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ER&M 350: Afro-Asian Formations of Race

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AFROASIAN ENCOUNTERS ONLINE

BACKGROUND

For the final public-oriented project, our group conducted a study of COVID-19 and its mass circulation within contemporary digital media. Originally, the project was going to be a relational study between COVID-19 and Ebola that sought to illuminate the ways in which Asian and Asian American as well as African and African American bodies have been racially pathologized co-constitutively. However, as COVID-19 became more salient and directly impacted the communities closest to us, we decided to shift gears and instead focused solely on our current historical moment. In stripping our project down to one pandemic, however, we quickly learned that we did not lose the relational framework whatsoever, as embedded within COVID-19 itself are layers of relational race dynamics, as we will discuss in our FINDINGS section.

AFROASIAN ENCOUNTERS ONLINE explores popular TikToks, tweets, and press headlines that pertain to COVID-19. Through this examination of digital media as our textual object of study, we were interested in the ways in which public health is actively narrativized in everyday discourse. Specifically in the realm of digital media, this project was invested in

elucidating how racialized panic and xenophobia are codified and enfolded into an electronic aesthetics of satire within the genre of the soundbite (i.e. the genre of the 60-second TikTok and 280-character tweet).

The project could have manifested as many different forms, but ultimately our group decided to use Instagram and its 'Stories' feature in order to publish an online "exhibit" featuring our media of interest captioned with our blurbed analyses. The reasons for and efficacy of using Instagram will be discussed more in-depth in the REFLECTIONS section. Questions driving the genre of our project include: How can we reimagine and redeploy digital media from a site of racial violence to a productive tool of community organizing, critical information, and coalition? How does the public-facing nature and easier accessibility of Instagram impact the way our content is being consumed, as compared to a separate independent platform such as a website?

Access to the slides (and respective media) we created for the project can be found here, a link that redirects you to the presentation we gave for class.

METHODOLOGY & PROCESS

This project harmonized methods of literary analysis, communications theory, critical ethnic studies, public humanities, and graphic design throughout its ideation and implementation. Timing for the project began in February, when our group started a shared archive where we gathered content each of us encountered in our everyday social media usage. Because algorithms are tailored to a specific user, we understood the limitations of this "data collection" process, so whenever one of us came across the same piece of media as another, we'd be sure to flag it. After gathering media for nearly two months, our group sat down and parsed through all the

TikToks, Twitter posts, and articles in order to pinpoint the ones we ended up featuring in the Instagram exhibit. In terms of selection criteria, because the project is grounded in public (mis)information, our group prioritized legibility, selecting media we thought would clearly distill our arguments of relational racializations vis-á-vis COVID-19.

After selecting the assortment of "texts" we would use, our group analyzed each piece thoroughly in a more scholarly frame, drafting write-ups for each text while keeping in mind the theorists from our semester (in particular Claire Jean Kim and Vijay Prashad). In doing so, we laid the analytical foundations from which we could begin architecting the creative exhibit, which pushed our methodological and intellectual boundaries as ensconced university academics. In this creative register, we distilled each of our write-ups into nicely packaged, digestible textual bites that users could easily consume while zipping through their followers' Instagram stories. This practice of consolidation transferred over to the visuals as well; not only did the captions have to be compelling, but so did their formatting. As much as we tinkered with the granularities of language—grammar, diction, and syntax—in formulating the captions, so too with the visuals as we mulled over font, chromatic scheme, borders, size, etc. on Adobe Illustrator. All this to say, aesthetics became a site of major critical contemplation that pushed our intellectual boundaries by forcing us to distill complex ideas regarding relational racialization into compelling and accessible deliverables. In this process of distillation, however, inevitably comes erasure, so crucial to our methodology was being able to conduct a balance between aesthetic needs and the (in/ex)clusion of information.

After our textual and visual deliberations, we created and published twelve slides on each of our respective Instagram accounts, as well as tagged organizations supporting racial justice

and organizing for COVID-19 to solicit any donations in our "Interested In Helping Out?" slide. Furthermore, the exhibit was interactive, as we prompted followers to tangibly engage in the media by clicking on the tagged accounts, videos, and photos, and to directly message us with any thoughts they had. Among these direct messages, many asked questions which required follow-up as well as requested access to the slides, meaning our project also took on a social dimension, too, in addition to the prior academic and creative work. Therefore, in our new role as creators of digital media, part of our methodology was to also be prepared to serve as liaisons of information while emphasizing that each of us by no means is an expert. Other examples of user engagement will be enumerated in the REFLECTIONS section.

