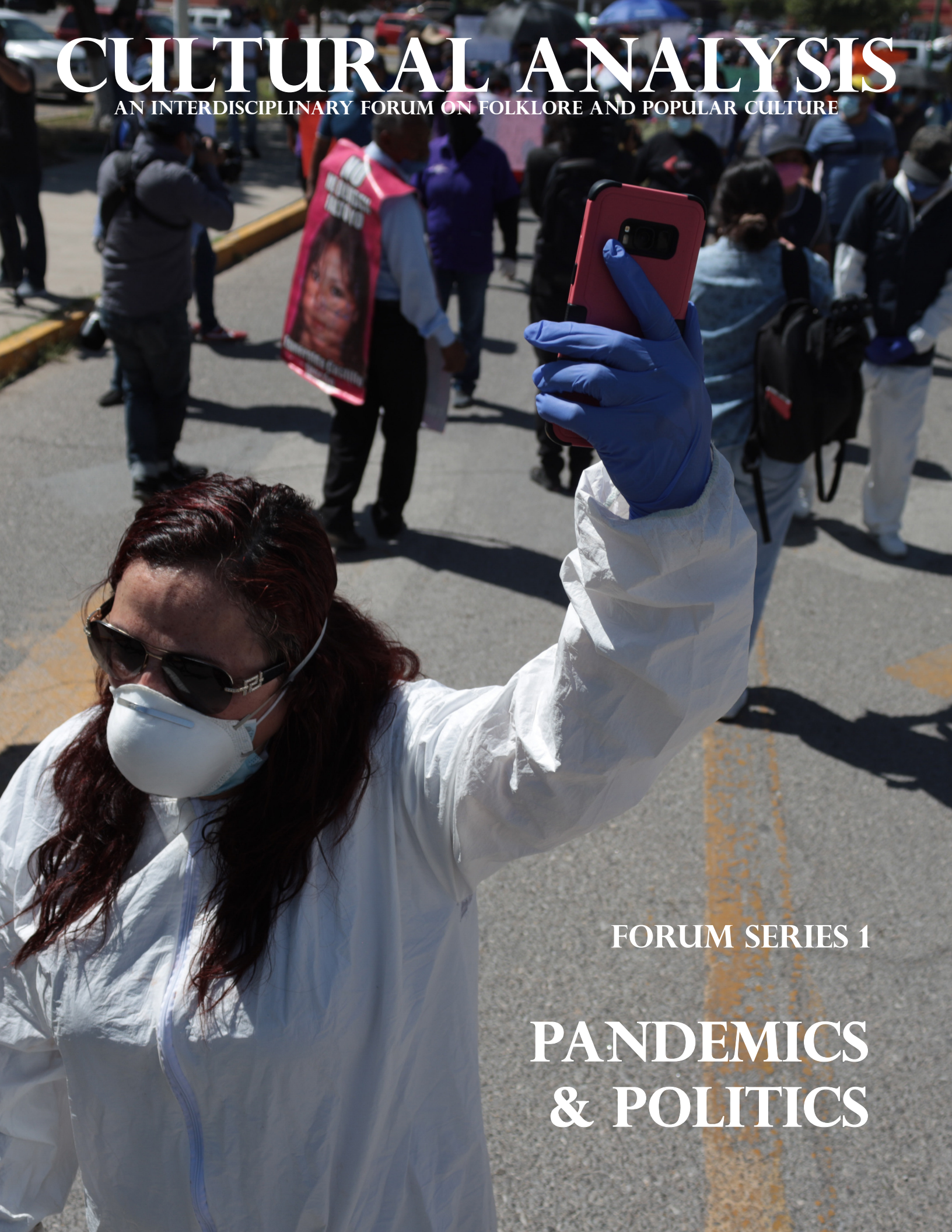


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Making Sense of the Pandemic of Racism: From the Asian Exclusion Act in 1924 to the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act in 2021

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Abstract

The anti-AAPI hate crimes in the US escalated during the COVID-19 pandemics. However, the pandemic is not the cause of the rampant racism revealed in all aspects of everyday life. Systemic racism is rooted in the political, social, and legal policies which are based on colonialistic and imperialistic mentality and white supremacy. The results are also shown in every aspect such as the unequal opportunity of education, immoral but legal tax laws in favor of the richest individuals, the monopoly of world resources seen in the control of the COVID-19 vaccine in the world, and the shocking number of deaths of the Americans who were people of color and in low socioeconomic class. To make sense of the chaos from a folkloristic perspective, this essay examines some racist stereotypical expressions and their transformations in recent history toward Chinese/Asians. Subsequently, this essay suggests that education of the Asian American history within and outside the school system shall be taken as a proactive approach to advocate cultural diversity and human equality while fighting against racism.

Keywords: racism; stereotype; anti-AAPI; folklore and folklife; COVID-19 pandemic; education

The past two years or so have witnessed the newest coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19, or Sar-Cov-2 and its variants) threatening human health and a recycled pandemic of racism in human cultures. The number of deaths caused by the coronavirus is simply scary, and the scale of anti-AAPI speech and action, along with other racist crimes, is rampantly resurging in the US which in many ways resembles the anti-Chinese and anti-Asian social and legal realities. However, looking closely at what happened in the US, for example, one can easily find that it is not a chaos, but a reenacted “performance” with, at least, two major “acts” that were played one hundred years ago: one act was about immigration – banning the immigration of “cheap Chinese labor” and “immoral Chinese women” by the discriminative federal laws such as the Page Act of 1875.¹ The other act is about pandemics – propagandizing the 1918 influenza pandemic as “Spanish Flu” while it originated in the US.² Today, the performances are recycled in new contexts and through new media: propagandizing the killing of the immoral Asian women as the elimination of the temptation of sex addition,³ “China stealing American jobs.”⁴ The current widespread anti-AAPI hate

incidents⁵ have remarkably revealed the same racist mentality through riots against Chinese *coolies* (hard labors) and massacre of the Chinese in many parts of the US in the late 19th century and early 20th century (e.g., Nooks 2009). In addition to the means of laws (e.g., the “Muslim Ban”⁶) and media propaganda, the performance of anti-immigrants today is aided with the “Trump Wall.”⁷ Certainly, the systemic racism against the Black Americans and Native Americans is even deeper in the ideology as the root of the governmental systems and social organization.

