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Asian North Americans, George Floyd and the politics of anti-Asian and anti-Black racism in COVID-19 times

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Introduction

A large marquee board outside a London, Ontario bar criticizing the Ford government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic read, "Mr Ford, history will show lockdowns caused more damage 2 the public then the China virus!" Posted in February 2021, approximately one year after the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Canada, this sign caused significant controversy. Within hours of its display, thousands of people had signed a petition demanding that the mayor of London have the sign removed immediately. Chinese residents of London argued that calling COVID-19 the "China virus" was racist and promoted hate crimes against Asians because it blamed China, and by extension all Chinese and Chinese-presenting people, for the virus. Alexandra Kane of Black Lives Matter London reached out to city councillors, the chief of police and the chair of the London Police Board to remove what Kane called "racist rhetoric" and "hate speech" that "shouldn't be allowed to be publicly displayed in our city" (Jabakhanji February 18, 2021). In addition to the dramatic rise in anti-Asian racism because of the virus' conflation with Asians, 2020 was defined by mass national and global protests against anti-Black racism due to a number of high-profile police killings of Black people in North America, particularly that of George Floyd. While solidarity has and does exist between Blacks and Asians against racism (as the above example reveals, see also Chang 2020; Roy and Constante June 12, 2020; Donato June 15, 2020; Zingel December 7, 2020), considerable public and media discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic attended to how Asians promote anti-Black racism, and Blacks exhibit anti-Asian racism (Anand and Hsu 2020; Gibson et al. 2020; Huang and Lee 2020).

This paper examines the intersections of the COVID-19 pandemic and the pandemic of systemic racism by focusing on how Asians in COVID-19 times have been multiply constructed as the vectors of infection, national security threats, victims of anti-Asian racism, and harbingers of anti-Black racism. I do so by drawing on public and media representations of and Asian responses to the two Asian people directly implicated in the death of George Floyd: Tou Thao and Kellie Chauvin. George Floyd was killed on

May 25, 2020 by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin when Chauvin pressed his knees on George Floyd's neck for over nine minutes while Floyd was faced down on the ground. Floyd's killing sparked months of protests in the United States and globally. It is estimated that approximately 20 million people in the United States participated in protests regarding Floyd's death within the first month alone (Buchanan, Bui and Patel July 3, 2020).

Derek Chauvin and the three other police officers who were present at the time of Floyd's killing were all charged in Floyd's death. The most prominent of these three police officers is Tou Thao, referred to as the "bystander to Black death" (Coalition of Asian American Leaders Minnesota May 29, 2020). Kellie Chauvin is Derek Chauvin's wife. Both members of the Hmong community in Minneapolis, I argue that Asianness in general, and the representations of Tou Thao and Kellie Chauvin in particular, must be understood within the context of white settler colonialism and heteropatriarchal capitalism that inform all relations on the Indigenous lands (home to a multitude of Indigenous nations) now known as North America. I begin by providing a brief overview of the North American white settler colonial context and the importance of structural violence in COVID-19 times. I move on to examine Asians and anti-Asian racism and anti-Black racism in the context of the police murder of George Floyd by highlighting the responses of Asian community and activist organizations. I end with a discussion of police and prison defunding and abolition and how divesting from the police and prisons are central to reducing the harms of the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and white settler supremacy (see Shihpar March 7, 2021).

White settler colonialism and structural violence in COVID-19 times

This paper contributes to critical race feminist and white settler studies scholarship that argues that in white settler colonies such as Canada and the United States, all violence must be understood within the context of continuous Indigenous dispossession and resurgence, and a racial hierarchy of entitlements. In white settler colonies white people are positioned as the original and most entitled citizens, Indigenous peoples are pathologized and romanticized as relics of the past, and racialized Others are differentially dehumanized and constructed as disposable. Disparately termed differential racialization (Delgado and Stefancic 2017), racial triangulation (Kim 1999), distinct and interrelated logics of the pillars of white supremacy (Smith 2006) and relational Othering (Dhamoon 2021), this diverse body of scholarship aims to expose and clarify how multiple and intersecting racisms structure marginalization and privilege in the contemporary North American context. Foundational to this work is an assertion that racialized groups are racialized differently, in relation to one another and often in opposition to each other, to uphold Indigenous dispossession, white supremacy and settler capitalism. Although there are key differences between Canada and the United States (particularly in relation to the Black slave economy and their distinct positioning in global wars and geopolitics), both countries are built on ongoing Indigenous genocide and share racist ideologies about Blacks and similar tensions surrounding white settler histories of Asian

exclusion and the neoliberal valorization and demonization of Asian capital (Amaduahy and Lawrence, 2009: 114 and 123). In both countries, racialized violence and terror has been and is the norm under which white settler capitalism operates (see Park 2012).

