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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Fifty years ago, James Baldwin penned the following words in *No Name in the Street*: “It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.” This year, amidst the weight of continued injustice that the COVID-19 pandemic has both revealed and exacerbated, Baldwin’s words are as resonant as ever. Our moment calls for bold, incisive voices—ones that push the bounds of our knowledge, speak truth to power, and articulate the means by which public policy can be an instrument of justice.

We are honored to publish many such voices in the 32nd edition of the Asian American Policy Review (AAPR). Several pieces this year illuminate, in novel and significant ways, the ongoing toll of this pandemic on the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community. They surface the degree to which trauma and marginalization have permeated not only our families and workplaces but also our culture and broader systems. At the same time, this year’s edition also offers lenses through which we can consider the enduring resilience of the AAPI community. In the face of hate, we have held space to grieve while also bringing forth new, generative modes of storytelling, political engagement, and representation.

In this paradoxical yet familiar tension between loss and hope, how do we continue to both call out inequities and build power for our community? When the dust of this season settles, many of our most complex challenges will remain. How



can we use policy as a means to fundamentally reimagine our current realities and then co-construct a different future together? These pieces affirm that the antidote to injustice does not center on withdrawal or seclusion. Our collective work, this issue insists, must instead revolve around solidarity and co-creation to disrupt the status quo. We invite AAPR's readership to join us in this endeavor as we seek a more just and inclusive tomorrow for communities on the margins.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the individuals who made this publication possible: Martha Foley, assistant director of Student Services at the Harvard Kennedy School; Nancy Gibbs, faculty advisor to the Kennedy School Journal Program; esteemed members of the AAPR Advisory Board; authors and contributors to this 32nd edition of AAPR; and all AAPR staff editors and directors for the 2021-2022 academic year. Thank you for your support and dedication to this ever-critical mission of uplifting the AAPI community through scholarship, analysis, and policy advocacy.

In solidarity,

Sarah Lin
Editor-in-Chief



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ELDER CARE IN COVID-19

Navigating Filial Duty and Loss

Jocelyn S. Chung

All my life, I was convinced that my grandparents were invincible. My paternal grandma, Keico A-ma, was a self-made entrepreneur who had lived and worked in Taiwan, Japan, Costa Rica, and Canada before immigrating to Southern California to be closer to us after my grandpa passed. When I thought of her, I viscerally heard hot oil crackling on the stove and her belly-shaking laughter as she cooked turnip cakes. My maternal grandpa was a chemical engineer turned custom broker who was charmingly eccentric, an avid tennis player, and a lover of bulk buying at Costco. He brought a Chinese chess set wherever he went in the hope of encountering new friends. My maternal grandma is a pianist and piano teacher, passing down her love of music to a roster of students spanning sixty years. She worked at a Japanese gem shop in Oahu, speaking in Japanese while simultaneously learning conversational English before leaving Hawaii to join the family in Southern California. All of my grandparents grew up under Japanese rule in Taiwan and witnessed the Chinese-led Kuomintang Party come to power after World War II. I marveled at the breadth of their resilience and knew there were bookshelves of stories behind their eyes. To me, they were invincible, until the pandemic came.

The realities of elder care during the COVID-19 pandemic have implications of navigating filial duty amidst loss—loss of presence, loss of safety, loss of social community, loss of health, and loss of life. The reciprocity of care for one's elders is the foundation of intergenerational relationships in many Asian American households. Reciprocity is viewed from the perspective of interdependence, in which mutual dependence is emphasized as essential for family life.¹ But as I write this, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken the lives of over 5 million people worldwide. Furthermore, the November 2021 Stop AAPI Hate National Report states that

there have been 9,081 incident reports of anti-Asian racism since March 2020, with elderly Asians experiencing 13.5 percent more physical assaults than the overall Asian American population.² Tangentially, existing discriminatory health practices based on ageist perceptions treat elderly lives as less valuable. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic there are, unfortunately, additional widespread experiences among Asian American elders: barriers to familial collectivity, loss of intergenerational and social relationships, food insecurity, and social as well as linguistic isolation.³

Even so, there is little documentation of or research on the intersectional realities of Asian American elder care, advocacy, and loss during the pandemic. In *Caring Across Generations*, Dr. Grace Yoo and Dr. Barbara W. Kim explain that children of immigrants bridge and broker on behalf of their parents in cultural, linguistic, financial, emotional, social, and medical decisions through childhood and then into adulthood as their parents age and face greater illness and health needs.⁴ In the pandemic,

a distance, or involuntarily separated by closed borders.

Like many other families, my family has faced unexpected illness, caretaking, and loss amidst the pandemic. We first lost my paternal grandma, Keico A-ma, to COVID-19 in September 2020. Due to social distancing and hospital protocols, we were unable to provide her care, advocate for her needs to doctors, or even be present in the final months of her life. Seeing her once in six months was heartache enough, but finally receiving permission to see her after she had already passed was shattering. The memory of her dying alone on a hospital bed haunts our memories. We joined many others in navigating the jarring task of grieving and honoring the fullness of her life while troubleshooting how to stream her funeral on Facebook Live. We toiled through the logistics and cultural compromises that felt like compounding layers of loss—for example, instead of honoring our guests with a traditional post-funeral banquet, we opted to gift our few guests with an individually packed *bento* to take home. The loss of Keico A-ma propelled our attention towards my maternal grandparents, A-gong and A-ma, and envelop them with as much support and care as we could provide.

A-gong and A-ma lived a five-minute drive away and became part of our “quarantine bubble.” My memory of the

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“These activities are more than placeholders in the schedules of older Asian immigrants; rather, they are essential spaces of linguistic and social connection.”

Asian Americans continue to navigate filial duty and intergenerational care in visible and invisible ways whether family members are geographically near, at

last two years are vivid with their presence: steam rising from hot soup on the stove, Tupperware meal deliveries to relatives, A-gong and A-ma learning how to answer a video call, updating family across the Pacific on Zoom calls and LINE messages, the smell of fish wafting through my disposable mask at 99 Ranch Market, the sounds of Taiwanese Hokkien and NHK news, A-ma scolding A-gong for going to a crowded Costco, A-gong lifting his hat for his temperature

scan at the doctor's office, nurses insisting that "only one person is allowed to accompany the patient," the steady beeping sounds in the hospital and its consistently sterile smell, black masks to match all-black outfits, live-streaming funerals and memorial services, socially-distanced grieving.

Not one month after Keico A-ma passed, we learned both A-ma and A-gong had cancer. The diagnoses fractured whatever was left of my fantasy of their invincibility. Prior to the pandemic, they were heavily involved in the Taiwanese American community in Southern California. They joined daily tennis and exercise groups at their local park, independently ventured for groceries at the local 99 Ranch, and had consistent touchpoints of community through attending bi-weekly church

activities and choir at the Formosan Presbyterian church they had attended for over three decades. My A-ma still taught piano lessons to her roster of students and was a mentor to these young

“A 2020 report by the National Alliance for Caregiving found that the number of Americans providing unpaid care has increased over the last five years with nearly one out of five Americans (21.3 percent) providing unpaid care to an adult.”

musicians. These activities are more than placeholders in the schedules of old-er Asian immigrants; rather, they are essential spaces of linguistic and social connection.

Ada C. Mui and Tazuko Shibusawa explain how elders with small social circles are particularly vulnerable. Communities promote a sense of social integration by providing elders group membership and a place to maintain social roles.⁵ The majority of Asian immigrants immigrate in mid-life, and a third do so after the age of sixty, resulting in the loss of existing social support networks. Those who immigrate in their mid to later life are more likely to have a smaller social network due to discontinuity and severed relationships, a weakened support system, and networks that are often stretched

thin because of geographical distance. Consequently, the creation and maintenance of social networks is both difficult yet essential to the lives of Asian elders. While there is a lack of reporting and research on how isolation during COVID-19 has affected the mental and emotional health of Asian elders, we can infer that the loss of social community experienced by our elders only add to the existing difficulties of living in a pandemic. A *Los Angeles Times* article interviewed Asian elders 65 and older

at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Respondents expressed feelings of isolation, loss of routine, weakening connections with their communities and social circles, and anxiety about distance from family members across the Pacific.⁶ In addition, an August 2021 US Census Bureau survey found that Asian Americans are more likely to report fear of going out as a reason for food insufficiency during the pandemic.⁷ Likewise, social distancing mandates, limited gatherings, and pandemic-related fears

“With Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders constituting the fastest growing ethnic group sixty-five years and older in the US today, and the projection that fifteen percent of the total US Asian Pacific Islander population will be over the age of sixty-five by 2050, there is a unique and growing need for services to assist Asian American elders.”

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either disrupted or completely extinguished essential life-giving activities my grandparents engaged in.

With the loss of my grandparents' daily routines and social community, my family navigated their dual cancer diagnosis through caregiving, companionship, and medical advocacy. A 2020 report by the National Alliance for Caregiving found that the number of Americans providing unpaid care has increased over the last five years with nearly one out of five Americans (21.3 percent) providing unpaid care to

an adult.⁸ A previous AARP report on Caregiving Among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders also found that Asian Americans (of Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, and Asian Indian ethnic backgrounds) were twice as likely to be caring for a parent and were simultaneously juggling work and caregiving responsibilities of both older and younger family members.⁹

My family joined numerous other families who navigated the world of caregiving amid added pandemic limitations. We adjusted to working and

schooling from home, translating and advocating at doctor's appointments and on phone calls with health insurance companies, mediating the emotional and mental well-being of family members, and coordinating drop-offs for food and groceries. However, after a year-long battle with cancer, A-gong passed away in September 2021. His loss reverberated through our family as we had to navigate again the painfully recent realities of grieving and funeral planning for another grandparent. Even as A-ma continues to battle cancer and the pandemic continues to persist, my childhood perspective of my grandparents' invincibility has been eclipsed by the sobering understanding of their fragility.

With Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders constituting the fastest growing ethnic group sixty-five years and older in the US today,¹⁰ and the projection that fifteen percent of the total US Asian Pacific Islander population will be over the age of sixty-five by 2050,¹¹ there is a unique and growing need for services to assist Asian American elders. As Asian Americans continue to navigate loss, filial duty, and caregiving for their elders during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a compounding need for research and visibility regarding the complexities of these experiences. In addition to Tupperware soup deliveries, we need to make visible new instantiations of and extensions to filial duty to our elders during and beyond the pandemic. Ultimately, the flourishing of our elders ensures the flourishing of us all. Despite the disorientation of the past two years, my grandparents modeled unwavering resilience and love that filled the voids of displacement and loss. And perhaps it is here that I understand their invincibility anew. ■

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ANTI-ASIAN RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

Implications within the Field of Medicine

Cindy H. Liu, PhD

Justin A. Chen, MD, MPH

AN IMPORTANT MOMENT FOR AAPI VISIBILITY

Escalating violence against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) has occurred within a backdrop of xenophobic rhetoric and blame against China, with politicians including President Donald Trump referring to severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and the disease it causes (COVID-19) as the “China Virus” or “Kung Flu.” Today’s sentiments echo prior and repeated scapegoating of this group for public health crises, e.g., the bubonic plague in the late 1800s.¹ Medicine is not exempt from the many blind spots in society’s treatment of AAPIs.

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A thorough knowledge of how the “model minority myth” operates within medicine is necessary to understand these blind spots. The “model minority myth” is often applied to AAPIs given the high median income and education levels of certain AAPI ethnic groups, and seemingly positive characterizations portraying the community as hard working, high achieving, and maintaining a low political profile, especially among individuals working within the field of medicine. The term “model minority” may appear to be rather complimentary, especially if it is well-received by AAPIs themselves.

However, the “model minority” concept conceals and minimizes health issues. AAPIs are screened less for cancer despite it being their leading cause of death,² and providers are less likely to speak to AAPI women regarding postpartum mood symptoms despite greater susceptibility to postpartum depression.³ Most insidiously, the notion of a “model minority” sets up a divisive contrast with other minorities, who are then blamed for their own health and economic disparities. The “model minority” term gained ascendancy in the mid-20th century to strategically

“Lower rates of NIH funding for major grants and career awards also reflect and reinforce the ‘bamboo ceiling effect,’ or impediments to career advancement among AAPIs across industries.”

undermine efforts to enact race-specific social policies. AAPIs were cast as an exemplar to demonstrate the importance of personal effort, shifting attention away from underlying structural disparities.⁴ The continued reference to AAPIs as a model group perpetuates the fiction that structural racism is not a concern, manifesting in a “You are doing just fine” attitude toward AAPIs, while relaying to Black and Latinx communities that “Others are doing well, why aren’t you?” The model minority stereotype initially embraced by many AAPIs was a welcome alternative to the prior “Yellow Peril” label, yielding an uneasy collusion that is now being exposed as the hollow prize it is in the era of COVID-19.

Critically, this stereotype misleads policy makers to overlook health issues that affect more vulnerable communities within the diverse AAPI umbrella.⁵ Limited data and reliance on aggregated data both contribute to the diversion of attention away from significant health risks faced by certain subpopulations. For instance, Filipinos and South Asians show a higher rate of diabetes relative to non-Hispanic Whites;⁶ in a cancer registry study, Korean and Southeast Asians showed the largest increases in

the incidence of breast cancer from 1988-2013.⁷

Despite their high median economic status, AAPIs have the largest income inequality of any racial/ethnic group in this country.⁸ Additional contributors to the omission and/or under-sampling of AAPIs in research include limited funding, translation of materials, and community engagement. Despite an urgent need for resources to rectify these barriers, only 0.17 percent of the overall National Institutes of Health (NIH) budget between 1992 to 2018 was committed to research focused on AAPI health.⁹ Lower rates of NIH funding for major grants and career awards also reflect and reinforce the “bamboo ceiling effect,” or impediments to career advancement among AAPIs across industries.¹⁰

Although racism has considerable health impacts,¹¹ racism itself is not well described or taught within medicine as a risk factor. Aside from racially motivated physical harm, AAPIs are exposed to stress associated with everyday discrimination including microaggressions.¹² Structural racism is an important social determinant of health, exerting harmful effects on those impacted.¹³ A major problem is that this history, and the means for addressing racism and discrimination generally, have been omitted from both general and medical education. Prior generations of medical providers have not received any training on these topics, directly contributing to

the persistence of structural racism. The limited research that exists on this topic suggests that AAPI medical students perceive their medical school learning environment more negatively and report higher levels of stress than White students, in part due to experiences of bigotry and outright harassment from clinical supervisors as well as inequitable performance evaluations.¹⁴ A recent review found that in comparison to other minority groups, there is an overall lack of research on AAPI medical students' experiences.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

Current advocacy efforts for policy change within medicine should include AAPI health needs. Healthcare providers need to be aware of the significant history of anti-Asian racism and structural discrimination such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and understand its impact on both the physical and mental health of AAPI patients.^{15,16} Clinicians must understand how AAPIs have traditionally been perceived in the US, and how such perceptions can in subtle and complex ways perpetuate anti-Asian sentiments, mask real health concerns, and reinforce negative health impacts. These actions can help facilitate support for AAPI and other marginalized groups without reinforcing a myth that conceals health concerns among AAPIs while diverting attention from other minorities.

Data disaggregation should be planned in advance and supported by government and funding agencies. There is now an opportunity to invest in AAPI health with data collected from COVID-19-related research. Additional resources for engaging the community, including translation and communication of materials for a range of Asian subgroups, can reduce sampling biases which conceal health concerns.

Clinical care should consider the role of racism as a risk factor for health.^{17,18} Providers should understand the effects of racism on patients' presenting problems and develop facility in asking their patients if they have experienced racism.¹⁹ The effects of structural racism may persist even in the absence of interpersonal discrimination. As part of much-needed

“Current advocacy efforts for policy change within medicine should include AAPI health needs. Healthcare providers need to be aware of the significant history of anti-Asian racism and structural discrimination such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and understand its impact on both the physical and mental health of AAPI patients.”

reforms within the field of education, anti-Asian racism should be actively examined and taught within medical schools.

The current moment presents an opportunity for the medical field to confront and correct the biases that uphold anti-Asian racism and discrimination.²⁰ The evidence and path for doing so is clear if we can marshal a commitment to engagement and overcoming inertia. We are witnessing a pivotal moment in history in which such change within the medical field is not only possible, but necessary. ■

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COMBATING EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION AGAINST SIKHS AND OTHERS

Religious Rights, Personal Protective Equipment, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Amrith Kaur Aakre
Sim J. Singh Attariwala

In May of 2020, as global anxiety around the COVID-19 pandemic continued to climb, a seemingly feel-good story emerged out of Montreal, Canada.

Dr. Sanjeet Singh-Saluja, an ER doctor at McGill University Health Centre, shared in a viral video how he and his brother, also a physician, made the difficult choice to sacrifice their religious practices for the sake of their careers.¹ As Sikhs, they maintained unshorn facial hair as an article of faith. However, because N95 respirators were not permitted for use by those with facial hair per their hospital's guidelines, the brothers felt compelled to shave.

Dr. Singh-Saluja and his brother viewed their choice as a reflection of *sewa*, the Sikh concept of selfless service. And while their commitment to the medical profession during a pandemic is admirable, their decision—and the popular framing of that decision by the Canadian government and media as a morally superior and necessary choice—raises a complicated question: should religious minorities feel or be obligated to make such sacrifices in the workplace, or can policies be made more inclusive so those choices are unnecessary?

