data and the Internet” (Andersson 2019). Drawing from this framework, I argue that Americans embody a fear of the unknown9 – the unfamiliar, the stranger, the foreigner. While exacerbated in the pandemic10, the profiteering of fear by political establishments have been long-standing: “Western governments have cynically used the fear-gripped border as ‘an almost limitless emotional resource’ in electoral politics. The misery of others comes second to the creation of an emotionally safe zone” (Andersson 2019, 159). All in all, I build off of Andersson’s notions that danger and fear become entrenched in geographical distances – between the Asia continent and North American and/or between Chinatowns and surrounding neighborhoods – distances that are normalized and maintained in the realms of Big data and the internet. While the internet can be used to close “the gap” in distances and increase familiarity with “the Other (Asian),” it is also the site by which some could enhance the “distance” between groups, perpetuating notions of us versus them.

Finally, while Andersson proposes the internet and big data plays a role in constructing landscapes of fear in the media, he does not focus on how scapegoating is enhanced during the epidemic. Rather, this gap is addressed by Matamoros-Fernandez’s framework of platformed racism11 in a study investigating how a national race-based controversy in Australia – the booing of Australian Football League Indigenous star Adam Goodes – was mediated by social platform

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9 The fear or hatred of that which is perceived to be foreign or strange – the unknown – is more broadly referred to as xenophobia.

10 During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump rallied and monopolized on his supporter’s cognitive biases and fears against outsiders, often “associating immigrants with ‘disease coming into our country,’ “ (June 11, 2019), “communicable disease” and “tremendous medical problem coming into a country” (Dec. 11, 2018), including during the 2015 primary campaign” (as synthesized by Lindaman and Viaïa-Gaudelfroy 2021).

11 Platformed racism has dual meanings: first, it evokes platforms as amplifiers and manufacturers of racist discourse and second, it describes the modes of platform governance that reproduce (but that can also address) social inequalities.
giants: Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube (Matamoros-Fernández 2017). Although it is a framework introduced in 2017, platformed racism builds on the idea that the “physical” geography of blame has shifted from physical space to the globally accessible cyberspace; as I will demonstrate later, the sites of violence have been performed in both the physical and cyberspace. Since the first cases of COVID-19, multiple media outlets were criticized for carelessly posting images of Asians in Chinatown as thumbnails for their articles about the coronavirus outbreak (See Figures 7-9). Additionally, on online social media platforms, “hate speeches can spread extremely fast, even cross-platform, and can stay online for a rather long time” adding another layer – a temporal landscape – that, in a way, immortalizes the trauma (Lyu 2020, 2).

Putting the surge in hate crimes against Asians during COVID-19 pandemic into conversation with scholars such as Farmer, Fassin, Lowe, Andersson, Han, and Matamoros-Fernandez illuminates the ways by which America protects itself and its dominant groups, and explains the exhausted use of anti-Asian rhetoric utilized throughout social media platforms in relation to posts regarding COVID-19 (See Chapter Two).

"Asianization": Asian Critical Race Theory

A great many scholars have contributed to the broader field of scholarship of critical race theory. The onset of Critical Race theory (CRT) began in the early 1970s within the field of legal studies and was a direct response to systemic racism – the conviction that racism stems not from acts of individuals, but rather rooted in systems of oppression. Pioneers in the field, Mari Matsuda (1987), Derrick Bell (1988), Richard Delgado (1989), and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1990), paved the way for insights surrounding the racial inequity underlying the American legal system. They
interrogated the fundamental ways that racial constructs undermined people of color living in the United States. Over generations, the field of CRT has grown to include the assumption that racism is entrenched in society and hegemonic culture, the rejection of the dominant ideologies, ... recognizance that power structures are based on White privilege and White supremacy which are sustained over time, and a commitment to social justice and the open and active resistance to oppressions through storytelling, naming, and revisionist history (Yi 2021, 29).

However, despite CRT’s overarching advocacy for POC, the experiences of specific immigrant groups are not the same and thereby, many conversations must be had addressing the specific concerns and histories of the varying ethnoracial or marginalized groups under the POC umbrella. Adopted from CRT, scholars have applied and conceptualized its central tenets to targeted racial and ethnic communities. Latinx Critical Race theory (LatCrit) and Tribal Critical Race theory (TribalCrit) were among the first to be established subfields branching off of CRT. In LatCrit, scholars named the racial constraints exerted against Latinx and Chicano peoples, focusing on immigration policy (Delgado 1995; Valdes 1998). In TribalCrit, scholars focused on amplifying indigenous perspectives surrounding colonization, sovereignty, and storytelling to address inequities in indigenous communities (Brayboy 2005).

However, a gap remains in CRT, including the exclusion of the lived realities of Asian and Asian Americans. The experiences, perspectives, and lived realities of Asians and Asian Americans are largely erased from the mainstream of CRT – histories of oppression stemming from stereotypes, ideologies and legal restrictions largely ignored. The urgency of Asian American visibility necessitates theoretical perspectives exploring the impacts of various oppressions exerted on Asian Americans and their communities. Scholarship under the umbrella of CRT centering on oppression against and nuances unique to Asians have emerged within the last five to ten years (Chae 2013; Curammeng 2017; Harpalani 2013). Dubbed as AsianCrit, Asian Critical Race theory...
centers the racialized experiences of the panAsian community living within the United States (Museus & Iftikar 2013).

Samuel Museus and Jon Iftikar’s analysis of redressing Asian American realities and experiences pertaining to racism and discrimination, through a pedagogical lens, includes seven overlapping principles: Asianization, Translational Contexts, Strategic Anti Essentialism, Intersectionality, Story, Theory and Praxis, and Commitment to Social Justice. Museus and Iftikar refer to the racialization of Asian Americans as “Asianization” (Museus & Iftikar 2013). They argue that the process of Asianization refers to the conflation of “cultural and ethnic identities into a whole and stereotyping mechanisms that position Asian Americans in certain ways and particularly as foreigners, objects of yellow peril, and model minorities” (Yi 2021). Such that these constructions are fluid, the social constructions of the Asian race can materialize interchangeably from honorary Whites to perpetual foreigners and from the model minority to exoticized evil (Tuan 1998) – dependent on the narratives and contexts presented by dominant groups. As you will come to read, that notion of fluidity is the foundation of Asian scapegoatism during the pandemic and throughout history. Such that the processes of Asianization operate to “(re)shape laws and policies that affect Asian Americans and influence Asian American identities and experiences” (Museus and Iftikar 2013, 23), I demonstrate that the racialization of Asian American identities, specifically the Chinese, is an ideological construction that is intended to organize policies, legislations, and discourses to serve hegemonic interests.

12 Scapegoatism refers to the assignation of blame or failure to another, to deflect attention and responsibility; therefore, Asian scapegoatism, as I will call it hereafter, is in reference to the blame of all peoples of Asian descent, and China, for COVID-19 in America fostered by the Trump Administration.
METHODS, OUTLOOK & ORIENTATIONS FOR MY RESEARCH STUDY

Methodology of Study

To better understand how anti-immigrant sentiment and racism affect health and health resource management, I investigated four components of existing in a hate epidemic amidst the COVID-19 pandemic: social understanding of the disease, effects of racially motivated hate crimes on Canton elderly and their lived experiences, community-based organization (CBO) and activist interventions, followed by an evaluation of the impacts of intervention and its reception by the Chinatown community. Addressing the experiences of a population transgressing geographic boundaries (since the late 1800s), this work contributes to a growing body of work regarding transnational migration (Chapter 1) and immigrant (mis)belonging (see “Asianization”).

Exploring the Beginnings of a Hate Epidemic

Interested in exploring the correlations between the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the onset of increased assaults against members of the Asian American Pacific Islander community. I explored questions including: When did the onset of increased violence start? How is the pandemic being described by the media, politicians, and the general American public? Is there a link between the severity of the pandemic (mortality rates) and racially charged language on the media (platformed racism)? Is there a link between the frequency of platformed racism and racially motivated, bias-motivated hate crime events, nationally?

To answer these questions, I used digital ethnographic methodologies to assess social media, which has been a space for platformed racism and racism on a different spatial dimension: Cyberspace. I examined publicly accessible news outlet publications, online forums (Reddit), and
social media platforms (Twitter) to gain access to different discussions regarding how the pandemic was initially perceived, how the general public feels about the handling of the pandemic, who people are blaming, and other general sentiments. For my safety, I did not engage with participants on these platforms, but rather was an outside observer trying to understand rationales behind each post or comment. I also synthesized large-scale data driven studies that used novel computer science metrics to sort through millions of tweets and data pertaining to the types of users who posted them – sorting through usages of controversial, racially-charged language ("Kung-Flu") and their correlation with reports of racially motivated crimes (against Asians) during COVID-19.

Exploring the Lived Experiences of Canton Elderly

I had several questions regarding the lived experience of elderly navigating and existing in New York City as a Sze Yup Cantonese-identifying individual. Conversations acknowledging the different sociodemographics that are unique to each interlocutor, respectively, and their everyday dynamics make clear the direct impacts that the pandemic has had on life pre-COVID-19. These questions included: (1) Identity, Sociodemographics and Immigrant History How would you describe your ethnic identity? How long have you been living in the United States? What are the reasons behind immigrating to New York City? Tell me about your experience living as [desired identifier] in America. What has your experience living in the US been like for you and those close to you prior to the pandemic? Tell me about your experience living as a Chinese American in America during the COVID-19 pandemic; what has it been like for you and those close to you? How have your relationships with your peers, family, and community changed since the pandemic began? (2) Onset of Heightened Racialized Violence What were your initial thoughts and feelings
about the recent Chinatown attacks? How do you think these incidents have impacted the Chinatown community as a whole? How have these recent Chinatown attacks impacted you or those close to you? Did it lead you or those close to you to change anything about your daily routine? (3) Health Resource Attainment How did you learn about the COVID-19 vaccine? What are your feelings about the vaccine? What are things that you think your local community can do to best help you in the face of Covid-19-related discrimination and violence currently?

Moreover, I partook in a total of 10 hours of participant observation, over the span of September - October 2021, in public spaces and community events throughout Chinatown (Figure 1), walking outside markets, bakeries, restaurants, and parks; and participating in community healing events. While observing these settings gave me insight into how Chinatown had truly shifted from a safe, prosperous haven for Chinese communities to a landscape of fear. Interacting with elderly and community members, such observations offered me insights into how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the day-to-day activities of the elderly, and more general Asian-identifying, community. Initial participant observation activities also increased trust between me and my interlocutors. Given that the elderly Canton population is generally not internet-savvy, I recruited my elderly interlocutors in-person at community gathering locations in Chinatown, i.e., as churches, community centers, parks, and vaccination events.

In sum, from October 2021 to December 2021, I conducted five semi-structured interviews with Sze Yup Canton elderly 75 or older and their relatives living in New York City’s Chinatown, in Taishanese or Cantonese. To ensure the anonymity of my interlocutors, I removed their identifying information and utilized pseudonyms throughout my thesis. As some of my interlocutors experienced harassment during the pandemic and possessed histories of physical assault, ensuring their anonymity is paramount to prevent events of potential retribution.
Exploring CBO Affiliate and Activist Intervention

I had several questions for community-based organization affiliates and activists regarding the impacts of their work for the broader Asian community—whether that be in advocating for Asian American history education, combating anti-Asian rhetoric, expanding accessibility for health and violence-prevention resources. I explored questions including: (1) Identity, Sociodemographics and Immigrant History How would you describe your ethnic identity? How long have you been living in the United States? What are the reasons behind immigrating to New York City, if appropriate? Tell me about your experience living as [desired identifier] in America. (2) Work Experience How did you get into working for [insert CBO]? What is your experience working for [insert CBO]? What resources do you and your CBO provide elderly? In what ways has your CBO tried to challenge or combat the negative perceptions of Asians during the pandemic? What are your thoughts on how the media talks about the COVID-19 pandemic? On the Asian American Community? On the broader AAPI diaspora and Wuhan, China? Specifically, how do you think your CBO can (or is currently) helping constituents with these issues? (3) Impact of Intervention How supported and prepared do you think elderly are for the pandemic? How do you think that has translated into the treatment of the AAPI diaspora, more generally?

In sum, from October 2021 to December 2021, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with affiliates from a couple of two different CBOs dedicated to “resource and knowledge distribution” based in New York City. The first, Organization X, was a mutual aid group dedicated to providing self-defense kits and training pamphlets to the Manhattan Chinatown community; the other, Organization Y, focused on coalition building between multiracial grassroots organizations to address root causes of violence. I utilized pseudonyms for the affiliates and for their respective
organizations throughout my thesis. Due to the size of the community-based organizations, it would be easy for readers to target and identify individual members. To avoid hindering the work that the organizations are attempting to do, organizations are described via their pseudonyms – identifying information is kept private.

**Researcher Positionality: A Reflection of Self**

As a son of immigrants who migrated over from Taishan, China in the late 1990’s, I identify wholeheartedly with being a Chinese American. Similarly, I identify as an “Asian American,” paying respects to the west-coast college activists and academics before me who coined the term as a the “radical label of self-determination that indicated a political agenda of equality, anti-racism, and anti-imperialism” in the 1970s — an identity chosen, not imposed — to decolonize our identity from “Oriental” and band together as an ever-diversifying community to resist injustice (Kandil 2018). Thinking about my identity in this way, I have often struggled with navigating the in-between identities.

Moreover, I am cognizant that I am also different from my interlocutors in how I was born, raised, and educated within Eurocentric thought. As a college student at Swarthmore, I have been formally trained to interrogate, dismantle, and understand the legacies and persisting systems of oppression impacting AAPI groups. That privilege could not be said of my elderly Canton interlocutors who in many cases had to prioritize survival of their families over pursuing advanced degrees. While any researcher can enter Chinatown to study the impacts of COVID-19 on elderly populations, not many have the Taishanese background necessary to foster trust and break through language barriers.
In my interviews, I do think that I shared more similarities than differences: identity as a Canton Chinese-American; similar immigrant background—one of trauma and sacrifice; a common tongue (Cantonese, Taishanese); and low-income. These identities and skillset (language and shared socio-cultural understandings) gave me a unique vantage point by which I could elucidate the needs of this population.