The scholarship on Black/Asian relations in the United States is particularly useful in articulating how racialized minorities are disciplined through white supremacist narratives of the other. Blacks and Asians in the United States (and to a lesser extent Canada) have been positioned in contradiction to each other, from the model minority discourse starting in the 1960s, to the conflicts between Korean immigrant merchants in Black neighbourhoods in the 1980s and 1990s, and the continual negation of Blackness in the twentieth “Asia Pacific century”. In white supremacist narratives, Asians are touted as mobile, independent, conformist, measured, efficient, cunning, competitive, family-oriented and forward-looking, whereas Blacks are vilified as poor, confined, pathological, criminal, dependent, stagnant, devoid of functioning families, and increasingly irrelevant. The discourse of Asians as model minorities – who labour and assimilate without complaint towards upward mobility – pathologizes all other minorities and economic poverty in general, while disavowing western imperialism in Asia. It does so by advancing the neoliberal logic of self-responsibility and independence from the state, and by disconnecting Asian migration from the wars that produced their resettlement in the west. Alongside the narrative of the model Asian minority, the demonization of Blacks obscures the extent to which white settler North America is built on Blackness as property and the continual social and physical death of Black and Indigenous peoples (see Jun 2011).

While the structural violence of indigenous dispossession and differential racialization undergirds all life in white settler societies, violence in western law and in dominant discourse is primarily individualized as illegitimate force that causes harm to persons or property. Currently, however, there is significant public engagement with systemic discrimination and structural violence due to the many systemic harms that the COVID-19 pandemic is revealing and accentuating. Structural violence refers to violence that is embedded in the structures of societies, materialize in inequitable power relations and life outcomes, and is typically routine and seen as natural (Galtung 1969). Structural violence is more common and more destructive than individual violence because it structures everyday life. The violence of racism, capitalism, colonialism, sexism and so forth are deeply embedded in social organizations, although experienced differently by disparately marginalized and privileged groups. Importantly, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004) remind us that all forms of violence are interconnected and overlapping, and that everyday and individual violence (such as stranger assaults and domestic violence) are not separate from more structural forms of violence such as historical and contemporary forms of colonialism and slavery.

The differential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities has received significant attention. A recent study published by The Lancet found that Black and Asian people are up to twice as likely to be infected with COVID-19 compared to white people (Sze et al November 12, 2020).

In the United States, Black people make up 30% of deaths but only 13% of the population (Ladimeji July 2, 2020). Race data is limited in Canada, but evidence shows that Black people in Canada disproportionately contract and die from COVID-19 (Chung, Adhopia and Glanz September 25, 2020). First Nations living on reserves in Canada contract COVID-19 at a rate of 40% higher than the general Canadian population (Somos January 25, 2021). These figures for Indigenous peoples are attributed to systemic health, racial and social inequities that existed prior to COVID-19 and have been magnified by crowded, inadequate housing, insecure access to health care and social services, excess of chronic disease, food insecurity, poor sanitation and inadequate access to clean water (Somos January 25, 2021). Similarly, in the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, Indigenous peoples in Canada comprised 28% of hospitalizations and 18% of deaths although they were 4% of the population in 2009. In Winnipeg, Manitoba 55% of hospital admissions for H1N1 were Indigenous peoples although they were 10% of the city's population (Palmateer April 30, 2020)

The largest COVID-19 outbreak in North America was at Cargill meat processing plant in High River, Alberta. 1500 of its approximately 2000 workers tested positive for COVID-19 (Press Progress May 14, 2020). 70% of the workers at Cargill are Filipinos; almost all of the workers at Cargill are racialized. Filipinos are also disproportionately front-line, precarious, health care workers. Essential workers, many rightly point out, are sacrificial workers. Race, class, gender and immigration status are key to their disposability (Mendoza May 28, 2020). The intersections of western imperial and colonial violence in Asia that frames Filipino migration, and Canadian settler colonial violence that frames their migration and settlement in Canada are fundamental to the expendability of Filipinos as sacrificial workers.