In the United States, each individual's faith is theirs to exercise as they see fit. From a legal perspective, the notion that one should be pressured or forced to choose between their faith and their career brings to the forefront the need to more fairly and inclusively apply rules and procedures in the workplace.

As legal and policy experts working for the Sikh Coalition, the largest Sikh civil rights organization in the United States, we are extremely familiar with matters of employment discrimination. Sikh articles of faith—including *keshi*, the maintenance of unshorn hair (including facial hair), and the *dastaar*, or turban—are frequently targeted by dress and grooming requirements in professions that include

uniforms (e.g., law enforcement) or in public-facing roles (e.g., the entertainment industry).² Our organization contends that many such requirements are outdated—that is, an employer’s aesthetic desire for uniformity should not supersede an individual’s religious freedom—and in many cases there are reasonable alternatives to sacrificing one’s faith. It is the employer’s responsibility to recognize and provide those alternatives as per their obligation to respect the employee’s protected rights.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, in the absence of clear government standards or guidelines on what constituted adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), many healthcare organizations began to rely on the N95 respirator as the only viable option. However, there are certified PPE alternatives that provide equivalent or better protection for the wearer regardless of facial hair—namely, the Powered Air Purifying Respirator (PAPR), which provides full coverage protection and meets all appropriate safety regulations.³ Given that policies in many US workplaces predominantly referenced N95s and did not provide clear guidance for the appropriate use of PAPRs or other PPE alternatives, we found that many employers were unprepared to make accommodations for Sikh and other healthcare employees who maintained facial hair.⁴ Many of these employees were also left without an understanding of their rights; some

chose to shave preemptively, others felt pressured or were ordered to do so, and still more developed their own uncertified alternatives (e.g., layering N95 respirators with additional cloth masks) to try and protect themselves and others.⁵

The need for an N95 alternative was not limited to the Sikh community. Other religious minorities, including some Muslims and Jews, maintain facial hair for faith reasons.⁶ N95s also proved inadequate at providing a seal for many individuals with facial deformities as well as women, who generally have narrower faces than men.⁷ Shave orders also adversely impacted many Black and Hispanic workers with the medical condition pseudofolliculitis barbae (PFB), which affects up to 60 percent of African American men and causes a severe and painful rash after shaving.⁸

To solve this problem, the Sikh Coalition has issued guidance to workers and coordinated with hospitals, medical schools, and other employers in the healthcare industry to articulate Sikh employees’ rights, ultimately helping individuals secure more than twenty accommodations for a PAPR or other appropriate PPE. Affected clients have included doctors, nurses, medical and dental students, emergency responders, and others. The issue, however, is larger than these individual cases. Accordingly, over the past two years our experts have submitted recommendations and delivered testimony, resources, and training to government agencies like the

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, US Department of Health and Human Services, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health—all

“All workplaces need access to appropriate PPE for those in need of religious and medical accommodations. This requires proactive investment in research and development for alternative PPE beyond PAPRs, including technology that may reduce the cost and ecological impact of currently available PPE, as well as advancements into more workable solutions that further protect people from pathogens and chemical exposure.”

to improve policy around PPE and religious accommodations.⁹

Chief among our recommendations is increased accountability for employers to provide religious accommodations consistent with their obligations under constitutional and statutory provisions at the federal and state levels. It is not incumbent on an employee, or a civil rights organization, to advocate for a religious accommodation: employers are responsible for proactively providing for the safety of *all* of their employ-

ees, and considering the employee’s rights—including the right to religious practice—when doing so. The profound effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on PPE protocol for the healthcare industry makes this point all the more essential for the future.

It is also critical that workplace policy mandates are interpreted as subject to all relevant protections afforded to employees and consistent with employers’ legal obligations. In many of the individual cases we worked on, employers took existing regulations proclaiming that those with facial hair could not be fitted for an N95 at face value, and failed to consider whether these regulations were fair, what the equal employment repercussions were under federal and state anti-discrimination laws, or whether alternative accommodations could

allow employees to remain working safely while maintaining their religiously-mandated facial hair. In each case, we challenged the employers to interpret the Centers for Disease Control and OSHA regulations like any other policy: in conjunction with constitutional and statutory protections for employees which require employers to provide reasonable accommodations absent undue hardship.¹⁰

Both of these recommendations will be easier to implement with a readily

available supply of alternative PPE. All workplaces need access to appropriate PPE for those in need of religious and medical accommodations. This requires proactive investment in research and development for alternative PPE beyond PAPRs, including technology that may reduce the cost and ecological impact of currently available PPE, as well as advancements into more workable solutions that further protect people from pathogens and chemical exposure. There also needs to be an understanding that our policies must evolve in an unbiased manner to reflect the needs of a diverse workforce.

The intersection of religious rights, PPE constraints, and the urgency of the COVID-19 pandemic made clear the need for better guidelines that fairly and consistently interpret the law and hold employers accountable when they fail to respect their employees' rights. But all told, these policy recommendations—and the broader need for policy-based guardrails to prevent Sikhs and others from being forced to choose between their faith and their career when it comes to PPE—are a symptom of larger issues with workplace discrimination against individuals from minority communities. The CDC itself has acknowledged that:

“... [R]acism also deprives our nation and the scientific and medical community of the full breadth of talent, expertise, and perspectives needed to best address racial and ethnic health disparities. To build a healthier America for all, we must con-

“These problems are larger than just the healthcare industry; though the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted new specific challenges, religious discrimination in the workplace is a longstanding and systemic issue.”

front the systems and policies that have resulted in the generational injustice that has given rise to racial and ethnic health inequities.”¹¹

As mentioned above, Sikh Americans face discrimination through outdated and arbitrary uniform and grooming requirements, workplace segregation practices that keep us out of the public eye, and even prejudice-rooted cases of harassment, retaliation, or termination based on our perceived or actual faith, nationality, or ethnicity. These problems are larger than just the healthcare industry; though the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted new specific challenges, religious discrimination in the workplace is a longstanding and systemic issue.

Employers must be incentivized to protect their employees’ rights and held accountable when they do not. Now is the time to update our laws and policies to address the failures leading to these discriminatory practices across the public and private sectors. No one should be presented with a false choice between their career and the practice of their faith. ■

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A CALL TO ACTION

Addressing the Historic Underfunding of AAPI Communities

Li Lu

The rise of hate against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the need to better support AAPI communities across our country—communities that have historically been drastically underfunded and under-resourced. This article focuses on how the philanthropic community and beyond can close critical gaps in support for on-the-ground organizations and contribute to a larger process of building the infrastructure needed to better support, protect, and celebrate the 23 million AAPIs living in the US.

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ANTI-AAPI HATE AMIDST COVID-19 AND THE FORMATION OF TAAF

In early 2020, the world was just starting to wake up to the realities of COVID-19. As we familiarized ourselves with what was happening and how we were supposed to respond, most of us learned for the first time what it meant to socially distance, wear a mask in public, and quarantine. However, we also learned that not all communities were experiencing the pandemic the same way, even from its earliest days.

I saw headline after headline detailing attacks and hate incidents targeting AAPIs across the country. With a great sense of concern in my heart, I started to talk to some of my friends, including Jerry Yang, Josh Ramo, Peng Zhao, Rick Niu, Joe Bae, and Joe Tsai, who were also seeing these stories unfold. As we kept the conversation going, this group eventually became key partners in the formation of The Asian American Foundation (TAAF). I also got on the phone with Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), who informed me that ADL was

While the model minority myth has led to the perception that AAPIs are financially secure and well-represented, the truth is that our communities are diverse and have a wide range of disparate needs.

tracking the data behind the gruesome reality we were seeing on the news. ADL has set the gold standard for how to identify and root out hate, and Jonathan has been instrumental in leading the organization's invaluable efforts. ADL's data showed that these incidents were not isolated events, but rather symptoms of a crisis in which AAPIs were being blamed for the novel coronavirus.¹

We know now that those early indications of hate were just the beginning. Anti-AAPI hate reached stunning heights as a consequence of anti-AAPI sentiment expressed by prominent figures that allowed AAPIs to be scapegoated for the pandemic. In fact, Stop AAPI Hate reported that of the 9,081 anti-AAPI hate incidents flagged from March 2020 to June 2021, 48.1 percent included at least one anti-China or anti-immigrant statement.² Of the reported hate incidents that involved verbal attacks towards the victims, over 20 percent featured language that explicitly blamed people of Chinese descent for causing the pandemic.³ The hate was so strong and so prominent in American cities that a March 2021 study by the US Census Bureau found that AAPI households were more than twice as likely as White respondents to report food insecurity because they were afraid to leave their homes to get groceries.⁴

While the rise in hate has been astonishing, anti-AAPI sentiment is not new. Our country has a long history of racism and xenophobia towards AAPIs, including the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the internment of Japanese Americans in the 1940s, the post-9/11 rise in hate incidents against South Asians, and what we're seeing today.⁵

In addition to experiencing hate, issues facing AAPI communities such as income inequality⁶ and underrepresentation⁷ across American society are perpetually overlooked. While the model minority myth has led to the perception that AAPIs are financially secure and well-represented, the truth is that our communities are diverse and have a wide range of disparate needs. Based on data from 1970 to 2016, the distribution of income among AAPIs went from being one of the most equal to being the most unequal among America's major racial and ethnic groups.⁸ This jarring trend both illuminates the diversity of economic realities across AAPI ethnic groups and stands contrary to reductive, misplaced stereotypes about AAPI communities' financial prosperity and success.

For me, this was all very personal. When I came to the United

States as a young man, I was welcomed with open arms. I was able to complete my education here, become a businessman, and live the American Dream. But the hate that was spreading as fast as COVID-19 made it clear that that dream was under serious threat for the millions of AAPIs living here. I couldn't bear that any person from my community would be denied the same chance I got to pursue my dreams.

After my phone call with Jonathan, we knew something needed to be done. Jonathan Greenblatt, Josh Ramo, Jerry Yang, Peng Zhao, Rick Niu, Joe Bae, Joe Tsai, and I gathered a group of business and philanthropy leaders to figure out how we could make the greatest impact. We wanted to address not only the growing hate in light of the pandemic, but also these broader, systemic challenges facing our communities.

As we got to work building what would eventually become TAAF, we became increasingly aware of just how deep-seated philanthropy's underinvestment in AAPI communities has been. We learned that, shockingly, AAPI communities have historically received less than 0.5 percent of charitable giving from foundations.⁹ This lack of investment has serious human consequences and hinders the ability of organizations to effectively serve our communities. While these statistics were startling to hear, they demonstrated to us that there was enormous opportunity to make real progress if we built the right kind of organization committed to closing these gaps in resources and building the infrastructure needed to better support, protect, and celebrate AAPI communities.

In May 2021, after a year of planning and fundraising behind the scenes, we publicly launched¹⁰ TAAF as a convener, incubator, and funder committed to accelerating belonging and prosperity for AAPI communities. Thanks to contributions from foundations, corporations, and individuals, our launch marked the largest philanthropic commitment in history by Asian Americans fully focused on supporting AAPI causes.

TAAF'S STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

In our first year as a public organization, we have been hard at work building a lasting infrastructure and bringing to bear more resources for AAPI communities than ever before. We have grown the focus of our work to cover several priority areas, including:

- **Unlocking Resources.** AAPI communities and organizations are severely under-resourced by the philanthropic sector. From its inception, TAAF sought to play an important role in solving this perennial issue by making historic investments across our communities. Upon our founding, mem-

bers of TAAF's Board including Joe Bae, Joe Tsai, Jerry Yang, Peng Zhao, Sheila Lirio Marcelo, and myself personally committed \$125 million to be invested into AAPI organizations and causes over the next five years—the largest philanthropic commitment in history made by Asian Americans fully focused on supporting AAPI communities.¹¹ In addition to our Board's initial commitment, TAAF launched the AAPI Giving Challenge urging leaders from business and philanthropy to make a five-year commitment to supporting AAPI communities and causes.¹² Just after launch, TAAF announced that we raised \$1.1 billion of donations and in-kind commitments to date.¹³ This was an astounding breakthrough that has created strategic partnerships consisting of organizations and individuals standing up and saying they're willing to do more for AAPIs. Now, TAAF is working with some of those partners to deploy their commitments effectively and offer other philanthropic organizations a model for how they can support AAPI issues.

- **Anti-Hate.** As hate and violence targeted at AAPIs persists at alarming rates, TAAF is committed to keeping our communities safe now and in the future. This is why we've invested resources into creating tools such as the Decoding Hate Tracker¹⁴—an open-source hate incident tracker developed in conjunction with Stop AAPI Hate and Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC) to monitor attacks on our communities on social and news media. This tracker continues to serve as a cornerstone of our anti-hate efforts and seeks to develop streamlined data reporting standards for AAPI communities. TAAF has also supported the development and design of other tools such as a Rapid Response Toolkit¹⁵ and Documenting Anti-AAPI Hate Codebook¹⁶ in partnership with Stop Anti-AAPI Hate, as well as InterFaith Youth Core's interfaith mobilization toolkit¹⁷ for college campuses. TAAF also launched our Anti-Hate National Network¹⁸ in 2021 to provide greater coordination and collaboration between a diverse set of organizations working to combat anti-AAPI hate by assembling them as part of a shared effort to better ensure resources get to where they are needed. The network includes AAPI Action Centers¹⁹ led by on-the-ground partner organizations that will serve as hubs for addressing hate in Chicago, New York City, and Oakland. It also includes TAAF's AAPI Emergency Relief Fund in partnership with GoFundMe, which drives the quick deployment of resources to victims of anti-AAPI hate and violence. All of these efforts aim to create new models for individuals, community advocates, nonprofit organizations, and

government officials to mobilize around tackling hate at both the local and national level.

- **Data and Research.** The lack of disaggregated data and research on AAPI communities has undermined attention on AAPI issues for far too long. In order to address this, TAAF seeks to develop common data collection standards that better track incidents of hate and violence targeting AAPI communities. Simultaneously, we hope to fund research that clearly reflects the AAPI experience for future policy making, advocacy, and philanthropy. TAAF also co-hosted the “Evidence to Action: Building AAPI Inclusion in Federal Policy”²⁰ panel discussion to mark the release of an Urban Institute study²¹ funded by TAAF, which provides recommendations for AAPI advocates to consider to better address challenges faced by AAPI communities across a number of policy areas. TAAF is also funding a groundbreaking, multi-pronged research study led by the Pew Charitable Trust that seeks to capture both qualitative and quantitative insights about AAPI identity, experiences, opportunities, and challenges. Our investments in new bodies of research are a part of larger efforts to address key gaps in community infrastructure, build community power, and accelerate efforts to help solve challenges currently facing AAPIs. TAAF will continue working with and convening leading national researchers on this bucket of work.
- **Education.** Two key issues impact AAPIs across American education systems: 1) some groups within our communities face disproportionate barriers to inclusive education,²² and 2) AAPI history is rarely taught meaningfully in schools, if at all.²³ To help address these issues, TAAF has been committed to improving educational access for AAPIs and seeding the creation of K-12 and higher education curricula that reflect AAPIs as part of the American story. That’s why we support Asian Americans Advancing Justice Chicago and the Asian American Caucus Education Fund as they implement the TEAACH Act²⁴ in Illinois—a historic law that requires the inclusion of Asian American history studies in every public school in the state. We have supported curricular efforts through providing a grant to The Asian American Education Project,²⁵ which partners with UCLA’s Department of Asian American Studies and Stanford University’s Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE) to provide K-12 curriculum lessons for teachers and school districts to teach AAPI history as a core part of American history classes. We hope these efforts catalyze action. TAAF

encourages the philanthropic community to understand its potential to be an integral driver of improving how AAPIs experience and see themselves represented in the American education system.

This spring marks the one-year anniversary of the **Atlanta spa and Indianapolis FedEx shootings**, the thirty-year anniversary of the **Los Angeles riots**, and the eightieth anniversary of the signing of **Executive Order 9066**, which ordered the incarceration of Japanese Americans. As a country, we must reflect on these incidents and take collective action to work towards a better tomorrow.

- **Changing the Narrative.** As evidenced by available data from Stop AAPI Hate, a key contributor to anti-AAPI hate are misconceptions that portray AAPIs as perpetual foreigners or in a disparaging light. TAAF has identified an opportunity to alter harmful perceptions of AAPI communities through narrative change approaches that utilize storytelling as a means for shifting dominant beliefs. TAAF spearheaded a project and cultural campaign called See Us Unite²⁶ to lead public awareness efforts to help change the story of AAPIs and ensure we are seen as part of the very fabric of American life and culture. The launch of the campaign was commemorated by the “See Us Unite for Change” Global Special²⁷ hosted by Ken Jeong, which explored the contributions of AAPIs to our society. And in November 2021, TAAF supported the introduction of Sesame Street’s first-ever Korean American cast member, Ji-Young.²⁸ We helped promote her introduction to the world by sponsoring “See Us Coming Together: A Sesame Street Special,”²⁹ which was an important milestone for educating children about diversity and representation. Ultimately, TAAF is making investments in AAPI storytelling to help promote positive and diverse AAPI narratives in the media to dispel misguided myths about our communities while fostering a greater sense of AAPI belonging and inclusion in American culture.

