Kung Flu and Roof Koreans: Asian/Americans as the Hated Other and Proxies of Hating in the White Imaginary

Julia R. DeCook and Mi Hyun Yoon

1 Loyola University Chicago, US
2 Rutgers University Newark, US
Corresponding author: Julia R. DeCook (jdecook@luc.edu)

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about not only political, social, and economic disaster globally, but also rising hate and the exacerbation of social inequity. As the pandemic spread beyond China, hate crimes against Asians skyrocketed in the United States and internationally. Amidst growing xenophobia and a global health crisis, 2020 also marked worldwide Black Lives Matter protests. Memes that featured “Roof Koreans” started being shared during the protests, along with the already racist memes about COVID-19 that targeted Asians. In this essay, we critically analyze memes from the spring and summer of 2020 to examine how Asian/Americans are not only positioned and reproduced as the Hated Other (“Kung Flu”), but also how they function as Proxies of Hating (“Roof Koreans”) in service to white hegemony. Using critical discourse analysis, while also responding to Palumbo-Liu’s 1994 essay examining images of Korean Americans from the 1992 LA Uprising as proxies of white hegemony, we explore the symbolic connections between these memes and the pervasive narrative of Asian/Americans as both yellow peril and model minority.

Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic will be remembered not only as one of the worst public health crises in modern history, but also as a global catastrophe that sowed political polarization, collapsed economies, and exacerbated already worsening social inequalities. First detected in Wuhan, China, the pandemic intensified existing racism and xenophobia toward Asians across the globe. As the virus spread in the early months of 2020, by March 9 there was an 800 percent increase in use of terms like “China virus” among conservative media outlets, fueling anti-Asian sentiment and racism (Darling-Hammond et al. 2020). According to the organization Stop AAPI Hate, there were over 2,500 recorded hate crimes against Asian/Americans in the United States in 2020 alone, ranging from verbal attacks to physical ones such as acid attacks, stabbings, beatings, and, in the case of an elderly woman in New York, being set on fire (Dejesus 2020; Stop AAPI Hate 2020). Throughout the year, Asian/Americans not only had to contend with the fear and anxiety of an unseen enemy in the form of a deadly virus but also increasing and socially sanctioned hatred toward them. If 2020 is any indication of the state of Asian/Americans in the larger American fabric, it has revealed deeply woven racism and persistent narratives of Asians as perpetual foreigners, and more specifically, as the “yellow peril” that seeks to invade, infect, and collapse Western countries and cultures (Li & Nicholson 2021).

Amidst increasing hate crimes toward Asians living in the United States and other western countries (Nakayama 2020), the world bore witness to the continued murders of Black Americans at the hands of the police, afforded by the power of social media. Sparking off worldwide protests, the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin was recorded and circulated across social media platforms for the entire world to bear witness to the continued atrocity of police violence against Black Americans. Protests erupted in every major U.S. city and were held in every single state and in various countries across the world (Taylor 2020). During these protests, police often escalated violence, and/or white supremacist infiltrators damaged property and engaged in violent attacks in an attempt to incite a race war (Zadrozny 2020). On social media, responses to the protests varied wildly: some supported, some were against, and others used the protests as
opportunities to call for civil war. In response to escalating protests and violence, the “Roof Koreans” meme, which features armed Korean American men on their businesses’ rooftops during the 1992 LA Uprising, re-emerged after previously circulating during the 2014 Ferguson protests against the police murder of Mike Brown (Ong 2020). In these memes, “Roof Koreans” are positioned as the Asian/American model minority that uphold white hegemony by arming themselves against Black protestors, but the fact that the popularity of this meme grew during a time of escalating hate and violence toward Asian/Americans reproduces the binary of Asian/Americans as they exist to serve the interests of maintaining whiteness—juxtaposed as either as the yellow peril or the model minority.

The images of “Roof Koreans” used in the memes (implicitly and explicitly) signify that they were protecting their private property not just from protestors, but specifically from the Black residents of Los Angeles. With the celebration of these armed Asian men amidst growing hate crimes against Asian/Americans (including an abundance of memes marking the Asian body as the diseased “Other”), we analyze these memes guided by the following questions: How does white hegemony continue to situate the Asian/American body in the (white) American imagination? How do these memes, as evolved forms of visual discourse, reproduce anti-Asian racism through the narratives they reinforce (Palumbo-Liu 1994) and where Asians fall on the U.S. racial structure? By exploring how Asian/Americans still serve as proxies of reinforcing white hegemony through their status as model minority and yellow peril, and their subsequent symbolic positioning in the (white supremacist) racial order, we argue that these memes demonstrate how little has changed while reinforcing these historical discourses—which are mired in exclusion, dehumanization, and hate. We analyze the ways that racism is still a defining feature of the Asian/American experience and attempt to parse out what we can glean from the circulation of memes and symbols that depict Asian/Americans through these lenses. Although these social positionings seem to be at odds with one another, we cannot understand one without understanding the other: The model minority and yellow peril positioning is wrought with a history of exclusion and dehumanization and reproduced to reinforce a white racial hierarchy by using Asian/Americans as a racial wedge (Ngai 2021).

