

Orientalism Restated in the Era of COVID-19

By Joey S. Kim

Since the first reports of COVID-19 released in December 2019, there have been increases in racist and xenophobic hate speech, actions, and violence across the world, particularly aimed at Asian people and people of presumed Chinese descent.¹ These include the San Francisco attack and murder of Vicha Ratanapakdee, the Midland, Texas stabbing of a family of three, and the Atlanta spa shootings where 8 people, six of them Asian women, were killed. In its first two weeks of reporting, the national reporting council and coalition, Stop AAPI Hate, received 1,135 reports of anti-Asian discrimination, assault and violence, barring from establishments, vandalism, online threats, and school bullying. As of August 2021, the council reported receiving 9,081 incident reports between March 19, 2020, and June 2021. Organizers say the rate of reporting is likely a severe undercount of the actual incidents taking place every day across the country. These people are of various ages, ethnicities, gender identities, and geographical locations. In this ongoing COVID moment, the Asian body is under public scrutiny, suspicion, attack, and exhibition. The current level of anti-Asian and xenophobic psycho-cultural turmoil recalls previous eras of Japanese internment camps and legal actions like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. In particular, the idea of the Asian body of presumed Chinese descent has, for many people around the world, turned into a hyper-visible signifier of virus, infection, and contagion.

From the moment "China" appeared in the global lexicon of COVID-19 discourse, the virus was racialized. This racialization created a human target for reacting to the threat of infection and death. Due to this racialization, the Asian-presenting body is under threat of blame, precarity, and possible plunder. After Donald Trump's explicit naming and blaming of China for bringing the virus to U.S. shores, the idea of COVID has hardened into its specific cultural, racial, and ethnic signification in the U.S. Names like "The China virus," "Kung-flu," the "Wuhan virus" signify more than a place of presumed origin. They deploy Orientalist rhetoric that is historically bound to empire, colonization, slavery, and genocide.² This rhetoric hearkens back to the end of the

¹ I will also refer to COVID-19 as "COVID" in subsequent references.

² For more on the interlaced continental histories and "imperial projects of conquest, slavery, labor, and government" across the past three centuries, See Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. (Duke UP, 2015)

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nineteenth century when European imperialist powers were expanding into vast expanses of interior Africa and Asia for the first time. When Russian sociologist (Yakov Novikov, 1849-1912), writing in French, popularized the term “Yellow Peril” in his 1897 essay, “Le Péril Jaune,” he activated a color metaphor that persists in racializing Asian bodies today. The phrase quickly became *de facto* grounds to distrust, objectify, and dispossess the Asian body of individual human qualities. Political leaders including the last German emperor Kaiser Wilhelm II used the term “Yellow Peril” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to justify European colonialism in China. In the past half century, decolonization and globalization may have unseeded the primacy of the “West” in the world’s political order, but the discourse of polarized “East vs. West” worldviews persists, as well as the implicit threat of the Asian “other.” “Yellow-Peril” rhetoric has been adapted and manipulated to serve multiple purposes that continually dispossess the rights of the visibly “Asian” body and body politic.

The COVID-19 pandemic implies a geographical and temporal narrative of origin, spread, and containment. Wuhan is one part of the “narrative,” creating misinformation and media profiling of parts of the world as nearer to the origin, i.e. the Asian continent as a homogeneous whole. This misinformation disseminates largely through the media and online mirage of content created and curated via social media livestream, post, vlog, or blog. As public health experts, nations and states, and private individuals around the world grapple with this pandemic, COVID-19 is not just an infectious disease, but, as Steven Shapin writes, “a pathological experiment on the nature of our social relations” (para. 3). COVID, Shapin continues, “is experienced in our social life in four major ways, and our responses bear upon the nature of our society. There are the everyday forms of our social life; the divisions within society that shape our experiences and concerns; the attitudes toward social boundaries — who belongs and who does not; and the social forms available for reacting to threats” (para. 3). As a result of the racialization of the virus itself, these four factors affect the Asian body more potently—specifically in terms of the “social forms available for reacting to threats” and consequently, who belongs and who does not to these forms of social life.