As I conducted my study, I found myself constantly thinking about recent movements to mold anthropology into a field that engages with activism—viewing activism not just as something collateralized, but as a deeply involved and central part of anthropological work. In particular, I thought about anthropologist Dána-Ain Davis, who stated: “Anthropological research can be posited as a more indirect form of activism, more often with implications on long-term policy decisions” (Davis 2006, 236). To that regard, my fervent hope is that my thesis can inspire further political actions that address hidden needs of vulnerable groups existing under the “Asian” racial umbrella.

Finally, native anthropology\(^{13}\) in many ways seeks to overcome Eurocentrism or Western academic hegemony that marks boundaries between the colonizer: seer, describer, knower, and the colonized: described, and known. Given that my focus is on Canton populations in New York City, I do consider myself to be somewhat of a native ethnographer in this context. However, what complicates my role as a native ethnographer is the fact that my work has a broader connection and implication for those living under the racial category of \textit{Asian} – a category so vast and so diverse. While I may be Asian, I do not necessarily share the same experiences as those who identify as Laotian, for example, who are similarly affected by the Anti-Asian rhetoric. As such, I

\(^{13}\text{Native Anthropology: the practice of “studying one’s own native country, one’s own native country, society or ethnic group, in contrast to the traditional role of anthropology – to study alien cultures” (Steinlien 1990, 40).}
feel that my work and my role lie somewhere between the boundaries of someone in solidarity and a native ethnographer that works to seek effective change (in social perception, resource distribution, etc...) for the broader Asian Pacific Islander community. For that reason, I strongly believe in the disaggregation of data that is typically combined into the single category “Asian,” so from here forward, I will only be focusing on Canton elderly 75 or older and their relatives, unless otherwise stated.

A Roadmap: Structure of Thesis

To contextualize the racialization of Chinese peoples in America, Chapter 1 discusses the histories of Chinese immigration and how their arrival had built up a landscape of fear by the dominant White populations. This chapter discusses how particular groups (i.e., Chinese peoples) have historically become associated with disease – sources of contagion. I discuss the different ways Chinese immigrants have resisted discrimination, including country-wide formations of Chinatowns that have operated as immigrant safe havens and defenders of socio-cultural values within the structures of assimilation. I describe how national relocation to these safe havens have had the unintentional consequence for consolidating Asian scapegoatism and exotification. All in all, I argue that the perceptions of the public shift – often, quite rapidly – across different historical periods, and we currently live in one where Chinese are at the brunt of coronavirus rage.

Chapter 2 explores how, with no definitive end, the COVID-19 pandemic has enacted a landscape of fear (of death and of sickness) in the broader New York City that has subsequently transformed into a fear of China, Chinatowns, and their peoples – an effect of historical associations to disease. This chapter discusses how these emotions have manifested fear both in physical (i.e. the Material World) and virtual landscapes (i.e., the Big Internet), and the
interconnectedness of these worlds. It seems what happens in the media has had direct implications to what happens in the material world. To that end, I demonstrate how the proliferation of fear in spaces surrounding Chinatown become expressed through physical acts of hate, such that – and I divulge – Chinatowns turn from safe havens/enclaves to landscapes engulfed in fear (fear of death and of sickness, and now fear of hate crime violence).

Just as the formation of Chinatowns were a form of resistance to discrimination and oppression from hegemonic actors (the dominant White population), Chapter 3 highlights the communal acts of resistance to the hate epidemic within Chinatown during the current pandemic. This chapter is situated in the lens of Rupa and Maya’s (2013) understanding of biological and social/environmental (societal) inflammation. To that point, I argue that the landscape of fear is simply an additive that shapes and influences our societal inflammation. American media, in times of confusion, has encouraged difference and distance between minority groups, reproducing landscapes of fear that distract us from asking: who really benefits from minority disagreements? All in all, I hint that perhaps the landscape of fear can be remedied by bridging the distance between minority groups and dismantling the landscape of fear.

Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the main points of my thesis and situates it within a broader comparative framework. I draw on future directions and limitations of my work.
PRE-CHAPTER ONE

The Pandemic Diaries, Part 2: Growing up in a Fishbowl (Chinatown)

.....Cut us off from our families, our history. So we made it our own place - Chinatown. A place for preservation and self-preservation; give them what they feel what's right, is safe; make it fit the idea of what is out there... Chinatown and indeed being Chinese is and always has been, from the very beginning a construction, a performance of features, gestures, culture and exoticism, invention/reinvention of stylization.

Charles Yu

Interior Chinatown (2020)

Figure 1. "San Francisco's Three Graces" By George Fredrick Keller for The Wasp, May 26, 1882. San Francisco authorities, believing that epidemics of smallpox and plague originated in the SF Chinatown, passed quarantine and vaccination laws that applied only to Chinese peoples.
Growing up in Chinatown, I have fond memories of walking through the masses of people zigging and zagging through the streets of New York: ants on a mission. Everyone seemed to have a place to go, things they had to do. As I navigated through the crowds, I would hear the piercing voices of the vendors who shouted: "很甜, 很甜" [Very Sweet] while bagging clusters of 龍眼 (Longan) and weighing it on their scales for clients to see. Often, I would see tour groups being led through these open main street markets--many a time, their eyes fixated on the fish markets and fruit vendors. For a brief moment, I felt as though me and my community were objects on display--a culture and heritage commercialized by tourist agencies. The very act of paying to observe this space and the willingness to enter this cultural enclave made me question whether this was a continuation of historical constructs of the Oriental, a trope that paints us as perpetual foreigners in America.

In an interview with NBC News, professor of history at the University of California, Irvine Yong Chen eloquently explained: “[Going to] Chinatown as an exotic place to experience the foreign culture and to witness the Orient. Going there satisfied [white] people’s curiosity about exotic cultures in the Orient, but also gave them a sense of cultural and moral superiority” (Chiu 2019). Or perhaps, this phenomenon of tourism was a shift to an appreciation of culture. Nonetheless, my feelings of uneasiness were always magnified when I found myself looking into the lens of a big Nikon camera that belonged to a tourist who had just snapped a couple of photos (without consent) of me and my mom at the fish market. In those moments, I would wonder if we were performing to what Omi and Winant argue to be racial projects and expectations by existing in Chinatown as ethnic Chinese, living a life so seemingly different from the canonical Western lens of what a market should look like. But one thing that always comes back to haunt me is the
notion that Chinatown’s allure is motivated by the false belief that authenticity is validated by the people and objects that look and act the part…

Scroll through any travel guide or online blog of New York, and Chinatown – one of the oldest and largest Asian neighborhoods in the United States – is usually listed near the top as a must-see location. Today, visitors can shop for trinkets, admire traditional pagodas, stop by Columbus park to see troupes of Chinese-opera performers, card players, and tai chi practitioners on the grassy lawns, or taste a variety of Chinese foods. However, this magnificent display of culture and tradition is a golden veil that hides the real origins of New York’s Manhattan Chinatown and Chinese immigration to America. The formation of the New York Manhattan Chinatown was a direct effect of rampant anti-Asian violence in the Western states of the United States, fueled by White anxiety following the Gold Rush and completion of the transcontinental railroad…

- Kent Chen, 11/12/21
CHAPTER ONE:
Eschewing the Hyphen: The History of the Chinese Diaspora
And Chinatown Formations in the United States

Ironically Asians are wrongly held up as the model minority and yet we are pushed onto the sacrificial pyre for the sake of national security with alarming readiness and willingness.

Susan Flynn and Melanie A. Marotta
*Critical pedagogy, Race and Media* (2021)

Even if we’ve been here for four generations, our status here remains conditional; belonging is always promised and just out of reach so that we behave, whether it’s the insatiable acquisition of material belongings or belonging as a peace of mind where we are absorbed into mainstream society

Cathy Park Hong
*Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (2020)
Peoples of the Asian continent—particularly those Chinese—have collectively been named as the source for COVID-19 (see Figures 3-5). Blamed for its spread throughout the world, the association of the entire racial (Asian) or ethnic (Chinese) groups with disease is not a new phenomenon. In line with Fassin, who critiqued the blame of Black Haitians for HIV/AIDS in South Africa, this chapter explores how the recent history of COVID-19 in America "constitutes a web of meaning that extends well beyond country borders and the disease itself" (Fassin 2007, 271), by taking on a racial dimension.

Bringing the focus to the COVID-19 pandemic in America, however, in this chapter I argue that the associations of Chinese populations as sources of contagion are deeply-rooted in time; memory and history thus play significant roles in the classification of the Chinese body during COVID-19. This chapter begins with a discussion on the ascription of the "Yellow Race" on bodies from the Asian continent in a time predating the Age of Discovery. That analysis is essential as those interpretations become so ingrained in Eurocentric thought that they inform America’s national responses to the waves of Chinese immigration to America in the nineteenth century, which all culminate into the national sentiments felt during COVID-19.

In this way, I introduce the notion that landscapes of fear against Chinese (and Asian peoples, lumped together by a bigotry that knows not of the difference) have remained in public sentiment throughout different periods in time. Particularly, fear—fostered by a collective institutional memory—has traversed American society and has—on multiple occasions—been translated into physical manifestations of hate. And while Chinatowns, ethnic enclaves\(^{14}\) historically created as a form of resistance to discrimination, serve as immigrant safe havens

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\(^{14}\) Chinatown serves as a cultural or social hub in spaces enclosed within and surrounded by the other communities in the city or town. I like to think of it as *a physical "distancing away" from the rest of America but within America*, if you will.
throughout America, this chapter discusses how they have also unintentionally prompted public reprisal – a consolidation of Asian scapegoatism and exotification against one space. All in all, I argue that the perceptions of the public shift – often, quite rapidly – across different historical periods, and we currently live in one where Chinese are at the brunt of coronavirus rage.

The Coinage of a Yellow Race: Origins of the Landscape of Fear

Before the mental association of Chinese people with COVID-19 disease, it requires the physical and visual identification that a body is in fact “Chinese.” In the United States, “skin color is the primary physical criterion by which people have been classified into [racial and ethnic] groups” (Jablonski 2020, 437). Exemplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese bodies are hyper visible and easily identified by virtue of their physical attributes. Of note, the stereotypical light, mustard-yellow skin – or the “yellow label” – has become essential in the construction of the racial category “Asian.” So how did the skin color become so ingrained in our institutional memory and what are the historical meanings behind the “yellow label”?

The designation of a yellow label on Asian bodies emerged during the nineteenth century in modern Europe. However, in a time before the Age of Discovery, European scholars struggled to reach consensus on how to describe foreigners. Skin color was often debated as a means of classification, but there was “often little agreement about precisely what color they were—partly because until the end of the eighteenth century, there was no systemic desire to classify people according to what we now call race” (Keevak 2011, 23).

In his book *Livre Des Merveilles Du Monde* written in the twelfth century, Marco Polo vaguely hinted at skin tones, characterizing the leader of Cathay and the Japanese natives as a
"white" people living in the Orient and employing a term which later encompassed all Chinese as well. With no trace of the term “yellow” in merchant and missionary archives, surviving literature uniformly references the whiteness, fair-skinned beauty, and extravagance of both Chinese and Japanese natives living in the “mysterious lands of the marvelous East,” such that they were all deemed “good looking [di corpo belli]” (Keevak 2011, 24). In contemporaneous reports, Portuguese apothecary Tomé Pires and official Duarte Barbosa remarked that Asian bodies are undoubtedly “white like us [bianchi, si come siamo noi; huomini bianchi],” but also “well-made [grandi ben disposti] ... a greater part of them dressing in cotton cloth and silk.” (Keevak 2011, 26).

It is clear that skin color becomes a proxy for the “function of a community’s affluence, their power, and their apparent level of cultural sophistication” by standards of Eurocentrism (Keevak 2011, 28). During this time, early explorers were quick to identify peoples in Asia as white, or “people just like us,” after a recognition of their wealth, of their robust networks of trade, and of their “civilized” mannerisms. French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that sharing similar forms of cultural capital – symbolic elements such as taste, clothing, mannerism and material belongings – leads to a sense of a collective identity (in this context, being “white”).

Understanding how both communities shifted in Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital thus becomes essential in understanding the shift from Asian peoples being “white” to “yellow” within a Eurocentric framework. This shift began with revolutionary developments in race theory that transpired with the introduction of novel human classification systems and ascriptions of inferiority to colored bodies. Racialization of Asian peoples and the coinage of the “Yellow race” can be accredited to French physician Francois Bernier, Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, and German physician and founder of comparative anatomy Johann Friedrich Blumenbach. Beginning in 1684, Bernier coined the terminology of race and racial classification when proposing “a new
division of Earth according to the different species or races of men which inhabit it” (Keevak 28).

Bernier described East Asians as “truly white” [veritablement blanc], whereas he addressed people of Indian descent, especially women, as “truly yellow.” In 1735, Linnaeus proposed in his book, *Systema naturae*, that the “natural world was divided between the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms” where the human genus was placed atop all other animal kingdoms (Keevak 2011, 4).

Referring to the Asian people as the *Homo asiaticus* species, he is credited as the first to link Asia with yellow and to introduce the ideology that Asia is a monolith: all Asian peoples are either dark yellow [fuscus] or pale, ghastly yellow [luridus]. By the end of the eighteenth century, Blumenbach unequivocally identified the people of the Far East as a “yellow Mongolian Race”—one that is distinct from the white “Caucasian.” Through his characterization of the Asian body as being “yellow” and “Mongolian,” Blumenbach linked Asia and its peoples to associations as “something dangerous, exotic, and threatening” as “both terms are symbiotically linked to the cultural memory of a series of invasions from that part of the world: Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, and Tamerlane” (Ibid., 4).

Memory and history thus play significant roles in the classification of the yellow body. Americans’ historic remembrance of powerful invaders from the East (Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, and Tamerlane) became linked to the scientific racial category of Asian or “mongoloid.” This led to an ascription of danger and fear onto all bodies that have Asian origin and ancestry. Conjointly holding historic and cultural significance in medieval Christian art, the color yellow was symbolically used for representations of Judas and Jewish peoples—embodiments of betrayal and inauthenticity to the Christian Church (Keevak 2011, 54). As Christian religion too, had such powerful influences throughout America’s history (Gjelten 2017), cultural implications of the word yellow connoting existential danger and inauthenticity translated into ideologies of the racist
color metaphor, the “yellow peril.”\textsuperscript{15} Thereby, the color yellow on the body becomes part of a visual imaginary that unmistakably marks it as the object of blame – the “Other.”\textsuperscript{16}

Even Yellowface, a caricature of the Chinese body, is a prime example of how the “yellow peril” metaphor became a physical, canonical representation of the landscape of fear. As previously mentioned, “Yellow Peril” refers to danger – and since the nineteenth century, referred to the danger to European schools of thought. Historically, yellowface\textsuperscript{17} unmistakably marks the Asian body as inexplicably alien by virtue of its mustard-yellow skin color. While Asia and its bodies are not a monolith,\textsuperscript{18} the designation of yellow as the racial color used to represent all of Asia and the Orient highlights the arbitrariness involved in the way racial categories have been socially constructed.