To that end, we consider memes as cultural and discursive objects that extend beyond mere “entertainment” and have political dimensions (Shifman 2014). Meme scholars note that the use of memes to advance political and social messaging are powerful in strengthening already existing beliefs (Greene 2019; Lee 2020b) and can serve as a mode of reinforcing ideologies as well for recruitment and indoctrination (Lee 2020b). We chose to analyze memes because they are powerful ideological artifacts that give scholars insight into the attitudes, beliefs, and fears of the groups that create and share them (Freund 2013; Grundlingh 2018). Through a cultural critique as opposed to an exhaustive study of the memes that circulated in 2020, we analyze just a few of the memes that we felt best exemplified this discursive duality as permanent foreign danger and “model” immigrant. As a form of visual discourse, the memes presented here demonstrate the duality of the Asian in the (white) American imagination. We include both forms in our analysis to explore how they inform one another. As Korean American women living in the current historical moment, we foreground our positionalities and turn to these memes as a way of seeing through the white gaze, and to understand how their popularity and broad circulation suggest that they are suitable texts for understanding these dominant perspectives about Asian/Americans.

Memes as Cultural and Discursive Objects
An Internet meme is a humorous image, video, text, or other type of web content that can be easily copied, altered, reproduced, and spread through the virtual landscape from person to person (or community to community) (Shifman 2014; Milner 2016). A key part of the digital landscape and language, many are meant for entertainment purposes, and online communities have localized memes that often do not spread outside of them (Freund 2013). Memes tend to reflect the culture of the online community or geographic location in which they circulate; therefore, memes are a useful unit of analysis in understanding the norms, beliefs, and attitudes of the people that create and share them (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017) and are an important part of building collective identity (Gal, Shifman, and Kampf 2016; Greene 2019). The racism and anti-Asian sentiment present in the memes in our essay are not unique to extremist groups, but rather reflect the insidious narratives that are held about Asian/Americans by circulating on major social media platforms.

Due to their “local” nature, analyzing memes to understand underlying hegemonic discourses is a tricky endeavor. Despite being shared by regular users, it is often within these memes that these extremist groups hide “dog whistles” and other culturally-specific signals to their followers, and through their use, engage in a form of a “culture war” where they attempt to dominate discourses about certain political and social issues (Mina 2019). However, because memes can be so specific to the communities from which they originate, they often seem bizarre and confusing to any outsiders (Milner 2016). Despite some of the more insider content, the far right’s “meme machine” has been fundamental in spreading white supremacist discourse across platforms and influencing cultural attitudes beyond them, and the belief that “meme wars” may result in societal change is often held within these spaces (Salazar 2018; Bogerts and Fielitz 2019; Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir 2019).

The convergence of memes and internet culture writ large that has long supported toxic communities supports arguments that extremism and racism are a feature of the Internet, and not a bug (Daniels 2018). In fact, the role of algorithms, platforms, and web infrastructures that lowered the costs and barriers of access and production of content is often pointed
to as to how far right discourse became mainstream (Daniels 2018; Hartzell 2018). Although many laypersons and journalists seem to think that these are “dark corners” of the Internet where these memes and ideologies propagate, the truth is that these communities are on the large-scale platforms that have come to define the online realm. Previously inaccessible ideas and writing from far-right intellectuals found a new form of expression in the Internet slang and web culture where these memes and other artifacts circulate, and the centralization of platforms helped their spread (Gray 2018). Memes are more often than not created by everyday users and members of online communities (Milner 2016), making them a quotidian part of life online and are often used to reinforce and reproduce ideologies. It is not only in the creation, but the consumption and sharing of memes that create community in the service of creating a sense of community (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2016).

Simply put, what defines a social group is the language that it chooses to create and use among its members, and the Internet and memes are no exception (Shifman 2014; Milner 2016). These online spaces continue to support the efforts of dominant and far-right groups to create and spread their content, and to evolve their discourse over time to fit the political and social needs in that moment. The connectedness they foster allows for these symbols and signifiers to circulate, to grow, and to adapt to changing policies regarding hate speech online (Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir 2019)—which is often under-moderated, with platforms often not implementing their own policies (Donovan 2020). The lack of moderation on anti-Asian hate speech is notable because of the spread and popularity of memes that position Asians as the “yellow peril,” while the lack on the “Roof Koreans” meme is emblematic of platforms’ reluctance to stifle violent content from militia groups (Tech Transparency Project 2020) and hate speech against Black Americans. Thus, the memes presented here not only helped to spread and foment anti-Asian sentiment more broadly, but also perpetuate beliefs about Asians being in service to white hegemony to further reinforce a white supremacist racial hierarchy.

