Between Empirical Data and Anti-Blackness: A Critical Perspective on Anti-Asian Hate Crimes and Hate Incidents

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Journal of Asian American Studies, Volume 25, Number 3, October 2022, pp. 387-410 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2022.0033*

BETWEEN EMPIRICAL DATA AND ANTI-BLACKNESS

A Critical Perspective on Anti-Asian Hate Crimes and Hate Incidents

Janelle Wong & Rossina Zamora Liu

After a US president (with connections to white nationalists), raised the specter of Yellow Peril and white shooters engaged in mass killings of Asian Americans in Atlanta and Indianapolis in the spring of 2021, white violence toward Asian Americans was difficult to ignore. Yet one leading story of anti-Asian violence in the wake of the pandemic is of an Asian American senior, often termed an "elder" in reporting, or young woman brutally beaten by a person who "appears to be Black." This story and others like it have circulated throughout the Asian American community via viral videos. The story has been the subject of calls for attention to "Black-Asian conflict" in the recent past.[1] In March 2021, for example, *Vox* reporters noted that "Many of the attacks that have gained widespread attention have featured Black assailants, and have threatened to inflame tensions between Asian Americans and Black Americans."[2] In April of 2021, a story by an NBC local affiliate in Seattle observed that "There have also been widely circulated videos that show Black men attacking Asian Americans."[3]

Meanwhile, survey and crime data suggest a different trend. Empirical data, for instance, shows that, compared to their share of the population, Asian American elders (over age 65) are underrepresented among victims of Asian American hate crimes and hate incidents. While women are more likely to *report* a hate incident to the StopAAPIHate reporting site, multiple sources of data show that men are as likely or more likely to experience a hate incident than women. Further, the vast majority of violence against Asian Americans

consists not of physical assaults but of verbal harassment and "shunning." The data also shows that Black offenders make up a minority of offenders. And, comparatively, Black Americans are up to ten times more likely to report being the victim of a hate crime than Asian Americans, and this pattern persists even in places like California, where Asian Americans comprise nearly double the population of Black Americans.[4] This is true despite the fact that people of all racial backgrounds indicate that they are reluctant to report hate crimes. The point here is not to minimize the disturbing incidents, crimes, and even killings that have been widely circulated as part of anti-Asian hate media coverage; rather, placing these incidents in a broader context allows them to be better understood and ultimately addressed by well-informed policy.

As two Asian American women and non-Black educators of Color, we seek to better understand the disconnection between the empirical data and the many Black-Asian conflict narratives of anti-Asian violence. We note that, despite a wealth of compelling empirical data, the media arc of anti-Asian violence—historically a symptom of white supremacy—quickly turned from the China-focused rhetoric of a white president and the heinous actions of white mass shooters to a focus on Black individuals physically assaulting Asian American elders. What is disturbing about this second narrative, which we describe as the "Black-on-Asian crime" narrative, is that it eclipses systematic racism captured by data, while gaining a widely accepted place in the discourse of Black aggression as a root cause of anti-Asian violence. The Black-on-Asian crime narrative has not only (re)ignited the Black-Asian conflict trope but seems to have also illuminated an undercurrent of anti-Blackness in narratives of Asian American victimization and perceptions of safety.

In this paper, we present data regularly ignored in widely circulating Black-on-Asian crime narratives around anti-Asian violence, followed by a theoretically grounded reflection on the gap between empirical data and viral videos that emphasize Asian American vulnerability against the threat of Black violence. To be clear, we acknowledge that the anti-Asian incidents shown on viral videos are not only real and abhorrent but they have understandably elicited anger and fear in our community. What we hope to illustrate is the way in which these incidents have become prominent in discourses around anti-Asian violence, even though data indicates otherwise. We ask: what do empirical data suggest about Asian Americans' experiences with hate crimes and hate incidents? Similarly, what insights might a critical racial analysis of the Black-on-Asian crime narratives around anti-Asian violence suggest about Asian American racialization and our perceptions of safety?

To explore these questions, we consider several important frameworks. First, Asian Critical Theory (or AsianCrit) allows us to examine how race and rac-

ism affect the lives of Asian Americans within US society.[5] Through this theoretical lens, we can better understand our unique racialization as Asian Americans; this racialization positions us as both model minorities and perpetual outsiders to US society. That Asian Americans can exist as exemplars in education and the professional workforce and as a "Chinese virus" during a global pandemic is an example of this precarity. AsianCrit also asserts that Asian Americans are often unseen and underheard in US history, and this assertion of being overlooked has certainly evolved into matters about race and racism. This belief of invisibility underpins much of the media coverage of anti-Asian violence during the pandemic. While this coverage is important, many news stories tend to amplify one particular type of offender and therefore one particular narrative over empirical fact.

In addition to looking at how white supremacy continues to fuel anti-Asian violence, we recognize the urgency to examine how antiblackness may be informing many of the narratives around anti-Asian incidents, thus weakening our solidarity with Black and other non-Black communities of Color. Certainly, the Black-on-Asian crime narrative is an outcome of white supremacy (racial minorities are positioned against each other), but to understand its prominence in narratives of anti-Asian violence, we must also engage in a deeply introspective critique of anti-Blackness—how white supremacy benefits from anti-Blackness and how we must work to reject it at the same time as we condemn the insidiousness of racism against the Asian American community.