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These projects are only the highlights of our work so far. We're just getting started. As we look ahead, we plan to continue advancing our mission, as it's absolutely critical that we keep the momentum going. News cycles come and go, but hate and inequity affecting AAPIs have persisted throughout our country's history, and have continued into 2022. This spring marks the one-year anniversary of the Atlanta spa and Indianapolis FedEx shootings, the thirty-year anniversary of the Los Angeles riots, and the eightieth anniversary of the signing of Executive Order 9066, which ordered the incarceration of Japanese Americans. As a country, we must reflect on these incidents and take collective action to work towards a better tomorrow.

TAAF is doing its part by working with our network of grantees and partners to mobilize and drive resources toward long-term solutions and to build AAPI community advocacy infrastructure for years to come. We're particularly interested in empowering existing local-level organizations. For example, TAAF funds the Asian American Federation as our New York City AAPI Action Center partner, which leads the Hope Against Hate Campaign to offer self-defense classes, mental health support, bystander training, and de-escalation strategies. We're also going to continue engaging with the business community, working closely with our AAPI Giving Challenge partners.

OUR HOPE FOR A WAY FORWARD

AAPI organizations and advocates cannot do it all alone — we need everyone, from public officials to everyday Americans, to step up and do their part to better support AAPI communities. Here are some ways we all can help:

- **Philanthropic leaders** must be intentional and committed to increased giving to AAPI organizations and causes to turn the tide on how our industry shows up for AAPI communities. TAAF's recent activities, outlined above, can serve as a framework for other philanthropic leaders looking to engage in giving and partnering with on-the-ground support organizations. We would welcome the opportunity to work alongside any funder that shares our hopes for the future of AAPI communities.
- **Public officials** at all levels of government must support legislation that invests in our communities' safety and strengthens anti-AAPI hate incident tracking and accountability measures. While H.Res.908³⁰ and the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act³¹ were important steps in the right direction, the continued surge in anti-AAPI violence in the year since makes clear that there's still a lot of work to be done.

- **Individuals** can make a direct impact too. In fact, we won't make the progress we need unless individuals rise up and take action in their communities. If you see a hate incident, report it to local authorities. Sign up for bystander training. Generate awareness by sharing accurate news and learning resources with your networks. Advocate for AAPI solidarity and protection by signing and circulating a petition. Donate to a victim relief fund or AAPI advocacy group. These are all valuable ways to make a direct impact and root out hate where it is happening.

We all have a part to play, and at TAAF we're doing ours to both address the historic underfunding of AAPI communities and build the community infrastructure that can lead to long-term change. Our work has only just begun and won't stop until Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders feel a permanent and irrevocable sense of belonging in this country. That is what I felt when I first came to America, and it was what propelled me forward throughout my life and career. Every AAPI child, mother, father, brother, and sister deserves the same. ■

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MEDIA MATTERS

Why Asian American Representation in Media is a Social Justice Issue

Michelle K. Sugihara and Jess Ju

In 2020, anti-Asian hate incidents spiked 149 percent across the larger cities in America, even though the overall hate incident numbers declined.¹ Moreover, Stop AAPI Hate’s National Report logged over ten thousand anti-Asian incidents from 19 March 2020 to 30 September 2021, of which 44.4 percent occurred in 2020 and 55.7 percent occurred in 2021.²

40 Although media attention about the violent attacks against Asians in America has waned since the global spotlight ignited by the Atlanta shootings in March 2021 and the various “Stop Asian/AAPI Hate” campaigns and hashtags, such violent acts remain rampant across the country.

In October 2021 in Los Angeles, Olympic gold medalist gymnast Sunisa Lee said she was pepper-sprayed during a racist attack by people in a passing car shouting racial slurs and telling her and her friends to “go back where they came from.”³

Violence against Asians in America is not new. Nor is the intersectionality of law, politics, and media in affecting our lives. Our communities have suffered from racist laws and policies dating back to our earliest arrivals centuries ago and continue today. In order to build a better world, we must acknowledge the role the media plays in shaping our culture and harness its power to create change.

WHY MEDIA MATTERS

Media creates the narrative foundation for how people of color are perceived and treated in the real world. Negative portrayals have profound and insidious consequences, which is why this is not just a representation issue but also a social justice issue. Stereotypical portrayals of Asian American characters flood our screens

again and again. These repeated reminders of dehumanizing stereotypes make it psychologically easier to hurt that group of people.⁴ Neuroscience research conducted by Susan Fiske, a psychologist at Princeton University

and a leading expert on prejudice, found that dehumanizing others activated the brain's disgust regions and deactivated the empathy regions.⁵ There is a reason this was a common tactic of wartime propaganda. When people see Asian Americans as being "foreign," it creates an "in-group/out-group" mentality, making it easier to treat Asians in America with hostility and to engage in acts of violence and discrimination against them.

As noted in a 2021 USC Annenberg study analyzing seventy-nine primary and secondary Asian and Pacific Islander ("API") characters from the most popular films of 2019, roughly 25 percent of the characters died by the end of the film, with all but one death ending violently.⁶ In 1959, the legendary actress Anna May Wong famously lamented "when I die, my epitaph should be: 'I died a thousand deaths,'" referring to the tragic fate of many of the Asian characters she played in her film career. This devaluation of human life translates directly to the way Asians in America are treated in real life.

What we watch on our screens impacts the way we think, feel, and act. According to the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, "eighty percent of media consumed worldwide is made in the United States."⁷ Thus, Hollywood has a profound responsibility to acknowledge its global influence on how cultures and communities are portrayed and perceived. That influence has only grown during the COVID-19 pandemic as viewership of content exploded, largely on streaming services. Nielsen reports that total streaming minutes increased from 117.7 billion in December 2019 to 132 billion in December 2020.⁸

What happens, then, when viewers are overexposed to White-centric narratives that marginalize—or worse, erase and demean—the experiences and narratives of other communities? In 1976, researchers George Gerbner and Larry Gross coined the phrase "symbolic annihilation" to describe the effects of being erased in the media.⁹ They posited that "representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation."¹⁰ In other words, if people don't see themselves or those like them reflected in the fictional media they consume, they are deemed insignificant or unimportant in the real world.

"Thus, Hollywood has a profound responsibility to acknowledge its global influence on how cultures and communities are portrayed and perceived."

WHY STEREOTYPES ARE SO HARMFUL

Stereotypes of Asians in America have persisted throughout history, largely propagated by the media. Tropes such as the model minority and perpetual foreigner have led to real world harm against these communities, including in corporate America. According to the Harvard Business Review, Asians are the most likely to be hired, but the least likely to be promoted.¹¹ Moreover, tropes, such as hypersexualization of Asian women and emasculation of Asian men, also have detrimental real-world consequences. What follows is a high-level discussion of these four tropes and their social implications.

1. MODEL MINORITY MYTH

The term “model minority” was coined by a White sociologist William Petersen and first published in a 1966 New York Times Magazine article, “Success story: Japanese American style.”¹² This misleading label presents Asian Americans as studious, educated, successful, smart, and hardworking. It has been translated to the screen as the overachieving Asian person, the nerdy sidekick, the IT person, the math whiz, and other manifestations. While on the surface these may seem like positive attributes, the model minority myth is simply a myth developed in the post-war era to create a racial wedge and minimize the role systemic racism plays in the persistent struggles of other racial and ethnic minority groups, especially Black Americans during the rise of the Civil Rights Movement.¹³ It conveyed the message “if Asians can do it, why can’t you?”

Furthermore, the model minority myth generally focuses on East Asians or South Asians, masking the needs of different ethnic communities under the larger Asian American umbrella and erasing them from the conversations around poverty and wage disparities. Contrary to this belief, a 2018 Pew Research Center report found that Asian Americans, in fact, have the largest wage gap of any racial group.¹⁴ The 90/10 ratio is commonly used to measure the income gap between the top 10 percent and bottom 10 percent ends of the earnings spectrum. In 2016, the 90/10 ratio for Asians was 10.7, meaning those in the 90th percentile had 10.7 times the income of Asians at the 10th percentile, which is higher than any other communities studied.¹⁵ Moreover, the wage gap for Asians has increased 77 percent from 1970 to 2016.¹⁶ Reflected in Figure 1, disaggregated data highlighting this income disparity disputes the notion that all Asians are economically successful and do not need social policies or assistance.

9 March 2021 was #AAPIEqualPayDay, marking the day that AAPI

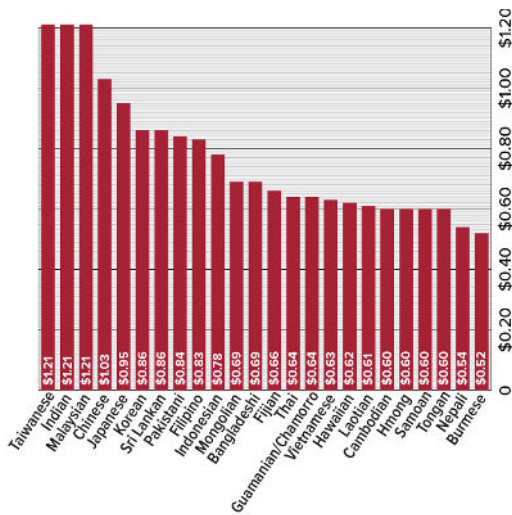


Figure 1. Earnings made by AAPI women for every dollar earned by White men, “Fighting for Equal Pay for AAPI Women,” National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum.¹

women have to work into 2021 to earn the same amount of money that non-Hispanic White men earned in 2020.¹⁷ On average, AAPI women earn eighty-five cents for every dollar earned by White men, but when broken down into sub-ethnic groups (see Figure 1), a very different picture emerges.

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Taiwanese and Indian women over-index at \$1.21 to every dollar earned by a White man. However, on the other end of the spectrum, Burmese women are at the bottom, earning fifty-two cents to every dollar earned by a White man, making them one of the lowest paid people in the nation.¹⁸ Moreover, according to 2017 Census data, Filipino Americans faced a 6 percent poverty rate, compared to the 16.2 percent for Hmong Americans.¹⁹ The model minority myth is extremely detrimental to policy arguments for economic support for Asian communities at the lower end of the earnings spectrum.

A related issue with the model minority myth is the misguided belief that Asians in America do not face discrimination or racism, a notion easily rejected based on the discussion contained herein.²⁰ The Harvard Business Review’s findings that Asians are the least likely to be promoted reflects the implicit bias stemming from the model minority myth. Asians are seen as

¹ “Fighting for Equal Pay for AAPI Women,” National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum, accessed 5 January 2022, <https://www.napawf.org/equalpay>.

hard-working and smart worker-bees, but not as charismatic and effective leaders.²¹

2. PERPETUAL FOREIGNER

As demonstrated in the story recounted by Sunisa Lee who was told to “go back to where [she] came from,” another stereotype that leads to real-world harm against Asians in America is the perpetual foreigner trope. Asians are often depicted on-screen as foreign, exotic, and inherently un-American. These characters are portrayed with exaggerated foreign accents, an inability to understand English, a reverence for non-Christian religious practices, and an adherence to outdated and “barbaric” practices such as eating cats or dogs. To be clear, there is nothing wrong or offensive about being an immigrant or having an accent. But in these stereotypical portrayals, the “other-ness” becomes the butt of the jokes and Asians are mocked, denigrated, and singled out for being the “other.” A few tropes flow from the perpetual foreigner concept, including:

A “Yellow Peril”

In the 1850s, Asian immigrants began arriving in significant numbers to the US West Coast and were quickly exploited as a cheap labor force by White American industrialists.²² This fear of economic competition and xenophobia from White Americans led to a rise of racist, anti-Asian sentiment, which was often further capitalized upon for political gain, such as the Workingmen’s Party of California adoption of “The Chinese Must Go” as their official party slogan.²³

Art often mirrors life, and we find the existence of “Yellow Peril” images since the early days of film and television painting primarily East Asians and Southeast Asians as a sneaky, villainous, and foreign threat to Western values and life. Yellow Peril was so ingrained in the cultural consciousness that it was coded into children’s movies like *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), which included two sinister Siamese cats Si and Am performing the racist “Siamese Cat Song.” Additionally, the target ethnicity often shifts and changes in relation to current US political relationships. For example, in 1915’s *The Cheat*, the villain was originally of Japanese descent. As relations with Japan warmed, the film’s villain was changed to Burmese in the 1918 re-release.²⁴

B “Brown Peril” / Islamophobia

The South Asian equivalent is “Brown Peril,” and it has been present for as long as its East Asian counterpart. Portrayals escalated considerably in the

wake of 9/11 and with “the war on terror” continuously streaming for two decades since. Islamophobia has taken up the mantle where Yellow Peril once stood. Interchangeable brown faces are seen as the face of terrorism, with various South Asian, Middle Eastern and North African ethnicities being conflated with one another.

While no longer as explicit as Fu Manchu stroking his beard, Yellow and Brown Peril still exist in modern film and television in the form of nameless Yakuza, ninjas, triads, tongs, Communist invaders, terrorist plotlines, and the seemingly ubiquitous Chinatown episode in every procedural series. In many of these narratives, the Asian characters are nameless, faceless, and storyless. They tend to have no lines, are given no motivation, and follow commands mindlessly, closely resembling props instead of characters. They are subjected to racial slurs and, more often than not, killed violently.

C Dragon Lady / Mata Hari

When this foreign peril is placed upon an Asian woman, the trope of the Dragon Lady or the Mata Hari is born. This portrayal is still nefarious and untrustworthy, but with an additional layer of sexual availability and immorality.²⁵ The Dragon Lady trope stems from the early, racist belief that all Chinese women immigrating to the United States were prostitutes and had the potential to spread foreign disease via sex work.²⁶ This belief was so pervasive, it led to the passing of the Page Act, which effectively banned the immigration of East Asian women and is considered the first federal law restricting immigration and the precursor to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.²⁷

“Mata Hari” has become a cultural shorthand for a lethal double agent who uses her powers of seduction to extract secrets from her many lovers. In real life, Mata Hari was the stage name of a Dutch sex worker who falsely claimed Indonesian heritage. Capitalizing on society’s fascination with the Orient and the sexual objectification of Asian women, she exploited the trope of the hyper-sexualized Asian woman. She was accused and eventually executed for espionage.²⁸

D China Doll / Lotus Blossom / Geisha Girl

In direct opposition to the Dragon Lady/Mata Hari trope, the China Doll/Lotus Blossom/Geisha Girl presents Asian women as meek and submissive, often in sexualized contexts, needing to be saved and willing to make tremendous sacrifices for her master. This trope is rooted in Giacomo Puccini’s popular opera *Madama Butterfly*, which was adapted into at least five feature

“However, there is a danger of a single story becoming the only story, and it is important to see counter-narratives as well. More stories need to show the breadth, depth, and nuance of our multi-ethnic, varied communities and more representation for those under the API umbrella that are typically less represented.”

films by 1932 and continues to live in mainstream consciousness due to the popularity of the musical *Miss Saigon*.

3. HYPERSEXUALIZATION OF ASIAN WOMEN

The hypersexualization of Asian women is one clear example of how images in film and television have real-life consequences.²⁹ The phrase “me so horny; me love you long time” from *Full Metal Jacket*, a 1987 film by Stanley Kubrick, is still used to taunt Asian women today. It is also sampled in 2 Live Crew’s “Me So Horny”, which stayed on the Billboard Top 100 for thirty weeks in 1989.³⁰

46 Unfortunately, the past thirty years has not shown much improvement. Asian women continue to be hypersexualized on screen. In a recent study of 1,300 most popular films from 2007 to 2019, nearly twenty-five percent of API women were clad in provocative attire and twenty percent of API women were portrayed with some type of nudity.³¹ Additionally, a 2021 CAPE research study with the Geena Davis Institute found that “female Asian and Pacific Islander characters are more likely than female characters of any other race to be objectified on screen.”³²

These demeaning portrayals lead to devaluing the lives and agency of Asian women. For example, an official said the Atlanta spa shooter had a “very bad day” and accepted his sexual addiction defense.³³ Of the over ten thousand anti-Asian hate incidents reported to Stop AAPI Hate from 19 March 2020 to 30 September 2021, 62 percent were against women.³⁴

4. EMASCULATION OF ASIAN MEN

While Asian women are over-sexualized and fetishized, Asian men are often emasculated and humiliated. Dating back to the 1850s and the initial wave of Asian immigration, Asian men were historically limited to domestic work traditionally done by women such as nannying, cooking,

and laundry.³⁵ Emasculation of Asian men was also a consistent tactic of war propaganda.

It is important to recognize that the perception of Asian men as unattractive and sexually undesirable was manufactured by the media. Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa was the first Hollywood sex symbol in the early days of the entertainment industry.³⁶ His popularity with White women sparked public fear that led to the reinforcement of policies against showing interracial relationships on screen, such as the Motion Picture Production Code or the Hays Code, a set of regulations on moral content in films that Hollywood imposed on itself to preempt outside censorship.³⁷

Although depictions of Asian men have been gradually changing, an analysis of the top-grossing films of 2019 revealed that 58 percent of API male characters had no romantic relationship compared to 37.5 percent of API female characters. In *Escape Room*, a South Asian male character is told, “Stop being chivalrous, no one wants to have sex with you.”³⁸

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

The good news is that media representation continues to evolve. Streaming platforms and social media have changed the game. Audiences are savvier and critical feedback is almost instantaneous. Here are some narrative and structural suggestions for continued forward movement.

