

continue to impact the lives of various Asians living outside of their natal Asian lands, whether in terms of multiple generations or recent relocation.² And I believe that the rise in anti-Chinese racism and xenophobia that has emerged worldwide³ in the wake of the global pandemic makes all of us who appear East Asian to be targets, whether we are Chinese nationals, Chinese Americans, or anyone who can be perceived and mistaken to be Chinese.⁴ Because in times of crisis, the pattern has emerged all too clearly and yellow rhetoric has demonstrated all too well: we are all in danger of being victims of violence, verbal or physical, through the flattening of ethnic distinctions in favor of racist and xenophobic ideologies and attacks.

I've often wondered what choices I'd have made if I had been alive during WWII. Very specifically, I've wondered whether I'd have worn a button declaring myself to be Chinese American. There's some debate about whether these buttons, ones that read "I am Chinese" or "I am Korean" were real or fictive, especially since within an Asian American studies frame, the most well-known citation comes from the fictional short story, "Wilshire Bus," written by Hisaye Yamamoto. In this short story a Japanese American woman is sitting on a Los Angeles bus and witnesses a drunk white man harass a Chinese American woman. During the encounter she flashes back on a memory where she saw a fellow Asian wearing an "I am Korean" button and recalls hearing about similar buttons saying "I am Chinese" (Yamamoto 1998, 36).

Would I have worn this pin? Would you if you were me?

I'd like to think we have. That we have protested the unconstitutional incarceration of 120,000 Japanese Americans—that these would have been my friends and neighbors.⁵ That I have recognized the precarity of their situation because of my own precarious circumstances as a non-white American. Yet during this time of enormous xenophobia and wartime hysteria, would that excuse my complicity and possible cowardice in wearing such a pin—to choose survival over solidarity?

Perhaps I don't have to wait for a time machine to see what kinds of choices I'd make in the face of xenophobia and rampant racism. In the case of our present times, I find myself in the position of being both a target and an ally. As anyone who isn't living off the grid or on a remote island untouched by technology or travel knows, we are living in the midst of a global pandemic that knows no borders nor boundaries. Yet the fact that the COVID-19 virus does not discriminate has prevented humans from acts of extreme violence targeting people they believe caused the outbreak: the Chinese. As alluded to above, this has meant that anyone who is perceived to be Chinese—so anyone of East Asian ancestry—is subject to forms of harassment as mild as dirty looks to more direct verbal harassment as well as violent attacks. In the US a Southeast Asian family of four was stabbed outside a Walmart in Texas, including a two-year-old toddler (Kennedy 2020). A Korean American woman was

punched in the face while walking in New York City (Bishara [2020](#)). A Filipino family in Carmel, CA was subject to a racist tirade by a drunk British

millennia have treated and still treat Black people as if their lives are expendable—as if their lives are not worth as much as the lives of white European descended people. Anti-Black racism in the US has been so real and so rampant for so long that many of us have simply thought that this is the way that it is—so much so that before Barack Obama’s election there were serious debates about whether a Black person could ever be elected to be President of the United States. That this would be considered a serious issue warranting serious debate shows how deeply entrenched anti-Black racism is and has been,

preventing Black people from marrying white people, and white supremacy is pronounced in laws preventing Black students from attending white schools or Black families living in white neighborhoods. White supremacy created separate train cars, water fountains, and bathrooms.¹² And when these laws were struck down there were de facto laws, cultural taboos, and social norms that kept Black people from being fully embraced into the fabric of the US.

This history is important for understanding why there were so many Black Lives Matter protests in the US and around the world in June 2020—it's a history imperfectly understood and undertold in the United States. The US's focus on freedom and liberty has often obscured a darker and more nefarious history of oppression and restriction. And as a friend from the UK recently opined, in Europe people talk about freedom from—from fascism for example, while in the US people talk about freedom to—the freedom to say whatever we want, to carry a gun, to not wear a mask.

We also have an imperfect history and understanding of cross-racial solidarity and coalition work, particularly between Black and Asian Americans in the US. In fact, more often than not, I would assume that if you asked the average

immigrants in China where they have been accused of spreading coronavirus and discriminated against in housing and employment (Vincent [2020](#))

who routinely advocate for Asian Pacific Islander Americans, African Americans, Indigenous, and Latinx people. Franklin Odo has worked with Tsuru for Solidarity (Tsuru for Solidarity [n.d.](#))

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Notes

1. For an excellent historical account of the origins of the Asian American studies movement see Daryl Maeda's (2011).
2. The theme of the 2021 Association for Asian American Studies conference is "Unsettling Transpacific Ecologies" (<https://aaastudies.org/calls-for-papers/>); both conference co-chairs, Dr. Aimee Bahng and Dr. LeiLani Nishime are scholars whose work looks at the transpacific and transnational connections within Asian American studies and among the Pacific Island diaspora.
3. Though the focus of this article is on anti-Asian racism in the United States, incidents of anti-Chinese and anti-Asian xenophobia have arisen globally, such as in Australia as this article outlines (<https://www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/asian-australian-groups-report-surge-in-racist-abuse-assaults-during-pandemic-20200512-p54s6f.html>) and in various European nations (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide>).
4. Between March and June 2020 there were over 2,100 reported cases of anti-Asian harassment (

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