One example of early exclusionary tactics is a March 2020 Facebook post shared by a now fired New York state Assembly staffer, Marilyn Franks, urging “citizens to stay away from Chinese supermarkets, shops, fast food outlets, Restaurant [sic], and Business. Most of the owners went back to China to celebrate the Chinese New [Year] Celebrations. They are returning and some are bringing along the Coronavirus.” Numerous other public officials around the world have shared social media posts urging their constituents to avoid not only Chinese businesses but people of presumed Chinese descent. In addition to social media discrimination, national trends in Asian-owned

For more on U.S. American racism during outbreaks, see Andrew Lanham, “American Racism in the Time of Plagues,” *Boston Review*, March 30, 2020. <http://bostonreview.net/race/andrew-lanham-american-racism-time-plagues>

businesses at the start of the pandemic showed steep declines in sales, with merchants reporting dips in sales of at least 50 percent (Gould Keil). From ethnic neighborhoods in New York and California to wide swaths of the middle and southern states, Asian American businesses around the country are now grappling with reopening for normal business after almost two years of COVID-related restrictions and politically motivated anti-Asian sentiment.

According to a report by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino, while hate crimes in America's largest cities declined overall by 7% in 2020, those targeting people of Asian descent "increased 146% across 26 of America's largest jurisdictions that comprise over 10% of the nation's population" (Levin 3). Anti-Asian racism is much more widespread and ongoing than many estimates suggest. This rise in hate crimes is compounded by rampant social media coverage, viral videos, and the shift in national coverage to anti-Asian racism as a mainstream issue. While nationally covered, it is often not viewed as a fundamentally "American" issue for various reasons, including the inability for national venues to understand this country's rampant history of Asian exclusion, xenophobia, and racism. The sustained lack of knowledge of Asian diasporas and Asian Americans in the U.S. has been remediated by the rise of Asian American Studies programs in the past 50 years, but it is not until recently that Asian American Studies scholars such as Russell Jeung have been able to actively shape the public understanding of events such as the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes and how Asian Americans are part of, not separate from, the discourse on race in America.

This COVID reality of public and private discrimination, exclusion, as well as violence, is part of the longer story of the U.S. production of the "Oriental" subject. As a result, Orientalism needs to be redefined for this moment. The rise of Orientalist representations, stereotypes, aesthetics, commodities, and Orientalist discourse during the nineteenth century is the palimpsest from which U.S. Orientalism finds its current COVID moment. I am using "Orientalism" to describe a public-facing discourse of East/West relations that pivots between imaginative idea and historical and political reality. I argue that Orientalism and its expressions of otherness propagate misinformed conceptions that are now finding expression in the Asian body as a viral signifier.

This essay bridges the gap between the analysis of anti-Asian targeting and the analysis of Orientalism. I analyze the question of the Asian and Asian American body as a historical, aesthetic, and phenomenological site of COVID signification. In doing so, I illustrate how Orientalism has been reactivated within the space of the Asian-presenting body as a site of psychosocial pressures and risk of bias, violence, and plunder. I do so, first, to demonstrate the centrality of Orientalism to xenophobic language and sentiment in U.S.-foreign historical relations and second, to examine how Orientalism functions as a diffuse, multimodal network of contradictory ideas, preexisting conventions, and contemporary expectations in a U.S.-specific context. One part of the

larger project to counter these modes of Asian exclusion and objectification is the continued pursuit of an Asian American identity that is not just a political category but a narrative one that decenters whiteness. Thus, I end by reflecting on the shifting parameters of Asian American identity formation in Ling Ma's novel, *Severance*, and Cathy Park Hong's essay collection, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*.

HISTORICAL DEPLOYMENTS OF ORIENTALISM

The first recorded usage of the word "Orientalism" is in a 1747 essay by literary historian Joseph Spence. Spence writes, "This whole prophetic vision of the fall of the suitors [...] gives us an higher Orientalism than we meet with in any other part of Homer's writings. You will pardon me a new word, where we have no old one to my purpose." The "purpose" of the word "Orientalism" was largely unmoored, culturally imprecise, and subjective until Edward Said's restatement of the term in 1978's *Orientalism*. After Said's coinage of the postcolonial resonance of Orientalism in 1978, its repercussions as imaginative idea and historical and political reality became clear to much of the Anglophone world. In a U.S. context, Amy Sueyoshi writes that "The American 'Oriental' while similar in its form and function to theorist Edward Said's *Orientalism* in its European understanding of...Southwest Asia and North Africa, marked itself as different in its centralizing of East Asians to articulate longing and desire" (6). This East Asian centering was a product of the closing of the U.S. frontier in the 1890s and the U.S.'s imperial expansion into the Pacific, sweeping Chinese, Japanese, and other East Asian groups into a new version of the American "Oriental" (Sueyoshi 6).