By and large less attention has been given to the vulnerabilities of low-pay, precarious Asian workers than to the rise of physical assaults against Asians, most often by strangers. This applies to both the mainstream media and politicians and Asian community organizations and activist groups. Both forms of anti-Asian violence, however, arise from white heteropatriarchal supremacy and racial capitalism that structures who belongs, under what conditions and whose lives matter. As Ghassan Hage (1998) argues in the Australian context, racial practices “are better conceived as nationalist practices; practices which assume, first, an image of a national space, secondly, an image of the nationalist himself or herself as master of this national space and, thirdly, an image of the ‘ethnic/racial other’ as a mere object within this space” (28). In thinking about both Asian worker expendability and the rise in anti-Asian assaults, one needs to conceptualize both as systemic, national and colonial violence tied to ongoing Indigenous dispossession.

In addition to the differential impacts of COVID-19 and the attention paid to the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes, issues of race and everyday and structural violence are currently considered of import due to recent police killings of Black and Indigenous peoples. These killings, many argue, should not be viewed as the acts of individual police officers (a few bad apples) but as state violence and as representative of the role

of policing in upholding and legitimating slavery and colonialism (Maynard 2017). At least nine Indigenous peoples in Canada were killed by police in 2020, including Chantel Moore in Edmundston, New Brunswick, and Regis Korchinski-Paquet in Toronto, Ontario. An Indigenous-Black woman who died during an altercation with Toronto police on May 27, 2020, Korchinski-Paquet's death and that of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota two days prior have, in particular, incited national and global protests.

How may Asianness and anti-Asian hate crimes be understood as part of the same analytical field of white settler colonial violence? The next section discusses issues of anti-Asian racism, and anti-Black racism by focusing on the two Asian people who are directly implicated in the death of George Floyd: Tou Thao and Derek Chauvin's wife, Kellie Chauvin. I examine the role of and the positioning of Tou Thao and Kellie Chauvin because media, activists, and the public have named their Asianness as significant.

Tou Thao, the Asian wife and the politics of solidarity

Literary scholar and novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen (June 26, 2020) writes of the Asian American experience:

Situated in the middle of America's fraught racial relations, we receive, on the whole, more benefits from American capitalism than Black, brown or Indigenous peoples, even if many of us also experience poverty and marginalization. While some of us do die from police abuse, it does not happen on the same scale as that directed against Black, brown or Indigenous peoples. While we do experience segregation and racism and hostility, we are also more likely to live in integrated neighborhoods than Black or Indigenous people. To the extent that we experience advantage because of our race, we are also complicit in holding up a system that disadvantages Black, brown and Indigenous people because of their race.

Speaking specifically about the role of Tou Thao in the death of George Floyd, Nguyen asserts that Tou Thao is "the face ... [that] haunts me". Writer Anna Haines (June 19, 2020), who describes herself as half Asian-Canadian, is less empathetic and states that watching Thao emotionless as he stands with his back to George Floyd and Derek Chauvin filled her with rage. According to Haines the rage is "[b]ecause he symbolizes the passive approach to racism that is often all too common in the Asian American (and Canadian) community".

Of the four police officers involved in George Floyd's murder, Tou Thao and Derek Chauvin are the two whose race was deemed significant: Thao as Asian or specifically Hmong, and Chauvin as white. The other two police officers (one white and one Black) are largely represented as blue, as police officers primarily and whose race does not appear to be as relevant. While Derek Chauvin is singled-out as the white police officer

who caused George Floyd's death, Tou Thao is the Asian police officer who turned his back to George Floyd's pleas and kept the public at bay. The other individual whose race is cited as relevant to the death of George Floyd is Derek Chauvin's wife of over ten years, Kellie Chauvin. Tou Thao and Kellie Chauvin represent Asian complicity in supporting Black death, anti-Black racism and white supremacy.

