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ABSTRACT

Title of Document: ASIAN AMERICAN'S EXPERIENCES OF RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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There has been a sharp rise in anti-Asian racism since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though the speed and severity of it might have surprised some, this hate and xenophobia is not novel; anti-Asian sentiments have existed in the United States since the mid-19th century, and many of the country's earliest immigration policies was designed to restrict Asian migration. This history has largely been cut from American history, and what remains has been whitewashed through the lens of the "Model Minority" myth – a narrative steeped in anti-Blackness that defines Asian Americans only by their relative economic success and denies their experiences of race and racism. Many scholars have recently studied how this rise in anti-Asian discrimination has affected Asian American and Pacific Islanders' (AAPI) mental health, but few have focused on their participants' lived experiences in said research. This study sought to fill this gap in the literature by centering AAPI's experiences of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to connect it back to the often-unspoken history of anti-Asian discrimination. The study was built around a qualitative descriptive framework that focused on rich description. A total of five AAPI people were interviewed virtually. Some common themes were experiences of microaggressions, increased feelings of fear and anxiety, a sense of othering and feeling like they were "guests" in the US, the support they received from their community and significant others, solidarity with Black Lives Matter (BLM), and contending with anti-Blackness in their family. Though the sample size was small, the findings of this study illustrate the racial reality of AAPI people's lived experiences during the pandemic. I conclude that this study illustrates that AAPI need to be included more in race scholarship outside times of crisis, and that future research involving AAPI must challenge and reject the "Model Minority" myth.

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UMBC

Thesis

ASIAN AMERICAN'S EXPERIENCES OF RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA DURING THE COVID-
19 PANDEMIC

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During the course of the pandemic, Stop AAPI Hate (SAH) has been one of the richest – and one of the few – sources of data on Anti-Asian racism and hate crimes, and as a result have either been referenced or directly cited by dozens of researchers since mid-2020 (Anand, Hsu, and Floyd 2020; Chen et al. 2021, 2020; Cheng et al. 2021; Gover et al. 2020; Hswen et al. 2021; Hwang 2021; Kim et al. 2021; Le et al. 2020; Lee and Waters 2021; Misra et al. 2020; Tessler et al. 2020; Wu, Qian, and Wilkes 2021). Because of this, SAH’s work was the cornerstone of this research, not only influencing the direction this project took, but also much of the literature cited here. I would be remiss to not give their work special recognition for the importance it has played in my, and many others’, work over the past year and a half.

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INTRODUCTION

On March 16th 2021, an armed white man¹ entered three different Asian-owned spas in the Atlanta, Georgia area and murdered eight people, six of which were Asian women. The gunman was apprehended – alive – on his way down to Florida where he intended to continue his murders. It was a shocking moment of extreme violence that was followed by an infuriating official police response that asked for empathy for the murderer, not the murdered, saying that he was “fed up and kind of at the end of his rope,” and that the day he went out with the intent to murder these Asian women “was a really bad day for him and this is what he did. (Chappell, Romo, and Diaz 2021).” The gunman equated his actions to being born out of a sex and porn addiction and considered the spas he targeted as sites of “temptation for him that he wanted to eliminate (Chappell et al. 2021),” denying any gendered racism that motivated his actions (Chappell et al. 2021; Eldridge 2021). Only days after the shootings, both national and Atlanta-based newspapers published articles questioning the character of the women killed and their places of employment, suggesting – if not outright accusing – that the spas provided illicit massages, and that some of the victims might have been pimps and matrons that exploited young Asian women despite there being no evidence of such at the time of their publication (Edwards and Judd 2021; Kelly, Estwick, and Mansfield 2021).

As of the completion of this paper, there has been only partial justice for these women. Because Georgia’s hate crime law requires a conviction before hate crime charges can be applied, the gunman was only tried for eight counts of murder, four counts in Cherokee County where the murders began and four in Fulton County. In July, the gunman took a plea deal given

¹ His name is intentionally omitted. To use his name is to grant him and his ideals a form of recognition and legitimacy that will not be granted in this paper.

to him by Cherokee County prosecutors and was found guilty of the four murders there and was sentenced to life in prison without parole; however, the prosecutors chose not to pursue hate crime charges, feeling that there was insufficient evidence it was racially motivated because two of the victims were not Asian women (Anon 2021b). In September, the gunman and his defense plead not guilty to the murder charges in Fulton County. The next hearing is slated to be held November 23rd, the day of this paper's completion. At least one of the prosecutors has said that she will pursue hate crime charges (Lenthang 2021).

The deaths of Xiaojie “Emily” Tan, Daoyou Feng, Hyun Jung Grant, Soon Chung Park, Suncha Kim, and Yong Ae Yue was a tragedy, one that traumatized the survivors of the shooting (Park 2021) and will continue to haunt these women's friends and loved ones for unknown years to come. Many of the details of how the police and media narratives were initially shaped by calls for empathy for the white murderer, questions of the victims' character after their deaths, and legal and social doubt that the incident was motivated by hate at all might be painfully familiar to people of color in the wake of tragedy.

However, this act of hate was not an isolated incident. This current moment, marked by a sharp rise in anti-Asian harassment, assaults, and hate crimes around the United States (Gover, Harper, and Langton 2020; Rogin and Nawaz 2020; Yellow Horse, Jeung, et al. 2021) made all the more poignant by former U.S. President Trump and other high ranking political officials calling the virus the “Kung Flu” or the “China Virus” (Lee 2020), is just the most recent chapter in a long, often unspoken history of anti-Asian racism, xenophobia, exclusion, and violence in the United States that has ebbed and flowed in magnitude and public acceptance, but has none the less remained a constant undercurrent for the past two-hundred years (Chen, Zhang, and Liu 2020; Gover et al. 2020). Despite the increased attention to and awareness of Anti-Asian racism

by media and social researchers as of late, it is still a considerably under-studied area of critical race scholarship. Asian voices are rarely considered when scholars discuss race and racism are often quite literally racially othered by the very methodology employed when studies are only concerned about “White,” “Black,” and “Other.” Because of the current social and political landscape, it is more important than ever to address this gap in the literature.

The aim of this study was to center the voices of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) and their experiences of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Though studies have been done investigating specific aspects of the pandemic’s impact on Asian American communities such as physical and mental health (Chen et al. 2020; Dee et al. 2021; Le et al. 2020; Lee and Waters 2021; Litam 2020; Misra et al. 2020; Pillai, Yellow Horse, and Jeung 2021; Saw, Yellow Horse, and Jeung 2021; Tessler, Choi, and Kao 2020; Yellow Horse, Jeung, et al. 2021), economic stability (Kim et al. 2021), and attitude towards Black Lives Matter (Yellow Horse, Kuo, et al. 2021), few have adopted a people-first approach that centers the lived experiences of the people interviewed. It is my hope that this paper will work to fill this gap in the literature and help to provide a foundation for future research to be conducted involving AAPI people.

BACKGROUND

Since the emergence of the COVID-19 virus in Wuhan, China in December of 2019, there has been a sharp increase in anti-Asian discrimination and violence in both the United States and across the world ranging from verbal harassment to physical assaults (Chen et al. 2020; Misra et al. 2020). Wanting to begin tracking and reporting out about anti-Asian hate incidents within the United States, the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council (A3PCON),

Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA), and San Francisco State University's Asian American Studies department began the collaborative project called Stop AAPI Hate (SAH) in March of 2020. Since then, they have received over 9,000 hate incident reports as of June 2021 and have published a little under two dozen reports with their findings. According to their most recent report, relatively few reported incidents were classified as hate crimes (14%) or civil rights violations (11%); most of the reports were of verbal harassment (64%) or social shunning (17%), and a little under half of all reports involved anti-Chinese or xenophobic rhetoric (Yellow Horse, Jeung, et al. 2021). The most common places these reports took place were in public streets (32%) and businesses (30%), with private residents, online spaces, public transit, public parks, and schools and universities occurring relatively equally, about 8-9% each. Asian women were disproportionately targeted, making up about 63% of all reports. In a more in-depth breakdown, SAH found that east-Asian women were most often the victims of hate incidents (68%), but that south Asian women, despite being the smallest subgroup targeted overall (1.3%), had the highest rate of physical assaults (Pillai et al. 2021).

This surge of anti-Asian hate and xenophobia has had a profound effect on the mental and physical wellbeing of Asian Americans across the country (Chen et al. 2020; Dee et al. 2021; Le et al. 2020; Lee and Waters 2021; Saw et al. 2021; Tessler et al. 2020). But this moment is not without historical context; pervasive anti-Asian racism and sentiments have existed within the United States for centuries, though that history has often been rendered invisible through whitewashing and revisionist narratives (Schlund-Vials, Wong, and Chang 2017). Treated simultaneously as both a “perpetual foreigner” and a “model minority,” Asian Americans have been the subject of subtle racism and overt othering since the 1960's, placing us in an illusory position of privilege built on anti-Blackness, both within and without Asian American

communities (Chang 2010; Chen, Chang, and Shih 2021; Kim, Kendall, and Cheon 2017; Lee 2009; Shim 1998; Tuan 1998). However, though often treated as “docile” and “demure,” Asian Americans have pushed back against white supremacy for as long as we have been here, and though there has been a mixed history with Black-Asian and Latine-Asian solidarity, the work of coalition building is being done (de Jesús 2020; Kambhampaty and Sakaguchi 2020; Parker, Horowitz, and Anderson 2020; Schlund-Vials et al. 2017; Yellow Horse, Kuo, et al. 2021).

A Brief Timeline of Anti-Asian Policy and Violence from the 1860's to Today

There is a long history of anti-Asian racism, xenophobia, and violence in the United States that is often rendered invisible through its exclusion from most of American history. Though the term has taken on a negative connotation in recent years, (Delgado and Stefancic 2017) suggest that “revisionist history” can be used to challenge existing dominant historical narratives, presenting the histories of Black, Asian, Latinx, and Indigenous people that have been neglected in favor of the narratives fronted by white elites (25). In order to better contextually situate the events of today, we must understand history as it has been experienced by Asian Americans throughout the past 200 years. Only with that history in mind can we, as (Mills 1959) put it, connect personal biography with historical context to fully understand these wider social issues.

Railroads and the Shadow of the Civil War (1860's)

Starting in the 1860's, southern plantation owners began recruiting indentured workers from China and India, called as “Coolies,” to replace Black slaves anticipating the abolition of slavery at the end of the Civil War. The southern plantation owners considered Asian immigrant

laborers “an ideal replacement workforce for slaves because the planters believed them to be a racially distinct, cheap, and controllable labor force” (Hsu 2019a). The coolie trade was officially outlawed in an 1862 act passed by the House of Representatives; however, the state of California passed its own anti-coolie act in 1862, bluntly named *An Act to Protect Free White Labor Against Competition With Chinese Coolie Labor, and to Discourage the Immigration of the Chinese into the State of California* (12 U.S. Statutes at Large 340 [1862]) which aimed to “protect free white labor against competition with Chinese coolie labor” and implemented a “Chinese Police Tax” that required anyone of Chinese descent to pay an additional “tax” to be able to work in the mines or own a business in California. The laws were difficult to enforce however, as there was no easy way to distinguish an indentured coolie from any other immigrant Chinese or Indian laborer, but the acts themselves helped to lay the foundation for later Anti-Asian immigration laws.

Also in 1862 was the beginning of the transcontinental railroad, which employed many immigrant Chinese workers in part because they were viewed as cheap, disposable labor after many of the Irish workers – who had previously been viewed as the cheap, disposable option – started unionizing and demanding higher pay (Kennedy 2020). Chinese laborers were paid less than their white counterparts, often were required to pay for their own food, unlike their white counterparts, and were employed to do the most dangerous work. By 1865, more than half of the railroad laborers were Chinese; by 1867, they made up about 90%. That same year, many Chinese laborers held an eight-day long strike to fight for wage parity with their white counterparts. The strike ended without any change in pay after Central Pacific Railroad “cut off food, transportation and supplies to the Chinese living in camps” (Kennedy 2020). One year later, the Burlingame Treaty was signed with China to secure free immigration of the Chinese to

the United States for the purposes of finishing the construction of the transcontinental railroad (Hsu 2019c).

After the Civil War was won by the Union, the United States passed the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments between 1865 and 1870 as a means of abolishing chattel slavery, extending guaranteed citizenship to anyone born within the US borders, and basic voting protections against race-based discrimination respectively. Though intended as a means of extending protections to freed slaves, the language of the 14th Amendment, namely that anyone “born or naturalized in the United States ... are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein the reside” (U.S. Constitution, Amendment 14, Section 1) laid the groundwork for the century of anti-Asian immigration policy starting from its passage in 1868 and continuing until the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965.

Exclusion, Expulsion, and Empire (1870's – 1930's)

Following the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, the United States entered a prolonged period of Asian expulsion, exclusion, and violence. The first major event happened in 1871 after a white man was killed in the crossfire during a conflict between two Chinese gangs in Los Angeles, California. The response was a massacre. Five-hundred white Los Angelinos marched into LA's Chinatown, murdering nineteen Chinese people, a full 10% of the Chinese population there (Grad 2021; Sewell 2011). The Los Angeles Chinese Massacre was only the first of many in the coming decades.

Four years later, in 1875, the United States congress passed the Page Act, which had the stated goal of excluding “any subject of China, Japan, or any Oriental country” attempting to gain entry into the country for “lewd and immoral purposes” (Schlund-Vials et al. 2017). On the

surface, the Page Act was designed to prevent Asian sex workers from entering the country; however, this presented two implicit assumptions: that most Asian women entering the country would be doing so as sex workers, and that they would present a moral threat if they were to. However, these justifications were largely a smokescreen for the real, unstated reason: most of the Chinese immigrants up until that point had been men coming over to work as gold miners or laborers for the transcontinental railroad; if women were to start immigrating and having children on American soil, then as per the 14th Amendment, they would be naturalized American citizens (Chomsky 2014). It didn't take long for the effects of the Page Act to be felt. Later that same year, twenty-two Chinese women were detained after sailing from China to San Francisco. Because they arrived alone, the state Commissioner of Immigration determined they had arrived for "lewd" reasons and were held until the Supreme Court ordered their release (Hsu 2019e).

The early 1880's saw a pair of legislative actions that would continue along the trajectory the Page Act set. After being forced to veto an 1879 bill that would restrict the number of Chinese immigrants into the US because it would violate the Burlingame Treaty, President Hayes appointed James Angell to negotiate a new treaty with China that would allow them to "regulate, limit, or suspend such coming or residence, but may not absolutely prohibit it" (Hsu 2019b). The Angell Treaty laid the groundwork for the Chinese Exclusion Act that would come two years later, which prohibited any Chinese laborers from coming into the United States for the next 10 years (Schlund-Vials et al. 2017).

