The Slur I Never Expected to Hear in 2020

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Early in February, I read unsupported speculations that a virus ravaging a distant city called Wuhan was due to a Chinese taste for a strange scaled mammal called the pangolin, which resembles an anteater but is cuddlier than its lumbering tube-snouted look-alike. Around that time, during a dinner party, I laughed when a friend quipped: “How do you eat a pangolin anyway? Do you dip its scales in butter like an artichoke?” When I tweeted that same joke the next day, a writer I knew responded, “It’s used for medicinal purposes.” He was simply stating a fact, but I suddenly realized that I could be spreading stereotypes about Chinese people. I deleted the tweet with a reminder to self: Make fun of Asians only around other Asians.

When the virus spread to South Korea, I became worried. I had family in Seoul, many of whom were elderly aunts and uncles most at risk.

“They’re fine,” my mother said. “They never go out anyway.”

I scolded her, telling her that she should be more worried. But if I was so worried, why didn’t I just call and check on them? I did follow a cousin in Seoul on Instagram. Every few days, she posted photographs of flowers that she arranged herself. Throughout the alarming spike of the coronavirus to its eventual dip in Seoul, her Instagram posts remained stubbornly consistent, revealing nothing except for the same artfully arranged bouquets of fragrant white roses, pink peonies and fringed tulips.

When I finally called her, she told me that she bought the flowers from a wholesaler that remained open. She walked 10 minutes to the shop and bought flowers every week or two, wearing an air-filtration mask that she spritzed with sanitizer and dried in the sun after use. Every morning she received text messages of locations where people testing positive had been and avoided those locations. She said she was

worried about me. She had heard stories of how Asians wearing masks have been harassed in Europe and the United States. “In Korea,” she told me, “we look at you funny if you’re not wearing a mask in public. We think you’re being selfish.”

On March 13, Doyers Street in Manhattan’s Chinatown was eerily empty on a Friday evening at 7, its curved street cleared of tourists, its fluorescent-lit restaurants empty except for silhouetted servers who waited wistfully for customers. My daughter and I, along with my husband and friend, were in the neighborhood because we wanted to support Chinese businesses. Through the storefront of a tea parlor, I watched a young waitress repeatedly spraying each table with disinfectant. She wiped it down as if to demonstrate to passers-by that the parlor was sanitized and ready for business.

I was adrift that day. That week, I found out that both my book tour and classes were canceled. With all my newly found time, I lived online, inhaling the fire hose of panic that also felt strangely ambient. In my newsfeed, I began to notice a troubling increase of anti-Asian incidents, which in the beginning was happening mostly abroad: A group of teenagers attacked a young Singaporean man in London, punching and kicking him while shouting about the coronavirus; an Italian bank denied service to a Chinese woman. Then in Texas, a man stabbed and cut a Burmese-American family, including two young children, in an attack that the F.B.I. has called a hate crime.

On March 13, the Centers for Disease Control hadn’t yet recommended that everyone wear masks. Most of the people wearing them on the streets — in Chinatown but also all over the city — were Asian immigrants, who probably already knew that it was safer to wear a mask because you could be asymptomatic. But from a xenophobe’s perspective, the face mask seemed to implicate foreigners as agents of diseases. The masks depersonalized their faces, making the stereotypically “inscrutable” Asian face even more inscrutable, effacing even their age and gender, while also telegraphing that the Asian wearer was mute and therefore incapable of talking back if aggressed. I was afraid for the Chinese immigrants I encountered on the street. I wanted to take them

aside and tell them it was safer not to wear one because the equipment that protected them — and others — only made them more vulnerable to attack.

I started bookmarking tweets and news reports of racist incidents. A sample:

An Asian woman pressed an elevator button with her elbow. A man in the elevator asked, “Oh, coronavirus?” She said, “Don’t have it, but trying to be prepared.” As he was leaving the elevator, he said, “Don’t bring that Chink virus here.”

An Asian woman walked into a park and a group of mothers screamed for their kids to get away from her.

A middle-aged Asian woman wearing a mask was going for a walk when a woman screamed at her to get away from her.

A man spat on an Asian man waiting for the subway.

A man spat on an Asian woman walking to her gym.

A woman refused a coffee from a barista because she thought the barista was Chinese. When the Asian man behind her started telling her how irrational that request was, she snarled, “Are you Chinese?” He retorted, “No, but your ugly-ass knockoff purse is.”