Using Black Critical Theory, or BlackCrit[6] , and other theoretical perspectives of anti-Blackness[7] we uncover narrative strands of Black criminality and aggression within discourses of anti-Asian violence, fear of racial violence, and collective-filial desire to protect our elders. In their theorization of BlackCrit, Dumas and ross center Black lives and confront the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness—the ongoing dehumanization of, and disdain for Black people, Blackness, and Black humanity—within white supremacy and beyond. That is, anti-Blackness exists regardless of what racial supremacy we live in, and it *can* and *does* manifest among non-Black people, communities, and institutions. Within the current context of reporting on anti-Asian violence, this critical racial lens can help elucidate the racial position of Asian Americans as non-Black people of Color and the ways in which some Asian Americans can participate in blurring, and perhaps even conflating, our differential racialization (e.g., by undermining the prevalence of anti-Blackness).[8] In his book on the denial of antiblackness, Vargas suggests that in efforts to center their (our) own suffering, the multiracial collective often denies the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness and its grave impact on Black people and Black communities. Central to our argument, therefore, is the seduction of anti-Blackness within our own Asian American community,

and in particular, the ways that anti-Blackness intertwines within and across discourses around Black criminality and Asian victimization.[9]

Accordingly, we assert that conversations around anti-Asian violence are incomplete without a critical analysis of anti-Blackness. Focusing solely on white supremacy (as most critiques around racial violence do) over-simplifies the differential racialization of Black and non-Black communities of Color. It does not allow us to fully understand the multilayered complexities of anti-Asian violence and anti-Black discourses and our cross-racial relationships with one another. Indeed, even if not always dominant, the interspersal of images of Black-on-Asian-crime in coverage of anti-Asian violence tends to emphasize physical assaults by Black individuals, thereby playing on commonly accepted racist stereotypes of Black criminality.[10] And while we may recognize that dominant discourses of safety and its antithesis (e.g., with regard to anti-Asian violence) are rooted in white supremacy *and* anti-Blackness (Jenkins 2021), most critiques of anti-Asian violence rarely examine the interconnections between them.[11]

For this reason, a large part of our paper calls for a critical racial analysis of widely circulating narratives around racist incidents against Asian Americans and their racialization as non-Black people of color.

We first present empirical data on anti-Asian violence and examine the patterns that it suggests. By presenting data from multiple sources, we lay the foundation for our critical reflection on the space between stories of anti-Asian violence circulating in the mainstream media and viral videos and the stories told by empirical data.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND NARRATIVE CONTEXT

In January and February of 2020, the first cases of COVID-19 in the United States weredetected by public health agencies.[12] The source of the virus was likely China (ibid), but the World Health Organization advised media organizations not to "attach locations or ethnicity" to the disease to avoid stigmatizing ethnic groups. Even so, on March 19th of that year, news outlets reported that President Donald Trump had "doubled-down on blaming China" for the spread of the virus, and that he had repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus."[13] Sean Darling-Hammond and colleagues documented a rise in implicit bias against Asian Americans during the time when Trump, prominent Republicans, and conservative media outlets continued to refer to COVID-10 as the "Chinese virus."[14] They observed exponential increases in use of such terms in the media and on Twitter in the first weeks of March and a corresponding

increase in implicit bias against Asian Americans among non-Asian Americans who took an Implicit Association Test over that same period. Over the first year of the pandemic, community reporting sites like StopAAPIHate.com and official law enforcement statistics logged an increase in reported anti-Asian hate incidents.[15] In March 2021, attention to anti-Asian hate further intensified when a white gunman killed eight people at several spas in the Atlanta metro area, including six Asian American women. Just one month later four Sikh Americans were killed at a mass shooting in Indianapolis.

Survey data suggest that among Asian Americans who believed that violence was increasing over the first year of the pandemic, Donald Trump was among those to blame.[16] In fact, Trump was one of the most common factors mentioned in open-ended responses to a Pew survey querying Asian Americans about "the main reasons violence was increasing." For example, one Asian American respondent (aged 40), said "Four years of Trump has normalized racism and bullying. His continual example of blaming Asians for the coronavirusis allowing people to openly discriminate against Asians(s)."[17] Meanwhile, in spring 2021, a parallel narrative was circulating. Videos of attacks on older Asian Americans, shared on social media, shifted attention away from Trump and the white shooters in Atlanta and Indianapolis. One of the most widely shared, in February 2021, was an attack on 84-year-old Thai American, Vicha Ratanapakdee, in San Francisco, who was hospitalized and later died. The video of Rantanapakdee is credited with prompting a public statement from President Biden on the issue of anti-Asian violence.[18] The suspect in the video appeared to be a young Black man.

Several other videos were shared in subsequent months, prompting headlines across the nation:

- "Covid Fueled Anti-Asian Racism. Now Elderly Asian Americans Are Being Attacked."[19]
- "Anger And Fear As Asian American Seniors Targeted In Bay Area Attacks."[20]
- "Amid Rash of Assaults, Asian American Elders Practice Self-Defense."[21]

Although unstated in headlines, the narrative most prominently featured in viral video coverage, as noted, was that of elderly Asian Americans being attacked by perpetrators who "appeared to be Black." To illustrate, the Associated Press published a story in March 2021 that ran under the headline "Suspect in Attack on Asian American Woman in NYC is Arrested."[22] The victim was described as a 65-year-old immigrant woman from the Philippines. The story featured a photo of the suspect and provided his name and age and mentioned his race as "Black."