This racist root is today exposed to an unprecedented extent, as seen in the dire contrast between “pro-Trump” and “anti-Trump” camps during and after the 2020 President Election in the US,⁸ in which “Trump” is seen as a symbol of racism and xenophobia. In the first 18 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, “The U.S. Has Hit 600,000 COVID Deaths, More Than Any Other Country.”⁹ While it is public knowledge that the people of color and marginalized groups suffer more in case numbers, deaths and social consequence from the COVID-19 pandemic, “yet, the disparities seen over the past year were not a result of COVID-19,” as the CDC Director said, “Instead, the pandemic illuminated inequities that have existed for generations and revealed for all of America a known, but often unaddressed, epidemic impacting public health: racism.”¹⁰

In fact, even before the outbreak of COVID-19, racism was seen as a bigger problem than ever in the past 20 years in the US,¹¹ and some even tried to make sense why racism in the US was worse than in Europe.¹² The Black Lives Matter (BLK) movement is a historical progress, which is painfully aided with the deaths of George Floyd and thousands of other black people murdered by the racist policemen directly and the systemic racist policies and rules indirectly. Just like the civil rights movement led by MLK Jr. and others in the 1960s, the BLK movement has changed the history of all the oppressed classes: the poor white, the black, the yellow, the brown, and other marginalized groups like LGBTQ+. Clearly, the current movement against anti-AAPI hate crimes, along with the BLK movement, is a progress, though at a great cost, toward breaking the existing unjust and unequal social and political systems.

In late January 2021, days after taking office, President Biden signed a memorandum to combat racism, xenophobia, and bias incidents toward Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders community. Obviously, racist ideas and actions about AAPI existed before the pandemic and exacerbated during the pandemic, but the end of the pandemic will not end the systemic racist behaviors.

One of the popular sayings in the past century is “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (Santayan 1906, 284). At a closer look, we find that history recycles itself, but not repeats itself. From a folkloristic perspective, there are no narratives that are the same, but they are all variants. Even when the written texts are the same, their texture and contexts are not the same. It is the change, or recycled performance, that makes sense to those who perform or participate in it, but makes no sense to those who dislike it. When the two sides reach a somewhat comparative level of power, conflicts also intensify. This is not necessarily bad because it is this kind of yin-yang dynamism that eventually pushes the history to move forward, though there may be detours along the way. For those who are in the turbulence, as we are now,

it may be “one man’s meat is another’s poison.” As a result, for some, the situation “doesn’t make sense,” but for others “it does make sense.” Of course, the bottom line of ethics or righteousness and humanities must be clear, though everyday expressions vary. Here I borrow the idea about “make sense of nonsense” (Dundes 2002, 137) as the goal for folkloristic studies, and try to make sense of the current conflicts between the two sides as seen in some folklore forms, because, if we simply deny what we don’t like, we may help worsen the conflicts, and it will not help all of us from different background to coexist in peace and thrive together.

Within this context, this essay attempts, from a folkloristic perspective, to make sense of the current anti-AAPI hate phenomenon in the US. This statement may sound like “It doesn’t make sense” because it is absolutely anti-humanity, and we must fight against it. This is true. The current pandemic of racism has not only split the larger society in politics and socioeconomic development, but also families and friendship in everyday life. In the past few years, who has not found that their spousal, siblingly, neighborly, collegial, and other social relations have not worsened due to the recycled racist propaganda? For folklorists, however, we may need to find ways through folklore expressions to deal with such behaviors seen in our families, schools, work place, and public place, and restore the relations that have been divided by the recent political and racist propaganda. Otherwise, the divide will only worsen.

The following discussion tries to make two points: 1) the current anti-AAPI phenomenon in everyday life in the public domain has its close historical and social continuum in the past century or so in the US; 2) even in studying everyday life, American folklore scholarship has not given relevant attention to Asian Americans as folk groups, and has not relevantly fulfilled its duty in positively affecting the public life, even though some public folklorists have individually contributed to a great extent. The purpose of this discussion, however, is not to recount the facts, but to make sense of the chaos and seek solutions to cope with conflicts. Thus, as the result of this reflection, this essay suggests that public education in various forms, by means of storytelling and other folklore practices, be taken as a practical way to bring a change toward social harmony because the public, whether seen as racists or antiracists, comes to their actions as the result of the long process of socialization and education.

Anti-AAPI Expressions in Folkloric Forms and Their Social Bases

From a broad perspective, there may be three layers in the systemic racism against AAPIO: considering the AAPIO, 1) as the non-white and barbaric “race”; 2) as pagans (e.g., Muslims, Buddhists, Confucians with “ancestral worship” practice); 3) as foreigners stealing jobs. These sociopolitical, religious/ideological, and economic aspects are essential to the material and spiritual life in American history, especially during the process of nation-building through immigration.¹³ The history of Asian Americans has shown that they are the target, or the scapegoat, of all these three pillars. Obviously, the history of “pagan” “xenophobia” in Europe began long before “racism” was informed along with colonialism in the 16th century when “non-white” was conveniently used to differentiate the “civilized” Europeans from the “barbaric” others in Africa, Latin

America, and Asia.

Specifically about Chinese and Chinese Americans, these historical facts have much to do with the current anti-China and anti-Chinese mentality in the US: 1) China was not eventually colonized and/or Christianized through the colonialist and imperialist movements by the European, American, and Japanese powers, a fact in contrast to other countries in Africa, Latin America, and most countries in Asia; 2) Chinese *coolies* were sold as “piglets” to the US to fill in the gap of labor shortage after black slaves were “emancipated” in the 1860s (e.g., as railroad workers, house servants, laundry workers) as cheap labor; 3) China has been officially made enemy to the American national interest after 1949 by labeling it as “communist,” and through “McCarthyism” in the 1950 and “Chinese spies” and “China threat” in the recent years. It is ironic that the Chinese were praised to be “diligent” and “polite” with the good words by the missionaries in the history and by the house masters/bosses who had Chinese servants/*coolies*, and as the “model minority” in the late 20th century, but are denounced as “stealing jobs” when American socioeconomic condition went bad.