Method
Using critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 2014; Janks 1997), we examine the ways that these memes reinforce race and racialization of Asian/Americans. Language as a social practice reinforces and helps to reproduce relations of power through these practices, interactions, and according to Fairclough (2014), discourse consists of three interrelated dimensions: 1) the object of analysis; 2) the processes in which the object is viewed and received; and 3) the sociohistorical conditions that govern these practices. We apply discourse analysis to understand the ways that these memes—as a form of visual language—communicate, naturalize, and legitimize discourses of white hegemony. CDA requires us to not just focus on the signifiers that make up the content of the memes, but also to pay close attention to the historical determinations they are situated in as well as the ways they are socially regulated and constrained (Janks 1997).

Against the sociopolitical backdrop of increasing hate crimes, Sinophobia, xenophobia, and civil unrest in the United States, this essay critically examines discourses of hate and hating from two perspectives: Asian/Americans as hated through the lens of intense xenophobia and Sinophobia in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, and Asian/Americans as hating via the “Roof Korean” memes that emerged during the height of the protests in May 2020. From the perspective of Barthes’ concept of myth and CDA, we parse out the ways that these memes reinforce, reproduce, and naturalize these narratives. “Myth” in the case of these memes is presented visually through their images, and the impositions of text over the images, and myths participate in the creation of ideology and allow people to simultaneously understand their social realities while also imposing larger hegemonic ideologies of power (Barthes 1972). Simply put, myth’s prime purpose is to naturalize, to make familiar, and through this naturalization, to indoctrinate consumers of the myth (Barthes 1972). Data for this essay were collected during the spring and summer of 2020 from Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit by us via screen captures in situ or by searching for images and posts related to the terms “Kung Flu,” “Roof Koreans,” “China Virus,” “Winnie the Flu,” and “COVID-19.” In total, we collected over 200 memes, with many of them having similar linguistic and visual features and significant overlap and duplicates.

“Kung Flu” and “Roof Koreans” share a number of commonalities that we aim to bring together in the following sections. Beyond their obvious representations of different lenses of hate, they also speak volumes about the state of Americanness, race, and masculinity in the white imagination. Not only perpetuating historical media stereotypes in their depiction of Asians (Ono and Pham 2009), these memes function as discursive objects to reinforce ideologies about gender, race, and belonging and engage in a form of techno-orientalism, particularly in regard to positioning Asians as primitive and in need of Western consciousness-raising (Roh, Huang, and Niu 2015). These memes represent the ways that the racial hierarchy is imposed, reinforced, and shaped in ways to protect and maintain white hegemony by co-opting and appropriating “Asian” in ways that, ultimately, are a means to an end.

COVID-19 and the “Kung Flu”
As COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic and in response to a number of measures taken by governments to mitigate its spread, hate crimes against Asians in the United States and other Western countries surged. Ranging from verbal harassment to physical attacks, xenophobia and anti-Asian sentiment exploded (Reny & Barreto 2020). Accusations from
conspiracy theorists and other government officials that the World Health Organization (WHO) had conspired with China to hide the severity of the COVID-19 virus were rampant on social media and news sites (Uscinski & Enders 2020). Adding to this, several anti-immigrant, white supremacist, anti-Semitic, and ethnonationalist political parties in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France latched on to the crisis to advance their respective agendas (Noel 2020). The Asian body as a vector of disease narrative re-emerged in the months leading up to and after the announcement of the COVID-19 as a global pandemic—reinforced by the fact that world leaders (including then-President of the United States, Donald Trump) referred to it as the “China Virus” and even as the “Kung Flu” (D. Nakamura 2020).

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic and blame being pointed to China resulted in appeals from organizations for governments to take anti-Asian racism and xenophobia seriously, while also attempting to educate others about the histori- cal discourse behind the “yellow peril” (De Leon 2020; Kumashiro 2020; Lee 2020a). But the marking of the racialized Asian body as a vector of disease reified a duality that many Asian/Americans embody—that of either the “model minority” or the aforementioned “yellow peril.” The historical connection to Chinese people and disease in the United States dates back to the 19th century, as medical scapegoats for diseases such as syphilis, cholera, and the bubonic plague due to their presumed inferiority and unsanitary lifestyles (Larsson 2020; Trauner 1978). The “yellow peril” myth expresses racialized fears and anxieties of invasion not just by disease, but through immigration and fears of white “replacement,” and was used as a justification for policies at the turn of the 20th century that limited immigration by persons of Asian descent to the United States—and has lingering effects to the present day (Li & Nicholson 2021). In a stark contrast, the “model minority” term was coined in the 1960s by sociologist William Petersen, who wrote a news article that pitted Japanese Americans and Black Americans against one another (Wu 2015). Asian/American attempts at respect and dignity after policies like the Chinese Exclusion Act and WWII Japanese Internment were co-opted as the model minority myth by white Americans and served as a racial wedge between white and Black—being held up as the “standard” of successful, non-threatening assimilation and as an example of the “bootstraps” mentality that so permeates the American psyche, with no regard to the social, cultural, and structural barriers that Black Americans face (Wu 2015).

