

We Need to Put a Name to This Violence

The recent attacks on Asian-Americans have unearthed the contradictions and questions beneath America's impoverished understanding of race. To solve the problem, we must first learn how to talk about it.

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In the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, a dedicated group of community organizers, activists and academics banded together to address what the press had called the “Black-Korean conflict.” Their work, which included a march through Koreatown demanding peace and the publication of several studies, aimed to tell a story of mutual misunderstanding and media distortion.

In “Blue Dreams,” the first in-depth post-1992 study of the Black-Korean conflict, John Lie, a sociologist, and Nancy Abelmann, an anthropologist, wrote that while the fissures between the two communities had a long history, “the situation is not simple; the responses are not singular.” For example, they noted, “There are Korean-American merchants who work hard to better community life by holding neighborhood picnics, sponsoring sports teams and offering scholarships.” By casting out a constellation of exceptions, the authors, who certainly were not alone in this type of work, attempted to show that underneath all the media hype, real people were still sharing real community.

One can certainly understand the desire to reduce tensions and provide some path toward mutual understanding, but many of these calls for unity, especially those expressed in the endlessly nuanced, overly caveated language of that era's academy, read in hindsight like desperate attempts to paper over the immensity of the divide.

The commonly observed reality was much more straightforward. It took the form of Latasha Harlins, the 15-year-old girl who, a year before the Rodney King verdict, was shot in the back of the head by a Korean store owner in an argument over a bottle of orange juice; the more than 2,000 Korean stores that were looted or burned to the ground during the riots that followed the verdict; the Korean men who carried rifles onto the roofs of their businesses in Koreatown and shot at looters who came near. And anyone who thought that the national news media had

invented a race war out of thin air needed only to listen to Ice Cube's 1991 song "Black Korea," which warned:

So don't follow me up and down your market
Or your little chop suey ass'll be a target
Of a nationwide boycott
Juice with the people, that's what the boy got
So pay respect to the black fist
Or we'll burn your store right down to a crisp
And then we'll see ya
Cause you can't turn the ghetto into Black Korea

Over the past month, as reports of attacks on Asian-Americans, particularly Asian-American elders, have circulated, a new generation of scholars, writers and celebrities have tried to figure out not just what to do, but what exactly is even happening, and how to discuss it.

The public conversations, which have focused on rising xenophobia and what it means for a largely professional class of Asian-Americans, reflect, in many ways, the legacy of the scholarship following the 1992 riots. One can feel the understandable desire to reroute the conversation to safer and more familiar conclusions. The conversations also reflect a disconnect between the people on all sides who experience the violence — who are often working class — and the commentariat.

What's different is the lack of clarity in the story. It's still unclear what, exactly, is happening and even less clear why. This time, there is no easy line to draw from the history of a Korean merchant class setting up in Black neighborhoods to a girl lying dead on the floor of a convenience store; no buildings are being torched in retaliation.

What exists, instead, are videos that show Asians being attacked in cities across the country. Viral outrage usually requires sustained propulsion: One video usually isn't enough because it can be written off as an isolated incident, but two videos released just days apart, both showing horrifying acts of violence, can create a narrative.

Two of the most widely shared of these involved elderly men in the Bay Area who were shoved to the ground by Black assailants. One of the victims, an 84-year old Thai man named Vicha Ratanapakdee, died from his injuries.

It is difficult to put these videos into a context that makes sense of them, leaving us with several unsatisfying interpretations. And not even the videos themselves are reliable — images of what was described as an attack on a second elderly Asian man, released shortly after the shoving of Mr. Vicha, prompted another round of outrage, including a \$25,000 reward from the actors Daniel Dae Kim and Daniel Wu for information that would lead to the capture of the assailant. It turned out that the victim, a 91-year-old man named Gilbert Diaz walking in Oakland's Chinatown, is Latino.

There are claims of a huge national spike in anti-Asian hate crimes, but they largely rely on self-reported data from organizations like Stop AAPI Hate that popped up after the start of the pandemic. These resources are valuable, but they also use as their comparison point spotty and famously unreliable official hate crime statistics from law enforcement. If we cannot really tell how many hate crimes took place before, can we really argue that there has been a surge?

