

Racializing disease, quantifying lives: COVID-19 isn't an ecological cure

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Body

On March 19, 2020, President Bradley posted the following tweet: "How many lives has coronavirus saved in China due to less pollution? Ironical."

Current students and alumnae/i alike have responded to the post with a wave of debate and criticism. They point out the inappropriateness of the post and its hostility towards the Chinese and Chinese-American communities at Vassar and elsewhere. President Bradley also recognized the tweet's impact, and sent out both formal and informal apologies.

Her apology has been received and accepted by many, and we acknowledge her effort to make Vassar a place where students of diverse backgrounds feel at home. We are grateful for her honesty, care, courage and willingness to learn, as evidenced in her apology emails. Though we do not intend for this piece to be another accusation against President Bradley and her tweet, we feel it is necessary to converse with the Vassar community. This article is our gesture of conversation with the currently circulating narratives, discourses, concerns, feelings and politics amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The concept of disease is highly racialized in contemporary politics. China has been held accountable for the global impact of the novel coronavirus in much U.S. media. In *The National Review*, an article titled "The Other Chinese Virus" accuses the Chinese government of covering up information about the virus and attacks the authoritarian regime for "exporting repression." While many Chinese people acknowledge the wrongdoings on the part of the Chinese government, such coverage rarely distinguishes among "China," "the Chinese government," and "Chinese people." Even if they do, misleading titles like "China is Avoiding Blame by Trolling the World," and "Yes, Blame China for the Virus" attribute the coronavirus to a specific race/nationality-Chinese or even Asian populations as a whole.

At Vassar, we have learned to be critical of such media rhetoric. Yet, these lines of thinking were reinforced by President Bradley's recent post. Worse yet, President Trump has recently used the misnomer of "Chinese virus" on various occasions, which reduces a global public health concern to the responsibility of a single nation. Racializing the coronavirus is not at all helpful in facing this global problem in solidarity. Though the first case of the coronavirus was detected in Wuhan, China, naming the virus as "Wuhan virus" or "Chinese virus" designates the problem to a racial/national other and obscures the fact that the rest of the world also faces this outbreak. Needless to say, the Chinese and Chinese American community have felt stigmatized by the phrasing of the "Chinese virus," particularly given the history of Chinese exclusion and the relegation of the "sick man," a degrading phrase the British used to refer to China during the opium epidemic in the early 1900s. Recently, the misnomer of the sick man reappeared in

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the headline of an article in The Wall Street Journal, which provoked criticism from more than four dozens of its own journalists and the Chinese government leadership. The news outlet later apologized and revived their headline.

The scapegoating of China has elicited anti-Chinese and xenophobic sentiments and practices. People perceived to be of Chinese descent (or other Asian ethnicities) have endured a number of hate crimes across the country and around the world. A Chinese international student at Vassar, who was studying abroad in London, posted on Instagram that a stranger passing by yelled at her, "It's all your fault!" Likewise, in New York City, the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak in the United States, anti-Asian hate crimes have surged. An Asian woman in Brooklyn was told to go back to China and get her temperature checked, while an Asian man was harassed in Queens for not wearing a mask. What outraged many in the Vassar community was the fact that a president of a prominent liberal arts college seemed unaware that her comments could potentially feed into the current racialized discourse of COVID-19, along with the stigma it brands onto the Chinese diaspora.

The original article to which President Bradley responded in her original tweet does, in fact, acknowledge the inappropriateness of drawing an analogy between fatalities caused by the coronavirus and deaths as results of air pollution. The authors made the following comment in regard to a Stanford study:

"That is NOT to say that the pandemic is some kind of a blessing in disguise, with all the suffering it has imposed on people. At the most, it shows it's easy to overlook chronic, long term health threats such as air pollution, and thus, harder to muster an adequate response."

Though the body text is relatively unbiased, the title fails to capture its essence. The headline, "Study: Coronavirus Lockdown Likely Saved 77,000 Lives In China Just By Reducing Pollution," sets the tone for the article, with the word "saved" as the least preferable phrasing anyone wishes to use in this context. Readers who have perceived China's past environmental policies in a negative light would easily fall into the trap of hidden xenophobia in this clickbait title. It is also worth noting that the article mentions a pattern of reduction in air pollutants globally in areas like Northern Italy, where scientists have observed an evident decline in the emission of nitrogen dioxide. Hence, to target solely China in the discourse on environmental degradation is unnecessary and ill-considered.

It is true that pollution in China has been significantly reduced due to the large-scale quarantine measures of suspending industrial production, work, and most public transportation. However, to view the coronavirus as life-saving is another issue. Pollution kills, and so does the virus. By no means shall we consider the coronavirus a life-saving, life-enriching and invigorating force. Tianqi Zhu '16 commented, "...[The reduction of pollution (at least in this case) means shutting down factories...underemployment of workers [and] many families in the rural and even urban areas losing their only source of income]." Many online diaries of people from Wuhan and interviews with those directly impacted by the coronavirus express a deeper sense of the physical, psychological, economic and social devastation that they grapple with on a daily basis (just one example is the Chinese writer Wang Fang who has been keeping an online diary, with an unofficial English translation. Imagine what it means, for a person experiencing such great loss, to read a sentence like "the coronavirus saves lives."

This is not a matter of hurt feelings. Both pollution and the coronavirus kill, but celebrating one for the reduction of another is problematic, given their vastly different nature, mechanisms and effects. Conflating these issues obscures the particularity of the problems and how each requires a distinct solution. In the same vein, putting the coronavirus and the reduction of pollution in a causal relation risks positing one killing force as a solution to another. Such logic layers up threat, injustice and suffering without addressing any of it.

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What we also want to avoid is a comparative approach that evaluates the "pros and cons" of pollution and the coronavirus to seek justification for either of them. Such comparative evaluation reduces human lives to calculable and replaceable data points. This calculus distracts us from the real issue of discussion: How do you solve both of them, instead of arguing to keep one over the other? We have seen the calculation of the incalculable in so many

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instances right now. For example, when the hospitals have reached their full capacity, a decision must be made: Who to cure and who to let die? And in the current moment of the coronavirus, the elderly are generally those left to die. We do not intend to condemn the doctors who are at this most difficult position of making such a painful "choice." Rather, in this case, we need to ask: Can lives be calculated by a particular way of measuring time? Can lives be valued based on how much time theoretically remains?

The impact of the Coronavirus has disturbed and displaced many lives in different ways and to varying degrees. We wrote this piece to reflect upon our collective experiences and to validate our feelings, whether it be anger, despondence, frustration or anxiety, during these challenging and uncertain times. Instead of narrowing our sights to focus on the actions and words of particular individuals near and far, we hope to address the larger and more pervasive structural underpinnings, in this case, the racialization of diseases and quantification of human lives, that gave rise to narrow-minded discourses and hate crimes directed at particular racial/ethnic groups. We hope that this conversation will prompt us to look beyond our immediate individual experiences and be attentive to lives beyond the scope of Vassar and the United States.

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