

COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter: Examining Anti-Asian Racism and Anti-Blackness in US Education

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ABSTRACT

The intersection of COVID-19 and the murder of George Floyd has refocused attention on the hitherto hidden, but pervasive, impacts of race and racism in the US. As this essay will argue, examining anti-Asian racism and anti-Blackness in the context of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter movement, allow a deeper understanding of how white supremacy operates in institutions of higher education and in US society. While universities have a critical role and responsibility to spearhead transformative justice and change, racial capitalism is still at work, whereby profits are prioritized over delivering equitable educational experiences for students and the health of all its constituents. School closures in spring 2020 and reopening plans for fall 2020 are used to illustrate racial capitalism in higher education.

Keywords: Anti-Asian Racism, Anti-Blackness, Black Lives Matter, COVID-19, Higher Education, Model Minority Myth, Racial Capitalism, White Supremacy

The surge of COVID-19 and resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement due to a continuum of murders and use of excessive force on unarmed Black and Brown bodies—most recently George Floyd,

Breonna Taylor, Jacob Blake, and Deon Kay—and primarily by white police officers, has brought the United States to a moment of racial reckoning. These events reveal the impact of white supremacist systems and racism in every walk of US society, including education spaces, where students of color are more vulnerable to discrimination and more often experience inequitable access to education. Most higher education institutions have ostentatiously committed themselves to antiracism efforts, and yet, there has been little evidence to show actual change in the institutional power structures in addressing systemic racism. In this regard, distinguishing between racism, Sinophobia, anti-Asian racism and anti-Blackness allow for a closer scrutiny to expose overt and covert white supremacist structures and the ways they manifest in education settings. School closures due to COVID-19 and fall reopening plans offer two illustrations to further understand how this distinction and the notion of racial capitalism exposes structural inequities and white supremacy. Originally coined by Cedric J. Robinson (1983), *racial capitalism* centers the systemic ways in which capitalism continues to create and sustain racial inequities.

Starting in February 2020, widespread transmission of COVID-19 in the US led to school building closures, affecting at least 50.8 million public school students (Education Week, 2020), and over 1,100 colleges and universities in all 50 states cancelled in-person classes or shifted to online-only instruction (Smalley, 2020). In higher education, the sudden school closures meant for some students, lost housing, income, and food, as well as repercussions for student loan debts and financial aid. International students experienced additional barriers (Smalley, 2020). Community colleges, tribal colleges, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were further impacted, with the majority of students they serve affected by socioeconomic barriers that put them at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 (McCaskill & King, 2020). Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that Latinx and African-American residents are three times more likely to become infected than their white neighbors, and are nearly twice as likely to die from the virus as white residents (Oppel Jr. et al., 2020). This unequal impact is due to systemic racism that historically denied access to healthy environments and the entrenched bias within healthcare and housing systems. For the African American community, the continued impact of enslavement, redlining, and Jim Crow laws is how racial capitalism works to have a fundamental impact on health inequities in the time of COVID-19 (Pirtle, 2020). The concept of racial capitalism offers valuable insights in understanding anti-Blackness and anti-Asian racism embedded within school closures and reopenings due to COVID-19.

Conversely, pledging commitment to antiracism efforts following George Floyd's murder and the fall reopening plans of many institutions, unravel the many gaps in addressing racism and systemic change. Antiracist

efforts, limited to statements, resources, and even curriculum changes, fall short in examining institutions as systems--questioning who holds power and what values they uphold. When we consider the fall reopening plans of many Ivy League institutions, profits seem to outweigh the delivery of equitable educational experiences and the health of all constituents. Across institutions of higher education, the dilemma between starting classes in person to remain financially viable versus laying off faculty and staff with reductions in enrollment, speaks to a larger question of capitalism or, more aptly, racial capitalism. The costs of classes being borne unfairly by students choosing in-person learning formats, should classes shift to remote format, raises the question as to how far institutions will go in terms of actually changing inequitable systems. Schools such as Harvard and Yale University, where students pay the same tuition amount for in person and remote instruction, without options to get refunds if classes go remote (Carey, 2020; Kristoffersen, 2020), point to how finances influence decisions. The import of such decisions also varies across tribal and community colleges, public and private universities, and the students they serve (Harper, 2020).