In the process of racial comparison and hierarchization from a dominant (white) racial vantage point, race is negotiated, adapted, internalized, and resisted in different ways among racialized persons, and in our essay, specifically among Asian and Black Americans. As such, these memes not only served as poorly concealed expressions of xenophobia and racism to reinforce a white supremacist racial order, but the hate crimes that increased along with an explosion of anti-Asian rhetoric on social media also highlighted the ways that Asian/Americans are viewed as monolithic, monoracial—one and the same (Nakayama 2020).

From this perspective, and particularly in the white gaze, Asian/Americans are any “type” of Asian that serves the purposes of the myth of white supremacy at that moment—like in the case of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man murdered in 1982 by two white men who thought he was Japanese (Wang 2017). Indeed, many Asian/Americans of non-Chinese descent reported being the victims of hate crimes or microaggressions, demonstrating that Asian bodies are racialized bodies and that a racist has no regard to country of origin in their treatment and their hatred (Nakayama 2020). Memes such as the one pictured in Figure 1, espousing anti-immigrant, Sinophobic, and anti-Asian sentiment swirled on social media platforms (Way 2020).

In this meme (Figure 1) from Twitter, Xi’s head replaces that of the cartoon character Winnie the Pooh’s and features the font and script used for “Disney’s Winnie the Pooh” with the text now showing “China’s Winnie the Flu.” The background is the Chinese flag, but the five stars that would be on the upper left of the flag have been replaced by COVID-19 spores that have come to aesthetically and visually represent the pandemic. Many users on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and others used this meme as a way of blaming China for the pandemic. Dating back to 2013, the Winnie the Pooh meme began on Chinese social media as a means of political satire targeted toward President Xi, but was quickly adopted as a meme by conspiratorial and far right online influencers which then led quickly to racist stereotyping of Chinese and, by extension, all Asians (Technology and Social Change Research Project 2020a). The co-optation of the meme and its use in reinforcing the “yellow peril” and growing anti-Asian hate crimes evinces how “one aspect of whiteness is the lack of desire to distinguish between Chinese and other Asians” (Nakayama 2021). During the previous SARS crisis, the virus was often referred to as the Asian Disease, similar to referring to COVID-19 as “Kung Flu” or “China Virus,” “raising not only xenophobic fears but also racialized ones” (Oh 2020, 53).

Reinforcing the racialization of Asians as one and the same and positioning whiteness as the antidote and savior in fighting against them as a “disease,” more memes emerged that sought to reinforce these ideologies. In May 2020, Donald Trump, Jr. shared a meme on his Instagram account that featured his father as the “Kung Flu Kid” (Moran 2020) (see Figure 2). Presenting an altered image of the 1980s film poster for The Karate Kid, the Instagram post features Donald Trump as the Karate Kid with former Vice President Michael Pence being photoshopped in as Mr. Miyagi. The number of issues present here are numerous and evident in just a glance: the text of the poster has been changed to say “the Kung Flu Kid,” and karate (a Japanese martial art) and kung fu (a Chinese martial art) are being conflated. In addition, the altered image and meme of Trump being the “Kung Flu Kid” implies that he himself is fighting the virus, with Mike Pence as his trusty sidekick.
Figure 1: Winnie the Flu.

Figure 2: The Kung Flu Kid.
The nostalgic re-rendering of the (racist and Orientalist) film’s poster to feature Trump is also loaded with its own symbolic power: The positioning of Trump as “fighting” against the virus also reinforces narratives of white masculinity’s dominance, and positions Trump as a protector. Trump had popularized the term Kung Flu during campaign rallies, and the Trump presidential administration and its allies repeatedly using racist phrases like “Kung Flu” and “China Virus” is no accident. In recent years, the Trump administration had levied a number of trade sanctions against China prior to the pandemic (York 2019), and used anti-immigrant and Sinophobic rhetoric to justify these actions. In May 2020, the Trump administration issued a proclamation to restrict the entry of graduate students and researchers from China for reasons of national security, but not Chinese undergraduate students who often pay full price for their tuition. In 2018, tuition from Chinese international students contributed $15 billion into the U.S. economy (Lloyd-Damjanovic & Bowe 2020), and Trump himself has business dealings in China and holds a Chinese bank account (McIntire et al. 2020), symbolizing that while Chinese money is acceptable, Chinese bodies are less welcome.

Apparent from the above memes and the number of hate crimes reported by Asian/Americans during 2020 and into 2021, whiteness does not recognize Asian differences, nor does it recognize as scholar David Oh points out, “our locations—foreign-born, foreign-located, or local” (Oh 2020, 4). Memes that placed blame for the pandemic on China and the CCP also circulated within Asian countries as well—most prevalently in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand—nations which sought to distinguish and distance themselves through the formation of the “Milk Tea Alliance” via internet memes (Technology and Social Change Project 2020b).

