

## Racism is a Virus

Racism is a virus, precariously harming communities internationally. Recently, it has been setting unprecedented record-highs alongside the COVID-19 outbreak, illuminating the gravity of injustice for Asian communities worldwide. However, dehumanising slurs or the 339% increase in Asian hate crimes in the United States, are only the surface of the long, ugly history of Asian discrimination.

Anti-Asian racism has plagued the Western hemisphere since the first wave of immigration. From the 1850s, “Oriental identity” has been tied to diseases, which helped to stereotype Asians as dangerous, immoral and dirty, thus suppressing their social status and justifying surveillance over them.

For instance, the 1900s bubonic plague in San Francisco falsely denigrated an entire community of Asian Americans. Overnight, police surrounded the city’s Chinatown, enforcing home searches, property destruction and only exempting white residents from entering and exiting the city. A century later, COVID-19 hit a world where racial discrimination awaited with the same intensity and xenophobic sentiments swept over the nation. COVID-19’s stigmatizing labels such as “China virus” and “Kung Flu”, courtesy of former president Donald Trump, has been a quintessential method of racial profiling that vilified all people of Asian descent, comparable to the the 1900s bubonic plague. The world is retrogressing.

Our racist past continues to infiltrate the world like a virus, creating our racist present. During the COVID-19 outbreak, as the world reverted to its unconscious biases, the West’s racist history rose and struck once again. February 2020, a month before the lockdown, I was passing a group of students in the school hallway when one kid sniggered to their friends, “Watch out,

China virus passing!” The other kids laughed and shared their own racist commentary and although I was shocked and repulsed, my only reaction was to pass the group silently and quickly as possible. Later, as I replayed the moment over and over in my head, I realised that *racism spreads like a virus*. The student who first made the racist comment infected their bias among the group and myself. Now how many people would those people, or myself, subconsciously spread racism to?

I did not report the students or share this particular experience. Since anti-Asian racism has been normalised for centuries and our challenges have been undermined through the model-minority myth, many Asians including myself have internalised that our struggles are invalid and inevitable on a social and political level. Furthermore, experiencing cultural discrimination from the media, friends and family, academic institutions and every corner of Western systems, I began to accept anti-Asian racism as “normal” on a personal level.

Experiencing the pandemic of racism daily had made me numb. Consider how the first COVID-19 lockdown in March, 2020 catalysed international frenzy but by the fourth lockdown, toilet paper still lined the shelves as if it had become routine. Similarly, when I first encountered racism, I reacted with a righteous attitude, retorting back to every insult and phoning local institutions to demand a change in policies. But when my attempts were met with a deadend such as “they were joking”, “there’s nothing we can do” or silence, I soon became apathetic to anti-Asian bias. When the group of kids I passed in the hallway yelled “China virus passing”, all I could think was, ‘There’s nothing I can do about it.’

However, when you note the violent mobs that deported Asians out of America in the 19th century, it is not a surprise that Asians experience a numbness when “go back to China” vandalises store windows in the 21st century. The fundamental structure of Western society has

been covertly built upon centuries of racism which has been institutionalised. For instance, during the formation of the educational system in 19th century Canada, provincial law banned Asians from having any voice over education, even in the midst of segregation. Decisions were left to white colonists who erased significant historical contributions of Asian immigrants and further emphasised our status as “perpetual foreigners”. To this day, curriculums often portray Asians as “the enemy” economically, socially or militarily and educators and students alike are deprived of opportunities to learn about Asian American history. Even seemingly small acts such as the use of exclusively Western names in textbooks have caused internalised ostracism, a hidden virus attacking us from the inside.

However, despite racism being a dangerous plague, killing, excluding and dividing humanity, there is yet to be a vaccine for it. Asian American communities have endured centuries of this pandemic of bias, yet a solution is not being prioritised.

While conversing with an Asian friend, she casually joked about being called a racial slur. When I became indignant on her behalf, she said, “sometimes, I think it’s just a part of being Asian American.” I paused. I realised that I, too, had not regarded being called “China virus”, being spat on or avoided, as seriously as I should have. Many Asian Americans have painfully adapted. Since we could not change our racist environment, we changed ourselves to fit it. Since our requests for a vaccine to this prejudicial pandemic has been ignored, we have accepted the virus.

Recently, I have been contemplating the specific moment when the kids yelled “China virus passing” and I walked away silently. I subconsciously chose to deal with the situation by myself. But instead, if I had stood up against discrimination in that moment, could I have stopped the spread of racism? If so, how many people could I have infected with self reflection?

Justice can be just as contagious as injustice. I have the power of justice in my own hands. At least a fraction of the vaccine for racism lies in our own hands.

When they silence us, we *can* scream louder. When they call us “China virus”, we can stop and face them. When they tell us “there’s nothing we can do about it”, we can say “we can do something about it”. When they suppress us, we *can* and we *will* rise again.

Word count: 989

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