The article linked the attack with "a national spike in anti-Asian hate crimes." The primary narrative being suggested throughout these rhetorical connections is that the increase in "anti-Asian hate crimes" is fueled by assaults committed by Black individuals. Over the spring of 2022, attacks against young Asian American women also featured prominently in local and national media. In particular, the murders of two women in New York City, one pushed into an oncoming subway train and one stabbed and killed in her apartment, dominated the news cycle in the early months of 2022. While neither was classified as a hate crime, coverage often connected these incidents to a rise in anti-Asian hate crimes. Pictures of the Black perpetrators circled widely on the internet.[23] Asian Americans were understandably outraged and distraught by these horrific incidents of anti-Asian violence. And it is not surprising that one potential interpretation of these headlines was that Asian Americans were facing a unique level of hostility relative to other groups, and that the most vulnerable members of our community were bearing the brunt of vicious physical assaults.

We identify how these stories depart from the systematic patterns that characterize anti-Asian hate crimes and hate incidents. Further, it is clear from the data presented that anti-Asian hate crimes and incidents take place within a broader landscape of racialized hate affecting other non-white groups. We provide an overview of the systematic patterns found in empirical data on hate crimes and hate incidents below.

The summary below includes data from four major sources: 1) official law enforcement crime statistics; 2) community-based reporting sites; 3) national surveys; and 4) media coverage analysis. The strengths and weaknesses of each source are detailed in a report by Janelle Wong and more briefly under subheading one below.[24] Before we discuss the trends, we offer a note on terminology:

> "Hate crime" refers to incidents classified by law enforcement as a "hate crime" or referred to in survey questions explicitly as a "hate crime." A hate crime, according to the FBI, is a legally defined criminal offense or an illegal act motivated in whole or in part by bias against race or another protected category.[25]
>
> For purposes of clarity in this article, "Hate incident" and "anti-Asian harassment" signify words or acts, perceived to be motivated by bias, that do not rise to the level of a criminal offense.

We use the same terminology employed in the data source referenced.[26]

Contrary to widely circulated viral videos featuring anti-Asian violence, the data from official law enforcement statistics, community-based reporting systems (like StopAAPIHate.com), national surveys, and systematic analysis of media reports show that while there was an uptick in anti-Asian hate after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, most incidents in the immediate years that followed did not involve physical attacks, nor target the elderly; they also did not disproportionately affect women or involve Black offenders. Finally, anti-Asian hate incidents, while growing, were not more widespread than those faced by other racial groups. Much of what we share below can be found in a data round-up report released by Janelle Wong in summer 2021[27], but statistics have also been updated to reflect trends up to December 2021.

EMPIRICAL PATTERNS

Multiple sources of data show an increase in the reporting of hate incidents targeting Asian Americans after the start of the pandemic in the spring of 2020.

Official law enforcement statistics show that in the largest jurisdictions reports of anti-Asian hate crimes more than doubled between 2019 and 2020.[28] Overall, the FBI recorded 279 hate crime incidents against Asian Americans in 2020, compared to 158 in 2019, representing a 73% increase. Survey data confirmed this trend. For example, comparable survey samples of Asian Americans show that in 2008, 11% of Asian Americans claimed to have experienced a hate crime, and in 2021, 27% claimed to have experienced a hate crime.[29] A 2021 AAPI Data/Survey Monkey Poll showed that 12% of Asian Americans experienced a hate crime over the entirety of 2020 and 10% of Asian Americans said they had experienced a hate crime in the first three months of 2021.[30]

One contrasting datapoint, from the Pew Research Center, shows that experiences with discrimination reported by Asian Americans were similar before and after the start of the pandemic. In April of 2019, 11% of Asian Americans said they had "regularly" "experienced discrimination or been treated unfairly because of their race or ethnicity," and this proportion remained consistent in June 2020 (11%) and April 2021 (7%). Among those who said they experienced discrimination "from time to time," the proportion of respondents remained consistent from April 2019 (76%) to April 2021 (73%). This data shows that experiences with discrimination were prevalent before the start of the pandemic.

Importantly, according to the survey, 81% of Asian Americans believed that violence against Asian Americans was increasing over the course of the pandemic.[31]

StopAAPIHate, a community-based reporting site, showed increasing reports of anti-Asian incidents between March of 2020 and September of 2021. A report from StopAAPIHate shows that by September of 2021, more than 10,000 incidents had been reported, with similar numbers in 2020 (4,548) and the first 9 months of 2021 (4,533).[32] The majority of these were "hate incidents," not "hate crimes," according to the organization (see terminology above).

