

Racial Disruptions: Asian American Optics in a Provisional Democracy

LINDA TRINH VÕ

America's democracy is fractured as the nation faces manifold crises of epochal and surreal proportions. Among them are political polarization, a deadly pandemic, an unraveling recession, a racial reckoning, and perilous climate change. As the leader of the free world, Donald Trump revealed the foundational flaws upon which U.S. democracy is built and now Joe Biden is tasked with repairing it. Trump rose to power demonizing immigrants and refugees and championing White supremacy, paradoxically following the election of the nation's first multiracial Black president and as the U.S. population has become more racially diverse. Focusing the optics on Asian Americans disrupts the master narrative of American democracy and provides a pathway for dissecting the emergence of Trumpism.

Transformations

Barack Obama's 2008 election raised hopes of meaningful racial transformation. However, his presidency was not a panacea for the nation's racial woes. For some, his victory embodied the nation's democratic ideals and they considered events like the 2014 Ferguson protests during his second term as an anomaly. For others, he symbolized the decline of White cultural dominance, and the "whitelash" was palpable with the election of Trump in 2016. Trump infamously announced his campaign by overtly appealing to White nationalists and the "heartland" of America as he strategically tapped into intransigent racist ideologies and xenophobic anxieties by castigating immigrants as "killers," "rapists," and "terrorists" (qtd. in Schleifer). Currently in the United States, 45 million people, or 14%, are foreign-born, which is slightly lower than the highest peak reached in 1890 when the nation, alarmed by the influx

of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, passed the Immigration Act of 1924, establishing a national origin quota to preserve a White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant majority (Budiman, “Key Findings”).

The Immigration Act of 1965 removed the racist quotas and prioritized family reunification and occupational preference, which unexpectedly resulted in a majority of immigrants arriving from Asia and Latin America. Trump’s nativist invectives came at a time when the non-Hispanic White population hovers around 60% in 2020, down from 89% in 1960. In the last decade, for the first time since the earliest census in 1790, the number of Whites has declined, whereas, in the last ten years, the Latinx (20%), Asian American (29%), and Black (8.5%) populations have grown. At over 20 million people, Asian Americans are the fastest-growing group in the nation with the largest representation by those of Chinese, Filipinx, and Asian Indian ethnicities. Another U.S. milestone was reached in 2019 during Trump’s presidency with more than half of those under age 16 identifying as BIPoC: Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (Schneider).

Trump’s “America First” tactic can be read partly as a response to China and Asia’s rise in economic power challenging U.S. dominance (Wike et al.). This anti-Chinese imagery resonates with historical apprehensions that Chinese laborers, recruited by American capitalists, were outcompeting and stealing jobs from White workers. This led the U.S. Congress to pass the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the only immigration legislation to explicitly specify an ethnic group. This is also reminiscent of the 1980s, when Japanese fuel-efficient compact cars outpaced the sales of American cars and the struggling U.S. auto industry responded by launching an anti-Japanese “Buy American” campaign.

The White nationalist ethos is troubled by U.S. imperialism and Manifest Destiny being emasculated by “Third World” nations they indirectly and directly “civilized,” colonized, invaded, or exploited. Presently, in addition to the outsourcing and offshoring of “American” jobs to Asia along with the unease over Asian bodies permeating the nation and Asian manufactured goods and technologies pervading the U.S. market, there is the perception of an encroachment of Asian cultural products, such as Asian foodways and K-Pop. When *Parasite*, a transnational production, won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2020, Trump bemoaned that they should have received Best Foreign Film instead: “What the hell was that all about? We’ve got enough problems with South Korea, with trade” (qtd. in Levenson).

Unmasking the Pandemic

To detract from his reckless mismanagement of containing COVID-19, which by January 2021 has killed more than 380,000 and infected over 23 million Americans, including Trump, he used inflammatory anti-Chinese rhetoric, referring to it as the “Chinese virus” or

