Rocks Thrown at His Head

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The Virus of Hatred

In early 2020, I went grocery shopping near my house at 5 a.m. The COVID-19 pandemic had spread across Southern California, so people started panic buying, schools shut down, and all major headlines were filled with news about a novel coronavirus. While waiting in the checkout line at the grocery store, I noticed that some people tried to maintain a distance from me, while they seemed okay with others surrounding them. I lived in downtown San Diego where the residents were predominantly white. I was not hurt because they stepped back when they saw me, which actually made them closer to other white customers behind them. What was hurtful was their gaze—the strange, uncomfortable way that they looked at me. I went to the grocery store so early in the morning not because I wanted to be around fewer people to avoid catching COVID-19, but I wanted to avoid their gaze.

The gaze reflects power dynamics through which a controlling mechanism operates. As Michel Foucault reminded us, those with more power gaze upon those with less power.[1] Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze is grounded in a gender hierarchy in which men watch women. Men objectify and watch women

1. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012).

https://doi.org/10.3998/conversations.3661

for sexual pleasure, while women internalize the male gaze via "to-be-looked-at-ness."[2] In racial power dynamics, white people more likely watch people of other races, censoring, patronizing, and exoticizing the historically marginalized Other since the colonial era, normalizing the white gaze.[3] The violence of the gaze is subtle and vague. It does not directly kill people. Nevertheless, like mosquitoes, the gaze is everywhere without apparent signals or physical threats. It is the feeling minorities experience every day. It kills the Other slowly until they internalize inferiority and remain docile like their ancestors colonized.

Since I came to the United States in 2010, I have encountered racist remarks and looks that made me feel uncomfortable. For example, when I stopped by a Panera Bread in the Midwest, an old white man stared at me for an uncomfortably long time. The gaze was persistent, shameless, and surveillant, as if he is looking at me like I am an animal. I was the only Asian person in the cafe, and perhaps, one of the few Asians he encountered in his life. It is easy to stare at puppies or babies because we know that they do not necessarily recognize the gaze in a way adults do. People unconsciously know that they do not have the power to react to our gaze.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people started looking at me differently, as if I were the virus. This staring was suffocating given that the headlines were filled with daily reports. The virus of hatred was as strong as the virus itself. The daily news reports of Asians being attacked also made me afraid that it might happen to me as well. Feeling as if my mental health, physical well-being, and even my life was under constant threat, I believed I had no choice but to book a

2. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 14–26.
3. For theories of racialized gaze and violence, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008); Peggy Phelan, U*nmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

plane ticket to my home country. I had never felt so grateful that I had another place to return to.

COVID-19 discloses the ugly face of racism. Former President Donald J. Trump's tweet escalated violence against Asians. Politicizing and racializing the virus as "the Chinese virus," Asians and Asian Americans in the United States became scapegoats for the Trump administration's failure to employ measures to curb the spread of the COVID-19. Despite the global slogan of "Stop Asian Hate" and "Stop AAPI Hate," hate crimes keep increasing as evidenced by the 2021 Atlanta spa shootings.[4] This essay is about my experience as a Korean woman, a former dancer, and an international faculty member teaching dance at a state university in San Diego, California. It includes my autobiographical reflection that juxtaposes my story with that of a social media dance influencer named Alex Wong, who was a victim of an anti-Asian hate crime during the pandemic. Alex Wong is a Chinese American dancer known for his versatile performances combining ballet and hip hop in Season 7 of the dance reality television show So You Think You Can Dance and his skillful but humorous dance videos on social media.

Wong's off-stage experience contradicts those of his on-stage persona, which explains the ambiguous position of Asians between the silenced majority and unprotected "Model Minority," a myth that Asian Americans are educated, competent, docile, economically prosperous, and politically silent.[5] However, such stereotypes are not "safeguards against racism and xenophobia" including anti-Asian hate during the COVID-19.[6] Wong's experience, assaulted and decided to take an action, challenging his inner "Model Minority," speaks to my decision to contribute to this special issue by sharing my experiences.

4. Sam Cabral, "Covid 'Hate Crimes' Against Asian Americans on Rise," *BBC News*, May 21, 2021.
5. Model Minority has justified systematic exploitations including Asian immigrants who replaced the slavery labor for railroad constructions since the abolishment in 1865.
6. Jennifer Lee, "Asian Americans, Affirmative Action & the Rise in Anti-Asian Hate," *Daedalus* 150, no. 2 (2021): 181.