Data sources show reported anti-Asian hate crimes and incidents increased after 2019 from a relatively low, though obviously unacceptable, baseline. Anti-Asian bias was recorded in about 7% of all reported hate crimes reported in the largest jurisdictions in 2020, and even in jurisdictions reporting the most dramatic yearly increases in hate crimes, like New York City, the rate was lower than the proportion of Asian Americans in the population.[33] In New York City, Anti-Asian crimes increased from 3 in 2019 to 28 in 2020, the largest percent increase among all large jurisdictions. This represents an increase of 833% and must be contextualized with raw numbers to fully understand the patterns.[34]

In Sacramento, anti-Asian crimes went from 1 in 2019 to 8 in 2020; this represents an increase of 700%. These crimes are each horrendous and deserve attention, but overemphasis on percentage growth may distract from the relatively small raw number of hate crimes.

In 2021, hate crimes reported by Asian American increased 360%, from 28 to 129, representing 5% of all racially-motivated hate crimes.[35] StopAAPIHate founder Russell Jeung commented that this rise in numbers should be interpreted with some caution, as it reflects both ongoing anti-Asian sentiment and "increased awareness around reporting these crimes."[36]

To be sure, there is wide variation in the sources above in terms of accurately accounting for anti-Asian hate crimes and hate incidents. We note the strengths and weaknesses of each type of reporting here. The StopAAPIHate.com reports are among the most cited in news reports. But, the site is very limited in its count of hate crimes and hate incidents, since it relies on self-reporting. There are more than 20 million Asian Americans living in the U.S., so the approximately 11,000 incidents reported by September 2021 were clearly a small subset of likely hate crime/hate incident experiences among the Asian American population. A strength of community reporting sites like StopAAPIHate.com, though, is that some Asian Americans may feel more comfortable reporting to a community-based site. In terms of official law enforcement statistics, a hate crime must meet the official legal definition of "crime" and hate motivation must be determined. Crimes range from intimidation to murder. Justice enforcement agencies are not required to submit data to the FBI for their annual crime report. In 2019,

more than 3,000 did not submit and of those that did submit, only 14% reported a hate crime.[37] A strength of official law enforcement data is the ability to track trends with a consistent definition of hate crime so that comparisons can be made across years. Law enforcement data has it weak points, however. Most individuals, across racial groups, are reluctant to report a hate crime to law enforcement agencies, and local agency participation is voluntary and very low and only includes incidents that meet the legal definition are included. Survey data, on the other hand, is not subject to the reporting biases of either law enforcement data or community-based reporting systems like StopAAPIHate.com. Both law enforcement and community-based reporting systems only represent individuals who have identified their experience as a hate incident and have chosen to report it. As such, survey data represent an important source of information on anti-Asian bias, because these data query a wider swath of those who identify as Asian American and include those who have and have not experienced anti-Asian incidents. In addition, this data is weighted in order to more closely represent known population parameters like national origin, immigration status, and age. One can also compare the wording of the same question over time. This data is subject to sampling biases in terms of who chooses to participate in the survey. However, researchers have developed techniques to maximize representativeness via triangulation of sampling techniques, including geographic, listed name, and in-language sampling.

Again, we believe any incident is one too many, and any physically violent incident deserves strong media attention. So, to be clear, we provide the percentage increases and raw numbers related to reporting here to illustrate the powerful way in which particular data points are highlighted without broader context.

MOST INCIDENTS WERE NOT PHYSICAL ATTACKS.

The StopAAPIHate community-based reporting site's November 2021 report suggests that the majority of incidents reported between March of 2020 and the end of September 2021 consisted of "verbal harassment" (63%) and "shunning" (16%) with 9% reporting physical attacks.[38] Similar patterns were reported by the Virulent Hate Project at the University of Michigan, which found that 80% of incidents studied in 2020 fell into the verbal assault or avoidance category, and 17% consisted of physical harassment, including spitting, coughing, and sneezing.[39] Verbal attacks are a form of violence, and any violent incident is one too many. But physical attacks constitute a relatively small proportion of all hate incidents. That said, physical attacks deserve special attention because

they are especially egregious. Viral videos may at the same time lead to a skewed view of the number of physical attacks when a large number of people view a relatively small number of dramatic incidents.

Younger Asian American people were more likely than older people to report hate incidents to community-based reporting systems (hotlines, online) and on surveys.

While there was a great deal of attention to vicious physical attacks on older Asian Americans in both mainstream and on social media after the start of the pandemic, physical assaults are much less common than verbal harassment and the vast majority of incidents reported are by people *under* 60 years old. By September of 2021, 7% of people reporting to StopAAPIHate were over age 60. Those in this age group make-up more than 10% of the Asian American population.[40] The Virulent Hate Project at the University of Michigan showed that about 3% of Asian American victims identified in news coverage in 2020 were senior.[41] Survey data collected by AAPI Data/Survey Monkey in March of 2021 show Asian Americans 18–34 years old were more likely than other age groups to say they experienced a hate crime in 2020 and 2021. Eight percent of Asian Americans 65 and older responded that they experienced a hate crime in 2021, compared to 14% of respondents 18–34 years old. For 2020, the stats are similar; 11% of respondents 65 or older reported experiencing a hate crime compared to 16% of 18–34 year olds. Importantly, responses to another question in the same survey suggests that older Asian Americans are *more* comfortable reporting a hate crime to law enforcement authorities than younger people. About 47% of those over 65 say they would be comfortable versus 22% of those 18–34 and 35% of those 35–64. That is, these statistics are not a function of older Asian Americans' greater reluctance to report a hate crime. It is deeply hurtful to see an Asian American older person attacked. It is important for our community to understand the nature and relative extent of such attacks so that we may respond best in an informed way.