“kung flu.” He proudly reiterates how he blocked flights from China, although early U.S. cases can be traced to Europe. Since the outbreak, hate incidents and crimes against Asians in the United States and in other Western nations have increased at alarming rates, in which they have been taunted as disease carriers or been told to “Go back to China” (“One Nation”). Many frontline medical care providers are Asian Americans, some confronted by racist patients who refuse treatment by them, and Filipinx American nurses, immigrants who as an outcome of U.S. colonization were recruited to fill labor shortages, are dying in excessive numbers due to contracting the coronavirus as essential workers (Shiochet). Additionally, the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on BIPOC populations with higher death rates and also reveals the systemic racial inequities in education, health care, housing, employment, and incarceration rates. The pandemic reminds Asians Americans that they live in a conditional democracy that treats them as perpetual foreigners and suspect citizens (Siu and Chun). In the late 1800s and early 1900s, “Yellow Peril” racialism stereotyped Chinese immigrants as rat eaters and carriers of contagious diseases, which contributed to their being murdered and attacked and the destruction of their Chinatowns. During World War II, the U.S. government incarcerated 120,000 Japanese Americans (the majority were U.S.-born citizens), falsely claiming that they were inherently unpatriotic and posed a security risk. This anti-Japanese fervor culminated in dropping the atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, with 150,000 perishing. The Persian Gulf wars and post-9/11 U.S. War on Terror has intensified Islamophobia and contributes to racial profiling as well as hate crimes against Muslim Americans and South Asian Americans, including Asian Indian Sikhs who are mistaken for Muslims (Lee).

Reckoning with Racial Injustice

On May 25, 2020, the recorded execution of George Floyd over a counterfeit \$20 bill sparked outrage and ignited massive protests nationally. It was another stark reminder of how Black men, women, and children are brutally killed or maimed by the militarized police and White supremacists, who act with impunity because of the collusion of the judicial system. As Floyd pleaded for his life while officer Derek Chauvin had his knee on his neck, onlookers urged officer Tou Thao, a Hmong American, to intervene; instead he showed no compassion (Chanen). Unbeknownst to average Americans, the U.S. military recruited Hmong subsistence farmers in Laos to assist them during the Viet Nam War, part of U.S. imperialism in Southeast Asia and their Cold War strategy against communism (Vang). At war’s end, the United States abandoned its allies, and the Hmong were viciously persecuted and forced to flee. Placed in low-income, inner-cities like Minneapolis-Saint Paul, which has the largest urban concentration of Hmong refugees in the

country with around 66,000, they endured racism, post-traumatic stress disorder, and high poverty rates at 30%. Acknowledging these predicaments does not excuse Thao's inaction; it contextualizes how Asians are positioned as both oppressed and oppressor, colonized and colonizer, and anti-racist and racist. Hmong and other Asian American activists promptly denounced Thao for his callousness and also spoke of their experiences with police brutality. As allies they joined and raised funds for the Black Lives Matter movement and launched educational campaigns to counter anti-Blackness in their ethnic communities.

The authoritarian president of law(lessness) and (dis)order responded by sending the national guard to squash the Black Lives Matter protests, tear-gassed peaceful marchers for a photo op, incited right-wing militia groups, and refused to say the names of those unjustly killed. In September 2020, his administration prohibited federal agencies from conducting diversity or cultural sensitivity trainings and rejected the existence of implicit bias, stating these programs are "divisive, false, demeaning, un-American propaganda" (Trump). Trump demanded a colorblind society while concurrently denigrating groups by using insidious stereotypes and enacting policies that reinforce systemic institutionalized racism.

Weaponized (Un)Belonging

To appease White nationalists, Trump made concerted efforts to cage asylum seekers and ban travelers from Muslim-dominated countries at the border, while also removing and excluding the "enemy" within. He threatened to end birthright citizenship in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment, although it would have been challenged by the 1898 precedent case *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, which confirmed that a U.S.-born child with non-citizen Chinese parents was entitled to citizenship. Not only did Trump attempt to dismantle the Affordable Care Act, which has increased health insurance coverage for Asian Americans, but starting in 2019 also sought to enforce the Public Charge rule to deny permanent residency status or a green card to legal immigrants who received or might need public assistance.

Trump fought against sanctuary city protections for undocumented immigrants and attempted to exclude them from the 2020 U.S. Census. There are an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, the majority of which are from Mexico with 1.3 million from Asia, and in total they pay approximately \$12 billion annually in taxes, without receiving taxpayer benefits (Gee et al.). Under the Obama presidency in 2016, there were 110,000 refugee admission slots, whereas in 2020 under Trump, there were 18,000 and the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has continued to inhumanely deport Cambodian and Vietnamese Americans who arrived as legal refugees but are not U.S. citizens ("Fact Sheet").