Sinophobia in other Asian countries has a long history and has also increased discrimination against Chinese persons in countries like South Korea and Japan (Kasulis 2020; Osumi 2020). Not surprisingly, fears of communism, anti-China, and pro-U.S. democracy rhetoric has had a significant impact due to contentious histories and misinformation from ethnic language platforms (Nguyen 2020b). As a case in point, survey results from September 2020, indicated that nearly half of all Vietnamese Americans surveyed said that they planned to vote for Trump (Nguyen 2020a), further pointing to the divisions in Asian/American communities and how the myth of whiteness has been interpellated by them.

Although Kung Flu memes are not obviously reinforcing the “model minority” discourse prevalent in American society, these memes help to reify and reinforce Sinophobia and ethnic hierarchies prevalent in Asian communities (Ngai 2021). As such, the significance of the memes deriding Xi as “Winnie the Flu” and memes like the “Kung Flu Kid” reinforce ideas of there being “Good Asians” and “Bad Asians” (particularly by using these countries’ systems of government to create this distinction), which create internal wedges in the Asian/American community itself. The sameness that is seen in dominant (white) readings and racializations is reinterpreted by non-dominant and diasporic Asians, who, through these internal wedges of who is a “good” and a “bad” Asian, reinscribe the model minority/yellow peril dichotomy. These reinscriptions of this Asian/American dichotomy, and the rejection of communism being equated with being “more American” (Ngai 2021), have tangible effects like the support for Donald Trump in the Vietnamese, Filipino, Chinese, and other Asian diasporic communities in the United States (Jaivin 2017). These discourses and their memes invite Asians to identify and place themselves somewhere on this racial hierarchy, despite the fact that whiteness does not “see” Asian-ness in all of its distinctions and differences. The “Roof Koreans” meme that re-emerged in 2020 not only reinforces these dichotomies and the myth of whiteness, but also interpellates Asian/Americans as vectors of white hegemony.

“Roof Koreans”

Many who lived through the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising remember the images of “Roof Koreans” that were popularized and pushed by the mainstream media during that time. For the Black community of Los Angeles, the acquittal of four officers of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) who used excessive force and violence to arrest Rodney King, a Black man, acted as the fuse that ignited their anger for the racial and economic inequalities that they faced. They took their rage to the streets—setting fires, attacking light-skinned motorists, as well as destroying shops and small businesses, which included those in the Koreatown neighborhood. Tensions between the Black and Korean American communities in Los Angeles existed prior to the unrest in 1992 (Abelmann & Lie 2009). However, resentment between the two groups reached new heights when a Korean store owner, Soon Ja Du, shot and killed 15-year-old Latasha Harlins for allegedly stealing a small bottle of orange juice but only received five-years’ probation, 400 community service hours, and a fine of $500 despite being found guilty for voluntary manslaughter (Stevenson 2004).

As civil unrest broke out in Los Angeles on April 29, 1992, LAPD belatedly responded to incidents of violence around the city—or failed to respond at all in the case of Koreatown. In an NPR interview, Kee Whan Ha, a Korean American business owner who experienced the unrest firsthand, stated, “From Wednesday [April 29, 1992], I don’t see any police patrol car whatsoever. That’s a wide-open area, so it is like [the] Wild West in [the] old days, like there’s nothing there. We are the only

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2 All of these countries have variations of milk tea and formed a digital ‘alliance’ following a Twitter war between pro-China accounts and Thai celebrit-ies (Technology and Social Change Project 2020b).
one left, so we have to [protect] our own self” (Martin 2012). Visual evidence through photographs and videos of Korean store owners’ defending their businesses became widely publicized in the news media, two of which would become foundational images of the “Roof Korean” meme (Figure 3). These images that circulated during and immediately after the unrest in Los Angeles in 1992 validated the ideal of the capitalist American dream—these dutiful, Korean American entrepreneurs saw their dreams turned into nightmares with the destruction of their businesses, garnering them sympathy and praise from white American who aimed to use them in advancing and justifying their own racist beliefs (Abelmann & Lie 2009; Palumbo-Liu 1994).

Images of “Roof Koreans” remained mostly dormant in public memory until 2014, when 18-year-old Black man Michael Brown was shot and killed by white Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson (Know Your Meme 2016). “Roof Koreans” emerged as a meme during the Ferguson protests but did not gain popularity and traction until during this year’s Black Lives Matter protests and demonstrations after Derek Chauvin, a white Minneapolis police officer, on May 25, 2020, killed George Floyd during an arrest by kneeling on Floyd’s neck for nearly eight minutes as three other officers looked on and prevented passersby from intervening. Using data from Google Trends, which offers an analysis of terms queried in Google Search, we can see that the most frequent use of the search term “roof Korean” in 2020 ranged between late May and late June (see Figure 4), during the height of the Black Lives Matter protests.

Figure 3: Images of Armed Korean merchants from the 1992 LA Uprising.