Finally, the notion of yellow skin becoming a perpetual symbolic marker of caution for the Orient and its peoples can be interpreted via Didier Fassin’s lens of the racialized body, a product of racial ascriptions judged and predicated through the intertwining of the subjective body, which involves perceptions molded by significant events in the past, and the objective body, which involves perceiving the material differences on a physical body (Fassin 2011, 428); to that point, the objective body as informed by those differences become the means by which one could identity and discriminate against Chinese bodies. What is most important to take away here is that the

\textsuperscript{15} The Yellow Peril is a centuries-old racialized metaphor that denotes people of East and Southeast Asian descent as dangers to, and even invaders of, American lands, technology, and Western values (i.e. democracy) (TChen and Yeats 2014).

\textsuperscript{16} The position of the “Other” is not always directly the object of blame. I explain in Chapter One, sometimes, objects may be initially the “Exotic Other,” an object of curiosity and fantasy. Still, as you will come to see, even the Exotic Other can be reduced to an object of blame when its values no longer align with the dominant values of society (see Chapter One).

\textsuperscript{17} White people performed in “Yellowface” as they did in “Blackface.” One of the earliest known performances of American Yellowface was from 1767’s \textit{An Orphan of China} based a play by French philosopher Voltaire; this was one of the earliest dramatizations of Asian culture that spearheaded Asian caricatures and ridicule in American film for centuries to come (Morgan 2021).

\textsuperscript{18} Asia is a continental landmass, consisting of people that come in the “broadest range of skin color and hue” (Lee 2).
politics of memory racially construct bodies and inform perceptions that constantly shift over time.

Put simply, it is the association to their skin color (a yellow label, if you will) that identifies Chinese peoples which initiates the association to contagion, prompts skepticism, and introduces a landscape of fear.

History of Chinese Immigration to America and America’s Response: Landscape of Fear

To truly understand how such (deep rooted) tropes play into Americans’ national imaginations, and how landscapes of fear manifest into physical harassment necessitates an understanding of the history of Chinese Americans living in America. The seeds for scapegoatism of Chinese as vectors of contagious disease is a part of the United States’ long legacy of discrimination. While skepticism of the Far East persisted well before (Zhang 2008), perhaps, scapegoating tactics were widely employed during the first waves of Asian immigration whereby large quantities of Asian immigrants were brought over to the United States as laborers--exploited by agricultural, mining, and railroad corporations--all throughout the mid nineteenth century. The first major wave of Chinese immigration largely consisted of migrants from areas from Canton (Guangzhou) in the Guangdong province, a southern coastal city situated along the Pearl River Delta. The political and economic instability (famine) in China in the mid-1840s, following the first Opium War and the invasion of Western imperial powers on the Asian continent, encouraged cheap and good labor in California: a chance to earn money to provide for their families back home was enough incentive for Chinese migrants to travel across the Pacific. Coinciding with the California Gold Rush in the 1850s, local Canton newspapers were filled with advertisements urging the move to the 金山 “Gold Mountain” (San Francisco) in pursuit of economic opportunity: the first collective memory of Chinese immigration in the United States (Cvetkovich and

Chen 45
Pellegrini, 2003). As railroad companies in America competed to expand quickly, “they needed a pool of cheap labor willing to take on dangerous and often backbreaking work, and Chinese immigrants fit the bill” (Blakemore 2019). Upwards of 15,000 Chinese men immigrated to California to become miners, railroad workers, and expanded into farming and laundry services. As such, Chinese immigrants made up a huge portion of cheap laborers working in America—essential to westward expansion and advancement. In 1850, a ceremony was dedicated to what the former San Francisco Mayor John W. Geary called the “China Boys,” as a form of gratuitous acknowledgement for time served and their work ethic.

Yet, as quickly as the gratitude came, Asian workers were soon cast off as targets of blame. White Americans felt threatened by the enclaves of foreign workers speaking in different languages and practicing alternative religions. What’s more, by the 1870s, widespread economic depression had hit America, causing job shortages. Despite being exploited for their cheap labor and subjected to poor working conditions, Asian workers were singled out for taking jobs from the American public. Further, smallpox and bubonic plague outbreaks often frequented America’s large infrastructure projects. While recent epidemiological tracings of these disease outbreaks indicate that they had origins in European immigrants, at the time (latter quarter of 19th C), blame and stigma focused on Asian immigrants. Fear of the epidemic outbreaks then came to be manifested as Anti-Asian xenophobia. Such xenophobia, building on scientific racism which viewed race as “natural” biological categories, contributed to racist tropes that framed Asian persons and countries as the “Yellow Peril.” This notion of the “yellow peril” held that Asia threatened to contaminate Europe and the United States with disease. A medical scapegoat, 

... up and down the Pacific coast (and in the Hawaiian Islands) local health officials rationalized the failure of their sanitary programs by tracing all epidemic outbreaks to living conditions among the Chinese. Whereas in the 1850s the early Chinese immigrants had been admired for their industry and frugality, by the 1860s
the Chinese were considered to be “an inferior race” and “degraded.” By the 1870s, the racist argument had broadened in scope, and the Chinese were viewed as a social, moral, and political curse to the community (Trauner 1978, 70).

Within the construct of a dirty, “inferior race,” the American racial project relied on a few specific arguments that actively worked against Chinese immigrants, and later generalized to all Asians, living in America:

An economic argument that attested that cheap Chinese labor undermined wage rates to the detriment of employment practices on the West; A cultural argument that asserted that Chinese immigrants were [from amongst] the lowest classes in China; An assimilationist argument that explained the Chinese are unwilling to merge into the American mainstream; A racist argument that maintained that America should preserve its homogenous population and that national degeneration would result from allowing an inferior race (Chinese) to interact with a superior race (Caucasian); A biological argument that claimed the Chinese were “inferior in organic structures, in vital force, and in the constitutional conditions of full development,” which for the purposes of this chapter will simply refer to biological differences; A medical argument that suggested that Chinese persons bred and disseminated disease which endangered the welfare of the state and nation (Trauner 1978).

Widespread xenophobia and workplace competition (against Asians), in the name of America’s racial project, were enshrined into law through the Page Act of 1875,19 and the Chinese Exclusion Acts of 188220 whose first line read: “Whereas in the opinion of the Government of the United

19 While the Page Act, on paper, “regulated” the immigration of Chinese women to prevent women from being brought in for prostitution; in practice, the Page Act was designed to keep women out to limit the growth of Asian American families and populations (Rotondi 2021).
20 More commonly known, the Chinese Exclusion Treaty, 1880 treaty placed an absolute 10-year ban on Chinese immigration into the United States (Archives.gov).
States, the coming of Chinese laborers to this country endangers the good order of certain localities within the territory thereof.” These two racially motivated policies that explicitly banned Chinese American laborers – men and women, respectively – from entering (or reentering after leaving) the country and limited the civil rights of Chinese-born (and adjacent members) living in the United States. This made it especially challenging for laborers whose intention was to provide for their families back home in Canton; these laws were in essence a reminder that non-European origin foreigners don’t belong in the United States, no matter their contributions.

Creating Close-knit Chinatowns, or Consolidating Hate?

Such widespread xenophobia and discrimination prompted the formation of Chinatowns throughout the United States. The extent to which Chinese immigrants were pushed into these ethnic enclaves is exhibited in this section. During the mid-nineteenth century, there were fewer than 1,000 Chinese that immigrated to West Coast America (Takaki 1998). Within two decades, by 1870, the Chinese population in the United States had grown to over 63,000. And while a majority of immigrants did indeed reside within California, the distribution of the Chinese immigrants ranged from cities to the rural towns like: Locke and Marysville, California; Butte, Montana; and Rock Springs, Wyoming (Kandil 2019). Notably, as much as 29 percent of total immigrants took up residence and found jobs in rural Idaho and 10 percent in Montana. However, no matter the city, Chinese immigrants living in the US could not escape the emergence of anti-Chinese sentiment throughout the 1870s. The frequency of legal restrictions outlining where Chinese immigrants could buy property, live, or work increased. Under the federal Chinese Exclusion Acts, the Chinese community is the only ethnic group in US history that has been denied
entrance into the country. Furthermore, under its conditions, it was illegal for those of Chinese
descent to testify, own land, vote, reunite with families outside of the United States (without
permanently leaving), marry into non-Chinese families, or work at federal agencies (Blakemore
2019). Put simply, such codified racism deprived Chinese men and women full participation within
a society that they helped build. It was truly a stab in the back.

During times of legal exclusion and discrimination, Chinese immigrants found themselves
leaving the gold mines, shops, and laundromats, to instead build self-reliant sanctuary
neighborhoods which came to be referred to as “Chinatowns.” Chinatowns could be thought of as
“separate, nearly independent, cities within a city” (Congress.gov), serving as safe havens for
Chinese immigrants, locales to eat “weird” foods, refuges from discrimination, temples to practice
their own religions, and bonds with their old country. Put simply, in an interview with NBC, John
Kuo Wei Tchen, chair of public history and humanities at Rutgers University, argues that “the
consequence of the exclusion laws … created the conditions, between racism and the law itself,
for segregated, isolated Chinatowns” (Chiu 2019). Unsupported by city and federal governments,
family and district benevolent associations were formed to provide socio-political support for those
within the community, ensuring that the basic needs of its members were met, and representing a
united voice of the collective. Chinese-owned businesses hired Chinese immigrants who lost jobs
due to the discriminatory legislation process. In these ways, the formation of Chinatowns and the
ways by which they operate serve as acts (or sites) of resistance against oppressive hegemonic
structures of mainstream society that work against them: “Empowerment, advocacy, and resistance
from inside [Chinatowns] are reactions to the enforcement from outside” (Yu 2016, 247).

However, as anti-Chinese sentiment intensified, so too did the frequency of massacres,
riots, and evictions in the West of the United States. Almost 200 Chinatowns were burned down
and destroyed at the turn of the late nineteenth century, many of which were in rural towns where major white supremacist groups organized. One such example was the Knights of Labor, who spearheaded opposition to Chinese labor throughout the 1880s in Rock Springs, Wyoming. On account of their willingness to work jobs at a lower wage, the Knights of Labor perceived the Chinese to be hoarding job opportunities. This anger took form on September 2, 1885, whereby 150 white men gathered in Chinatown with Winchester rifles in an orchestrated attack; 28 Chinese miners were murdered in cold blood, 15 were severely injured, and 78 homes in Chinatown were burned down (George Mason University, Center for History and New Media 2005).

The very act of entering and orchestrating a massacre in Chinatowns (already isolated from mainstream society) is indicative of the deep-seated fear and hatred, feelings shared nationally. Such that even the areas of which Chinese were forced to reside are also being destroyed. As rural Chinatowns were increasingly targeted and destroyed without repercussion, Chinese immigrants were forced into Western urban cities in the US. To their dismay, discrimination against Chinese did not stop in these metropolitan areas, but rather it was facilitated by local city officials. In one instance, rather than simply referring to the Chinese population, Chinatowns as a whole came under scrutiny as hubs of disease. One trope, in particular, that aided in American popular culture associating Chinatowns with disease “was that the Chinese ate rats and lived in filthy, overcrowded quarters” (Zhou 2021). In the 19th century, San Francisco routinely banned Chinese from public hospitals (ibid.). In one case, SF Chinatown was blamed for bringing in smallpox:

When the city grappled with a smallpox outbreak in 1875-76, for example, officials blamed the “foul and disgusting vapors” — and “unwholesome” living conditions of Chinatown — for fueling it. Even after the epidemic ended, and after a city-ordered fumigation of all homes in SF Chinatown, the stigma and blame persisted. “I unhesitatingly declare my belief that the cause is the presence in our midst of 30,000 (as a class) of unscrupulous, lying and treacherous Chinamen, who have disregarded our sanitary laws, concealed, and are concealing their cases of smallpox,”
SF city health officer J.L. Meares wrote at the time. In another case, when the bubonic plague reached San Francisco in 1900, the city of San Francisco tried to quarantine almost 14,000 Chinese Americans living in SF Chinatown – even going so far as to propose a bill to send residents to detention camps so that they could be further separated from the public. A circuit court rejected this bill. In these instances, the vitriol toward SF Chinatown was “driven by explicit racism, a fundamental lack of medical knowledge, and pushback toward the influx of Chinese laborers competing with white workers for job opportunities. Policy prescriptions were actively informed by assumptions that Chinatowns were a “laboratory of infection” (Zhou 2021). Thereby, even when Chinatowns were created to shield Chinese people from discrimination and isolate them from mainstream society, the broader community always found ways to actively disrupt the boundaries and assert violence – whether directly physical or emotional.

Formation of New York City Manhattan Chinatown: “A Western Street with Eastern Manners”

During this unrest, many Chinese moved to the American East Coast as a means to escape the violence. The Chinese population in New York City grew from 150 in 1859 to over 2,000 in the 1870s, (Kwong cite his book here- avoid book/article titles in text). These early populations mostly gathered around a few core streets in New York — Mott, Pell, and Doyers — making up an early version of the NYC Manhattan Chinatown. To the dismay of its residents, like in San Francisco, Manhattan Chinatown was exoticized as a space of the Orientalist Other: “The faces of America [...] pass into the faces of Asian” (Cheng 2001, 40) on a Western (American) Street with Eastern (Orientalist) manners. Without local or federal support, Chinatown needed to play into

21 “A Western (American) Street with Eastern (Orientalist) Manners”
these stereotypes as a survival tactic and a source of income. Thereby, Chinatowns self-exoticized to profit from white tourism. Many communities created cheap Americanized meals, i.e. Chop Suey, and cultural experiences that catered to white curiosities.