In terms of folkloric forms, here are some examples of the stereotyping expressions of the systemic racism that are resurging in public folklife. Folk and fairy tales are the common folk narratives, often with visual illustrations, that are not only read by students and adults, but are also read to the young children who begin to learn the social norms with certain values and beliefs. Thus, tales about “others” (e.g., Chinese or Asians) play an important role in either positive depiction and understanding, or negative stereotypes of “others.” One of the exemplary images is the “almond-shaped eyes,” which was first used in the 18th century by missionaries as a somewhat neutral description of the Chinese women (translating the Chinese traditional aesthetical view and term of *xinghe yan*), but gradually changed to mean the exotic, or ugly eyes, and eventually leading to the disparaging expression of “slant eyes” or “not-opened eyes,” and the hurtful gesture of pulling down the eye corners with two index fingers while uttering “Chinese.” Today, plastic surgery is used by Asian women, to some extent as a way to appeal to the “aesthetical standard” following the Westerners.¹⁴ Many story books published a hundred years ago, such as *Chinese Fairy Tales: Forty Stories Told by Almond-Eyed Folk* (Fielde 1912), are still reprinted. One may also notice that the 1998 Disney version of *Mulan* depicts the girl with super “almond eyes,” but in an unrealistic angle. Similarly, various humiliating images of Chinese men and women were common a hundred years ago, which deepened stereotypes about Chinese or Asians, for example, about their sexuality, among other aspects. These issues are still “fresh” today, and are constant topics about Asian Americans’ masculinity and femininity in public life, for example, “The desexualization of the Asian American male”¹⁵ and “Asian American masculinity is being increasingly celebrated. But many men still face stereotyping,”¹⁶ and in academic studies (e.g., Nguyen 2000; Okazaki 2002; Shek 2006; Lee 2016).

Even more powerful visual impact is from the Hollywood movies since the early 20th century, with which evil figures like “Fu Manchu” and “Charlie Chan” filled the imagination of the American public about Chinese and Chinese American people. In continuing the Hollywood tradition of derogating the Chinese and Chinatowns, the

movie *Chinatown* (1974) clearly indicates Chinatown is a lawless place where crimes of killing could get away with, as it was said to a figure with some sense of justice at the end of the movie on the killing site in a Chinatown, “Forget it, Jake. It’s Chinatown.”¹⁷ It is only in recent years that we see some kind of resistance from the Asian American community has begun. One recent example is the sarcastic comedy of the negative images of Asian Americans in the movies and lack of representation of the roles of Asian American actors and actresses, the film *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018),¹⁸ which certainly marked a turn in the movie industry related to Asian American communities.

In the popular music world, there was the national hit song “Chinatown, My Chinatown” (1906). The lyrics begin with: “When the town is fast asleep, and it’s midnight in the sky//That’s the time the festive chink starts to wink his other eye//Starts to wink his dreamy eye, lazily you’ll hear him sigh.”¹⁹ The popularity of this song clearly reaffirmed the stereotype of the Chinese and Chinatowns.

A century later, nevertheless, among numerous musical pieces about Chinatown, a new song “Chinatown” (2020) begins its lyrics as such: “get in my backseat honey pie//and i’ll wear your sadness like it’s mine//...but a girl like you//could rip me out of my head//black tears on your cheek//i want them in my bed//...with a girl like you//my chinatown baby//sittin’ on your front porch ...”²⁰ Through this song, Chinese girl is continuously used as a “sex symbol” of “honey pie,” while Chinese men are implicitly asexual and incompetent.

Even when a century ago the Chinese men were seen as laundrymen, the lowest possible occupation for men, the slur “no tickee, no washee” developed during the Gold Rush in the late 19th century also contributed to the racist stereotype (Mieder 1996). Today, Asian Americans have made great achievements and contributions in all walks of life. Sadly, racist stereotypes also resurge by all means. For example, when Jeremy Lin performed so well as the first Chinese American who led a championship in the NBA (in 2011-12 season), at least as well as any NBA basketball player, he was called “Linsanity” and other old racist slurs (Magat 2015), among others,²¹ very much continuing the long history of stereotyping East Asians as “sick men” or “patients” in the US.²²

The proverb “You are what you eat” is certainly one of the most frequently used folkloric forms to further derogate Asian Americans. In early 2020, China and Chinese were blamed by American top politicians for spreading the COVID-19 virus because Chinese “eat bats and snakes and dogs and things like that.”²³ It is even not worthwhile here to refute this racist characterization by equalizing Chinese cultural tradition to the outbreak of an epidemic, because, there is not even one counter-evidence to prove that the H1N1 in 2009 was not originated in the US, yet a totally different logic or rhetoric is applied to the propaganda within and beyond the US. This is the typical racist strategy of using double standards, and finding scapegoats for their own crimes by spreading rumors. Rumors are different from other traditional narrative forms like myths, tales, and legends because rumors do not have the narrative structure of plot, figure, and location of an event. But rumors are similar in content and nature to “misinformation,” “fake news,” “contemporary legend,” and “conspiracy theory” with the function of demonizing or stigmatizing certain targets in order to gain self-

benefits. Therefore, rumors are eventually harmful to the community where they are spread. In the past years, various rumors, conspiracy theories, and fake news have only aided the widespread of racist division of families, societies, and communities or groups at work and at home, and folklorists, mostly from the recent two decades or so, have keenly paid attention to them (Kitta 2012, 2019; Lee 2014; Frank 2015; Tangherlini 2018; Briggs 2020; Peck and Blank 2020; Bodner 2021).

While the focus here is to look at the folkloric expressions in everyday life, it does not mean that these expressions are not related to official or governmental behaviors. For example, in the Guidelines for “Emerging Infectious Disease” issued by the US CDC, “The CDC’s Misappropriation of a Chinese Textile, and Why It Matters,” in which “The cover of the May 2020 issue of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Emerging Infectious Diseases journal stokes xenophobia against Asian-Americans by identifying COVID-19 as a Chinese disease.”²⁴ There is no doubt that this action was in line with the historical stereotypes against Chinese through the public images mentioned above, and now with “China Virus,” “Wuhan Virus,” and “Kung Flu,” even from the government voice.