Figure 4: Roof Korean web search information from Google Trends.
“Roof Koreans,” in meme format, is not a new positioning of these Korean Americans as upstanding citizens, but rather an updated use of the image of the gun-wielding model minority as proxies of white hegemony. The meme was used by Boogaloo Bois, Libertarians, and members of far-right militias as a rallying cry and held to an almost myth-like status, wherein the “Roof Koreans” were held as exemplifying their white, “American” values of the right to bear arms and participate in the armed oppression of Black Americans. In far-right circles, armed vigilantism is celebrated and encouraged (Belew 2018; Ong 2020), and the “Roof Koreans” memes often lauded the Korean American store owners for their patriotism and bravery. The meme and its popularity exemplifies the ways in which Asian Americans are used to perpetuate anti-Blackness and is itself a symbolic unifier for the far right (including right-wing Asians) (Ong 2020).

In the midst of “Asians are diseased” rhetoric due to the COVID-19 crisis, we saw the emergence of the “Roof Koreans” and the celebration of the armed model minority specifically to engage in thinly-veiled anti-Black racism. One of the most popular “Roof Korean” memes features a Korean business owner from the 1992 LA uprising, smiling and wearing a red polo shirt and holding a rifle (see Figure 5). In this meme, the “Roof Korean” hero replaces the rattlesnake on the Gadsden flag—which is used by far-right groups and Libertarians as a symbol for gun rights, American patriotism, and anti-government beliefs (Walker 2016). It also features the text “Fuck Around and Find Out” (as opposed to the original “don’t tread on me”), stylized to look like hangeul (Korean alphabet) script. White supremacists, especially those who belonged to militias and the burgeoning Boogaloo Bois used the “Roof Koreans” not only as figures they should aspire to, but as justifications of their own racist beliefs and dominant racial positions (Ong 2020). This appropriation of the model minority myth in the service of white hegemony in the “Roof Koreans” meme reflects how the model minority myth is in itself an objectification that reduces actual Asian/American voice and agency.

Inter-racial tensions between the Asian/American and the Black American community are also present in the memes, images, and commentary about the 1992 LA Uprising whether it is specifically stated. For creators and sharers of the meme, “Roof Koreans” represent the kind of America that they desire—saturated with a kind of longing, but more specifically a longing to engage in violence against Black Americans. Positioning the “Roof Koreans” and their white supporters as the “real Americans,” Black Americans are placed as “non-American” for protesting against systemic oppression. More importantly, the crucial historical context of why Korean business owners took up arms is often missed—LAPD effectively abandoned parts of the city that were not white and wealthy, and the racial tensions between the Korean American and the Black communities in Los Angeles have a violent and bloody history. The layers of meaning and history behind the images used in

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Figure 5: “Fuck Around and Find Out”.

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1 The phrase “fuck around and find out” (co-opted from African American Vernacular English [AAVE]) became a popular meme in online leftist communities and was quickly co-opted by libertarian and far-right movements (Know Your Meme 2020.)
the meme are concealed—some Korean Americans felt an intense sense of abandonment by (white) American society when
the LAPD stopped responding to their calls and set up physical barriers between the white neighborhoods and Koreatown
(Abelmann & Lie 2009). Within Asian/American communities, the meme is incredibly divisive due to the implicit and expli-
cit anti-Black racism present within it (Wong 2020).

The meme continues to be used by the far right to call for violence against Black Americans. It is unsurprising, then, that
the meme emerged during the 2014 Ferguson Protests, which would serve as the igniting spark for the larger Black Lives
Matter Movement, and re-emerged in the spring and summer of 2020. The meme in its current formulation began as a
(racist) satirical Craigslist advertisement (“Roof Koreans for Hire in Ferguson”), a screenshot of the ad was posted to Reddit
on the r/funny subreddit and would be shared on other platforms from there (Know Your Meme 2016). How the memes
presented in this essay and elsewhere became absorbed into the larger “Roof Korean” meme category is still unclear, but
the images also present a deeply complicated relationship with what it means to be American. In Palumbo-Liu’s 1994 essay
reflecting on images of Korean Americans during the 1992 protests, the caption features an image of a Korean business
owner from Newsweek, with a quote from the subject of the image stating “This isn’t America” (Palumbo-Liu 1994, 367), a
shattering of the subject’s belief in the “America” myth. In 2020, a “Roof Koreans” meme emerged with the text “I’m gonna
tell my kid this was America” (see Figure 6). Assumedly, the creator of this meme had not read Palumbo-Liu’s essay, nor
seen the photograph from the essay, but the direct connections are somewhat eerie and help to support our argument of
the persistence and ubiquity of these narratives.

