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Foreign Intrusions: An Exploration of Asian American Historical Memory through Food-Related Discourses

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This paper explores historical memory, grief, and trauma in Asian American racialization through food-related discourses. While discourses of colorblindness, post-racialism, and multiculturalism work to individualize and bifurcate race from structural power, I argue that historical memory and racial trauma act as intrusive forces that disrupt them. In doing so, I discuss the way in which anti-Asian racism has historically been mediated through food-related discourses, as well as my own experiences with food, memory and racial trauma which intrude upon the page performatively in a similar way that historical memory intrudes upon the present.

My fingers rolled over my keyboard as I tried to focus on my writing. It was a Monday afternoon, and I was working on a piece about Asian American racial trauma, historical memory and food-related discourses, with hopes of eventually sending it to a journal for publication. It was a project that I was excited to work on, but the level of clarity in my mind did not match my enthusiasm in the moment. I kept getting distracted, stuck in my own thoughts. This inevitably produced some frustration given the piece was particularly important to me. I wanted to write a piece that used food as a medium to explore the relationship between racial identity, trauma, and personal experience. The piece would, in part, be a form of commentary on the dissociative structures of racial trauma against Asian Americans, in other words how colorblindness and similar ideologies have socialized us to psychologically separate our experiences of suffering from structural racism. In line with these thoughts, I had conceptualized the essay as also commenting on the cold, disinterested narrative so often present in academic writing that suppresses the visceral, personal, and embodied nature of historical memory in favour of objectivity and "rigorous" rhetorical criticism of an external object of study. But I found myself fumbling with the first sentence. I was writing half a sentence, deleting it, trying to write it again, and deleting it again. I just couldn't seem to find the right words.

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I got up to cut up some fruit for myself as a snack and sat back down. I thought about how my father used to cut up apples, kiwis, and other fruit for me when I used to study at his house after school. Then, I thought about how my family were constantly cooking and bringing over food while I was caring for my father in the last few weeks of his life. My father had been diagnosed with colon cancer, and although the doctors thought he may make it a year at first, he only made it a month. I had dropped everything in the middle of my finals to travel home to care for him at the end. When he had first told me on the phone, the sinking feeling in my stomach had felt all too familiar. I had suddenly lost my mother a few years prior, and I knew this meant I would soon be parentless. "How are you coping?" was a question no one in my family asked me about how I was processing his impending death while I cared for him, or how I was doing afterwards. I had written this off as their inability to broach emotional subjects in direct conversation, though I wasn't exactly initiating any deep conversations either. But now, I realized them bringing me food — homemade teriyaki chicken, salad, pasta, and pizza — was simply just a different mode of communication; they did it because some things are too hard to say.

I shook my head. *Focus.* I had been sitting here for half an hour and I needed to get words on the page. Instead, I thought about my grandfather. The day before, we had argued on the phone about whether he should go outside. "It's not safe" I had told him, "there's a global pandemic and you really don't need three bananas" — or whatever random item he had insisted on getting at the grocery store. I could hear him sigh, probably throwing his hands up in exasperation. "I'll be fine, I'm going anyway" he had insisted. I chuckled to myself about my grandfather's stubbornness. Then I thought about a newspaper story I had read about an elderly Asian American man who was tossed onto the street out of a supermarket by someone who assumed he had the coronavirus, and I grew worrisome.

I dragged myself out of this thought and stared at the screen. When I had first decided on the topic of the paper, I had done so because I felt compelled to communicate the weight of ossifying discourses that render people like myself - an East Asian American woman - as a romanticized assimilated minority subject, whose past had been marred by regrettable histories of immigration exclusion yet eventually reconciled with a multicultural, democratic present. I wanted to think about how these discourses attempted to cover over and seal the gaps between continuing histories of racial trauma and this ideal of the modern East Asian American subject as a cosmopolitan free agent unfettered by persistent structures of exclusion. And I wanted to think about how historical memory and trauma interrupted that closure and exposed those gaps in unexpected ways. At this point though, I was growing weary. *But how will you frame your unique contribution to the literature?* The ever-present question of academic writing loomed near. How would my work add yet another kernel of truth to our corpus of all-encompassing and ever-expanding regime of knowledge, to our own Tower of

Babel? I got up again and pulled a Red Bull out of the fridge as if it were some kind of solution to my intellectual-existential dread. I also grabbed a box of Pocky off the counter, the kind my dad used to get me as a snack when I was a kid. I thought about how, even into my adult life, he had bought them for me every time I returned home to visit from school. I missed him. I needed to get back to work, but these thoughts weren't just distractions, they were *intrusive*. I could not fathom why of all times, when I was trying to focus on an academic paper, that these irrelevant personal memories and feelings kept interrupting my work. Finally, trying my best to silence the cacophony of memories, worries, and questions erupting into my head, I forcibly put words on the page.