Nguyen and Haines' visceral and intense reaction to watching Tou Thao is largely in response to experiencing this moment of Asian and Black interaction as yet another moment in which Asian and Black relations is marked by violence, tension, and discord. The mainstream media has continually framed relations between Asian and Black communities as troubled and in opposition. This includes reports of Black boycotts of Korean stores in New York City in 1990, the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, police officer Peter Liang's conviction in the death of Akai Gurley in 2016 and the recent Asian-led lawsuits against Affirmative Action in higher education for Black students (Chang 2020; Lee et al. 2020; Ho 2021). Asians are represented as more privileged immigrants who are exploiting and preying on poor Black communities, and Blacks are constructed as criminals victimizing Asians who are simply attempting to live the American dream (Lee et al. 2020: 405). Both representations support white settler narratives of Asians as the model and the foreign peril, and of Blacks as inferior, violent and the cause of their own misfortune.

The attention placed on Tou Thao for his role in Floyd's death has led to threats, harassment and attacks, online and in person, of other people named Tou. Tou is the most common Hmong name; Thao is a common last name (Hirsi May 29, 2020). The Hmong community is also being vilified because Derek Chauvin's wife is Hmong and her maiden name happens to be Thao. This led to numerous incorrect assertions that Tou Thao and Kellie Chauvin are brother and sister and are in cahoots in the murder of Floyd (Dupuy May 30, 2020; Pai June 3, 2020). Asians who are not Hmong are being harassed and questioned. Hoang Murphy, candidate for Minnesota House of Representatives, received a text from one of his Black friends the day after Floyd's murder asking, "What's going on in your community". Murphy is Vietnamese, and not Hmong (Hirsi May 29, 2020).

Kellie Chauvin, who has since filed for divorce from Derek Chauvin, is said by some on social media to be "morally responsible" for Floyd's death because she was most likely abused by Chauvin but never reported it and should have, or that Kellie Chauvin was not abused but must have known about his violent nature and should have acted on this knowledge (Conan Altatis May 31, 2020; Larson June 6, 2020). Others debate the entity called WMAF or White Male Asian Female and how many of these unions consist of a white supremacist male and a self-hating Asian woman (Conan Altatis June 30, 2019). Although Kellie Chauvin worked as a radiologist for 13 years and is a real estate agent, most articles refer to her as Chauvin's "Asian wife" and as a beauty queen since she won the title of Mrs. Minnesota.

Asian Americans were already facing nation-wide attacks due to the belief that they caused the COVID-19 pandemic. An Association for Canadian Studies – Leger Marketing web survey of 1000 Americans and 1500 Canadians found that 51% of Americans believed that COVID-19 was created by the Chinese government. 33.7% of Canadians overall believed that COVID-19 was created by the Chinese government (Association for Canadian Studies June 1, 2020). The proposed Secure Campus Act bans all Chinese nationals seeking STEM degrees from entering the US. Trump banned entry of Chinese graduate students and researchers affiliated with seven Chinese universities. Chinese students are constructed as national security threats (VOA Student Union May 30, 2020). Anti-Asian attacks seem to reflect that for some the Chinese government is equated with all Chinese and also Asians in general.

Significant media attention has been placed on how many of the people attacking Asians in COVID-19 times are Black. This spotlight on Black violence against Asians (many elderly and women) has occurred before (as addressed by Freedom Inc. below), as well as after the murder of George Floyd. Asian and Asian American organizations quickly responded to denounce hegemonic representations and voice solidarity with Black communities. An “Open letter from Freedom Inc.’s Southeast Asian Team on COVID-19 and Black Solidarity” dated April 14, 2020, more than a month before Floyd’s murder states:

COVID-19 is highlighting the historical conflicts between Asian American and Black communities. Though there is a long history of our communities building and supporting each other, we must acknowledge that our community has also contributed to anti-black violence.

Specifically referring to anti-Asian violence and anti-Black racism, the open letter goes on to iterate:

As the visibility of hate crimes against Asian Americans heightens, we must question the high trending rates of anti-Asian hate crimes committed by Black people documented and published on public media platforms. These videos perform racial stereotyping of Black and Asian Americans in a time of instability, fear, and death to: 1) maintain the belief that Black people are inherently violent, 2) redirect the flow of outrage away from institutional failures and racist leaders to people of color, and 3) uphold white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism.