The ever-shifting figure of the "Orient" is intensified during moments of crisis or conflict that affects the U.S. and larger "Western" world. "Orient" has been used to refer to places in various parts of Asia, but also North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, colonial North America, Italy, Turkey, and parts of Eastern Europe. Today, the "Orient" still undergirds psycho-cultural perceptions of the individual, culture and society, the public, and public health. The avian flu is listed on the CDC's website as an influenza virus with "Asian lineage," reinforcing the notion of viral "genealogy" as a form of credible medical knowledge. Words like "Lineage," trajectory, and vector do not only show direction. They also can imply a teleology or chain of being that cannot be reordered by human will.

The order of the universe is both a teleological and cultural concept. Mary Douglas argues that "[t]he native of any culture naturally thinks of himself as receiving passively his ideas of power and danger in the universe, discounting any minor modifications he himself may have contributed" (5).³ This passivity ignores the "habit-grooves" of one's culture and prevents one from seeing the limitations or blind spots in their perspectives. While "[a]nimal and vegetable life cannot help but play their role in

³ See also, Mary Douglas, *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 1992), Part 1; Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

the order of the universe," Douglas notes that this role is specifically "imperfect" for humans who, compared to other animal life, resist conformity and value "free consent" (179). Due to the shifting guidelines of what the virus is and how it affects the body, the role of the human is charged with individual responsibility, self-motivation, self-protection, and accountability to an invisible state apparatus or nebulous public will of ambiguous and inconsistent directions.

Global powers have, in histories of conquest and plunder, been rooted in colonialism, imperialism, and a hegemonic "West" delinked from clear borders or limits. As Sara Ahmed notes,

The distinction between east and west is also far from neutral; it is not that they exist as independent spatial attributes, in contrast to right and left. The distinction between east and west is asymmetrical... the East is associated with women, sexuality, and the exotic, with what is 'behind' and 'below' the West, as well as what is on 'the other side.'...The East as well as the left is thus orientated; *it acquires its direction only by taking a certain point of view as given.* (14)

This asymmetrical relationship between East and West continues in the present-day COVID-19 moment, with the "East" becoming a trope of racialized contagion and reactivated Orientalism. In the process, geographical referents such as "Wuhan," "China," and "Asia" become metonyms for a certain type of homogenized "body" in space.

In linking space and bodies, geographical significations and connotations of COVID are instruments of subject formation. Katherine McKittrick notes that traditional geography is not only three-dimensional but also contains a "corresponding language of insides and outsides, borders and belongings, and inclusions and exclusions" that construct and reinforce social differences as a type of spatial projection (xiv). Social differences include cultural norms and customs and ways of life that do not align across groups and societies. Tracing cultural differences is a way to identify and surveil the subject within and through spaces and political borders.

Social differences in the global food and agriculture industry are coming to a head during this pandemic. "Wet markets" in Wuhan have been blamed by many for being the "origin" of the virus.⁴ On April 3, 2020, U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham appeared on *FOX News* to decry wet markets and order them to shut down across the world. Graham said, "How many times do we have to go through this before we change our behavior? It's just not in China. It's in southeast Asia. It's in Africa . . . Some guy in China started all this, and it most likely came from a wet market. . . Bats carry this stuff, and they literally eat bats. Stop eating bats!" (Pearce, para. 4) This combative language of foreign interference and cultural generalizations is frequently seen in our public discourse surrounding the pandemic. Narratives of xenophobic blame, foreign orders

⁴ In addition, China has been profiled as being uncooperative in foreign communication and transparency.

without the receiving party's consent, and emotional responses to threats are now regularly deployed to the point of normalization in mass media.