Introduction

As the novel coronavirus has continued to spread throughout the globe, the world has also witnessed increasingly visible anti-Asian racism ranging from racial epithets to physical violence. On several occasions, this racism has reached excessive scales. In New York, an Asian woman was doused and burned with acid (Moore and Cassady). In Texas, a man stabbed an Asian family including a 2-year-old and a 6-year-old shopping at a local Sam's Club because he suspected they were spreading the virus (Matthews). Much of this anti-Asian discourse surrounding the coronavirus has associated Asians and Asian Americans with "backwards" food practices specifically, such as eating bats, dogs, or cats, thus characterizing Asian cultures as unsanitary and blaming the outbreak on them. Indeed, as the virus spread throughout the globe, images of the virus's suspected origins – a Chinese "wet market" – circulated as well, stoking racialized notions that Chinese cultural practices were to blame for the crisis (Zhang). In one instance, a three-year-old video of a Chinese vlogger eating a bat went viral as individuals touted the video as evidence of Chinese backwardness, despite the fact the video was not even taken in China. This vlogger faced numerous death threats, while the viral video worked to stoke racist fears of Chinese people (Wallace). Nevertheless, these occurrences amidst the coronavirus aren't novel or isolated; instead, they highlight deeper and more ingrained processes by which Asians and Asian Americans have historically been associated with unsanitary food practices.

This paper explores the role of food-related discourses as they relate to historical memory, racial trauma, and Asian American racialization. As a number of scholars have pointed to, food is an important site around which broader dynamics surrounding Asian American racialization are staged and negotiated (Mannur; Xu; Ku). *Will my grandfather be safe when he goes to the supermarket tomorrow?* On the one hand, racist discourses have long targeted Asian and Asian American food practices as culturally inferior, foreign, and unsanitary, rendering them outside the boundaries of U.S. national belonging. *Or will he be the next*

headline about another coronavirus-related hate crime? On the other hand, food practices have also often played an important role in Asian American traditions and cultural practices, as well as navigating racial trauma in the midst of these exclusions. In this essay, I take up food as a medium for thinking about larger processes of racialization, historical memory, and racial trauma.

Moreover, I place this discussion of food-related racial discourses in conversation with the contemporary era in which discourses of multiculturalism, colorblindness, and post-racialism work to deny the persistence of structural racism. These discourses are connected to the figure of the model minority, which exalts (East) Asian Americans not only as science whizzes, but also as neoliberal subjects able to succeed without the help of welfare (Lee). Consequently, the figure of the model minority is used to gaslight Asian Americans by casting them as autonomous individualistic free agents unfettered by structural forces and thus unable to experience racism. It also works to criminalize Black and Brown people, blaming any lack of upward mobility on their character as opposed to discrimination. Additionally, discourses of colorblindness and liberal multiculturalism also impact the psychic lives of Asian Americans. Eng and Han examine the social and psychic lives of Generation X and Y Asian Americans, arguing they are largely characterized by processes of racial melancholia and racial dissociation, respectively. While racial melancholia involves the way in which racial loss is figured as a forfeited or lost object, racial dissociation describes the process by which racial loss is obscured, working to bifurcate suffering from questions of race (Eng and Han). Consequently, racial dissociation results from a psycho-social structure embedded in the logic of colorblindness, which socializes Asian Americans to dissociate their own personal experiences from questions of racial or structural oppression. We might consider this dissociation in light of Jinah Kim's contention that contemporary liberal discourses operate by disciplining proper healing as that which reconciles past racial violence with a plural, multicultural present (J. Kim). At the same time, however, unresolved histories of violence operate as insurgent political forces that disrupt these hegemonic narratives of reconciliation (J. Kim).

Drawing on the work of these scholars, I explore food-related discourses and Asian American racialization. *"Ew, what's that smell?"* Specifically, I argue that historical memory and racial trauma act as unruly, interruptive forces that refuse to stay buried beneath the domesticating discourses of liberal reconciliation. Put differently, while discourses of multiculturalism and colorblindness work to narratively reconcile a past history of exclusion with a supposedly inclusive and progressive present, historical memory and racial trauma interrupt this process of narrative closure. *My white friend asks as she enters my house. My father is in the kitchen cooking.* These interruptions highlight and make visible the gaps between ongoing legacies of racial trauma and epistemological discourses of closure that figure Asian Americans as assimilated, neoliberal subjects. The coronavirus crisis and concomitant association of Asian Americans with dirty

food practices is thus but one example of this process; that is, the process by which histories of anti-Asian resentment and yellow peril interrupt fantasies of inclusion and fracture the colorblind discourse of the model minority. *"Let's go play outside instead" I say, slightly embarrassed.*

At the same time, I argue the interruptive momentum of historical trauma also exposes the deeply intimate reach of discourses like colorblindness and multiculturalism, which often compel Asian Americans to dissociate grief, loss, and trauma from structural racism. In this regard, structures of power do not operate transcendently but shape and are shaped by the textures of everyday living, suffering, and personal experience. As a result, I extend the insight of scholars working within autoethnography who see the interaction between embodied experience and socio-cultural contexts as a key site of engagement for engaging questions of identity, resistance, and structural power (Calafell; Rodríguez-Dorans; Gutierrez-Perez; Young).[1]

In what follows, I first discuss the way Asian American food practices have been shaped by larger histories of immigration, survival, and national belonging that mediate the boundaries of identity formation. Then, I turn to an exploration of how food has historically figured in anti-Asian exclusion in the United States and the ways that has intruded upon fantasies of post-racialism, colorblindness, and assimilation. Finally, I conclude by arguing that instead of attempting to reconcile this history of violence, grappling with the incommensurable loss surrounding the impossibilities of assimilation might produce new grounds for imagining liberation.