If social media is a stage for Wong, my stage is a campus surrounded by the sheltered bubble of academia. We both have extended stages—the street—metaphorically and physically, where we can be attacked simply because of our race. For me, the grocery store can be an example, and for Wong, it is a corner of a street in New York. Wong's experiences on the street reveal that empathy built on the sanitized social media may not be extended to reality. As SanSan Kwan reminded us, space is racialized; performing race is performing geography.[7] This essay extends my diasporic identity and border-crossing experiences at airports to discuss how space affects racial sentiment.

A Dance Influencer and Throwing Rocks at His Head

On March 3, 2021, around Broadway and 58th Street in New York, Wong encountered dozens of teenagers on bikes who threw rocks at his head. In an interview with *Spectrum News* NY1, Wong elaborated:

> I was biking down the bike lane right here, and I was passing slowly. One of them threw a handful of like rocks at my head. . . . And then I kept on going, like, I tried not to react just because [I] didn't want to give that to them. And as I kept on going down, there was like six or seven of them coming up the wrong way. And as I passed, another one threw a rock at my head and then kind of like *cheered* (emphasis added) when it happened.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, Asian people in the United States have had objects thrown at them, pushed onto subway tracks, spat on their faces, and beaten on the street. Wong did not file a police report on that day.[8] A few days later, however, he came forward with the assault

7. SanSan Kwan, "Performing a Geography of Asian America: The Chop Suey Circuit," *TDR/The Drama Review* 55, no. 1 (2011): 126.
8. Stephanie Simon, "Dancer Alex Wong Speaks Out After Rocks Thrown at Him in Possible Bias Attack," *Spectrum News NY1*, March 23, 2021.

he experienced. In an interview with *Spectrum News NY1*, he said, "If I don't speak out about, like, what if my mom gets pelted with rocks or an older person."[9]

On March 17, 2021, Wong posted a story on his Instagram with the hashtag #StopAAPIHate.

> ROCKS THROWN AT MY HEAD. Please like/share. This happened on March 3rd. I usually stay silent, but in light of recent events, I think it's important that I speak up. This is an example of how as an Asian, I have learned to stay quiet, keep my head down, and not cause trouble and so I pretended nothing happened. Can I say for sure this was a hate crime specifically targeted toward an Asian? No, but because I didn't speak up, maybe I perpetuated the stereotype that it is ok to do this to an Asian. . . . What should I have done in this situation?[10]

He also posted a video recorded on the same day where he appears confused, angry, perplexed, and emotionally distressed. He said:

> I didn't even say anything like I just pretended it never happened. But like what do you even do in a situation like that? It's not worth it for a fight but . . . no I mean . . . there was a policeman right and I was like yo, these people just threw rocks at me and they were like, yeah. . . . *It's not okay* (original emphasis)![11]

In the video, verbal clues are vague with mixed signals in the video. When he says "yeah," replicating what he heard from the policeman, he lightly nods his head but did not clearly share what he heard from the police. He makes a somehow disinterested face as if that of the policeman who might imply that it was not a big deal. Interestingly, his verbal comments often contradict the visceral physical expression delivered through his body. It is his facial expression that is clear. What he says,

9. Ibid.
10. Alexdwong, *Instagram*, March 17, 2021.
11. Ibid.

"not worth . . . for a fight," contradicts his feeling delivered through his anxious and elevated facial expression, shaky voice, and pausing during his speech. His comment "but no, I mean," after saying it is "not worth . . . for fight [against the teens]" and the final word "it's not okay" delivers his emotional intensity and a slice of truth he wanted to tell.

Perhaps what Wong wanted to do was to fight back. While no one is necessarily ready to respond immediately to situations like these, Wong's silence in the first few days can exemplify the toxic imagery of the "Model Minority," as he pointed out, and how it censors Asians who internalize the stereotype. The fact that he posted his story on Instagram a few days after the incident reveals a potential process of hesitation, struggle, and contemplation until he took action.

While Wong was clear that it is about race, NBC New York tried to mitigate it. After sharing Wong's story and recent reports of hate crimes, the news ends with, "While it's unclear whether Wong was attacked simply because he is Asian, the nationwide rise in violence against Asians has led to many community gatherings in New York City."[12] Not surprisingly, the mainstream media plays a role in further silencing and diluting Asians' pain, experience, and voice.