With Chinese immigration effectively halted, the following twenty years would be punctuated with efforts to expel the existing Chinese population throughout the United States. On September 2nd, 1885, three years after the Chinese Exclusion Act went into effect, a conflict between Chinese and white laborers at the Union Pacific coal mine in Rock Springs, Wyoming,

ended with twenty-eight Chinese workers dead, fifteen wounded, and hundreds driven out of their homes and into the desert (Anon 2021a; Perkins 2007; Rea 2014; Schlund-Vials et al. 2017). The Rock Springs Massacre set off a chain reaction across the west coast, inspiring the mining community in Black Diamond, Washington to violently expel the Chinese living there only a week later. In November of that year, city officials of Tacoma, Washington alongside members of the Knights of Labor marched through the city and knocked on every Chinese person's door to force them out of the city (Karlin 1954; Perkins 2007). The following February, a citizen committee in Seattle forced more than 350 Chinese onto the docks of Seattle to be taken south by steamboat. The governor at the time intervened, stopping the boats from leaving and proclaimed a state of insurrection and petitioned for federal intervention after riots broke out (Kinnear 1886; Perkins 2007). Two days later, rioters in Olympia, Washington attempted to push out their own Chinese population, but were ultimately stopped and imprisoned before they could begin in earnest (Perkins 2007). These expulsions were only some of a hundred-odd attempts across the west coast in the latter half of the 1880's (Pfaelzer 2008).

In 1889, Congress abolished the "returning laborers" status that some Chinese workers held that allowed them to return to the United States after going back to China. The sudden abolition led to around 20,000 Chinese laborers bearing Certificates of Return being barred from reentering the country. The law was challenged by the Chinese government, but the Supreme Court ruled against them, citing the "plenary powers" of the United States (Hsu 2019d). In 1892, the Geary Act extended the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 in addition to now requiring Chinese immigrants to carry a "Certificate of Residence" to prove they had legally entered the country (Schlund-Vials et al. 2017). Chinese residents challenged the legality of forcing them to carry these certificates in *Fong Yue Ting v. United States* (149 U.S. 698 [1893]), arguing that it singled

Chinese people out and violated the 14th Amendment. The Supreme Court ruled against them, once again citing “plenary powers” of the federal government (Hsu 2019f).

The Chinese Exclusion Act would see one final extension in 1902, making the exclusion permanent and indefinite (Schlund-Vials et al. 2017). This, however, was just a precursor to what would come fifteen years later with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1917 (Schlund-Vials et al. 2017). Most known for establishing the “Asiatic Barred Zone,” the act outlined most of what we now know as the Asian subcontinent and declared that nobody within this zone may immigrate to the United States except for the Philippines, who were a US colony, and Japan, who had willingly restricted immigration back in 1907 (Hsu 2019g, 2019h, 2019i; Schlund-Vials et al. 2017). This would be followed up with the 1921 Emergency Quotas Act, which placed quota restrictions on how many people would be allowed to immigrate from a given country, that would be made permanent three years later with the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act (Hsu 2019i; Schlund-Vials et al. 2017).

World War II (1940's – 1950's)

On February 19th, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 into law, establishing a legal justification for instating a curfew, and eventual internment, for Japanese Americans. (Jones 1985; Schlund-Vials et al. 2017). The Executive Order would be challenged the next year in *Hirabayashi v United States* (320 U.S. 81 [1943]), arguing the military lacked the authority to instate a curfew aimed specifically at a racialized group and then later inter them. Though the court case never directly addressed the internment issue, the Supreme Court in a 9-0 decision sided with the military, ruling that it did have the ability to institute a curfew. The issue of internment would be challenged again in 1944 when Fred Korematsu, who had initially

ignored Order 9066, argued that the order was unlawfully violated his 5th Amendment rights. The Supreme Court once again upheld the Executive Order in a 6-3 split, ruling that the internment camps were both legal and justified by the war (Schlund-Vials et al. 2017). The Korematsu decision would remain on the books until 2018, when it would finally be repealed in *Trump v. Hawaii* (585 U.S. ____ [2018]).

In a rare positive turn of events, 1943 also saw the passage of the Magnuson Act, which repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and allowed for limited immigration and the naturalization of Chinese citizens already living in the US. However, because of the quotas system established by the Johnson-Reed Act, the number of Chinese people allowed entry into the country was set at 105 per year, rendering the lift of the ban largely in name only (Schlund-Vials et al. 2017).

The Hart-Cellar Act, the Model Minority, and SARS (1960's – 2000's)

The 1960's saw a dramatic shift in both American immigration policy and attitudes towards Asian Americans. The passage of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act overturned the immigration quotas put into place by the Johnson-Reed Act and replaced it with a policy of “family reunification,” which prioritized immigration petitions from those with family already living within the US. This led to a boom in Asian immigration (Schlund-Vials et al. 2017).

The 60's also saw the emergence of the “Model Minority²” myth, which first appeared in a 1966 *New York Times* Article titled “Success Story Japanese American Style” which wrote glowingly about Japanese American communities able to recover after the internment, both acknowledging and downplaying the decades of oppression and wrongful mass imprisonment,

² Discussed in more detail in a later section.

even comparing them to the fictional Horatio Alger in terms of heroism and success (Lee 2009; Petterson 1966). The brief, but tenuous shift in public opinion of Asian Americans was soon shown to be ultimately hollow, however, when the rise Chinese, Japanese, and Korean manufacturing began rivaling American industries in the late 70's and 80's. In 1982, a Chinese American man named Vincent Chin was beaten to death by a pair of white auto workers that blamed him for Japanese car manufacturers and its impact on the US auto industry. Despite being tried for murder, both men were lightly sentenced, sparking outrage from the Asian-American community (Little 2020). A few years later in 1989, a white supremacist wielding an AK-47 opened fire on a playground of elementary school children in Stockton, CA, killing 5 young southeast Asian children and wounding more than 30 others in what was one of the first mass school shootings (Associated Press 1989; Chotiner 2021). The gunman apparently resented “seeing so many foreign faces” that were “determined to grasp American opportunities that [he] felt had passed him by,” as (Mathews 1989) of the Washington post sympathetically wrote. The message was made loud and clearly: Asians were not a beloved “Model Minority” lauded for their industriousness and work ethic; they were still seen as a dangerous other, perpetually foreign.

We would see this message reinforced in 2003, when the SARS outbreak in China led to a rash of fears and rumors about Chinese Americans being vectors for the virus. One editorial from the British Journal of Medicine wrote that “rumors of infection proliferated faster than the microbe itself (Schram 2003).” The widespread sharing of rumors and misinformation bolstered by the mainstream media saturated with images of mask-wearing Asians stoked xenophobic racial anxieties. When SARS broke out in Toronto, Canada – the first outbreak in North America with a large Asian population – Asian stores were informally boycotted and vandalized, Asians

were harassed and shunned on the streets, and Chinese-Canadians were specifically targeted for accusations of being infectious and dirty (Fang 2020; Schram 2003). This proved to be a grim omen for what would come in 2020.

Physical and Mental Impact of Racism

In a review of the literature on racism and its impact on physical and mental health, Williams et al. (Williams et al. 2019) concluded that, despite the area of study only being about thirty years old, there is ample empirical evidence that racism has a serious, direct impact on people's health. Experiences of racism and discrimination was not only linked to negative mental health outcomes ranging from emotional distress to increased risk of depression and psychiatric disorders (1383), but also greater risk of developing cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, and greater BMI and obesity (1383-84). Discrimination from healthcare workers can also affect POC's health in how it changes their relationship with the healthcare system, making them less likely to engage with it in the first place, and less trusting of medical experts when they go to them (1385). These findings corroborate an earlier review of the literature conducted by (Williams and Williams-Morris 2000) focusing specifically on racism and mental health outcomes of Black Americans. In both studies, the authors conclude a need for more and better research to be done on the impact racism has on POC bodies. In the case of (Williams and Williams-Morris 2000), they call out the need for more specific research done on racially marginalized communities; for (Williams et al. 2019), their suggestions lie more in the call for more intersectional research to be done, critically considering race alongside sex, gender, SES, and so on.

Though in some ways current health research on Asian Americans during the pandemic has met these suggestions, Asian Americans are not a monolith, and the wide range of cultures, languages, histories, and conditions of immigration can lead to drastically different health outcomes for different Asian American communities. As noted by (Dee et al. 2021), aggregated data tends mask health disparities experienced by disadvantaged ethnic subgroups. Only about 60% of elderly Asian Americans are English-proficient (Le et al. 2020), making the healthcare system considerably more difficult to navigate for them than other Americans, and though Asian Americans, on the whole, have a higher median household income (\$85,800) than the national median (\$61,800) and a lower poverty rate (10%) than the national average (13%), Burmese (\$44,400) and Nepalese (\$55,000) have a much lower median household incomes than both Asian Americans and Americans overall, and Hmong (17%), Nepalese (17%), Bangladeshi (19%), Burmese (25%) and Mongolians (25%) are much more likely to live below the poverty line (Budiman 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e; Budiman and Ruiz 2021; Le et al. 2020). When the range of median household incomes between different subgroups is \$75,600, Bachelor's degree attainment can vary from 75% for Indians to 15% for Bhutanese, and population sizes can range from 5.4 million Chinese Americans to less than 200,000 Nepalese (Budiman 2021e; Budiman and Ruiz 2021), it becomes difficult to meaningfully interpret averages that treat people from all of these varied ethnic backgrounds as the same. If race and socioeconomic status (SES) are known to be a fundamental cause of disease (Link and Phelan 1995; Phelan and Link 2015), then the lived experiences and health outcomes of disadvantaged Asian American communities facing increased poverty rates and lower access to needed healthcare services might not reflect the aggregated data we are accustomed to seeing. Because

of this, research findings that work under a generalized understanding of “Asian American” that does not de-aggregate the racial category must be taken with a grain of salt.

With that in mind: Asian Americans have been disproportionately affected by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consisted with the literature reviewed by (Williams et al. 2019; Williams and Williams-Morris 2000), the increased stress from the surge of anti-Asian racism, on top of the stress and trauma brought on by the pandemic, has negatively affected Asian Americans physical and mental health, including greater levels of anxiety, depression, and sleep difficulties, as well as worsening chronic health conditions (Chen et al. 2020; Lee and Waters 2021; Misra et al. 2020; Saw et al. 2021). Some Asian Americans have even reported that anti-Asian discrimination was a greater source of stress for them than the COVID-19 virus or other pandemic related stressors (Saw et al. 2021), while others were worried that even so much as coughing in public might make them a target of a hate crime (Tessler et al. 2020). (Saw et al. 2021) also found that some Asian Americans have already been experiencing PTSD symptoms, which might lead to serious, lasting harm (Chen et al. 2020). Discrimination doesn’t even need to be directly experienced to have an impact; indirect forms of discrimination such as hateful posts on social media or news stories about hate incidents can still be felt vicariously and can significantly affect Asian Americans health (Lee and Waters 2021).

Asian women and girls have also been disproportionately affected by racism during the pandemic. Historically, some of the earliest immigration policy in the U.S. was written to keep Asian women out of the country under the pretense that they would be coming over as sex workers (Schlund-Vials et al. 2017), which eventually led to twenty-two Chinese women being detained after arriving in San Francisco until a Supreme Court decision ruled in favor of their release (Hsu 2019e). As for today, 63% of all reports to SAH within the past year and a half have

involved women, most of whom were victims of verbal harassment and/or active avoidance and shunning (Pillai et al. 2021; Yellow Horse, Jeung, et al. 2021). Though most of them attributed the hate incident more to their race (50.1%) or ethnicity (29.5%) than their gender (9.1%), many of the examples of reports provided by (Pillai et al. 2021) demonstrate the pervasive racialized sexism that many Asian women have faced since the start of the pandemic, including many of them being called “bitch” or “Asian bitch,” verbal sexual harassment, physical assault, and refusal of services on public transit by other riders or at car mechanics. Perhaps the deadliest example of this was the murder of six Asian women in March of this year, perpetrated by a white man wanting to “remove temptation” that he felt these women embodied (Chappell et al. 2021). This can have a lasting effect on the mental health and wellbeing of Asian women and girls, even if they were not directly targeted for harassment or assault themselves.

There is also a long history of equating Asians and Asian communities with disease and dirtiness dating as far back as the 19th century and as recently as the current pandemic (Chen et al. 2020; Litam 2020; Tessler et al. 2020). Asian Americans have been shunned and avoided out of the belief that they were carriers of the COVID-19 virus (Misra et al. 2020; Yellow Horse, Jeung, et al. 2021) or told to “go back to China,” simultaneously labeling them a carrier of disease and a dangerous other that does not belong here (Litam 2020; Yellow Horse, Jeung, et al. 2021). This treatment of Asians as a diseased and dirty other was one of the pillars of the “Yellow Peril,” the xenophobic belief that Asians were bringers of illness and immorality, a danger to Western culture and institutions, and threat to the white working class that was prevalent throughout the 19th and early 20th century (Chen et al. 2020; Le et al. 2020; Lee and Waters 2021; Litam 2020; Tessler et al. 2020). While some researchers believe that the Yellow Peril faded as the Model Minority Myth rose (Chen et al. 2020), (Tessler et al. 2020) believe that

the recent surge of anti-Asian racism, the equation of COVID with China, and the moral panic that has painted Asians as an un-American other might indicate otherwise. Considering the kinds of statements that came from politicians like one Kansas state official claiming that they didn't have a COVID problem in early months of 2020 because they had few Chinese people living there (Orecchio-Egresitz 2020; Tessler et al. 2020), it's hard to refute.

Microaggressions

Microaggressions, unlike overt forms of discriminatory action or malice, are often invisible to both the perpetrators and outside observers but are still deeply felt by the victims (Sue and Spanierman 2020). Though the term “microaggression” might suggest something minor or insignificant compared to blatant acts of discrimination, it is their very mundaneness that makes them so destructive. When faced with everyday forms of racism that has become so deeply imbedded in even the most banal of small talk among coworkers, store clerks, and even close friends, it can feel inescapable. These small acts, often fueled by unacknowledged bias and prejudice, can compound, resulting in even the most well-meaning individuals causing unintentional harm. In some cases, the harmful microaggressions might even be intended as a compliment from the aggressor, unaware of the potentially harmful implications their compliment may carry (Kim et al. 2017). Though much of the early literature focused around racial microaggressions, the field has expanded to include gender, sexuality, age, and many other elements of identity.

Microaggressions commonly take one of three forms: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are the closest to what we would traditionally think of as racial, gender, or other forms of discrimination, consisting of deliberately harmful attacks against

marginalized groups often with the intent to threaten or intimidate (Sue and Spanierman 2020). This can take the form of verbal attacks, such as using racial slurs, sexist and demeaning language towards women, or purposefully misgendering a trans person, or through ones behaviors such as workplace hiring discrimination or a taxi driver ignoring a Black or Brown person trying to hail them. Due to the more overt nature of microassaults, they are much less likely to occur in broad daylight unless the aggressor feels they are in some way protected from public backlash. (Sue and Spanierman 2020) offer three different conditions under which this may occur, but only one of them is pertinent to this research: when the aggressor feels they are relatively safe, or if they know they can get away with their actions without any major consequences.

Microinsults and microinvalidations, on the other hand, are much more subtle, and more along the lines of what researchers typically mean when they are discussing microaggressions. Microinsults are characterized by interpersonal interactions laden with stereotypes or insensitivity towards an aspect of one's identity, often without the aggressor consciously aware that their actions have caused harm (Sue and Spanierman 2020). Microinvalidation are characterized by interpersonal interactions that unintentionally exclude or invalidate thoughts, feelings, and experiences of a marginalized person or community. Both may appear less outwardly destructive than a microassault, but under normal conditions, they are also much more common and often invisible to both the aggressor and most observers, lending themselves to a sort of silent "death by a thousand cuts" that no one save the victim might realize is even happening.