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[1] For example, while Edgar Rodríguez-Dorans uses autoethnography in order to explore how his own desires and conceptions of beauty have been shaped by colonialism, Stephanie Young analyses her and her mother's experiences to theorize how mother-daughter relationships impact hybrid Asian American subjects' navigation of identity. These scholars demonstrate the way their own personal experiences were informed by larger dynamics of power, as well as how these dynamics cannot be divorced from embodied life. Moreover, Sara Ahmed's approach to "performance cartography" demonstrates the way in which storytelling can act as a mechanism for mapping and exploring the production of identity. Finally, Robert Gutierrez-Perez and Luis Andrade address the politics of marriage by bringing their own experiences into conversation with legal archives, arguing the interplay between the two offers opportunities for a form of queer of color worldmaking that imagines their relationship to marriage, love, and community otherwise. What Gutierrez-Perez and Andrade point to so significantly, then, are the ways in which drawing out the tensions between personal experience and traditional academic and legal texts have the potential to explore new perspectives on power, oppression, and identity. In exploring the process by which racial trauma interrupts and highlight dissociation, I seek to consider not only broad discursive trends but the intimate interaction they have with historical memory, identity, and personal experience.

Made in Asian America: Food, Identity Formation, and Asian Americans

Asian American food practices have been deeply shaped by the historical and structural conditions that envelop them. While the first Chinese immigrants in the 1800s on the West Coast - barred from other occupations - turned to farming, cooking, and other food industries to make a living, two decades later the first Japanese immigrants would work primarily in salmon canneries, fishing fleets, and sugar plantations (Xu). At the same time, Asian immigrant food practices have been historically demonized as indicative of cultural backwardness. For example, Anita Mannur takes up Samuel Gompers and Herman Gutstadt's treatise on labor in which they argue having Chinese "rice eaters" labor alongside whites who eat meat and bread damages the integrity of the American workforce. Here, food works as a linguistic medium for ascribing moral qualities to racial groups, rhetorically barring Asians from Americanness (Mannur).

Even the way America came to know Asian cuisines has been shaped by larger structural forces. *After internment, I am told my great-grandmother Mitsuye opened a restaurant in the 1940s.* Prior to the 1965 Immigration Act, the restaurant business was one of few employment opportunities for Asian immigrants. *She had originally come to the U.S. as a mail order bride to escape poverty, and it is after her that I got my middle name. Lacking the means to buy their own property, my family leased a small building from a bank for the restaurant.* Often forced to cater to non-Asian consumers, by 1959 much of Chinese food in California had become influenced by American consumers, and dishes such as chop suey and chow mein were popular. *I am told they served mainly American food, like burgers and fried chicken, along with a few popular Chinese American dishes such as chop suey. When I asked my grandpa why they didn't serve Japanese food, he shrugged, "that's what the people we catered to wanted to eat," he said, matter-of-factly.* Yet after the act, with the influx of Chinese immigrants, communities such as the L.A. Chinatown found increased demand for mainland dishes such as Peking duck and shifted their culinary practices in response (Liu and Lin). Thus, these dynamics point to the way food practices become indicative not only of one's national culture but also the historical conditions in which they are situated. *My grandpa used to go to the restaurant every day after school to help wash dishes and peel potatoes with his siblings. Together, they helped keep the family afloat. As my grandpa would later tell me, "There wasn't really any profit from it, it was just a living."*

Within Asian American communities themselves, food is often a significant cultural practice that can express collective identity. *The restaurant was small, with 4 or 5 booths and 12 seats at the lunch counter. They were in the heart of a bustling Japan Town, a humble centerpiece of the Japanese American community in Salt Lake City at the time. In addition to the restaurant, there was a noodle house, a tavern, a Buddhist temple, and a few other businesses.* These foods are not always synonymous with the native dishes in Asian countries, often constituting a mix of traditionally "Asian" and

"American" cuisines or sometimes even diverging from foods associated with Asia completely. For example, Erin Curtis explores the explosion of Cambodian American donut shops in Los Angeles, arguing they not only offered a route to survival for immigrant families trying to make a living in the United States, but have become a major part of community, collective identity, and cultural negotiation for Cambodian Americans in the area (Curtis). In this sense, the foodscapes of diasporic Asian American communities are not synonymous with the food of corresponding Asian nations but rather evolve according to the conditions surrounding them. *Mitsuye sold the business in 1962. It is unclear why she sold it, but when she did her children continued to work there under the new owner.* Indeed, Asian American food practices can often emerge from and signify collective trauma, for instance Japanese Americans developed a number of unique dishes involving spam and hot dogs as a result of internment camps restricting their diet (Ku; Nelson and Silva). Food also served as a foil for national discourses about community structures in the camps, for instance, during World War II public discourse identified the collective eating-style in internment mess halls as a source of the disintegration of the Japanese nuclear family unit and stoked racist fears about juvenile delinquency, all while obscuring the U.S. government's role in separating families (K. Kim). *Unfortunately, a few years later Japan Town was demolished to make room for a convention center and a few large hotels. In the blink of an eye, an entire cultural center for the local Japanese American community had been destroyed. The Buddhist Temple is one of the only remaining buildings from Japan Town today, a remnant of a much larger, more vibrant community space that once was.* In this regard, Asian American food practices are intimately enmeshed with historical memory; rather than signifying "Asian foods" neatly transposed to America without modification, they are shaped by and contain traces of immigrant experiences, racial trauma, and strategies of survival.