As Confucius said, people are the grass, gentlemen (or elite with wisdom, virtue, and power) are the wind. Most readers may remember, and we all react on the mainstream media reports (or not?): during March and April, 2003, up to 80% Americans supported George Bush’s action of attacking Iraq, as the result of governmental propaganda, but as the bombing faded, the support rate dropped to about 39% a year later, due to the fact that the earlier claimed (about MDW) had not been proved.²⁵

A hundred years ago, before the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed (1882), the majority of the “public opinion” was negative toward Chinese (as the result of media and propaganda by certain groups with certain goals). It is alarming that current “polls” also indicate that an absolute majority of “public opinion” is negative toward China and Chinese. For example, a report from the Pew Research Center in October 2020 shows that 81% of Americans are negative toward China, reaching “historic highs in many countries.”²⁶ What is extremely even more shocking is that in those polls of Americans “in their words,” they are repeating the words used by the politician and those in power, and words from a hundred years ago, rather than from their own everyday life through interactions with Chinese as neighbors, co-workers, classmates, business partners, or from their views about the level and quality of their material and cultural life such as eating Chinese food, and purchasing things made in China.

We are again in a critical moment, even a century later, in terms of the public opinions about Asians in general. But the difference between a century ago and today is that racist dominance was then supported by “sciences” or “academic studies” like anthropology, ethnology, and folklore, even though there were only a few brave individuals who were clearly anti-racism with their knowledge through fieldwork, as Franz Boas and Ashley Montagu, among some others. Today, genomics has subverted the “scientific” evidence of race and racism, and the racism scheme is exposed as the “political decision” for the unjust social system (Zhang 2020). If we are not able to see where we are heading at this cross-road today, we will be, as quoted above from

Santayana, “condemned to repeat it.”

Making Sense Through Studying Asian American Folklore and Folklife

In recent years, folkloristic studies in relation to pandemics have developed in such areas as, “disaster folklore” (Brunvand 1996), “folklore of AIDS” (Smith 1991; Goldstein 2004; Yankah 2004; Wilson 2013), “new folklore of health” (Briggs 2012; Blank and Kitta 2015), and “folklore of epidemics.”²⁷ The efforts have demonstrated that folklorists can contribute to public education in terms of understanding and promoting human cultural diversity and co-existence, and breaking racial stereotypes. But that also reveals some problems within the field of folkloristics, that is, how Asian American (or AAPI communities’) folklore and folklife have been treated or studied in the past century, or, bluntly, how Asian Americans were not seen as “folk groups” as a goal of American folklore scholarship (Zhang 2015), and how contemporary Asian American folklore and folklife are often “transplanted” with the “ancient traditions” from Asia, without seeing the current “hybridized and new customs in the American social and material landscape,” and thus, as folklorist Fariha Khan points out, “Countering stereotypes of Asians as ‘model minority,’ unassimilable ‘forever foreigner,’ and dangerous ‘yellow peril’ or ‘terrorist threat,’ Asian American folklore and folklife scholarship navigates the expressive cultures of Asian Americans through the intersectionality of their experiences in the United States with reference to race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and class” (Khan 2018, 742–43).

In a recent thought-provoking book, *Implied Nowhere: Absence in Folklore Studies* (2019), the authors intend to seek “new paradigms in folklore studies” by revealing, and sequentially integrating what is absent in folklore studies because there are “things that have been implied to be nothing and the things that are nowhere implied,” which is yet engaged in the shaping of “both ideology and actuality” in folkloristics (Ingram et al. 2019, 7). Through this lens of “absence in folklore studies,” we can more things that are absent in current folkloristics and beyond: first, Asian American folklore and folklife are understudied in the field of folkloristics; second, Asian Americans have been implied as the victims of the systemic racism, though some acts are recently seen from President Biden and federal government, including signing the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act into law,²⁸ and other individuals and organizations (e.g., stopaapihate.org).

When the American Folklore Society was founded in 1888, the goals were set clearly to study the folklore of such four folk groups: “1) the relics of Old English Folk-Lore; 2) the Lore of Negroes in the Southern States of the Union; 3) the Lore of the Indian Tribes of North America; and 4) the Lore of French Canada, Mexico, etc.” (Newell 1888:3). Obviously, Asian Americans, or AAPI communities, were not considered to be folk groups at that time, nor for the following one hundred years (Clements 1988, Oring 1986, 1989).²⁹ Asian American folklore and folklife began to be mentioned in folklore scholarship through publications only at the turn of the 21st century. For example, “ethnic food” (largely Chinese/Asian foods) began to enter American public life after the 1960s, but related folkloristic studies did not appear until two decades later, while

Asian American foods were overall much understudied (Brown and Mussell 1984).³⁰ As a research area, “Asian American folklore” was collectively defined only a few years ago.³¹

The outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 only helped the invisible be visible, the untellable be tellable, the implied be exposed, and the marginalized be the “center” of social tensions and conflicts culminated on the basis of systemic racism. There is no doubt that the current anti-AAPI hate crimes show the extreme negative side of it. If we look in the other direction and compare the situation with what it was fifty years ago, we see that in this process Asian American folklore and folklife has gained a part in the public eye and in the everyday life of all Americans. We begin to see Asian American folklore becoming integral to American folklore, culture, and history through such things as, foods and foodways, traditional medicine being accepted by the major health insurance plans, and more and more intermarriages, though stigmatizing Asian Americans through slurs, rumors, and smears continues at various degrees. In this process, folklorists have struggled to bring the invisible to be visible, whether in terms of religion and identity (Khan 2015, Mitra 2016), food and arts in daily life (Shun and Fine 1995, Ku 2013, Kim and Livengood 2015, Magat 2021), or migration experiences (Mitchell 1992, Koltyk 1993, Thao 2006, Lee 2015, Hsu 2015), among other.

Certainly, “as the alarming rise in cases of violence against Asian-Americans in the United States clearly illustrates, stories have the potential to reaffirm the stigmatization of specific groups that already occupy marginalized, or contingent, positions of belonging” (Bock 2020).³² This also means that Asian American folklore and folklife should not only be studied by scholars, but also be educated in the public domain along with the Asian American history. We will be more hopeful, while remaining optimistic in historical sense, when AAPI communities are not treated as “ethnic” or “other,” but be seen as part of “us” as Americans. Until then, we have a long way to go to change through everyday folkloric practices, the racist stereotypes shown in proverbs, tales, images, gestures, phrases, or names.