This preponderance and normalization of Orientalist profiling has a longer history of Chinese and Asian exclusion in the U.S. We see a similar reliance on racialized logic in literary representations of Chinese or Asian-presenting groups during the long nineteenth century. The immense popularity and reprinting of Bret Harte's poem, "Plain Language from Truthful James" (1870) during the U.S. Reconstruction evidences a similar type of anti-Chinese distrust through the logic of slavery and antiblack racism.⁵ Lisa Lowe writes of "how the figure of Asian labor was used to buttress promises of freedom that remained out of reach for enslaved and indentured peoples alike, even following abolition" (*The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 37). In Harte's poem, two white miners convince a Chinese worker, Ah Sin, to join a game of euchre where they intend to cheat to win. Instead, Ah Sin unexpectedly wins, but the white miners discover Ah Sin has cheated, too. A fight breaks out with Ah Sin attacked. Harte writes, "'Can this be? / We are ruined by Chinese cheap labor,' – / And he went for that heathen Chinee" (40-42). Harte's poem became "one of the most popular poems ever published" in the U.S., particularly through its coinage of the phrase "heathen Chinee" (Scharnhorst 377). While anti-Asian slurs and stereotypes have shifted over time, the poem's phrase "Chinese cheap labor" and the idea of stolen jobs have a continued resonance in U.S. international trade and concepts of mass production and affordability.⁶ Harte's figure of the "heathen Chinee" set the stage for later representations of the Chinese and Asian-presenting worker in North American literature for the rest of the nineteenth century and, I would argue, is renewed today through COVID-related discrimination and panic.

THE ORIENTALIZED BODY

The discourse of Orientalism is consistent in the present day and can occur visually, linguistically, spatially, gesturally, and thus, phenomenologically. When phenomenological, the subject, object, or associative "body" viewed as "Oriental," "Asian" implies a host of contradictory meanings and assumptions. The Asian-presenting body becomes an expression of preconceived ideas, expectations, and implied meaning based not on logic, but on position, situation, and/or proximity. Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes about human expression as a host of significations:

⁵ For more on the figure of the Chinese worker during Reconstruction, see Caroline H. Yang, *The Peculiar Afterlife of Slavery: The Chinese Worker and the Minstrel Form* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

⁶ In terms of a present-day correlative, the Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council contains the following incident in its March 26-April 1 2020 weekly report of coronavirus discrimination: "I got pushed and slammed on the floor by neighbor who lost his job. He yelled at me 'I lost my job cause Asians.' I got my back, neck and hand hurt. It is video recorded" (Jeung).

The available significations suddenly intertwine according to an unknown law, and once and for all a new cultural being has begun to exist. Thought and expression are thus constituted simultaneously when our cultural assets are mobilized in the service of this unknown law, just as our body suddenly lends itself to a new gesture in the acquisition of habit. (189)

If the body is the host for a “new cultural being,” the Asian body deemed “perpetual foreigner,” “cheap labor” source, and, in this moment, cause and carrier of COVID is a site of bodily disassociation and disorientation. Sara Ahmed argues that disorientation “is a way of describing the feelings that gather when we lose our sense of who it is that we are” (20). This gathering can be a type of loss or injury. Ahmed continues, “The concept of ‘orientations’ allows us to expose how life gets directed in some ways rather than others, through the very requirement that we follow what is already given to us” (21).⁷ What has been given to the Asian-presenting body in the current moment is an amplified sense of dispossession because of viral signification.

As a COVID signifier, the Orientalized body today is inextricably linked to the idea of risk. The body at risk signifies, in sickness or injury, an acknowledgment of precarity—the condition in which certain individuals or groups are exposed to unpredictable and uncertain life chances. Precarity, in effect, is an acknowledgement of risk and vulnerability. Judith Butler writes about precarity as the condition of living an uncertain and unsafe existence, oftentimes with respect to one’s gender identity or expression, socioeconomic status, class, race, and ethnicity.⁸ Precarity makes us consider the conditions of a livable life and problems like social marginalization, job insecurity, and the diminished rights of historically marginalized individuals and groups. It also shows us how not all bodies are afforded the same access to basic survival needs and bodily recognition. The lack of bodily recognition is exacerbated by ideas of fungibility and interchangeability that have historically diminished the singularity of the Asian body.