Asian American women were not disproportionately targeted by hate crimes and incidents.

Women have featured prominently in coverage of anti-Asian violence. Such coverage is critical because it illustrates the ways in which experiences of misogyny and violence often go hand-in-hand. Community-based hotlines such as StopAAPIHate.com show that Asian American women are more likely to report hate incidents than men, with 65% of reports issued by women. The Virulent Hate Project at the University of Michigan shows that news coverage in which the victim's gender was identified also show Asian American women were the victims of 65% of harassment incidents covered in the media. However, it can be helpful to assess a range of data to obtain a clear picture of how violence is affecting our communities. For instance, official hate crime statistics analyzed by Zhang and colleagues show men (67%) are more likely than women (33%) to report violent anti-Asian hate crimes (1992–2014).[42] Further, national survey data from AAPI Data/SurveyMonkey shows that Asian American men are slightly more likely than Asian American women to report ever having experienced an anti-Asian hate incident (31% vs 25%, respectively), and in the first three months of 2021 (12% vs 8%).[43]

Most perpetrators in anti-Asian hate crimes and hate incidents identify as white, though data are often missing on the perpetrator's race.

Viral videos featuring Black perpetrators have been circulating widely on social media.[44] It is critical to contextualize social media and news coverage of such incidents as research shows that the media and crime news overreport and overrepresent Black suspects.[45] Official law enforcement statistics compiled by Zhang and colleagues in a study published in 2021 show that compared to the proportion of offenders in anti-Black and anti-Latinx hate crimes, the proportion of offenders in violent anti-Asian hate crimes are more likely to be non-white, but that 75% of offenders in violent anti-Asian hate crimes are white.[46] Though the data analyzed is from 1992–2014 it is consistent with other national data. For instance, systematic analysis of media reports of contemporary anti-Asian incidents by the University of Michigan Virulent Hate Project shows that the majority of perpetrators are identified as male and white in upwards of 75% of news stories when the perpetrator's race was known in incidents of physical or verbal assaults/harassment.[47] Official hate crime statistics from 2020 show that 55% of the offenders in hate crime incidents (all incidents) were identified as White.[48]

Racist incidents against other non-white groups demonstrate the endemic nature of hate faced by Asian Americans and other groups.

From 1996 to 2020, Black people made-up the largest proportion of hate crime victims and were the "number one target" at "twice the level they represent in the American population."[49] Official law enforcement data show that in 2019, anti-Black hate crime reports dropped, but because Black people make-up a disproportionate share of hate crime victims, Black people were still the most targeted racial group (ibid). In 2020, the latest year for which official law enforcement data are available as of this writing, anti-Black hate crimes were on the rise again. In that year, there the FBI recorded 2,871 anti-Black hate crimes, representing 54% of all racially-motivated hate crimes. In addition, there were 279 anti-Asian, 517 anti-Latinx, and 869 anti-White hate crimes reported to law enforcement, representing 5%, 10% and 17% of all racially-motivated hate crimes recorded by official law enforcement agencies in 2020.[50] This comports with historical data on violent hate crimes showing that over that period (1992–2014), there were 329 violent anti-Asian hate crimes, 5,463 violent anti-Black hate crimes and 1,355 violent anti-Hispanic hate crimes.[51] Data from the 2021 AAPIData/SurveyMonkey survey show that 27% of Asian American reported experiencing a hate crime or hate incident at least once in their life. Meanwhile, 34% of Black, 27% of Latinx, 25% of Native American and 24% of Pacific Islander respondents indicated experiencing a hate crime or hate incident. In 2021, there was some indication of converging rates of hate crimes and incidents among minority communities from AAPI Data/Survey Monkey and Pew Research Center.[52]

In addition, California Department of Justice released official law-enforcement data on hate crimes for the year 2020 that showed that Black Californians reported five times the numbers of hate crimes (459) as Asian Americans (89) in that state.[53] This was over a period during which the media devoted unprecedented attention to anti-Asian hate crimes in part due to pandemic-related increases. And given that Black Californians make-up less than half the population size of Asian Californians, the level of racialized violence experienced by Black Americans was even more striking.

These differences in rates of reported hate crime and hate incidents across groups do not appear to be a function of differential rates of reluctance to report such incidents. Existing data suggest that members of all racial groups are uncomfortable reporting a hate crime to law enforcement. Survey data from AAPI Data/SurveyMonkey show Asian Americans (30%) are the least likely of all racial groups to feel comfortable reporting an incident to law enforcement,

but more than half of all racial groups also say they do not feel comfortable with reporting hate crimes to law enforcement. Just 36% of Pacific Islander, 45% of Black, 42% of Latinx, and 46% of Native American respondents said they *would* feel comfortable reporting a hate crime to law enforcement authorities.[54] Only a small proportion of any racial group believed that justice would be served if they reported, and some feared unwanted attention or being attacked again.[55] Alternative reporting mechanisms, like community-based reporting sites and surveys lead to higher incident reports than official law enforcement statistics capture. There is some indication that media attention to community-reporting hotlines like StopAAPIHate.com are raising both awareness and addressing reluctance to report among Asian Americans as more than more than 500 incidents that took place in 2020 were *retroactively* reported to StopAAPIHate.com in the first three months of 2021.[56]