Without justification during the pandemic, Trump announced an ICE directive that international students could not stay in the United States if they were taking all their classes online, which would have affected over one million students. Universities filed lawsuits and within a week the order was rescinded. Striking is that these foreign students contribute \$45 billion to the U.S. economy and in 2020 China (35%) and India (18%) were the largest source of students followed by South Korea (5%) (“Open Doors”). Notably, Vice President Kamala Harris, born in Oakland, California, is the child of parents raised in countries under British colonialism—her father from Jamaica and her mother from India—who originally came to the United States as international students. Trump has denigrated Harris by intermixing misogynist, anti-immigrant, and anti-miscegenation tropes to depict her as “angry” and “nasty,” calling her a “monster” and a “communist,” while also ridiculing her first name and questioning her U.S.-born citizenship status (qtd. in Summers). Dehumanizing her and undermining her qualifications is aligned with his efforts to diminish the political power of BIPOC and immigrants to reinstate White political hegemony. This also echoes Trump’s persistent birtherism conspiracy theories meant to humiliate and delegitimize Hawaiian-born Barack Obama, whose Kenyan father and Indonesian stepfather were both international students when they met his White mother (Rogers).

Politicized Electorate

The 2020 election was unprecedented with Trump holding super-spreader rallies and voters turning out in record numbers, even during a raging pandemic. At a time when more U.S. voters are non-White, Jim Crow-style voter intimidation and suppression persists, from threats of sheer violence to hindering the U.S. Postal Service’s delivery of election ballots. The president’s lawyers insidiously tried to prevent citizens from voting, refused to concede the election by using “alternative facts” to make baseless accusations of wide-spread voter fraud, and declared the election was stolen, of course, implicating voters of Color.

The 1790 Naturalization Act declared that as non-Whites, Asian immigrants could not become naturalized citizens, and it was not until 1952 that all Asian immigrants were finally granted the rights to citizenship and voting. Currently, Asian Americans are the fastest growing segment of eligible voters, the majority are naturalized citizens, increasing by 139% from 2000 to 2020 and comprising 11 million or 5% of the nation’s eligible voters (Budiman, “Asian Americans”). There are high Asian concentrations in California, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and Washington—many of which are key battleground states. They are easy targets as untrustworthy voters, since over 60% of Asian Americans are foreign-born. Although they lean towards the Democratic Party, they are also registered as Republican and

No Party Preference, and as relatively new voters, they are wooed for their malleability as swing voters in close elections. In 2020, the majority of Asian Americans joined African Americans, Latinx, and Native Americans in voting against Trump (“2020 Asian American Voter”; Zhou).

Forwards and Backwards

These past four years of disinformation and vilification have intensified distrust, violence, and chaos. In 2016, it could be explained that Trump’s unexpected ascent to the presidency was merely an aberration, but even after his litany of transgressions and an impeachment, the expected buyer’s remorse barely materialized, and in fact, more Americans voted for him in 2020, with over 74 million votes or almost half the popular vote. Without his missteps regarding COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter, it is possible we would have an incumbent president serving a second term. The announcement of a Biden-Harris victory led to spontaneous jubilancy in the streets and many who felt unsafe in Trump’s America could momentarily breathe again, cognizant of the daunting tasks ahead. What remains are his emboldened cult followers who participated in the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, including the “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) base, QAnon adherents, and “stand back and stand by” militia, as well as the wealthy donors and conservative judicial appointments who are expected to erode the rights of BIPoC, immigrants, women, and LGBTQ+.

To solely blame a narcissistic, corrupt, unhinged charlatan who lacks empathy and his complicit cronies for the nefarious regressions would be misplaced. We built a republic based on the original sin of slavery and the myth of the Statue of Liberty; hence, the nation was created as a provisional democracy that serves the privileged and Trump’s rise to the presidency is simply representative of those racial hauntings. We want to believe in the optimism of the 1960s that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (King), then again maybe America’s democratic experiment of exceptionalism is a “hoax.” Will the nation restore its institutions of capitalism by merely rehabilitating its racial hierarchy with President Biden’s “Build Back Better”? Is the United States able to leverage a moral compass based on basic principles of human decency and embrace an inclusive and equitable plurality in a transactional world? Or will it enable another demagogue to rise to power?

Works Cited

- “2020 Asian American Voter Survey (National).” APIA Vote, AAPI Data, and Asian Americans Advancing Justice, 15 Sept. 2020. Web. 10 Nov. 2020. https://aapi-data.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/aavs2020_crosstab_national.html.
- Budiman, Abby. “Asian Americans Are the Fastest-Growing Racial or Ethnic Group in the U.S. Electorate.” Pew Research Center, 7 May 2020. Web. 10 May 2020. <https://pewrsr.ch/2WBvxf6>.

