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## for Unemployment

Two restaurant workers tell their stories.

[Michelle Chen](#) • May 13, 2020



An empty street in Chinatown in May (Rob Kim/Getty Images)

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*This article is part of Belabored Stories, a series by Sarah Jaffe and Michelle Chen featuring short accounts of what workers are facing during the coronavirus pandemic.*

In New York City, the pandemic has eclipsed the city's diverse urban landscape. In Chinatown, your neighborhood is no longer the city's vibrant hub for local businesses.

In chronicling the two series, the fusion of the two have changed the

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James Chau stopped working in late March. Business had been slow for weeks in Chinatown even before restaurants were ordered to close. Outsized fears of the coronavirus—which was then ravaging Wuhan—drove customers to avoid Chinese food. Anticipating the worst, his boss told him he could stay home a few days before Governor Andrew Cuomo issued his stay-at-home order. Since then, he has been waiting out the crisis with his family in Flushing, with his retired parents and unemployed brothers.

While he is out of work, he said, “to be honest, safety-wise, of course I’d rather stay home. . . . But then, on the other hand, we all have rent . . . we all have to survive this situation.” While he and his brothers are waiting on their unemployment claims, he added, “we don’t see an end [to] this . . . because even the government cannot guarantee anything right now. So we don’t know.”

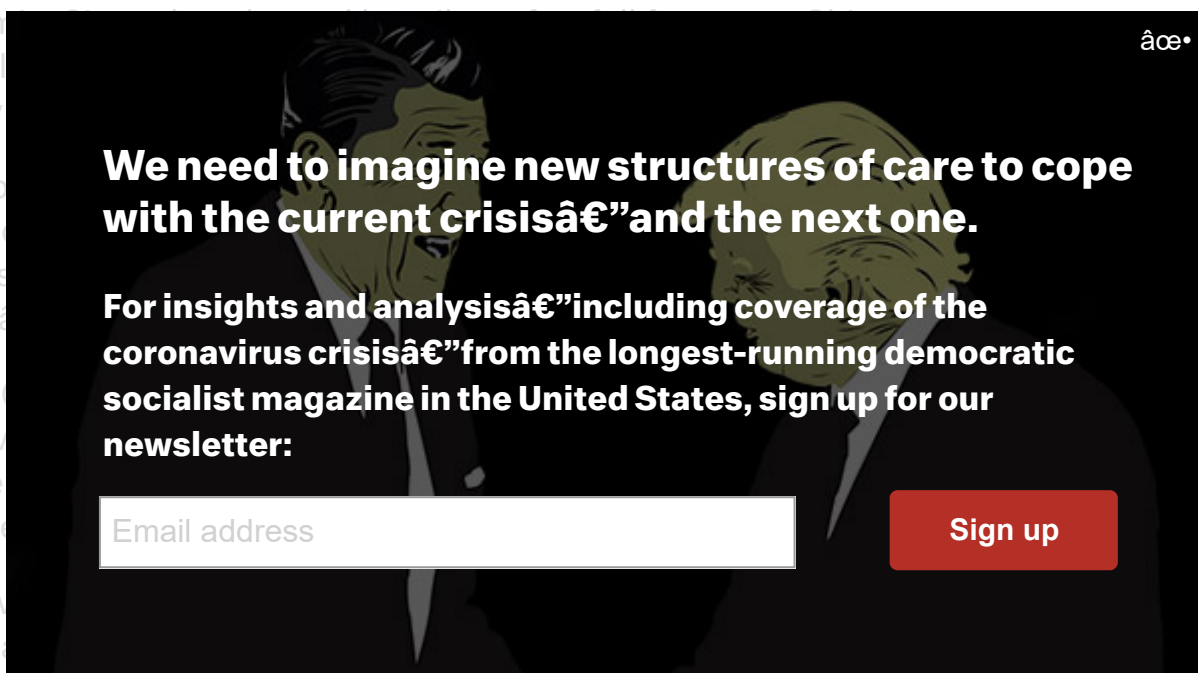
Asian Americans in the city are also on edge because of the heightened threat of racial attacks. Chau said that when the pandemic first began gripping the city, he had two ugly encounters prior to the stay-at-home orders. He got shoved by a woman passing him on a subway platform, he said; another time, while shopping at Trader Joe’s, “a white lady yelled at me for no reason. . . . People don’t know who to blame, and they still have emotions [that lead to them] attacking our Asian people.”

According to police data, there have been fourteen reported COVID-19-related bias attacks, impacting fifteen Asian American victims, in just the past month, including both verbal and physical assaults.

Chinatown's restaurant industry is facing the possibility that, even if New York reopens its economy, the restaurants may never recover from the pandemic, particularly if they are not able to comply with the new health and safety regulations.

And if the government doesn't step in, the industry will be in a very nervous state, and it may go out of business.

One of the challenges of lockdown is that it's over before it's even started, and it's collapsing.