I never would have thought that the word “Chink” would have a resurgence in 2020. The word was supposed to be as outdated as those sinister little Chinamen saltshakers I saw in thrift shops. It still thrived among bottom feeders on the internet, but I hadn’t heard it directed at me since I was in my 20s. But now I was encountering that word every time I read about an anti-Asian incident or hearing about its use from friends. I couldn’t process the fact that Americans were hurling that slur at us so openly and with such raw hate. In the past, I had a habit of minimizing anti-Asian racism because

it had been drilled into me early on that racism against Asians didn't exist. Anytime that I raised concerns about a racial comment, I was told that it wasn't racial. Anytime I brought up an anti-Asian incident, a white person interjected that it was a distraction from the more important issue (and there was always a more important issue). I've been conditioned to think my second-class citizenry was low on the scale of oppression and therefore not worth bringing up even though every single Asian-American I know has stories of being emasculated, fetishized, humiliated, underpaid, fired or demoted because of our racial identities.

After President Trump called Covid-19 the "Chinese virus" in March, the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council said more than 650 incidents of discrimination directed against Asian-Americans were reported to a website it helps maintain in one week alone. Even after seeing that number, I wondered if anti-Asian racism would be taken seriously. On Twitter, when the novelist R.O. Kwon talked about the surge, an in-law asked doubtfully, "Is it really happening?" Do the reports have to rise to 1,000 a week? 2,000? How many is enough so that the hate will be seen?

Since the coronavirus, what has been happening is a different strain of anti-Asian racism than the kind to which I'm accustomed. Not the kind in which we are invisible or we're seen as efficient cyborgs. Racism never disappears but adapts to new circumstances when old strains rise from the dark vaults of American history. The recent rise carries the stench of late-19th-century xenophobia. In 1882, the government passed a federal law that banned Chinese laborers from entering the U.S. because of fears they were taking jobs away from whites. They were portrayed as a "degraded" race, a contagion that would stain the morals of white Americans. If black and indigenous people were systematically enslaved, killed and dispossessed of property, the Chinese were excluded from the U.S. altogether, an immigration ban that was essentially a form of global segregation. Chinese immigrants remaining in cities were segregated into squalid quarters. The scholar Joan B. Trauner writes that whites were repulsed by San Francisco's Chinatown with "its foul and disgusting vapors" and

health officials blamed the enclave for spreading every epidemic. One physician said at the time: “The Chinese were the focus of Caucasian animosities, and they were made responsible for mishaps in general. A destructive earthquake would probably be charged to their account.”

The anti-Chinese campaign was widespread, reaching less densely populated areas as well, where Chinese immigrants were afraid to leave their homes because they would be assaulted, even shot at. In 1885, in what is now Tacoma, Wash., white people terrorized the Chinese community by setting fire to their businesses. The xenophobia culminated in a riot in which a white mob drove 300 Chinese immigrants out of their homes. “Using clubs, poles and pistols,” writes the historian Beth Lew-Williams, the mob chased the weeping immigrants out of town in a freezing rain.

“I’m afraid to leave my home not because of coronavirus,” my Asian friends say, half in jest, “but because I don’t want to be a victim of a hate crime.” It doesn’t matter if our families hail from Thailand, Burma or the Philippines. Racism is indiscriminate, carpet bombing groups that bear the slightest resemblance to one another. We don’t have coronavirus. We are coronavirus.

On March 26, almost a week after Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York ordered all nonessential businesses to close down and everyone to stay indoors, I wore a face mask to the grocery store. My husband had found a box of dust masks when he was cleaning out his studio. Headlines that day announced that the U.S. had the largest number of Covid-19 cases in the world, but the majority of Americans were still not wearing masks. I posted a picture of me wearing a mask on Instagram. “Wish me luck that I don’t get hate-crimed!” I wrote in the caption. My fears still felt performative, as if I didn’t have any right to them — as if I was overreacting — so I was compelled to make light of them.

But once outside, I was genuinely afraid, as if there were guards on the rooftops of

South Brooklyn watching me through their sniper scopes. It is jarring to suddenly be so hypervisible. As an East Asian woman, I am more used to being overlooked and underestimated. I walked down our block and made a left on Bond Street, watching a man walk his dog coming my way, expecting him to make visible his fear, but he simply smiled as he walked around me.

The everyday racialized experience is not so much being the target of hate more than the anticipation of it. Will I be bullied because I'm Asian? Will he reject me because I'm Asian? Will they ignore me because I'm Asian? But it also happens when you least expect it. Once, when I was 13 and my sister was 8, we were walking out of a mall in Los Angeles as a white couple were walking in. I thought he was holding the door open for us so we scurried out. "I don't open the doors for Chinks!" he yelled. Later that evening, I told my father of the incident. He looked both enraged and hurt. But instead of cursing that white man, he demanded that we should always "let them go first." When I argued back, he said: "You can't trust them. You don't know what they'll say. Always let them go first."

