Working Together to Achieve Racial and Social Justice: From Anti-Asian Racism and Violence to Anti-Racist Praxis in Geography

In June 2020, the Association for Asian American Studies issued an open call for putting an immediate end to anti-Black racism and advancing efforts toward achieving global social justice. The murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and George Floyd pulled a painful trigger for many Asian Americans. The Association clearly stated that “[the] fight against anti-Asian pandemic racism is rooted in a common struggle against White supremacy” and “[to] end global anti-Black racism, we must fight racism in our local communities and educate ourselves and others about the rich history of Black Americans and support, validate, and value Black lives now and always.”

Following the horrific Atlanta-area shootings of 8 people, including 6 women of Asian descent in March 2021, anti-Asian racism has been more widely reported by the media than before (see LA Times coverage and NY Times, for example). And, anti-Asian racism and violence is not just a North American problem. There is a reported rise in anti-Asian hate crimes around the world (see Time). Back in early 2020, Asian American communities and scholars were already well aware of this rise in anti-Asian racism. On a virtual panel in June 2020, president of the AAAS, Dr. Jennifer Ho, at the University of Colorado Boulder, explained why Covid-19-related anti-Chinese sentiment is essentially anti-Asian racism:

“while China and Chinese people have been targeted and blamed for the coronavirus in the United States, while you’ve probably heard various people use the phrase Chinese virus or get defensive when saying they should use Chinese virus, the truth is all forms of racism against the Chinese in the United States are forms of racism against anyone who is perceived to be Chinese in the United States. It’s an Asian/Asian American issue … what it means to be an Asian American is the recognition that those particularities that happened in a natal homeland get diminished, get flattened when you arrive in the United States.
Because someone who doesn’t know what your particular ethnicity is, your nationality, and only sees your Asian-looking face and is going to make certain assumptions of who you are, about your ability to speak English … one of the things we have in common, as Asian Americans, is this understanding that we are not benefiting from white privilege, that we have been on a receiving end of systemic racism, starting with the Chinese, extending into other Asian ethnic groups.”

Since January 2020, the lives of Asian-heritage people in the U.S. and likely the same for those in other countries have been violently shaken. Asian Americans were among the first to help local communities combat Covid-19, while racist attacks were increasing in cities like LA. The Stop AAPI Hate website received 3,795 reports of anti-Asian hate incidents nationwide between its launch on March 19, 2020, and February 28, 2021. In these reports, the Chinese were the ethnic group most targeted, but 60% of the respondents were non-Chinese. Incidents occurred in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Asian women reported significantly more incidents than did Asian men. The fatality rate for Asian women has continued to increase as they face a terrifying rise in hate incidents. Over this long year, anxiety has also built up as many have been separated from their families or extended families and ancestral lands due to travel bans from both sides of the Pacific—a circumstance that has likely caused more stress on Asian women due to their caregiver roles than Asian men. As early as July 2020, studies were already finding a large percentage (40.3%) of Asian Americans with self-reported symptoms of anxiety and/or depression (an 8-fold jump from the previous year) compounded by racism-related vigilance. These same studies warned of the serious and long-lasting negative impact of experienced and perceived racial discrimination on physical health and psychological well-being.

There is plenty of discussion linking the anti-China rhetoric in Washington, DC, the xenophobia stoked by Trump, and the most recent “paranoia about China” to the rise of anti-Asian racism and hate. We must also accept the historicity of our current crisis of racism and racial violence. Anti-Asian racism is racism, just like anti-Black racism and
any other form of racism. Whenever an Asian country is perceived as a national threat, Asian Americans suffer. Ask the Japanese Americans and they’ll tell you. Read about the murder of Vincent Chin, it will tell you. Asian Americans know too well about the history of state-sanctioned discrimination. When asked during the panel, if being “more American” would help Asian Americans, Jennifer said, “It doesn’t work. It doesn’t work … as a way to prevent racism from befalling you … it doesn’t work. We have plenty of historical examples to show you that.” Racism is like a river that affects everyone in the country, and it is deeply rooted in white supremacy in the U.S.

Racialized identities and the angst of a small number of diasporic scholars in North America are not universally shared but understood by other transnational scholars in a global academic community united by specialty groups. We have come to realize that some of our geographic scholarships are compartmentalized along national, experiential, and personal identity lines. But the themes of our studies are universal. As one geographer wrote to me, “different forms of oppression are linked…nobody is free until all are free.” And as a community of geographers we need to continue our discipline’s strong tradition of studying how oppression and marginalization play out, within places and across space. As a former chair of a Specialty Group of the AAG, I have led some open dialogues with some Asian and China-heritage geographers, and some opinions and stories were shared with me in June 2020. Most expressed pain arising from frustration with a cross comparison of the ways different nations had handled Covid-19 in 2020, together with feelings including fear about the prospect of leaving an anodyne field to enter a “politicized” arena, and distant or near memories of being discriminated against or marginalized as a Chinese or Asian scholar within our institutions. I appreciate their sharing with me.