Similar to Nguyen, Freedom Inc.’s Southeast Asian team declares that, “Let us be clear ... that while our oppressions are connected, our oppression is not the same. Black bodies are systemically and historically dehumanized in this country in ways we will never face”. The open letter ends by asking members of the Southeast Asian community to do the following:

- Stop sharing these videos that do nothing but increase division and anti-Blackness in our communities.

- Acknowledge that the Black community is disproportionately impacted and support diverting resources to addressing their needs.
- Redirect your anger from individuals to systems and racist leaders.
- Envision solutions that address violence that does not use the criminal justice system as the solution to addressing conflicts between us and other communities of color.
- Shift blame and responsibility from individuals to government and leaders that continue to invest in militarism and criminalization of people, instead of investing in people.
- Educate yourselves and your community on anti-blackness/colorism and deepen your analysis of oppression.
- Stand in solidarity and fight back with the Black community while they are mourning and fighting for the lives of their people.

A joint statement by Lausan Collective (a Hong Kong leftist press), Pacific Rim Solidarity Network (a global Chinese diaspora organization) and Seeding Change (an Asian American organization) (May 19, 2020) condemns all xenophobic attacks tied to the conflation of minorities with COVID-19 transmission. This includes the attacks of African migrants in China (see Ho 2021; Dionne and Turkman 2020) and Asians in the west. Highlighted are how structures of racial capitalism, that siphon wealth from poor countries to feed global capital, produce the conditions for violence. Titled “Asian leftists challenging global racial capitalism in the time of COVID-19: A joint solidarity statement on global anti-Blackness and racism against African migrants in China during COVID-19”, the statement ends by affirming:

As leftists, we reject global anti-Black racism and call on our communities to fight for Black lives against racial capitalism. Join us in challenging anti-Blackness as it shows up at home; to support anti-racist mutual aid efforts; to expand anti-imperialist efforts for mutual liberation. Anti-Asian sentiment may abate as the virus becomes contained, but Black people will still be barred from the privileges we enjoy through the ongoing institutionalization of anti-Black racism. Now is the time for creating, expanding, and strengthening international solidarity, thereby building power for Black, Asian, and all workers.

Following the murder of George Floyd on May 27, 2020, Asian American leaders urged their communities to stand in solidarity with the Floyd family and with Blacks against anti-Black racism (Hirsi May 29, 2020). On May 29, 2020, the Coalition of Asian American Leaders Minnesota published an, “Open Letter to Community: A Call for Unity and Solidarity in the Face of Violence”. The letter was endorsed by 37 Asian Minnesotan organizations and 311 organizations outside Minnesota. It asserts:

We also cannot ignore the role of Officer Tou Thao who stood watch as George Floyd was dying. To see someone who looks like us behave as a

bystander to Black death is devastating and painful. This is yet another reason that we must recognize our silence in the face of anti-Black racism, and commit to the ongoing work to dismantle anti-Blackness. Throughout history, there have been attempts to pit Asian and Black communities against each other, a tactic that encourages us to turn on each other rather than tackle our common oppression: the system of white supremacy. These efforts distract us from the real solution of building cross-racial solidarity to root out racist oppression. And while Asian communities have been rewarded for our assimilation into whiteness with the lie of the “model minority” myth, it is at times like this crisis that we should remember that our status is always conditional and subject to being taken away by xenophobia.

In the Canadian context a webinar titled, “Asian solidarity with Black lives: Dismantling racial capitalism” held on June 29, 2020 is noteworthy. Organized by a number of labour organizations including Asian Canadian Labour Alliance, the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists and Chinese Workers Network, panelists Carol Wall and Winnie Ng and moderator Min Sook Lee named the current moment as one of clarity in which white supremacy can no longer be negated. The global pandemic has laid bare a multitude of systemic inequities that reveal the need for fundamental structural change; this change must centre the lives of Black and Indigenous peoples but will improve the lives of all equity seeking groups (see also Chang 2020: 742). Carol Wall highlighted as inspirational the extent to which the global protests against police violence and anti-Black racism were multi-racial and multi-generational events largely led by BIPOC youth. Implicit in many of the statements are an iteration of how the various forms of racial capitalism and white supremacy are both hierarchical and interconnected. Indigenous and Black peoples are by and large at the bottom of the hierarchy of white settler colonialism, and the marginalization of BIPOC peoples are disparate but inter-linked (see Lee et al. 2020: 406).

