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The Dual Pandemic of 2020:

Rhetorical analysis of how American COVID-19 elite messaging,
enabled by the monster trope, justifies cultural violence against A/AAPI.

by

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Honors Thesis

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Department of Rhetoric and Communication Studies

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“Since the coronavirus, what has been happening is a different strain of anti-Asian racism than the kind to which I’m accustomed. Not the kind in which we are invisible or we’re seen as efficient cyborgs. Racism never disappears but adapts to new circumstances when old strains rise from the dark vaults of American history.” - Cathy Park Hong, from *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*, February 2020.

On March 16th, 2020, President Donald J. Trump posted a Tweet: “The United States will be powerfully supporting those industries, like Airline and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus. We will be stronger than ever before!” (Yam). This Tweet marked the first public and recorded instance of the term “Chinese virus”, heralding the emergence of similar referents such as “China virus,” “Wuhan virus,” and “kung flu” for COVID-19. With a single, seemingly innocuous post, Trump opened the floodgates for an outpouring of hatred and blame pointed towards anyone perceived as an A/AAPI.

Word of the virus spread even faster than the virus itself, infecting all who heard of this novel coronavirus with fear for their lives and livelihoods. But COVID-19 was not the only pandemic to ravage American society. With her classes and book tour canceled, professor Cathy Park Hong recounts the time she spent immersed within the frenzied panic of the internet, and the worrying increase of anti-Asian hate crimes populating her newsfeed. Her writing reflects the shock of bearing witness to these violent physical and digital crimes, both online and from personal encounters: “I never would have thought that the word “Chink” would have a resurgence in 2020” (Hong).

The past few years of pandemic exposed several simmering problems in American society. COVID-19 laughed in the face of our apparent preparedness and continues to leave a trail of

tragic sickness and death against a complexly interwoven background of economic hardships, political squabbles, and institutional racism. The virus is a monster, and that's what we call it. The 2019 novel coronavirus is a natural force that we as individuals, governments, and global organizations still struggle to understand and desperately attempt to control. Yet COVID-19 itself is not the scariest monster of the 2020s. COVID-19 is the precursor to a much longer battle and much tougher enemy, the final poke that woke the monster of prejudiced erasure and scapegoating—a monster that does not only attack, but infects, turning its chosen victims into monsters themselves.

Thesis and Methods

My thesis aims to examine monstrification as a rhetorical trope, largely reliant on metaphor and synecdoche, in COVID-19, through elite messaging, specifically in its unique targeting of A/AAPI communities. By rhetorical trope, I refer to the ways public discourses turn attention and inevitably shape public knowledge, belief, and ultimately, action. Beyond the obvious monstrous appeals to COVID-19, I argue that the monster trope not only enables, but is necessary for the scapegoating of A/AAPI throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The elite rhetorics of political authorities used to describe COVID-19, most prominently, the “Chinese virus,” employs monstrification to simultaneously erase humanity and amplify infectious, fearfully fatal Otherness, providing justification for violence against A/AAPI. Amidst this violence, I also endeavor to identify cultural inoculations against such harmful troping through exploration of emerging resistant rhetorics. I do so by analyzing a selection of key texts that embody overt, complicit, and resistant rhetoric to the monstrification of A/AAPI.

By overt rhetoric, I refer to the often explicit, and arguably always intentional usage of anti-A/AAPI terminology, such as the “China virus,” or other similar metaphors that align A/AAPI with COVID-19 in a blameworthy fashion. By complicit rhetoric, I refer to the unintentional furthering of anti-Asian sentiments. All too often, in attempts to either provide neutral information or even in the efforts to raise awareness and support for a certain cause, writers and reporters perpetuate anti-A/AAPI sentiments regardless of their initial intention. In this way, such language complicitly reinforces the harmful association of A/AAPI as foreign and monstrous Other, regardless of their history in the U.S. or personal citizenship. As a quick caveat regarding my definitional use of intentional versus unintentional, I specifically address intentionality or lack thereof in terms of monstrification—does the text in question intend to blame, scapegoat, and monstrify, or is the monstrification an unintended consequence? Secondly, I re-emphasize my chosen scope on how such rhetoric affects A/AAPI, not the complicated ways that global politics may be invoked in such discussions. By resistant rhetoric, I refer to the efforts by scholars and activists to reveal and criticize the dangerous implications entrenched in terms like “Chinese virus”, effectively serving to begin dismantling the monster trope that labels COVID-19 as a vicious synonym for A/AAPI communities.