Wong's experience reminds me of myself, who has tried to wear a smile, remain polite, and solve issues without noise. I went on a backpacking trip to Europe with my older sister in college. Walking down a park in Austria, two white teen boys started throwing rocks at us. I had only ever read stories about people being stoned to death in the Bible. It was the first time someone had ever thrown rocks at my head. In that moment, I did not know what to do except walk faster. I was not fluent in English or any European language. Finally, my sister said, "stop," but the two boys kept throwing rocks until my sister yelled, "I said stop!" I still remember the faces of those two boys. They were *laughing*, just like the teenagers on bikes who *cheered* after throwing rocks at Wong. Would these teens do the same thing if we were white?

12. Adam Harding and Kiki Intarasuwan, "Broadway Dancer Stirred by Anti-Asian Violence Speaks Out About Getting Pelted with Rocks," *NBC New York*, March 19, 2021.

The idea of empathy demonstrates deeply rooted power dynamics such as race and nationality. A couple of years ago, a white female colleague came to my class as a guest speaker to teach martial arts movement. She showed a clip from *Kill Bill* as an example. After showing a fight scene where the white female protagonist kills a group of men, she asks what the students saw. It seemed quite clear that the instructor shared the clip as an example of skillful martial arts to inspire the students. An Asian male student responded being perplexed: "a white woman killing a bunch of Asian guys?" An uncomfortable moment of silence followed the student's comment. The instructor did not respond and quickly moved on to the next topic wearing an embarrassed smile on her face.

On social media, beauty and fame is another source of evoking empathy. Influencers often represent the conventional beauty standard—young, slim, fit body and charming face. With increasing followers and global popularity, dance influencers have power on social media. From merchandise to a political agenda, what they say, share, and advocate can easily permeate the public.[13] With one click of "like" and "share," empathy is built instantly on social media, including Asian Americans and Asians whose colonized bodies have been often marginalized from the programmed empathy. Nevertheless, sadly enough, those empathy built on social media may not be applicable in reality.

Feeling Diaspora from the Airport to Campus

Not all violence is physical. Violence can emerge from unexpected spaces like a grocery store, school, or airport. My experience as an international student and then a faculty member for over a decade has allowed me to observe a diasporic identity across borders. As soon as I returned to Seoul in early 2020, I saw a few conservative Korean

13. Chuyun Oh, *K-pop Dance: Fandoming Yourself on Social Media* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 26.

organizations' anti-Chinese sentiment packets on the street. Although I am marginalized as a woman, I am privileged as a South Korean citizen living in the Gangnam district in Seoul, Korea, a country filled with working-class immigrants from around the world.

Such privilege can be easily revoked based on space. After a 13-hour flight to Los Angeles, I fall under the umbrella term of "Asian." I do not even remember how many times I have corrected my ethnicity and my country of birth to those who asked, "Where are you from?" or "Are you Chinese?" Interestingly, no one said "Chinese American." The generic imagery of all Asians and Asian Americans as the Chinese Oriental Other seems unavoidable in the United States.

In addition to my ethnic identity being quickly erased as soon as I enter the United States, an airport itself reveals deeply rooted prejudice. My border-crossing experiences at airports are an extended street from my self-contained world of academia, which amplifies how fragile, unstable, and mobile my identity is based on space. I have faced unpleasant, interrogating questions at airports where I often feel the most vulnerable and unsafe. A few years ago, a security guy, who was not even an Immigration and Customs Official, randomly stopped me and asked me to show my document. I showed my visa document that proves my institution and job position. He did not believe it and asked me to show more evidence. He said, "You? Professor?" sneering at my face. My visa document consists of two pages, each clearly marked as 1 of 2 and 2 of 2. He insisted that there should be more pages and that the record is incomplete through which he exercised power as white American over an Asian woman. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, I was often sent to a separate room requiring additional interrogation after a brief first interview at the US Customs and Border Protection. I do not know their system, and do not know why I was sent to another room. The room was filled with dark-skinned and Asian-looking people. They sent me back to the line for non-US citizens after confirming my status as a university professor. My status in academia often functions as a safeguard that de-criminalizes me at the border.