This hierarchy and disparity also exists within and between communities categorized as Asian. Asian relationships to Blackness are not uniform and working through disaffinities and affinities may be different for disparate Asian groups. While the representations of Tou Thao and Kellie Chauvin affect all Asians in western white supremacist societies (see Ho 2021), significant differences exist between how white supremacy is experienced by different Asian groups. Filipinos and Vietnamese in Canada, for example, are often absent from both East Asian and South Asian categorizations produced in public and academic discourse. In speaking about anti-Asian and anti-Black racism during the COVID-19 pandemic, Vincent Wong of the University of Toronto argued that Southeast Asians, such as Laotians, Cambodians, and Hmong, do not have the same experiences in North America as people of Japanese, Koreans, or Chinese descent (Chan July 17, 2020). Cambodian, Lao and Hmong refugees, Aihwa Ong contends, are marked by an ideological blackening or association with Black communities due to their position as refugees, their rural backgrounds and their high rates of poverty. Hmong, more so than East Asian Americans have lower educational success rates and experience

more policing and surveillance (Lee et al. 2020: 407). Some members of the Hmong community insist that the Hmong "... should not be seen through the lens of the model-minority experience, should not be subject to liberal Asian-American guilt and hand-wringing over Tou Thao as a symbol of complicity" (Nguyen June 26, 2020).

To heed the words of Freedom Inc.'s Southeast Asian team on anti-Asian violence to "redirect your anger from individuals to systems" requires a de-centring of Tou Thao and an emphasis on the systemic violence of war and imperialism, its connections to migration and displacement and racialized poverty. As stated by Nguyen (June 26, 2020):

To locate Tou Thao in the middle of a Black-Hmong divide, or a Black-Asian divide, as if race were the only problem and the only answer, obscures a fatal statistic: the national poverty rate was 15.1% in 2015, while the rate for African Americans was about 24.1% and for Hmong Americans 28.3% The problem is race, and class, and war—a country almost always at war overseas that then pits its poor of all races and its exploited minorities against each other in a domestic war over scarce resources.

Abiding by Freedom Inc.'s Southeast Asian team's recommendations also requires an analysis of stranger assaults and hate speech that ties these acts to a larger system of white settler colonial and neoliberal violence. Policing and the criminal justice system are key technologies by which settler and neoliberal violence is propagated and legitimated. Thus, Freedom Inc.'s Southeast Asian team's resolution that, we must "envision solutions that address violence that does not use the criminal justice system as the solution to addressing conflicts between us and other communities of color". This counsel continues to be timely as media reports of Black violence against Asians, many of them elderly, on both coasts of the United States garnered significant attention in the first few months of 2021 (Fernandez February 11, 2021; Kim February 12, 2021). Large monetary rewards provided by Asian American celebrities to catch the culprits has some accusing Asian Americans of supporting the racial profiling of Black people and akin to slavery, providing a bounty on Black people's bodies (Fernandez February 11, 2021). The last section critiques criminalization and punishment as solutions to violence and advances arguments for police and prison abolition and defunding, prevalent in the protests over the killing of George Floyd.

How to end the violence: Abolition and Defunding

In April 2021, Derek Chauvin was found guilty in a criminal trial on three counts of murder and manslaughter in the killing of George Floyd. Chauvin was sentenced to 22.5 years in prison. Subsequently, in December 2021 Chauvin pleaded guilty to federal charges of violating Floyd's civil rights. The city of Minneapolis settled a civil suit and awarded Floyd's family \$27 million (Aguilar-San Juan 2021: 405). In February 2022, Tou Thao, J. Alexander Keung, and Thomas Lane were found guilty of federal charges of violating Floyd's civil right to medical care. Thao and Keung were also convicted of

failing to intervene to save Floyd's life. The three ex-officers have yet to be sentenced for their violation of federal civil rights. In June 2022 Thao, Keung and Lane will face state criminal charges for aiding and abetting in the murder and manslaughter of Floyd (Associated Press February 24, 2022).