I've told this story before. Every time I tell it, the vividness of the memory fades until it becomes an exhausted anecdote told to those who can only understand racism as a spectacle. Distrust, by the way, doesn't result in insubordination. Growing up, my distrust of white people manifested itself in a physical unease in which I held my tongue or "let them go first." It was a survival instinct, to curl myself in, so that there was no surface area vulnerable to insult. I grew out of that when I found my city and my community. I let my guard down. Maybe it was in my head, all along.

A teenage boy kicked a 59-year-old Asian man in the back.

A man chased an elderly Asian woman down the street with Purell.

A woman punched a young Asian woman in the subway, possibly dislocating her jaw.

The photo of the Burmese-American boy in the hospital was released. The stitches are deep and wide, from the back of his head to just below his eyebrow. He looked away from the camera, his eyes averted.

When a coronavirus-related racist incident happened to me, the perpetrator wasn't white. Like many New Yorkers, I was jaywalking and nearly walked into a Latino deliveryman whizzing by on his bicycle. "Chinese bitch!" he shouted as he rode by. I wasn't filled with hot rage or a hurt that cut me to the bone. I was just rattled and then sad.

To be Asian in America during the time of coronavirus is to feel very alone. You might think that everyone's alone during the pandemic. But it's a different form of isolation carved out by that insidious model-minority myth, with its implication that as long as you worked hard and didn't ask for handouts, racial inequities could be overcome. Asian-Americans like Andrew Yang double down on the myth. In his recent Washington Post op-ed, he urged Asians to be more American: "Step up, help our neighbors, donate gear, vote, wear red, white and blue." After 9/11, South Asian cabdrivers beribboned their cars with American flags, which did nothing to curb the Islamophobia. "During World War II, Japanese-Americans volunteered for military duty," Yang wrote, "to demonstrate that they were Americans." Japanese-American soldiers did enlist, helping free more than 30,000 survivors in Dachau, but their heroic acts abroad failed to liberate some of their own families from internment camps in this nation.

Asian-Americans have always lived a conditional existence in which belonging is promised as long as we work harder at being good, hamming up acts of courtesy when we help our neighbors, internalizing any racial slights we encounter and always allowing them to go first. The model-minority myth is a lie that silences the structural economic racism Asian-Americans have endured and the intergenerational traumas our families have experienced from years of Western colonialism, wars and invasions.

I hated talking about the model-minority myth because it was like being stuck in a feedback loop. After refuting that myth, I was dragged back to refute it again. But when the pandemic struck, I realized how deeply entrenched that myth was in the psyches of not only whites but other people of color.

The coronavirus at least burned away any illusions that East Asians are almost white. Since the first cases were discovered in the U.S., I kept imagining the coronavirus as an irradiating purple light lancing through the cracks of our white-supremacist world. Some of us never noticed these cracks before, but now it is all that we can see. African-Americans and Latinos are dying in higher proportions than anyone else in New York City, perhaps because of their lack of access to health care and because many of them are essential workers and can't shelter at home. But systemic racism keeps minorities separated. White supremacy ensures that once the pressure of persecution is lifted even a little from one group, that group will then fall upon the newly targeted group out of relief and out of a frustrated misplaced rage that can never touch, let alone topple, the real enemy.

The hate hasn't abated since Americans have been ordered to stay indoors. The Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council said the reporting site was still receiving about 80 incidents a day, and there have been 1,600 since March 19. Because of the shelter-in-place rules, working-class Asians who are employed in essential businesses, like grocers, are not only at higher risk of being exposed to the virus but face the brunt of anti-Asian harassment. Yuh-Line Niou, a New York State assemblywoman who represents Chinatown and other areas in Lower Manhattan, said an Asian-American friend delivered food to a customer who spat right into his eye. Another friend, a nurse, was called a "dirty Chink" by her patient, who had Covid-19. "And these are the people who don't report," Niou said. "They're scared of losing their jobs."

Then on April 5, an assailant tossed what's believed to be acid on a 39-year-old Asian woman in Brooklyn while she was taking out the trash, severely burning her head, neck

and back. I am enraged. I am scared. In addition to fears of catching the virus or of being unemployed or of loved ones dying, we now have to worry about having acid thrown at us? It is happening everywhere. It is happening too close to home. It's happening at home. One Asian-American family returned to their house in Minnesota and found a sign posted at their door: "We're watching you," the note said. "Take the Chinese virus back to China. We don't want you here infecting us with your diseases." It was signed, "Your friendly neighborhood."

Cathy Park Hong's book of essays, "Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning" was published in February 2020 by One World/Penguin Random House.

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