At the same time, in 1946, Caucasian stage producer Tom Ball opened “New York’s only all-oriental night club,” *China Doll*, that featured an all-Asian cabaret act on Broadway. Perceived as what was a new, exotic novelty, these acts involved “entertainers singing, dancing, and behaving according to what “Asiatic” was expected to be, while performing “Americanness” (Chung 2018). From being told to use fake Chinese accents to being dressed in Oriental clothing by American costume designers, the Chinese community was encouraged to outwardly express their exoticness to entertain white audiences—a continuation of the concept that race was performed. These curated experiences added onto “outsized rumors of opium dens and prostitution houses that fueled Chinatown’s allure, which residents exploited by giving tours of these illicit places to visitors” (Ngu 2016). In this way,

The appeals [of Chinatown for white curiosities] combined a number of overlapping impulses – the desire to see the exotic; the pull of an encounter with a different culture; the draw of slumming; and the attraction of experiencing from a safe distance or with a police guide, racially charged urban danger . . . in a circular relationship, for many visitors, their perceptions and experiences were filtered through tourist literature they consumed prior to their Chinatown excursion. (Berglund 2005, 6).

Unfortunately, this long legacy has remained in national sentiments (imaginations) of Chinese communities, nationally, and plays into the American “racial project.”
What is the effect of this racial project? A self-contained, almost isolated microcosm of Chinese Americans within New York City that becomes a “substitute configuration” for all of Asia (Cheng 2001, 36). As such, despite having assimilated well into American society, these Americans of Asian descent “remain the symbolic alien, the metonym for Asians who by definition cannot be imagined as sharing America” as citizens (Lowe 2007, 6). In the minds of white Americans, there is already an imagined citizen-subject; one that is incompatible with the (exoticized) Asian identity. While a survival tactic in the twentieth century, the memory and legacy of self-exoticism play significant roles in the classification of Chinatowns. The historic remembrance of Chinatown as a kitschy reproduction of the Orient in its most “objecting and most idealizing forms” (Cheng 2001, 37), regardless of assimilation into American language, culture, and society plays to the detriment of the communities living there today (explored in Chapter 2).

Persistent Conflations of Communism with Chinatown:
Deepening the Landscape of Fear

Hubei is not a province that likes to eat wild animals.
There is no such thing as [eating] bats,
as mentioned on the Internet, certainly not.

Lai Yun (translation)
Restaurateur in Wuhan, Hubei Province, Excerpt from a PBS interview

The continued perception of Chinatowns as a “substitute configuration” is essential for renewed and modern understandings that conflate all Chinatowns as hubs of communist thought, exacerbating the landscape of fear. This point can be most articulated via an analysis of masks and mask mandates in America.
As mentioned previously, in December 2019, the first known case of the coronavirus infection was recorded in Wuhan, China. And while life in China had (long) returned to normal with the coronavirus pandemic contained after its first year, the United States struggled with its recovery from nationwide outbreaks. At the pandemic’s first peak in early April 2020, there was a high point of 2,752 deaths (Robertson et al 2020); right before the Thanksgiving holiday, there was a resurgence of reported cases. In a single day, cases surged by 2,760 (Tavernise 2020). The resurgence of cases, however, came as no surprise. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and infectious disease expert, Anthony Fauci, had repeatedly warned that holiday travel would worsen the COVID-19 surge and as early as October 2020 urged the public to sacrifice the year’s festivities in the name of public safety (Kamisar 2020; Bostock 2020). Still, millions—including the former President and his supporters—reproached and ignored the appeals of experts suggesting limiting travel (Talbot and Eng 2020).

Still, it is not the act of traveling, itself that was responsible for the surge in cases, but rather the nonadherence to the mask-wearing protocol on airplanes—one place where social distance to strangers is all but impossible. Upon the CDC’s strong recommendation for a mask-mandate on all flights, many major airlines (excluding Southwest and Spirit airlines) enforced company policies that require face coverings aboard their planes by late-October (McMahon 2020). While many were relieved, there was a significant growth of resistance. In one instance, a Delta passenger punched her flight attendant after being given the ultimatum: "wear your mask or leave the plane"—an altercation that caused a four-hour delay (Bremner 2020). In another case, Alaskan Republican state senator Lora Reinbold—who was banned from Alaskan Airlines after refusing to wear her mask properly—described employees as “mask bullies in full force” (Jiménez 2021). Instances like these were increasingly common; not even a month into the introduction of mask
mandates, six US airlines had released memos (McCartney 2020), indicating that they have banned nearly 1,500 individuals from flying for egregious violations pertaining to their mask-wearing policies. The resistance to mask-mandates is not novel; American journalist Liza Featherstone describes this resistance as ‘wholly syntonic with American libertarian right-wing ideology’ (Featherstone 2020). Since the start of the pandemic, the former US President Trump and his Republican colleagues have disregarded public health guidelines (Restuccia 2020), questioned the severity of the ‘fake Kung-flu’, and argued that mask-wearing is a violation of personal and civil liberties (Lovelace Jr. 2020). Whilst, for right-wing conservatives, the mask is a purported overreaction to a pandemic that impedes personal comfort; in reality, infectious disease researchers studying COVID-19 prevention have proven time and time again that face masks remain single-handedly the most powerful weapon to impede the transmission of the disease, shielding against respiratory droplets and particles that may potentially infect others (Bai 2020). As such, the reluctance to wear masks stems from the country’s deep ties with medicalized individualism and voluntary association that obscures the communal foundations of health care.

Epidemiologically, the decision to wear a mask protects others more than it protects oneself; effectiveness in prevention thereby relies on mass, communal participation. Mask-wearing, a societal project where the focus deviates from self to community, thereby becomes “a kind of proto-socialism in spirit”, an ideology that Trump and right-wing politicians have since conflated with Communism (Shephard 2019). This is most apparent through the repeated lawsuits against mask restriction orders that argue that individual freedom should supersede emergency health guidelines for the collective good (Jett and Nichols 2020). Resistance by Trump and his supporters – and their war on the national mask-mandate – is essentially an alt-right political statement and arguably—as military history writer Joseph V. Micallef describes it – a proxy war.
in a new, second Cold War (Micaleff 2020). The Trump presidency spread false information (propaganda) that brainwashed and galvanized its followers into a frenzy against the Red Scare. At one pro-Trump demonstration, individuals can be seen attending the anti-mask rally wearing a mask embroidered with the words ‘Tastes Like Socialism’ (Bowman 2020). Another Trump supporter, Tee Allen Parker, owner of the Machine Shed Bar & Grill in Texas has become the face of an anti-mask resistance movement amongst business communities after banning masks at her bar: “We don’t live in a communist country! This is supposed to be America; it’s an individual choice. There’s been nothing scientific that says masks are effective. I choose not to wear it, but I don’t let thousands of people breathe on me” (Madowo 2020).

These statements not only illustrate the way far right followers tend to conflate socialism and communism but also the (selfish) emphasis on personal health in biomedicine. As the mask becomes the ultimate symbol of a continued cultural and political divide in America, images of Asian people with masks in crowded Chinatowns and of open fish markets are deliberately utilized as a signifier of otherness, of Communism, and of contagion. Increased attacks on Asians in America wearing masks by right-wing extremists during the coronavirus pandemic is indicative of deep-rooted anti-Asian, anti-Communist prejudice (Cheung et al 2020). One instance detailed in the 2019 Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations (LACCHR) involved a Japanese man who was confronted by a White man in a drugstore parking lot who repeatedly interrogated him about his race: “Are you Asian?” Realizing that the stranger held a large knife, which he was already using to slash at the air in circular motions, the fearful victim denied being Asian. The suspect demanded that the victim remove his sunglasses and mask so that he could inspect his eyes and facial features, before attempting to stab him. In thinking about the cultural histories as explained previously, racial ascriptions of biological features and conflations
of Asianness with communist ideologies are deeply embedded in American society, regardless of political affiliation. The mask divide only adds fuel to the fire.

The introduction of a nationwide mask mandate is not novel. Various studies of the SARS epidemic—another respiratory syndrome coronavirus—have shown how communities in East Asia, regardless of Communist affiliation, all view the mask as a symbol of solidarity, intimacy, and trust during a time of grief (Sin 2014; Baehr 2008; Kleinman and Watson 2005). Thereby, only in the West do we see such a divide. In understanding this phenomenon, we must consider bodies and memory: the inscribing of (American) historical time onto flesh, the social determinants of (Asian) individuals’ biological fate, and the remembering that defines meaning (in Chinatown) in the present time.

Conclusion

To sum up, this chapter explored the connections between the science of race, politics, and mainstream media during COVID-19 by interrogating past and ongoing racial projects that contributed to the formation of Chinatowns across America and perpetuate racialized legacies and the institutional memories of Yellow Peril.

In this way, there are explanations of how colonial carceral logic seeps into modern medicine and works to the detriment of immigrant bodies, in this case, Chinese. When violence is inscribed and exerted on certain bodies, dominant groups within colonial powers set up dichotomies of “us” versus “them” or “foreigners and foes.” As such, it is no wonder that modern biology, too, understands immunology and host defense mechanisms as synonymous to border patrol and national security: “The modern border patrol agent, rolling database of possible threats, capable of discriminating between foreign and domestic ones. And if ever a body appears not to belong, the dutiful phagocyte of colonial medicine will act as judge, jury, and executioner” (Marya Chen 57)
This metaphor can be further extended to their analyses of the organ, skin. As the authors explain, skin is a liminal space, a dual site of protection and intimacy. (I understand protection to mean immunological function, but also in regard to how America’s white-skinned citizens are in many ways immune from racially oppressive systems). Skin thereby becomes a site for the exertion of racialization, discrimination, and violence—a site defining Self or Other: “Colonialism has ascribed our most sensual organ a police function, using it to apply a social order of inclusions and exclusions” (Marya and Patel 2021, 232). In this Danger model, the conviction that colored bodies are misplaced in white-dominated society persists as a vital tenet of American thought; a “perpetual state of non-belonging” (Ibid 46). When taken further, it is necessary to analyze the outcomes of health for Asian (Canton) elderly bodies who must combat COVID-19 whilst enduring the impacts of compounding external stressors such as racism, trauma from immigrant histories, and socio-economic instability (systems amplified by the ongoing pandemic). Put simply, Asian bodies are rendered hyper visible, scapegoated, and marked as inexplicably foreign; their bodies are inflamed and susceptible to disease.

Just as Chinatowns were ethnic enclaves that built their own networks that sustained the community, questions on how health can be a collective project are now inspired: How can we reimagine our wellness as a collective project and forge new forms of solidarity so that we can remedy society’s landscape of fear? Can America ever reach that potential? During the pandemic, the reluctance to wear masks stems from the country’s deep ties with medicalized individualism and voluntary association that obscures the communal foundations of health care. Thereby, how could we reimagine health as a collective project in a nation built on capitalism, colonialism, and “Self”? These are questions that we will take forward with us in the following chapters.
Figure 2. Chinatown was nearly empty in the days after an attack on a 55-year-old Asian woman, in June 2021. (Source: Mike Segar/Reuters)
In light of national assault statistics and of my newfound hypervisibility, I was wary of embarking on this project. And yet, on October 9th, 2021, I took the intercity Chinatown bus that brought me from the Friendship Gate in Chinatown, Philadelphia back to the heart and soul of New York Manhattan’s Chinatown – the site of my study and where I grew up. Over the span of my college years, I have frequented this bus, coming back for the weekends, holidays, and breaks. And yet, the familiarity of this particular trip was lost to me.

Regardless, one important distinction about this trip – aside from being extra cognizant of how loud my coughs and sneezes were on the bus – was its cost. Chinatown buses provide a phenomenally cheap alternative (service) to other big-named intercity buses, i.e. Greyhound or Megabus. On this trip, fares rose from the usual 20 USD round-trip cost to 18 USD, one-way22. I remember thinking, “Small, local businesses increasing fares during the pandemic: makes sense.” Another distinction was that often-times, the trip back from Philadelphia is a suffocating experience, but I was shocked when only five other passengers descended the stairs of a bus – a bus that would otherwise have the capacity to fill over 40 seats. Again, I dismissed such concerns: “Makes sense. Who in their right mind would travel during the pandemic without necessity?”

While I dismissed these initial observations, never did I ever imagine that the streets that usually burst with tourists and local communities would continue to be bare; the supermarkets, usually housed with enthusiastic vendors and shoppers carrying fruits in long lines, would continue to be closed; and the restaurants, usually full of happy customers with even happier stomachs, would continue to be shut down – their storefronts plastered with “For Rent” fliers and security gates adorned with fresh graffiti (Fig. 2).

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22 This fare still persists today, even as I write this (2021).
Indeed, almost two years has passed since the first case of the coronavirus, yet visitors and tourists have maintained their distance from the once prosperous and popular tourist spot – deterred by growing public anxiety likely fostered by the racialized rhetoric of the pandemic popularized in the media. Such is indicative of an underlying, subconscious American racial project that inscribes historical time onto flesh, defines the social determinants of (Asian) individuals’ biological fate, and perpetuates the remembering that defines meaning in Chinatown in the present time: a kitschy reproduction of the Orient. Simply put, decades’ worth of metaphorical associations that conflate viruses with “foreign” bodies (For more, refer to Chapter 1) play into what Omi and Winant describe as America’s racial project of intentional intolerance for immigrants – reproduced by anti-immigration sentiment, political conservatism, and disgust sensitivity (Omi and Winant 1986, 111). This effect has a dual, interconnected and compounding effect on all actors involved.23

23 At this point of my thesis, it has been well established that many Chinatowns have been erected, nationally, initially as sites of refuge for the Chinese people and later, for immigrants of a broader Asian continent. Notwithstanding, from here on out, New York City’s Manhattan Chinatown will be referred to as “Chinatown” for simplicity, unless otherwise noted.)
CHAPTER TWO

Following Four Chinese American Families:
Living with “Second-Class” Oppression During a Health Crisis

Mr. Wu, is it true that you have an internalized sense of inferiority? That because on the one hand you, for obvious reasons, have not been and can never be fully assimilated into mainstream, i.e., White America—

And on the other hand, neither do you feel fully justified in claiming solidarity with other historically and currently oppressed groups. That while your community’s experience in the United States has included racism on the personal and the institutional levels, including but not limited to: immigration quotas, actual federal legislation expressly excluding people who look like you from entering the country. Legislation that was in effect for almost a century. Anti-Miscegenation laws. Discriminatory housing policies. Alien land laws and restrictive covenants. Violation of civil liberties including internment. That despite all of that, you somehow feel that your oppression, because it does not include the original American sin—of slavery—that it will never add up to something equivalent. That the wrongs committed against your ancestors are incommensurate in magnitude with those committed against Black people in America. And whether or not that quantification, whether accurate or not, because of all of this you feel on some level that you maybe can’t even quite verbalize, out of shame or embarrassment, that the validity and volume of your complaints must be calibrated appropriately, must be in proportion to the aggregate suffering of your people.