Chauvin is the first white police officer in Minnesota to be incarcerated for killing a Black man (Chappell June 25, 2021). Black people in the United States are twice as likely as white people to be killed by police officers (Bunn March 3, 2022). Police officers are rarely held accountable for the death of people in their custody (Chappell. June 25, 2021; see also Razack 2015). The guilty verdicts for the four police officers are said to represent a step towards healing and accountability (Chappell June 25, 2021). For some, justice for Floyd can only occur if all four ex-police officers involved in Floyd's death are convicted and given prison sentences. Justice for some is ensuring that those who perpetrate hate crimes against Asians are arrested and brought before a justice. Key questions that arose in the context of the global pandemic and the rise of Black Lives Matter protests include, how can the lessons of the pandemic usher in social change? Can we dismantle current problems by using current solutions? Can justice be done by "locking them-up and throwing away the key"?

In an interview with Toronto Life magazine, Robyn Maynard, author of Policing Black Lives said this:

The mass protests we're seeing right now are happening precisely because people don't want to go back to the old version of normal, which was so violent and exclusionary for Black people, for Indigenous people, for migrant communities. Do I believe we can have a police-free future? Absolutely. Do I think we can do that in our lifetime? Absolutely (Zarum quoting Maynard June 12, 2020).

An often-heard chant at anti-Black racism protests over the killing of Floyd was, "no justice, no peace, defund the police". Advocates for police defunding and prison abolition, many of them Black women, have been putting forth a call for divestment from carceralism for decades. One cannot end one form of violence -- police violence -- by using another form of violence, the violence of incarceration and punishment. Hate crimes legislation, for example, legitimates and expands the criminal punishment system and thus cannot produce less violent societies (see Spade 2015). Sustaining and expanding systems that police, surveil, incarcerate and detain people produces violence and cannot end violence.

According to Pam Palmateer, in Canada 30% of federally incarcerated people are Indigenous peoples, although Indigenous people are 5% of the Canadian population. For women 42% in federal prisons are Indigenous. 50% of the youth incarcerated nationally are Indigenous. In some provinces, it is much higher. In Saskatchewan, 92% of incarcerated male youth are Indigenous and 98% of incarcerated female youth are Indigenous (April 30, 2020).

Policing and incarceration are key technologies of colonialism in that they contribute to the destruction of marginalized families, communities and nations on local, national and global scales (Chartrand 2019; Davis 2003). Not going back to the normal, and “investing in people”, as Freedom Inc. advances, necessitates divesting from punishment as the solution. The Toronto police budget is \$1.22 billion per year (Zarum June 12, 2020). This \$1.22 billion is greater than the funds allocated to paramedics, public housing, libraries and firefighters combined (Preville April 26, 2016). Veteran police officers across North America note that virtually all property crime would disappear if drugs were decriminalized and addictions treated as social, health and education issues and not criminal issues (Littlefield 2006). Allocating funds to adequately address addictions would virtually eliminate property crime. Many crimes are also poverty-related crimes, crimes that would not occur if people’s basic needs for adequate and secure food, housing, child-care, community engagement and so forth were met.

In her book *Golden Gulag* (2007) Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism as the, “state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (261). In other words, the design of society produces vulnerability, disposability and death for some, and valorization and increased life chances for others. White settler neoliberal societies are characterized by organized abandonment or austerity such as the privatization of land, social services, health, and education, and by organized violence such as policing, detention and deportation. Policies of organized abandonment leads to imprisonment. Thus, the call for abolition and defunding is less about removing people from cages and on to the street, and more about collective organizing to create another world. Rather than a simple reallocation of public funds, abolition requires a transformation of social and economic structures. According to Gilmore the purpose of her definition of racism is to assist people to think through how vulnerability is produced through systems, and to enable people to collectively join forces to overcome that vulnerability (Gilmore April 16, 2020). Hence, in ending anti-Asian racism it is imperative to seek solutions that account for and prioritize Indigenous and Black life since all forms of violence are overlapping and linked. Creating less violent societies for Indigenous and Black peoples requires that we “change everything” (Gilmore April 16, 2020). This will inevitably reduce the harms experienced by all life on Indigenous lands.