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1. Stories By Us, For Everyone

Changing the narrative can change the world. Start with who is telling the story. Writers are important because representation starts on the page. We need stories by us for everyone that tell universal narratives through specific lenses.

We need more stories, in any format or genre, centering API characters and experiences rather than merely making them the sidekick or underdeveloped love interest. This must be done thoughtfully, though, with an eye toward seeding new stories and steering away from stories that may be over-represented.³⁹ For example, not all Vietnamese stories need to be about the Vietnam War or the trauma of being a refugee. South Asian storylines do not always have to revolve around arranged marriage. In light of the economic disparity in the API communities rejecting the model minority myth, there should be more than the crazy rich Asian storyline.

That is not to say these stories are invalid or even inherently inauthentic.

However, there is a danger of a single story becoming the only story, and it is important to see counter-narratives as well. More stories need to show the breadth, depth, and nuance of our multi-ethnic, varied communities and more representation for those under the API umbrella that are typically less represented.

Who gets to be the hero? Whose story are we telling? Is there a way to tell this story in a way that does not center around a White male protagonist?

2. More Intersectional Stories

As racial demographics continue to shift America toward becoming majority-minority and identity conversations continue to evolve, Hollywood must catch up with more intersectional narratives.

For example, a 2021 USC Annenberg study states that “the lack of API characters overall extends to intersectional communities . . . Only 15 API characters across 600 films from 2014 to 2019 were LGBTQ; none were transgender. Only 1.9 percent of API characters from the top 500 movies from 2015 to 2019 were shown with a disability. A mere 19.6 percent of all API women were 40 years of age or older. The image of API characters is predominantly young and largely male, straight and able-bodied.”⁴⁰

In particular, more narratives with intersectionality with LGBTQ+, disability, and mixed-race experience are imperative.

3. Tell Stories That Break or Subvert Stereotypes

This can be the creation of more content that actively breaks stereotypes and tropes, including:

- Working-class, loud, crass Asian families.
- Having more than one Asian actor in the main cast who grapples with issues unrelated to their race.
- Resilient but kind Asian heroines.
- Coming of age stories with young Asian women with agency over their own sexuality.
- Attractive—and still smart—Asian men.
- Asian himbos.

In addition to narrative solutions, structural solutions can also make the Hollywood system more equitable and diverse.

4. Hire Asian American Talent Behind the Camera

Media companies need to hire more Asian American creators and executives

at all levels and give them meaningful positions. CAPE often gets asked to consult on projects much too late in the process, when few if any meaningful changes can be made. Asian American writers should be hired from the beginning, not just at the end for an authenticity pass. Writers need to stop being hired solely to “soy sauce,” or add cultural flavor, to the script at the final polish stage. This practice needs to end.

This questioning and reflection should also extend to the source material and the context in which it is created. Who gets to tell the story? Is the author of the intellectual property committing cultural appropriation?

Additionally, more positions should be given to Asian American crew members—casting directors, hair and make-up workers who know how to work with Asian hair and appropriately apply make-up on monolids, lighting crew who know how to light for different skin tones, set designers, costume designers, editors, marketing and publicity, and all others.

Actress and producer Sandra Oh shared her story about Season 3 of *Killing Eve*, “I remember talking to the sound people, it’s like, ‘Hey guys, you are layering in the sound of me wearing shoes in the house. I don’t wear shoes. My character doesn’t wear shoes. I know you don’t see the feet. But don’t layer in the sound of shoes in the house, because that doesn’t happen.’”⁴¹ She adds, “But maybe these people, mostly White English dudes, don’t know that. It’s something that you might not even think is important, but it is because that’s how we start building the nuance of a character.”⁴²

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5. Provide Equitable Pay

Emerging talent, including support staff, need to be paid a living wage. If the barriers to entry are prohibitive for people from less privileged backgrounds, a diverse pool of talent would be difficult to maintain.

In a survey from the #PayUpHollywood report, almost 80 percent of assistants reported making \$50,000 or less; in Los Angeles County, \$63,100 is considered low-income.⁴³ Moreover, 35 percent of survey respondents reported making less than \$30,000 in 2020.⁴⁴ Many do not receive health benefits or sick days, and their vacation time is not guaranteed. In some cases, assistants also face abusive treatment from their bosses.

In the casting process, producers and casting directors should also consider any unequal expectations from Asian actors that are not expected from White actors—are they appropriately compensated for any additional work beyond acting? This includes, without limitation:

- Foreign language proficiency or fluency.

- Martial arts skills.
- Additional time and resources to train the right Asian actor.
- Support and resources for accent or language work.
- Work beyond the hired role (e.g., translating, cultural consulting).

For instance, *Heroes*' Masi Oka reportedly translated his own lines into Japanese for the hit TV show.⁴⁵

Many actors are also having to correct a costume design or a prop on set. While these are often spun as positive stories of collaboration, it begs the question—is the project benefiting from the actors' free labor?

CONCLUSION

Representation in media, especially in narrative entertainment, has the ability to greatly influence society. It is time Asian Americans reclaim and combat the harmful, stereotypical narratives in order to craft a better world and an inclusive community for tomorrow. ■

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A STATISTICAL STORM

Data Disaggregation and the Decades-Long Debate Over AAPI Identity

By Andrew Peng, Javan Santos, and Mary Yang

Efforts to advance disaggregation have been derailed by community infighting, government bureaucracy, and bitter clashes over identity. But as demand for quality data surges, supporters have reason to be hopeful.

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INTRODUCTION

As the coronavirus began its rapid spread throughout the United States in early 2020, researchers studying its impact detected an alarming trend. In roughly a dozen states that report data on Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (NHPIs), the virus seemed to be tearing through NHPI communities with particular viciousness—resulting in higher infection and death rates than any other racial or ethnic group.¹

But COVID-19's disproportionate impact on NHPIs was nowhere to be found in data published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)—at least initially. In most reports, Pacific Islanders had been grouped together with Asian Americans, masking the virus' true devastation in their communities. The CDC's hospitalization and death tracker also appeared to exclude NHPIs, despite providing comparisons between Black, Latino, Indigenous, and Asian populations to Whites.

The agency's failure to provide specific data on NHPIs was no accident.² The CDC's pandemic surveillance system relies on and reflects the inconsistent practices of local and state health departments, where granular NHPI data collection is “virtually nonexistent,” according to a September 2021 study.³

As a result, academics and journalists have turned to alternate sources as they seek to understand the pandemic's unequal effects. Community groups and a handful of state agencies have played key roles in identifying these troubling NHPI trends by engaging in a process of "disaggregation," whereby information on diverse subgroups is collected and reported separately.

At first glance, data disaggregation seems like a logical step to counter toxic stereotypes about Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) and help inform policy makers about the nuanced needs of more than 50 different subgroups. The reality is far more complex and occasionally puzzling. Despite enjoying support from many prominent activists and decision makers today, decades-long campaigns aimed at swaying governments to disaggregate AAPI data have struggled to gain traction. Those who spoke to our team of journalists at *The Yappie*—including seasoned advocates, researchers, and former government officials—point to a variety of reasons for the lack of progress, ranging from red tape to community infighting.

Yet even those justifications do not tell the whole story. Instead, history shows the greatest challenge to data disaggregation is that it is interwoven with raw, longstanding debates over who gets to be part of the "AAPI" umbrella, and the ever-shifting power dynamics that come with the term.

MAKING "ASIAN AMERICA"

Today, the labels "Asian American" and "AAPI" are everywhere. But their dominant use is both recent and inherently political, a product of an ongoing process of self-identification, advocacy, and federal bureaucracy.

Prior to the 1960s and 70s, people of Asian descent in the US loosely self-identified with subgroups, choosing terms such as Filipino, Japanese, Chinese American, and so on to describe themselves. These labels were often tied to pride as different ethnic enclaves expanded, but their geopolitical roots also led to darker scenes—such as when fearful Chinese and Korean Americans scrambled to distinguish themselves from Japanese Americans during World War II, aiming to prove their loyalty to the US.⁴

Meanwhile, White policy makers looking to wield their powers against a broad swath of immigrants from Asia embraced the colonialist label, "Oriental." Though the derogatory term fell out of favor in the late 20th century, it would take a 2015 bill authored by Congresswoman Grace Meng (D-New York) to formally strip it from federal law.⁵

Among those looking to reject "Oriental" were activists at the University of California, Berkeley, who sought to unify Filipino, Korean, Japanese, and Chinese

“Less than a decade after the term ‘Asian American’ was coined, an obscure office in Washington would prove consequential in transforming the political label—and igniting the push for disaggregation.”

students on campus into a bloc lobbying for ethnic studies. In May 1968, the Asian American Political Alliance emerged from their efforts and was led by graduate students Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka, who drew inspiration from the Black Power Movement and anti-Vietnam War protests.⁶

The term “Asian American”—radical at the time—would go on to promote pan-Asian alliances, build political power, and influence decades of civil rights activism.⁷ The 1982 killing of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man who was brutally beaten by two White auto workers in Detroit, was rooted in a wave of anti-Japanese sentiment in the US fueled by Japan’s automotive boom. The attack and its aftermath was a pivotal moment that helped popularize the term beyond activist and academic circles, while triggering the formation of advocacy groups under the “Asian American” umbrella.⁸ Later, tragedy in the form of post-September 11 hate crimes would also spur the creation of organizations to support South Asian, Muslim, and Sikh communities.

Soon, the federal government took notice. Less than a decade after the term “Asian American” was coined, an obscure office in Washington would prove consequential in transforming the political label—and igniting the push for disaggregation.

THE FEDS TAKE THE WHEEL

Look through reports and federally funded studies from the mid-to-late 1900s, and you’ll find mentions of “Oriental Americans” (usually referring to Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and occasionally Korean Americans) littered through their pages.⁹

Decisions made by the Federal Interagency Committee on Education (FICE), an entity housed under the now-abolished US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) during the Johnson and Nixon administrations, would soon change that. Facing questions from

“As Directive 15’s implications became evident, dissatisfaction over the accuracy of the data bloomed into an explosive controversy.”

Congress over how the government planned to enforce legislatively mandated protections born from the Civil Rights Movement, the panel lamented the lack of “useful” race data in an April 1973 report to HEW’s Secretary Caspar Weinberger.

Weinberger, a Republican lawyer who earned the nickname “Cap the Knife” for attempting to slash social spending as Nixon’s director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), showed “particular interest” in the issue, federal papers say, and encouraged the coordinated development of “common definitions” for racial and ethnic groups.¹⁰ The walkout of Native American and Hispanic representatives at a HEW meeting and added pressure from the US Commission on Civil Rights—which wrote that “virtually every aspect of the Federal civil rights effort has suffered from lack of sufficient data”—spurred Weinberger and FICE to create the Ad Hoc Committee on Racial and Ethnic Definitions in June 1974.¹¹

Though little record of the committee’s activities is publicly available, its 25 members set out to determine major groups to be identified by federal agencies. Their choices would have a seismic impact on how Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are described today.

Documents show the panel tapped Juanita Tamayo Lott, a Filipina American government statistician and director of HEW’s Office of Asian American Affairs, to assist in the committee’s final recommendations. In her 1998 book, *Asian Amer-*

icans: *From Racial Category to Multiple Identities*, Lott—who was on the front lines in a 1968 San Francisco State student strike that resulted in the country’s first ethnic studies department—noted that the committee wrestled with “major” problems over how to define Asian populations.¹²

In its final April 1975 report, the committee settled on “Asian or Pacific Islander” as a replacement for “Oriental.”¹³ The move artificially unified disparate populations from countries east of the “Indian subcontinent” while lumping in natives of the Pacific Islands to create a single demographic. At the same time, the panel also endorsed classifying “Asian Indians” as “Caucasian” after the Supreme Court had also declared them “Caucasian” but not “White” in the 1923 case *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*.¹⁴

The committee’s creation of “Asian or Pacific Islander” and four other constructed racial classifications, including the contentious pan-ethnic term “Hispanic,” “resounded throughout the federal government,” per the *Washington Post*.¹⁵ Two years after the recommendations were published, they served as the blueprint for a groundbreaking OMB memo called Directive No. 15, which formally ordered historically-fragmented federal agencies to collect and disseminate data using the new standards.¹⁶

58 But the racial categories themselves remained “fluid and negotiated,” according to Thomas P. Kim, author of *The Racial Logic of Politics: Asian Americans and Two-Party Competition*. As the federal government began to determine “protected classes” for civil rights enforcement, different groups “jockeyed to be included in or excluded.”¹⁷ For example, prior to the publication of OMB’s 1977 directive, the Association of Indians in America successfully lobbied the agency to reclassify persons with “origins on the Indian subcontinent” from White to the Asian category to ensure minority status.¹⁸ That sizable shift would serve as a preview for the firestorm to come.¹⁹

A STATISTICAL STORM

In the eyes of activists, OMB’s directive was a blessing and a curse. For the first time, federal agencies had guidelines to combat discrimination and present standardized labor, health, and education statistics. Furthermore, better collection of racial and ethnic data in the decennial census, used to shape political representation and distribute billions of dollars in federal funding, had far-reaching consequences that benefited typically undercounted communities.

But as Directive 15’s implications became evident, dissatisfaction over the accuracy of the data bloomed into an explosive controversy. The problem? Aggregation.

Although OMB's guidance did not restrict data collection to the five racial categories, numerous agencies relied on aggregated figures to draw sweeping conclusions about AAPIs and actively reinforced harmful stereotypes, even when they had more precise information available.

In one striking instance, the Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum pointed to the 1985 "Heckler Report" by the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).²⁰ While it marked one of the first comprehensive government reviews of minority health disparities, HHS incorrectly asserted that "[t]he Asian/Pacific Island minority, in aggregate, is healthier than all racial/ethnic groups in the United States, including Whites."²¹

The influence of OMB's guidance was also felt well beyond federal programs. Originally crafted to meet reporting needs mandated by Congress, it "inordinately shaped the very discourse of race in the United States," according to scholars Yen Le Espiritu and Michael Omi.²² State and local governments, marketing firms, nonprofits, and even researchers adopted the classifications, putting them to widespread use despite the fact that they were primarily developed based on geographic, federal compliance, and political considerations—not actual scientific, cultural, ethnic, or racial differences.

The fierce debate over how the government should view race and ethnicity gained new visibility in the early 1990s, thanks to increased congressional scrutiny and a flurry of lobbying from advocacy groups connected to the census. Prompted by criticism that OMB's categories were incapable of measuring new immigrant communities and those who identify as multiracial, the agency agreed to initiate a review of Directive 15 and formed a new committee to make recommendations in 1993.

AAPI groups pushing for revisions of OMB's guidelines had established the National Coalition for an Accurate Count of Asians and Pacific Islanders in 1987. In communications to lawmakers, they argued that the single overlapping "Asian or Pacific Islander" category fed the damaging "model minority myth"—frustrating community members who felt they had to "prove their minority status."²³

Other activists notably opposed changes to the directive, worrying that they could be costly to implement and would disrupt the historical continuity of data. Black groups including the NAACP and the National Urban League formed their own coalition, jointly writing in 1994 that "we are opposed to any action by OMB which will result in the disaggregation of the Black population."²⁴ Appearing before a House subcommittee in 1993, senior OMB official Sally Katzen further testified that the agency heard from "members of some minority communities" who viewed potential revisions as "a blatant attempt to provoke internal dissension within a

larger minority group or who were concerned that this would reduce their official count within the general population to their detriment.”²⁵

But another group—Native Hawaiians—saw opportunity and seized the moment. It was during this time that debate over their status took center stage.

THE NATIVE HAWAIIAN QUESTION

While “Asian” as a category first appeared on the 1870 Census, it would take nearly a century for Pacific Islanders to be recognized with the introduction of “Hawaiian” and “Part Hawaiian” categories in 1960, though “Part Hawaiian” was later removed in 1970.²⁶ But OMB’s decision to bundle them into the larger Asian category in 1977 was a source of contention and protest, with Native Hawaiians groups decrying the decision as an erasure of their community.