REFLECTIONS AND THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

It is clear from the summary of data above that, contrary to frequently articulated Black-on-Asian crime narratives, the bulk of documented experiences with anti-Asian hate crimes and incidents do not involve an elderly person or a young woman being physically attacked by a Black perpetrator. Instead, most of these occurrences entail verbal harassment directed at people who are young adults or middle aged (18–40 years old), and where data is available, offenders are more likely to be white than Black. Let us pause for a moment and underscore that regardless of the frequency of occurrences, what happened to the victims in the viral videos was beyond tragic. And as noted, it makes sense that most Asian Americans were enraged by what they saw. Furthermore, non-physical forms of aggression are harmful and can indubitably fuel fear among our community, for all forms of violence reap consequences, whether immediate or prolonged. Nevertheless, we must also caution against conflating non-physical assaults with the immediate severity of physical assaults (and hence, the consequences associated with them). Doing so can misdirect our perceptions of anti-Asian violence and fuel the sensationalizing of Black-on-Asian crime narratives. That multiple sources of empirical data on anti-Asian violence contradict the suggested frequency of Black criminality and Asian victimization (as implied in the widely broadcasted narratives) certainly raises the question: Why do some people in our community continue to lean into the Black-Asian conflict trope by the sharing and/or viewing of these viral videos? What motivates this tendency to overlook multiple sources of data and to invest in this dangerous narrative?

While our ability to answer such a query is beyond the scope of this paper, as Asian Americans and non-Black educators of Color who are committed to cross-racial solidarity and coalition building, we recognize the urgency to address these insidious narratives with explicit critical racial framing. At the very least, a critical racial framing of anti-Asian violence can situate these narratives outside of simplistic dichotomies like Black vs Asian, good vs, bad, *us vs them*. Certainly, the "Asian victim-Black criminal" binary plays specific roles in our understanding of the racialization of Asian Americans, as well as the differential currency of victimhood attached to that racialization within a white supremacist society. Particularly when rooted in anti-Blackness, narratives of victimization can be seductive because they discern our racialized experiences as non-Black people of Color.[57] And this makes sense; for far too long, many Asian Americans have felt overlooked, particularly when it comes to our experiences with racism. Hence, whereas the prominent narratives depicted in viral videos and the media can work to centralize and reify our experiences with racism, the empirical data can dilute them.

As powerful as these notions of victimization can be, however, they can also be devoid of critical and intersectional analysis of the varied racialization among Black and non-Black people of Color.[58] In fact, conversations about anti-Asian violence have been commonly siloed, fragmented, and incomplete; if they include any kind of critical examinations of our racialization, they tend to focus less on anti-Blackness than white supremacy. Even then, most stories around anti-Asian violence typically localize these offenses at the individual level rather than actually interrogate white supremacy *and* the prospect of our participation in anti-Blackness[59]—be that intentional or unintentional.

To this end, we contend that the prominence of the Black-on-Asian crime narrative must be understood through a combination of AsianCrit and BlackCrit and other theoretical perspectives of anti-Blackness. Such a framework uncovers how constructions of "safety" in the Asian American community and in the public imagination may be connected to anti-Black ideologies.[60] That narratives of anti-Asian hate involve a focus on Trump and white supremacy *and* a contention that Asian Americans' vulnerability is mostly rooted in Black antipathy toward our community[61], reveals the degree to which Asian Americans and the larger public may be invested in anti-Blackness[62] and in the subscription to Black criminality.[63] We argue, therefore, that the increased attention to Asian Americans discrimination can be connected to anti-Blackness.

First, the focus on Black perpetrators in the images and videos shared on social media show that like any crime coverage in the U.S., those involving Asian American victims are subject to long-standing biases that overrepresent Black people as offenders and reflect racist stereotypes about Black criminality.[64]

Many essays and reflections on anti-Asian hate since the start of the pandemic and the women rarely comment on the need to maintain vigilance against anti-Black media biases or anti-Black racism in policing, though these biases have been documented for decades.[65] Yet centering our critiques primarily on Asian Americans offers only one part of the overall racial discourse, particularly when the presumed perpetrator in the coverage is identified as a person of Color, i.e., Black.