My textual artifacts primarily consist of two categories: selections directly from Trump, and articles produced in reaction to proliferation of both COVID-19 and elite messaging concerning COVID-19. Specifically, I examine overt rhetoric through Donald J. Trump’s repeated use of terms like “China virus” to create a narrative of blame as an authority figure. Elite messaging is particularly key as it both connotes a sense of credibility and retains wider reach to the general public. I then address complicit rhetoric via harmful stereotypes implied by authors like Walter Russell Mead and representatives like Chip Roy, as well as internalization of toxic stereotypes

by popularized A/AAPI advocates such as Andrew Yang. Complicit rhetoric does not have to use the primary terminology of “Chinese virus” to stimulate similar strains of violence against A/AAPI. Rather, complicity’s danger lies in its assumed and typically internalized manifestation of anti-Asian sentiments. My textual analysis finishes with resistant rhetoric in reflections by professor Cathy Park Hong and a speech from Representative Grace Meng during the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties. Their significance lies in offering A/AAPI and allies alike ways to critically approach overt and complicit rhetoric, uncovering the violence they generate and perpetuate.

I begin with a discussion of tropes, particularly those which negatively impact A/AAPI communities, before explicating the monster trope and monstrification. After establishing how these tropes build upon one another, I utilize Burkean theories of dramatism, scapegoating, and the comic corrective to analyze overt, complicit, and resistant rhetorics regarding COVID-19 and anti-Asian violence.

However, prior to delving into the bulk of my thesis, I wish to briefly examine the troped referent “A/AAPI”, and my choice to use this rhetorical signifier to turn attention towards those most vulnerable to COVID-19 monstrification. This signification is distinct from the more commonly used “AAPI”, abbreviation for Asian American Pacific Islander, or the new and more inclusive “APIDWA”, abbreviation for Asian Pacific Islander Desi West Asian. I prefer A/AAPI, with the extra A representing Asians in America. By Asians in America, I do not refer to born Asian Americans or naturalized Asian citizens, but Asians who live in America but do not have citizenship. This choice stems from the rhetorical insight that in cases like casual racial assumptions that breed discrimination, citizenship does not matter. Rather, it is imperative to

focus on lived experience. How did American public perceptions of Asian-ness warp due to negative COVID-19 attributions, and how did those changes manifest in reactions to perceived Asian-ness—both against A/AAPI and within A/AAPI? For the purposes of this study, perceptions of Asians in America are no different from Asian Americans, and so they must be included in my referent. Furthermore, regarding my choice of referent A/AAPI over APIDWA, I do so for two main reasons: COVID-19, as well as my own subject position as a Cantonese-Japanese American, both call for a focus on East Asian and East Asian passing communities. While I do seek to expose the erasure of South and West Asian countries in the category of Asian-ness, the bulk of my subject material is based in the United States, produced by and for American audiences. Thus, the American cultural and physical association of COVID-19 to Wuhan, and by extension, China, pushes the burden of viral blame onto East Asian and East Asian passing peoples.