Daniel Akaka (D-Hawaii), America’s first senator of Native Hawaiian ancestry, became a vocal proponent of reclassifying Native Hawaiians to the “American Indian and Alaska Native” category.²⁷ Fresh off of spearheading a successful push for Congress to acknowledge and apologize for the “US complicity in the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy at the end of the 19th century,” he pressured the Clinton administration to act ahead of the 2000 Census, testifying in 1993: “I want to make it clear that Native Hawaiians are Native Americans. While we are culturally Polynesian, we are descendants of the aboriginal people who occupied and exercised sovereignty in the area that now constitutes the State of Hawaii.”²⁸

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Backed by Native Hawaiian and Samoan groups who were pushing for similar reclassification to the “Native” category, witnesses for Asian American organizations largely supported Senator Akaka’s proposal. Henry Der, then-executive director of Chinese for Affirmative Action, highlighted the inconsistency of federal statutes in his remarks before Congress, stating that “in some cases, [Native Hawaiians are] identified as Asian Pacific Islanders and in other instances they’re identified as Native Americans.”²⁹

According to Espiritu and Omi, OMB’s Katzen surprised advocates by suggesting that Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders be placed together in a standalone category. The move would allow for their data to “no longer be overwhelmed by the aggregate data of the much larger Asian groups.”³⁰

The hard-won compromise was finalized by OMB’s interagency group, which rejected requests to reclassify Native Hawaiians but split the blanket term “Asian or Pacific Islander” in two.³¹ With a 1997 revision of Directive 15, the federal government began collecting and reporting data on “Asian American” and “Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander” populations separately, recognizing them as distinct categories.³²

“The public participation is particularly important because it reminds us constantly that there are people behind the numbers and for many, this is a deeply personal issue,” Katzen later concluded.³³

DISAGGREGATION GAINS STEAM

Despite the OMB’s move to divorce Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders ahead of the 2000 Census, the label “AAPI” stuck, much to the consternation of some Pasifika leaders—and the relief of others.³⁴ But with the continued growth in diversity and political clout of AAPIs, advocacy groups have managed to convince recent administrations to acknowledge the need for better data about a ballooning number of subgroups.³⁵

Disaggregation has purportedly been a bipartisan priority under at least five presidencies (Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden), though little has been written about their efforts over the last decade.³⁶ President Bill Clinton was the first to establish a White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (WHIAAPI) via executive order in 1999, charging the office with improving the collection of AAPI data. In a January 16, 2001 interim report to Clinton, AAPI leaders listed “improve data collection, analysis, and dissemination” as their top recommendation, expressing concerns that federal agencies were slow to implement OMB’s 1997 standards.³⁷

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But former federal officials who spoke to *The Yappie* said data disaggregation efforts only ramped up after the watershed 2008 election, which saw the ascendance of the nation’s first Black president and fresh conversations around racial equity. Pledging to improve the federal government’s data collection practices, President Barack Obama moved WHIAAPI from its original placement at HHS to the US Department of Education, where he launched an AAPI data quality campaign called iCount.³⁸ The department also made headlines for doling out nearly \$1 million in federal grants to Minnesota, Hawaii, and Washington to gather and study data on AAPI students by their ethnicity.³⁹

Elsewhere, WHIAAPI partnered with OMB and headed a government-wide effort to encourage disaggregation systems in federal agencies, leading to apparent advances at the US Departments of Labor, Justice, and Housing and Urban Development.⁴⁰ In 2014, the administration launched Data.gov/AAPI, a “comprehensive hub” of government data on AAPIs containing nearly 2,000 datasets.⁴¹

“By not collecting data on AAPIs as we are, in all our diversity, we are made invisible to the system. The erasure of major differences leads to ‘one size fits all’ policies and programs that fit no AAPI group,” said Tung Nguyen, Chair of the AAPI Vic-

“With the continued growth in diversity and political clout of AAPIs, advocacy groups have managed to convince recent administrations to acknowledge the need for better data about a ballooning number of subgroups.”

tory Alliance who previously led Obama’s Advisory Commission on AAPIs.⁴² “I call this the ‘gaslighting’ of Asian Americans . . . Those working on AAPI issues during the Obama administration understood that this structural issue is not simply about data—it is about our right to be seen and to matter.”⁴³

In the following administration, President Donald Trump’s AAPI commission called for executive action to ensure “better data on the AAPI experience” during the pandemic and proposed conducting telephone interviews with a sample of 1,000 AAPI business owners “to determine the economic and social impact of COVID-19” on the broader community in December 2020.⁴⁴

But the survey never happened, noted Tina Wei Smith, who was appointed to serve as executive director of WHIAAPI as it was relocated to the US Department of Commerce in late 2019.⁴⁵ By the time money was spent to contract an AAPI women-owned firm, with data scheduled to be captured during February and March 2021, the project had been tabled due to the transition between the Trump and Biden administrations.

“During my tenure, prioritizing the need for more data and disaggregated data for the AANHPI community was a focal point of both the Commissioners and the Initiative,” Smith told *The Yappie*. “We encouraged the US Census [Bureau] to disaggregate their data for the Small Business Survey through pandemic shutdowns [and] funded the Minority Business Development Agency to execute a small business owner survey to assess the concerns and challenges of the Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander community through the pandemic.”⁴⁶

Aside from presidential efforts, senior AAPI officials and departments have also paved the way for limited progress on the issue. In 2003, former Labor Secretary Elaine Chao’s Bureau of Labor Statistics added a question to the Current Population Survey for respondents to indicate whether they are Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, or Vietnamese.⁴⁷ HHS announced plans

more than a decade later to “launch the first-ever, large-scale national health survey to collect detailed health information on [NHPI] households.”⁴⁸

Early moves by the Biden administration suggest that data disaggregation will return with more prominence in 2022. Amid the surge in violence against AAPIs during the pandemic, President Joe Biden established an “Equitable Data Working Group” in January 2021 and directed the Attorney General to “expand collection of data and public reporting regarding hate incidents.”⁴⁹

In a May 2021 order, Biden also authorized the establishment of the White House Initiative on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders (WHIAANHPI) at HHS, handing it a broad mandate to “expand the collection and use of disaggregated data at the Federal, State and local level on AA and NHPI communities.”⁵⁰ The document also formalized recognition of Native Hawaiians and the acronym “AANHPI” throughout federal agencies, which is significant considering more than 30 percent of federal data sources fail to provide disaggregated NHPI data.

Krystal Ka’ai, the first Native Hawaiian ever tapped to head WHIAANHPI, told *The Yappie* that the Initiative would be “laser focused” on the issue in the year ahead.⁵¹

“As the fastest growing racial group in the country, Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders cover a wide and incredibly diverse range of communities,” Ka’ai said. “The ability to disaggregate data on our population helps to not only highlight the unique issues impacting individual communities, but also to develop policies and programs that better serve the particular needs of different subgroups.”

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STATES FILL FEDERAL GAPS

Despite advances at the federal level, government officials concede that their efforts have been moving at a glacial pace.⁵² In the past decade, a handful of states have already enacted laws mandating disaggregation at far more comprehensive levels than outlined in OMB Directive 15, though overall collection remains lacking.

New York became the latest to require state agencies to collect and publish detailed data on AAPI groups after Governor Kathy Hochul signed a bill sponsored by Assemblymember Yuh-Line Niou (D) in December 2021.

“Our state can’t begin to address problems it can’t see, and for too long AAPI New Yorkers have been treated monolithically when what was needed was nuance and deeper understanding,” Niou told *The Yappie*.⁵³ “Twenty percent of Asian Indians and Filipinos struggle with limited English proficiency. Among Vietnamese and Chinese Americans, that number is closer to half. And one in four Asian Amer-

icans lives in poverty, yet the community receives the least amount of government assistance of any group.”

Some local agencies and nonprofit organi-

zations have also leaned on data disaggregation for key projects during the pandemic, including the California-based organization, Stop AAPI Hate. The group, which was founded in March 2020 to track the rise in anti-Asian hate incidents, asks respondents to voluntarily self-identify their ethnicity and regularly publishes detailed reports broken down by subgroup.

“Even though COVID-19 racism usually gets directed towards those who are Chinese and look Chinese, we know that different ethnic groups experience racism differently and disproportionately,” said co-founder of Stop AAPI Hate Russell Jeung in an interview with *The Yappie*.⁵⁴ “We need to be attuned to that.”

But Jeung emphasized that disaggregation should be viewed as a mechanism to create more precise policy solutions instead of as an all-encompassing fix.

“Data disaggregation is relevant,” he said, adding that it should be “secondary to the real concrete issues that Asian Americans face like racism, like homelessness, like unemployment.”

“The whole focus on data disaggregation, to me, is such a model minority, nerdy kind of issue. That’s coming from an academic,” Jeung continued. “If we say, ‘disaggregate our data,’ nobody is going to come to that rallying cry.”

THE FIGHT BACK

While Jeung may be right in that data disaggregation may seem like an overly-wonky topic confined to academic and activist bubbles, critics have not stayed silent. The issue has become a flashpoint in recent years, resulting in raucous demonstrations and even “incendiary” rhetoric invoking Nazism and the Holocaust.⁵⁵

In California, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Minnesota, and elsewhere, initial attempts to pass data collection measures prompted harsh backlash from Chinese American parents, who linked disaggregation to broader battles against race-based affirmative action policies in higher education. Opponents further characterized disaggregation as a backdoor attempt to legalize racial profiling and a slippery slope to another Chinese Exclusion Act.

In New York, conservative critics also relied on suspicions that disaggregation

could be a ploy to weaken AAPI communities' electoral power, falsely claiming that government agencies and liberal advocacy groups were purposefully singling out AAPIs for discrimination when, in fact, Black, Latino, Indigenous, and even White populations have called for greater disaggregation of their categories.⁵⁶

Legitimate concerns around current data disaggregation practices usually focus on methodology, costs, and privacy. A July 2021 report by the Urban Institute and The Asian American Foundation noted that "AAPI organizations often rely on their own small-scale data collection, which is irregular and limited by a lack of training, capacity, and funding," while state governors have occasionally sought more specificity on implementation when weighing disaggregation legislation.⁵⁷

Furthermore, self-reporting is "the gold standard" when it comes to collecting ethnicity and race-specific data, especially in public health. However, it is not required, resulting in limitations. Smaller sample sizes drawn from an extremely heterogeneous AAPI community pose an additional challenge for researchers studying health disparities for individual subgroups—which cannot and should not be applied to all.

But for many, the pros still far outweigh potential cons.

"The payout for adding just a few more crosstabs to demographic data is astronomical," Jenn Fang, founder of the Asian American feminist blog *Reappropriate*, wrote in 2016.⁵⁸ "The cost to state and federal institutions are minimal, and the census has already provided a clear road map for the kind of ethnic information that states can and should collect."

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NHPI LEADERS RAISE THEIR VOICES

Nowhere are the benefits of data disaggregation clearer than in Hawaii, which "stands out nationally for how much detail is available about specific race groups under the Asian American and Pacific Islander umbrella," according to the *Honolulu Civil Beat*.⁵⁹ The state is home to the highest percentage of Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders in the country, making it "better positioned" to dig into possible disparities and assess the needs of historically disadvantaged subgroups.⁶⁰

Though state-published statistics are more comprehensive compared to federal ones, that hasn't stopped NHPIs from driving efforts to collect quality data of their own.⁶¹ Organizations like the Hawai'i Budget & Policy Center regularly practice data sovereignty, an approach that, when paired with disaggregation, ensures Indigenous communities help to shape what data is collected and how it is used.

Data sovereignty has also taken hold elsewhere. "I consistently say in my work: Pacific Islanders know how to serve Pacific Islanders best," said Alyshia Macaysa,

a founding member of the Oregon Pacific Islander Coalition, in an October 2021 webinar.⁶² “A lack of disaggregated data ultimately undermines our expertise, our abilities, our cultures, our strengths, and of course our self-determination.”

Sina Uipi, Policy Associate at the Los Angeles-based group Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC), echoed Macaysa’s sentiments.⁶³

“We know what it means to show up for ourselves and each other through cultural protocols that weave us together, much like the traditional mats we use to gather on to learn from our elders, and teach our children,” she told *The Yappie*. “As a result of the fierce advocacy and leadership path our elders have paved, we have felt the fruits of their labor when our data is disaggregated, and we will continue to prioritize it through our advocacy and policy work.”

Guam is another area where NHPI data broken down by subgroup is critical to daily life, especially during the pandemic, noted public health expert Dr. Francine Naputi. “Without disaggregated data, healthcare decisions would be driven by guesswork, which only makes the allocation of resources and personnel even more challenging,” she said. “By having locally disaggregated data available across many demographic indicators, Guam’s healthcare professionals are better able to plan for and to respond to health crises.”⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, data disaggregation is an issue that benefits not only the NHPI community, but all groups under the AAPI umbrella. While decades-long campaigns to advance disaggregation have been slowed by community infighting, government bureaucracy, and bitter debates over identity, the pandemic perhaps marks a turning point for a movement that has long struggled to pick up steam.

The reasons to encourage broader data disaggregation are numerous. Experts say we have reached a point where maintaining the status quo of aggregated data validates the myth that AAPIs exist and move as one. Failing to install a coherent standard clouds our ability to track long-term trends which could unmask health disparities, close educational gaps, and illuminate centers of economic inequity most directly affecting NHPIs.

It should be noted that governments should take on the tasks of funding and implementing disaggregation. The decennial census and legislative mandates in New York and elsewhere show us the path forward. Community groups can and should hold policy makers accountable and ensure data is used appropriately.

Data disaggregation may not be a catchy slogan. But in practice—as a community-centered policy that demands from history an accurate and accessible record—it

surely saves lives. It is our belief that a combination of grassroots efforts, greater funding, and federal support can provide the research and information we need to promote equity for all. ■

*Shawna Chen, editorial director of *The Yappie*, contributed editing.

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Interviews

MOBILIZING OUR COMMUNITY

Reflections on Civic and Electoral Engagement Among AAPIs in Recent Years

An Interview with Christine Chen by Sarah Lin

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

AAPR: Can you briefly introduce yourself and APIAVote? How has APIAVote's work changed or evolved since its founding?

CHEN: Thanks so much. This is Christine Chen, executive director for Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote. We're a national nonpartisan organization that works with local partners and nonprofits in 28 states to help them build their capacity to be able to mobilize Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in electoral and civic participation.

The idea of APIAVote actually started back in the mid 90s—around 1996 when that presidential election cycle was starting up. At that point, there [were] only about four or five national AAPI advocacy organizations based in Washington, DC, and at that time I was with the Organization of Chinese Americans. A few of us had decided to go ahead and work with national as well as regional organizations to launch a National Asian Pacific American Voter Registration Campaign, or NAPAVRC [for] short. And that was the start of us coordinating and trying to get out the vote. As we were heading into 2000, we also recognized that even though the community was growing—and we saw that after the 2000 Census—we still didn't have the same level of power as our colleagues in the African American, Latino, women's, or youth groups, because our community was not voting at the same levels. That's when we decided to think about transforming NAPAVRC and the coalition and the project into a specific nonprofit organization. Essentially, in

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2007 we decided to formalize that institution and spin it off from OCA as a fiscal sponsored project. It's really with that thought that the work that we do complements all the other national and local groups that do advocacy work, because if we can get our community to turn out to vote, then we actually have more power to be able to influence elected officials and public policy.

AAPR: As a national, nonpartisan organization that works with local and state community-based organizations, what does APIAVote's engagement with policy and politics look like at these different levels?

CHEN: So early on, we started to have, in 2000, a number of newer national organizations representing different Asian ethnic communities or specific policy interest areas—whether it was health, community development, the legal field, or specific communities. But once again, they were focusing on public policy and trying to educate elected officials, federal agencies, local agencies, and also those within the Administration, about how these different policies impact our diverse community and really demystifying the model minority myth. But we had realized that [at] APIAVote, our philosophy is that we're not about to start another organization. There are so many trusted messengers already out there that have relationships with different parts of our community. So the model was about identifying organizations [and] trying to convince them that they're allowed to do nonpartisan voter engagement work. Early on, as well as even to this day, a lot of people still think that if you're part of a nonprofit organization, you're not allowed to do voter registration or voter engagement work, because their automatic assumption is that that's partisan politics. We actually work with the community leaders to help them understand why it's important to do this, that they're allowed to do this, how other communities have done this for generations, and how that actually helps them in terms of their advocacy work.

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With that in mind, we know that once we convince them, we also have to train them in best practices. So our next step was implementing the Norman Y. Mineta Leadership Institute, where we identify places we could go to to implement a regional training every year, or every other year, depending on the need. And we go through different modules, everything from best practices on voter registration [to] voter education, GOTV, election protection, etc. Now heading into 2022, we're also adding a component about mis- and disinformation. The reason we do a state-specific [approach] is also because every state's laws and regulations differ. So some states make it really easy to cast your vote, but in other states like Georgia and Texas, there are a lot of voter suppression laws being implemented, or it's very confusing.

So we really have to make sure that the modules and the training are updated for that particular region.

Then, once we have the volunteers and the leaders trained, the next step is building their capacity so that they can actually implement a field program to effectively engage the AAPI electorate. This ranges from getting them access to voter files, to helping them if they don't have the person to work on the data files—[in those cases] APIAVote will have the staff to carve out a universe to set everything up for a phone banking, door knocking, texting, or mail program. That way, the local partners can focus on recruiting volunteers, training them, and doing the work that we can't do since we're not there locally.

AAPR: What impact would you say the events and sociopolitical conditions of 2020 had on the AAPI electorate and APIAVote as a civic engagement organization?

CHEN: Well, one thing I always try to re-emphasize to everyone is: what transpired in 2020—and the amazing turnout [we saw]—that all really happened because we were also building for the last ten years. Even back in 2012, when APIAVote realized that we were not getting much traction in terms of funding, coverage in the news, or attention from political candidates—one of the main reasons [for that] was there was no hard data on our community. And that's when we decided to raise the money and bring on a few partners to be able to implement our Asian American Voter Survey. And we've been doing that every two years. Then in addition, we look at the data presented by the US Census that analyzes what happens during midterms and presidential elections. At that time, we realized that the number one reason why AAPI voters were not voting was because they said that they were too busy. Over the last decade, we've been doing education around early voting, mail-in ballots, and other options [aside from] showing up on Election Day. So when it came to the pandemic in 2020 where everyone had to pivot to mail or early voting, I actually felt a lot more comfortable because we have been doing that type of education. Also, when you look at voter participation rates in states like Oregon, Washington, etc. who have already pivoted to mail-in ballots, we see how [these changes have] made it easier for AAPIs to participate in systems like that. We know that this is something that interests our community, and it showed in 2020 because three out of four AAPIs who voted, ended up voting early in-person or by mail.