FINDINGS

The many types of media that we sourced on TikTok and Twitter all worked to racialize the virus as being distinctly Asian, reflecting the gradual, spatiotemporal encroachment of COVID-19 into everyday American life. We found that TikTok, as a platform, was a space that promoted the racial satirization of COVID-19—under the guise of comical memes, internet challenges, and trending humor. For instance, there were numerous clips of predominantly (yet not exclusively) white, teenaged creators evoking Orientalism with the facilitation of the platform's features: a plethora of custom and accessible user-created Oriental background sounds and accents to amplify "Asian-ness"; trending #coronavirus hashtags that targeted Asians; filters and backdrops that spatially "placed" the virus in China, and more (i.e. slide 5 in our presentation).

Similarly, on Twitter, users posted memes that continued to pathologize the Asian and Chinese body, further satirizing Asian communities vis-à-vis their "roles" in spreading the virus. On this platform, these modes of racialization became quotidian and normalized—especially with the application's algorithm in displaying trending tweets, retweets, and favorites at the top of the timeline. On March 18th, 2020, these modes of Asian racialization were officiated by President Trump—referring to COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus," he pathologized Chinese bodies as being diseased and the Oriental source of the pandemic. This designation, coming from an official government position, illuminates the nation-state's overt scapegoating of the Asian and Asian American community, and thus reifies and reproduces the notions of the "Other" through a top-down mode of racialization.

The racialization of COVID-19 in popular culture and in the news had reciprocal, material impacts on Asian and Asian American communities in the United States. In March and April—during a moment of the Asian body's pathologization—existed a simultaneous scapegoating, in the face of racist and xenophobic violence towards Asian communities. In March and April, there was an upsurge in hate crimes and violence geared towards Asians—and in many cases, the victims were mistaken to be "Chinese." Furthermore, numerous Asian-owned small businesses were forced to shut down, mirroring the fear that white Americans had of Asian communities. Thus, while TikTok and Twitter satirized Asians and played into comedic politics, these platforms ultimately helped to veil the insidious reality of racial violence and displacement that haunted—and continue to haunt—Asian people.

The impacts of the virus and its racialization, however, should not be understood as singular or in isolation. Rather, racial violence and dispossession vis-à-vis COVID-19 occurs

co-constitutively—it is multivalent. Anti-black violence, however, is not as visible in popular culture or the media. It is overshadowed by headlines of anti-Asian stories, which seems to erase how COVID impacts Black people in cultural consciousness. And while we have recognized the very real, disproportionate impact of COVID-culture on Asian communities, our project pivots to understand how Black communities are specifically impacted and neglected.

For instance, although racial profiling certainly exists in Asian communities, the violence against Black people reveals an alternate, structural history of anti-Blackness and policing is nuanced and different from Orientalism. Twitter user Aaron Thomas tweeted that he doesn't "feel safe wearing a handkerchief or something else that isn't CLEARLY a protective mask...I am a Black man living in this world. I want to stay alive but I also want to stay alive." Thomas' sentiments echo the reality of policing on Black communities that COVID-19 lays bare—the fact that these communities continue to be exploited by white supremacy during this advantageous time. Furthermore, a *Vox* article demonstrates how the virus itself is disproportionately killing Black and Brown populations—this statistical death toll reifies the long-standing anti-Black resource inequity and structural disparities in the public health system.

REFLECTIONS

The portable nature of social media—the way that people are able to mundanely scroll through, as they would on the everyday—allowed our project to be easily consumed. Showcasing our findings on our respective Instagram stories, and bridging academic concepts of relationality with popular culture, social media, and COVID-19, allowed for our articulations to be accessible for our audience. Through our distillations and concise definitions, our group was

able to deviate away from a formal seminar table and academic jargon, rather conveying our insights in a digestible way. This proved useful for people who, for instance, have never taken an ethnic studies course or had a grasp on the theory of race and relationality.

The engagement for our presentation was high—ranging from middle school and high school students; to college students studying in different fields; to adults and acquaintances. Our followers' feedback was also generative—many expressed the importance of this information and suggestions for us to produce this project further, using a larger platform. Others praised the project for the fact that it highlighted very applicable, relevant understandings of race and relationality that are not discussed in their classrooms or on social media. A handful of followers kindly donated to the organizations that were tagged at the end of our presentation, while others asked us to email them the slides for them to share or repost. Ultimately, the media framework that we employed throughout the project allowed for knowledge not only to be received, but also reproduced. Playing at the idea of praxis, our presentation allowed us to translate classroom topics into deliverables to reach a mass audience—a culmination of relational, community-based work.