



March 21, 2020

Major public health and medical institutions have made statements concerning how to deal with the coronavirus epidemic. The recommendations are basic and simple: wash your hands frequently, or use hand sanitizers with alcohol if washing is not possible, and try to avoid crowded and contaminated spaces. However, the response in many areas of the country, especially in New York City and our CUNY colleges, is to attack certain groups of people instead of the virus. The virus has become associated with certain regions of the world and certain communities of people. As a result, there has already been a spike in anti-Asian and anti-Asian American bigotry.

As colleges that house international Asian students and a very vibrant Asian American community, we write this to condemn any form of anti-Asian and anti-Asian American bigotry. Attacks geared towards these communities have been such that they have mapped out the coronavirus onto Asia as a geographic area and onto East Asian Americans as incubators and carriers of the virus. It has thus given license to people to verbally, symbolically, and physically attack Asians and Asian Americans. What such stereotyping does is to divert energies from addressing the emergence of the virus as a result of certain socio-historical conditions rather than as something innately Asian/Asian American.

The stereotypes of the Chinese in particular and Asian Americans in general as dirty, sickly, and prone to spreading disease is part of United States' racist history. What we are witnessing now is not new to this moment. While the coronavirus and its presence as a global epidemic are new, the racist discourses used against Asians and Asian Americans are not new. One can just look at the historic 1880s San Francisco's Chinatown and its bachelor communities to see how the very emergence of public health institutions in the United States surfaced through a racial stereotyping of the Chinese, their isolated and crowded living conditions, and their uses of opium as contagious, uncontrollable, dangerous, and pathological. Many are unaware of the role of the west in the rampant addiction to opium in China. Similarly, we can see how such anti-Asian sentiment is also used throughout the United States, in the past and in present times, to regard Asian flora and fauna brought to the United States, such as kudzu, carp, Japanese beetles, and snakehead fish, as invasive, dangerous to the local areas of the nation, and a threat to a national well-being. We also saw similar racial language emerge during the SARS outbreak.

The media is spreading the stereotypes by constantly depicting the spread of the virus and its impact by using images of Asians with face masks. People wearing the masks as a protective measure for themselves, rather than a result of being ill, have been shunned or attacked.

The very medical language of viruses as pathology, uncontrollable, and dangerous is being used to mark people as the problem. It is a dangerous discourse that puts Asian Americans in precarious situations, especially with the rise of white ethno-national populism and xenophobia.

Thus, as leaders and members of educational institutions, we write to condemn such bigotry and forms of hate crimes that take place in the name of community health and protection. We ask that all individuals contact medical professionals and public health officials to seek advice on medical preparations to stave off the coronavirus. Racist language and attacking Asian/Asian Americans are not a way to protect oneself from the coronavirus.

Our CUNY campuses call on all members of New York City and New York State to stop racist acts against Asians and Asian Americans. Let us deal with the coronavirus and find ways to protect ourselves and each other epidemiologically. It is a public health issue where we can empower ourselves with the information posted across our campuses, staying updated on data and recommendations from the Center for Disease Control, and through conversations with medical professionals. Washing your hands is an important strategy. Refraining from traveling to level 3 countries is an important strategy.

There are no clear and uniform symptoms of the coronavirus; we must work against targeting Asian and Asian American communities. Saying racist things and racist acts against Asians and Asian Americans are not acceptable. Don't be racist, wash your hands instead. We need a vibrant and healthy New York City and state. We condemn acts of racism in the name of virus.

Sincerely,

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