The one thing that we did not anticipate was the rise of anti-Asian violence due to political rhetoric and the pandemic. And that also [caught] the attention of AAPIs that typically do not focus on politics and do not focus on political candidates, and

it actually invigorated them and motivated them to turn out. We know that a certain percentage of voters in 2020 did not—even though they were registered—turn out in 2016, but did in 2020. I think those types of political events that had transpired actually helped push that along. But once again, [it was] because we had the infrastructure-building, and organizations reaching out that had developed relationships with those households not only for the elections, but for the 2020 Census, the primaries, the general elections, and then later on, addressing the anti-Asian violence, as well as doing wellness checks in regards to general information about the pandemic.

AAPR: This year's print edition explores dual themes of loss and resilience. As you reflect on the last twelve months, what has struck you about working in the AAPI advocacy space? Have you seen these themes reflected in your work with APIA-Vote?

CHEN: Both those themes are very relevant. Obviously, this pandemic has really impacted everyone—no one has escaped from that. And so many of us know community leaders, or even have family or friends that lost someone due to the pandemic. I think, though, it was also great to see how different parts of our community that have never been mobilized politically were even addressing, initially, the COVID rates or fighting anti-Asian violence, but then connecting the dots in terms of how that's all related to the decisions that elected officials are making on a day-to-day basis. It's also been hard on all of our nonprofits, community leaders, and volunteers because they're on the front lines. They're also being impacted emotionally and physically, but at the same time, we all know that we have the means, and we know what needs to be done for the community. So we're also stepping up at the same time.

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"I am hopeful just because I saw so many people leaning in, especially this new, larger generation that's coming up. But it's now about how we plug people into the different infrastructures, bringing in this newer generation and new resources."

AAPR: What is your long-term dream for APIAVote? What will effective partnership and coalition-building need to look like among policy makers, advocates, researchers, and community members to turn this into a reality?

CHEN: The reality is that I've always known it's going to be a long, hard ride—I've been doing this for 27 years now here in DC, always in this space, working at the national level yet always working with local partners around the country. My dream has always continued to be that we really maximize our community and get them organized and activated, so that way, they truly utilize their voice and weigh in on different policy issues and resources.

We've come a long way, yet we still have a lot more to go. We have a lot more AAPIs running for office and [folks] that are appointed, yet it's still very much lower than our population growth. I think we have more of an infrastructure now, so for folks that want to run for office, advocate on particular issues, or get appointed to focus on particular issues, they can do that at the local, state, or federal level. We know how to get people plugged into that and get them trained. But now it's more about getting everyone who is eligible to actually continue to go vote. We need them to vote at least three times in a row so that they become lifetime voters. From that base, we can get and essentially motivate more people to do more advocacy work, recognizing that their work does not end on Election Day but actually continues on. And then, [it's about] inspiring more folks to actually run for office or go for political appointments. Along with that, it's also really about how we can continue to build stronger coalitions. AAPIs throughout history, even in terms of the 1960s civil rights movement, have been there with the African American community and other communities fighting for equality and equity in terms of policies and

resources, but we haven't always maximized our total potential because we didn't have enough of our community activated to do that.

So I am hopeful just because I saw so many people leaning in, especially this new, larger generation that's coming up. But it's now about how we plug people into the different infrastructures, bringing in this newer generation and new resources. I like to always remind everyone that only half of 1 percent of all foundation dollars goes to the AAPI community, and less than 1 percent of corporate dollars is being directed to this community as well. It's definitely well below the 7 or 8 percent of our population.

AAPR: Is there anything else you'd like to share with our readers that we haven't already discussed?

CHEN: The one big thing I would want to impress on everyone is that our time has come, and everyone has a role, so it's really about trying to identify what role you want to play. There are so many different roles out there, so it's more about actively being engaged and maintaining that interest. I sort of worry that now that the anti-Asian violence or sentiment is not in the news as readily—although it is still happening because we know that from reporting from within the community—[folks are] moving on with their lives. So I'm hoping that we can figure out how to get people to integrate this type of work into their daily lives so that the whole idea of activism and being involved in the community is [fully] integrated. Also, even if cases [of anti-Asian violence] are hopefully reduced once the pandemic is under control, this type of hatred underlying things still continues—it always has been [around], and the long term solutions are really going to be about resourcing and policy changes and getting more people elected and in power. And that actually is tied to the voting work that we do. ■

REPRESENTATION, REDISTRIBUTION, AND REVOLUTION

A Conversation with Viet Thanh Nguyen

An Interview with Viet Thanh Nguyen by Cat Huang

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

INTERVIEWER'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

As you join us in conversation with authors Viet Thanh Nguyen and Ken Liu, I encourage you to pay attention to common themes woven throughout both interviews. Both writers stress the importance of understanding our place in the structures of colonialism, war, and genocide; both remind us that to be American requires an understanding of our relations to our Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian Pacific Islander communities, who are also affected by structures of White supremacy and colonialism. Further, both pieces share unspoken themes of the importance of education and language; migration and movement; genocide and war; and simultaneous truths of power and oppression, privilege and marginalization. In conducting these interviews, I found myself feeling called in again and again to learn about the capacity of our resilience and bravery, the necessity of resisting the seductive pull of our own self-interest, and the deep importance of building multiracial coalitions of justice and solidarity. I hope that as you join us in conversation, you feel the same.

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With gratitude,

Cat Huang

Editor, Co-Director of Partnerships

AAPR: You've mentioned in previous interviews¹ that, as a writer and as an English professor, you were trained and educated in the American literary tradition. *The Sympathizer* echoes with allusions and references that hint at American literature; American race relations; references to Ralph Ellison, T.S. Eliot, etc. on just the first page. You've also talked about Toni Morrison as another phenomenal American author that you've studied—you cite her for her great explorations of humanity, and one of her influences was William Faulkner. How do you see yourself in relation to Black and White authors, and how do you see yourself as continuing or diverging from their legacy of language and literature?

NGUYEN: Certainly seeing myself as an American author, I grew up feeling very American and my education has been very American, and so to be a writer, for me, means to engage with that literary tradition. Because that's what writers do. We tell stories about our present, but we also have to think of ourselves as part of some kind of genealogy. That's both an artistic issue and a cultural and political issue. So the artistic issue, obviously, is we layer our work, or I do, with references to this literary history, but it's also a political and cultural issue because it's a claim to being a part of the American literary tradition. Obviously, if you're Asian American, we have experienced a structural condition of exclusion in the United States. Now, at the same time, you brought up the fact that there's a Black and White American literary tradition. These, to me, are not simply signs of diversity or difference within the United States, but are in fact, signs of, or outcomes of an ongoing and basic contradiction in American society. We say Black and White—for me, it's not to invoke the possibility of reconciliation and harmony and all of that; it's to point to the fact that slavery is a fundamental part, not an accidental part of the United States. It still is.

To invoke that Black and White tradition means to invoke that contradiction and to think about where I fit in as an Asian American. I think that increasingly, the idea of being a part of the American literary tradition is certainly an act of claiming it, but also an act of recognizing its deep limitations for me, as a person and as an Asian American. I don't think that our solution—as Asian Americans—to being Asian American is to think about the reformation of the American tradition, whether it's the political one or the literary one. Our solution to our problem of being Asian Americans is to recognize that the problem is inherent in the United States. Insofar as we talk about race, we're talking about something that is irresolvable in the United States. There is no resolution, there is no reconciliation to these problems

1 Ashish Ghadiali, "Viet Thanh Nguyen: 'I always felt displaced no matter where I was,'" *The Guardian*, March 6, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/mar/06/viet-thanh-nguyen-in-the-committed-interview-biden-american-imperialism-foreign-policy>.

“With AAPI, the basic contradiction here is—what is the relationship between Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders? Can it be built around this narrative of diversity and inclusion when in many AAPI organizations and coalitions, there are no Pacific Islanders? There is no Pacific Islander content, **there’s no Pacific Islander recognition**, there’s no understanding of the fact that you simply can’t name your organization as AAPI and then be done with it. [. . .] If you were to **fundamentally address the Pacific Islander aspect of AAPI**, what you would have to do is not talk about diversity and inclusion, but to talk about colonization, imperialism, and conquest, and **this is why Pacific Islanders are part of the United States**. And AAPI coalitions, in fact, may serve to obscure that history of colonization and conquest, which is ongoing and not in the past.”

of racial difference in the United States because they’re not purely cultural. They’re deeply, deeply political, structural, economic, all tied in again to the very formation of a country. So we have to resolve that formation and its implications in the present day. For me as an Asian American, what that means is that a lot of my work deals with war and refugee experiences because that’s how we come to be as Asian Americans.

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Until we’re able to acknowledge the fact that the United States is built for war, has been built for wars since the very beginning, and that Asian Americans only exist in the United States because of this kind of history, we’re not going to be able to really talk about what it means to be Asian American. We have to be able to talk about not just the histories of war that have brought us to this country, but the histories of war today that we are implicated in as Americans. That’s why *The Sympathizer* is about the Vietnam War, but it’s also about war in general. I think that’s a point that a lot of readers don’t understand because for Americans, they are invested in not understanding that the United States was and is constituted by war.

AAPR: I appreciate the shift from recognizing that this Black and White divide is related to not only war and slavery but also structures like colonialism and how being Asian American doesn’t seem to be recognized as fitting within that same space. You talk about contradictions a lot in your writing—about this concept of duality in your work with the Asian American experience. Beyond the duality of feeling like an outsider and an insider, what are other contradictions you see in the

Asian American experience that relate to these ideas of war and colonialism?

NGUYEN: In our preparatory conversation, you talked about the Review as being a Review that addresses AAPI issues. There it is. That's a very basic contradiction. Our coalition has evolved over the last few decades to become AAPI as a gesture towards diversity and inclusion. These buzz words and concepts that many who consider ourselves to be on the left-er side of the political divide find sacred. Of course, we're committed to diversity; of course, we're committed to inclusion.

These gestures, while important, are far from proficient, and in fact can delude us into thinking that we're doing the proper amount of political work, when in fact, our political work might be blinding us to basic contradictions. With AAPI, the basic contradiction here is—what is the relationship between Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders? Can it be built around this narrative of diversity and inclusion when in many AAPI organizations and coalitions, there are no Pacific Islanders? There is no Pacific Islander content, there's no Pacific Islander recognition, there's no understanding of the fact that you simply can't name your organization as AAPI and then be done with it.

If you were to fundamentally address the Pacific Islander aspect of AAPI, what you would have to do is not talk about diversity and inclusion, but talk about colonization, imperialism, and conquest, and this is why Pacific Islanders are part of the United States. AAPI coalitions, in fact, may serve to obscure that history of colonization and conquest, which is ongoing and not in the past. Every time you go to Hawaii, for example, you as a tourist, are participating in ongoing colonization and conquest. If you're an Asian American in Hawaii, you are participating in colonization and conquest. How do AAPIs or Asian Americans address that contradiction? That is an emergent and really crucial aspect of our coalition that needs to be at the foreground rather than the background as a part of diversity and inclusion, and the self-congratulatory rhetoric.

AAPR: What interests me about this specific contradiction that you've spoken about, is that it relates to rhetoric and language. The language of "AAPI," we just talked about, is failing to disaggregate the experiences of Pacific Islanders and is lumping them together under AAPI. Do you think there's a way that we can make that language more inclusive or push the boundaries of language to emphasize the Pacific Islander experience and highlight more marginalized populations under the AAPI umbrella?

NGUYEN: Well, when it comes to doing things like naming ourselves and our orga-

nization, there's always going to be a limitation to what language can do, which is why names evolve over time. It's true not just for Asian Americans, obviously, but let's say for African Americans too, if we want to talk about the comparison that the

terminology for African Americans and their organizations has evolved as a recognition of the limitations of language and changing the rhetoric to try to accommodate changing political contexts and understandings.

I don't think that the problem is inherent in the name Asian American and Pacific Islander. I think the problem is more inherent in the practice of it. Now, if the issue is that the name prevents us from engaging in the necessary recognition and the idea that we really need to fundamentally restructure Asian American political practices, then yes, perhaps the name might have to go and what would replace it—I don't know. But I think at the very least, or what might need to happen, is the divorce of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. I don't know what benefit Pacific Islanders get out of this coalition. Asian Americans get the benefit of rhetorical profit, inclusion and the addition of Pacific Islander numbers to AAPI statistics, which is important for all the reasons that you're aware of. What do Pacific Islanders get out of it? Pacific Islanders only get their histories and realities obscured by this coalition and no benefits, either in terms of limited reform or in terms of major structural recognition and change. I would say maybe Pacific Islanders need to tell Asian Americans that they don't need us anymore, and that might be the shock that the Asian American side of the coalition would need to engage in some very serious self-reflection.

Now, the other dimension of rhetoric here is, again, what AAPI enables or what AAPI typically does. I think AAPI is regulated typically in conjunction with a rhetoric of diversity and inclusion. That rhetoric has to go for sure. It is too easy and yet not dangerous enough. Now the rhetoric of diversity and inclusion in today's age of our political divides, is inflammatory to the right, as it is, and yet it is not politically provocative enough to undertake the kinds of major structural changes that I think are necessary to actually deal with socioeconomic and racial and cultural inequities in our society.

“I already felt intuitively that any kind of political project that I wanted to be engaged in would have to be built on the principles of solidarity and alliances. This is the only way that forces like colonialism and imperialism can be defeated, because those forces are built on the divide and conquest. If we divide ourselves, we've already done half the work of what colonialism and imperialism want.”

That's why I prefer to use terms like colonization and decolonization, warfare and imperialism, refugees over immigrants, and talk about the historical and contemporary realities of Asian American Pacific Islanders.

The [next] steps that are needed for Asian Americans to undertake are very, very clear, at least on the surface, which is to invest—invest the money, invest the time, create the position, do the recruitment, change the educational structures in order to fundamentally have Pacific Islanders in the organization that we're talking about, in the issues that are being dealt with, and the people that are being recruited. And if they don't exist, then you build the pipelines. It's very, very clear to me what needs to be done. Whether Asian Americans are willing to do it, is a completely different issue.

AAPR: Beyond your life experiences, which I know were shaped by war and the refugee experience, how did studying ethnic studies help you find the language of colonialism and imperialism to name these specific problems?

NGUYEN: At Berkeley, I was an English and ethnic studies major, and most of those were actually very crucial to me. In English, for example, it was where I received a good part of my education in postcolonialism, in the critique of imperialism, through a handful of Marxist professors in the English department at Berkeley. Despite stereotypes, Berkeley was not actually full of Marxists. They're actually a very small minority but it was what I gravitated to and became an ethnic studies major very deliberately, because personally, I could have become an Asian American studies major. But I felt that the issue of solidarity was very crucial, and I wanted to become an ethnic studies major over an Asian American studies major, not because Asian American studies wasn't important, but because I wanted to learn more than just about my own people or peoples.

I already felt intuitively that any kind of political project that I wanted to be engaged in would have to be built on the principles of solidarity and alliances. This is the only way that forces like colonialism and imperialism can be defeated, because those forces are built on the divide and conquest. If we divide ourselves, we've already done half the work of what colonialism and imperialism want. That work of solidarity and alliances is obviously very, very difficult, because there's great capacity for misunderstanding and recrimination on all sides. But that's one of the things ethnic studies helped to enable.

Of course, ethnic studies itself is vulnerable to the language of diversity and inclusion and all those seductions of institutional belonging. But within ethnic studies, there's a very strong component, still, of this deeply materialist, ahistorical critique

of why it is that race matters. Race matters again, not just because of difference or inclusion, or for the pleasures of hybridity, and so on. Race matters because of the way that colonialism and imperialism have shaped so much of our world and certainly all of the Americas. All of that was inherent within ethnic studies, but I think for me, the project that ethnic studies and English started for me in college is still ongoing because to me, at least my own experience, it is so very seductive to give in to self-interest of your individuality, your family, your community, and your culture.

It's difficult to constantly learn how limited those worlds are and to understand the way by which our worlds are linked and connected. That's why I'm saying, for me, foregrounding the rhetoric of colonialism and imperialism and decolonization is so crucial to keep on reminding myself about these linkages between different populations and experiences. Part of the problem now with being an Asian American, is that the very terminology "Asian American" has become embedded in various kinds of institutions. This reflects the structural pressure of Asian Americans isolating themselves from the experiences of others so that first and foremost we are Asian Americans, and first and foremost, we're going to be talking about Asian American history and issues. And it already seems inclusive enough that we, for example, have an alliance between Koreans and Vietnamese and Japanese and Chinese. But it's not enough.

We need to be able to understand that why we exist as Asian Americans is inseparable from why there are African Americans or why this country is built on colonization and the taking of land from native peoples, which is still ongoing. Asian American culture and politics today is not geared to lean in those directions.