Figure 6 as well as other “Roof Korean” memes foreground the ways that Asian/Americans are used to fortify
white hegemony. The memes themselves, like the image analyzed by Palumbo-Liu, “gestures toward a discursive space
beyond and outside it” (Palumbo-Liu 1994, 368). Reducing these images simply to emblematize the nature of race
relations in the United States misses the larger narratives of race, belonging, and nationalism that cut across their
representations and how “Roof Koreans” were appropriated as a symbol of white supremacist violence. In addition, the
model minority positioning of Asian/Americans in the mid-20th century to portray themselves as upstanding citizens
capable of assimilating into mainstream culture was co-opted by white politicians to deny African American demands
for racial equality and to shift the blame for Black poverty (Wu 2015). As Palumbo-Liu asked, “how, in this rescripted
context of racial violence and counter violence has Asian/American property come to stand in for white property?”
(368). To this we add, how has the Asian/American continued to stand in for whiteness when it is convenient and

Figure 6: “This was America”.
appropriate (like in the context of anti-Black racism)? To see this image of “Roof Koreans” representing the user’s nostalgic and mythic remembering of “America” amidst a flurry of anti-Asian sentiment is dizzying. But these memes and how they represent Asian/Americans are purposeful: historically, Asians serve a crucial function in mapping out the racial hierarchy of the United States, including in the present day, which keeps whites at the top and Black Americans at the bottom (Lee 2016). The images above implore us to ask whose America these men represent, leaving rhetorical space for people to draw their own meaning.

Asian/Americans not only serve a function in strengthening the racial hierarchy, but their positioning and symbolic function as the “Roof Korean” are crucial to the myths perpetuated by white hegemony that aims to maintain whiteness at the center of social and political life and at the top of the racial hierarchy. Similar to how they were treated by the news media in 1992, the “Roof Korean” meme is an evolution of when Korean Americans fulfilled the model minority stereotype by taking up arms. Referred to as “Korean American Cowboys,” the “Roof Korean” meme also serves as a space of projection for white Americans: Property is much more than just its materials, but rather the protection of property is tied to the political, social, and economic conditions reified and reinforced via racial hierarchies. The “Roof Korean” meme naturalizes the role of the Asian/American as a dutiful minority via their embrace of capitalism and therefore assimilation into “American” life. Like the 1992 Newsweek photograph analyzed by Palumbo-Liu, these memes reinforce and perpetuate narratives that aim to support and justify the dominant ideologies they symbolize. In addition, the positioning of “Roof Koreans” as “patriots” and “true Americans” amidst a political climate rife with Sinophobia reinforces not only inter-racial tensions between Asian/Americans and Black Americans, but also tensions within the Asian/American community itself. In the “Roof Koreans” meme, the images of Korean American men standing on a roof, armed and ready to “protect” their property functions to project the Asian/American as a ventriloquist of white hegemony (Palumbo-Liu 1994). Roof Koreans are mythologized to absorb them into white supremacist justifications of violence and hate, and maintain whiteness at the top of the racial hierarchy.

**Discussion: Hating and the Hated**

The “Roof Korean” and “Kung Flu”/anti-CCP memes at first glance, other than centering Asians as racial Others, do not seem to have much in common. But understanding them as digital representations of the racial dichotomy that is thrust upon Asian/Americans to racialize them connects them to a larger racial structure informed by white hegemony. In the “Roof Korean” meme, by taking up arms, the armed Korean men on the rooftops not only demonstrate their successful assimilation into “American” values, but also can claim some proximity to the things that define masculinity in the United States—protecting one’s property (which is also tied to capitalism), the right to bear arms, and violence against the Other. As Oh (2020) states, Asian Americans are often “adjacent to whiteness, its lap dogs that assure white people of their benevolence and their guard dogs that protect white people from charges of racism” (52). In the “Roof Koreans” memes, the guard dog metaphor is literal and symbolic—as minorities “protecting” their businesses from other minorities, white Americans are also assuaged and justified in their racism, using the Asian/American body as both a literal and symbolic shield against their own prejudices and anti-Blackness.

This brings us to another point of analysis that we feel deserves some more unpacking. Asian/Americans in the United States were the victims of hate speech and hate crimes regardless of their country of origin. Simultaneously present and excluded from mainstream conversations about race, Asian/Americans are racialized and dehumanized through their many depictions as emotionless, robot-like—exoticized and fetishized if they are women, asexual and emasculated if they are men—and diseased (Eng 2001; Kawai 2005; Oh 2020). The memes we presented here and the larger discourses surrounding Asian/Americans in the time of COVID-19 emblematize how, as minorities in the United States, Asian/Americans are invisible or hypervisible depending on the needs of white hegemony. Moreover, one cannot understand the rise of anti-Asian hate without understanding the duality that Asian/Americans are situated in by whiteness.

These memes, as visual discourse, mediate the complex relationship between race, belonging, and “American” identity, and as digital objects reinforce and reify these already existing “offline” norms and racial ideologies (L. Nakamura 2002). In these memes, the embrace of dominant gender and racial norms in the “Roof Koreans” meme is emblematized as meeting an ideal, particularly in regard to masculinity. In these memes, masculinity and, more specifically, the things that emblematize white masculinity are centered: They are the norm, the white man is the savior, and despite the fact that the “Roof Koreans” meme features Korean men, the mythologization that they embody is tied to the relationship between guns and (white) masculinity (Metzl 2019).