When looking specifically at Asian Americans' experiences of microaggressions, (Sue et al. 2007) identified eight major themes, some of which included "Alien in Own Land," or the

assumption that Asian Americans were not “from” American, and instead must be from some far off elsewhere; “Denial of Racial Reality,” or the downplaying of Asians’ experiences of racism and the existence of systemic racism; “Exoticization of Asian Women,” or the fetishized belief that Asian women are more docile, domestic, and objectified as something to be possessed; and “Invisibility,” or the feeling that Asians were often overlooked in discussions of race or diversity. Many of these experiences left Asians feeling both excluded and objectified, trapped somewhere between being seen as a “perpetual foreigner” and a “model minority.” They also often didn’t know how to respond microaggressions, unsure if they were overthinking the experience or being oversensitive to a harmless comment or if they should even confront the aggressor when they knew the harm was unintentional.

However, race does not exist in a vacuum, and as evidenced above, even studies looking at specific forms of microaggressions – e.g., race, class, gender, and so on – find that intersectional oppressions get brought up naturally by the participants themselves (Nadal et al. 2015). Initially coined by (Crenshaw 1991), intersectionality was born out of the Black Feminist movement’s attempt to address the lack of feminist literature that recognized both gender and race, and how focusing on one but not the other failed to adequately capture the experiences of Black women. Though by her own admission Crenshaw did not come up with the concept of intersectionality – intersectional work had been done by many before her – she did coin the term that would later unify the theory. Core to the theory is that intersecting identities such as race, gender, age, sexuality, ability, and so on are interdependent with each other, and play a part in shaping one’s lived experiences (Collins 2019). Much like with Crenshaw’s example examining the overlapping oppressions Black women face, both (Nadal et al. 2015) and (Sue et al. 2007) found that trying to study *only* racial microaggressions failed to capture the experiences of

women of color, queer people of color, and especially queer women of color, as race was not the only element of their identity that shaped their experiences or the type of microaggressions they faced.

Perpetual Foreigner and the “Model Minority” Myth

Regardless of whether they have been living in the United States their whole lives, Asian Americans have historically been treated as “perpetual foreigners,” labeled a racialized other that does not fully fit within the dominant culture, or that might pose a threat to western values (Chang 2010; Chen et al. 2020; Misra et al. 2020). This played out in the form of nearly a century of exclusionary immigration policy, numerous assaults on Chinatowns across the country in the late 1800’s, and by the very creation of the Asiatic Barred Zone, all of which was discussed in more detail in the timeline above. Asian Americans are viewed as less patriotic by white Americans, thought to owe allegiance to a foreign state regardless of nativity status (Chang 2010; Misra et al. 2020); this was taken to its logical extreme in 1942, when Japanese Americans were forcibly relocated to internment camps under pretense that any number of them might be acting as spies for the Japanese government despite the fact there was no evidence of such. Even education and career advancement aren’t always protective, as (Tuan 1998) illustrated with the story of Lance Ito, a third-generation Japanese American judge best known for presiding over the O.J. Simpson case, who still had his American-ness questioned by people like Senator D’Amato.

On the surface this might appear to be in stark contract with the “Model Minority” myth, but the two are intrinsically linked in ways difficult to untangle. Since the term was coined in 1966, the “Model Minority” myth has been used as a hegemonic device to reinforce anti-Black racism, positioning Asians as navigating upward social mobility “correctly” during a contentious

decade of Black Americans fighting for their civil rights (Lee 2009). Asian Americans were held up as the example for other marginalized communities to aspire to, pitting their relative success against other racial minorities. This characterization was unsurprisingly disingenuous, however, as it focuses entirely on stories of Asian success, rendering invisible Asian Americans' experiences of racism and discrimination (Kim et al. 2017; Lee 2009), and actively omitting Asian communities that do not meet the mythologized ideal (Chen et al. 2020; Le et al. 2020). This simultaneously delegitimizing the impact structural racism has had on Black, Latinx, Indigenous, *and* Asian communities while weaponizing Asian Americans' as justification to attack affirmative action initiatives and delegitimize racial justice movements.

However, the very act of labeling necessitates holding Asians as a social "other," apart from the assumed majority that is ever approaching assimilation and acceptance, but never quite there. In many ways, the "Model Minority" myth and the "Perpetual Foreigner" stereotype are two sides of the same coin: on one side, praised for their family oriented culture of ingenuity and hard work (Lee 2009; Petterson 1966; Shim 1998), on the other, villainized as duplicitous foreigners incompatible with American culture that bring disease and debauchery (Shim 1998; Tessler et al. 2020), but both attributed to their foreign Asian-ness.

This elevation of Asian Americans as a "Model Minority" cannot be mistaken for acceptance or "honorary whiteness," even if some Asians consider it a means of gaining equality with whites (Lee 2009; Tuan 1998), and even if their relatively closer proximity to white power structures has, in some ways, privileged them over other marginalized ethnic groups in the US (Chen et al. 2020). The "Model Minority" myth is a weapon of white supremacy that turns Asians into a tool of oppression and doesn't care that Asians are the ones presently being used to accomplish that; in another time, decades from now, that gilded mantle might fall on another

community, and Asians will fall back to being seen as the foreign, dangerous “Yellow Peril” to be kept out of the country. As the pandemic has shown us from the rise of anti-Asian hate and xenophobic rhetoric, any privilege gained from it is hollow and ephemeral.

Resistance and Solidarity

Lastly, there is a long history of Asian Americans pushing back against racism and discrimination from legal challenges to expressive art. Though some of the methods historically employed by Asians to fight for their rights within the US leveraged anti-Blackness as a way of trying to appeal to white supremacist views, attempts to build interracial coalitions with other communities of color have been made in recent decades.

Some of the earliest acts of resistance came in the form legal challenges to xenophobic immigration and citizenship policies that were explicitly passed to keep Asians out of the US, though often with rarely any success. Both *Chae Chan Ping v. United States* (130 U. S. 581 [1889]) and *Fong Yue Ting v. United States* (149 U. S. 698 [1893]) challenged the legal authority of immigration policy that specifically excluded Chinese people, and both cases were ruled against them, the court decisions later being used to justify harsher exclusionary policies. In 1922, Takao Ozawa took a citizenship case all the way to the Supreme Court, arguing that he should be granted naturalized citizenship because he met all the listed requirements except race. The Supreme Court ultimately ruled against him, arguing that the 1790 Nationality Act clearly stated only free whites would be allowed citizenship, and that Takao was “clearly of a race which is not Caucasian, and therefore [belongs] entirely outside the zone on the negative side (Hsu 2019j).” A year later, the Supreme Court would rule that Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian man, was also ineligible for citizenship despite Indians being classified as “Caucasian,” and

therefore white, under the pseudoscientific race science of the time (Hsu 2019k). Lastly, and perhaps most well-known, when Fred Korematsu challenged the legality of the Japanese internment camps during World War II, the Supreme Court ruled that the curfew and detention were entirely within the legal powers of the federal government.

However, not all legal battles were entirely lost. As briefly mentioned earlier, in 1875, twenty-two Chinese women that arrived without husbands or children were detained aboard a ship in San Francisco under the assumption that they were coming to the US as sex workers (Hsu 2019e). Their case was heard by the Supreme Court the next year in *Chy Lung v Freeman* (92 U. S. 275 [1876]), where they landed themselves a lukewarm victory based on a technicality: the law used to detain them was a Californian state law, not a federal law, and the Supreme Court ruled that only the federal government had the power to regulate immigration. Had their detention been justified through the Page Act, which was nearly identical to the Californian law used, it is unlikely they would have won the case.

Outside of legal challenges, Asian Americans have pushed back against racism through both scholarship and art, the intersection of which is exemplified by (de Jesús 2020) in her three meditations on anti-Asian violence published in the *Journal of Asian American Studies*. One of those meditations was in the form of a freeform poems responding to Andrew Yang saying that Asian Americans “need to embrace and show our American-ness in ways we never have before,” in which she said:

“we don’t need to prove shit!

my ancestors bled for the red white and blue

and you want more?

how much more asian blood

can prove our worthiness to the white man?

can “screaming monkeys” ever really belong?”

Simultaneously fetishized for “our cultures, cuisines, music, fashion, martial arts, yoga, religion, exotic bodies” and then treated as the “permanent other (326),” de Jesús points out that even Andrew Yang is only accepted by the mainstream so long as he is perceived as useful to the systems propped up by the white elite, but the moment that usefulness dries up, so too does his “honorary whiteness.” In another of her poems, (de Jesús 2020) speaks out about how Filipinx people are “overrepresented on / the pandemic / frontline, (325)” and openly wonders who will raise the children of the EMS and healthcare workers that have “sacrificed” themselves for the very country that undervalues them.

Lastly, many Asian Americans have been actively working towards solidarity not only with each other, recognizing the vast diversity within the “Asian” racial category, but also with the Black community. According to (Parker et al. 2020), Asian Americans were much more likely to support Black Lives Matter than whites and showed the second least amount of drop off in support between June and September of 2020 (Thomas and Horowitz 2020). For centuries, Asian Americans have stood together with Black Americans in the fight for civil rights. Asian Americans activists like Grace Lee Boggs, who was so deeply involved in Detroit’s Black community that the FBI speculated she was “probably Afro Chinese (Chow 2015),” and Yuri Kochiyama, who closely with Malcom X and was even present when he died (Wang 2014), worked to advance civil rights alongside Black activists until their deaths in 2015 and 2014, respectively. In more recent decades, Asian Americans have actively rejected the baked-in anti-Blackness of the “Model Minority” myth and challenged racism from within their own

communities to stand together with Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people against white supremacy. In many of the testimonials gathered by and reported on by (Kambhampaty and Sakaguchi 2020), even when Asian Americans were discussing their own experiences of anti-Asian racism, they would connect their experiences with the need to fight for the rights of Black Americans. For many, Black Lives Matter was what helped to contextualize their past experiences of discrimination and prejudice as acts of systemic racism rather than individual acts of hate.

However, as has been shown numerous times already, Asian Americans are not a monolith, and alongside this long history of support and solidarity also comes with a significant amount of historic anti-Blackness and indifference towards Black issues, painting a much more complex history than one of complete solidarity or complete opposition. For example, alongside Asian American's high degree of support for Black Lives Matter, Asians were also the most likely of any racial category to report *indifference* to the movement, which (Yellow Horse, Kuo, et al. 2021) argue is implicit support for the racial status quo of anti-Blackness. The '92 LA Riots is just one example of this: while the dominant narrative is that of Korean shop owners being unjustly targeted by Black protesters after the acquittal of the four officers that had beaten Rodney King, this belies the existing racial tensions between the LA Korean and Black communities that came to a head in that moment, the history of Black-Korean solidarity and collective action prior, during, and after the protests erupted, and the role that systemic racism played in both the Rodney King beating and eventual acquittal of the officers that beat him. The flattening of the narrative simultaneously absolves anti-Black sentiments held within the Korean community and erases the activism that was being done in both communities to rectify it.

With all of that said, it is the purpose of this study to explore the lived experiences of East- and Southeast-Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders during the rise of COVID-19 related racism and xenophobia within the United States, and to center those experiences in the body of this work. This research sought to answer three major research questions: how have AAPI people been affected by the rise of anti-Asian racism since the start of the pandemic; how does this current moment connect to the often-untold history of anti-Asian racism within the US; and how might the experiences be affected by participants' other intersecting identities such as age, gender, sexuality, and so on?

METHODOLOGY

The study was built around a fundamental qualitative descriptive framework, as (Sandelowski 2000) describes, rather than a more abstracted interpretive framework like phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, or so on. This decision was made, in part, to be free from methodological and theoretical constraints that would come with adhering to a specific approach, and to also provide “low-interference descriptions” that “[stays] closer to [the] data and to the surface of words and events” expressed by the research participants (335-336). Although this research was heavily informed by a multitude of social theories and existing literature, the goal was not to use those theories to abstract the findings, but to inform and contextualize them. Theories like critical race theory and intersectionality shaped the means of data collection and analysis, but only in ways intended to hold the level of understanding. However, no analysis is ever strictly descriptive (Richards and Janice M Morse 2013; Sandelowski 2000), and elements of interpretive methodologies will always color qualitative descriptive with their “hues, tones and textures” (Sandelowski 2000). To that end, critical theory, grounded theory, and phenomenology have all contributed to the color palate, so to speak, of this

study: critical theory, and more specifically critical race theory, in the very theoretical underpinning of the research design, as discussed above (Creswell and Poth 2018; Delgado and Stefancis 2017); grounded theory in the exploration of how the research participant's perceptions of their neighbors, community, and their experiences of anti-Asian racism have changed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic; and phenomenology in how those changes in perception, in conversation with their lived experiences pre-pandemic, might have changed how they view and navigate the world (Creswell and Poth 2018; Richards and Janice M Morse 2013).

(Sandelowski 2000) outline of how qualitative descriptive studies can be conducted informed many of the decisions in how this study was constructed, including participant selection, data collection, and data analysis, all of which will be discussed in greater detail below.

IRB Approval

Initial IRB approval was granted on August 16th, 2021, with an amendment submitted and approved on August 30th. The project was considered to fall under the “expedited” category due to the low likelihood of the project causing harm to any of the participants.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Participant selection was restricted east- and southeast-Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders that had been living in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. South Asians were not included in the sample population because of the predominantly sinophobic rhetoric of political speech during the pandemic and the low incidents of south Asians being targeted for hate crimes (Yellow Horse, Jeung, et al. 2021). Participants were recruited from across the

United States with the goal of acquiring as diverse a sample as possible with regard to age, gender, intra-racial ethnic background, and geographical location and proximity a Asian community. The purpose of this was to employ a maximum variation sample, aiming for as much heterogeneity within Asian Americans as possible to explore their varied experiences of racism and xenophobia during the pandemic in order to gain a broad understanding of their lived experiences (Sandelowski 1995, 2000).

Participants were recruited first through convenience sampling from within my own social and professional networks. Initial outreach was done through one of three means: direct contact for those within my immediate social and professional networks, a recruitment email, or indirect contact through mutual friends or acquaintances that was later followed up with more formal outreach. In each case, the participants were sent a short description of the project including what the goals of the project were and what their participation in it would entail. Each participant was given a consent form that outlined how they would be protected, and verbal consent was obtained before the interview began.

Three initial interviews were scheduled with participants from my extended social network. All three were approached directly. The original plan was to begin with those three base interviews and then use snowball sampling – asking participants to refer me to other potential participants – to expand from there. However, in no case did snowballing produce results. A second pass within my social network was then conducted to secure the final two interviews.

Data Collection and Management

A total of five interviews were conducted between August 26th, 2021 and October 13th. All interviews were conducted virtually over a variety of platforms including Discord, Zoom, WebEx, and Telegram. All but one interview was done verbally, with one conducted over text due to extenuating circumstances preventing them from speaking over the computer. Audio interviews were recorded using either the platform's native recording feature or through Open Broadcaster Software (OBS), an open-source streaming and recording program that allows for computer audio and video capture. Audio files were saved on a secure flash drive that only the principle investigator had access to. Interviews were transcribed using Transcribe by Wreally³ and checked over several times to correct for mistakes. All participants' names, place of employment, or other personally identifiable information (PII) was scrubbed directly from the transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms.