Another outcome of COVID-19 is a resurgence of Sinophobia in the US. The “Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center” (2020) recorded more than 2300 reports of racist incidents against AAPI, including micro-aggressions, bullying, harassment, hate speech, and violence since January 2020. News outlets such as CNN initially referred to the virus as the “Wuhan virus” (Griffiths & Gan, 2020) and the “Chinese coronavirus” (Christensen & Senthilingam, 2020). In addition to using the same references, President Trump refers to COVID-19 as the “kung flu” (Nakamura, 2020). Such insensitive references serve to ascribe blame and justify discrimination against Asians. UC Berkeley, which has 34% Asian and Pacific Islander students (“UC Berkeley Quick Facts,” 2020), came under scrutiny when its health services initially listed xenophobia as a “common” reaction to COVID-19. After much backlash, the post was taken down (Chiu, 2020).

Sinophobia at “the intersection of fear and hatred of China” (Billé, 2015, p. 10) is a throwback to the sentiments that sanctified the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which denied entry to Chinese immigrants to the US and the “yellow peril” stereotype that has plagued east Asians immigrating to the US for centuries: That they are dirty, disease-infested people who cannot be trusted (Tessler et al., 2020). Unsurprisingly, these are categorizations that remain at the root of anti-Black racism as well. Anti-Asian sentiments and acts were then disproportionately borne by those who look phenotypically Chinese. The recording of racist acts as anti-Asian incidents than Sinophobic incidents towards the beginning of the pandemic (Lee, 2020; Pan, 2020; Pomfret, 2020) obscures the disparate impact of COVID-19 racism within Asian American communities. Recent immigration restrictions curtailing legal immigration and the rescinded attempt to send back international students taking online courses (Trump,

2020) are part of a larger, insidious move to use the pandemic to expand on racist immigration policies. Another flaw in this homogenization of Asian Americans is the lack of awareness about the unequal impact of COVID-19 within Asian communities. For example, in California, Filipino Americans had a 40% mortality rate among Asian Americans in comparison to 3.3% US mortality rates, despite being only 25% of the state's population (Wong, 2020). In contrast, for Indian Americans, job losses, financial worries, and the immigration ban were the primary stressors in the wake of COVID-19 (Kumar, 2020).

The distinction of Anti-Asian and Sinophobic racism is also important to unpack the myth of the model minority. Coined by Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee in 1968, the term "Asian American" was meant to mobilize a collective identity to combat orientalist definitions and racial injustice (Kambhampaty, 2020). Soon, the model minority myth, the overgeneralization that Asian Americans achieve universal educational and occupational success, rose to prominence (Poon et al., 2016). The myth suggested Asian Americans were intelligent, quiet and obedient, and capable of overcoming disadvantages through strong family values and hard work. They were also considered "averse to challenging authority, adaptive, assimilationist, demure, shy, and isolated," (Yi et al., 2020, p. 20), which made them "models" for other minorities. This myth homogenizes Asian Americans as a uniform group disregarding the different histories of oppression, resources, and opportunities with which sub-groups of Asian Americans immigrated and contributes to racial exclusion from research, policy, and practice considerations that might better support distinct Asian American communities in education. It has also been used as a political tool by white supremacists to invalidate claims of systemic racism against non-Asian American People of Color and has advanced the deficit orientation that communities of color were to blame for inequalities in the first place (Yi et al., 2020). The recent Justice Department's charge against Yale University discriminating against Asian and white students in violation of civil rights law (Hartocollis, 2020), and the 2014 lawsuit filed by Asian American students against Harvard University's affirmative action, funded by right-wing activist Edward Blum, is an "example of how white power perpetuates anti-Blackness within Asian communities at the expense of Black people" (Ramirez, 2020, para. 7). Conversely, examining anti-Blackness allows scrutiny of "affirmative action" in terms of the inclusion of Black people, both as faculty and students, and how the "inclusion" of non-Black People of Color can be weaponized to exclude Black people.