In making sense of why so many innocent and native people follow the racist ideas and behaviors, we have to recognize that most common people practice traditions (two key words in folkloristics studies) in order to make sense of their own everyday life in terms of their personal and group identities. In other words, common people usually do not think about the “end goal” of “praxis” (doing) after “thinking” and “making” as Aristotle sees, or in the pursuit of “pure reason” and “practical reason” in the “principles” *a priori* of human mind and action, as sought by Immanuel Kant (who is also responsible for the birth of modern *scientific racism*, and the idea of white supremacy).³³

One example is the tradition of eating *balut*, fertilized eggs, in some Asian cultural groups that has continued in the US. While eating *balut* may be a revulsion in the Western eye, it is a tradition for the practitioners, as Margaret Magat (2019) discusses in her book. What is more meaningful in her study is that this tradition becomes a public display or demonstration of a cultural or folk group identity in its making in a society where the diasporic group is marginalized or excluded, and thus, we are all “a

nation in an egg" (2019, 45). The *balut* example illustrates that any tradition, regardless where it originated, when it is continued in the US, is also used to play out or perform as a core identity marker, and subsequently to develop a new culture, or third culture, in a multicultural society. To an extent, it is also a struggle of cultural power. Similarly, when eating "whole fish," "animal organs," or "everything" is seen as "nonsense" by those who have the power in a society to legitimize their own way of eating as a social norm, all other ways of eating become unfamiliar, exotic, or barbaric, and are used to justify the latent systemic racism. Culturally, when an American cannot make sense of Chinese behavior, the Chinese may equally be puzzled at American behavior, precisely because they have different ways of life and/or cultural values (Hsu 1981 [1953]). Clearly, whether one is able to understand how one tradition is emphasized in a society where it is not accepted may well explain whether one can make sense of so-called nonsense from others.

What common people care about most is their personal identity in their everyday practice through neighborhoods, families, and workplace. In other words, it is their "folkloric identity" (Zhang 2020)—shared lifestyle and interests—that matters, but not the "racial" "ethnic" or other labels that are imposed on them by the class in power. Those impositions are meant to maintain their superiority by racializing and politicizing the difference of skin color, birth origin, or other physical characteristics.

Indeed, one important function of folklore is to release tensions, affliction, or to make sense of the nonsense in daily life. But when such tensions or afflictions were not being reasonably handled, and when rumors, conspiracy theory, or blaming become handy tools not only at personal level, but also at social and political levels, they are instrumentalized for the spread of racism, as seen in the current anti-AAPI and anti-BLM hate crimes, in both forms of "individual racism" and "institutional racism" (or systemic racism) (True and Hamilton 1992 [1967], 4).

Education: Curing the Problem from the Root

Many folk narrative forms (e.g., myths, legends, folktale or fairytale) have formulaic structures or types containing identifiable beginning, plots, figures, ending, and other cultural symbols or motifs, and are culturally distinctive for people of various backgrounds to make sense of their everyday life and entertain themselves, among other functions of folklore (e.g., escape or release social or psychological tensions, educating social norms in the socialization process). However, the formula of conspiracy theory, fake news, or rumor as a form of stigmatizing or blaming certain individuals or groups is substantially different in content and nature as well as the choice of words. With the Internet media platform, it becomes so easy for anyone with or without writing or designing skills as "generators," "cloners," "wishful thinkers," "citizen satirists," and "dirty tricksters" to create and spread "fake news as folklore" through various social media platforms (websites or apps) (Frank 2015). Certainly, folklorists have tackled the problem of folklore and social media in regards to racism, politics, history, and pandemic beyond the traditional genre studies (Goldstein 2004; Kitta 2012, 2019; Peck and Black 2020; Briggs 2020; Borland and Shuman 2020).

Typically, fake news, conspiracy theories or rumors with racist blame or smear, for example, about Chinese/Asian/AAPI people eating certain foods and thus creating pandemics to hurt others (in this context, the non-Asian white, via “China Virus”), often bear the look-like folkloric narrative form, but upon closer look, they are made up of unidentifiable locations and figures (e.g., from “friend of a friend,” “somewhere”), contradictory or illogical plots, and, ultimately, blaming on certain individuals or groups so as to maintaining the power and benefit of the generators of such slurs and rumors. Here, it is very important to differentiate the generators for such blames and smears from those who transmit or clone them (e.g., by forwarding email messages, tweets or images in social media). The generators usually have an ideological agenda; the “naive” transmitters or cloners (who are always the majority) often seek temporary “it-makes-sense” without further thinking or reasoning. In the case about spreading rumors, holding stereotypes about the AAPI histories, disbelieving the fact about COVID-19 and vaccine, many people do so without making effort to find out the fact because they are used to believing that what they have learned from textbooks, authorities, or mainstream media must be true, and they are not inclined to deny their own past experience. They do so because they do not have enough chances to learn or see enough facts that can change their views; they will change once they have reasonable sources and means of education.

Consequently, education of the skills to identify and analyze those folkloric and non-folkloric narratives, the knowledge of the subject matters (e.g., the nature of coronavirus in contrast to other influenza virus), and the history of racism may be the most realistic way to change the current realities. It is true that systemic racism is embedded in the governmental policies and structures, and thus needs fundamental change at the root. But, instead of waiting and hoping for the virtue to blow like the wind over the grass, we the people of grassroots can actually do something, as seen through the progress in the past decades. In other words, education through the school system is important in social and political senses, but education beyond school system may be more important and accessible to everyone as siblings, friends, neighbors, co-workers, parents or children, by means of everyday interactions. When would Asian American children not feel embarrassed, ashamed, and eventually reluctant and resistant to bring “rice balls,” “noodles,” “dumplings,” or other traditional foods in their lunchbox in school?

If young children are told tales about *others* (e.g., Chinese/Asians) and see images through picture books, movies or TV, and even in close face-to-face contact, that the *others* are not different from themselves in terms of playing, speaking, joking, that those who are different in skin color are not different in becoming classmates or friends, and that the tales and images about *others* are sincere, true to culture and history and true to what they see with their own eyes, these young children will become adults who can only make this society and world better, and their children will be even more positive to diverse human cultures around them. In this regard, the change in the children’s literature production or industry, through writers, publishers, and parents, has to play an important role, because “It is essential that these industries are diverse” since they “have a direct impact on the types of books created for children” (Crisp 2016, 30).