On Tropes, Metaphor, and Synecdoche

The familiarity of the word trope may signal literary studies.¹ However, tropes were first theorized by Aristotle in his classical and canonical work, *The Art of Rhetoric*. Rhetoric, in this classical tradition, is not related to literature, but imbues public argument across genres of politics, law, and cultural beliefs. Tropes exist beyond the scope of literature, pervading our public discourses, and circulating through news cycles, everyday conversations, even architectural objects and material culture. We can define trope as a rhetorical term for the way discourses and artifacts turn attention to shape public opinions and attitudes, informing our

¹ Heinrich Lausberg exemplifies a premier academic text situating tropes in and for the literary tradition, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*, originally published in 1960.

shared life. They “...operate to shape cognition and action” (Bates). Tropes amplify a particular narrative, and in doing so, suppress or erase non-relevant content and context.

There are hundreds, thousands of possible tropes that we invent, enact, and assimilate every day. However, according to Kenneth Burke, there exist in Western Civilization four overarching master tropes (Burke). These master tropes are metaphor, irony, synecdoche, and metonymy. All four of the master tropes represent main ways of inventing, interpreting, and understanding meaning making in public life. Scholars like Hayden White further condense this categorization, arguing that synecdoche—when certain emphasis of a part becomes representation of its whole—and metonymy—when focus on a characteristic of a referent grants a specific weight to interpretation of that referent—are sub-categories of metaphor (White). This reasoning draws upon metaphor, synecdoche, and metonymy’s common use of understanding the unfamiliar through allusions to what is familiar. In other words, all three of these tropes rely on appeals to similarity to convey understanding. By contrast, irony offers the opportunity to understand the unfamiliar via intentional difference—the traditional meaning of any given argument exists in distinct opposition to its contextual, circumstantial meaning.

Metaphors, and by extension, synecdoche and metonymy, are inevitable products of human communication. After all, metaphor is useful for framing difficult concepts—by associating what is unfamiliar with something easier to digest, an audience may better perceive and is often more likely to accept the given argument. However, the power of metaphors extends beyond shaping thoughts alone, for “...when a metaphor becomes the structure for how we think about a topic, they make some goals, plans, actions, and outcomes thinkable and others unthinkable...” (Bates). The repetition of metaphors that rely upon dangerous assumptions continue to warp possibility

for understanding into a form of troped oppression and suppression: “The constant deployment of the metaphor make perceptually required goals, policies, and actions that emerge as further ways to actuate and activate the structure of reality engendered by the metaphor” (Bates). Within the context of COVID-19 and the elite messaging of “China virus,” such rhetoric shapes perceptions of A/API as deserving of punishment, encouraging cultural violence reflected in demonstrations of racist attitudes and the increase of hate crimes against Asians.

Tropes Shaping A/API

Perpetuated, harmful tropes of origin seize this space between human and monster, monstifying A/API. Tropes of origin, especially applied to humans, turn attention to a person or population’s perceived origin, which usually manifest in an often reductive or generalized prioritization of ethnic or racial background. As such, these tropes of origin often employ synecdoche. Synecdoche itself is not monstrous. However, when synecdoche becomes so generalized as to erase the bodies, voices, and cultures of others in favor of a singular chosen narrative, it turns into a violent trope of origin. In the case of viewing Asia as a monolith, “...Such a synecdoche can serve sources of racism and xenophobia either directly or complicity” (Mifsud). Said articulates orientalism as “...a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient...because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action” (Said). In order to understand and consequently control what it deems as exotic and savage, Western institutions must frame that which it deems different as Other, or Orient. For the British, the term “Asian” calls India to mind because of the British empire’s historical rule in that subcontinent. By contrast, the United States had greater involvement with East Asian rather than Southeast or South Asian countries. American

familiarity with Japanese and Chinese immigrants turned them into referents for all of Asia.² This sentiment is an inherited stereotypical perception, culminating in the modern day “...sense that East Asians...are viewed as more synonymous with the term Asian than others” (Zhou). Beyond its erasure of other Asians outside of those perceived as East Asian, the Asia as a monolith trope of origin enables several other tropes that further build the mask of A/API monstrification. Most crucial to this paper are the intersections between the perpetual foreigner, model minority myth, and the yellow peril.