Your oppression is second-class.

Charles Yu

*Interior Chinatown* (2020), 239
In America, immigrant groups are coerced to assimilate into a new, foreign culture whilst enduring animosity and antagonism perpetrated by existing citizens of their host country. At its conception, Chinatowns – as sites of resistance against coerced erasure – countered that narrative. Already facing legal and institutional exclusion, in New York City’s Manhattan borough, Chinatown formed out of a need for a place Chinese Americans could call home: a safe haven for old and new immigrant workers, a locale to eat “weird” foods, a refuge from discrimination, a temple to practice their own religions, and a bond with their old country. And as the ideals of whiteness became unattainable, the processes of integration “delineated an unresolved process of suspended assimilation of Asians into the national fabric” (Eng 2000, 671), inevitably translating into a process of othering. In other words, the exclusion laws that once barred Chinese peoples from participating in mainstream society created the conditions – between racism and the law itself – for isolated cities within cities. While, on one hand, the distance between Chinatown and its surrounding communities safeguarded cultural values for those living within Chinatown, the same distance became a driving force for further subjugation and discrimination from the greater American public.

With no end in sight for the current pandemic, in this chapter, I explore how COVID-19 has exacerbated the landscapes of fear of Chinese bodies and of Chinatown; the fear of contracting disease from Chinatown has also deterred tourists, such that the (social) distancing between Chinatown’s residents and the public continues to grow. Expanding into the virtual landscape, I evaluate how these expanding landscapes of fear have devolved into anger, subsequently transforming fear into blame. In associating Chinese bodies with disease and danger (refer to Chapter 1), “China virus” and related racialized associations of COVID-19 have dominated cyberspace. Moreover, Chapter 2 discusses the ways in which the virtual landscapes of fear are
interconnected and have direct impacts on what happens in the physical world. In the end, I will argue that as perceptions of the public quickly shift during the pandemic, Chinatowns too have shifted from safe havens/enclaves of support to locations that are targeted by individuals harboring racist hatred (?). In that way, the perpetrators, who commit assaults, carry with them the hate that has been driven by their intense fears into and around Chinatowns. With every slap, punch, or kick, those fears are physically and mentally transferred (like a virus) onto Chinese bodies who now not only have to worry of possible death from COVID-19 and of economic instability (from decreased tourism), but also death from assault. When videos of those assaults are recorded and shared online, physical landscapes of fear once again turn virtual and proliferate – this time affecting Chinese populations at national and global scales. And the fear propagates ... hence an Epidemic of Fear within the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Diseases, Bodies, and Disgust: Persistent Associations of Immigrants and Disease in American Society

In a time where Americans have been urged to social distance, the Big Internet has been a way to close the gap of distance between loved ones, educators, and students: a way to stay connected at the touch of one’s fingertips. However, for the Chinese and Asian community, it seems that cyberspace has only added distance between them and neighboring groups. This can be explained by evaluating the usage of racialized rhetoric to describe COVID-19.

Since 2015, the World Health Organization has called on scientists, national authorities, and the media to practice caution when labeling newly emergent diseases by geographic origin “to minimize unnecessary negative effects on nations, economies, and people” (World Health Chen 64)
Organization 2015). As Dr. Keiji Fukuda, Assistant Director-General for Health Security, WHO, explained in their 2015 press release:

Disease names provoke a backlash against members of religious or ethnic communities, create unjustified barriers to travel, commerce and trade, and trigger needless slaughtering of food animals. This can have serious consequences for peoples’ lives and livelihoods (Ibid).

When a disease is labelled by its geographical origin, whole countries or communities may be singled out as being the source of contagion – rather than the germ itself. And, unfortunately, once those disease names are established in common usage and have gone “viral” on the Internet and through social media, they are difficult to retract, no matter how inappropriate. To name a couple, “Swine Flu” and “Middle East Respiratory Syndrome” were two disease names that resulted in the blame of Mexicans and other Latinos, and people of Middle Eastern descent, living in the United States, respectively. Looking to newly emergent diseases, WHO warned that those that “first report a newly identified human disease need to use an appropriate name that is scientifically sound and socially acceptable” (World Health Organization 2015). Yet, despite WHO’s 2015 warning, disease names for COVID-19 surfaced on social media and news outlets almost immediately following its discovery.

On February 11, 2020, it was announced that the disease caused by the novel 2019 severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV2) would hereafter be named COVID-19. Not one month later, a national phenomenon of racialized rhetoric describing COVID-19 occurred. On March 8, there was a 650-percent increase in Twitter retweets using “Chinese Virus” (Table 1, sourced from Rizzuto 2020); on March 9, an 800-percent increase of the term in news media articles (Ibid); and on March 18, the term “Chinese Flu” gained international coverage, propagating through mainstream media, and bringing the landscapes of fear to the virtual space.
The “Chinese Flu” metaphorically personifies the threat of COVID-19. Familiar to the American vernacular, the usage of metaphors contributes greatly to the general understanding of the unfamiliar (in this case, the coronavirus). However, as cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson warned, metaphors are much more than poetic tools for understanding; they are pervasive in shaping social perceptions and world views (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Consequently, the term “Chinese Flu” associates the COVID-19 infection with an ethnicity that has long been viewed negatively within America’s socio-political milieu. Its popularization revives long-standing ideologies that Chinese bodies are misplaced (foreigners) that bring disease into an otherwise pure, uncontaminated, and homogenous (white) America (See Chapter 1 for further details).

Lakoff and Johnson also explain that metaphors highlight some, while hiding other, aspects of a concept – often for the benefit of hegemonic or dominant systems (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). As the term “Chinese Flu” highlights the geographical origins of disease in Wuhan, China, it implies that closing the borders off to China can protect America from the diseased foreigner – a point that POTUS Trump and his government makes clear by boasting about his success in disease control after “closing borders to China very early” (Figure 4).

It hides and draws attention away from the fact that border control will not contain an outbreak of disease that has already entered national boundaries; public health research has strongly confirmed that hermetically closing borders (whether internal or external to a country) does little to stop spread of airborne viruses (Banulescu-Bogdan et al., 2020). While America needed a prompt public health response from its government, former POTUS Donald Trump posted a series of tweets at the start of 2020 – from a now suspended account – blaming China for

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24 POTUS Trump’s ban on travel from China has been his “go-to” argument in his defense of his government’s success in preventing deaths to COVID-19.
the “Chinese Virus,” which poignantly diverted any blame from his government and their lack of preparedness to, instead, “big evil China.” The former POTUS was quick to defend his tweets, claiming his reference to the coronavirus using the term “Chinese Virus” was “not racist at all” to reporters at the White House coronavirus task force’s daily news briefing on March 19, 2020. Alternatively, we could understand the Trump’s decision to close borders and utilize disease naming as a ploy to further strengthen his government’s pre-existing anti-immigrant agenda.

Indeed, in a country with free speech as one of its central tenets, how can we be sure that the term “Chinese Flu” is actually being utilized as a discriminating term to attach ethnicity to the virus, and not simply a neutral term that refers to the geographical origin of the virus? While both arguments appear to be valid, overwhelming evidence synthesized from large-scale data driven studies points to the former of the two arguments. In fact, novel computer science metrics sorted through millions of tweets and data pertaining to the types of users who posted them; using multiple transformer models, or deep learning model programs that can link term usage with underlying mindsets, they “consistently showed that the term "Chinese Virus" is associated with different substantive topics and sentiment compared with "COVID-19" and that the two terms are easily distinguishable by looking at their context,” and the intentions by which the term was used (Chen et al 2020). Put simply, those who utilize the term “Chinese virus” are intentional in its usage to push and strengthen an already existing anti-immigrant political agenda of the America’s far right—lumped together by a bigotry that knows not of the difference.

Posts and information that circulate on Twitter and in the media, in this context, contributed to the construction of paranoid psychogeographies – described by anthropologist Ruben Andersson as “landscapes by which [Americans] can project their fear of disease onto the body of the Other.

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25 The Trump administration and his government did not act until a month after WHO declared a global emergency. Rather, Donald Trump diverted all blame away.
[the Asian]" as an effect of fear mobilized "on a massive scale via Big Data and the Internet" (Andersson 2019). In other words, Big Data and the Internet are platforms where people rally societal blame on the Asian body, but more specifically on the Chinese body. Similar to my argument that geographical distances between Chinatown and the surrounding city created the conditions by which the Other was formed, in the same fashion, Andersson explains that notions of danger and fear become entrenched in geographical distances, distances that are normalized and maintained in the realms of Big data and the internet (For more, see next section). While the internet can be used to close "the gap" in distances and increase familiarity with the Other, during the pandemic it has been used by some politicians to increase the "distance" between groups – perpetuating notions of us versus them.

The Rise in Hate Crimes:
The Interconnectedness of the Physical and Virtual Landscapes of Fear

As terms like "Chinese Virus," "Chinese Flu," "Kung Flu" (a word play on Kung Fu), and "Foreign Virus" circulated on the Internet, incidents of hate crimes that took the form of verbal and physical assaults spiked; there is an intertwining of virtual and physical events fostered by landscapes of fear. Incidents of hate crimes that took the form of verbal and physical assaults spiked (Mangan 2020; Timberg and Chiu 2020). If racism and discrimination already existed prior to the pandemic, how can we ascribe these assaults to the POTUS’s rhetoric and metaphors of the like?

To counter claims that these events are not related, one large-scale social media-based study synthesized data that tracked the "density of online media coverage with the controversial term and COVID-19 related racial attacks" (Kyu 2021). This research demonstrated clear
correlations between peak online media coverage using the term “Chinese Flu” and peaks of recorded COVID-19-related racial attacks. For instance, as shown in Figure 5, around February 2, 2020; the research revealed that a peak of “COVID-19-related racial attacks” followed a peak of online media coverage using “Chinese Flu” (Kyu 2021). Another peak with a magnitude that nearly doubles the first, respectively for both controversial term use and COVID-19 related racial attacks, can be observed in mid-March 2020 (see Figure 5); this data is analogous to the statistics as shown in the reports from Stop AAPI Hate (Yam 2021). Though the study ended in April 2020, media coverage of these terms still circulated long after. In fact, one year later, on March 16, 2021, a white gunman opened fire in three Atlanta-area spas killing eight – including six women of Asian descent.

Put simply, while a plethora of Asian Critical theorists, activists, and local communities have called for visibility of issues that address disparities in labor, representation, etc.... for decades, this was certainly not the type of visibility that they had in mind. Instead, racialized rhetoric surrounding contagion has stoked fear, resentment, and anxiety against the Chinese and broader Asian community at national – and quite frankly, even at global – scales (Haynes 2021; Tan 2021). To conclude, as sentiments of anti-immigration, political conservatism striving for national homogeneity, and disgust sensitivity escalates, exacerbated by the pandemic, so too did the visibility of hate. In their hypervisibility, the Chinese American community and Chinatown have been made vulnerable to ascriptions of blame – scapegoats of political agendas, and of the virtual and physical landscapes of (racialized) fear.

**The Rise in Racialized Fear:**
**Impacts of racially-charged rhetoric relating to COVID-19 on Chinatown**
As discussed in Chapter One, a large portion of Chinatown’s prosperity, overall, stems from the tourist economy. Historically unsupported by city and federal governments, Chinatown and its businesses have relied on tourist dependency and a network of support within its district. Hiring from the community, businesses have served as a refuge for Chinese immigrant workers, who themselves are confined to working within Chinatowns. As many immigrants in Chinatown migrated from traditionally impoverished villages in Canton, a majority are limited in language and educational background (< high school diploma). Compounded with external discrimination, many immigrants rely on employment within these enclaves. Though working in Chinatown means low wages and slim profit margins, immigrant workers in Chinatown are also most at risk when any disruptions in business arise.

During the pandemic, these communities bore the brunt of COVID-19 and its related effects earlier and more significantly (Ong et al, 2021; Yee 2021). On account of xenophobia and misplaced fear fostered against Asian establishments at the start of the pandemic, consumer spending in Manhattan’s Chinatown significantly declined two months before city wide lockdowns in March 2020. By March, spending in Chinatown dropped lower than any other neighborhood in New York City with “over half of Asian-owned companies in Chinatown said their revenue dropped over 75-percent” – including restaurants, fish markets, and souvenir shops (Yee et al., 2021). As a result, the closure of local businesses contributed to a 4000-percent unemployment spike amongst Asian American communities, city-wide, one year into the pandemic (Yee 2021).

At the same time, rent prices in Chinatown were steadily increasing. In March 2020, the cheapest apartment in Chinatown available on Trulia – one of New York City’s leading realty databases – was a one bedroom in a small apartment listed at 2500 USD, monthly. Taken together, the mounting rent prices, early declines in tourist economy, and surging unemployment has made
life in Chinatown unsustainable for businesses and residents alike. While efforts for urban-sprawl and gentrification driven by both stubborn Chinese and non-Chinese landowners in New York’s “original” Chinatown did not begin with the pandemic, the compounding factors of a fading economy and surging unemployment for its residents have driven many of the younger generations of Chinese out of Manhattan and into satellite hubs – alternative Chinatowns in New York’s Flushing, Elmhurst, and Brooklyn neighborhoods (Lee 2021).

The Destruction of Jing Fong: An attack on Chinese American identity

As rent prices skyrocketed for both businesses and homes, many businesses that were staple to the community have closed down. One of these businesses that I visited while on my trip in October 2021 was Jing Fong (金豐) – once the biggest and most renowned hotspot for Chinese-families and elderly to gather for dim sum Sundays, weddings, and cultural celebrations. Situated in the middle of Centre Street, the building that formerly housed the restaurant stood empty.

Before the pandemic, on a typical Sunday, you could see crowds gathered outside, waiting to enter the traditionally elaborate gates. The gates would open to a pair of grand, towering escalators that stretched out to welcome guests to an even grander banquet hall. On this day, it was closed; the doors were shut. The windows were blacked out. In February 2021, Jing Fong’s restaurant owners had closed the venue, its kitchen remaining open only for takeout and delivery “until further notice” per their public statement. By March 2021, more than 17 Asian-based restaurants and 139 ground-floor businesses were permanently closed as direct and indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kim 2021); among them, Jing Fong. As the last fully unionized restaurant in Chinatown, Chinatown’s largest restaurant, and New York’s largest Chinese
establishment, the closure of Jing Fong, had a profound impact on the entirety of the Chinese community.