“… there is a rising anti-Asian sentiment because of the U.S. leader’s rhetoric and the hawkish advisors and media he listens to. We may not be able to determine clearly China’s or the local government’s role in the Covid-19 virus because of a potential coverup, but it is easier to blame the Other, versus looking clearly at the fault of not acting early, to respond to the pandemic, and doing the
necessary steps to have masks, etc. We can see the excellent examples of Taiwan, South Korea, New Zealand and even many African nations that have low infection rates, and VERY low fatalities. If this government would listen and follow the good examples, there would not be 112,000 current deaths. This country is really hurting, and I get emotional almost weekly because of the current situation .... I will stop writing about this.”

“I’m not a China-study scholar and I was never an active member as I almost never went to those AAG happy hours. But I do care about the study subjects and have a lot of good friends from this group … Also due to the political turmoil and division within the greater China area, it is necessary to accommodate different representatives. I used to think politics and politicization should be separate from academic endeavors, however, it becomes increasingly difficult, if not possible at all, to be like that. And even further, being a social scientist, I started asking myself whether it’s responsible not to face the challenges from the political side. I guess it’s a learning process for me.”

“I grew up in post-colonial Africa and have a very low level of tolerance for racism in any form. Even if I am not genetically Asian, I too could say a few words on bigotry and prejudices. But is this enough? Should we try to publish our personal opinions if this helps us discover our own identity and the originality of our own contributions as transnational geographers? We are a tiny minority but maybe it is easier for us to articulate or advocate than it is for a vast majority of people.”

“It is highly relevant to the subject matter of … which in no way can ignore the anti-Asian/Chinese racism and discrimination that exist around the world, not just in the US … the diasporic Chinese scholars’ life experience … matter, and … the research on Asian (im)migration and racism … matter.”
“As a Mainlander based in Hong Kong, I can totally relate to [the] feeling and would be 100% supportive of [efforts] against racial prejudices against Asian scholars.”

“[I] would like to reach out to say that I feel being discriminated in my job.”

In 2021, these messages from nine months ago look so distant, but the concerns are even more relevant today. As we sojourned in the Zoom world of scholarly exchanges in the past year, the fluidity has afforded us connectedness and made us academic refugees striving for existential relevance. Nevertheless, a halt and interruption also provide an opportunity to change. It is time to prioritize anti-racist praxis in Geography, like in other disciplines and to ensure that our being anti-racist advances a resolution to “challenge structural racism and other intersecting oppressive systems—e.g., ableism, classism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, sexism, transphobia—by shifting power—e.g., funding and other critical resources, policies, processes, leadership, culture” in our discipline and subdisciplines. For area geographers, some clear goals are to continue to interrogate the assumptions and privileges we have enjoyed as area experts, to continue to problematize our positionalities and the dominant narratives in our research field, and to continue to privilege the scholarship that has long been considered “marginal,” such as work on transnational migration and migrants, underprivileged people, race, ethnicity, and social justice, to name a few. There is also an urgency to develop anti-racist learning and teaching praxis in our discipline.

Many challenges are ahead, but the most dreadful time is when we are in silence. We should continue to intervene with dialogues to break this silence. The research field is there to be defined and redefined.

You are welcome to join these two virtual panel discussions sponsored by the Asian Geography Specialty Group and the China Geography Specialty Group at the AAG meeting on April 8th and 9th, 2021:
(1) **Racism, Anti-racist Praxis, and Covid-19: A Conversation with AAAS President, Dr. Jennifer Ho** (Day: 4/9/2021 Start / End Time: 1:30 PM / 2:45 PM PDT Room: Virtual 12)

Please submit any question in advance [here](#).

(2) **Global Perspectives on Migration, Immigration, Race, Ethnicity, and Justice** (Day: 4/8/2021, Start / End Time: 8:00 AM / 9:15 AM PDT Room: Virtual 29)

Note: Sessions are accessed through the annual meeting program platform at [https://aag-annualmeeting.secure-platform.com/a/](https://aag-annualmeeting.secure-platform.com/a/)

Panel resources:


To be an Asian woman in America. *CNN opinion.*

Anti-Racism Resources for Asian Americans. [https://tiny.cc/AntiRacistAsAmResources](https://tiny.cc/AntiRacistAsAmResources).

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