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I was always being able to stay afloat financially while pursuing my career as an actor. . . . I wouldn't want to be a burden on society. . . . I think also that was [from my] upbringing from my household growing up. It's not something that you do.

Then came the rejection from the unemployment office; it turned out that because He spent much of the past year working in the entertainment industry in China, he lacked the requisite work hours to qualify for benefits. "I was so ashamed of . . . not only working myself up to that process, but also [getting] rejected," he said.

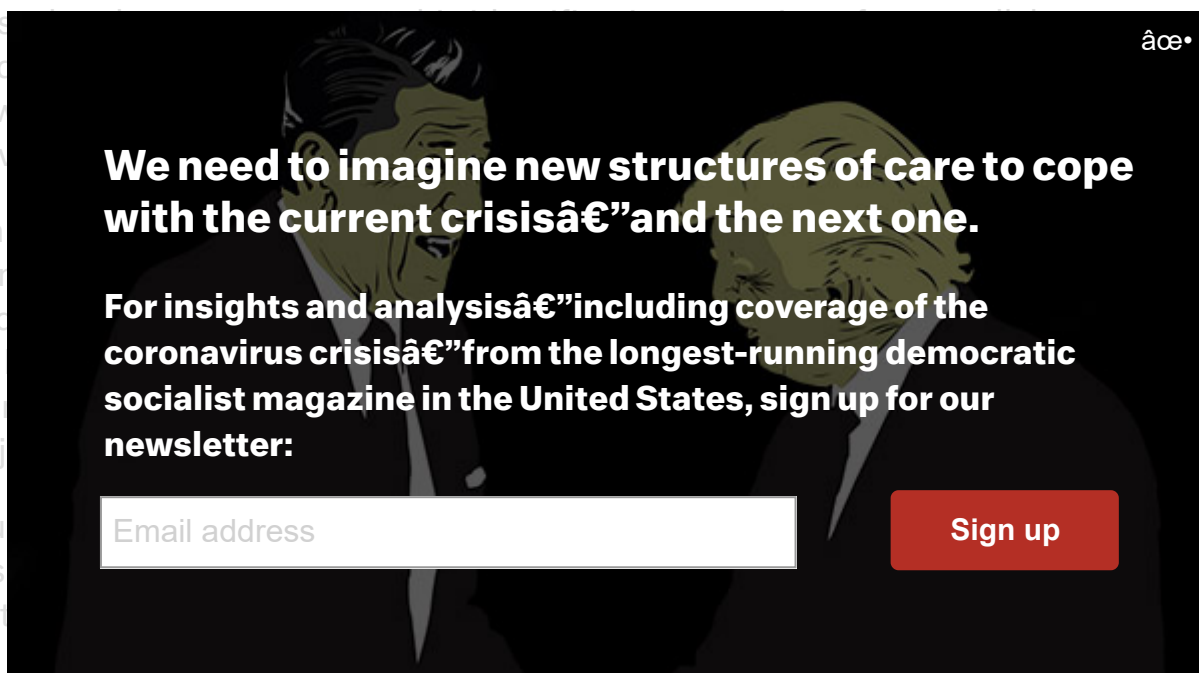
And I felt like, maybe I had failed, in some ways as an actor, that I couldn't provide for myself. But also, an extreme guilt and shame that I didn't realize was deeply rooted [in] my upbringing. I felt like I didn't pursue the path that my parents would want me to, but instead, I chose the artistic path, and then now, obviously, I am in some sort of crisis mode.

With his savings dwindling, He decided it was time for a fresh start and caught a flight to Mobile, Alabama to stay at a friend's house while the pandemic ravaged the city. It was an odd fit; He felt like a distinct minority in the Deep South. Then again, he noted that he experienced racism and marginalization while growing up in North Carolina, and even in New York, he was attacked with racial epithets on the street at the height of the outbreak. But in Mobile, he said, "I'm hyper aware of my surroundings . . . whether I'm in the club or the grocery store or the post office, [I see] there are five white people, two black people, and zero Asians, except me."

After applying for a number of low-wage jobs, he landed at an Amazon fulfillment center—one of the few businesses on a hiring spree amid the pandemic. He was nervous, but he decided to go. “If I show up, I’ll have a job,” he thought. “I’ll have a job during the coronavirus pandemic.”

It’s all a part of the experience, recalled a New York Times reporter who interviewed him from his home. “I don’t want to have a job during the coronavirus pandemic.”

He would have been reading news a lot about how people are in worse conditions, and, so, you know, it’s always better to go through [each] day coming from a gratitude perspective. . . . I have to tell myself that my worth and my competence is not the temporary job I have. . . . A large part of American culture is your job, and your job is a huge part of your identity. And I’m just going to separate who I am as a person, and my capabilities, and my worth, [without thinking] my measurement comes from my job.



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**Michelle Chen** is a member of *Dissent*’s editorial board and co-host of its *Belabored* podcast.



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