Two interviews took place over Discord, one took place over WebEx, one took place over Zoom, and one was conducted in a private chatroom over the text chat application Telegram. For all voice interviews, the interviews took place in a private, locked call that nobody else had access to at the time of interviewing. For the one text interview, the interview was conducted in a private, direct messages with nobody else present to view the chat windows for either party. Voiced interviews ranged from approximately 34 minutes to 57 minutes long, while the text interview took approximately 50 minutes. Once verbal consent had been obtained and the recording had begun, participants were asked demographic questions about their age, gender, ethnicity, where they live, and broadly what their occupation was. This was done for two

³ <https://transcribe.wreally.com/>

reasons: first, to obtain their demographic information, and secondly to perform an equipment check to make sure hardware and recording software was working properly. For the text interview, the questions were simply asked at the start of the interview.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured and conversational format, with the interview schedule (Appendix A) intended more as a loose guide to address all research questions rather than a rigid list. All interviews began with brief explanation of the structure of the interview as well as stating the aim of cocreation, placing as much control in the hands of the interview participant to control the direction and flow of the interview as in the researcher. All interviews were concluded by asking the participant if there was anything that they thought was important that hadn't been brought up during the interview, and then giving them the space to speak on that.

The initial interview schedule was broken up into four broad question categories: experiences of racism, relationships with others, support, and activism and social engagement. The first category, "experiences of racism," was centered questions aimed at getting the participant to speak in some detail about any forms of racism that either they personally, or that someone close to them had experienced. Questions in this category included "can you tell me about some of your experiences of racism, either subtle or overt, that you have faced since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?" as well as follow-up probes asking about their workplace, in and around their community, online or on social media, on the news, or in political speech; "how do these experiences compare to before the pandemic?"; a probing question "would you be willing to go into detail about some of these experiences?" in the event they hadn't divulged many details up at this point in the interview; and "what about experiences some of your friends or family have had?"

The second category, “relationships with others,” asked questions about how the participant’s relationships with friends, family, significant others, coworkers, and so on had been affected by these experiences. Questions in this category included “how have your experiences of racism or discrimination within the last year affected your relationships with others?” including probes for friendships, romantic relationships, and family members; “how has the last year changed your outlook on the people around you, if at all?” including probes for coworkers or classmates, neighbors/community members, and people online; and “who have you found you are the most comfortable talking to about some of these experiences?”

The third category, “support,” asked questions about what sort of support – be it social, emotional, financial, and so on – they felt they needed and either did or did not receive. Questions included “what sort of support do you feel you’ve needed – from friends, family, your community, and so on – to weather some of these recent experiences?” with probes for emotional and social with room for participants to expand into any other forms they choose to elaborate on; “what sort of support do you feel you haven’t gotten enough of?”; “what sort of support do you feel you’ve been asked to give to others facing similar experiences of racism and discrimination?”; and “can you tell me about any times you’ve felt gaslit by your peers, or any times you felt like your experiences were questioned or weren’t taken seriously?”

The final category, “activism and engagement,” asked questions about the participant’s familiarity with or involvement in anti-racist organizations and activism, and what solidarity they felt, if any, with Black Americans and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Questions included “how familiar are you with Stop AAPI Hate or other organizations aimed at addressing anti-Asian racism?”; “can you tell me some of your thoughts about the recent Asian racial justice movement?” with the follow up question “what has been your involvement, if at all?”; “how

familiar are you with the Black Lives Matter movement?"; "can you tell me some of your thoughts about the Black Lives Matter movement, or other calls for Black racial justice?" with the follow up question "what has been your involvement, if at all?"; and "how do you feel these movements might mirror one another?" with probes asking about what solidarity they felt with Black Americans.

As stated above, the interview schedule was treated more as a guide than as a rigid questionnaire, with few questions asked as written during the interview process. Participants were encouraged to take the interview in any direction they wished so long as it stayed on topic, and questions that were addressed "out of order" were noted as having been asked and skipped over when the interview had broadly progressed to that question's category.

After conducting each interview, an audio memo was recorded and were used to document any major thoughts I had after ending the recording as part of the analysis process. The memos were not transcribed to save on time and money but were kept for later review. All audio recordings of verbal interviews, their transcripts, memos, and the text logs of text interviews were stored on a secured, password protected flash drive. Each transcript was reviewed for accuracy before coding and analysis began. All transcripts were also uploaded to Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software, to assist with the data analysis process, which will be described in more detail below.

Relational Content Analysis of Asian American Testimonials and News Reports

A brief relational content analysis (Anon n.d.) was done on news media stories centering Asian Americans and their experiences during the pandemic to get a better idea of the nonacademic response to rising anti-Asian hate and to help inform the interview questions. The

process was done using a qualitative approach, looking for reoccurring themes and concepts in the news stories more than specific words or phrases (Babbie 2010). As this was not the main form of analysis for this project, only a few days was spent gathering data. This content analysis is by no means exhaustive, nor was it intended to be; the aim was to get a sample of testimonials and news reports on anti-Asian hate incidents to both get an idea of what news stories the participants might have seen over the course of the pandemic and get an idea of how Asian Americans felt about the current social and political atmosphere. Only articles published in the latter half of 2020 and early months of 2021 were considered for analysis. Testimonials and news stories written by Asian Americans were prioritized. If no stories covering an incident written by Asian Americans could be found, a local news site was preferred over a national news site. A total of 16 articles were reviewed.

One common thread was the rampancy of microaggressions and discrimination faced by Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hong 2020; Lin 2021; Mostoles 2020; Sitthivong 2020; Strohlic 2021), and how it has felt like it has gotten worse since March 2020 (Lin 2021). Many of these stories involved acts of physical violence including having things thrown at them (Strohlic 2021), being shoved to the ground (Baig 2021; Hsu 2021), being physically beaten (Hsu 2021), being assaulted and harassed at a protest against AAPI violence (Rayman and Parascandola 2021), being assaulted with a weapon (Chen 2020b; Chittum, Parascandola, and Rayman 2021; Hsu 2021), being immolated (Chen 2020a), being hospitalized after an assault (Strohlic 2021), and outright murder (Baig 2021; Hsu 2021). These assaults happened in a variety of public spaces from schools (Strohlic 2021) to Sam's Clubs (Chen 2020b) in open daylight.

There has also been a rise of slurs, hate speech, and people screaming at Asian Americans to stay away from them in public spaces (Hong 2020; Mostoles 2020; Sitthivong 2020). Asian Americans have also been accused of being the spreaders of COVID-19 or being called “Coronavirus” (Lin 2021; Strohlic 2021). Many testimonials included Asian Americans being told to “go back to China” or equivalently xenophobic and exclusionary statements (Hong 2020; Mostoles 2020; Ryu 2020; Sitthivong 2020). At least one news story involved instances of people terrorizing an Asian woman at her place of employment (Baig 2021).

Another theme was the feeling of gaslighting, or manipulation tactics designed to make someone question the legitimacy of their own experiences and begin to doubt their own accounts of events. This includes experiences such as Asian Americans having their experiences dismissed by other marginalized groups as “not being as bad” as theirs or being “performative” in calls for solidarity (Li 2021); being told the racism they experience “could be worse” or that they aren’t “real minorities” (Jordan 2021; Li 2021); having attempts to speak out about anti-Asian racism shut down or redirected into accusations of Asians being racist, themselves (Li 2021); or the denial that racism was the motivation behind an assault or hate crime, or that a comment was “just a joke” and should not be taken seriously (Ryu 2020; Stohr 2021).

Lastly, corroborating the previous section, there has been an incredible emotional toll on Asian Americans since the start of the pandemic. At least one story included the stress and pressures placed upon Asian Americans due to the Model Minority myth and the racism that is baked into it (Ryu 2020). Another testimonial recounted the sympathetic anguish they felt from hearing stories of anti-Asian violence and hate, even if they were not directly affected themselves (Fan 2021). Many Asian Americans also expressed how painful it was to hear Trump and other government officials call COVID-19 the “Chinese Virus” (Hsu 2021; Ryu 2020;

Sitthivong 2020; Strohlic 2021), and how the presidential administration continued to show support of white supremacists and perpetrators of violence against people of color (Stohr 2021). Finally, many Asian Americans also expressed fear of their neighbors or of going out in public, worried that they might be the next to be attacked (Chittum et al. 2021; Fan 2021; Hong 2020).

Coding and Data Analysis

Employing what (Sandelowski 2000) referred to as “qualitative content analysis,” a mix of *a priori*, descriptive, topical, and analytic codes (Richards and Janice M. Morse 2013) were used to provide rich descriptions of the data. Rather than waiting for all interviews to be completed, coding and analysis began immediately after each transcript was sufficiently cleaned, corrected for accuracy, and uploaded to Dedoose. Prior interviews were routinely revisited after a new interview was conducted, transcribed, and initially coded. Outside of the *a priori* codes, codes were allowed to emerge from the data themselves, , allowing for the “simultaneous collection and analysis of data whereby both mutually shape each other (Sandelowski 2000);” in other words: there was no clear distinction drawn between what was data collection and data analysis, as the act of analysis was performed through the entire research process.

The *a priori* codes consisted of three broad categories: experiential, community, and support. The experiential codes included “racism,” which was broken up into two child codes, “discrimination” and “prejudice,” “microaggressions,” “xenophobia,” and “gaslighting.” Community consisted of two broad, catch-all codes, the first of which simply named “community” for any mention of the participant’s community or community members during the interview, and the code “location” that would be filled in with child codes relating to the broad geographical location of the participant as well as any specific locations mentioned during the

interviews. Lastly, support consisted of a single category, “Support,” with the intention of later organizing the coded excerpts into specific forms of support – or lack thereof – once patterns emerged.

Initial coding consisted mostly of descriptive codes, which are mainly used to store descriptive information discussed in the interviews, and topical codes, which focus on particular topics discussed (Richards and Janice M. Morse 2013). Once all interviews had been conducted and each transcript had gone through at least one coding pass, analytic codes were used to outline emerging themes in the data. A full list of the final codebook can be found in Appendix B. Once the final codebook was established, the codes were arranged into broad themes that represented commonly shared experiences or feelings among the participants.

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Spruce

Spruce is a nonbinary Filipinx person in their mid-twenties currently living in New York City with their parents. They currently work in construction, commuting back and forth via the New York subway system. Though they had braced for racial discrimination in the workplace after the rise in anti-Asian hate incidents last year, as of the interview they said they have experienced no real racism from their coworkers. Instead, where they felt the most in danger was in the subways during their commutes, especially at the more populated stations, after hearing several reports of Asian Americans being assaulted in the subways. Their neighborhood, on the other hand, is majority Asian, which they said both makes them feel safer there and provides a much-needed safe haven at the end of the day.

“My neighborhood is very densely Asian populated, as are the usual places I go shopping, so I actually do feel quite safe there. It's kind of a nice break from the stresses of the daily commute.” – Spruce

However, even though their local community is seen as a source of comfort, they also said they don't interact with the people there very often, instead focusing more to online communities that they feel much more affinity with.

Spruce was the only interview participant unable to, and uncomfortable with doing the interview over voice, instead opting to use the chat client Telegram for a text interview.

Pine

Pine is a fourth generation (*Yonsei*) Japanese American that was born in Hawaii but has been living in the Seattle area for quite a while now. Pine is in his mid-30's and works a fairly standard office job doing data entry for a collections agency, filling the rest of his time with hobbies including video games and occasionally acting as an official sports judge. Having grown up somewhere with as large an Asian population as Hawaii, Pine has a very different perspective from the rest of the interview participants, many of whom either grew up in small ethnic enclaves within larger cities, or as one of the few Asian Americans in their hometown. Unlike the others, Pine was very certain of his place in the US, going so far as to find xenophobic attitudes towards Asian Americans absurd at this point.

“We're part of this country now, we always have been. And I think it's easy for me to say that as a fourth generation because, you know, I'm not, I would not function well in Japan. I'm too America. It was just like, I've been in this country for forever. I

don't know what, I don't know [why] you're still doing this, why can't you just you know, get over it?" – Pine

Pine is also highly politically active, not only engaging in civic activities in and around his area, but also deeply interested in both political discussion and debate, which came out during his interview.

Elm

Elm is a half Korean, half Jewish American that is currently finishing his doctoral degree in mathematics at a midwestern university with plans to graduate by the end of the year. Despite being a mathematician, Elm is incredibly knowledgeable in both Chinese and Korean history and geopolitics, in part because he still has family back in Korea – including family that he and the rest of his immediately family have been cut off from since the 50's when North and South Korea split into two countries – and in part because he is keenly aware of how much US-Chinese political tension directly affects him and many of the people around him.

"I guess it makes me worry about the future too, right? Like, if, if the US Winds up in the conflict with China [that] a decent chunk of the national security apparatus seems to want, then what exactly does that mean for me? What does that mean for a bunch of the people I know? What it's like, what does that mean for first off, a lot of graduate students and professors that I know who are Chinese nationals? What does that mean for me, who I don't think ... I don't think that John Q Random racist is going to care very much about the distinction between Korean and Chinese and foreign born or US born." – Elm

Of all of the participants, Elm has perhaps the most pessimistic of outlooks for the future, but much of that pessimism is informed by a deep understanding of the history that has led us – in both the US and abroad – to this moment, but in his own words: “the alternative is just lying down waiting to die. So yeah ... pay your money, you make a choice.”

Cedar

Cedar is a half Chinese, half Vietnamese man in his mid-40's that married into a large, established Latinx family that has wholeheartedly accepted him into their very close-knit family. He and his wife moved from a small town in northwestern Maryland to a semi-rural town in southeastern Maryland during the pandemic, though he still commutes back and forth from their old town for work once a week. Since their move, he and his wife have made quick friends through his wife's work and a local tennis club they both attend. However, though his new community has, on the whole, been very accepting, there have been a few instances where he has felt observed and out of place.

“Because, once again, [Southeast Maryland] was like [Northwest Maryland], equivalent to being a small town. Everybody knows everybody and it's, you know, I stick out like a sore thumb there also, too ... I'm commuting back and forth and, like, tomorrow I'll be heading there for the weekend, and every time I'm out and about in public, it's the same, you know, stares or glances ...” – Cedar

Despite feeling overall welcomed and accepted by his new community, there was still an underlying sense of other-ness that has left him feeling hyper-aware since the start of the pandemic, even if the rest of his family doesn't think it's warranted. Not wanting to let it bother

him – or at the very least, not let it seem like it’s bothering him – Cedar mentioned trying to “shrug off” the anxiety, putting on a brave face for his family, but that underlying anxiety still remains.

Ash

Ash is a second-generation Thai woman living in the Baltimore area with her elderly parents. Having recently graduated with an advanced degree, Ash has been working under a former mentor of hers as a research assistant while acting as the sole caretaker for her parents. Since the start of the pandemic, Ash has felt like a lot of responsibility has been placed on her shoulders, often being the one that family members will come to for emotional support or assistance with things like navigating the healthcare system but has felt like she often wasn’t able to get as much of support she needed from her family back.

“My older sister, my older half-sister, she lives about 45 minutes away and she has her own family. So once in a blue moon, you know, she would check in on us to see if we had supplies like cleaning supplies, hand sanitizer, toilet paper, all of that ... my younger sister is a bit more. Mmm. She's younger. She likes going out. She and, throughout the pandemic. She was going to raves. Hosting like basement parties, like everything that you should not be doing during the pandemic, right? ... So it was really, I felt like it was just me. I wish I could have been able to call up, like, say my aunt or Uncle for help, but the interesting part was that my aunt and uncle would call me for help. So, though I could rely on other relatives. Other relatives were also relying on me as well, too ... But no I don't really think that I had much support as I would have liked.” – Ash

Much like Cedar, Ash also felt a sense of hypervigilance while navigating the pandemic, but she felt much more protective of her friends and family than she was worried about her own safety.