What the COVID-19 pandemic revealed, in conjunction with the civil unrest we witnessed in summer 2020, is that the myth of the model minority and narratives of the yellow peril continue to persist and exist in tandem, serving as racial wedges and narratives that help to maintain the historical position of Asian/Americans in the white American hierarchy. While we occupy dual roles as targets of COVID-19 racism and as allies of the Black Lives Matter movement as educators and active participants in protests and initiatives like the Letters for Black Lives, we are also acutely aware of the generational and gender divides that exist within our community. Specifically, these divides persist due to the purposeful framing by
white Americans of Asian/Americans as a racial wedge and the benefits that Asian/Americans continue to receive in U.S. society for our complacency and proxy enforcers of white hegemony. This duality was most obviously embodied in Tou Thao, a Hmong American man who was one of the three other officers who prevented bystanders from intervening as Chauvin murdered Floyd (Chanen 2020). The division in the Twin Cities’ Hmong community revealed that Hmong women predominantly spoke out against racial injustices and criticized Thou’s behavior, while Hmong cis men tended to respond negatively, fueled with anti-Blackness and misogyny and “embodie[d] patriotic pro-assimilationist tendencies coupled with a superficial belief in the American Dream” (Vang 2020).

After former President Donald Trump announced his COVID-19 diagnosis in late September 2020, researchers at the Anti-Defamation League found that there was a surge of anti-Asian American and conspiracy theory content on social media, increasing roughly by 85 percent (Anti-Defamation League 2020). A 2020 Pew Survey additionally found that 40 percent of respondents felt that it is now common to express racist views about Asians than pre-COVID (Ruiz et al. 2020), but as Sastry and Ban (2020) notes in their essay, to point to Trump’s racist use of “China Virus” and “Kung Flu” as the cause of this shift is insufficient. Rather, what we have tried to do in this essay is demonstrate the more nuanced and hidden discourses that permeate narratives about Asian/Americans via an analysis of memes. We have analyzed how Asian/Americans exist as racialized objects of hatred and proxies of hating, in line with the complex significations and meanings of the model minority/yellow peril myth in the United States.

While Asian/Americans may imitate whiteness and are used to ventriloquize whiteness, we are not exempt from its power and do not have access to its privileges. Although Asian/Americans and other minorities may attempt to absorb themselves into these systems in exchange for some of its privileges, they will always be the racialized Other upon which whiteness asserts its dominance—and ultimately, whiteness aims to maintain the myth of colorblindness to hide the ways that white supremacy operates (Oh 2020). To connect these points to our larger argument, the COVID-19 pandemic perhaps shattered an illusion for many Asian/Americans of their place and belonging in the United States with the sharp uptick of racially-motivated hate crimes and harassment in response to the racialization of the coronavirus disease. In sum, Asian/Americans move quickly from “model minority” to “yellow peril,” invisible or hypervisible, depending on the needs of white U.S. hegemony.

The insidious nature of racism persists because it is often not spectacular, but rather perpetuated through acts of symbolic violence like cultural beliefs, legislation and policies, and cultural objects that inform our worldviews (Bonilla-Silva 2006). During the writing of this essay, news broke on December 19, 2020, that a new strain of the COVID-19 virus had emerged in the United Kingdom. It is of note, then, that hate crimes against those of British descent have not increased, memes are not circulating equating British people with disease, and the United States has yet to initiate a full travel ban (Reardon 2020). While this manuscript was under review, six Asian women were murdered by a white man in Atlanta—who specifically targeted Asian-owned and operated massage parlors to “eliminate” the sources of his sexual “temptation” and shame (Fausset, Bogel-Burroughs, and Fazio 2021).

News media and law enforcement were reluctant to—and at times, outright refused—to identify racial Othering, misogyny, and racism as key drivers of the attack. More attacks have also occurred against Asian/Americans, including a mass shooting in Indianapolis and other violent attacks including stabblings, receiving limited media attention. A 2021 report by the group Leading Asian Americans to Unite for Change found that a quarter of white Americans do not believe that anti-Asian is a problem that needs to be addressed (Chen 2021). Thus hate, within these contexts, is much more than physical and verbal attacks but rather asserts itself through its more concealed manifestations—and even more so through its exclusions and omissions. In these memes, we are confronted with the cultural and symbolic realities of racism and xenophobia, manifesting themselves in ways that seem incongruent (“model minority” and “yellow peril”) but which aim to support the same system of reinforcing white hegemony.

Conclusion
Little to nothing has changed in terms of the cultural narratives and dominant beliefs that circulate about Asian/Americans. Either we are used as model examples of assimilation and used as racial wedges, as proxies of white hegemony in perpetuating anti-Blackness, or vectors of disease and perpetual foreigners warranting destruction and forced removal. As Sastry and Ban (2020) notes, “Any analysis of COVID-related Anti-Asian racism that ignores the anti-Blackness endemic to both the United States and China fundamentally misses the point.” To unpack and dismantle these ideologies, we must examine how cultural objects (memes and beyond) perpetuate long-held narratives about Asian/Americans and the racial orders created and maintained by white hegemony. Asian/Americans are not only fighting rising hate and xenophobia, but also must recognize and fight how we are used in perpetuating anti-Blackness as proxies of white hegemony.

Competing Interests
The authors have no competing interests to declare.
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