There have also been reports that suggest that these attacks be placed within the context of rising crime nationwide, especially in large cities. What initially appears to be a crime wave targeting Asians might just be a few data points in a more raceless story.

There have also been condemnations of Donald Trump and how his repeated use of the phrase “China virus” to describe the coronavirus and his invocation of white supremacy might be responsible. But how does that explain the attacks by Black people? Were they also acting as Mr. Trump’s white supremacist henchmen? Do we really believe that there is some coordinated plan by Black people to brutalize Asian-Americans?

And there are writers who argue that Asian-Americans fall outside the accepted discourse about race in this country — that there’s just no available language to discuss bad things that might happen to them.

This last point is only partly true. There are plenty of words to describe discrimination at the hands of white people: white supremacy, microaggressions, the bamboo ceiling, Orientalism. What doesn’t exist now, or for that matter, didn’t exist in 1992, is a language to discuss what happens when the attackers caught on video happen to be Black.

And so, we are left with the videos, which transcend language and cultural barriers and exist in a space outside mediation and intervention. They have been viewed thousands, or even millions, of times by a people who are not really a people at all. There is no shared history between, say, Thai immigrants who saw images of one of their own attacked in San Francisco, and the Chinese-American population of Oakland alarmed by the assault in Chinatown.

Asian-American identity is fractured and often incoherent because it assumes kinship between people who do not speak the same language, and, in many cases, dislike one another. Solidarity between these groups is rare — the burning of Korean businesses during the 1992 Los Angeles riots, for example, did not produce a mass response from Chinese- or Japanese-Americans. But because the recent attacks seem aimed at anyone who looks Asian, they have translated across the language, country-of-origin, and perhaps most important, class lines that usually separate one group of Asians from another.

For better or worse, a collective identity can emerge from these moments. Amid the outcry, a new form of Asian-Americanness has begun to stand up, unsteadily, on its legs, still uncertain of where it will go. In private conversations, the foreign language press, and messaging apps like WeChat and KakaoTalk catering to the Asian diaspora, a central question is being asked: Why does nobody care when our people get attacked and killed in the streets? Where is the outcry

for us? Do our lives not matter?



Na Kim

This is not to say that all Asian-Americans believe that these attacks are racially motivated, nor does it mean that some silent majority now believes that Black people are waging a race war against them. But the answers to the question “Why does nobody care?” has unearthed a series of contradictions that always lurked right beneath the surface, unmentioned in polite company: We are not white, but do we count as “people of color”? (Not according to the newer literature around school equity, which increasingly doesn’t include Asians when discussing diversity.) When people say “Black and brown folk” do they also mean yellow? (Probably not.)

These questions are not new, but the attacks have placed them in a discomfiting, sometimes maddening, context and heightened their urgency. The videos of the two assaults in the Bay Area, for example, coincided with national scrutiny over the place of high-achieving Asian students in public schools.

The San Francisco Board of Education recently voted to end merit-based admissions to Lowell,

the city's premier public high school. The ostensible reason for the change is to address equity concerns within the school system and to make Lowell more representative of the city at large. Like most of the public schools with merit-based admissions that have come under fire over the past few years, Lowell is predominantly Asian, with many students coming from Chinese working-class families.

For some Asian-American families in San Francisco, the change amounted to discrimination, not from right-wing politicians or white supremacists, but from the liberals who were supposed to be on their side. This change, juxtaposed with the recent attacks, expose, in microcosm, the deep, discomfoting tension that sits at the heart of progressive politics around race: *Why would we give up our spots at selective schools to benefit the same people who attack us in the streets?* And more broadly: *If we are the natural enemy of equity and racial progress, then why should we support it? Is the pursuit of a more equitable America a zero-sum game?*

The relative truth of this tension can be excavated, debated and examined. The usual explanations, invoking the history of this country, the model minority myth, and the need for solidarity against white supremacy, can be forcefully stated. All these are true and necessary, but they do not tell us why nobody seems to care when Asian people get attacked.

In the fall of 2018, I spent a few days with Yukong Zhao, a Chinese immigrant businessman who had worked on several Asian-American activist campaigns, whether protesting Jimmy Kimmel's show or supporting Asian anti-discrimination initiatives against prestigious universities.