FINDINGS

The aim of this research was to center the voices of Asian Americans speaking about their experiences during the pandemic, and for that reason most of this section will be excerpts from Spruce, Pine, Elm, Cedar, and Ash’s interviews. This is not to say that their words will simply be displayed here to let the “data speak for themselves,” as excerpts without context are no more useful than raw statistical outputs printed to page. Instead, the goal is to present their thoughts and feelings in as unobtrusive a manner as possible while still recognizing that the act of cutting up and organizing their words into themes and categories is an intentional act of data manipulation, and is therefore presented through a lens of my own making. With that in mind, the findings of this study have been arranged in a way that both makes sense as a logical progression of themes, from broad to specific, and crafts a compelling narrative using the words of the participants in a way that does not mischaracterize or misrepresent them. Context and descriptive discussion will be provided where needed but will be kept to a minimum.

Experiences of Microaggressions and Xenophobia

As expected, all five participants spoke at length about experiences of racial microaggressions and xenophobia since the start of the pandemic, though some were more hesitant to label their experiences as such than others. Up until recently, most of the participants had been socially distancing and working from home, which limited most of their interpersonal interactions to friends, family, and coworkers. No participant mentioned experiencing any racist

acts or attitudes from friends or coworkers, and only one participant, Cedar, mentioned experiencing a discriminatory act from a family member; however, the act was perpetrated by his grandson – a young child – and was interpreted more as a reflection of what was being discussed in his school than any genuine belief he held (the specifics of the experience will be discussed in more detail later).

Three of the five participants – Spruce, Cedar, and Ash – mentioned explicit experiences of microaggressions in their interviews. Most experiences could be classified as either microinsults or microinvalidations, but a few experiences shared by Cedar and Ash were much closer to microassaults (Sue and Spanierman 2020). In Cedar's case, a man stared him down and aggressively approached him in a supermarket in a way that felt targeted and with the intent to intimidate.

“Yeah, but um, there was one incident [that] comes to my mind. Now, there's a supermarket in [a nearby town]. First time we went there I did get one stare down. He stared at me for a probably a good 10 seconds. And my Wife wasn't aware of it. She was, you know. The other side of the store, you know, picking out steaks or something. I mean, I was just walking, you know, cruising around a supermarket because I was new to the market that we never been to in [the nearby town]. And this guy just kept walking towards me, but I, like I said, he was farther away, I would say 20 feet ... but I can see his eyes just staring like, you know, like darts at me ... but when he kept coming towards me I was like “hold on, is this guy gonna do something here, because he's getting pretty close, like 20 feet away.” Like he didn't make a move by, you know, walk away from me, or turn to another aisle. He Just kept on coming towards me about 20 feet away. And then by the time we crossed paths, he's just like came close to

me and then just kept walking. And then I told my wife, she says, “well, your maybe you're exaggerating [Cedar],” but but I said, “well, I saw him from 20 feet away.” You know, my wife's name is [Maple], I say, “[Maple], I, he, I saw him 20 feet away and he kept coming towards me and kept staring at me.” But luckily, nothing nothing happened. I was pretty on guard at that time.” – Cedar

Even though the man eventually walked past him, and no physical altercation occurred, the experience left Cedar shaken and feeling threatened. When he eventually met back up with his wife in the supermarket, she downplayed the experience as him possibly “exaggerating,” even though the incident was frightening and left him on high alert.

For Ash, the experience was her father’s that she recounted during the interview. He had been experiencing stomach pains and sought medical attention to figure out what was causing it but said that he felt none of the doctors were taking him seriously when he tried to explain the issue. After a surgery failed to address the problem, he eventually gave up, feeling the experiences was more trouble than simply dealing with the pain.

“With that being said, there was an incident that my dad had to get surgery, and he's been having stomach pains for quite some time. And we saw two different doctors to get their opinions and neither one of them could give him a straight enough answer as to why he was feeling the way that he, he did at the time. And so that was frustrating. So, when he went under, when he went to do some surgery ... [it] still didn't fix or cure or treat what he was going through. And at that point, my dad just thought to himself “I don't want to continue to seek treatment for this particular ailment because it's not extremely life threatening,” at least in his mind. He thought this is not extremely life-threatening and going

to have to explain himself to multiple specialists was a huge headache. And he had described it in many cases in many times where he felt like some of these specialists weren't taking him seriously.” – Ash

Though it's possible the incident was not racially motivated, this was not the only time Ash's parents had experienced difficulties involving the medical system.

“And a situation like that also happened again when my one of my parents were, they were seeking urgent care at a local Patient First. They were trying to describe their ailments to a physician and the physician just laughed, right? And I don't know necessarily if that had to do with race. I, I don't necessarily think so, but at the same time, I wasn't there to observe it and say, I don't think so because [...]”⁴ Actually. Because I think it had more to do with differences in education, not necessarily differences in race because my parents have a hard time [...] and I guess maybe it is imbedded in race. I'm not sure actually, now that I think about it ...” – Ash

Even Ash was uncertain if race was a factor in the incident or not, waffling back and forth between thinking it might have more to do with either race or education, and eventually uneasily settling on the conclusion that it might be both. Outside the realm of the medical system, Ash's father also had an experience in a supermarket, but unlike with Cedar where the intent was clearly to intimidate, the intentions of this aggressor are a little harder to determine.

“I remember that during the start of the pandemic, my dad had to run into a Walmart. And this was when there was very little information about the coronavirus. So, as he's walking through

⁴ Notation used to indicate a long pause from the participant.

the Walmart, there was a man who saw him and visibly looked upset as in was trying to almost, the way that my dad described it to me was that he was perceived as being sort of almost disgusting that you know, how like, sometimes you see something that was, that is disgusting or you smell something that's bad? You have that visible physical reaction to whatever is happening in front of you. Well he felt like that, that person was reacting physically towards him, like, "oh, this man must be disgusting. He must have the, he must be the reason why COVID-19 is being spread around." – Ash

This incident straddles the line between a microassault and a microinsult; the act clearly caused distress, but it's difficult to determine if the face the aggressor made at Ash's father was meant to cause direct harm or if it falls more in line with a rude or insensitive act. There was a similar sense of ambiguity when Spruce spoke about crossing paths with white people in public.

"I always have my mask on in public unless there are absolutely no people around me for like ten feet or so. I'm considered fully vaccinated by the state, and they don't require masks on at the moment, but I keep 'em on out of courtesy. Now there are a lot of people who have their masks off, like around their neck or on a single ear. But sometimes when I walk past them, they put them on briefly. I've taken to watching sometimes to see, and yup-- most of those people take their mask off when I'm no longer in proximity (but other, non-Asians are). I find it...kind of amusing, kind of demeaning. It's weird." – Spruce

Participants also described experiencing microinvalidations in the form of something adjacent to gaslighting by family and peers. Since most definitions of gaslighting requires the intent to manipulate the victim into questioning their perceptions, none of the participants' experiences

could be fully described as gaslighting, but the outcome of the experiences were still very similar. In Ash's case, the experience was while sharing with her sister her and her parents' feelings of fear and anxiety from the increase in anti-Asian racism. Rather than receiving any empathy from her sister, her sister downplayed her fears and suggested the incidents that were causing Ash distress weren't actually happening.

“Surprisingly, I felt gaslit by my own older sister, who is also Asian. And she is first generation, so she actually emigrated from Thailand to the US. And so, I was letting her know the fear of my parents, I'm feeling very much discriminate against ... and I guess let me just backtrack a little bit and describe a little bit about my older sister. My older sister is, she married into a very affluent family who's also Asian. My parents are not affluent folks, but my older sister, she is very affluent. She also has a majority group of friends who if I could describe their background characteristics aren't, they're majority of white and of course, I don't really know their educational attainment or educational level, but I could describe their occupations, which is like bartending, sales, realty, stuff like that. So affluent folks, majority white living in [the Annapolis area]. Long story short, I was having different discussions regarding like Asian hate crime, how there are folks who believe that, you know [...] There are groups of people who believe that some Asians have brought over the coronavirus to the US. There was also some discussion about like say how the Trump administration at the time was really fueling this up. And my sister, my older sister responded to me and said “I don't really think that's happening. I think that's just in Asian people's minds.” which was such a huge like, stark contrast to my thoughts because we were both family, and we are both Asian people.” – Ash

Ash attributed the difference in perspective to her sister's wealthy and status – existing in a much more privileged position in society, even if still part of a marginalized community – but still found the moment hurtful and confusing, and left the conversation feeling like her perception of reality was being challenged by somebody that she felt should have been more on her side.

In Cedar's case, the experience was much milder. Though he didn't label them as such, he spoke about many small moments of family members casting doubts on his perception of events or make light of a concern of his by dismissing it as silly which, in turn, made him question if his concern was valid in the first place. One example was already provided in an earlier section, when Cedar spoke about the experience he had in the grocery store:

"... And then I told my wife, she says, 'well, your maybe you're exaggerating [Cedar],' but but I said, 'well, I saw him from 20 feet away.' You know, my wife's name is [Maple], I say, '[Maple], I, he, I saw him 20 feet away and he kept coming towards me and kept staring at me.' ..."

Another experience was in a conversation with his brother during their trip to Manhattan in which he expressed fears of being assaulted in the streets, which his brother dismissed as Cedar "watching too much TV."

"Even my brother said nothing's gonna happen to you. Yeah. I was a little hesitant [in the] beginning because we jokingly, I said, 'hey [is] someone, you know. Quote-unquote, jump me or somewhere [while] I'm here' and he started laughing [and said 'you're] watching too much TV, [Cedar]. But to be honest with you, nothing really happened, really stood out to me.'" – Cedar

Another common theme was the blaming of China for the pandemic, much of which was perpetuated by government officials and authority figures that trickled down into the

participant's everyday lives. From what people called the virus to outright accusing China of engineering it, most participants reported some experiences of hearing these accusations on the news, seeing it on social media, or in Cedar's case, from his own grandson.

"And we had all this talk about, you know, the virus came from China, is all of these, you know, and all the jokes in poor taste about the name of [the] virus and what to call it and who was responsible and why." – Pine

"I [saw] conspiracy theories about how the plague was developed in a virus lab, which had been pretty thoroughly discredited early on by just looking at, here is what the virus is made of, here is genetic information. You can see here that it was probably, that it probably passed through bats at some point and this and that and the other thing or things that you definitely wouldn't do if you were trying to design a virus because all of them decrease infectivity. And now I'm seeing those bubble back up again. I'm seeing the, the idea that these were manufactured somehow. And, and even supported by members of the US government, who have otherwise been level-headed too, for whatever that means." – Elm

"And then when we, when we transition to [Southeast Maryland], it's kind of funny, but the first comment my grandkids told me when they saw me was – they call me, Go-Go, that's my nickname cause I was always on the go, constantly working – and so one of my grandkids named [Aster] says, "Go-Go, supposedly in school, were learning that COVID came from China!" to me. And my wife goes, "what did he say to you?" I said "[Aster] thinks the COVID came from China, and I guess I had part to do with it," and he goes "yeah, you did!" – Cedar

Lastly, an experience shared among all of the participants was a sense of vicarious discrimination in line with the findings of (Lee and Waters 2021). Though none of them were directly affected by the actions they witnessed in news stories, social media posts, or even in person, simply seeing hate being directed at people that look like them affected them.

“Yeah, so when the pandemic first happened and there was an uprising against Asians, seeing Asian hate, I received a handful of telephone calls with my aunts and uncles, I was pulled aside by my mom and my dad to really discuss how they were internalizing this. And for them, they were very afraid for their lives, and it was mostly because they were seeing images of older Asians in the media, and they themselves identify as being older Asians.” – Ash

*“The stories I heard on the news were like... Asian people being yelled at on the trains. Being assaulted, beaten up, without any help from passers-by. The scariest were the stories of people that literally got **shoved** onto the train tracks.” – Spruce*

“And you know, just like in the beginning, you know, you see one instance, you’re like. Okay, maybe, you know, something must have happened. We don't know the whole story. But then they kept showing different videos or different, you know, people being attacked and it was kind of alarming, that.” – Cedar

Fear and Anxiety

One of the most common ways those experiences of vicarious discrimination manifested was in an increased sense of fear and anxiety, both for themselves and their loved ones. For

Spruce, that fear had a tangible impact on their willingness to use public transit for their commute, making them seriously consider spending more money to use Uber instead.

“But... when I heard that anti-Asian rhetoric started to ramp up, it made me quite nervous to use the subway. I had days where I considered spending more money for an Uber instead of on the subway, when I was tired and unable to concentrate fully. It sort of felt like a... survival instinct, I guess I'd call it.” – Spruce

For Ash, it manifested more in the form of, in her own words, overprotectiveness of her friends and family members, especially her elderly parents.

“But for me hearing this, about my family members, made me afraid for them, so then that became more, I became overprotective of them [...] It came to the point where, especially during the height of the pandemic. I wouldn't allow them out of the house for many reasons, one being that they are immunocompromised and I didn't want them to get sick, but also because I was afraid that they would get hurt.” – Ash

This fear of injury – especially from being assaulted – was a common worry that many of the participants expressed. In many cases, hearing reports of assaults on Asian Americans in their areas or places they planned to visit made them worried that they or a loved one could be the next target of a hate incident, especially when the attacks appeared to target Asians at random.

“The most of my experience with racism and xenophobia has been Looking at, looking at the news, at assorted broadcast, at hearing incidents of racially motivated violence and thinking “that could, that could be my grandma. That could be me. there's nothing separating me from the victim of this or that other attack in the minds of whoever did that.”” – Elm

“And, um, and then during covid my wife and I did make the trip to Manhattan to see my brother and of course on TV during that time we saw a lot of the racial slurs and you know, the attacks on the Asians there in New York. And So, I was a little hesitant about going, of course. My wife said, “no, we’re going. I haven’t seen my brother in a while [and] we need to get out of the house a little bit.” But to be honest with you nothing really happened, really stood out to me ... Even my brother said nothing’s gonna happen to you. Yeah. I was a little hesitant [in the] beginning because we jokingly, I said, “hey [is] someone you know, [going to] quote-unquote jump me or somewhere [while] I’m here” and he started laughing [and said “you’re] watching too much TV, [Cedar].”” – Cedar

Even if they recognized that chance was relatively low, the possibility of serious, lasting harm made being out in public feel like a risk calculation for people like Spruce.

*“Since about January or February of this year, I’ve actually been **afraid** to wait in certain stations that get more foot traffic. The more people, the more times I’m rolling the dice, and there’s just that one chance I get unlucky, and well, my life’s changed forever. That...has eased a bit. I don’t think any specific incidents targeting me have occurred.” – Spruce*

Lastly, this fear also led some of the participants to become hypervigilant, always on guard when out in public and on the lookout for possible harm. Though that harm never came to pass, they never lost that sense of needing to be always alert, even nearly two years into the pandemic.