At a March 2021 rally fighting against the closure of Jing Fong, protesters chanted, “You destroy Jing Fong, you basically destroy Chinatown.” Speaking to Grub Street, a food blog managed by New York Magazine, Liang Chen, a server employed at Jing Fong for over 16 years, spoke:

The landlord during the pandemic, especially right now, displacing us, closing the dining hall — many, many people lost their job. It would really destroy Chinatown. It’s why we spent so much time [here]. They’re sending a really bad message. Chinatown is going to change. For [those at the top], it’s great, they make money. They don’t care who lives here. We want to work, we want to live, and we want to prevent Chinatown from being destroyed (Crowley 2021).

Anxiety filled the air as the crowd contemplated what would become of Chinatown, a district already “facing gentrification and displacement of longtime residents, as well as unconcealed racism and a spike in violence against Asian Americans” (Crowley 2021). I found myself coming back to the word, “destroy.”

Destroy… No.

Destroyed… Jing Fong has been destroyed. And its effect?

Destroying… Chinatown is in shambles.

On one hand, it is true that Jing Fong’s destruction has contributed to the destruction of Chinatown and its local community, economically; in a single closure, 70 workers face unemployment – an ever-growing crisis within Chinatown. On the other hand, Jing Fong’s destruction has also “destroyed” Chinatown’s socio-cultural landscape.

Like many, the closure of Jing Fong flooded me with memories – fond moments I shared with my grandparents and great grandparents during our weekly Sunday yum cha, before taking...
my Chinese-language classes a few blocks away. *Yum cha*, a dim sum brunch, and food represents so much more than basic sustenance, but rather it is symbolic of multi-generational love: the ultimate love language in Chinese communities (Liu 2020). As cultural anthropologist Li Zhang explains in her interview with the Washington Post, “We eat together communally, sharing dishes and piling on food. It’s like a built-in cultural practice of how you express your emotions” (Liu 2020). Thereby, the forced closure of Chinatown’s cultural and gravitational center, Jing Fong, was, in effect, an attack on a quintessential human experience – a core value of the Chinese American identity.

However, this attack is most apparent to the elderly community who relies on these sites of gathering to see family and childhood friends, and even to make new friends. On my second day of canvassing Chinatown during my October visit, I met Mrs. Wong, her husband, and their home care aide who were all catching their breath on chairs near an outdoor dining patio, after a walk to the local pharmacy. As I stared in the direction of Jing Fong, Mrs. Wong, 89, pointed at the restaurant and smiled. Remembering older times, she spoke fondly of memories from before the pandemic:

I am 好高兴 [translated to an emotion more than happy; enthusiastic, even] that I can see my friends every weekend. [Though] we usually meet to eat dim sum, it is not about food. It is more about the time together. A time ago, I did not know where they were after I left the village. Now, every Sunday, I meet someone new, and we plan when to meet for next week.\(^{26}\)

Mrs. Wong looked over to her husband, Mr. Wong, who at this point had tears in his eyes. Mr. Wong – now 104 years of age (and still walking strong!) – was among the first of Chinese immigrants granted permission to migrate to America after the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion

\(^{26}\)Mrs. Wong. Canton Elderly. Interview by Kenny Chen. 10/10/21.
Acts in 1943, an effect of China joining the Allied Nations during World War II. Speaking in mixed-English, he said: “Every year, the Chinese American Legion in Chinatown hosts celebrations for Chinese New Year there. We go to eat. We see friends, other veterans, and soldiers in service now... The people I know, there are not many left...”

Their home aide got up from her chair and proceeded to gently pat Mr. Wong’s tearful eyes. “We did not go for years. We used to attend with his close friend, but he passed away earlier this year... to COVID-19,” Mrs. Wong explained. For the Wong family, restaurants such as Jing Fong were one place where reunions took place; a site of remembrance and connection with longtime friends; a source of happiness and reminiscence. Furthermore, as sites of socialization, seniors like Mr. and Mrs. Wong, who depended on them for weekly interaction with friends, had become vulnerable to isolation as well.

Thereby, although Chinatowns were built to shield their residents from outside oppression, as concentrated enclaves, they also became easy targets for hate crimes. The destruction of this site, and sites like it, due to outside agents – whether indirectly influenced by racial projects or directly by agents of gentrification – is an epitome of that fact.

The Destruction of Asian Bodies:
The Viral Transfer of Fear

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27 Mr. Wong. Canton Elderly. Interview by Kenny Chen. 10/10/21.
28 The process of gentrification - not simply an economic process - runs in parallel with institutionalized racism, whereby whole communities are erased and replaced. This form of violence - like hate crimes - is concealed in symbolic (social control) and physical violence. This can best be explained through the gentrification of Black communities across New York City, whereby to maintain gentrification, NYPD asymmetrically target, imprison, and kill Black and Brown people. Over policing in the New York City Housing Authority housing projects leads to arrests of BIPOC for petty offenses, i.e. loitering and selling untaxed cigarettes. Thereby, the process of gentrification is a form of violence that intersects with social domination of hegemonic systems (wealth, White, men, etc...).
The destruction of Chinatown did not stop with the destruction of buildings and of the economy, but rather extended to violence against its residents: an intentional destruction of bodies and of human life. As previously described, in the span of roughly 15 months since the start of the pandemic, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders reported more than 10,000 incidents – 4000 of which occurred in the span of only four months (Jeung 2021). Of those incidents, over 10% targeted Asian elderly and New York remains at the top of the list of states with a high number of hate incident reports. And while this data is important to consider, it is important to note that this data only offers a small window into the actual extent of these phenomena since such incidents tend to go unreported and elder abuse is especially underreported. This holds especially true for the dominant Sze Yup Canton elderly population in Chinatown who speak in Taishanese, a language overshadowed by the more common Cantonese and Mandarin languages.

Take Mrs. Lin as an example. Mrs. Lin, for a large portion of her life in America, lived in Queens, NY. However, so that her son and daughter-in-law could have their privacy, in 2018, Mrs. Lin had agreed to move out of their house and into one of Chinatown’s newer low-income senior buildings. Not too long after moving into her new place, Mrs. Lin experienced her first assault. Coming home after a grocery run one day, she was waiting at a traffic light across from her building. All of a sudden, she felt something wet running down her cheek: “He spat on me... I was too scared to move. I just stood there and after a while, I called my son.” Mrs. Lin stayed with her son for a few weeks after the incident but did not report it to police. “What will they do? I didn’t take a picture and I did not see his face,” she explained.

At this point in our conversation, Mrs. Lin moved closer to the edge of the park bench and reached out her phone, showing me a video of Mrs. Xiao Zhen Xie, an elderly woman who picked

29 Mrs. Lin. Canton Elderly. Interview by Keray Chen. 10/10/21.
up a piece of wood from the street and defended herself after a 39-year-old white man punched her in the face while she waited to cross at a traffic light in San Francisco. The video, footage from after the assault, showed a distraught Mrs. Xie holding an ice pack to her face in one hand while still holding the wooden stick in the other. At one point, Mrs. Xie, sobbing, tried to hit the suspect once more as he was pulled away, handcuffed to a stretcher with a bloodied face.

“You bum, why did you hit me?” she said in Taishanese. Turning to the crowd of police and medics behind her, she sobbed and repeated, “This bum, he hit me! This bum, he hit me!” The video stopped, and Mrs. Lin exclaimed:

They probably don’t even know what she was saying, but how brave! I could not do what she did… Every week, there is an incident. Now, I am scared to leave my home – not because of disease. Because I do not want to end up going to the hospital. The less I go out, the less chance I am hurt by crazy people…

To Mrs. Lin, the fear of violence is greater than the fear of exposure to Covid19 and becomes the primary reason for staying at home. Exhibiting how Chinese Americans face a double threat, Mrs. Lin shares that while everyone else grapples with how to avoid the virus itself – residents of Chinatown are also contending with mounting racism that have fostered landscapes of fear.

The concept of “landscape of fear” – explored by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan refers to physical or geographical spaces that come to be associated with fear caused by violence. Having been so frequently the site of hate crimes, Chinatown has become a landscape of fear for its residents and – as my trepidations that characterized my visit in October reveal – AAPI visitors. This situation has led to increased isolation of Canton seniors who have been forced to alter their daily lives to avoid danger (Tuan 2013). Interestingly enough, as Tuan explains, these landscapes of fear are

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30 Mrs. Lin, Canton Elderly. Interview by Kenny Chen. 10/10/21.
often devised by authorities to instill fear and subservience of certain populations \( (Ibid) \).

How that fear has permeated through all walks of society, however, is important to delineate.

Even before COVID-19, anti-immigrant political rhetoric was not uncommon. During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump rallied and monopolized on his supporter’s cognitive biases against outsiders, often associating “immigrants with ‘disease coming into our country,’” (June 11, 2019), “communicable disease” and “tremendous medical problem coming into a country” (Dec. 11, 2018), including during the 2015 primary campaign” (Lindaman and Viala-Gaudefroy 2021) Although just one example of a larger narrative of hate mongering in America, elderly in Chinatown have seemed to hold Trump personally accountable, pointing out that his position during times of COVID-19 amplified existing notions of hate. Speaking on behalf of his family, Mrs. Lin’s son told me:

When you have a man, at the top of the American government, declaring his outward hatred of immigrants and the Chinese in front of millions of Americans, you have no choice but to hold him accountable. \( ^{32} \)

In this way, it seems agreeable by Lin’s family that fear not only drives the intention of a hate crime, or racially driven assaults, in Chinatown but is the emotion that dictates community responses. Put simply, fear is enforced top-down, and the government is to blame for inciting violence and emboldening attackers to disrupt Chinatowns without consequence (See Introduction for hate crime prosecution procedures in America). Even when a crime is committed, the nuances of charging a racist act in America as a hate crime is a greatly contested issue – one unresolved even by the government. So, while acts of violence and harassment against Asian Americans

\( ^{31} \) You can think of this landscape as synonymous with a toxic work environment with an angry boss, or even high school. You are fearful that you may be called in to your boss’s or principal’s office, so you are obedient, productive, and subservient. Relatedly, sociologist Annette Lareau also explores how POC children are taught to follow strict rules and guidelines whilst white children are encouraged to break the rules and be creative (Lareau 2003). Put simply, POC are socially regulated and restricted by authority.

\( ^{32} \) Son to Mrs. Lin. Son of Canton Elderly. Interview by Kenny Chen. 10/10/21.
continue, a majority of those attacks will never be tried as hate crimes. The uncertainty that you may be attacked, and the awareness that reporting hate crimes rarely leads to any kind of satisfying outcome, is one driving factor that prevents assault survivors from reporting, recovering and moving on.

Mr. Fong, an active participant in early versions of Chinatown’s benevolent associations and a veteran (of what war), recounted his own experience being face-to-face with his assailant this way:

I was walking on the street when he walked up to me and slapped me across the face. I fell to the ground and I remember people crowded around me... Police came but I did not press charges. As an immigrant in America, you need to be an obedient citizen, do not cause trouble. Do not attract attention. Be dutiful. 33

To Mr. Fong, an immigrant cannot attract attention to oneself; a continuation of the immigrant narrative. Expanding on Mary Douglas’s notion of danger and purity, here Chinese immigrants have been conditioned to be politically obedient and economically productive citizens. Any deviation risks the label as incongruous threats (pollutants) to social harmony. The irony, however, is that despite these conscious attempts to “not stick out,” Asians and the Asian body – by virtue of racially defined, stereotyped physical features characterized by hegemony as Oriental, i.e., imagined mustard-yellow skin color, slanted eyes, and overbite – are perpetually foreign.

Still, Mr. Fong’s understanding of what it means to be an American citizen is driven by a desire to assimilate. He recounted his experiences as an immigrant in the mid-twentieth century: “I remember Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents knocking on my door early in the morning one day, accusing me of being a communist spy for China. I kept shouting, ‘I am in the United States Army’... It was not until weeks later, they let me go.” 34 Mr. Fong’s experience is

33 Mr. Fong. Canton Elderly. Interview by Kenny Chen. 10/12/21.
34 Mr. Fong. Canton Elderly. Interview by Kenny Chen. 10/12/21.
part of a larger FBI project on hunting for Communist spies among Chinese Americans, a continued narrative that conflated and continues to conflate Chinatowns with Communist hubs.

When China entered the Korean War in 1950, hysteria from the Cold War and the Red Scare over the perceived threat of Communists in the United States became heightened in the United States. This, in turn, led to suspicion of Chinese Americans. In response, the American government recruited the House Un-American Activities Committee which worked with the FBI to investigate allegations of subversion at the government and local levels. Quick to equate any kind of dissent or protest with communist subversion; this included civil rights demonstrations and support for leftist groups (Brooks 2019). Veteran journalist Gilbert Woo even went as far as to describe fellow Chinese Americans as “numbed with fear,” wrestling with the sense that “being Chinese is itself a crime” (Ibid). Thereby, legacies of that fear became transient in defining the immigrant experience for Chinese Americans: Do not stand out! Be politically obedient! And you won’t be targeted by the government and the FBI. Unfortunately, in the context of the pandemic, such ideologies did not stop society from hypervisibilizing Chinese bodies. Rather, the institutional memory of these events has shaped elderly responses to assault during COVID-19.

Mr. Fong’s response can also be interpreted through the lens by which Mares understands to be existing at the boundaries of (in)visibility: simultaneously “rendered invisible…but all too visible” (Mares 2021, 12). A common theme that emerged in discussions with my interlocutors is that existing as a Chinese American is a lived experience of knowing how to navigate the dilemmas of simultaneously being oppressed while being used as a scapegoat to oppress: the dilemmas of being hypervisible, yet invisible all to the benefit for a dominant group. These notions hide the reality which is that most elderly whom I spoke to were of low-socioeconomic background and struggled to make ends meet. Simultaneously, taking together the hypervisibility of Chinese
elderly during the pandemic and their hesitancy in reporting, Canton elderly have been left particularly vulnerable to physical and psychological forms of violence.