Conclusion

In a *Time* magazine article on Tou Thao and Asian Americans, Nguyen (June 26, 2020) writes, “Like many Asian Americans, I learned to feel a sense of shame over the things that supposedly made us foreign: our food, our language, our haircuts, our fashion, our smell, our parents.” Nguyen goes on to refer to poet and essayist Cathy Park Hong:

What made these sentiments worse, Hong argues, was that we told ourselves these were “minor feelings.” How could we have anything valid to feel or say about race when we, as a model minority, were supposedly accepted

by American society? At the same time, anti-Asian sentiment remained a reservoir of major feeling from which Americans could always draw in a time of crisis. Asian Americans still do not wield enough political power, or have enough cultural presence, to make many of our fellow Americans hesitate in deploying a racist idea. Our unimportance and our historical status as the perpetual foreigner in the U.S. is one reason the President and many others feel they can call COVID-19 the “Chinese virus” or the “kung flu”.

I begin my conclusion with Nguyen’s words because it captures a central experience of being Asian in North America: that of repeatedly experiencing multiple forms of anti-Asian racism and yet this anti-Asian racism is rarely recognized and legitimated as important. The current pandemic may be a rare moment in which there is some validation of anti-Asian racism, albeit it is primarily limited to stranger physical attacks and verbal assaults. These assaults are numerous; many of the attacks and robberies have been very violent and some deadly (Chen and Lee-An March 28, 2021; Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter and Project 1907 March 2022). And yet the unimportance of Asians for both mainstream society and social justice movements largely persists. As Michelle Kim (February 12, 2020) states, “The collective and intergenerational trauma Asians hold is vast and painfully deep. The erasure and silence around our struggles, from both of our own community and our allies, only deepen the wound while widening the gap between us and other marginalized communities”.

This unimportance of being Asian and of anti-Asian racism is reflected in sentiment that Asians are an under-policed, under-protected group, a group defined as unworthy of police protection. East Asians specifically are under-policed and Black, Brown and Indigenous groups are over-policed (see Fernandez, Feb 11, 2021). In other words, Asian lives do not matter and anti-Asian crimes receive less attention and resources. This desire to be defined as a group worthy of police protection, or as Dean Spade (2015) states, “having the law say good things about you,” fails to acknowledge how the police and the criminal punishment system are key purveyors of violence for most BIPOC people. Being unimportant cannot lead to fighting to get protection from the criminal punishment system.

Sociologist Rashawn Ray reminds us that:

A person gets killed by the police, on average, every eight hours. That’s a normal thing. So police violence is an endemic, and when things are an endemic, it’s kind of like Covid. People got used to it . . . That’s how police violence is right now. We’ve been dealing with it ever since slave patrols (Bunn March 3, 2022).

Data collected by The Washington Post reveals that police killings of Black people increased in 2020 despite the mass global protests over the killing of George Floyd. Ray asserts that the attention to police violence may have contributed to a hardening of the blue wall of silence (Bunn March 3, 2022). Similarly Canadian research points to an

increase in deadly police encounters over the past twenty years; Indigenous and Black people are disproportionately represented in these police killings (Singh July 23, 2020). While some United States cities vowed to reduce police funding in the aftermath of the Floyd killing, most of these police budgets have since been increased or reinstated (Bunn March 3, 2022). Recent reports pronounce that the significant increase in anti-Asian hate crimes continued in 2022 (Jabakhanji April 26, 2022).

Through an examination of the role of Asianness in the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism, this paper attempted to illuminate the multiple and often contradictory ways that Asians are positioned to support white settler colonialism and racial capitalism. Asians in COVID-19 times are multiply positioned as the vectors of infection, as national security threats, as victims of anti-Asian racism, and as harbingers of anti-Black racism. Drawing on Asian community and activist organization responses to Asian involvement in the death of George Floyd, and representations of Black violence against Asian, this paper argued that the solutions to ending the pain of being Asian do not lie with inclusion and still lie with cross-racial solidarity and a divesting from systems that produce social and physical death of the most marginalized. Central to this articulation is an understanding that the oppression of disparate marginalized groups are connected and constitutive, but not equal and the same. Adhering to Gilmore's call to "change everything", a more just post-COVID-19 world on Indigenous lands requires collective action towards abolition and decolonization.

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