“If you were to ask me something like: have your behaviors changed as a result, then the answer would be “absolutely yes”. I have to be on high alert.” – Spruce

“I mean, I’m kind of like, shrug it off like, shrug it off saying “hey, it’s not going to happen to me with my family” and you know, hopefully they’ll respect, you know, we’re in a family, in a restaurant or some, and they respect our obviously. No, I’m always guarded because you stand out, you know, as you know, [son-in-law] has a come from big Latino family and they’re, they’re vocal, they’re loud and I joke about like, “you guys quiet down or something,” but, you know. So it’s all about attention, were out in restaurants out and about in public, you know, my wife’s like talking loud and like hand gestures. I’m sure [son-in-law] can attest to that when but um, but we got on big groups, you know, it’s coming from a big family. And you know, there’s a big group when we go out, I know. I am I on guard? Sure. Absolutely. I’m always staring around and my wife’s always like, although I mean saying, “what are you worried or some?” I’m like, “well, you know, I’m in a different town now and nobody knows me here and you just never know.”” – Cedar

A Sense of Othering

Another major theme was a feeling of othering, even if they didn’t have the specific words to describe the feeling. There were three major sub-themes, the first of which was a feeling of hypervisibility, or standing out because of their Asian-ness.

“But um, did I experience any racism? I don’t think I did. I mean, maybe going to the supermarket, I will get glares or glances, you know, I mean, but that was typical normally too, living in small

*town and standing out since I'm [of] Asian descent there.” –
Cedar*

Living in a small town where he was one of the only Asian Americans there, Cedar felt like he stood out, or was perceived by others to stand out, and would often get “glares or glances” even before the pandemic. This sentiment was expressed numerous times throughout the interview. To refer again to the excerpt used in his profile:

*“... every time I'm out and about in public, it's the same, you
know, stares or glances ...” – Cedar*

For Spruce, while they didn't feel like they were hyper-visible, they found themselves avoiding activities that might make their Asian-ness stand out more, such as learning Japanese during their commute on the subway, out of fear that they might be targeted and attacked.

*“I think... in a lot of ways, I kind of lucked out. I speak fluent,
native English, and I am told my features are ambiguously
Asian. Even my name is of Spanish descent. It's weird, I might be
overthinking it. But so it goes. But heck, I've been trying to study
Japanese for the last year and a half, and my motivation to do
that on the subway totally tanked, haha. It's the same thing.
Afraid of being attacked because suddenly I cross that threshold
of being "Asian Enough".” – Spruce*

The second major sub-theme was a feeling of invisibility, especially when it came to Asian American issues. Though this may seem to contradict hypervisibility, their feelings of invisibility were less of a personal nature and more of a socio-historic one; Asian American history is rarely if ever talked about, and several of the participants felt like Asian specific issues hadn't been given any attention up until very recently.

“you know, they have, they just had a Latino month ... African-American [History Month], but there's really not much Asian ... there wasn't much publicity [for AAPI month], you know, I mean, yeah, it's just in passing on the news like “hey, it's Asian Pacific Islander month and maybe go to Chinatown or something” or yeah, but yeah.” – Cedar

“like the active hate against Asian Americans is never as present as it is against Blacks, against Latinx, against Indigenous peoples. But also because of that, I think a lot of people don't see anti-Asian sentiment as being as much of a problem.” – Pine

Because anti-Asian hate isn't as prevalent, and by extension aren't as talked about as anti-Black, anti-Latinx, and to an extent anti-Indigenous hate, Pine felt like Asian issues are often ignored. And, as Cedar pointed out, even when there is a month dedicated to AAPI history – much like Black History month or Hispanic Heritage Month – it gets far less attention in both the media in schools.

“Guests” – The Perpetual Foreigner

The last major sub-theme, “Guests,” took its name from something Elm said during his interview, where he said and his family felt perceived to not fully belonging within the US, at least not permanently, and that Asian Americans' citizenship status was conditional on how “useful” they were perceived to be by white elites.

*“When, when I was growing up, my, my mom said my family, my Korean side would fairly frequently tell me that that we are, that we are **guests**⁵ in the US, that white people don't really like*

⁵ Emphasis my own.

us. And every now and again, I real note something that reminds me of the extent to which I agree with that. And a lot of, the a, lot of the, the incidents of racially motivated violence have been driven, or I've interpreted them in that way.” – Elm

Elm later elaborated on what he meant by being “guests” in the US, saying it was due to three things: first, the recent immigration of his family, only coming over in the 70’s after the Hart-Cellar act was passed; second, that Asians were only welcomed into the country because they were seen as somehow “valuable;” and third, a feeling that if Asians did not live up to the “Model Minority” myth, no longer seen as valuable, that they could be ejected from the country.

“I mean it's guests in I guess three major senses. First off, we're like, we're guests here. Like my, my mom and my grandma and their entire family, they immigrated in the 70s, right? So, like they've only been here for a few decades and one of the things that my mom would tell me, is you know some of these people, they have families that have been in the US for literal centuries, and we're only just getting started here. So that's thing One. Thing two is we're guests here as in if we misbehave, if we, if we aren't going to [...] [I] guess if you're not a Model minority, then we could just as easily be ejected. Like some unruly house guest. But also, on the other hand, the third part is that in some sense we've been invited here, even if contingently that there was something about [...] Something about the, the [...] about our family, about our ethnicity that had been permitted here, that had been seen as valuable.” – Elm

Though this was not a sentiment that Ash herself felt, she did mention that this feeling of being a guest, and especially no longer being a *welcome* guest, was something her family members have expressed.

“But regarding like being perceived as a guest, being perceived as other ... I felt my uncle has said to me, multiple times that he is not, he is no longer welcome here. He feels like he is no longer welcome here.” – Ash

This was not, however, a sentiment shared by all participants. For Ash, though her family might feel this way, and she may have felt that way in the past, she no longer does. Rather, she takes a much more Marxist approach and sees Asians as yet another exploited minority within the US, serving their own purpose within the capitalist system.

“I would say, perhaps growing up, my family may have felt like that. The need to present themselves as guests. They need to present themselves as [if] we are entering someone else's home that is not our own. Therefore, we must treat it with the utmost respect. So in other words, treating the United States and its values and its people with the utmost respect. That, I saw a lot growing up as a child, and in some ways I embodied that. At the same time as I was growing up or now into adulthood that has changed. Now, no longer see us as being guests. I now see us as being just another number for capital elitists to benefit from us, or off of us.” – Ash

For Pine, his reasoning was much more personal. For him, he finds the notion that we are some foreign “other” as inherently ridiculous, especially given how long Asians have lived in this country, though he admits that might be due to him being a fourth-generation Japanese American, and he and his living family have only ever known living in the US.

“Now at least those of us in the East Asian communities, and I know a lot of Indian Americans as well and they tend to have it pretty well, so it's very easy for us to say, you know, “look, we've made it, look, we're part of this. How silly is it that people are

still doing this? Why can't they just accept the way here to stay?" And I think there was a sense of complacency in that sense. There was a sense of complacency and like, you know, it's 2017⁶, we're part of this country now, we always have been. And I think it's easy for me to say that to as a fourth-generation because, you know, I'm not [...] I would not function well in Japan. I'm too American. It was just like, "I've been in this country for forever. I don't know what, I don't know why you're still doing this, why can't you just, you know, get over it?" And I think it was again, among my primarily East Asian American friends, there was the sense of same set of things" – Pine

Pine recognized that his generational status and relative privilege let him be more “complacent” than other Asian Americans might be able to be, to be able to find the idea that Asians are still not fully welcome in the country silly, but even accounting for his biases his point stands: Asians have been living in the US for centuries, and to still be treated as, and to still feel like guests is something he pushed back against.

Support, Given and Received

The third major theme was that of support given and received. Some participants spoke more directly about their support structures or who they were a part of a support structure for, but nearly every participant spoke to some degree about how they were helped and/or helped others cope with the stress of anti-Asian racism and the pandemic. Beginning with support received,

⁶ This was in reference to a video compilation put together by NYT deputy metro editor Michael Lou, where he gathered testimonials from Asian Americans expressing frustration with experiences of racism and xenophobia. The video can be found here: <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000004706646/thisis2016-asian-americans-respond.html>

participants spoke about various forms of assistance, ranging from the direct and personal to a more collective form of support from their communities.

For people like Spruce, something as simple as having a neighborhood that felt safe to be in was a huge help for them after the stress of commuting to and from work.

“My neighborhood is very densely Asian populated, as are the usual places I go shopping, so I actually do feel quite safe there. It's kind of a nice break from the stresses of the daily commute, haha.” – Spruce

For Ash, that community support came in the form of a primary care physician that was willing to work with her parents' diets and cultural practices, something that was incredibly beneficial to them while attempting to navigate the healthcare system for the first time during the pandemic.

“our primary care physician. She is amazing. She recently left. So, I don't know how and our next Doctor visits going to go. But all the times I've been to this woman with both of my parents, she has always just been very kind and understanding, and a lot of the advice she gave was not coming from, say, like a very ethnocentric point of view. So, for instance, in Thai culture, we do we eat a lot, like curries and whatnot. And I learned recently that that's not always great for your physical health. And so instead of her saying, “oh, you have to cut this entirely,” she discussed things like doing certain things in moderation. So, long story short, she would tie in some of the treatment with the things that my parents already culturally, had cultural beliefs in.” – Ash

In Pine's case, the support they noticed came more from people overall, not just his community members, that were willing to speak up about, and stand up against anti-Asian hate.

“You know what's been there, but more people have been willing to speak out about it. More people have noticed it. I would say more people are looking for it, more non-Asian Americans, I mean.” – Pine

For others like Cedar, that support came more directly from friends and family, often taking the form of direct emotional support during and after their recent move into a new community.

“Yes. Absolutely, especially with family, you know? First and foremost they are always there, very supportive. The friends, I mean, we lucked out in picking good friends ... you know, and we had a couple of friends from [Central Maryland] come visit us two or three times already in [Southern Maryland], you know, they, they really just “how are you guys doing here. Have you transitioned well here? are there any issues” or yeah, I mean just making sure we're comfortable and we made the right decision to move there. So, it's been pretty good to experience all the way around. When you know, old friends, new friends and making new friends here in the future too.” – Cedar

Another way Ash mentioned her white friends were able to passively offer support was by acting as a sort of racial buffer between her and other white people that might cause harm, intentionally or otherwise. This is something she mentioned was only recently attained as her old circle of friends did not offer the same feeling of protection for her.

“I used to hang out with other groups of white people as well to, who again using my sociological background, my sociological thinking, a handful of these people, we were very different in political viewpoints. We're also, were very different in our educational background, a handful of them were really high

school graduates while I was going through grad school, and I never felt like I had a buffer with them. It was just an association. I just happen to have known these people because they were in my life for a long while. It took me awhile to be like, you know what, I don't agree with your viewpoints and I don't agree with how you make me feel. So it was really through grad school, was really through, going through different occupations to really find my core group of people to give me that buffer.” – Ash

In terms of support given, Ash was the only participant that spoke at length about expectations of acting as a support structure for others. Living with and taking care of her elderly parents, both of whom are not fully English proficient, Ash felt she was in a position where she needed to provide more support for the people around her than she was often able to receive back from them.

“So it was really, I felt like it was just me. I wish I could have been able to call up, like, say my aunt or Uncle for help, but the interesting part was that my aunt and uncle would call me for help. So, though I could rely on other relatives, other relatives were also relying on me as well, too.” – Ash

She also felt like some of the support she had in taking care of her parents was lost during the pandemic when her younger sister moved out.

“my younger sister decided to move with her, into her boyfriend's home. And really that decision came because it was just more fun over there, but she made that decision also because she didn't want to keep coming back and forth during the pandemic and accidentally spreading covid to my parents. So she made that decision to just leave entirely. And so, I was without her for, like, several months at the beginning of the pandemic, and that truly

hurt, because she was my best friend. And also, because I felt this burden that, oh, my God, I, it's just me and my parents now. And I'm responsible for them and I have nobody to lean on.” – Ash

Although few of her experiences of having to be a support structure for her family were directly related to increased experiences of racism and xenophobia, the feeling of overprotectiveness, born out of her and her parents’ fear of assault and injury, and wariness to venture out when not absolutely necessary played a role in her increased responsibilities, and by extension how much she needed to support the people around her.

Resistance and Solidarity

Finally, the last major theme was how the participants engaged with and participated in resistance against anti-Asian hate and discrimination, and their feelings on solidarity with other marginalized communities. Perhaps the clearest example is Pine’s newfound unwillingness to let racism go unchallenged, be it directed towards him or others around him.

“it's certainly made me less tolerant of that sort of thing. You know, used to be something where I could just swallow it. I could just ignore it. I could just let it go. Even though I haven't experienced a very much of a like, I can sense the difference in myself, that willingness to just put my foot down and say no. That the next time this happens I'm absolutely going to call it out. I'm absolutely not going to let it stand” – Pine

Much of the way the participants expressed pushback against racism and xenophobia was in discussion about Black Lives Matter and the 2020 protests around George Floyd’s murder. Of the participants that spoke in any detail about their thoughts on BLM and Black solidarity, a majority expressed strong support.

“Yeah, so understanding that, understanding that, that I'm not in fact, white, not even remotely, not even white passing except in I guess mannerisms or culture is, [it] puts me in mind of the fact that any, that it would be a waste of time for me to try to benefit exclusively the Asian Community or exclusively the Korean community in in [...] in what little activism I try to do or what causes I try to support because undocumented immigration is, it's not just a Latino issue. It's also an Asian issue. It's, police brutality is not just a Black issue. It's also an Asian issue. And the fact that I'm not a part of the Black community and very likely never will be is immaterial.” – Elm

It didn't matter to Elm that he was not Black or Latinx, nor was he likely to ever be directly involved with Black or Latinx communities, he saw their issues as Asian issues, too. Ash mentioned making a similar argument when trying to convince her parents that justice for Asian communities cannot happen without also calling for justice for Black communities.

“I always have to have a discussion with them about, okay, before we talk about giving justice to us, we should also discuss how giving justice to Black folks, as well, too. Otherwise, there is no justice. And that was a huge conversation that I had to have with my parents throughout the pandemic because there is a sense of racism, I feel, like between Asian people towards Black people, right? And that was something that I experienced too, growing up with my family, observing them seeing how there was sometimes racist tendencies or like sense of prejudice towards Black folks. And I had to talk my parents through that, that we can't give ourselves the Justice we deserve if we're not in solidarity with Black folks.” – Ash

However, as social justice movements in the US began to more reflect the political protests in Thailand, Ash said her parents became far more understanding of, and far more supportive of BLM and calls for justice for the Black community.

“I’m not sure if you know this about Thai culture and the news, but there is now an uprising occurring in Thailand. There’s been a handful of student protests against the monarch. Their thought is that the monarchy is corrupt, utilizing money for personal expenses, for their own, their own lives, but instead of, like helping the Thai people. And so, there is a distinction of like here, here, how in America, we have the progressive folks versus like the conservative folks. My parents have talked openly about this with me that they lean more the progressive side in Thailand. They support the student protest; they support Thailand being a democracy and not a monarchy ... So I think my parents having an understanding of like, the need for progressive laws in Thailand allows them to be more open to the need to having progressive laws here in the US, but also just having way more progressive thoughts. And I think that’s why it was a bit easier to have the discussion of “hey, Mom, Dad. We can’t provide justice to Asian folks if we’re not providing justice to black folks,” during the light of the uprising here in the US when it came to Brianna Taylor or George Floyd.” – Ash

The support was not entirely unconditional, however. Though Cedar supported BLM and the demands of the movement, he felt the mass demonstrations were dangerous for people to attend and insisted that there were other ways to attempt change that put you less in harm’s way.