Certainly, “If diverse authors and illustrators are not seen as picture book creators, it sends a message” (Koss 2015, 33), and even reaffirms the existing racial stereotypes like “model minority,” “tiger mom,” “pig tails,” “slant eyes,” “dumplings,” and other “exotic” imaginations and associations. For example, one study shows that “children who interact with current picture books predominantly see White faces and receive the message that to be White is to be better,” and that “Finding books depicting non-White characters, particularly books depicting culturally specific elements, is rare” (Koss 2015, 38).

Of course, children’s education is the result of parents and teachers’ work at home and in school, and is every adult’s responsibility, in which teaching the actual history of migration and cultural integration is essential. It is only in the process of learning from the history that we can recognize and remember that it was just a minority of people (“slave masters” in this quote) who “divided both [“poor whites and blacks”] to conquer each,” a quote known to be from Frederik Douglas (1817-1895).³⁴ As a “cure to racism,” former President Obama recently suggests that with education of our history, reaching out to people who do not look like us, and not feeling offensive being the white people, we may begin the long process of healing.³⁵

In early July 2021, while this essay was being revised, “Illinois becomes first state to require Asian American history to be taught in public schools” with the Teaching Equitable Asian American History Act. It is encouraging to see that this prevailing wave will bring greater changes to US history and society.

It is only in the search of humanity that we can find and appreciate the richness and diversity of human cultures. In this regard, folklore studies are “at the very center of humanistic study” (Wilson 1988, 157). In this process of searching for the cure of the problem, we must not put “ice” on the wounds or “massage” away the physical pain when we are injured or sick; we must first find the root of the problem and then change it. American folklorists as a whole have shown their efforts toward this direction.³⁶

In trying to make sense of the current pandemic of racism, we know that the COVID-19 is not the cause of resurgence of racist crimes, but it is the racist ideology that is filtered in the social systems and laws for a long time. We know that racism has been instrumentalized to reinforce the existing unjust and unequal system to benefit those who insist on racism.³⁷ Through folklore and folklife, we know that it is the common lifestyle and interests in everyday folklore practices that brings people of different backgrounds together as folk groups, and that it is the folkloric identity (Zhang 2020), not racial or race-based ethnic identity that determines our relations with our neighbors, friends, spouses, co-workers, or business partners. We know that the 21st century is and should be better than the past centuries in nurturing humanity by advocating human and cultural diversity. From the laws excluding Chinese women (1875), Chinese men (1882) and Asians (1924) to the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act and actions addressing anti-AAPI hate crimes (2021), we know that the goodness of equal humanitarianism will prevail.

Through making sense of nonsense in everyday life, “we may yet achieve a greater America, as the nation which will offer to mankind not only the technical know-

how, but a social architecture which will form a solid foundation for the peace and prosperity among mankind as a whole" (Hsu 1983, 57). Thus, we need to carry and apply the "principle of hope" (in Ernst Bloch's sense, 1986) not only in the belief in the world of fairy tale (Zipis 2019), but also in this real human world that is filled with conflicts of goodness and evil, and everyday joy and pain.

Notes

- 1 The first US federal law banning immigrants began with the Page Act of 1875, which was specifically targeting Chinese women. This law eventually led to several other similar laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, and Asian Exclusion Act in 1924.
- 2 This pandemic originated in the US (now known as a type of H1N1 virus) and killed 500 million people, but it was propagandized as "Spanish Flu" because Spain was the neutral country while the US engaged in the wars in Europe.
- 3 For example, regarding the March 2021 Atlanta spa shootings, which killed 8 persons including 6 Asian women, a stronger voice through media was that the shooter wanted to eliminate the temptation of his sex addiction and had "a bad day." This rhetoric is clearly a replay of the propaganda preceding the Page Act of 1875 which used the label "immoral Chinese women." See, "Atlanta spa shooting suspect's 'bad day' defense, and America's sexualized racism problem," by Nancy Wang Yuen, March 18, 2021 NBC News. (<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/atlanta-spa-shooting-suspect-s-bad-day-defense-america-s-nca1261362>). But, in psychology and World Health Organization, there is no such a diagnosis as "sex addition" and those seen as "sex addicts" "are typically nonviolent" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2021_Atlanta_spa_shootings#cite_note-74).
- 4 For example, this concept has been used in various contexts in recent years: "Trump says US jobs get 'stolen' by China. Well, here are the countries 'stealing' Chinese jobs" by Patrick Winn, September 27, 2016 (<https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-09-27/trump-says-us-jobs-get-stolen-china-well-here-are-countries-stealing-chinese-jobs>); "China really is to blame for millions of lost U.S. manufacturing jobs, new study finds" by Jeffry Bartash, May 14, 2018 (<https://www.marketwatch.com/story/china-really-is-to-blame-for-millions-of-lost-us-manufacturing-jobs-new-study-finds-2018-05-14>); "No, Mr. President: China didn't steal our jobs. Corporate America gave them away" by Cody Cain, May 27, 2019 (<https://www.salon.com/2019/05/27/no-mr-president-china-didnt-steal-our-jobs-corporate-america-gave-them-away/>); "Is China Actually Stealing American Jobs and Wealth?" by John L. Graham and Benjamin Leffel, Nov. 8, 2019, in *Harvard Business Review* (<https://hbr.org/2019/11/is-china-actually-stealing-american-jobs-and-wealth>); "No, the Pandemic Will Not Bring Jobs Back From China" by Edward Alden, May 26, 2020 (<https://foreign-policy.com/2020/05/26/china-jobs-coronavirus-pandemic-manufacturing-trump/>); "The Chinese Are Eating Our Lunch": Biden Stresses Need For Economic Competition, May 7, 2021 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6p23bhRS04>).
- 5 For example, according to a report from StopAAPIHate.org, 3,795 incidents were reported from March 19, 2020 to February 28, 2021 (<https://stopaapihate.org/2020-2021-national-report/>).
- 6 For example, the Executive Order 13769 (January 27, 2017), and several related Executive Orders by the US President Trump.
- 7 For example, "Trump Wall" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trump_wall).