Not only do larger structural forces of immigration and displacement shape food practices, but food practices work to shape the contours of identity in turn. As Wenying Xu writes, "food, as the most significant medium of the traffic between the inside and the outside of our bodies, organizes, signifies, and legitimates our sense of self in distinction from others who practice different foodways" (2). We might relate Xu's contention to Sara Ahmed's work on emotion, in which she argues that emotions constitute not simply internal, individual feelings but circulate between bodies and work to produce the surfaces between them. For her, certain objects become "sticky" with meaning, in such a way that certain bodies become associated with emotions like fear, disgust, hatred, and love (Ahmed). In this regard, emotions operate in a way that is necessarily raced and gendered. *During my first year in graduate school, I learned that the National Communication Association Conference was to be held in Salt Lake, at the very convention center where Japan Town used to be. Most conference attendees would be staying at a neighboring hotel, which my family's restaurant had been destroyed to make room for.* Similarly, food also becomes condensed with racial signifiers and emotions such as disgust to

demonize marginalized communities. In the instance of Gompers and Gustadt's treatise on labor, being marked as rice-eaters versus meat-eaters helped to solidify the boundaries between Americanness and foreignness. *I was eager to attend the conference as an excuse to visit home. At the time, I was lost in a program in which there were no other female Asian American graduate students and no Asian American professors in my department who taught graduate courses. None of my classes mentioned Asian Americans, and I had just moved alone to a new city. I didn't know what I wanted to write about and felt like my writing didn't have purpose.* In this sense, food overlaps with national discourses about citizenship, in many cases rendering Asian Americans outside the boundaries of U.S. national belonging. At the same time, Asian American food practices also shape their own unique relationship to identity and culture. *With no sense of direction, I had never felt so completely and utterly alone. That year, I developed severe and chronic anxiety attacks for the first time. Though perhaps obvious in retrospect, at the time I could not fathom that these attacks were at all related to my racialized experience.*

While I don't mean to suggest that food is the only way that questions of identity formation, racial trauma, and historical memory might be explored, I do posit it is a significant avenue through which to do so. *By the following semester, all of my colleagues were excitedly discussing the papers they would be presenting. My paper had gotten rejected. As a first-year graduate student, getting rejected from a national conference was hardly a big deal. But I still felt a deep sense of shame.* This is in part due to the fact that food represents an important meeting point between the personal and the structural; Asian Americans are, on one hand, overdetermined through larger racialized discourses that render them outside the boundaries of U.S. national identity by associating them with unsanitary, dirty, foreign food practices. On the other hand, food practices have also served as a salient means of survival and community; that is, how Asian American communities have determined and shaped their own identities and practices in response to these larger conditions. Perhaps on an even simpler level, food is a key site of interaction between our bodies and the outside world. As the most "significant medium of traffic between the inside and outside of our bodies," food operates as both deeply personal and interpersonal. It is a substance that both nurtures our bodies and has the potential to make us sick; as a result, food often sutures notions of the *physical* body to larger discourses about the benefit, or threat, that Asian Americans present to the larger U.S. national body. *My grandpa had given up his social life to work at the family restaurant all day, and my father had worked manual labor at the railroad for decades. They did those things so I could live my life as an educated grad student, and I felt as if I were letting them down.* Finally, food represents an important site of traffic between body and mind, demonstrating the way that racial identity, historical trauma, and culture are lived through corporeal experience and cannot be relegated to a cartesian model of personal bias or intellectual ignorance housed only in the mind. *I felt I deserved my isolation and loneliness for not working hard enough. My colleagues kept asking me– innocently - for recommendations of places to eat in Salt Lake*

City. I smiled and gave them a list of all my favorite restaurants. In these regards, food operates as a key nexus between intimate, community, and structural knowledges, and as a result represents a fruitful avenue through which to explore questions of identity, racial trauma, and historical memory. *Yet I couldn't help but think about my family's old restaurant, and how my colleagues would be attending the conference at the convention center that Japan Town had been demolished to create.*

Food, Racial Trauma, and Anti-Asian Discourses in the U.S.

While in the wake of the coronavirus, racist discourses associating Asian Americans with unsanitary food practices have reached recent heights, this sort of discourse is tied to a much longer history of anti-Asian racism in the United States. For example, during heightened racialized fears about the spread of leprosy in the 1890s into the 1900s, Asians were associated with spreading the disease. Dr. A. W. Hitt presented to the U.S. Senate Committee on Public Health and National Quarantine, speculating that the consumption of "rotten fish" in Filipino and Indian cultures was a common vessel of the disease (Moran 28). Here, food is read not only as indicative of overall lack of sanitation, but gains particular saliency insofar as it is linked with the body; that is, the supposed consumption of rotten food in Asian cultures is rendered as a form of contamination present in the bodies of Asian American racial others, and those racial others are rendered as a source contamination to the U.S. national body in turn.