“Did we support them? Um, we were, I mean, it’s just on TV, where that’s the extent of it. We didn’t go any marches or, you know, really go out of our way. It was, you know, support what

they're doing. We, we agree with what, you know, what needs to be done, what needs to change. We didn't go in the marches or anything like that, and actually my son went to the March in Baltimore, there with his girlfriend. And I recall my wife and I were saying you shouldn't be there and it's dangerous ... It's terrible going the middle there marching. So, I remember wife and I had a big argument about it. But you know what, there stands a different stance on why he's doing it and she would stand saying, "I don't want to do it for his safety." I agree that needs change and, but there's other ways you can approach change." – Cedar

One of the more surprising findings was that despite this study being explicitly about their experiences of anti-Asian racism, when the topic of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous solidarity came up, many participants expressed beliefs that the issues of Black people were more pressing than their own. That is not to say that they downplayed anti-Asian racism – they still acknowledged that it was an issue that needed more attention than it got – but both Pine and Ash felt that Asian problems were either not as widespread, or that greater priority should be placed on addressing Black issues than Asian ones, even if hesitant to say so.

"I will say, despite the rise in Asian hate crime, I do believe that [...] I don't want to have, I don't want to put weight on either one of them, because they are just both, I don't know how to properly describe this [...] They're both important in their own ways. But I don't think that there should be a weight given to either one of them, if anything. If you were to ask me, I feel bad having to say this as an Asian person, but I feel like there should still be more weight given to the Black Lives Matter movement, and my reasoning for that is because Black and Brown folks, particularly

Black folks in America have experienced, are still way more marginalized than the Asian population.” – Ash

“And if you know, if I'm being honest, I don't think it is as much of a problem as the anti-Black ... anti-indigenous, anti-Latinx hate because that is so much more widespread. That is so much more embedded in the system. And you know, the systems have been there to oppress Asian Americans as well. But I think the, the system has also found ways to use Asians as Asian Americans as a bludgeon against these other communities. So, in that sense, we are quote unquote allowed to exist.” – Pine

Contending with Anti-Blackness

Though none of the participants themselves expressed anti-Black beliefs, many of them recognized the prevalence of it in Asian communities both past and present. Both Ash and Elm spoke about the racism of their parents and extended family. While Ash chose to challenge her parents directly, as mentioned in an excerpt above, Elm was hesitant to “pick at” the racist beliefs of his family.

“Yeah, I mean part and parcel of that, of that upbringing was a mistrust of Black people that I struggled to shake off until I hit College. like that, that was, I have never felt particularly motivated to pick at the racial attitudes of my mom's family because I am almost certain that I would see a lot of Anti-Black and probably also anti-latino sentiment. They, when they immigrated to the US they wound up living in what was at the time a fairly poor neighborhood, and I know they got robbed on several occasions. Not that that's a justification for it, but it's certainly part of why it's there, and I [...] for Koreans in

particular, there's also everything about Sa-I-Gu the, the, the 1992 LA riots.” – Elm

Sa-I-Gu, Korean for April 29th, is used in this context to refer to the millions of dollars in property damage Korean American shop owners experienced during the '92 LA Riots in the wake of the Rodney King trial's verdict, leading to heightened racial tension between the Black and Korean communities in LA.

“So, the 92 riots were sparked, the insit- [...] as it kind of still is now, there was a an atmosphere of racial tension in the US. Particularly I mean, the notably brutal LA Police Department and the treatment of black people fueling that, but the inciting incident was a Korean convenience store owner killing a Black child who he accused of stealing orange juice or something like that. And consequently the, a large part of the Black community of LA rose up in, in riots, in, in protests, in property damage and looting. And a lot of that wound up getting focused against Koreans because of that inciting incident. And so, there is a very famous series of photos of Koreans armed with long guns on the top of a convenience store. And on the one hand, you know, hooray community defense, but on the other hand. On the other hand, this is the obvious outcome of the model minority myth. This is, this is “keep your nose clean and work hard and don't question the system and [you] eventually will have some measure of prosperity, Unlike these people.”” – Elm

Elm was not the only one to make direct note to the “Model Minority” myth and the inherent anti-Blackness that is baked into it. He went on to talk about how in that moment in the LA Riots, he felt Koreans had been granted a sense of contingent whiteness because of their position against the Black community, making them useful to white supremacy.

“Because that's, that's sort of the [...] that one in particular is almost Koreans being accepted as contingently white because they're in conflict with the Black community, which on the one hand, I'm not surprised but on the other hand, it's just kind of gross.” – Elm

Pine also spoke about this sense of Asians being used by whites to protect and reinforce white supremacist beliefs. As he said in an earlier excerpt:

“And you know, the systems have been there to oppress Asian Americans as well. But I think the, the system has also found ways to use Asians as Asian Americans as a bludgeon against these other communities.” – Pine

He used this term, “bludgeon,” again later, when talking about how conditions for Asian Americans might periodically be, or seem better than other marginalized groups because their communities are often weaponized by white supremacist narratives to use against Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people.

“But it has been convenient to use general metrics about the Asian American community as a bludgeon against members of the Black community, members of the Latin American community, members of the indigenous American community. I think as long as that is, the case there will be less hate directed at us. Or at least it will be [...] it will be, it'll be [...] I think less is probably the wrong word there. You know, the boot won't be grinding quite as hard” – Pine

[final remarks]

DISCUSSION

All five participants spoke about experiencing some form of racism since the beginning of the pandemic, though some more than others. Spruce and Cedar both shared direct experiences of microaggressions while Ash spoke more about her parents' experiences. All of their experiences took place in a public space, with the most common sites being supermarkets. While some of the experiences clearly fell into the category of microassaults, others were a bit more ambiguous: somebody making faces at Ash's father as if they found him "disgusting" and passersby putting on their mask when they approached Spruce, but not when they approached non-Asian people, straddle the line between acts intended to harm and something more like a microinsult, a rude and insensitive action or comment that might be unintentionally harmful or not consciously performed (Sue and Spanierman 2020). Many of them also didn't know how to feel about their experiences, either uncertain the act was racially motivated, or in Spruce's case, felt both amused and insulted.

Ash and Cedar also expressed the experiences of unintentional pseudo-gaslighting from family members, one in the context of describing an experience they had and the others after expressing anxiety about going out in public. I call this "unintentional pseudo-gaslighting" for a few reasons. First, because while they technically fall under the category of microinvalidations, the term is too broad to fully capture the specifics of the experiences. Second, because gaslighting is a term most commonly used to describe a form of an abusive relationship, relying on manipulation tactics in which the abuser attempts to control the victim by making them question their perception of reality through deception and misdirection (Davis and Ernst 2019; Sweet 2019). Since none of the family members in question were attempting to manipulate Ash or Cedar, nor were they attempting to intentionally make them question their perception of

reality, saying their experiences were gaslighting would be disingenuous and misleading. Lastly, there was no established term that I could find that described the experience I was attempting to discuss. The closest I was able to find was (Davis and Ernst 2019) Racial Gaslighting, which they defined as “the political, social, economic and cultural process that perpetuates and normalizes a white supremacist reality through pathologizing those who resist (763).”

In only one case does this definition seem appropriate: when Ash recounted her older sister saying “I don't really think that's happening. I think that's just in Asian people's minds” in response to Ash talking about how the Trump administration was fueling xenophobic conspiracy theories. In this case, an argument can be made that Ash's sister is perpetuating and normalizing a white supremacist reality by casting doubt on what Ash is saying and pathologizing other Asian Americans by saying it's “just in [their] minds.” This is, however, the only time this definition is appropriate for describing their experiences.

For Cedar, the experience had the affect of making him question his perception, even if a little bit, but not to the extent that full gaslighting would, and was not done with the intent to manipulate. The biggest example was when his wife suggested he was “exaggerating” the experience of the man that aggressively approached him in a supermarket, casting doubt on his perception of events in a way that he felt he had to defend himself. In a lesser extent, Cedar's brother dismissing his concerns of being assaulted if they went out in public while visiting him in Manhattan caused him to question if his fears were misplaced to begin with.

The scapegoating of Asians, and particularly the blaming of China, for the pandemic was something many of them either witnessed or directly experienced. For Elm and Pine, the experience was mostly relegated to hearing the conspiracy theories from peers and politicians – even political leaders Elm thought had “otherwise been level-headed” – but for Cedar, the

scapegoating made its way into his home. His grandson, Aster, told him that he was learning in school that COVID came from China, and went on to confirm that on some level, he did believe Cedar had some role in the pandemic. Cedar dismissed the experience because of Aster's age, chalking it up to "kids say the darndest things," but the experience still stood out to him, and was still hurtful.

The constant stream of anti-Asian hate and targeted violence on the news and on social media was something that all of them had expressed as having an effect on them, from making them more afraid for themselves and their loved ones when out in public to engendering a sense of hypervigilance, feeling the need to always be on guard when around other people. This is consistent with (Lee and Waters 2021) findings on vicarious discrimination, which could impact a person's mental health even if they weren't the main target of the act. None of the participants spoke about how this might have impacted their physical health, but the impact racism has on the body is well documented (Chen et al. 2020; Lee and Waters 2021; Saw et al. 2021; Williams et al. 2019; Williams and Williams-Morris 2000), so it's possible they were experiencing physical ailments that they didn't connect to their experiences of racism, thus didn't bring up.

Othering and "Guests"

There was also a clear sense of othering from all of the participants, though all of them responded to it differently. Some, like Cedar and Spruce, either felt like they were hyper-visible to the people around them or feared performing certain acts in public that might make them more noticeable. This feeling of hypervisibility was often mentioned alongside hypervigilance, though it's unclear if one would lead to the other or if they were intrinsically linked with one another. In contrast to a sense of hypervisibility, Cedar and Pine expressed feelings of invisibility when it

came to Asian American history or the prevalence of discrimination against them. Up until the start of the pandemic, it felt to them like Asians were often ignored or dismissed. Neither wanted to put a positive spin on the pandemic or the surge of anti-Asian hate incidents, but Pine did feel like it had put a spotlight on Asians in a way that there hasn't been in years. This dual sense of being both hyper seen yet invisible reflects established literature on the perpetual foreigner myth (Cheryan and Monin 2005; Endo 2015; Hwang 2021; Tessler et al. 2020), where Asians are often held at arms-length as an excluded other, their American-ness called into doubt. By establishing Asians as part of an inherent out-group, they are made more visible by their exclusion. Part of the denial of American-ness is the erasure of Asians from the retelling of American history. As the timeline provided earlier in this paper hopefully demonstrates, Asians have had a long and storied history within the United States, but it is one that is often cut from the dominant narrative.

Some, like Elm, grew up fully aware of this feeling of othering, and in some way has internalized it. He said his family described Asians as being “guests” in the US, which carries with it a wealth of connotations. The most obvious being that a guest is not a permanent resident to wherever they're visiting, and therefore does not fully belong. Guests are also only granted entry into a space when expressly invited, requiring the permission of the residents there. They are not entitled to the resources found within the space they are visiting and are often expected to ask for permission before using or consuming what they interact with. Guests are expected to follow a certain set of rules established by the residents of the space they are visiting, and a breach of those rules can result in them being ejected, possibly permanently. And lastly, guests are expected to leave once they've stayed their welcome. By calling Asians “guests,” the implication is that Asians are only in the United States because they are wanted here, only

entitled to the resources and services allowed to them, and will eventually be expected to leave once they are no longer wanted. This paints a grim picture, but one that Elm expressed that he does not entirely disagree with. When put in context of the many mass expulsions of Chinese during the 19th century, the Japanese internment during World War II, and the fact it took until 1965 to fully repeal the Chinese Exclusion act, it is understandable that Elm and his family might feel this way.

However, none of the other participants agreed with this sentiment. The only one that came the closest was Ash, who expressed she may have felt that way in the past, and that some of her relatives still feel that way now, but that she no longer sees herself or other Asian Americans as “guests” in the United States. This sentiment was shared by Pine, who remarked that he is “too American” to function in Japan, and expressed exasperation at the notion that Asian Americans are not Americans. As he saw it, Asians have been living in the United States too long for this sentiment to still be alive, though he recognized that this belief might have been born out of his “complacency” from being a fourth-generation Japanese American; not only was he born in the United States, thus protected from deportation through nativity, but also belongs to one of the more widely accepted Asian ethnicities.

Support and Gendered Difference

All participants expressed that they felt, in some way, supported throughout the pandemic. Spruce had their community, Cedar and Ash their friends and family, Pine from the wider sea-change of public opinion and the willingness of non-Asians to stand in solidarity with Asian Americans, and though an excerpt was not used for Elm, he did express that he felt welcome and supported by his faculty and cohort at his university. However, only Ash spoke at

length about feeling she did not always have the support that she needed to do everything that was expected of her. Despite wanting to lean on her family for support, she often found that they wanted to lean on her. Her elderly parents, who she said she began to feel overprotective of in the wake of rising anti-Asian hate, often relied on her for navigating the healthcare system because they were not fully English proficient. Her older sister was not only physically distant, but also had her own family, and was not a reliable source of material or emotional support. Her younger sister, who lived with her and her parents at the start of the pandemic, moved in with her partner part way through, leaving Ash feeling abandoned to take care of her elderly parents on her own. Put simply: there was a high expectation for Ash to perform emotional, and sometimes mental and physical work for her family that she did not feel she received enough of back from them. All of this on top of working full time.

As Ash is the only woman identifying participant in this study, I cannot draw any solid conclusions that this indicates a difference in experience based around gender; however, of the participants, she was the one with the greatest emotional demand put on her, acting as the sole caretaker for her parents and support structure for other family members. In addition to scheduling her parents' medical appointments and running errands in their stead to shield them from possible harm, Ash was also expected to perform uncompensated emotional work for her entire family (Hochschild 2012), which women are more often expected to perform than men.

Resistance and Solidarity

Most of the participants⁷ expressed a greater unwillingness to tolerate hate and racism, either directed towards them, other Asians, or people of color writ large. Pine was the one that spoke most fervently about it, stating in no uncertain terms that he would not act as passively as he had in the past. For Elm and Ash, the solidarity they felt with the Black community ran deep. They both believed in a sort of “we all rise” form of social justice, believing that advocating for only Asian issues was not enough; if there was going to be justice for Asians, there needed to be justice for all other marginalized groups within the US as well. It didn’t matter to Elm that he wasn’t part of the Black community, he still believed that their issues were his issues, too.

Most participants also showed strong support for Black Lives Matter, which was consistent with public opinion surveys throughout 2020 (Parker et al. 2020; Thomas and Horowitz 2020). Only one participant, Cedar, expressed more lukewarm support bordering on indifference, supporting the movement’s overall goals, but not fully supportive of all of the tactics employed by protesters and activists. Perhaps the most surprising finding was that both Ash and Pine felt that BLM and Black issues still needed to be prioritized over Asian issues, feeling that Black people had faced far greater systemic oppression for far long than Asians have. However, not everyone agreed. Cedar felt that there wasn’t enough attention being paid to Asian issues as it were and wished that Asian issues would be talked about more alongside Black, Latinx, and Indigenous issues rather than excluded from the conversation to the extent they historically have been.

⁷ Due to a time constraint, the interview with Spruce was unable to discuss their feelings on BLM or other racial justice movements in any detail, so their thoughts could not be included in this part of the analysis.