- 8 The result of the 2020 Presidential Election in the US shows that the winner had 51.3% votes versus the loser with 46.8%. This was not more “neck to neck” than the 2000 election when the winner had 47.9% votes versus the loser with 48.4%. What made the 2020 election more “bloodier” in US history is not the number, but the ideas held by those runners, in particular, related to immigration and social justice.
- 9 See the report with this title by NPR, June 15, 2021, (<https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2021/06/15/1006186695/the-u-s-has-hit-600-000-COVID-deaths-more-than-any-other-country>).
- 10 Rochelle Walensky, “CDC Director Declares Racism A ‘Serious Public Health Threat,’” April 8, 2021. (<https://www.npr.org/2021/04/08/985524494/cdc-director-declares-racism-a-serious-public-health-threat>).
- 11 “Americans say racism is a bigger problem today than at any point in the past 20 years,” by Christopher Ingraham, August 5, 2015 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/08/05/americans-say-racism-is-a-bigger-problem-today-than-at-any-point-in-the-past-20-years/>).
- 12 “Why racism in US is worse than in Europe” (Viewpoint on BBC), May 17, 2018. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44158098>).
- 13 It is meaningful to note that the 1965 Immigration Act finally made America “a nation of immigrants” after removing many discriminatory laws against immigrants, particularly Chinese (1875, 1882) and Asians (1924), but the statement of “a nation of immigrants” was eliminated from the federal government Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) mission statement. See two reports from the National Public Radio: “America No Longer A ‘Nation Of Immigrants,’ USCIS Says,” February 22, 2018 (<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/02/22/588097749/america-no-longer-a-nation-of-immigrants-uscis-says>); “How The 1965 Immigration Act Made America A Nation Of Immigrants,” January 16, 2019 (<https://www.npr.org/2019/01/16/685819397/how-the-1965-immigration-act-made-america-a-nation-of-immigrants>).
- 14 For example, in a NPR commentary “Why Do We Describe Asian Eyes As ‘Almond-Shaped’?” (Sept. 13, 2013), the author, Kat Chow, found that the expression was first cited in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1786, and was also used by many writers like Mark Twain and William S. Maugham in various contexts, and that today people used it mostly for an unconvincing senses of “Asian” and “exotic,” (<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/09/16/219402847/-almond-shaped-eyes-remarkably-exotic-yet-too-foreign>).
- 15 For example, a story in the Beauty section of CNN.com, in March 2020 (<https://www.cnn.com/style/article/andrew-kung-asian-american-men/index.html>).
- 16 See the story with this title in Washington Post, June 22, 2021, by Richard Morgan (https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/asian-american-men-stereotype-masculine/2021/06/21/d219025e-d2c6-11eb-a53a-3b5450fdca7a_story.html).
- 17 *Chinatown*, directed by Roman Polanski from a screenplay by Robert Towne, 131 min., 1974.
- 18 It was released in 2018, directed by Jon M. Chu, 121 min., and it was the first film made in the U.S. for its all-Asian cast.
- 19 The words were by William Jerome, and music by Jean Schwartz, and the song was recorded by numerous singers and music players, and is seen as a Classic Jazz piece.
- 20 See, Bleachers - Chinatown (Official Video) ft. Bruce Springsteen, Nov. 16, 2020, available, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4uA85iWslg>.
- 21 See, “Racial issues,” available, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy_Lin.

- 22 See, "Stereotypes of East Asians in the United States," available, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stereotypes_of_East_Asians_in_the_United_States#Physicality_and_sports.
- 23 See, "Fact-check: Is Chinese culture to blame for the coronavirus?" by Madlin Mekelburg, March 6, 2020 (<https://www.statesman.com/news/20200326/fact-check-is-chinese-culture-to-blame-for-coronavirus>), in which, the author concludes that the claim was false, and that "consumption of animals mentioned above," according to experts, "is not, itself, the problem."
- 24 Quoted from Michelle C. Wang in the Opinion piece on the website: <https://hyperallergic.com/562771/emerging-infectious-diseases/>.
- 25 See, "Public opinion in the United States on the invasion of Iraq" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_opinion_in_the_United_States_on_the_invasion_of_Iraq).
- 26 See, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries" (<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>), also, "In their own words: What Americans think about China" (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/03/04/in-their-own-words-what-americans-think-about-china/>).
- 27 A special issue in the *Journal of Folklore Research* with the theme of "Folklore of Epidemics" is forthcoming in early 2022.
- 28 For example, "Biden signs memorandum to combat bias incidents toward Asian Americans" on Jan 26, 2021 (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/biden-signs-executive-order-combat-bias-incident-toward-asian-americans-n1255713>); "President Biden Announces Additional Actions to Respond to Anti-Asian Violence, Xenophobia and Bias" on March 30, 2021 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/30/fact-sheet-president-biden-announces-additional-actions-to-respond-to-anti-asian-violence-xenophobia-and-bias/>); "President Biden Establishes the White House Initiative on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders" by signing an Executive Order on May 28, 2021 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/28/fact-sheet-president-biden-establishes-the-white-house-initiative-on-asian-americans-native-hawaiians-and-pacific-islanders/>); "Here's What The New Hate Crimes Law Aims To Do As Attacks On Asian Americans Rise," an NPR report on May 20, 2021 that "The signing comes two days after the House of Representatives passed the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act by a vote of 364-62; all 62 votes against the bill were from Republicans" (<https://www.npr.org/2021/05/20/998599775/biden-to-sign-the-COVID-19-hate-crimes-bill-as-anti-asian-american-attacks-rise>).
- 29 For example, in the review of a centennial history of American folklore studies Clements (1988), and popularly used books for "folk groups" (Oring 1986, 1989), Asian groups are not mentioned or discussed in the sections of "ethnic groups and ethnic folklore" or other genres of folklore.
- 30 Among the 12 essays in the collection, there is only one related to Asian/Asian American, i.e., on American Hindu conversion, while the rest are about European groups.
- 31 See, special issue on Asian American folklore, *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 128, 2015, the authors defined Asian American folklore and suggested relevant approaches.
- 32 Bock, Sheila. "Deliberate Infectors & Exotic Origins: The Folklore Behind COVID-19," April 1, 2020, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, New Center (<https://www.unlv.edu/news/article/deliberate-infectors-exotic-origins-folklore-behind-COVID-19>).
- 33 See, "Racism" in "Immanuel Kant" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immanuel_Kant#Racism).
- 34 See, "Reply of the colored delegation to the President of the United States?" by Geo. T.