This discourse of contamination works to shore up the boundaries of identity. For instance, U.S. Chinatowns were associated with the bubonic plague, with American officials alleging that unsanitary practices predisposed these communities to spreading it. In 1900, Surgeon General Walter Wyman wrote that the bubonic plague was an "oriental disease, peculiar to rice eaters" (qtd in Shah 155). Seven years later, despite the majority of cases affecting white people, the California State Board of Health continued to specifically monitor Chinatowns and Japantowns for the disease (Shah). *On the day I passed my M.A. oral defense, my husband and I had decided to get some food and drinks to celebrate.* Here, we can apprehend how initially, the bubonic plague became associated primarily with "oriental" "rice eaters," producing a sense of distance between white and Asian American subjects and shoring up the boundaries between the two. *We settled on checking out a ramen restaurant a colleague had recently recommended that was near the university. When we got there, we were seated in a corner.* Even when the disease was found to affect mostly white people, Chinese and Japanese American communities remained the imagined locus of the disease, justifying increased surveillance and monitoring.

This dynamic can be further explicated in the context of American society's fascination with monosodium glutamate (MSG). *The restaurant was spacious and modern with a bar surrounded by neon lights and color-blocked tables and chairs, seemingly catering to the predominantly white, young, student population in the area.* As Jennifer

Lemesurier details, despite the fact that MSG is found naturally in mushrooms, parmesan cheese, and tomatoes, many perpetuated fears of a so-called "Chinese Restaurant Syndrome" (Lemesurier). After first being "discovered" in 1968, a debate would rage for decades over whether the syndrome was real and what its effects were. Indeed, the syndrome was figured in relation to racial identity and drew on fears about the dangers of Chinese culture (Mosby). *A skinny white man with dirty blonde hair brought us some waters. We thanked him.* In fact, media sources took up satirical medical articles on the syndrome as legitimate scientific evidence, further fueling public panic regarding "Chinese restaurant syndrome" (Lemesurier). As a result, Asian Americans have been associated with dangerous and unhealthy food practices in such a way that it became linked with their racial and cultural identity despite the presence of MSG in other cuisines. *I was deciding between the ramen with kimchi in it and the ramen with pork, relieved my exam was over.* Here, we might consider the way in which Asian American bodies and cultures become "sticky" with meaning; they are associated with food practices that elicit disgust, fear, or dubiousness, but it is not the foods that inherently attract these emotions. *"Oh yeah, by the way," the waiter said, "that container right there is MSG, so don't mistake it for salt!" I glanced at the container. I hadn't even noticed it until that moment. My husband, surprised, said "oh, that's good to know. I wonder why that's there."* Instead, these foods act as condensation symbols for a racialized desire to distance oneself from the cultures and people that repel them, operating, as Ahmed suggests, to create the "surfaces" between bodies as boundaries of difference. *The waiter chuckled as he was walking away and flippantly remarked, "Oh, you know. Asians and their MSG."*

I want to pause to consider the slippage between "Asian" and "Asian American" in discussing food-related discourses and anti-Asian racism. Historically, communities have deployed the label "Asian American" in order to produce a sense of collective identity in the face of white supremacy (Iwata). Nevertheless, to say "Asian American" does not capture the heterogeneity of experiences amongst Asian American people or the varied histories of oppression they have (Ling). Many have importantly critiqued the way in which the label "Asian American" often overlooks histories of colonization between different Asian people – such as Japanese and Korean people – or disparities in education, poverty, and income, such as that between Northeast and Southeast Asians (Ling). At the same time, anti-Asian racism often works by differentiating Asian Americans, racializing some Asians as "good" Asians while racializing others as "bad" ones, for instance in recent waves of anti-immigrant deportation measures targeting Cambodians and other Southeast Asians rather than Japanese or Chinese Americans. In this regard, it is important to understand the uneven ways that anti-Asian racism manifests. Moreover, "Asian" and "Asian American" people are not synonymous either, as there exist cultural differences between people living in Asian countries and those diasporic subjects such as Asian Americans born in the U.S.

Yet anti-Asian racism, like all racism, is contradictory. In many cases anti-Asian racism works precisely by homogenizing all Asians and Asian Americans as the same; for example, in the murder of Chinese American Vincent Chin, his assailants assumed he was Japanese. Although the coronavirus has been most heavily associated with China, other Asian Americans have been lumped in as Chinese as well. This association relies on a double slippage; not only are Hmong Americans, Japanese Americans, Thai Americans, and other Asian Americans lumped in as all Chinese immigrants, but Asian Americans are lumped in as being the same as Asian people. This slippage between Asians and Asian Americans is a common part of anti-Asian racism; as Kawai notes, during the 1980s, the global rise of Japan as an imperial power produced a resurgence of yellow peril and model minority discourses affecting not only Japanese Americans but Asian Americans writ-large in the U.S. In this regard, amidst the coronavirus pandemic, the slipperiness between Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans works to homogenize and rationalize violence against a number of different Asian communities, while the slipperiness between Asians and Asian Americans makes possible the quick designation of all Asian-descended people as interminably foreign irrespective of legal citizenship.