However, while an attacker in a hate crime seemingly does not receive justice for their actions in the court of law (Refer to Introduction for processing Hate Crimes), there are compounding consequences for elderly populations still residing in Chinatown. Mrs. Lin, explained that after her assault in 2018 and constantly seeing assaults of elderly on the media with no consequence,

I go to buy food once a week, and sometimes I do not even buy enough to last the whole week. By Friday, I finish all the fresh food and have nothing to eat...I open a jar of fermented tofu and eat it with rice for dinner. Or eat cereal until Sunday.\(^{35}\)

Mrs. Lin, as a reminder, lives alone is physically separated from her son who lives and works in Queens. As a result, Mrs. Lin, like many other elderly residents of Chinatown who are socially isolated from friends and from family suffer from food insecurity, as well as deteriorating mental and physical health. For example, Mr. and Mrs. Wong – who reminisced about their times at Jing Fong – rarely go out unless to grab fresh air. When they do, they always go out with their home aid, who herself worries about the added responsibility of care amidst a hate epidemic during pandemic: “I will always put myself in front of Mr. and Mrs. Wong, but I worry what will happen after [the attacker] does away with me.”\(^{36}\) Thereby, the landscape of fear, while heightened for elderly residents, impacts people of all ages within the Chinese community in Chinatown. How has this fear influenced disease prevention related to COVID-19 though?

One would think that combatting a global pandemic would be enough concern to think about, but as previously stated, the Chinese community has unfortunately been dealt a wild card –

\(^{35}\) Mrs. Lin. Canton Elderly. Interview by Kenny Chen. 10/10/21.

\(^{36}\) Caretaker for Mr. and Mrs. Wong. Interview by Kenny Chen. 10/10/21.
whereby they have simultaneously found themselves in a situation where they need to protect themselves from acts of direct violence. An overwhelming response across the board, when speaking to elderly in Chinatown, was that they have delayed health and wellness appointments, which has led to misinterpretations about the COVID-19 vaccine. Mr. Wong cites his friend who passed away from COVID-19: “His son brought him to get the vaccine when it first came out! He still died. What is the point?” Misconceptions, such as these, circulated fake news on social media; they falsely claimed that vaccines are neither effective nor safe, and could spread other diseases. These misconceptions may stem from the fact that Mr. Wong, despite Mrs. Wong’s pleas, has not gone to see his doctor since the pandemic started. Despite aggregated data showing 77 percent of Asian American adults as fully vaccinated in New York City, according to Bloomberg’s weekly tracker, the rollout process has been steeped in racism and limited by socioeconomic barriers invisible to aggregated datasets. Thereby, such data is incomplete and hides the fact that for many elderly residents like Mrs. Lin, who was still shaken from her own experiences of being assaulted and refused to take transportation to her preferred clinic in Flushing, Queens, chose not to leave their homes. Thereby, even when the physical bodies of Chinese American elderly are safeguarded from direct outside discrimination, they are indirectly impacted due to missed appointments that would otherwise optimize health: the slow destruction of Asian bodies.

### Conclusion

To sum up, this chapter investigated the social underpinnings of social disgust of Chinatowns, its driving effects in motivating racially driven crimes, and responses by Canton elderly. The persisting association of immigrant bodies, specifically the Chinese American body, with contagion through racialized metaphors has led to an onset of destruction – of bodies and of
community buildings that are at the heart of Chinatown. This destruction, either directly or indirectly, is a continuation of a larger American racial project that wages war against the Other. After speaking to the many elderly in my study, I can conclude that “this war” leads to a destruction of Chinatown’s economy, indirectly destroying restaurants – cultural and gravitational sites embodying the community’s socio-cultural values. Simultaneously, the violence exerted against Chinese and other Asian bodies near Chinatowns can directly and indirectly impact elderly health and wellness. Put simply, the act of entering Chinatowns – an immigrant safe haven – and the intentional decisions to cause harm are a continuation of history where national Chinatowns were leveled, and massacres were orchestrated. These acts are indicative of the deep-seated fear and hatred for immigrants who disrupt the homogeneity of America, or the image of America as a white country. That fear is spread from the assailant onto their victims – perpetuating a shared physical and mental trauma that informs everyday decisions by the broader Chinatown community. And in exploring the virtual and physical landscapes of fear, I have shown that due to the “global reaches and instantaneous nature of modern media, fear contagion spreads faster than the dangerous yet invisible virus” (Debiec 2020).
CHAPTER THREE:

Those Who Remained and Those Who Returned:
Resistance within Chinatowns

Systems that position humans as supreme over the entire web of life, settler over Indigenous, a singular religion over all other world-views, male over female and nonbinary understandings of gender, white over every other shade of skin—these must be dismantled and composted. We must reimagine our wellness collectively, not simply as individuals or communities but in relation to all the entities that support the possibility of healthy lives. These relationships, precisely because they are vital for health, are worthy of our care.

Rupa Marya and Raj Patel
_Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice_ (2021), 336

Providing for one another through coordinated collective care is radical and generative... Solidarity is disincentivized, yet solidarity is what builds and connects large-scale movements. Mutual aid projects, by creating spaces where people come together based on some shared need or concern but encounter and work closely with people whose lives and experiences differ from their own, cultivate solidarity.

Dean Spade
_Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival_ (2020), 137
Chapter Three explores how the Chinatown community, its community-based organizations, and its allies have contributed to conversations of care and of healing to remedy the landscapes of fear. After the last two chapters have probed modern understandings of racialized disease in and out of Chinatowns, this chapter will expand on how external inequalities fostered by colonialist mindsets and systems of power, in the contexts of COVID-19, contribute to a process of "inflammation" (Marya and Patel 2021).

Inflammation, as described by physician Rupa Marya and political economist Raj Patel, is the body’s natural response to infection and damage. During the inflammatory process, chemicals are released by damaged cells to induce swelling, subsequently isolating foreign antigens, and attracting immune cells (macrophages) that destroy the invader. Once the healing is complete, inflammation should subside. However, when the damage is ongoing, the inflammatory response will persist, transforming the body’s healing mechanism into what the authors describe as a “smoldering fire that creates ongoing harm” (Marya and Patel, 53). And what we get is a chronic, systemic inflammation.

What is vital to their analyses is that bodies are disproportionately inflamed: some bodies are more chronically inflamed due to the social, political, and economic systems that structure their daily lives. Communities and bodies that are most socially oppressed may have an additive impact of “toxic” exposure in their lives; such can range from environmental toxins, police violence, colonial terror, to economic debt. In tandem to biological inflammation, the stress and fear from these exposures create lasting, chronic damage that wears down these bodies and leaves them susceptible to disease. Through interrogating the influence of colonial powers on indigenous communities, Marya and Patel argued that in stripping indigenous communities of their land,
America in turn has stripped them from the substances that will allow their microbiomes and immune systems to thrive and has destroyed their overall health and well-being. Indigenous communities, as a result, are rendered more prone to chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, depression, and Alzheimer’s. In doing so, Marya and Patel suggest that there are no separations of physical inflammation and social/environmental (societal) inflammation, but rather they inform one another. While oftentimes we focus on the biological malfunctions that need to be fixed, their work reminds us that the manifestations of illness should be also be described and correlated to the relations of power and history that produce the conditions for our inflammation. Only then can chronic inflammation and health be remedied.

To that end, healing no longer becomes an individual project. Remedying societal inflammation requires a collective effort of care. In the case of COVID-19, perhaps Asian elderly bodies are placed at higher risk for developing more serious complications due to interrelated psychological trauma (stress) and physiological impacts fostered by the landscape of fear – viral fear that has permeated Chinatowns, nationally. In reimagining care that not only acknowledges biology, but rather how one’s life experiences, and embodied racism, are contributing to their disease, Chapter Three asks how community-based organizations (CBOs) are currently doing to reimagine Chinatown and elderly wellness as a collective project? How can CBOs remedy the landscape of fear and “inflammation” that has not only been introduced in the Chinatown community during the pandemic, but so deeply ingrained in American society and politics?

While a daunting task, this chapter only begins to discuss how the landscapes of fear have put the Chinatown community and its residents farther in proximity with other minority groups; in times of violence, American media has propagated the notion of minority-on-minority crime that further shifts the politics of blame, continues the cycle of transferring landscapes of fears, and
allows dominant groups to monopolize on minority disagreements. With my previous questions guiding this chapter, I will argue that although emerging from the landscapes of fear can be daunting, it requires a coordinated effort to bridge the gaps and the close distance between minority groups. Only then, is there a reconciliation of disconnection. Moreover, I argue that perhaps the landscape of fear can simply be thought of as inflammation that has permeated across racial divides. To remedy and heal divisions among racial groups is to remedy societal inflammation and to dismantle the landscape of fear.

**Distancing and (Dis)Connection**

There have been many efforts to remedy the landscapes of fear and societal inflammation by prioritizing defensive measures, as opposed to addressing the root causes of fear. In the wake of fear, Organization X, a mutual aid group dedicated to providing self-defense kits to Chinatown communities, have distributed over 25,000 free personal alarms, whistles, pepper spray, and informational pamphlets (translated in Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, etc…) across New York and California through organized events at parks and community bookstores. Through Zoom, I was able to speak to their volunteer Mei, a second-year college student who has grown up in Flushing, another ethnic enclave in New York, who has been appalled by the recent upticks in Asian assaults:

> As an Asian American woman, I live in fear that I may be slapped walking on the street. But I also get scared when I look into the eyes of the people who I share these resources with… all I can think about is [that] this is someone’s grandpa or grandma, mom or dad, sister, or brother. And maybe, just maybe, this one canister of pepper spray will save their life from a coward who preys on those who can’t fend for themselves.  

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37 Mei. Volunteer at Organization X. Interview by Kenny Chen. 11/21/20.
Generally, the most participation occurs at mutual aid campaigns and community-led public safety initiatives following an assault that has captured national attention. She describes how they usually hold a fair to give out free personal defense kits after a hate event that makes national headlines, as those are the moments where “the whole community... you can feel... is in pain, shaken up and confused about what to do.” Recounting the Atlanta Spa shootings, her team volunteered nights on end to be able to buy, package, and distribute 1,000 self-defense kits over the span of two days with publicly sourced funds. Although prevention methods have mainly been the focus of their organization, Mei reflects:

I am not sure why we focus on assault prevention and defense mechanisms, instead of looking at the root causes of why they want to hurt us and making sure they never will have the same reason to hurt someone else.

The focus on responding to hate, a symptom of systemic racism, as opposed to addressing, correcting, and remedying the root causes of it is not a novel phenomenon either.

This masking experience can be placed in proximity to the apparent valorization of cancer victims. Medical anthropologist S. Lochlann Jain explored how American culture shrouds [cancer’s] terror under a scarf of rosy hopefulness” by organizing colorful donation events and by “[lionizing] the [cancer] individual” in manners that “[diminish] the experience of... cancer” (Jain 2013, 86). In her analyses, she names Four Diamonds, a foundation started after the death of 11-year-old Christopher Millard, who shortly before his passing had written a story about a knight who goes on a journey to collect four diamonds – one for courage, for wisdom, for honesty, and for strength. His family fundamentally believed that these diamonds represented the attributes necessary for anyone to “overcome” cancer; his story not only becomes the organization’s namesake but serves as an inspiration for other children fighting cancer (Four Diamonds 2022).

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38 Mei. Volunteer at Organization X Interview by Kenny Chen. 11/21/20.
However, as Jain argues, while the valorization of cancer patients by the Four Diamonds foundation masks tragedies to provide comfort for patients going through tumultuous times, painting children who are battling cancer as courageous, wise, honest, and strong “[keeps] us from detecting the patterns” that cause cancer to begin with (i.e., the slow violence enacted by industries that release environmental carcinogens), reducing the inevitable and unjustified pain and suffering down to platitudes that fail to capture cancer’s reality (Jain 2013, 86). Failing to center cancer issues in productive ways lead to a failure of organizing around increased cancer detection and prevention. On a related note, mutual aid campaigns and community-led public safety initiatives organized after an assault on a member of the Asian diaspora gains national attention is on one part, relieving. However, on the other, it obscures the true causes of Asian scapegoatism and discrimination in America. Rather, it may be perpetuating a cycle of violence and fear that may be founded on other stereotypes. Mei asserts:

On the news, oftentimes, you hear violence is committed by people of color. When that happens, Asian communities become extravagant walking on the street, and it becomes sort of like discrimination against other minorities. Think people in hoods and how for the longest time, that was associated with perceptions of neighborhood crime. That fear, discrimination, and stereotyping was all done via the media.40

As Mei claims, recent studies have found that viral images and recordings of anti-Asian violence that circulate national media outlets are ones committed mostly by people of color. Even a quick Google Images search of Anti-Asian Crime during the COVID-19 pandemic garnered a page of images showing assaults committed seemingly only by Black perpetrators (see Figure 6). Despite that fact, a new analysis has determined that many attackers are, in fact, white (Wong et al 2021). After analyzing official crime statistics, Janelle Wong, a professor of American Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park, revealed that more than 75% of anti-Asian hate crimes and

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40 Mei. Volunteer at Organization X. Interview by Kenny Chen. 11/21/20.
incidents, from both before and during the pandemic, have been white – contrary to many of the images circulating online. These incidents and how they are portrayed have “long-term consequences for racial solidarity” Wong said in an interview with NBC News (Yam 2021).

But the racist kind of tropes that come along with it – especially that its predominantly Black people attacking Asian Americans who are elderly – there’s not really an empirical basis in that.

Such continues the cycle of societal blame on black, indigenous, and people of color communities, distances minority groups, and further shapes racial formations in America.

However, when thinking about the elderly who have predominantly stayed home during the pandemic, questions remain. If much of the media has exhibited images of Black men attacking Asian elderly, how has the Asian elderly population, as an effect, been impacted? How has social media and news outlets shaped long standing tensions between racial and immigrant groups in New York City (See Chapter 1)? In America?

Moreover, if much of the elderly have stayed home during the pandemic, what is the effect size of these mutual aid campaigns and community-led public safety rallies? Reaching back out to Mrs. Lin – who as a reminder only goes out to buy food once a week, oftentimes running out before the week is over – she did not hear of any of the self-defense events that were organized by CBO X. Thereby, ultimately, the question becomes: how much of an impact are these small-scale events having if much of the targeted audience – like Mrs. Lin – continues to be fearful of going out and is thereby disconnected from the community resources offered to them?