Lastly, though none of the participants held explicit anti-Black beliefs themselves, many of them had to contend with it in their families and communities. Elm and Ash both spoke about anti-Blackness in their families, and while Ash was able to eventually get her parents to come around to more anti-racist views, Elm was hesitant to broach the subject with his family. This seemed in part due to the relatively recent history of the '92 LA Riots, which he spoke about at length to help contextualize why Black-Korean solidarity might prove challenging. He also made mention of how the “Model Minority” myth played into that moment, calling it the “obvious outcome” of the racial positioning of Asians as successful and well suited for American cultural assimilation on contrast to the Black community. Koreans were granted “contingent [whiteness],” the dominant narrative characterizing Black bodies as the aggressors against the law-abiding Koreans who just wanted to defend their homes and businesses. However, as (Yellow Horse, Kuo, et al. 2021) mention, this was not the complete story, and “erases the actual involvement of Korean Americans in racial conflicts ‘before, during, and after the riots’,” while simultaneously “[erasing] Korean American cooperation with Black communities (and Latinx communities) in these neighborhoods where they invested in local organizations and churches because that narrative does not serve White supremacist logics of racial conflict between minorities (Yellow Horse, Kuo, et al. 2021:5) Pine had called this sort of narrative manipulation turning Asian Americans into a “bludgeon” to use against other marginalized groups, their only shield their usefulness.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to center the voices of Asian Americans and their experiences of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative descriptive framework was used to keep the coding and analysis of the interviews close to the data (Sandelowski 2000), ensuring the

voices of my participants were preserved so that they might, in some small way, tell their stories through this study. The experiences, fears and anxieties, acts of resistance, and feelings of solidarity with other communities of color that Spruce, Pine, Elm, Cedar, and Ash shared with me don't even scratch the surface of the Asian American community's feelings and response to this moment of rising hate, but they can offer us a lens, even if a small one, through which we might gain some understanding.

The sharp rise of anti-Asian racism and hate within the US throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has hurt not only the victims of these hate incidents, but also the people that look like them, that can see themselves or their loved ones in their positions and worry that they might be next (Lee and Waters 2021). Though most of the participants in this study didn't have the academic language to name their experiences as part of the "Perpetual Foreigner" myth or the Yellow Peril, they still felt they were "guests" in the United State and could see that Asians were being blamed for the pandemic by strangers, politicians, friends, and even family members. Many of them could see how the "Model Minority" myth was steeped in anti-Blackness and was damaging to Black-Asian solidarity, and many of them could see that they were being racially manipulated into a "bludgeon," as Pine put it, to be used against other marginalized groups. Though there was no consensus among them on how much they felt solidarity with the Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities, many of them did feel that the plights of those communities were also their plights of their own, and only by standing together could racial justice be attained for all.

Much of this often goes unspoken, however. Asian American history is rarely included in the dominant retelling of American history, and Asians are often excluded from conversations around race, cast as the racial "other" in media and academia alike. In some cases, like with the

Chinese Exclusion Act and other legislation intended to restrict Asians from immigration and citizenship, the exclusion and othering is the intent. In many others though, this othering is unintentional. It is safe to say that most social scientists that break race classifications into “White,” “Black,” and “Other,” although quite literally racially “othering” Asian Americans (and other non-white and non-Black marginalized groups), are not doing so with malicious intent. In many cases, they are often bound by constraints in the data where there are not enough Asian respondents to meaningfully compare against “White” and “Black” and the only meaningful options are to either combine the other racial groups into a single catch-all category or to exclude them altogether. This hypothetical has played out countless times, even in my own past research, and was taught as best practice in my social statistics education⁸. I do not use this example to cast blame on any researchers that have done this in the past and might continue to do so in the future, but to point out the double invisibility of this othering that has been built into the very methodology of many research studies.

This invisibility also extends to the breadth of ethnic identities that are encompassed in the pan-ethnic label of “Asian.” All five participants brought their own stories and focuses to their interviews that spoke to just how internally diverse “Asian” as a racial category really is. All of them had their own histories and family contexts that shaped how they perceived and responded to the stress of increased anti-Asian racism on top of the stressors the pandemic brought on its own.

Moving forward, Asian Americans and Asian experiences must be recognized more in critical race scholarship. While there has been greater recognition of Asian Americans’

⁸ I fully intend to cite a social stats textbook that talks about this to back up my point; however, as my books are still packed and I am unable to find one as of the writing of this section, this is something I will have to do at a later date.

experiences of racism in the wake of the pandemic, it is not enough to only give them focus during moments of crisis. The experiences of Spruce, Pine, Elm, Cedar, and Ash were consistent with established literature conducted both pre- and mid-pandemic; when considering the wider historical context, it is clear that their experiences are not entirely unique.

Nearly a century of exclusionary immigration policy kept the Asian population intentionally small between 1870 and 1960. Since then, they have been one of the fastest growing racial groups in the United States, nearly doubling in size between 2000 (11.9 million) and 2019 (22.4 million), and projected to more than double again by 2060 (Budiman and Ruiz 2021). While it might have made sense to give them little focus in the past, it is becoming increasingly clear that Asian experiences and the recognition of their racial realities must be given more consideration as the population continues to grow.

It is also important that any research involving Asian Americans be critical of, and actively challenge the “Model Minority” myth and the “Perpetual Foreigner” stereotype. Since the 1960’s, Asian Americans have been seen as a “Model Minority,” but this label belies the vast breadth of cultures, languages, and experiences of Asian communities that have not lived up to the myth’s lofty standards, and has played a role in silencing conversation around anti-Asian racism for decades. White supremacist logics might have elevated Asians as a tolerable other, granting them a position of relative privilege over other marginalized groups, but that privilege was only granted to weaponize them against those other marginalized groups, and that privilege only remains so long as they are useful in that way. The moment Asians cease to serve that function, or the moment “Asia” and anyone attached to the continent are perceived as a threat to white America, the “Model Minority” status is stripped away. Put another way: Asian Americans might be seen as a “Model Minority” when white supremacist narratives can position them to

maintain the racial status quo, but the moment a virus is believed to originate from China, that status is ripped away, replaced with the much older, ever present perception of Asians as the disease-ridden “yellow peril” (Chen et al. 2020; Le et al. 2020; Litam 2020; Misra et al. 2020; Orecchio-Egresitz 2020; Tessler et al. 2020; Yellow Horse, Jeung, et al. 2021).

ACCESSIBLE LANGUAGE

One of the guiding principles while writing this was to make the language as accessible as possible to everyday people. While I do believe the work that I have done here can add to the established literature of critical race scholarship, I firmly believe that the knowledge co-created with Spruce, Pine, Elm, Cedar, and Ash could benefit people from outside the discipline as well. As I hope I was able to demonstrate with their words, the act of social theorizing is not limited to academics, and many of the participants outside of academia brought their own critical theories to the table when discussing their experiences. However, as Collins (2019) eloquently put it: “educated academics are not the only ones who produce critical social theory, but they are the ones who are more likely to claim it and benefit from it (5).” While these ways of understanding might not carry the same weight of institutional legitimacy as established social theory, their methods of social theorizing were nonetheless still valid, and they should not be excluded from knowledge and resources that might benefit them.

In an attempt to break from this exclusionary tradition, I do not want to claim the knowledge that was co-created here as solely belonging to me or the academic discipline of sociology by virtue of how it’s written, but rather have it open and accessible to anyone engaging in social theory and activism, academic or otherwise, that might find the information here useful. Put simply: I did not want to write a paper that the participants in this study could not *read*, and

by extension benefit from, when their knowledge and experiences were instrumental to the completion of this project.

LIMITATIONS

One of the biggest limitations of this project is that five interviews was not nearly enough to reach code saturation. While clear themes could be found from the sample set gathered, the participants had such different experiences, backgrounds, opinions, and interpretations of events that there were rarely more than two to three participants for a given theme or sub-theme. I do not believe this was a failure of the research design, however, but in the scope that was possible with this project. Treated as a foundation, I believe that what has been laid here could be built upon with further interviews to gain a more complete picture of Asian Americans' experiences during the pandemic.

Another limitation was the completely virtual nature of the interviews. While this was a boon in some capacities, freeing me up to be able to have interviews with anyone from anywhere at any time, it also limited the interview process in several ways. There was a much greater reliance on computers and the internet than would have been necessary had the interviews been done in person, and most interviews began with fifteen to twenty minutes troubleshooting the meeting and audio capture software. Internet outages delayed at least one interview, and audio latency over the internet led to countless instances of the participant and I talking over each other thinking the other had finished speaking. All but one of the audio interviews were conducted without webcams, either because the participant lacked one, didn't want to use one, or to save bandwidth; the only interview that did use the webcam ran into such audio lag issues that WebEx would often hiccup for a second or two, and then quickly play back what they had said to catch

up, leading to some sections of audio being rendered unintelligible from the compression. This narrowing of the interviews to audio, or in Spruce's case, text only flattened the experience, removing the possibility of using body language and facial expressions as visual cues. Because of this, the interviews would occasionally take on an intangible awkwardness. Moments of silence while the participant was thinking would be interrupted by my asking if they had lost connection, moments of notetaking and collecting my own thoughts before moving on with the interview would result in long silences where the participant had no context as to what was going on, and many other examples. While this project could not have been done through conventional, in-person interviewing methods, these virtual constraints did have an impact on both the interview experience for myself and the participants, as well as on the data collection.

Lastly: the pandemic, itself. This project was begun at the end of 2020, nearly a year into lockdown, and was completed at the tail end of the fourth wave of COVID cases spurred on by the Delta variant. As of the writing of this section, there have been a total of 569,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the state of Maryland, with nearly 11,000 confirmed deaths since the state began tracking in March 2020. This put considerable strain on not only my access to important resources – a quiet workspace, ready access to the UMBC library, the ability to have impromptu meetings with committee members – that would have aided in this project, but also my access to possible participants. While the pandemic was, in a way, the subject of this research, and therefore the reason it was conducted in the first place, it put considerable strain on every step of this research.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Experiences of Racism

1. Can you tell me about some of your experiences of racism, either subtle or overt, that you have faced since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - a. Experiences in the workplace or with coworkers (college/university if student)?
 - b. Experiences in your community?
 - i. In the grocery store? Out on walks? At parks?
 - c. Experiences online or on social media?
 - ii. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Nextdoor, etc.
 - d. Involving the news or other media?
 - e. Political speech?
2. How do these experiences compare to before the pandemic?
3. Would you be willing to go into detail about some of these experiences (if they haven't, already)?
4. What about experiences some of your friends or family have had?

Relationships with Others

1. How have your experiences of racism or discrimination within the last year affected your relationships with others?
 - a. Friendships?
 - b. Romantic relationships?
 - c. Family?
2. How has the last year changed your outlook on the people around you, if at all?
 - a. Coworkers/Classmates?
 - b. Neighbors?
 - c. Parasocial relationships?
3. Who have you found you are the most comfortable talking to about some of these experiences?

Support

1. What sort of support do you feel you've needed – from friends, family, your community, and so on – to weather some of these recent experiences?
 - a. Emotional?
 - b. Social?
2. What sort of support do you feel you haven't gotten enough of?
3. What sort of support do you feel you've been asked to give to others facing similar experiences of racism and discrimination?

4. Can you tell me about any times you've felt gaslit by your peers, or any times you felt like your experiences were questioned or weren't taken seriously?

Activism and Engagement

1. How familiar are you with Stop AAPI Hate or other organizations aimed at addressing anti-Asian racism?
2. Can you tell me some of your thoughts about the recent Asian racial justice movement?
 - a. What has been your involvement, if at all?
3. How familiar are you with the Black Lives Matter movement?
4. Can you tell me some of your thoughts about the Black Lives Matter movement, or other calls for Black racial justice?
 - a. What has been your involvement, if at all?
5. How do you feel these movements might mirror one another?
 - a. Feelings of solidarity with the Black community?

APPENDIX B: CODEBOOK

Code	Subcode	Description
Changes in Behavior		Any noted changes in behavior since the start of the pandemic.
Class/SES		Any mention or discussion of Class or SES
Community		Any broad discussion of communities, be they physical or virtual.
	Community Member	Any time community members were brought up during the interviews.
	Location	Any mentions of a specific location, be it their general geographical location or a specific location, e.g.: the grocery store.
	Baltimore Area	
	San Francisco Area	
	DC	
	New York City	
	Seattle Area	
	Semi-Rural Maryland	
	Supermarket	
	Work	
	General Public Spaces	
Fear and Anxiety		Any discussion of fears and anxieties.
	Fear of Assault	Mentioned fears of being targeted for an assault.

	Hypervigilance	Any mentions of hypervigilance, be it old or new to the pandemic.
Friends and Family		Parent code for specific mentions of friends and family.
	Children & Grandparents	
	Extended Family	
	Friends	
	Parents	
	Partner	
	Siblings	
Gaslighting		Any time the participant was made to question their experiences or the validity of their account.
Hate incidents		Any mention of hate incidents, either experienced, witnessed, or seen on news media.
	Direct Experience	Any direct experiences of hate incidents.
	Vicarious Experience	Any observed hate incident that has had an adverse effect on the participant.
Microaggression		Any noted experiences of microaggressions.
Model Minority Myth		Any discussion of the “Model Minority” myth.
News Media		Any mention of the news – televised or on the internet – or any news reports.
Othering		Any mention of othering or feeling othered.
	“Guests”	The sense that Asians are treated like “Guests” in the US, and therefore do not belong here permanently, i.e.: perpetual foreigners.
	American-ness	How “American” the participants felt they were or were perceived to be.

	Heightened Visibility	Any time they felt their Asian-ness was extra visible, or that they stuck out because they were Asian.
	Invisibility	The sense that Asians are invisible, or that Asian issues are invisible, and are not held in any importance.
Politics		Any discussion of politics, or how politics affected their experiences.
	Geopolitics	Any discussion of geopolitical issues, especially ones that affect the participant in some way.
	Political Speech	Any discussions of harmful political speech.
Racism		Any discussion of racism.
	Discrimination	Racially discriminatory actions, behaviors, or words.
	Prejudice	Racially prejudicial beliefs and language.
	Historic Oppression	Any historic examples of racism where the effects can still be felt today.
	Systemic Oppression	Any discussion of systemic racism and systematized oppression.
	White Supremacy	Any mentions of the harmful effects of white supremacy.
Resistance		Acts of resistance against racism and white supremacy.
	“Private People”	The notion that Asians are “private people,” unwilling to challenge the status quo.
	Activism	Active engagement in resistance, or any examples of the participant or people they know trying to affect positive change.
Solidarity		Solidarity felt with other non-white racial groups.
	Black Solidarity	Feelings of solidarity with Black people.
	Indigenous Solidarity	Feelings of solidarity with Indigenous people.

	Latinx Solidarity	Feelings of solidarity with Latinx people.
	Challenges to Solidarity	Any noted challenges to solidarity attempts and coalition building.
Support		Support, either given, received, or that the participant felt they lacked (or did not want) from significant others or community members.
	Support to Others	Support given to others.
	Support From Others	Support received from others.
	Lack or Loss of Support	Any time there was insufficient support, or support was lost.
	Rejection of Support	Any time offered or suggested support was rejected.
	Social Buffer	How friends – especially white friends – can act as a social buffer to racism.
Xenophobia		Experiences or observation of xenophobia.
	Blame China	Any mentions of China being blamed for COVID-19, or implying the pandemic is China's fault.
	Scapegoating	Any mention of Asians being scapegoated.

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