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AAPR: A few months ago in California, Governor Newsom signed into law AB 101,² which requires ethnic studies to be taught in high school. You've mentioned³ before that you felt like you really became an Asian American when you first came to Berkeley and started taking ethnic studies classes and meeting other Asian American student activists. Now that you're a professor of ethnic studies, do you have specific memories or experiences that you remember profoundly as both a student and an instructor that impressed upon you the importance of teaching ethnic studies, beyond teaching you the language of colonialism, decolonization, etc.?

² Meryl Kornfield, "California becomes first state to require ethnic studies for high school graduation," *The Washington Post*, October 9, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/10/09/california-ethnic-studies/>.

³ Viet Thanh Nguyen, "The Beautiful, Flawed Fiction of 'Asian American.'"

NGUYEN: I do believe that education has the potential to be revelatory and transformative. It certainly was for me, to come to Berkeley and to be for the very first time exposed to the very idea of being an Asian American. The very term didn't exist in high school, even though I grew up in California, in the 1980s.

To take Ronald Takaki's Asian American history course and Elaine Kim's Asian American literature course were literally eye opening and turned me into an Asian American and sent me on the road to where I am now. Along with that was my participation in the campus politics of Berkeley in the 80s and 90s. I also became an Asian American through joining the Asian American Political Alliance and being a part of what we call the United Front, which was not just Asian Americans, but all the other progressive organizations on the campus.

The work of activism and being a part of some kind of a movement was very important to me. I understood the critical role that political movements have played in the transformation of this country and many others—and the role that political movements played in relation to literary movements—because I wanted to be a writer, but I was and am still deeply committed to the idea of political movements. For me, the literary transformations that Asian American writers have undertaken would not have been possible without the history of political struggle that Asian Americans have, as well. To me these two struggles, the literary and the political, have always been intertwined.

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The other formative political experience I had as an activist was when I was co-chairing the Asian American Political Alliance. During one meeting, the women of the Asian American Political Alliance stood up and said, "You're all a bunch of sexist" to the men. "You have problems, especially Viet, and you guys need to take care of your own issues. We're not here to educate you. You deal with this." And then they left. That was actually very transformative for me, because it made me reflect deeply about my own masculine privilege and why did women see us and me this way? And what were my own personal political practices that would lead to the silencing of women and to the unequal division of labor and recognition. So that was an example in my own life where I felt that being the object of political struggle was not a pleasant experience, but it was an absolutely necessary one.

That's why I'm committed to this idea that, at times, ruptures need to take place. In ruptures, we are forced to confront our own blind spots, and our own deep and unrecognized investments are in our own power and privilege—even if we happen to be the so-called marginalized populations, because on one hand, I'm a so-called minority as an Asian American. On the other hand, I'm a man and I'm heterosexual and I am, at this point, super privileged in my life in a lot of ways.

We all need to be capable of recognizing not only our own suppression and

“Is the principle of AAPI self-recognition and the demand for recognition? Or is the principle for AAPI an ever-evolving struggle for justice? These are two very separate things that have been implicated and intertwined in AAPI history to the extent that one can be confused for the other. I think a lot of Asian Americans struggle for recognition, self-recognition, and that substitutes for the struggle for justice.”

people engaging in power politics all the time and are fully capable of exercising all kinds of recriminatory and abusive political acts, in addition to power and political acts. To be ethical means to be capable of both struggling for a more just world but also recognizing our capacity to be unjust and this is true of not just Vietnamese people here in this context, but Asian Americans as well.

AAPR: I am interested in this tension of how hurt people can hurt people still. I know you explore this tension through the lens of race and how we all hold relative power, privilege, and marginalization at the same time, and that these are not contradictory concepts. In *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*, you talk about male heterosexual sexuality, and the ways in which men who have been hurt by things like war and violence and colonialism can also hurt women, but through domestic violence and abuse, assault and more . . . When you talk about a just world and thinking about, in the vein of women who might be hurt by men who have been hurt, what does your vision of a just world look like, where we can have accountability for those who hurt people, but accounts for all hurt parties at the same time?

NGUYEN: There have to be policies in place that address all the many variations

marginalization, but our own power, wherever that happens to be. I really do believe that for almost everybody, we cannot use the word powerless. Because in fact, if we were to say that we were utterly powerless, we would have no hope. Where would our change come from if we were utterly powerless? So we have power. Our power fluctuates and changes according to the situation but we have to recognize where that power exists and take ethical responsibility for it.

That is to me a very serious dimension of politics. I see this as a Vietnamese person, so the final example I’ll end with is this: Vietnamese people like to think of themselves as victims here in the United States of racism, but also communism and so on. And yet, I see Vietnamese

“That’s the distinction between recognition and representation on one hand, and redistribution and, dare I say, revolution on the other, in which the struggle for justice doesn’t end. For Asian Americans, when we say we’re Asian American, oftentimes the struggle for justice means more Asian Americans with greater opportunities in higher levels and so on. That’s not my vision of justice. Justice is, in fact, this greater redistribution of wealth and power for everyone. And not just in the United States, but everywhere.”

that you’re talking about. These policies in place, would, in my opinion, be built upon the idea that these abuses take place as ongoing legacies of past abuse. Power becomes institutionalized within institutions but also in populations and formations so that even men, in this example, from relatively marginalized communities can still participate in the pleasures and powers of masculinity.

Policies need to be capable of redistributing wealth and power. That’s very difficult because people who have wealth and power don’t want to give it up, in whatever form that wealth and power takes. But you’re just not going to have a more just world unless that redistribution takes place. But to say the very word ‘redistribution’

in the United States is anathema to so many people, in all its political significations, but that is exactly what at the very bare minimum needs to take place.

Now, the redistribution of wealth and power also needs to be guided by principles. What are those principles? This goes back to our very beginning of our conversation on AAPI. Is the principle of AAPI self-recognition and the demand for recognition? Or is the principle for AAPI an ever-evolving struggle for justice? These are two very separate things that have been implicated and intertwined in AAPI history to the extent that one can be confused for the other. I think a lot of Asian Americans struggle for recognition, self-recognition, and that substitutes for the struggle for justice.

So that Asian Americans think that, if we’re anti-Asian violence, if we’re pro-Asian American for whatever reason, then we’ve done our work of justice. But that’s not true—that’s the work of self-interest. The work of justice is different from the work of self-interest, but for a lot of Asian Americans, they get confused, because their self-interest is aligned with these liberal politics of Asian American self-recognition. While there is a lot of utility to recognition and representation, we all want better Hollywood movies for example, does it make any difference if Hollywood is still an elitist, hierarchical, racist, sexist, capitalist institution in the service of the military industrial complex? Which is what it is. So, more Asian Americans in Hollywood, that’s great, but how far is that going to get us?

That’s the distinction between recognition and represen-

tation on one hand, and redistribution and, dare I say, revolution on the other, in which the struggle for justice doesn't end. For Asian Americans, when we say we're Asian American, oftentimes the struggle for justice means more Asian Americans with greater opportunities in higher levels and so on. That's not my vision of justice. Justice is, in fact, this greater redistribution of wealth and power for everyone. And not just in the United States, but everywhere. You invoked the third world movement and strike and separation in the 1960s. That was actually one point in our history where we had a moment of conjunction between racial politics and revolutionary politics. Of course, we've far diverged from that, far separated from that. I think now, the dominant mode for Asian Americans is the mode of recognition and representation, diversity and inclusion, which is important but deeply limited in this capacity for achieving this more just world.

AAPR: Today, we are seeing Asian Americans feeling really impassioned because the hurt that our communities are suffering from is anti-Asian violence. On this idea of self-interest, for instance, I think a place where we see this self-interest most intensely is around policing, or safety. In some pockets, I hear themes of Asian Americans who understand the Black Lives Matter movement and engage in community action or mutual aid protection. But still, very prevalently, throughout the Asian American population, many people are deeply uncomfortable with the idea of defunding or abolishing the police, which you wrote very briefly about in your TIME magazine article.⁴ Do you think Asian Americans should take action to push towards this vision of an ideal police-free future?

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NGUYEN: This is a complicated issue because I don't think it is reducible to saying that all Black people are on the side of defunding the police, which is not true. The politics of the country at the moment indicate that it is much more complicated than that. There are, still, for good reason, a lot of prominent Black people who are invested in a more just police. Everyone recognizes that we don't want an unjust police but we want a more just police.

That is in tension with this other position, which sees the police as being a part of a much larger structure of incarceration and regulation of the body and bodies of color. It is a long hard struggle. I certainly do support abolition and defunding the police and the transformation of our thinking, about property and crime, about how to prevent those things, and the police are a short-term measure while the

⁴ Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Asian Americans Are Still Caught in the Trap of the 'Model Minority' Stereotype. And it Creates Inequality for All," TIME, last modified June 26, 2020, <https://time.com/5859206/anti-asian-racism-america/>.

long-term solution is about the redistribution of wealth and power. We wouldn't need the police to police if, in fact, our underserved, marginalized communities had greater access to all the various kinds of resources that the middle class take for granted.

That involves a redistribution of property. Property is part of what we're talking about—people with property want to protect it. They see the police as doing that work. For a lot of immigrants, refugees, and Asian Americans, what we have to talk about is that they come to the United States to participate in the American dream, this ideological narrative of property. So it's not a surprise that a lot of us are invested in the idea of the police.

To be invested in the idea of property means you're invested in colonialism, because colonialism is built on the transformation of land into property. I think a lot of Asian Americans don't recognize that. Property is also built on bodies of property, our history of slavery. For instance, the Los Angeles Rebellion, the fact that the Asian American perspective or Korean American perspective—much of the injustice there came about from the destruction of Korean American businesses at that time. Which is terrible. But, for me, the issue is also that Korean Americans, as marginalized as they were, structurally, economically, and racially, also had property. And the fifty-eight or so people who died at that time, almost all of them were Black and Latino and the majority of those arrested were Black and Latino. Here, we see a very clear distinction in terms of the structural position of Asian Americans versus other groups.

That is something Asian Americans have to grapple with and recognize. But that would involve positioning themselves against the literal investment of their own communities. When we talk about a more just world and ethical positioning, it goes back to this idea that to be an Asian American oftentimes would involve contradiction. The struggle for justice might involve positioning ourselves against the self-professed interest of a good number of Asian Americans. So, it is not just policing, but affirmative action for example, where these kinds of politics come up. The politics of labor exploitation, where Asian Americans sometimes find themselves on the side of being the exploiters of labor and have to be called out when that happens.

AAPR: We're seeing loss and hurt today a lot, specifically around attacks against elderly Asian American people and Asian Americans, which has been sparked specifically by COVID-19. Where do you see resilience happening as a brighter turn away from loss and conflict? Where do you want to see resilience happening more for the Asian American community?

NGUYEN: Part of what we have seen in this era of COVID-19 and rising anti-Asian violence is a lot of resilience—in previous eras of anti-Asian violence, we simply did not have large numbers of Asian Americans who had the power to speak out and represent. It's not that Asian Americans weren't fighting against these things in the past, there just wasn't as much critical mass at all levels. So, the Asian American response to anti-Asian violence in the past couple of years has demonstrated a great degree of resilience, simply because we have Asian American organizations that speak out, we have Asian American celebrities, for better or worse, who can speak out, Asian American politicians, Asian Americans who are adept at social media, and we have created our own media organizations as well. So that is an example of resilience, of the powers of recognition and representation that Asian Americans have undertaken for themselves, in the last several decades.

That, if anything, is a very important spot to focus on, amidst all the difficulties of the last couple of years for Asian Americans. We have not, for the most part, taken anti-Asian violence submissively. We have been angry, we have been upset, we have been sad, of course. The fact that we have spoken out, organized, protested, written, marched, all manner of things, is one of the positive aspects that, in the future, we'll look back on as an important transformative moment for Asian Americans.

AAPR: You have said in past interviews⁵ that you used to think that your own lived experiences weren't important enough or interesting enough to warrant writing non-fiction about your life. But you've also mentioned⁶ that one of the stories in *The Refugees* is partly semi-autobiographical, or at least some of those moments in the story are. What changed to make you realize that your stories and experiences have as much importance and deserve to be told still? Do you think that you will write nonfiction at some point, now that you have more experience?

NGUYEN: In fact, I'm writing a memoir. The draft is done and I'm hoping to finish it sometime this year. I think that for most of my life I didn't want to write about myself because I was always living in the shadow of my parents, and deservedly

⁵ Longyan Zhang, "On Writing, Memory and Identity: An Interview With Viet Thanh Nguyen," VietNguyen.Info, June 18, 2020, <https://vietnguyen.info/2020/on-writing-memory-and-identity-an-interview-with-viet-thanh-nguyen>.

⁶ Karl Ashoka Britto, "Remembering and Forgetting': An Interview with Viet Thanh Nguyen," Public Books, September 25, 2018, <https://www.publicbooks.org/remembering-and-forgetting-an-interview-with-viet-thanh-nguyen/>.

so. For a lot of us who are refugees, we look at our parents and our grandparents and think, they live through history. What are we dealing with as the children of refugees here?

For me, the only reason, the only way I could justify writing this memoir, was to make it a memoir of my parents and of me, and a memoir of how our lives are completely intertwined with history. In the American tradition of the memoir, huge emphasis is placed upon individual experience. I'm not interested in that. I would never write a memoir where it was just about me and what I've been through. I have been through some interesting things, but not enough to justify a book. But a book in which I connect my family's journey and my own, to the histories that created refugees, is interesting to me.

In fact, my memoir embodies much of what we talk about. For example, I can't separate literature from politics—that's a parallel for how I can't separate my family and me from history. The memoir itself is a lot about our individual lives and experiences, but also a lot about capitalism and colonialism and racism and warfare and the refugee experience. These are issues that I think a lot of Americans don't want to hear, when they pick up a memoir by a refugee or an immigrant. When Americans pick up such a memoir, I think their expectation is "you're going to tell us about your sad life or your parent's sad life, and then tell us how you made it here in America." That's what they want to hear. Or, if you want to tell us about grief or loss, you only want to hear the privatized experience of grief and loss, like the terrible things my parents have been through as immigrants or refugees and how that shaped me. Period.

This book is very much about how grief and loss for Vietnamese refugees is inseparable from the tragedies of colonization and warfare that created refugees in the first place. That, to me, is an interesting memoir and what I hope to write. ■

STORYTELLING AND NARRATIVE: *Challenging Systemic Racism as Asian Americans*

An Interview with Ken Liu by Cat Huang

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

AAPR: The eponymous short story “The Paper Menagerie” within your short story collection *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories* is highly decorated, has won multiple prestigious awards, and is very popular among readers. The story talks about basic themes that many readers within and beyond the Asian American population can at least understand, if not specifically relate to. It discusses family, immigration, and growing up in this era of race and discrimination in America. It talks about the American Dream and the desire to assimilate—even themes of corporatism.

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What do you think is the significance of talking about these themes? And do you feel like talking about these themes of discrimination, race, etc.—or the way people talk about these themes—has perhaps become reductive in today’s day and age?

LIU: Yeah. I’m really glad you asked the question. “The Paper Menagerie,” the story itself, is actually a fairly difficult story to talk about because the story is written in such a way that it’s open to multiple interpretations, some of which were interpretations I intended. But other interpretations were not ones I intended. So I think the reason that story has become popular is largely because it is very amenable to multiple interpretations, which is actually kind of my big thing.

So to me, fiction is kind of like building a house, right? I am an architect and an engineer and I build a house and the house encodes within it my expectation and understanding of how human behavior is and what the human condition is. I build the house to reflect the way I think people live and how they love and how they

hate and how they grow and so forth. But the house is just an empty house. It's not alive. The reader comes to the house and moves in. The reader has to put her own pictures up on the walls. The reader has to cover the floor with their own purpose. The reader has to unpack her baggage literally and emotionally inside the house. The reader has to actually feel at home and start to explore it. That's when the house becomes a living thing. Every story is a collaboration between the reader and the writer.

So just as two families moving into the same house, one after the other will live entirely different lives; two different readers coming to the same story will end up coming away with two different stories. That's just the way. I think houses that are open and amenable to a multitude of different kinds of families moving into them are going to be more popular than houses that are very quirky and strange and specific and exotic and whatnot. They're very idiosyncratic. Some people will love, love, love these houses and other people will hate, hate, hate them. But because the house is reflecting in some way the writer's intention and the writer's personality and the writer's own baggage, it just has to be reflective of the writer's entire life experience.

96 Coming back to "The Paper Menagerie," I wrote the story because I was inspired by these very moving personal narratives by women who would be called mail-order brides in contemporary parlance. They are women who are mostly from what we call the Global South who, for a variety of reasons, often in order to make a better life for themselves and their families, choose to be included in introductory services so that men from developed countries would meet them and marry them and then they get to migrate and make new lives in these developed countries. They're often viewed as figures of derision—mocked and seen as mercenaries.