In educational institutions, Jared Sexton's (2008) analysis of multiracialism in relation to anti-Blackness is useful to consider how schools pit the academic success of (some) Asian American students against and above the academic difficulties of Black students. Here, schools can be celebrated as diverse despite the

absence of Black students in the building and / or in the higher academic tracks. (Dumas, 2016, pp. 16-17)

Taking note of the complicity of Tou Thao, a police officer of Hmong ethnicity, in the murder of George Floyd (Westerman et al., 2020), endorses the need to distinguish between racism and anti-Blackness, and to uncover how white supremacy invisibly operates within Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) communities. Anti-Blackness lies at the core of the many Asian Americans opposing the Black Lives Matter protests as “looting and rioting” (Mishra, 2020) and conforming to the model minority stereotype.

Further illustrating the outcomes of anti-Blackness, William A. Smith (2004) introduced the conceptual framework of racial battle fatigue, “a response to the distressing mental/emotional conditions that result from facing racism daily” (p. 180) in both education and in society at large. The impact of COVID-19 and heightened levels of stress following George Floyd’s murder further exacerbated the disparity in impact on BIPOC students and faculty. One of the first surveys of a USA-wide sample of 725 full-time college students on COVID-19-related experiences in Spring 2020 revealed that of the 9.2% who experienced discrimination in the sample, 65.7% were Asian/Asian American (Cohen et al., 2020). A community sample of the Household Pulse Survey distributed by the US Census (2020) indicated that the demonstrations and debate following George Floyd’s murder has exacted a disproportionate emotional and mental toll, with rates of anxiety and depression almost triple for Black people and Asian Americans in comparison to white and Latinx Americans (Fowers & Wan, 2020). A recent study measuring the impact of publicized incidents of police violence on “racially underrepresented” college students at various colleges and universities in the U.S. showed that students displayed symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (Campbell & Valera, 2020). The invariant nature of how racial stressors affect BIPOCs points to the crucial need to distinguish between racism and anti-Blackness. Comparing these research findings with both spring closures and fall reopenings in 2020, and the racial toll experienced by BIPOC students, staff, and faculty, vis-a-vis those who profit from those decisions, reveal the ways in which racial capitalism operates in higher education.

The current moment of racial reckoning highlights the urgency for non-Black People of Color to build solidarities with the Black Lives Matter movement in resisting racist tropes, exposing inequities, and demanding reparations. Shared experiences of othering and racism in the wake of COVID-19 has created a common ground of solidarity that Asian Americans and African Americans can forge against white supremacy. The rise of movements, such as *Asian Americans Advancing Justice*, *Asians for Black Lives Matter*, and *Letters for BLM* addressing Asian American family circles spearheaded by students of Asian descent, point to a changing

dynamic within the community to break away from the model minority stereotypes underpinned by anti-Blackness.

Within institutions of higher education, efforts to spearhead antiracism through training, hiring practices, and revisiting curricula—while welcome—does not negate the fact “that most presidents, senior administrators, and trustees/regents at colleges and universities are white” (Harper, 2020, “Racialization of Input” section). Reopening plans, especially with in-person options, place the highest risk of loss on constituents of color, from loss of tuition to loss of life, as did school closures due to COVID-19. Financial trouble exacerbated by COVID-19 closures and the lack of federal funding, have had devastating consequences for tribal and community colleges, again disparately affecting communities of color (Bull & Goldrick-Rab, 2020; Jaschik, 2020). Moving beyond antiracism, which is often educational for white constituents, it is important to integrate ethnic studies and cultures of the global majority to decolonize and counteract white supremacist epistemologies. Scrutinizing the ways in which racism and capitalism entwine to sustain white supremacy in institutions of higher education is important for understanding, countering and reinventing a new system where each person is valued equally. Mobilization of coalitions among BIPOCs and those who support such efforts across faculty, students, and staff is an important step towards equality in higher education spaces.

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