This inability to extract our perceptions of safety and/or lack of safety from insidious stereotypes of Black criminality reflects our assumptions about space and the occupation of, and the belongingness within, that space. Through the framing of anti-Black theoretical lenses, Black people are regarded, for instance, as intruders of space and place and thus may call to question non-Black people's sense of security.[66] As Jenkins (2021) describes, "The dissonance caused by the presence of Blackness in largely non-Black confines invites us to consider how antagonisms against Black people coincide with long-held views about space and place" (108). To this point, the general perception of safety (mostly by non-Black people) is deeply rooted in anti-Blackness such that Black men are presumed guilty in every space. Further, because anti-Blackness is the dehumanization of Black men, Black women, and Black children,[67] it is assumed that they are also indistinguishable (i.e., all Black people are the same). Black dehumanization pervades the US carceral system wherein Black criminality is a universal assumption, i.e., any Black person "will do" when convictions are made in the name of "public safety." In the viral videos of attacks against elderly Asian Americans and young women, a parallel assumption that for many viewers, this idea that *any Black person* could be an offender (regardless of whether it is an actual or hypothetical attack) easily plays out. This is the current widely disseminated story plaguing many shared video documentations of anti-Asian violence. Regardless of data, perhaps many Asian Americans maintain the narrative of Black criminality and victimization of elderly Asian Americans because it is how many of us understand our positionality as non-Black people of Color[68]; there is no greater "villain," after all, than the construct of Black criminality. As Dumas (2016) writes, the embracing of "non-Black bodies of color [. . .] is facilitated by antiblackness."[69] This suggests that as non-Black people of Color, Asian Americans navigate US space in a way made possible by and in connection with anti-Blackness.

Second, and related to the previous point, we as Asian Americans sometimes fail to present our Asian American experiences in connection with those of other racialized or minoritized communities. Data from multiple sources, collected at various times, shows that Black Americans are the most vulnerable racial group when it comes to hate crimes and hate incidents. And, as we note above, the

disproportionate amount of racialized violence Black people experience is not a functionof a much greater willingness to report or talk about such violence compared to other groups. Recall that data from the 2021 AAPI Data/Survey Monkey survey show that less than half of any racial group feels comfortable reporting a hate crime to law enforcement and an even lower proportion of each group believes that justice will be served if they report a hate crime. Studies of both implicit bias toward Asian Americans and official law enforcement statistics suggest that reported anti-Asian hate crimes and hate incidents were trending down in the decade up to the pandemic and had begun to converge with that of other people of color, religious minorities and LGBT people after the start of the pandemic in 2020.[70] The exceptions are South Asian Americans, who have reported racialized violence and attacks driven by xenophobia and islamophobia, particularly in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001.[71] These trends underscore that hate and attacks are an ongoing part of life for most marginalized groups in the United States, including and especially Black people. Yet in many cases coverage of anti-Asian hate is reported without attention to the broader landscape of racially motivated hate crimes against other non-White groups.

Third, too often our community narratives suggest that Asian Americans are invisible and that experiences with racism go unrecognized by the broader public. As we discussed, this is one of the tenets of AsianCrit, but taking on this perspective should also entail serious reflection on how our experiences relate to those of other people of Color and, specifically, the systemic nature of anti-Blackness in the United States.[72] Indeed, as people of Color in the United States, our lives are impacted by systems of white supremacy *and* anti-Blackness, and we must be able to examine this without obfuscating asymmetrical power dynamics and conflating the racism experienced by Black and non-Black people of Color.[73] Rendered another way, the precarious racial positionality of Asian Americans can obscure how we make sense of our experiences with racism. It is not unreasonable, therefore, for us to consider the possibility of our own subscription to anti-Blackness and how it can inform our perceptions of anti-Asian violence. Certainly, we are not suggesting that conversations focusing on Asian American experiences with racism should not happen. In our efforts to call out anti-Asian incidents, however, our critiques must also consider the perniciousness of anti-Blackness within a white supremacist society and how it informs our own experiences with, and understanding of, violence. We must distinguish between individual street crimes and systemic racism. Where individual heinous racial violence is rooted in interpersonal situatedness and informed by systemic racism, for example, systemic racism is the sanctioning of racial injustice and inequality throughout institutional and structural networks.[74] To be certain, as

we have underscored, individual acts of violence against Asian Americans are abhorrent and unacceptable and many of them are informed by a history of racial violence and exclusion. While these offenses are consequences of white supremacy, they differ from systematically racist acts of exclusion, biases, and even violence encouraged by our laws, policies, and criminal justice system for which there is little accountability. Street crimes can be horrific, for example, but individuals committing them by their own accord carries a different meaning than police brutality, enacted by government actors with institutional power. Indeed, individual acts of violence are crimes and they can be prosecuted as such. But individual acts of violence should not be conflated with systemic anti-Black racism authorized by and exercised through laws and policies. Importantly, individual acts of violence must be analyzed and understood in connection with ongoing systemic racism, and in the case of violence committed and endured within Black and Asian communities, they have to be critiqued in conjunction with systems of anti-Blackness and how we may also participate in perpetuating them. Otherwise, without this intentional critical interrogation, our efforts to identify the specificity of anti-Asian violence could inadvertently serve a white supremacist agenda that diminishes Black claims of state violence while reifying the harmful precarious racial positionality of Asian Americans. As an ongoing query, therefore, we might ask: how can we call attention to anti-Asian violence without supplanting systemic anti-Blackness—no matter how unintentional that may be?

