



Body as Disease

By David C. Oh

Early in March, there was news that a case of COVID-19 had been confirmed in Teaneck, New Jersey. The city is in the same county as my home and my college. Days later, students told me that there was a case of COVID-19 in Fort Lee, where I live. While the buzz about COVID-19 was in the air, I didn't really feel it at first. At one point in my Media Literacy class, my students brought up news about anti-Asian racism that they'd been reading. My students expressed visceral frustration at their fellow US Americans' ignorance, and I felt affirmed. It seemed heartfelt.

Days later, several faculty members gathered for a listening session with search consultants who were hired to help select the College's new president. Because of my socialization in my high school band, I'm usually early to meetings, and this listening session was no exception. I shuffled in, and I found a seat on the left side of the room, leaving an extra chair between me and the person to my right. When a Black American colleague entered, he sat two seats to my left, and we struck up a short conversation. As the room packed in, people filled the back and right side of the room, and as more entered, it became obvious pretty quickly that this was going to be a tight meeting. All

the chairs filled except the chair to my left and the chair to my right.

I know that some people had chosen seats for any number of good reasons, but I also know that enough of them had chosen to avoid me. Even for my colleagues, learned men and women of letters, I had been stigmatized. As Robert G. Lee points out, Asian Americans have historically been thought of as contaminating agents that needed to be excised from the USA. Realizing the racialized fears that my body signified, I joked to a colleague who I thought would understand what I was experiencing. I gestured to the empty seats and said, “Do people think I have the virus or something?” Instead of a show of solidarity, she, a White woman, returned an awkward, forced laugh.

I was bothered but put those feelings aside until I was joined in a listserv message where a White man colleague argued forcefully about the harms of anti-Asian racist sentiment. Well, if we were going to vent, then I’d share with them my own experience, and I shared that story of isolation, of racial stigma. I didn’t say it in the email; I’d said enough. But, this stigma from colleagues, many of whom see themselves as “colorblind,” revealed that they certainly saw race at that moment. It’s funny how colorblindness gets cast aside whenever it doesn’t suit White people and becomes a banner for when it does. This reveals, of course, the lie of colorblindness. But, I also felt the stigma from my fellow faculty of color. They chose to not make a gesture of

solidarity, assuming they recognized the alienation I received. As Mitsuye Yamada writes, invisibility creates psychic turmoil, and this was true for me as I felt hypervisible for those who would avoid me and invisible from those who might help. For my White anti-racist colleagues, some of them may have placed their anxieties over their progressive racial commitments. They felt like allies in the abstract, but when our real bodies mattered, I was a liability, a racialized contagion.

I know it's too ungenerous to say that this was true for everyone. I know it wasn't. But, this is also part of the problem with racism, at least of this microaggressive variety. I know that the statistical likelihood of only the seats next to me being unoccupied is nearly impossible, so some of them had made conscious choices to avoid me, particularly as seating became scarce. I also know that my friends and my anti-racist colleagues didn't care enough at the moment to notice and to take action. This is hurtful in its own way.

This has been true during the stay-at-home orders, too. At first, I felt lucky. Fort Lee, besides being known as the home of the motion picture industry, is known for being a Korean American ethnoburb across the Hudson River from New York City. There are many familiar faces here, which helps me feel insulated. My Asian grocery store shelves were fully stocked because of racialized fears of Asian spaces, and I hoped that people's familiarity with Korean Americans would create more understanding. This has

only been partially true. I haven't been spit on, attacked, or called "corona," but I have had people move swiftly past me in the grocery aisle or walk well around me as if I had an invisible force field. This would be okay, even preferred, if they did this with other non-Asian people, too, but it was only for me and people who look like me. When I turned in a cart, a woman refused to take it, and she waited for a White elder woman to take hers, instead.

I've learned to not go for walks in the neighborhood. I want to avoid encounters and confrontations. If I don't have to be outside, I don't want to risk putting myself in jeopardy. Probably, nothing serious will happen, but the lingering concern that something might immobilize me from stepping outside my door. When I do, it comes with some degree of anxiety that I'm not seen as a person but, rather, a human contagion. Though I've been fortunate to not catch COVID-19, I know I symbolize it, anyway. It's dehumanizing.



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