Lowe writes about the heterogeneity of Asian American identities and how differentiation has never been a common mode of Asian American identification. Lowe argues that Euro-Americans are explicitly different from Asian-Americans,

But from the perspectives of Asian Americans, we are perhaps even more different, more diverse, among ourselves: being men and women at different distances and generations from our ‘original’ Asian cultures—cultures as different as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Indian, and Vietnamese—Asian Americans are born in the United States and born in Asia; of exclusively Asian parents and of

⁷ Ahmed continues, “For a life to count as a good life, then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good” (21).

⁸ *Undoing Gender* (New York, London: Routledge, 2004). For more on precarity, see Butler’s *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2006).

mixed race; urban and rural; refugee and nonrefugee; communist-identified and anticommunist; fluent in English and non-English speaking; educated and working class. (“Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity” 27)

The perspective of being “even more different, more diverse, among ourselves” decenters hegemonies of the white gaze and Orientalist encounters. Asian intraethnic shared knowledge has not been normalized as an Anglophone majority viewpoint, however, in this COVID crisis.

The common stereotypes many Asians and Asian Americans are encountering on a face-to-face basis are now exacerbated by virtual forms of anti-Asian expression and hate speech. Thus, the current blame and fear placed on the Asian-presenting body is not always explicit or direct. Due to social distancing, isolation, quarantine, and governmental restrictions, Orientalist and racist rhetoric in the current COVID moment is largely online. This disembodied mode of anti-Asian targeting bridges the physical and mental disorientation of Asian self-identity and identity formation. Erica Lee, director of the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota, argues that “[f]uture historians will look upon this period as the absolute high point of xenophobia in our history” (Loffman). With travel restrictions, closed national borders depending on vaccine status, state-by-state public health methods, and a continually ongoing sense of COVID, isolationism and nativism are, subconsciously or not, fomenting in both individual and collective psyches. The psycho-cultural anxiety of contagion, death, as well as the inability to foresee a return to “normal” life for many of us has also withheld individual self-actualization needs like free will.

Free will, when applied to the Asian-presenting body as a viral signifier, results in an amalgam of personal responsibility disguised as an independent choice. Responsibility, guilt, blame—the cultural confusion of being both “model minority” and “viral carrier”—reinforce a narrative of white racial innocence while discounting the asymmetrical power dynamics that undergird all processes of white-centered racialization. In 1966, sociologist William Petersen’s *New York Times* article, “Success Story, Japanese-American Style” famously popularized the “model minority” myth. Petersen argued for the idea that Japanese-Americans were “good” citizens and “better than any other group in our society, including native-born whites. They have established this remarkable record, moreover, by their own almost totally unaided effort” (22). This characterization also placed Japanese Americans in stark contrast to Black and African Americans, reinforcing identity politics and competitiveness between minority groups. The Asian “model minority” myth that was popularized in the 1960’s is a homogenization of Asian American identity, and it serves to buttress larger systems of racial control that essentialize and marginalize minorities in fixed positions of a white-dominant racial hierarchy.

In *Minor Feelings*, Cathy Park Hong writes that Asian Americans “keep our heads down and work hard, believing that our diligence will reward us with our dignity, but our diligence will only make us disappear. By not speaking up, we perpetuate the myth that our shame is caused by our repressive cities and the country we fled, whereas America has given us nothing but opportunity” (78). The land of “opportunity” for many immigrant families creates a sense of indebtedness or gratitude that occludes one’s sense of individuality, self-determination, and bodily ownership in a new land where linguistic, cultural, and racial differences disorient one’s sense of personhood, safety, and political representation.