Despite this history of food discourses and resurgent anti-Asian vitriol, many Asian American communities have been overdetermined through the figure of the model minority. What is salient about this discourse is not only that it homogenizes and reduces all Asian Americans to stereotypical images of unemotional math whizzes, though that aspect is also important. What is also salient is that the model minority is entangled with prevailing discourses of multiculturalism and neoliberalism insofar as it presents an image in which minorities can achieve upward mobility in society through individualistic hard work and compliant behavior. This narrative thus functions ideologically to smooth over the contradictions and racist history of American democracy; that is, the model minority perpetuates a narrative that redeems American meritocracy as just and accessible to minorities, while at the same time obscuring and invisibilizing histories of anti-Asian exclusion. In this sense, the model minority is but one example of how liberal multiculturalism promotes narrative reconciliation; by foregrounding a story of successful progress and assimilation, racial trauma is rendered as a confined to the past, disconnected from Asian American experiences in the present day.

In the context of colorblindness and multiculturalism, we might then consider the romanticization and fetishization of "exotic" Asian cuisines as the flipside of outright disgust by them. Indeed, mainstream culture increasingly finds Asian cuisines as profitable sources for marketing exotic dishes and producing niche "fusion" foods as a form of "culinary multiculturalism" (Xu). Significantly, however, this culinary multiculturalism is not equal, but rather reproduces a power dynamic in which Asian cuisines are simply rendered as embellishment to European ones (Xu). In a related vein, as increasing Asian diasporic cuisines

have spread throughout the globe, purist discourses represent an increasing fixation on "authentic" Asian cuisines, rendering foods such as the California roll, American takeout Chinese food, American kimchi and other foods as dubious and inauthentic (Ku). In many cases, this fixation on eating "authentic" Asian cuisines relies more on orientalist tropes of cultural otherness than it does on the nature or quality of the food (Hirose and Pih). *"Yeah, but, you're different. You're Asian, but not like those Asians."* As Robert Ji-Sung Ku contends, this question of culinary authenticity is intertwined with the characterization of Asian American people as "human analogs of inauthentic cultural products. Discursively positioned neither as truly 'Asian' nor truly 'American'…The Asian presence in the United States is commonly seen as watered down, counterfeit, inauthentic— at least when measured against a largely mythical if not entirely imaginary standard of people of so-called real or authentic Asia" (9). In this regard, culinary multiculturalism produces its own exclusionary processes of identity formation, rendering Asian Americans not only outside the boundaries of Americanness, but as counterfeit versions of their Asian counterparts.

Consequently, the supposed acceptance and celebration of Asian cuisines and fusion foods must be taken with a grain of salt, pun intended. Indeed, celebratory discourses of culinary multiculturalism not only uphold a regime of authenticity that renders Asian American foods and communities illegitimate, they rely on an essentially fragile foundation; that is, the presumption of racial reconciliation, which can always be revoked at the whims of a racist society. *Would things had been different if I was more assertive?* Narratives of racial reconciliation, multiculturalism and colorblindness function epistemologically; that is to say, they represent regimes of knowing or making sense of the world. Consequently, making sense of the history of Asian American racial politics through racial reconciliation involves the process by which crises in American democracy and inclusion are covered over or sealed. Though once excluded, the narrative goes, Asian Americans have found their place within a just and tolerant meritocracy, thereby redeeming the national body. Nevertheless, this epistemological closure is never fully complete, as historical memory interrupts this closure to expose the gaps and contradictions racial reconciliation attempts to cover over.[2] One only has to look to both the history of anti-Asian vitriol as well as the anti-Asian discourses under coronavirus to understand that this veneer of incorporation

[2] If we understand epistemology through its etymological roots, *episteme*, meaning knowledge, and *logos*, referring to reasoned discourse, then we might understand multiculturalism and racial reconciliation as discursive processes of reasoning that produce a closed, internally consistent account of history whereby Asian American subjects once excluded are now incorporated into the body politic. Consequently, we might consider the way in which historical memory thus operates as a form of epistemological interruption, insofar as the embodied, visceral, and personal nature of racial trauma refuses to stay buried beneath rational discourses that attempt to smooth over them.

and happy plurality are always subtended by the possibility for histories of racial trauma to erupt into the present and fracture them.

Nevertheless, following Eng and Han, the normalization of this narrative reconciliation amidst epistemological regimes of colorblindness and multiculturalism produces forms of racial dissociation. An illustrative example might be gleaned in the context of the coronavirus, in which many expressed genuine surprise and dismay that explicit yellow peril would so easily resurface. This dissociation revealed itself, perhaps most prominently, in expressions of utter disbelief and genuine surprise at the explosion anti-Asian discourses. Many Asian Americans throughout the nation took to social media and other avenues to express their surprise anti-Asian racism would resurface in this way. I do not seek to demonize those Asian Americans that were shocked at the realization of their own precarious positions, or to imply they were not educated enough on their own oppression. Rather, I believe it is important to interrogate the reasons why many responded in this manner. As I suggest, many Asian Americans have been socialized by discourses of colorblindness, post-racialism, and multicultural reconciliation, prompting them to implicitly buy into myths of racial progress in which their oppression is rendered a relic of the past. As Cathy Hong puts it:

> I never would have thought that the word "Chink" would have a resurgence in 2020…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). (Hong).