- Downing, on behalf of the Delegation, Washington, February 7, 1866, in which a passage goes as such, “The hostility between the whites and blacks of the South is easily explained. It has its root and sap in the relation of slavery, and was incited on both sides by the cunning of the slave masters. Those masters secured their ascendancy over both the poor whites and the blacks by putting enmity between them. They divided both to conquer each. There was no earthly reason why the blacks should not hate and dread the poor whites when in a state of slavery, for it was from this class that their masters received their slave-catchers, slave-drivers, and overseers” (<https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/4391>).
- 35 Obama: Cure for racism, in answering Emmanuel Acho, How to cure racism, April 6, 2021 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0Wqj6CULT8>).
- 36 For example, at the American Folklore Society annual meeting in 2020, discussion about “systemic racism” within the American folklore discipline and scholarship seemed to be the biggest issue, along with the launch of “Notable Folklorists of Color” website (<https://notablefolkloristsofcolor.org/notable-folklorists-of-color/>) and strategic change of the cover design and plans in the *Journal of American Folklore*.
- 37 For example, a recent report from ProPublica, “The Secret IRS Files: Trove of Never-Before-Seen Records Reveal How the Wealthiest Avoid Income Tax,” by Jesse Eisinger, Jeff Ernsthausen and Paul Kiel, June 8, 2021 (<https://www.propublica.org/article/the-secret-irs-files-trove-of-never-before-seen-records-reveal-how-the-wealthiest-avoid-income-tax>). This example does not mean that being rich or being the richest is racist, but it does indicate that the wealth accumulated by the richest is the result of the unjust and immoral laws that are part of the racist system.

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Responses

Making Sense of the Pandemic of Racism: From the Asian Exclusion Act in 1924 to the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act in 2021

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The COVID-19 global pandemic has unleashed multiple junctures of trauma—economic, physical, and emotional. At the same time, Covid has exposed deep racial divisions within the United States (Stop AAPI Hate). While it may be convenient to assess the post-pandemic Anti-Asian violence as a more recent phenomena, Zhang rightfully urges the reader to consider the long history of discrimination and future pathways for Asian American folklore education.

Xenophobia against Asians has been embedded within the U.S. landscape since the start of migration in the 1800's. Historically, restrictive immigration laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Alien Land Law of 1913, and anti-miscegenation laws, prohibited Asian Americans from building lives in the U.S. despite the demand for cheap labor. Although the U.S. did not want Asian lives through migration, there was an interest for Asian objects such as porcelain, tea, and spices. As Erika Lee points out, "North American settlers also experienced a "China-mania" for Asian goods beginning in the eighteenth century ... Asia remained important to Americans in the new United States ... But it was the

lucrative trade with China (from which Europe's great powers were already profiting) that Americans most immediately wanted to engage in" (Lee 2015, 29). The fear of migration from Asia coupled with the zeal for Asian goods and the need for labor were factors that supported both the exoticification and objectification of the Asian body as alien to the nation. In other words, the desire for goods and labor from both China and India, lay the foundation of a long history of simultaneous fascination and revulsion for Asia and ultimately, anti-Asian discrimination.

Today, labor, migration, and geopolitical forces continue to remain intertwined determining the perceptions of Asian Americans as foreigners, as people outside of the fabric of the United States. Anti-Asian violence, as a result of the global pandemic, was not an isolated or recent phenomenon, but rather Covid-19 reinforced the continuation of strident xenophobia. Zhang details the history of the Asian body as unassimilable, dangerous, and objectified and urges a reframing of the historical narrative (Zhang, p. 5).

The brutal killing of eight individuals, six of them women of Asian heritage is one of the latest tragic reminders of ongoing racism (Fausset, et. al., 2021). However, despite the xenophobia, despite the racism, Asian Americans are an integral part of the United States from farming to technology, from small businesses to healthcare. Yet, how do we reimagine the ways in which we foster and promote the inclusion of Asian Americans as Americans in the field of folklore? It is critical that multiple academic, practical, and theoretical approaches are utilized in the restructuring of the American story into one that legitimizes the place of Asian Americans and their contributions. Of-

ten, the incorporation of Asian American history in elementary and high schools is either brief or limited, and I would argue this can no longer be sufficient. Colleges and universities must invest in and develop Asian American Studies Programs that offer a deeper examination of race, migration, and ethnic studies through the lens of disciplines such as English, Sociology, and History. The field of Folklore also has an opportunity to forge new directions in the study of Asian American life as an intrinsic part of American folklore. Our work as scholars is enriched by the expertise and knowledge from local Asian and Asian American community organizations such as VietLead, the Philadelphia Folklore Project, and Asian Americans United in Philadelphia; Desis Rising Up and Moving, National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum, and the Asian American Federation in New York; Asian American Journalists Association, Committee of 100, and the Japanese American Citizens League based in California.

Partnerships or service with one organization can expand both practical and theoretical perspectives. In addition, work with community organizations offers an opportunity to shift conceptions of knowledge, the center of power that is often monopolized by academia. A combination of education and community engagement allows for a richer discourse on acts of racism and xenophobia in everyday life, and it additionally has the potential to build more diverse representation of Asian Americans in the media and in film or television. In other words, education from elementary through post-secondary levels can deepen the full understanding of American history and resolve the misrepresentation of Asian American

life. Education in partnership with community-based organizations can further expand understandings of xenophobia and other forms of racism that impact the daily lives of Asian Americans. The Asian American story can thus be understood as truly an American story.

The historical social and legal structures in the United States have obstructed and continue to limit the full incorporation of Asian life in America, as Zhang points out (Zhang, p. 5). However currently, there are positive outcomes from the pandemic as well. Young activists and entrepreneurs are collaborating and establishing foundations that support Asian American businesses, nonprofit organizations, and youth programs such as Stand with Asian Americans (<https://standwithasianamericans.com/>), the Asian American Foundation (<https://www.taaf.org/>), and Stand with Asians (<https://www.standwithasians.com/>). These organizations encourage activism through community grants, information campaigns, and documenting hate incidents offering a voice to Asian Americans. Their work reimagines the power and presence of the uniquely Asian American story. There are significant educational changes necessary to best advocate for Asian American stories, but as Zhang emphasizes, there are also many opportunities to embrace the humanity in each of us (Zhang, 19).

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