The paradox of being both “model minority” and enemy “Other” is clearly seen in the demographics of Asian American physicians, nurses, and healthcare workers who are serving to combat the virus and save lives. According to recently released 2020 U.S. census numbers, while 7.2% of the U.S. population identifies as Asian, at least 17.1% of U.S. physicians identify as Asian, with another 13.7% identifying as multiracial, “other,” or “unknown” (“Diversity in Medicine: Facts and Figures 2019”). Patients are refusing to be seen by Asian American doctors due to fears of COVID. Asian Americans are simultaneously scapegoated yet called to serve as a large portion of healthcare workers fighting the pandemic. At its broadest level, this paradox illustrates how individual precarity can become a shared vulnerability across the spectrum of lived Asian and Asian American embodiment. This shared vulnerability is a forced deferral of the individual will in the face of heterogeneous yet collective suffering. Precarity, in certain contexts, can be a “resource for politics” in “[t]hat our very survival can be determined by those we do not know and over whom there is no final control” (Butler 23). As a resource, the precarity of the Asian body illustrates the limits of identitarian rights-based movements and the power in collective organizing across identities and interests.

THE THREAT OF PLUNDER

Without freedom or protection of one’s body, one is susceptible to infection by biological forces but also psychological modes of bodily plunder. Used since the 1600’s, the idea and action of “plunder” refers to “taking something as spoil in time of war or civil disorder,” “to rob (a place or person) of goods or valuables forcibly,” “to despoil,” and “goods or valuables taken from an enemy by force; booty, loot” (“plunder, v.2.”). As many have argued, the history of “Western” civilization’s global expansion is a history of plunder.⁹ U.S. histories of settler colonialism, slavery, imperialism, and racial capitalism have created a modern state founded on liberal fictions of freedom and democracy that assuage white guilt but occlude racial reckoning. At the site of the Asian-presenting body during this crisis, plunder is occurring physically, psychologically, culturally, and politically. The idea of bodily plunder relies on the same logic as the plunder of land,

⁹ See also Astrid Swenson and Peter Mandler, eds. *From Plunder to Preservation: Britain and the Heritage of Empire, C.1800-1940*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

goods, cultural artifacts and heritage: conquest, plunder, then appropriation—these concepts now undergird the presentation of the Asian body in public and all interfacing spaces, whether physical or virtual. These modes of plunder have multiple routes of propagation, including verbal discrimination, casual racism or microaggressions, structural barriers, cultural appropriation, and explicit hate crimes. Public health methods to control, limit, and stall the spread of COVID have expanded state control over individual and collective freedoms, and these emergency actions have also heightened individual levels of indeterminacy, uncertainty, panic, and fear-based responses.

The plunder of the Asian-presenting body is first, a type of disembodiment, severing mind from body. Next, it is a filtering of that body through a gaze, a witness, a gesture—some recognition or acknowledgment of proximity to the observed body. Next, it comes a type of selective silence—the inability of the perceived-as-infected body to respond with reason or judgment. This inability to respond is a deferral of logic from the Asian body and raises the possibility to pillage the body of meaning and sovereignty through visual, gestural, and psychological methods. For example, Jeff Yang, Taiwanese-American journalist and writer, experienced what he calls a “breathing while Asian moment” at the end of March 2020. Yang writes, “Went out for groceries and an older masked white woman passing by the line shouted ‘FUCK YOU!’ at me for no apparent reason. As I stared at her, she pulled off her mask, coughed directly at me, turned on her heel and walked off” (@originalspin et al). Yang’s encounter is familiar to many Asians and Asian Americans in this COVID era. Rather than responding to the attacker in person, Yang shared the incident on Twitter. This multimodal network of Asian voices documenting anti-Asian discrimination and incidents delinks body from psyche but does not disavow the phenomenology of plunder. Merleau-Ponty writes, “It is the body that shows, that speaks . . . This revelation of an immanent or nascent meaning [*sens*] in the living body extends, as we will see, to the entire sensible world, and our gaze, informed by the experience of one’s own body” (203-4). When the body shows and speaks something different from one’s internal experience, precarity intensifies. The body is not only put at risk, but it is dispossessed. This dispossession shows how Orientalism has been reactivated within the space of the human body and needs dismantled through a better intersectional understanding of the cultural, gendered, ethnic, and racial coordinates of this new COVID era. One part of this dismantling is found in literary production and writing that unsettles an Orientalist gaze.

DISMANTLING ORIENTALIST HISTORIES

How do we rethink ways of seeing bodies in space beyond an inherited, threadbare repertoire of Orientalist errors and obsolescence? What happens when we redirect our lines of seeing and reading along new lines, borders, and orientations, and

those that fail to fit neatly into Orientalist narratives of conquest, freedom, and the right to plunder?