Hong's statement demonstrates the way in which Asian Americans have been socialized to believe their experiences of oppression aren't real. Discourses of colorblindness and post-racialism normalize the belief that Asian Americans no longer experience racism. *Did they cross the street because they thought I was dirty?* As an implicit assumption held by many in the U.S., it is this regime of knowing that prompts the white person in Hong's account to interject and deny that anti-Asian racism could possibly be the issue at hand. Her parenthetical comment that "there was always a more important issue" highlights the way in which there is always a presumed alternative account that narratively de-races the moment of racial trauma. These alternative accounts may range from denying trauma altogether or attributing it to structural conditions (supposedly) outside of racism, such as class. *No, I'm overthinking it. Most people didn't want to come anywhere near each other because of the pandemic, right?* Either way, it teaches Asian Americans to second-guess themselves at every turn, to rationalize any and all anti-Asian behavior as surely being caused by something more reasonable.

Indeed, as Eng and Han suggest, discourses of colorblindness facilitate racial dissociation, in which Asian Americans dissociate their trauma and experiences from structural power. *A white professor once commended me for a speech I had given about wrongful incarcerations. "You seem so quiet and mild mannered, I didn't know you had that in you" he said, as if it were surprising that I could give an impassioned speech on a political topic.* When Hong states it had been "drilled into her" at an early age that anti-Asian racism didn't exist and thus she "couldn't process" the recent wave of anti-Asian discourse, we can identify the process by which racial dissociation is normalized; through the repeated disciplining of Asian American subjects to believe they are irrational for thinking something is racially motivated. If we understand the process of gaslighting to be one in which victims of oppression are made to feel irrational for thinking they have experienced violence, then multiculturalism and Asian American racialization has often operated through a historical narrative of racial gaslighting, and we might tie the disbelief expressed by many Asian Americans under coronavirus to this narrative's persistence. *I wondered whether the stereotypes of Asian women as passive and apolitical had guided his thinking. I also wondered whether he was right; was I too quiet and mild mannered?* This gaslighting naturally serves the interests of empire, as it encourages Asian American communities to second-guess their own oppression and align themselves instead with discourses of post-racialism and colorblindness that rationalize the status quo. Thus, when the anti-Asian vitriol erupted amidst the pandemic, it highlighted two interrelated dynamics; first, the way in which this genuine shock at anti-Asian racism results from a normalized structure of racial dissociation, and second, that historical memory and racial trauma nevertheless refuse to stay buried under ossifying discourses of false inclusion and happy plurality, interrupting that dissociation in turn.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have chosen to focus on food as a condensation point for the overlapping politics of Asian American racial trauma, grief, and historical memory. As one of the most important objects that traffics in and out of our bodies, food represents an important site through which to consider the identity formation; how we come to know ourselves and differentiate ourselves from others is often conceptualized through foodways. In particular, food represents an important point for considering Asian American identity precisely because it represents a meeting point between the larger structural forces and discourses that exclude Asian Americans from American identity, and the ways in which Asian Americans respond to, navigate, and process those structural forces and forms of exclusion in turn. Food-related discourses and practices thus signal an important medium through which the contradictory boundaries of Asian Americanness are staged and permeated. In this sense, food captures the historical

memories of and tensions between the personal and structural, exclusion and survival, and overdetermination and adaptation.

Within a society that increasingly touts a vision of multiculturalism, happy plurality, and post-racialism in the United States, Asian Americans - and perhaps others, too - have been taught that our experiences of oppression ought to be compartmentalized from structural forces. Under pressure to assimilate and discourses that render us as colorblind neoliberal subjects, many Asian Americans have been socialized to dissociate our experiences of trauma from collective and structural forces of racism. The process of dissociation operates not simply as ignorance, but as a coping mechanism against the terrors of historical trauma and the simultaneous denial of that history. Consequently, it can often lead to isolation, fragmentation, and frustration in the attempt to confront the horrors of a racist society while being told that we are crazy for thinking that anti-Asian racism is a reality.

Importantly, these dynamics demonstrate the interruptive and intrusive nature of historical memory and racial trauma that refuse to capitulate to epistemological regimes of colorblindness, multiculturalism, and post-racialism. These epistemological regimes function by attempting to close the gap between lived experiences of continuing racial trauma and the fantasy of Asian Americans as symbols of a reconciled, multicultural present. Ultimately, however, both these epistemological regimes and the psychic processes of dissociation are interrupted by the embodied, visceral, and emotional nature of racial trauma that forces those gaps to be exposed anew. In the context of the coronavirus, the resurgence of yellow peril has erupted into the present, disturbing and intruding upon the narrative that Asian Americans, though once excluded, had become assimilated model minority subjects. In a similar vein, we might consider the way histories of racial trauma intrude upon psychic processes of dissociation, shattering the ability to silence experiences of suffering and their relationship to structural power.