Between Silenced Majority and Model Minority

My position as a university professor further complicates my diasporic identity. People doubt me when I introduce myself as a professor on the street. An Uber driver asked, "community college?" The comment implies his assumption about Asian women and their social status. It is quite common to encounter sexual and racial harassment on the street (and it's the reason why I hate to go downtown on Friday night). The young drunken people yelling and saying nasty things likely include college students, including those at my institution. San Diego is a relatively safe workplace during the day, but it turns into a dangerous site when I am off campus.

Academia is not entirely safe. As an Asian female who speaks with a Korean accent, I contradict the typical image of a university professor as a middle-aged white man. In 2017, after the first day of class a white, middle-aged, male student came to me and said he is surprised that I am a professor with a PhD. If my position as a university professor challenges the conventional racial and gender imagery of a professor, it partially explains why my large general education classes are mostly filled with female and racial minority students except a few white male students. Academia was much more friendly when I was an Asian international student who needed help. Asians in a professional workplace are often viewed as a threat to the majority white faculty, as those Asians no longer meet the stereotype of inferior Asians based on racial hierarchy, but instead compete with the white system, which leads to the majority's "competitive racism" towards the minority.[14]

Asians are racial minorities by law.[15] However, as recent debates and students' lawsuits show, universities often exclude Asians and

14. Competitive racism refers to a subtle racism where "the dominant ('positively privileged') status group seeks to protect and maintain disproportionate prestige and power while the other ('negatively privileged') status group seeks to encroach upon this dominance in order to raise its level of power and resources" (Jackson, 17). See Monica L. Jackson, "Symbolic and Competitive Racism on Campus," *Explorations in Ethnic Studies* 13, no. 1 (1990): 17–24.

15. The U.S. Census Bureau, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the California Fair Employment and Housing Act declare Asian Americans as a minority group.

Asian Americans from racial minorities regarding affirmative action policies and the hiring process.[16] After finishing a search for a position, a colleague told me, "I wish we hired a minority." His comment confused me because the final candidate was Asian. When there is no system to protect, it is hard to make a claim about discrimination. Asian and Asian Americans are situated in a complicated position: being privileged when perceived as the "honorary white"[17] in hiring process and being deprivileged as the minority when competing with or challenging against white. This ambiguous position reflects the myth of model minority where Asians and Asian Americans are at the convenience of the white system, being tossed between the majority and the minority.

In academia, albeit subtler than the street, I have encountered microaggressions, competitive racism, white solidarity, white feminism, old-boy network, psychological and verbal harassment, systematic discrimination, public humiliation, and xenophobia. My report about a student who wrote "whites are superior to black" was dismissed. A racist white student can be easily excused if she is good at dancing through a close bond with white faculty. I have seen certain racial and gender populations get promoted much faster, while Black, Indigenous, people of color female faculty tend to struggle to fit into their whitewashed department cultures and promotion process, even with a much stronger list of publications as their research is not the "canon."

The Model Minority myth creates a bubble as if Asians and Asian Americans thrive.[18] The denial of real discrimination Asians and Asian Americans face make the community "angry."[19] When they finally

16. Lee, "Asian Americans, Affirmative Action," 180. Also see Jay Caspian Kang, "Where Does Affirmative Action Leave Asian-Americans?" *The New York Times*, August 28, 2019.
17. Frank H. Wu, "The Moral Dilemma of Honorary Whiteness: A Comment on Asian Americans and Affirmative Action," *Asian Pacific American Law Journal* 20, no. 1 (2015): 25.
18. Pensri Ho, "Performing the 'Oriental': Professionals and the Asian Model Minority Myth," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6, no. 2 (2003): 149–75.
19. Wu, "The Moral Dilemma of Honorary Whiteness," 26.

speak up, they are often told that they "have no right to complain" compared to African Americans and Hispanics who see Asians as a "threat" rather than allies.[20] Sadly, COVID-19 exposes how Asians are attacked by other racial minorities and majorities. Supporting Asians' human rights is not about fights among minorities but about "equity, fairness, access, and support" for education.[21] The irony of the Model Minority is that Asian Americans are positioned as "honorary white"[22]—only if they remain silent, do not complain, are not confrontational, and assimilate into and assure the white majority. The status of being a Model is only achieved by remaining as a silent Minority.