- . "Key Findings about U.S. Immigrants." Pew Research Center, 20 August 2020. Web. 10 Oct. 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/?p=290738>.
- Chanen, David. "Trouble Signs Showed up Early in the Career of Fired Minneapolis Police Officer Tou Thao." *Star Tribune*, Star Tribune Media, 26 Sept. 2020. Web. 1 Dec. 2020. <https://www.startribune.com/trouble-signs-showed-up-early-in-the-career-of-fired-minneapolis-police-officer-tou-thao/572551651/>.
- "Fact Sheet: U.S. Refugee Resettlement." *National Immigration Forum*. National Immigration Forum, 5 Nov. 2020. Web. 27 Nov. 2020. <https://immigrationforum.org/article/fact-sheet-u-s-refugee-resettlement/>.
- Gee, Lisa Christensen, Matthew Gardner, and Meg Wiehe. *Undocumented Immigrants' State & Local Tax Contributions*. The Institute on Taxation & Economic Policy, Feb. 2016. Web. 3 Mar. 2017. <https://itep.sfo2.digitalocean.com/spaces.com/immigration2016.pdf>.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Address at the Conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March." 1965. *King Papers*. The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, n.d. Web. 1 Dec. 2020. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/address-conclusion-selma-montgomery-march>.
- Lee, Erika. *The Making of Asian America: A History*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015. Print.
- Levenson, Michael. "Trump Denounces Oscar Winner *Parasite*." *New York Times*. New York Times, 20 Feb. 2020. Web. 21 Feb. 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/us/trump-parasite-academy-oscar-south-korean.html>.
- "One Nation AAPIs Rising to Fight Dual Pandemics: COVID-19 and Racism." *One Nation Commission*. One Nation Commission, Oct. 2020. Web. 1 Nov. 2020. <https://www.onenationcommission.org/the-commission-report-ii>.
- "Open Doors 2020 Report on International Educational Exchange." *U.S. Department of State*. IIE Books, 2020. Web. 18 Oct. 2020. <https://opendoorsdata.org/annual-release/>.
- Rogers, Kate. "Trump Encourages Racist Conspiracy Theory about Kamala Harris." *New York Times*. New York Times, 13 Aug. 2020. Web. 9 Dec. 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/13/us/politics/trump-kamala-harris.html?searchResultPosition=1>.
- Schleifer, Theodore. "Trump: Mexican 'Rapists' Coming Now, Middle East 'Terrorists' Coming Soon." *CNN.com*, Cable News Network, 25 June 2015. Web. 11 Dec. 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2015/06/25/politics/donald-trump-mexicans-terrorists-immigration-2016/index.html>.
- Schneider, Mike. "Census Shows White Decline, Nonwhite Majority Among Youngest." *The Associated Press News*. Associated Press, 25 June 2020. Web. 14 July 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/a3600edf620ccf2759080d00f154c069>.
- Shiochet, Catherine E. "Covid-19 Is Taking a Devastating Toll on Filipino American Nurses." *CNN.com*, Cable News Network, 24 Nov. 2020. Web. 30 Nov. 2020. https://edition.cnn.com/2020/11/24/health/filipino-nurse-deaths/index.html?fbclid=IwAR2uT1sOpIGKwrKD0gDWnHAbTNq4of4LZX8ot9g9Mp7Hh2VCdH_7k823NU.
- Siu, Lok, and Claire Chun. "Yellow Peril and Techno-Orientalism in the Time of Covid-19: Racialized Contagion, Scientific Espionage, and Techno-Economic Warfare." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 23.3 (2020): 421-40. *Project MUSE*. Web. 1 Dec. 2020.
- Summers, Juana. "Trump Calls Harris a 'Monster,' Reviving a Pattern of Attacking Women of Color." *NPR*, 9 Oct 2020. Web. 11 Dec 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/10/09/921884531/trump-calls-harris-a-monster-reviving-a-pattern-of-attacking-women-of-color>.

- Trump, Donald. "Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping." *Whitehouse.gov*. The White House, 22 Sept. 2020. Web. 23. Sept. 2020.
- Vang, Chia Youyee. *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora*. Urbana-Champaign: U of Illinois P, 2010. Print.
- Wike, Richard, et al. "Globally, More Name U.S. than China as World's Leading Economic Power." Pew Research Center, 13 July 2017. Web. 20 Aug. 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/07/13/more-name-u-s-than-china-as-worlds-leading-economic-power/>.
- Zhou, Li. "Most AAPI Voters Backed Former Vice President Joe Biden while a Segment Supported President Donald Trump." *Vox.com*. Vox Media, 14 Nov. 2020. Web. 15 Nov. 2020. <https://www.vox.com/21561408/asian-american-voters-presidential-election>.