The horrendous attacks we have seen on Asian Americans recently can be tied to prejudice and racism, including former President Trump's labeling the virus "the China Virus," and "Kung Flu." They align with age-old racist stereotypes about Asian Americans being perpetually foreign, disease carriers, and lacking loyalty to the United States. In the past, these stereotypes led to laws that limited Asian immigration to the United States, and today they can be traced to the unjust racial profiling of Chinese American scientists by the US government. Historical restrictions on immigration from Asia and the current racial profiling of Asian Americans also reflect a system of institutionalized white supremacy. Attacks on Asian Americans, when perpetrated by Black people as selectively documented in viral videos circulated over social media during the first two years of the pandemic, are different from unfair laws and government surveillance. Sociologist Tamara Nopper's commentary on reports of increased anti-Asian violence over the past two years is instructive here: "It's not to say that we can't experience racial violence. We do. It's not to say that there aren't specific ways that we get targeted. There are. But we're not the basis of how people organize punishment through society in general [. . .]. To me, the question is, how can we talk about serious coalition or serious solidarity if we're not dealing with the

elephant in the room in terms of power relations. How do we actually deal with white supremacy together if we're not dealing with power relations between ourselves".[75] To the extent that anti-Asian violence is happening on an individual basis, we must recognize that it reflects social and racialized patterns wherein people of Color target one another while leaving the system and structures of white supremacy unscathed.

A critical race perspective helps one to make sense of the disjuncture between empirical trends and media coverage that positions some of the most vulnerable members of the Asian American community (elders and young women) as victims of vicious physical attacks, often at the hands of a Black perpetrator. This disjuncture is apparent in discourse around anti-Asian hate crimes. For example, a respondent in a Pew study on anti-Asian hate incidents stated: "Ignorant people placing a 'blanket blame' on Asians regarding the origin of COVID-10. Racism against Asians has always been present and it is generally caused by other groups, both *Whites and Blacks* [authors' emphasis]".[76] Here we see an obfuscation of power dynamics and the ways it works in furthering anti-Blackness in attention to anti-Asian hate crimes. Note that Black people are mentioned in the same breath as White people, and the white supremacy (Trump's incendiary comments about the "China virus" and "Kung Flu" and the actions of a white gunman in Atlanta who killed 6 Asian American women) that marked initial attention to anti-Asian violence at the beginning of the pandemic is no longer the primary reference when it comes to the roots of anti-Asian racism.

Relatedly, the emphasis on elderly Asian Americans and images of young women who were the victims of unspeakable physical violence understandably incites anger within our community to protect those who are most vulnerable. In the midst of our collective pain, we feel urgency in calling out the egregiousness of these violent crimes. Yet, were we to look at these connections through the perspectives of anti-Blackness, we can see, too, the facile mechanisms by which the criminalization of Black people, particularly Black men, can overtake a narrative, even if data show otherwise. What is suggested is that, more prominent than the frequency of assaults, is the perceived gravity of the crime, particularly if it is committed by a Black person. That is, regardless of the data, the narrative that more readily launches into public discourses is one that reifies stereotypes of Black criminality.[77]

Further directing the blame on Black community members, anonymous commenters on viral videos expressed similar sentiments to those of conservative pundit Michelle Malkin: "The recent crime wave against Asians in America's big cities is not the fault of Donald Trump, MAGA activists, conservative talk radio, or White people. It's the fault of the perpetrators and the perpetrators alone—most of whom happen to be thugs 'of color.'"[78] Like Malkin, right-wing

commentators also posted content on niche sites with headlines such as, "The Truth about Anti-Asian Attacks" which linked to a list of "all of the attacks on Asians in the US" and asserted that "where the offender was known and reported, most of the perpetrators of the crimes were black."[79] This story and those like it were shared by right-wing propagandists and eventually made their way to mainstream sites like Reddit and ethnic social media platforms like WeChat. Not surprisingly news outlets began to frame the problem as one of "Black-Asian" relations.[80]

Noteworthy is the intentional weaponization of this conflict by right-wing politicians to redirect scrutiny to interracial tensions among Black and Asian communities. Similarly disturbing is the way that some Asian Americans have subscribed to this narrative.[81] To the extent that we are outraged by anti-Asian incidents, we also seem to normalize assumptions of Black criminality[82] more quickly than we are interrogative of white supremacist leaders and mass shooters—often deeming the latter as anomalies.

Undoubtedly the disturbing level of anti-Asian violence triggered by the pandemic has been deeply felt by the Asian American community and is entrenched in US history.[83] The media, especially Asian American journalists, should be commended for insisting we pay attention to the story of anti-Asian bias in the United States so that more people acknowledge the racism Asian Americans face historically, and day-to-day. Of course, any kind of aggression against another human being—*anywhere*—is unacceptable, and each case should be localized and interrogated as its own case. The ideas that fuel anti-Asian prejudice come from our nation's white supremacist history and cannot be separated from that history nor the structural power undergirding it. Engaging in anti-Black rhetoric or blaming does not excavate this prejudice nor its roots, nor does it help explain anti-Asian sentiment. To this end, we caution against generalizing these highly broadcasted incidents as illustrative of Black aggression against Asian vulnerability.

Groups like Chinese for Affirmative Action in San Francisco and Advancing Justice-AAJC have condemned acts of violence against Asian Americans *and* cautioned against using these incidents to ramp-up policing and surveillance in communities of Color.[84] They lead the way toward advocacy for Asian Americans that does not further institutionalize racism against Black people. To this point, if addressing violence against Asian Americans entails furthering Black criminality and the policies associated with those stereotypes, then we have misdiagnosed the problem, and thus, misguided our solution.

NOTES

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