At the time, it seemed that Mr. Zhao was part of an ascendant Asian-American conservative movement whose main appeal came from upending the carefully constructed, nuanced narrative about the place of Asians in the American racial hierarchy. Mr. Zhao, who voted for Donald Trump and made a losing congressional bid as a Republican in 2020, has fashioned himself into an evangelist of pure meritocracy and self-reliance. He believes that Asian-Americans should be politically active like right-wing Cuban-Americans in Florida.

Instead of the capitulations and endless contextualizing offered up by progressive, second-generation Asian-Americans, he and his fellow activists simply asked: What about us? Why does it not count when we're discriminated against? Toward the end of our time together in his home in Orlando, Fla., Mr. Zhao told me he wished Asian-Americans could unite to fight for their own and persuade Americans to protect them in the same way the Black community does.

I disagree with Mr. Zhao on almost every possible substantive point. I do not think America protects Black lives, I support affirmative action, I reject all forms of self-interested, racial chauvinism. But I recognize that in this time of crisis for Asian-Americans, this message of nationalism and self-protection, with all its implied calls for law and order and incarceration, will be heard by millions who are still trying to figure out what "Asian-American" even means. Who will sound like the truth-teller, and who will sound like the out-of-touch liberal who talks

vaguely about the need for unity?

Last year, a few weeks before the pandemic shut down San Francisco, a video made the rounds on social media. It captured a 68-year-old Chinese man in the Bayview neighborhood in a confrontation with a handful of Black people. The man, who made his living collecting cans, was being harassed and humiliated. The cart he used to carry the day's haul had been taken away from him. His grabber had also been snatched and a Black man was swinging at him with it.

In the video, you can hear a woman off-camera ask the person filming the encounter to help the old man. He responds: "Hell, no, I'm not helping this [expletive]. I hate Asians." As the Chinese man begins to despair and cry, the man filming shoves the camera in his face and mocks him.

Asian-Americans in the area demanded justice from San Francisco's progressive district attorney, Chesa Boudin. Mr. Boudin, who is among a new breed of prosecutors who favor restorative justice over jail whenever possible, dropped charges against the 20-year-old man who filmed the attack, citing the wishes of the victim. The decision prompted people to raise the well-worn questions asked by Asian-Americans conservatives like Mr. Zhao: What would have happened if the attackers were Asian and the victim was Black? Do hate crimes count only when they run one way?

These are not sophisticated questions, but they are being asked over and over again. My fear is that these attacks will also accelerate a trend already underway. Roughly one-third of Asian-American voters supported Donald Trump in 2020, a figure that represented a seven point increase from 2016. As Asian-Americans once again ask themselves where they fit in the country, champions of law and order like Mr. Zhao will provide simple, compelling answers.

They will not care about the decades of efforts by courageous Asian, Black and Latino organizers to build solidarity between working-class people in the Bay Area and nationwide, nor will they care that the people who have been attacked appear largely to be from the working poor and will certainly bear the brunt of an escalation in racial conflict.

Electoral politics are not everything, nor should they be the basis for how we think about ourselves and how we relate to others. But these past months have also shown the limits of the rote progressive language about race and its assumption, in practice, of a binary between Black and white Americans.

There is an opportunity to reshape that language to address the contradictions inherent in the lives of millions of immigrants and to create a reality that acknowledges the size of the rift between Asian and Black Americans, but does not fall into a zero-sum game in which everyone loses.

These questions and contradictions must be taken up before the narrative around these attacks calcifies into something more sinister. Foot patrols have already formed in Asian neighborhoods around the country. Those of us who, like Mr. Boudin, believe in non-jail

solutions to crime, must not bury these concerns about the simplistic way in which race is discussed and then acted upon with a fog of platitudes about white supremacy and Donald Trump.

It has become increasingly clear that in the coming months, the climate of fear and the unsaid conversations could lead to vigilantism or a false accusation against a Black defendant. A militant response, which takes, at least in part, its inspiration from the images of Korean shopkeepers patrolling their rooftops with guns during the 1992 Los Angeles riots, seems possible and should not be dismissed. If left to fester, this reactionary anger will only harden into a reactionary nationalism that will threaten vital community and organizing work and turn one race against another.

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