Many Asian Americans have spoken out against racism amidst the coronavirus. In many cases, Asian Americans have turned to appealing to our humanity and citizenship in an attempt to show they are not the stereotypes we have been cast as. Andrew Yang spoke out, telling Asian Americans to "embrace and show our Americanness" to show their worth to the American populace, while referencing Japanese Americans enlisting in the military during internment (Yang). A number of Asian Americans rightfully criticized Yang for essentially demanding that Asian Americans "suck up" their experiences of racism and identify with the nation anyway (Chen). Others have turned to spreading appeals on public media and social media, such as the #IAmNotAVirus campaign which seeks to demonstrate that Asian Americans are not the stereotypes placed on us. Though these are understandable responses to anti-Asian violence – who doesn't, after all, want to be accepted? – the pandemic of anti-Asian racism in recent months perhaps points to the very limits of attempting to prove one's assimilability and

acceptability to a white society. If the coronavirus has taught us anything, it is that appealing to our oppressors for their compassion and recognition will not save us, that it is just as easily revoked as it was granted. More importantly, it demonstrates that the desire for acceptance and recognition into mainstream society is one fraught not only with inevitable failure but with the psychic trauma of attempting to strip oneself of our racialized and "foreign" elements in order to prove our Americanness to an endemically racist society.

What alternate approaches might we consider outside of this framework of reconciliation? I cannot pretend to have all of the answers. My own experiences have taught me that no matter how educated on Asian American literature and critical race theory I am, I am still plagued with the dissociative forces of anti-Asian racism that compel me to pull away from historical trauma in order to feel insulated. Nevertheless, I want to suggest that one way of confronting anti-Asian racism is to turn away from the desire to prove our humanity, assimilability, and our Americanness. That it perhaps involves, following Jinah Kim's important work, the process of sitting with the incommensurable melancholia that is racial trauma. A process that laments not only the inability to assimilate, but the impossibility of our attachments to whiteness and the ways they will inevitably fail us. The epistemological regimes of colorblindness and multiculturalism teach Asian Americans to dissociate personal experiences from structures of race through narrative reconciliation that renders anti-Asian racism as past. When racial trauma and historical memory expose the gaps between that multicultural, narrative reconciliation and continuing histories of violence, perhaps resisting the desire for neat closure and reconciliation by considering what it means to be suspended within that gap will provide new possibilities for thinking and being otherwise. Put differently, perhaps it is in recognizing that individual efforts to prove our worth will be fruitless, in turning to those intrusive thoughts, historical memories, and racial traumas that continue to interrupt the present, that Asian Americans might turn to each other and other marginalized people in order to imagine something beyond the confines of liberal reconciliation and recognition.

I rubbed my eyes and yawned. Finally, I had gotten something on the page. I closed my laptop and began reheating some leftovers. It was a dish my grandpa always used to make for me called "weenie cabbage," consisting of cut up hot dogs and cabbage in a soy sauce broth, often poured over rice. It had a salty, sweet, and umami taste to it, and the softness of the hot dogs balanced the crunchiness of the cabbage, while the saltiness of the broth enveloped the fluffy, glutinous rice. Every time I eat it, it feels like I am being wrapped in my favorite blanket—homey, warm, and familiar. The first time I made the dish with my husband, we joked that it was poor people's food. Indeed, the ingredients seemed to be indicative of a poor immigrant lifestyle.

My family had a number of stories about weenie cabbage. Apparently, the home retail store R.C. Willey sometimes gave out free hot dogs. My grandparents would go and stuff as many hot dogs as they could into Ziploc bags, smuggle them into my grandmother's purse, and then later use them to make weenie cabbage. In fact, my grandpa was always collecting free things like sauce packets, napkins, plastic utensils, and more, anything to save a little money. These stories have always made me laugh; imagining my grandparents hurriedly stuffing as many free hot dogs as they could into my grandma's purse as if they were stealing away with some buried treasure. Yet this laugh is never lighthearted. A lighthearted laugh explodes weightlessly off of your chest when your friend cracks a joke or you're watching a T.V. sitcom. Instead, this is the type of laugh that gnaws at your chest like heartburn. The type that you let out kind of because it's funny, but also kind of because if you don't, grief will tumble out instead. It is that sort of weighted laugh, because as silly as my grandpa stuffing hot dogs in my grandma's purse seemed, I knew they only did those things in order to survive.

As I sat in my kitchen eating the soup, I recalled one evening when I was home visiting my family for summer break, and my grandpa had made us weenie cabbage. My uncle was also in town at the time, and we were all sitting around the table. "I love weenie cabbage," I remarked. "I don't know why, but I have always really loved this dish." My uncle chuckled and looked at me, "you know that's camp food, right?" he said. By "camp food" my uncle was referring to the food my family had cooked while incarcerated in internment camps. As a result of their incarceration, Japanese Americans had been forced to rely largely on preserved food like spam and hot dogs. Unable to eat traditional Japanese cuisine, they invented new dishes to serve to their community in the mess halls. "Wow," I said, a little bit embarrassed. "I never knew it was camp food." All these years I had assumed the dish had come about because of poverty, that class—not race—explained why the ingredients were cheap. I suppose in some ways, it did. After all, it's not as if the government was sending expensive and healthy foods to people they considered internal enemies. But the fact of the matter was it somehow never occurred to me that this food could have resulted from racial trauma. Despite the fact I was writing my dissertation on Asian American racialization in the contemporary era, I had been unable to identify it sitting right in front of me in a bowl of soup.

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