**Community Needs Assessment: Discrepancies Between and Across Groups**
Intra- and inter-community disagreements have surfaced regarding the correct method to combat Asian hate crimes in and around Chinatowns. One of the key topics of these conversations have been surrounding conversations of policing within Chinatowns. Many CBOs like Organization Y have been focused on coalition building and finding ways to address the root causes of violence that do not endanger members of any other racial community. In speaking to an affiliate, Ming, who is part of their litigation team, he says:

> We believe that police presence is not the answer to the problem that Chinatown is facing. Increasing police presence will not address the root cause of violence, and it will simultaneously endanger our own community and others... specifically Black Americans, who have disproportionately been targets of police brutality. It is also not a tenable long-term solution or the best use of the Chinatown communities’ resources. 41

In contrast with this position, other community members have argued, on a national platform, that ramping up police presence is a necessary resource because it is the method that elderly are most familiar with and are able to trust, in contrast to newer efforts that have emerged – including escort programs that oftentimes rely on youth volunteers to walk the elderly around the city. For instance, the Executive Director of a San Francisco nonprofit called Self-Help for the Elderly, Anni Chung, who provides food and health care support to older persons in Chinatown said in an interview with Vox: “Unless the police step in, there’s very little protection they would be getting,” going on to argue for larger police task forces canvassing Chinatowns and for bilingual training to foster trust between the Chinatown community and police (Zhou 2021). Many studies have cited a generational split of opinions regarding the matter, where an overwhelming majority of elderly have agreed that: rather than defunding and abolishing the police force at large, government officials need to do a better job of removing “bad officers.” As Mrs. Lin exclaimed: “Police will deter crime!” And she is not alone in believing so.

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41 Ming. Volunteer at Organization Y. Interview by Kenny Chen. 11/22/20. 

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These conversations are not novel, nor unique to the Chinatown community. They are, in part, part of a larger, national debate regarding the “Defund the Police” campaign, a movement that started out of a need for police reform. Stemming from national outrage regarding the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 25, 2020, and other police-involved shootings of Black persons, the campaign is divided on its goals about what the defunding movement should look like. While some activists argue that defunding means the reallocation of funds from police departments to community policing and organizations that center public health and education in underserved communities: less money invested in structures of punitive structures and surveillance, and instead more money invested in resources that address root causes and keep communities safe from the start. On the other hand, some argue that defunding means the abolition of police departments in all its forms. In an interview with ABC News, sociologist and former Boston police officer Tom Nolan argues that the roadblock stopping the movement from gaining widespread traction is misinterpretation:

The movement to defund the police has been misrepresented and it's been made into a cliché where anybody who would render anything short of unwavering support to law enforcement is cast as someone who hates the police (Zaru and Simpson 2020).

While definitions for defunding the police remain unclear, tensions between Asian and Black communities continue to grow, despite early signs of coalition building. Reacting to violence aimed at their communities, which included the police killing of George Floyd in 2020 and the murders of six Asian women in Atlanta amid a spree of anti-Asian attacks in 2021, both groups protested in unity at #StopAsianHate rallies held across the country in mid 2021; in Los Angeles and Chicago, protesters even wore “Black-Asian Unity” T-Shirts to show solidarity and collaboration in reducing violence and discrimination against all peoples of color. Nearly two dozen activists, historians, and community leaders around the country that, nine months later, no
major efforts were made to build bridges between the two groups and national talks of solidarity have gradually lessened (Browning and Chen 2021). Rather, the tensions boiled down to the ways of policing. While, more generally, Black Lives Matter activists have urged for limiting police budgets, Asian leaders have cited police as crucial to the prevention of Anti-Asian crimes. In fact, while Black Americans have been disproportionately killed by police officers, Asian Americans were among the least likely to be harmed in such encounters (Edwards 2019): while hate crimes had risen 73 percent in 2020, police killed 192 Black people in 2021 and 249 in 2020 (Mapping Police Violence 2022). To make sense of the different needs of each respective community, political scientist Claire Jean Kim argues in an article shared with the New York Times (NYT) article that Asian Americans see the police “as protectors of private property rather than instruments of social control” (Browning and Chen 2021). These sentiments seem to be supported by reports in Brooklyn’s Sunset Park district, another Chinese enclave in New York City. In June 2021, dozens of patrol cars surveilled the area for a week with no reports; hate crimes reports resurfaced immediately after the police left the area, says Paul Mak, a community organizer (Ibid). Thereby, while the conversation on defunding police and on the best ways to address hate crimes remain largely contested amongst Asian American activists, coalition building across racial groups gradually became less of a priority.

Still, the media’s tendency to amplify minority on minority violence over minority solidarity is lazy, and misleading. A prime example of that work is in Oakland, California whereby a tightly connected, multiracial coalition of grassroots organizations and independent activists have worked tirelessly to compile a memo of community safety programs with suggestions on how to best protect residents in Oakland’s Chinatown (Wang 2021). One of projects that emerged shortly after was Compassion in Oakland, a group founded by Latino activist Jacob Azevedo who
has organized more than 300 volunteers to escort fearful Asian elderly on walks and errands across Oakland. In collaboration with the citizen group, Asians with Attitudes, and Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice, a nonprofit that works to end youth criminalization and mass incarceration, this coalition hope to be able to foster interracial interactions by bringing in more Black and Brown youths into conversation with older Asian populations living along Oakland; the first team was deployed to patrol Chinatown and Little Saigon (Wang 2021). And while the Bay Area spearheads cross-racial initiatives like these, similar efforts have emerged in New York City Manhattan Chinatown like Protect Chinatown, a community-led initiative to chaperone seniors on errands, that has worked to restore the Manhattan Chinatown community’s safety and confidence. Moreover, a diverse coalition of activists have continually stocked up fridges (@BroomeBoweryFridge and @Les_CommunityFridge) in Chinatown with fresh produce from local grocery stores. These mutual aid strategies become ways that we can resist racial domination, racial hierarchies, and racial violence, situated in a landscape of fear and white supremacy that has made up America. To solve the root causes of crime and violence, we have learned from history that “We need to do a better job of humanizing each other and not pointing fingers” (Simon 2021). Through coalition building and implementing mutual aid strategies, we may be able to stop the cycle of fear and violence, resist the distancing that has been encouraged by hegemonic structures (i.e. Model Minority, exclusionary laws, etc…). In closing the distance gap, and working together, we may finally be able to understand different community needs, dismantle racial hierarchies that have historically been built up by difference, and perhaps remedy societal inflammation.

**Conclusion**

After speaking to the activists and affiliates of community-based organizations in Manhattan Chinatown, I can while efforts may not be reaching every elderly within the...
community, mutual aid strategies that take advantage of multiracial coalition building is a way to dismantle racial hierarchies that have distanced minority groups throughout America’s history. News coverage of Black Asian crime is a continuation of placing Asians out of proximity with Black communities—all to the advantages of white supremacy. While authorities that benefit under white supremacy and hegemonic structures encourage minority groups to argue over differences, they distract us from acknowledging that all of our fights, respectively, have the same endpoint: to reduce violence and discrimination against all peoples of color. While the paths to reach that endpoint may differ, it is only through working together and acknowledging our respective needs and differences can we emerge unscathed, healthy, and in solidarity—our inflammation healed.

While more research needs to be done on the impacts that the Compassion in Oakland, Asians with Attitudes, and Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice had on remedying tensions between the Asian elderly population with Black and Brown youth, I have shown that we can remedy the landscapes of fear that have been imposed on our communities. We can stop the cycle of blaming, so long as we are open to learning from the “Other.” Maybe, the “Other” was simply “Us” in disguise the whole time.
CONCLUSION:

Final Remarks

In this thesis, I have contextualized the hate epidemic amidst the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of a landscape of fear. Through tracing historical understandings of race in America, synthesizing semi-structured interviews, engaging with online discourse analysis, and reflecting on a literature review, I discovered that social determinants of contagion begin with viral fear that spreads through acts of violence. Throughout America’s conception, the nation has been challenged with obstacles that have led to suffering and injustice of the lower and working classes. As moments of confusion and suffering become untenable and exhausting, the “blame game” is a tactic to affix responsibility elsewhere. In a moment of desire to understand, (white) American people have created a mental distinction between “Us” (White Americans) and “them” (foreigners).

Despite America’s history of being built up by immigrants – foreigners – who worked at low, horrific conditions, at the first glimpse of job shortages, immigrants were to blame. At the first glimpse of viral outbreak of the 2019 coronavirus disease, America created a distinction of the uninfected and the infected. Former POTUS’s blithe label “The Chinese Flu” amplified blame against Asian peoples, making their position as “perpetual foreigners” that much more precarious. Put simply, the viral hate fostered by a landscape of fear was borne in America. It is an American Hate – hate for immigrants, hate for foreigners, hate for “pollutants of the West.” In the contexts of nationhood, porous borders seemingly separate people and make it easy to label people who are suffering – just as much as Us – as “Other.” But what are the concerns and tragedies of “Other” to the dominant white, upper classes? What are the concerns of “Other” to the (still-very much) dominant white, lower class who massacred and burned down Chinatowns in the 20th century due

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to job shortage fears? It is easier to hate and blame immigrants – people suffering just like Us, and sometimes, even more so – than to blame the real structures that oppress.

Through verbal assaults and physical abuse –

    with each punch,

    kick,

    and slur –

the viral fear is transmitted on to the immigrant...

    foreigner...

    Chinese...

    Asian body.

It is easier to hate and blame immigrants – people suffering just like Us, and sometimes, even more so – than to blame the real structures that oppress. The land, or the safe haven, by which these attacks occur is shaped into a landscape of fear. Chinatown becomes influenced by that fear. Scapegoated and vilified in the media on the false pretenses that they are to blame, multiple layers of harm against Asians living in America emerge: the contagion itself, the racism, and the fear. Fear is then transmitted by word of mouth, by videos on the media, and through experience. The landscape of fear grows and expands across Chinatowns, nationally: a collective, communal fear.
To the individual, that fear having taken hold of the body and causes physiological and psychological harm. Canton elderly, who are the most susceptible to COVID-19, are now fighting off violence, mental trauma, and fear. My thesis has found that all these forces, working in parallel, restrict elderly access to healthcare, fresh produce and food, and connection — contributing to a framework of inflammation. Inflamed bodies are especially vulnerable to disease as the body works in excess to cure the perceived problem. But how do we cure discrimination, and remedy collective and individual fears?

In response, community-based organizations have provided self-defense kits that, to some degree, are only band-aid solutions to the root causes of discrimination. At the height of the pandemic in March 2020, pacts and promises were made between activist groups across racial categorizations to work towards a common goal: freedom and liberty to all people of color. As America’s history was built on divide and difference, it seems fitting that only a collective acknowledgement of each groups’ respective needs can dismantle systems of racialized hierarchy, domination, and violence. Currently, there is a resurgence of multiracial coalition of grassroots organizations in closing the gaps and distances between minority groups; collectively working towards remedying the fear amidst the Canton elderly population, they are building bridges. A closer study needs to be done to best interpret the successes and drawbacks of such endeavors, and how it was received by the Canton elderly in Manhattan Chinatown.

Finally, I started this thesis with an argument that we must dismantle “Asian” as a monolithic category and disaggregate pandemic data to fully understand the impacts that viral contagion has had on individual groups forgotten by mainstream media. The Canton population in Manhattan Chinatown are but one group overlooked in the broader Asian American Pacific
Islander diaspora. Much work needs to be done on all those communities, and work on the Canton population in Manhattan Chinatown still needs to be done. But I am glad that I can start those conversations.

As I conclude my thesis, I only think of my great grandparents who died during the pandemic, and of the fear that they had embodied on their deathbed. I hope that this thesis may give them a semblance of peace.

公公, 婆婆, wherever you may be now, I hope you know that you, your heritage, and your community will never be forgotten.


Anon. n.d.-k. “Immense Interest in Research at the Joung Lab - Kenny3chen@gmail.Com - Gmail.” Retrieved January 6, 2022
(https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#sent/KtbxLvHgPHqwKFljPPDBTQppSshHsCZvIV).


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San Francisco's authorities, believing that epidemics of smallpox and plague originated in the SF Chinatown, passed quarantine and vaccination laws that applied only to Chinese peoples.
Figure 2. Chinatown was nearly empty in the days after an attack on a 55-year-old Asian woman, in June 2021. (Source: Mike Segar/Reuters)
Figure 3. The usage of racialized language to describe COVID-19 was a national phenomenon, and not necessarily pertaining to one specific political party (Source: Rizzuto 2020).
Figure 4. Trump tweeting about border control after naming COVID-19, the “Chinese Virus.”
Figure 5. Density of online media coverage of the controversial term “Chinese Flu” and COVID-19 related racial attacks (Credit: Kyu et al 2021).
Figure 6. A Google Image Search Anti-Asian Crime during the COVID-19 pandemic garnered a page of images showing assaults committed seemingly only by Black perpetrators – despite statistics showing that the majority of hate crime offenders during the pandemic have been White.
New York State reported its first case of coronavirus, in a woman in her late 30s who had traveled to Iran. The announcement brings the total number of cases in the United States to 76.

Figure 7. A Facebook post from the New York Times on Sunday, March 1, 2020 utilizing a photo of Chinatown despite its caption that reads: “First case of coronavirus...a woman in her late 30s who had traveled to Iran” with no mention of traveling to Chinatown or her ethnicity.
Figure 8. A Tweet from the Hill on Tuesday, March 3, 2020, utilizing a photo of a Chinese man with a mask on a train, despite having no mention that the second case of the coronavirus in New York was of Asian descent.
First case of coronavirus confirmed in Manhattan
trib.al/bRSIpEy

Figure 9. A Tweet from the New York Post on Sunday, March 1, 2020, utilizing a photo of a Chinese man with a mask standing in front of a DuaneReade in Flushing, Queens, New York – not Manhattan – without any mention of the first case of COVID-19 was from a person of Asian descent.
Table 1. 2020 Time Line of Tone of COVID-19 Coverage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Media coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 30, 2020</td>
<td>WHO declares coronavirus an international emergency.</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 11, 2020</td>
<td>WHO provides guidance to use the terms “coronavirus” and “COVID-19,” and to avoid “stigmatizing” terminology.</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 12–March 6</td>
<td>The use of stigmatizing terminology falls to negligible levels in Twitter retweets and news media articles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 7, 2020</td>
<td>Mike Pompeo uses “Chinese virus” terminology on Fox and Friends and CNBC.</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 8, 2020</td>
<td>Republican Paul Gosar tweets about “Wuhan virus.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 9, 2020</td>
<td>There is a 650% increase (compared to highest reported prior daily average) in Twitter retweets with terms “Chinese virus,” “Wuhan virus,” “Chinese coronavirus,” and “Wuhan coronavirus.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There is an 800% increase (compared to prior day) in number of online news articles using stigmatizing terminology.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. WHO = World Health Organization.

**Table 1.** 2020 Timeline of Tone of COVID-19 Coverage (Source: Darling-Hammond 2020).