But the reality is, these are women of great courage. I don't think many of us can imagine doing such a thing, and in fact, in one sense, their lives reflect the great inequality our world thrives on. In another sense, they also reflect the great courage that people have always had to move across borders to create new lives and defy the

odds and try to make of their own lives something that couldn't be imagined given the circumstances of their birth. So I was very moved by these narratives of these women who did this and their efforts to connect with their hus-

"What does it mean to be an immigrant? What does it mean to have your story be misunderstood and taken away from you? That you feel like you cannot tell your own story? That's how a lot of immigrants feel—that they cannot tell their own story because the language they wish to use is not the language that most people in their new home can understand. There's something deeply frustrating and incredibly human about all that."

bands to make lives in their new lands—to really craft out a space for themselves to build their own houses, to make rooms of their own, if you will. That’s what they were doing: they were trying to make rooms of their own. And I was just so moved by the stories. And I realized that so many of these women are right here in America, and they’re an important part of the American story. But their stories are often not told in a way that is empathetic, that centers their experience, that really focuses on who they are.

I was supposed to write a story at the time about magic. I was trying to enter into a contest for stories about magic users. And I thought, no, there’s a great deal of magic to what these women go through and maybe I can write a magic realist story inspired by these narratives that will center the experience of these women and maybe allow me to talk a little bit about my own thoughts about what it means to be American.

What does it mean to be an immigrant? What does it mean to have your story be misunderstood and taken away from you? That you feel like you cannot tell your own story? That’s how a lot of immigrants feel—that they cannot tell their own story because the language they wish to use is not the language that most people in their new home can understand. There’s something deeply frustrating and incredibly human about all that. So I put all of that in there. I wrote the story. In some sense, fundamentally, the story to me is an exploration about what it means to be American. And what it means to tell a story, to be American without necessarily using English as your primary language of expression. That’s what the mother is. So the story is about the mother really.

Jack is there also, because Jack is there to explore a secondary theme, which is the theme of systemic racism and internalized racism. Because his mother was not seen as American even though she was. His mother was excluded, even though she

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“The internalized aspect is something that I feel like we have not talked enough about in our exploration of systemic racism. Systemic racism, in large part, operates by making the oppressive seem normal. And this whole idea that some people get to be Americans, that Americanness is defined by a certain language, by a certain skin color, by a certain state of being, is deeply pernicious. Unless we question it, we always end up buying into it, and so many of us, myself, and fellow Asian Americans have for way too long bought into the idea that Whiteness equals Americanness and we have often ended up just not really challenging the system as we ought to.”

belonged. His mother was made to feel like somehow she shouldn't be here, even though—why doesn't she belong here? She has the same right to be here as any of those women who really ridiculed her in Connecticut—the same right as her husband, the same right as her son. And yet everybody else in the story seemed to think they belong here more than she did, which is ludicrous. It's about systemic racism. That's what I wanted to explore.

So I wrote the story, and the story came out, and right away you can see that the story was not interpreted the way I intended it to be interpreted. You can read it in the way that a lot of summaries describe the story. They talk about how the story is about an American father and the Chinese mother. Why is she described as the Chinese mother? Why is she not American the same way as her husband is? They both are. Now if the description is a White father and a Chinese mother, I can understand because those are both racial descriptions, but it doesn't talk about who they are. But the way these things are phrased, it equates being White with being American. It equates being native born with being American, which are both positions I absolutely reject. But very few people picked up on that. Even in the way that people who claim they like the story describe the story, you can see the very systemic oppression of the mother being replicated and recreated.

It's really kind of incredible to me that very few people seem to even understand how wrong it is to describe the mother as Chinese and the father as American. You just cannot do that. That's missing the point of the story. And in fact, a lot of people ended up interpreting the story to fit the traditional immigrant narrative. Which is explicitly this story I was writing

“I do think it's very important for all of us to look into that history and to understand where things come from, and to try to **dismantle the unjust structures** that we benefit from or suffer from. It's absolutely critical for all of us to try to tear all that down and try to question it.”

“The point isn't to make anybody feel personally guilty. That's kind of the whole point of why we talk about systemic racism and structures of oppression. It's to show that individual goodwill or **individual moral responsibility** is not really enough. It's just not.”


against. They interpret it as a story about how the children of immigrants are caught between worlds and how they're somehow choosing Americanness versus Chineseness. Which is ridiculous. Again, the mother is American. When she cooks her dishes, they are American dishes. When she speaks her language, it is an American language. Chinese is an American language, just as Chinese cooking is an American cooking style. As long as you don't accept that premise, you will never understand the story properly. As long as you always describe her as speaking a language foreign to America and cooking foreign to America, you are participating in the systemic racism against her.

The point is, that kind of attitude is pernicious. It's part of systemic racism. When the interpretive frameworks are in favor of systemic racism, a story cannot prevent that from happening, cannot prevent itself

from being co-opted into the power structure, even though I constructed the story intentionally against it.

The internalized aspect is [also] something that I feel like we have not talked enough about in our exploration of systemic racism. Systemic racism,

in large part, operates by making the oppressive seem normal. And this whole idea that some people get to be Americans, that Americanness is defined by a certain language, by a certain skin color, by a certain state of being, is deeply pernicious. Unless we question it, we always end up buying into it, and so many of us—myself, and fellow Asian Americans—have for way too long bought into the idea that Whiteness equals Americanness, and we have often ended up just not really challenging the system as we ought to.



“I will also say specifically, in terms of **learning about the history of migrations**, and so on, it is very easy for us, especially those of us who are in privileged positions, to say that I personally didn't do anything to hurt other people. **Why am I being asked to reckon with these historical issues?** [...] That's not the point.”

AAPR: You talked about learning about the narratives and stories of the mail-order brides, as they're known as. I'm wondering, because a lot of your writing does talk about themes of migration and movements surrounding the Asian American diaspora, do you think it's important for us to know the histories, past and present, of migration and movement—for example, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Muslim ban from the Trump administration, current concerns about undocumented immigrants, and refugee policies?

LIU: I think it's incredibly important to know the history of not just your own people, your own tribe, but also of your country and really the world at large. There are so many aspects of history that we don't question, that we just look at and say, "This is the way it is." But how did it become that way? Unless you understand how things became the way they are, you're not going to be able to understand where to go. To learn about the history of civilization is to learn a history of oppression, of invasion, of domination, and of genocide of all kinds.

It really makes you question the narrative of the modern nation-state, which assumes an equation between land and language and title and blood and all the rest of it. The modern nation-state and the borders between nations is, again, part of systemic racism. It's part of the modern political apparatus to keep people in the status quo, which is not natural, but the result of oppression and legalized murder and legalized rape and legalized expropriation. Unless we acknowledge all that and try to reckon with that, how can we possibly move on? I don't understand how that's supposed to be.

I do think it's very important for all of us to look into that history and to understand where things come from, and to try to dismantle the unjust structures that we benefit from or suffer from. It's absolutely critical for all of us to try to tear all that down and try to question it.

More specifically, when you don't focus enough on the history of migration, you end up just accepting things the way it is. You end up accepting as universal, the things you're taught as universal, because you were taught that these writers are worth reading. And they're worth admiring. You end up accepting that without realizing that the fact that these writers are worth reading is because many other people were told, at pointed sword, to study them, as opposed to other voices that are equally great and wondrous.

We end up learning to admire the art coming out of certain people, and to treat art of other people as anthropological pieces. What does anthropology cover? And what does art cover? It is a very important distinction, but why? Why do certain people get to be considered art and other peoples considered merely anthropologi-

cal curiosity, mere artifacts to be displayed in the natural history museum? We can't not question these things. Because these distinctions of history matter, they matter to how we determine the future, how we determine the present, and how we value what we find to be valuable.

AAPR: I agree, I think it's very easy for us to accept things the way that they are without realizing the ways in which many different populations have shared histories of genocide and war and violence, and how these have affected many of us in different ways. I also really love your explorations of what is basically solidarity—when you're talking about the moral responsibility that we have to one another, and how sometimes we have to act against our own self interest to help one another if you want to have a just society.

LIU: It's so frustrating sometimes, the way I hear about how unconscious bias enters into every conversation. I hear from writers who say things like, oh, I don't want to write about immigration, because it's not universal. How is it not universal? By taking that stance, you're somehow assuming that being native-born is universal. But being a migrant is somehow not. Just accepting that premise in the first place is to accept the ideal of the modern nation-state and to accept the myth of blood equals land equals language equals all the rest of it. It's nonsense.

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And yet, we unconsciously replicate it. It's like some writer writes about college professors sleeping around with their students. And this is considered the universal great American novel. But when we're talking about immigrants, that's marginalized, that's just stuff that's only of ethnic interest. Not somehow universal. It's ridiculous. But we keep on replicating that pattern, in the way we talk about books, in the way we classify books, in the way we sell books. Even efforts at trying to remedy these things, somehow unconsciously replicate the very power structure they're meant to dismantle. And it's deeply frustrating.

AAPR: Thank you for sharing these thoughts because, it is my hope at least, that in pointing out and identifying these power structures and the way that they continue in our writing and in the way we talk about things, that will help people become more aware. And again, this returns to the question of, what things are considered American? Is it the "Chinese mother"? Or is it the American family, the immigrant dream?

I am especially struck by your thoughtfulness about what kind of things are accepted in certain canons, for instance, the literary canon. You mentioned certain tropes that are allowed or some that aren't. I am really interested in this because in

one of your short stories, “State Change” you include many references to writers like T.S. Eliot, who is a great modernist poet, figures like Joan of Arc, Cicero the Orator and the Romans and the traditions and formations of democracy. And these are really traditions and figures who are imbued in the Western canon. How do you see yourself either continuing or diverging from these Western traditions of writing and literature?

LIU: One of the things I think we do a disservice to is—when we speak about the Western tradition, we often end up erasing differences and diversities within the Western tradition itself. There’s a tendency for us to be so reductive and a tendency to simplify. And a tendency to sharpen differences when ambiguity, internal contradictions, and multiplicity are the hallmarks of every culture, including so-called Western tradition. The Western tradition is not monolithic and I wanted to highlight its internal diversity and contradictions.

For example, there are a lot of assumptions about how toxic individuality is a core tenet of Western traditions, which is ludicrous. The Western tradition includes huge strings of collectivism and collective action, and the idea that the individual is not defined as an individual, but rather as the intersection of a multiplicity of connections. This goes back to the earliest thinkers in the Christian tradition. So if you want to talk about the diversity of Western tradition, how can you not include the collectivism that is at the heart of so much Western thinking?

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The idea that somehow you can ignore the diversity within the Greeks, within the Romans, within the British tradition, which is itself a subsumption of so many other free Imperial traditions, and the idea that you can treat all of Europe as somehow a monolithic thing when Europe is such a diverse, wondrous land full of so many different languages and cultures and histories, is caused by the process of the modern nation state movement. Part of the whole movement of forming modern nation states is this erasure of differences where regional distinctions get subsumed. And that’s a tragedy that continues.

Much of the process of modernism and modernity is about erasing a very vital, lively diversity within these Western nation-states. So a lot of my work is about recovering that diversity, reminding people that the Western tradition is not monolithic, that it is, in fact, broad and open and diverse, and that it’s cosmopolitan in the most positive sense of the word.

Like many other non-white individuals in the past who have tried to or struggled against the Western canon, I came to the conclusion that the the best way to address the Western canon is to understand that it can be an inclusive, diverse and welcoming place if we simply treated ourselves as though we belong in it, rather than treat-

ing ourselves as outsiders trying to somehow adopt something that's not our own.

I view the Western tradition as very much my own tradition. It is simply a canon that I study, and therefore, is a part of me. It's a part of my personal canon. I have no problems with the idea that we can all learn to admire these writers and to add other writers to the canon and to attempt to carve out spaces within it for ourselves, for our own voices.

Because if there's anything that is grand about the Western ideal, it is the ideal that humanism and ever-expanding scopes of empathy are possible—that we can in fact, become truly universal not by erasing differences, but by actually recognizing and celebrating differences, and to say that these differences, the focus on the local, the regional, the specific, the personal, is actually at the very heart of what Western universalism is about. A true universalism is not aimed to erase, but to recognize, to celebrate, to lift up every single voice.

AAPR: Thank you for sharing these thoughts about the Western tradition and the understanding that we belong to this canon. We are an extension of it, just as, as people in America, we are by extension Americans. And when we talk about diversifying literature, we're not talking about replacing any type of writers in the canon, we're not trying to strike out White writers. We're actually just adding to it, carving out our own spaces. And I think that is something that people sometimes misunderstand about these new movements in literature.

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LIU: 100%. I think a lot about language itself, also, and I think about what the role of language actually is. English is a very interesting language in this sort of debate, because English is, by default, now recognized as sort of a universal language around the world. It has more speakers than any other language, and a very large portion of English speakers and writers are not native English speakers and readers. And that has implications.

You see this sort of debate around the world: what does it mean to speak and write English well? Does it mean that you're imitating models from the great British writers, the great American writers? And if you're talking about imitating the great American writers, are they White American writers? Or can they be Black American writers, and Asian American writers, and Muslim American writers, and immigrant American writers, and so on? Is your stance that only White American writers count as great writers of English and worthy models to emulate? What are you really saying?

So this is a debate around the world. And you have to think about, what about writers from Africa who write in English? What about writers from Europe, or writ-

ers from Asia who choose to write in another language? Are they somehow less worthy of admiration, because they are somehow not considered owners of English and therefore able to define what it is?

I think these are all worthy debates to have, and I haven't seen enough debate around them. But I really think that if you really view English as a world language, then you have to be willing to open yourself to the possibility that people from outside of North America and Great Britain get to define what English actually is, and they get to expand the language and they get to reshape the language to tell stories that in its previous or current form, is incapable of. Can we extend the language to do so? And my view is that English, historically, has been able to expand and grow and become the language of people whose stories that language was not meant to tell initially, but people have been able to use it for that purpose and grow it in the same way that the Western tradition can grow and encompass greater diversities than it initially perhaps was able to. And I think it's a nice metaphor for the fact that we need to, like you say, grow rather than seek to replace. I always believe that you need to grow; you need to elevate every voice and not try to suppress some at the expense of others.

AAPR: To wrap up, do you want to talk about your forthcoming work?

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LIU: Yeah, there are a couple things I want to talk about. One is the conclusion of my Dandelion Dynasty, which is coming out in June. It's called *Speaking Bones*, which is the final book in my Dandelion Dynasty series. Like I said, it's a series I've worked on more than 10 years now and it's over a million words. It's the longest thing I've ever written. It's the thing I'm proudest of.

It is, in fact, a series about modernity. In some ways, for me, modernity is very much the story of America. It's the story of America, it's a story of how a diverse collection of peoples become one people. How [do these] people come up with a constitution, which is not just a piece of paper, but rather a set of stories that allows them to explain to themselves who they are. That's what I mean by a constitution. A constitution is a set of constitutive stories, a set of constitutive practices, a set of constitutive deeds that collectively form a mythology that allow that people to define for themselves who they are and to react to crises. We have a crisis, a constitutional crisis in America right now, because we're arguing over who gets to be American and who gets to tell the American story. That's fundamentally what our political differences are actually about. It's a competition. It's a clash between visions of America. What does it mean to be American? What does it mean for America to exist as a nation?

Right now, there's a huge argument in this country, not between merely two sides, but between many different voices about what that really means. The riots of January 6th, the insurrection, our elections, our arguments, our seeming irresolvable differences—these are all actually just manifestations of this fight over what is our constitution—what is our constituted story?

It turns out that, because these thoughts and ideas are swirling around the air, my epic fantasy series ended up being about that. That's really what it is. It's an epic fantasy that's ultimately about what it means to have a nation. What does it mean to actually build a nation that isn't defined by blood, language, or merely land, but by a set of ideas, a set of mythologies.

It is, to me, the most moving story of our time, because the American experiment is a grand and beautiful experiment, and full of blood and pain and oppression and all sorts of horrors. But it is fundamentally a beautiful story, and worthy of our effort to defend it and to fight for it really.

My epic fantasy, ultimately, is about that more than anything else. I hope readers who have followed the journey so far will enjoy the very final volume that is a coda on that. ■

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ASIAN AMERICAN POLICY REVIEW

33rd Edition

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The Asian American Policy Review (AAPR) at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government is now accepting submissions for its 33rd print edition, to be published in the spring of 2023. The AAPR is the oldest journal in the United States dedicated to analyzing public policy issues facing the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community.

We are dedicated to publishing a wide range of work that explores AAPI communities and identities and examines the role of public policy in the lives of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. We aim to publish a journal that captures a broad range of AAPI experiences, movements, and identities and makes this work accessible to policy makers and the broader public.

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We welcome a wide range of submissions and are eager to publish work that broadens the boundaries of what constitutes public policy. Past editions have published photo essays, poetry, and personal essays that explore the intersection of culture, identity, and politics. We also encourage submissions that directly address public policy, including research articles and case studies on how different policies have affected the AAPI community, from the local to the federal level.

We strongly encourage submissions from authors of all backgrounds, including scholars, policy makers, civil servants, advocates, organizers, and artists.

Please reach out if you have questions about the journal or our submissions process. We are eager to talk with potential authors about submission ideas and the journal process.

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- Commentaries: (750 to 1,500 words).
- Media, film, and book reviews: (750 to 1,500 words).
- Artwork: includes graphic design, installation pieces, photography, and paintings.
- Creative writing pieces: includes short stories, poetry, and excerpts from larger works of all genres. (500 to 5,000 words) in length.
- Short films and documentaries to be featured on our website.
- Abstracts for proposed pieces will also be accepted. Final acceptance will be based upon production of a full submission.
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- Authors are required to collaborate with editing and fact-checking and comply with AAPR's mandated deadlines.

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