Familiar Foreigners

By Corinne Mitsuye Sugino

Since the start of 2020, the globe has witnessed the spread of both the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter demanding justice for Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Tony McDade, and other Black Americans murdered at the hands of police. Within these dynamics, two interrelated aspects of Asian and Asian American racialization have emerged. First, former officer Tou Thao's participation in the murder of George Floyd highlights the way Asian Americans perpetuate anti-Blackness through an identification with white policing apparatuses, exemplary citizenship, and the deputizing operations of the "model minority." Second, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Asian attacks – both verbal and physical – have spiked throughout North America and much of the globe, signaling the way in which the figure of "yellow peril" has resurged amidst 2020's racialized unfoldings. In this regard, Tou Thao and the anti-Asian attacks under COVID-19 present us with the Janus-faced dynamics of Asian American in/assimilability.

Though it may seem as if these dynamics operate in opposition to one another, the contemporary political environment highlights instead how yellow peril and model minority discourses bleed together. In L.A, a man went on a drunk racist tirade against a Thai American woman, blaming Asians for the virus and stating "everything comes from China because they're fucking disgusting. They can be so smart and be like, 'Oh yeah, I developed this, I developed that.' But like, yeah, you can't even wipe your ass."[1] At the same time, conspiracy theories about the virus have circulated widely, ranging from the claim that the virus accidentally escaped from a Wuhan lab as the result of China's attempt to compete with the U.S., to the idea that the Chinese government intentionally manufactured the virus themselves. In these racist fantasies, Chinese people (and through racist metonymic association, all Asian-descended people writ large) are figured through a sort of racial uncanniness, as *strangely familiar*. Amidst the pandemic, Asian and Asian Americans are cast as strange insofar as we are rendered foreign, dirty, harbingers of disease, yet familiar insofar as we are seen as capable of technological advancement that rivals the U.S. If, as Freud suggests, the uncanny represents a repressed signifier speaking through a familiar one, COVID-19 highlights how the repressed signifier of yellow peril speaks and bleeds through the familiar signifier of the model minority.[2]

The COVID-19 pandemic has no doubt revealed underlying social anxieties in North America. If, following Lacan, we consider the operations of anxiety as a signal of the Real, COVID-19 threatens to expose the groundlessness of the subject.[3] We might consider this not

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[1] Sara Li, "As Coronavirus Spreads, So Does Anti-Chinese Racism." *Teen Vogue,* 19 March 2020. https://www.teenvogue.com/story/coronavirus-anti-chinese-racism.

[2] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny, " *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works,* trans. by James Strachey in Collaboration with Anna Freud, Assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. Vol. 17. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 219-253.

[3] Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book X,* ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A.R. Price (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

only in the sense that the virus presents the physical threat of death, but also in the sense that its spread challenges the construction of the "West" and the "Western" subject as immune from disease outbreaks symbolically associated with "developing" Asian and African countries. In this sense, the anti-Asian racism under COVID-19 functions in part through the (ultimately inadequate) attempt to convert an anxiety into a fear; that is, as a definable, controllable object. In response, many Asian Americans have sought to appeal to their status as good citizens. This can be gleaned not only in Andrew Yang's call for Asian Americans to embrace "Americanness" amidst the anti-Asian vitriol, but also in campaigns such as #IAmNotAVirus which encourages Asian Americans to post the hashtag online with a picture of themselves and several "I am" statements highlighting their passions, professions, and/or contributions to society.

Yet both the COVID-19-related anti-Asian vitriol and the figure of Tou Thao problematize this desire to appeal to good citizenship. If the repressed signifier of yellow peril can speak through the familiar signifier of the model minority, then appealing to model citizenship represents a cruelly optimistic identification with an oppressive society. Moreover, as David Marriott suggests, white and non-Black subjecthood is constituted in part through a rejection of Blackness as abject.[4] The figure, then, of the exemplary, respectable Asian American citizen is staged through the negation of Blackness, which is constructed as criminal. In this sense, the desire to resignify ourselves from the dirty foreigner to the respectable, assimilable minority – however understandable – is nevertheless what makes Tou Thao's actions as an agent of anti-Black violence possible. Thus, confronting the anti-Asian racism under COVID-19 does not simply occur "in tandem" with Black Lives Matter but is critically entangled with it. Rather than seeking Symbolic *recognition* within institutions or society writ-large for our respectability and relatability, then, the demand by Black Lives Matter and other Black-led movements to *abolish* police, prisons, and other apparatuses of state-sanctioned violence becomes all the more imperative in considering practices of combatting both anti-Asian and anti-Black racism.

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[4] David Marriott, "On Decadence: *Bling Bling." E-Flux Journal,* 79, no. 1 (2017).