In a prescient imagining of a viral pandemic that purportedly starts in China, Ling Ma's *Severance* navigates a satirical science fiction world through the perspective of Candace Chen, a Chinese American immigrant dispossessed of bodily ownership in multiple ways. Candace survives "Shen Fever" and joins a small group living in the wake of the apocalyptic virus. Candace is tellingly the only Asian person in the group of survivors, and she tries to hide the fact that she is pregnant for much of the novel. Throughout the novel's bleak, fatalistic events, Candace's characterization recalls what Park Hong calls Asian American "minor feelings of paranoia, shame, irritation, and melancholy" that "are not often featured in contemporary American literature because these emotions do not conform to the archetypal narrative that highlights survival and self-determination" (55-56). These feelings are engendered by the "disfiguring of senses" that accrue from "everyday racial experience and the irritant of having one's perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed" (55). In this COVID era of bodily vulnerability and sensory dysphoria, the Asian-presenting body feels a specific racialized range of emotions in response to COVID's connotations with a "Chinese" origin.

In a scene where Candace is under the duress of the group's self-proclaimed leader, Bob, Ma describes Candace's internal monologue: Bob's "face I have spent a lot of time trying to read, trying to appeal to, trying to capitulate to, trying to pretend for. I have always positioned myself in relation to him, thinking I could toe the line, thinking it would be fine if I just cooperated, thinking if only I compressed myself a bit more" (280). Held captive by Bob and the group of survivors due to her pregnancy, Candace attacks Bob in her efforts to escape. During this climactic scene, Ma traces Candace's memories such as being praised for her work ethic by Michael, her former boss. In this emboldened rage and because Bob is "fevered" with the virus, Candace is able to overtake Bob and grab his car keys. The scene ends with the group of survivors begging Candace to stay. Instead, Candace narrates, "I pull out of the parking lot and I get the fuck out" (282). It is in this moment of rebellion that Ma discards any vestige of an "indebted Asian American" or "model minority" trope, and Candace regains control of her life and future beyond a white-centered "conditional existence" (Park Hong 185, 202).

Park Hong reminds us that Asian Americans have been in the U.S. for centuries and working in solidarity with other racial and ethnic groups for community-building. However, "[s]ince the late sixties, when Asian American activists protested with the Black Panthers, there hasn't been a mass movement we can call our own. Will 'we,' a pronoun I use cautiously, solidify into a common collective, or will we remain splintered, so that some of us remain 'foreign' or 'brown' while others, through wealth or intermarriage, 'pass' into whiteness?" (29). This fear of disappearing or passing into whiteness shows

the limits of leaning into white dominant modes of social acceptance—a type of social contract that negates individual freedom in exchange for state protection. The global pandemic projects onto the Asian-presenting body a heightened risk of multimodal plunder that needs allyship and support beyond just AAPI or white-centered political interests. Asian Americans must be in dialogue with the experiences of Black and Brown communities and the host of marginalized and underserved groups who have been affected at higher rates by the pandemic.

In addition, while the COVID crisis is fundamentally epidemiological, the continuous idea of the “human” is more uncertain than ever. It is the task of the public intellectual to trace and make visible the historical formation of cultural human subjects like the “Oriental,” the “heathen Chineese,” the “perpetual foreigner,” and the “model minority” to disrupt the furthering of anti-Asian targeting, racism, and discrimination. Rather than the normalized forgetting of “bad” words in the service of enforced civility, we must revisit our shared histories and remediate our words. Returning to the phenomenology of perception, Merleau-Ponty argues that, “[t]he problem of the world—and to begin with, the problem of one’s own body—consists in the fact that *everything resides within the world*” (204). The situatedness of our bodies in a capricious world—a world of ever-shifting laws, social restrictions, cultural rituals and new norms—shows us the possibility that the amplified level of today’s viral racisms may be temporary. The history of Orientalism in the U.S. may be rooted in exclusion and imperial plunder, but new works by Ling Ma and Cathy Park Hong reflect an evolving Asian American consciousness responding to today’s necessity to create, theorize, and resist Orientalism in the age of COVID.

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