Beyond the Stage

Wong is celebrated on social media for his talent, physical appearance, and charming personality, but he is read as Asian who is subject to assault outside of social media. Although social media is not immune from racism, his status as a dance influencer seems to create a safer space for him than the street where he could be physically attacked. His story reminds me of my experiences confronting explicit attacks on the street where my identity as a university professor functions as a relatively safe bubble. An influencer's brunch photo on Instagram presents a genuine "just being me" moment.[23] However, the influencer's perfectly polished makeup, ironed dress on early Saturday morning, perfect lighting, camera angle, charming background, and the natural gaze signify how unnatural the photo is. In the highly choreographed setting, social media is a *stage* that plays with authenticity under the anxiety of being constantly on the show mode.[24] Likewise,

20. Ibid., 27.
21. Ibid., 28.
22. Ibid., 25.
23. Brooke Erin Duffy and Elizabeth Wissinger, "Mythologies of Creative Work in the Social Media Age: Fun, Free, and 'Just Being Me'," *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 4652.
24. Oh, *K-pop Dance*, 3, 30.

as a dance influencer, Wong's videos are a set of choreography—a whimsically changing face from cathartic grimace to sensual lip biting, close-ups of the sensual body sweat on stage, and the clumsy, humorous, and humane "the boy next door" characters off stage.[25] While the dancing body itself can be physically and emotionally genuine, his glamorous representation on social media is an edited reality, like a movie trailer that only shows condensed highlights.

On TikTok, "hot K-pop idol" videos are on demand. They include shirtless K-pop boys, showing their sweaty muscular chests and body rolls with intense eye contact. Viewers, including English speaking users in the US, are empathetic with unconditional support to the idols. Like Wong, whose body becomes vulnerable as soon as he moves away from the stage (either the actual *SYTYCD* stage or his social media stage), those K-pop idols can confront unexpected racist attacks. K-pop sensation BTS, for example, released remarks about COVID-related racism in the US on *Twitter* that were based on their border-crossing experiences of being superstars performing on a global stage and being unknown Asian men facing racism while on tour.[26] TikTok activists have shared charming photos of K-pop idols with the caption, "they are also Asians too. Stop Asian Hate."

Today, Asian and Asian American dancers such as Kyle Hanagami, BTS, Blackpink, and Alex Wong, thrive on social media but the popularity of Asian dance influencers does not mean racism no longer exists. Instead, their glamorous presence hides the brutal reality of ordinary Asian Americans who are threatened, humiliated, and assaulted for looking Asian. The dramatic dissonance—the love of beautiful Asian dancers on social media versus the hatred of Asian bodies on the street opens room for discussing the double-edged swords of performance. The power of performance builds a sense of community due to its visually pleasing aesthetics. Performances lure audiences to

25. Alexandra Harlig, Crystal Abidin, Trevor Boffone, Kelly Bowker, Colette Eloi, Pamela Krayenbuhl, and Chuyun Oh, "TikTok and Short-Form Screendance Before and After Covid," *The International Journal of Screendance* 12 (2021): 197–98.
26. 방탄소년단, *Twitter*, March 29, 2021.

focus primarily on what happens on stage only. There is also a potential limitation of social media, where being an activist is too easy, and the action short lived. Anyone can be an activist by sharing a post; the activism will disappear as soon as users swipe it up.

As social media is "the smallest but most transnational stage,"[27] there is still a possibility of spreading politically informative messages. President Joe Biden invited BTS to the White House to address anti-Asian hate crimes on May 31, 2022. President Biden said: "I got involved in public life because of civil rights. Even back then, famous artists helped move people. What you are doing makes a big difference . . . don't underestimate. Not just your great talent. It's the message you are communicating."[28] Like many of the US audience, the President would not get a chance to get to know BTS without social media. It is possible that social media, albeit sanitized, still gives us hope so that we can continue to dream of a better society for all.

Epilogue

Until a few years ago, I wanted to have US citizenship because it is stressful to be interrogated at the airport every summer. COVID-19 changed my mind. I came to the United States as a dreamy PhD who fell in love with performance studies scholars who taught me that education could change the world. My father is a history professor. I grew up listening to stories about American soldiers who fought for South Korea during the Korean War and felt grateful to those who sacrificed their lives on the battlefield. Over a decade, however, I have developed fear towards the United States because of the way I have been treated. Deep inside my heart, I still feel the passion and love I used to have for the country. Scapegoating the Other via hatred does not

27. Oh, *K-pop Dance*, 26.
28. The White House, "President Biden and Vice President Harris Welcome BTS to the White House," *YouTube*, June 4, 2022.

make people united, stronger, or respected, but empathy can. I do not want to remember America for the way you looked at me during the COVID-19.

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