In his remarks to the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Constitution, Civil Right, and Civil Liberties, President and Executive Director of AAJC John Yang discussed how the tropes of perpetual foreigner and model minority myth act as roots for racism against A/API. The perpetual foreigner stereotype effectively serves to undermine the inclusivity supposedly granted to A/API through U.S. citizenship, whether it be born or naturalized. Because of one’s Asian appearance or alternate proximity to Asia, “...we are still seen as the other, not to be trusted and to be feared” (Yang, HJS). As activist and scholar Harsha Walia notes in her university lecture series about dismantling borders, it is difficult, if not impossible, for hyphenated communities to simply exist as American (Walia). Even though very few of those residing in America could claim indigenous origin to their occupied space, dominant white power forms a sort of synecdoche—to be white or white-passing is to be American, and anyone who does not pass must be perpetually foreign Other. Perpetually foreign Others cannot claim the same privileges allotted to those who fit the criteria of origin, regardless of their actual citizenship, which is

² The concept of the Orient is also a synecdoche that this thesis does not have the proper space to dissect. For further explanation, scholars such as Mae Ngai and Charles Kraus theorize a particular branch known as American Orientalism.

supposedly the criterion for claiming those privileges. Applied to the cases of overt and complicit rhetoric against A/API, the Asian-ness of their named identity overrides any proof of American-ness they could offer, whether legislative or societal.

On the other hand, the model minority myth suggests "...that Asian Americans are held up as good people of color when it is convenient to plant seeds of division within allied communities of color" (Yang, HJS). The model minority myth may not seem harmful—indeed, some A/API interpret this as a sort of praise, a reward for achieving a high level of success despite their exclusion and status as a minority. Unfortunately, as theorized by political scientist Claire Jean Kim, the model minority myth "...exaggerates Asian American prosperity, homogenizes this extremely diverse population, and obscures discriminatory treatment against it" (Kim, 118). This pretense of A/API flourishing pits Asian American against groups marginalized by the same system of oppression, like the Black and Hispanic communities. Furthermore, the model minority myth disregards the internal socioeconomic and cultural discrepancies with less prominently represented Southeast or South Asian American people, breeding resentment between unique A/API communities. Statistics presented by the National Community Reinvestment Coalition list some of these disparities amongst A/API communities: "Indian Americans have the highest income among Asian American subgroups, with a median income of \$100,000...[while] Burmese Americans make a median income of \$36,000...According to 2017 Census data, Filipino Americans faced a 6.0% poverty rate, compared to the 16.2% for Hmong Americans...Mongolian, Sri Lankan and Malaysian Americans have bachelor's degrees with high rates, 59%, 57% and 55%...Bhutanese, Laotian, and Cambodian have the lowest rates of attaining bachelor's degrees, at 11%, 14% and 17%" (Asante-Muhammad and Sim). Simply put, internalization and acceptance of the model minority myth crafts a facade of acceptance

particularly prominent in complicit rhetoric, covering the tension and animosity it nurtures between A/AAPI and other minorities, or even with other A/AAPI communities.

The yellow peril, the last of my chosen tropes, "...is thought to have been coined by Wilhelm II...who commissioned a painting...[that] called on the civilized nations of Europe to defend against Asian conquest" (Lee). Yellow peril heavily rests upon the implication of sheer number. Early iterations of yellow peril, such as those found in the 1875 Page Act propaganda, used the threat of contamination and horde ideation to vilify Chinese female immigrants, depicting them as prostitutes that would pollute the whiteness and virtue of the United States. This trope gained momentum in the years leading up to World War II, plaguing American thought as "...Whites continued to view Japanese immigrants and their descendants as the enemy within, harbingers of the "yellow peril" posed by Japan's steady ascendance during the prewar period" (Kim, 116). Fear concerning Japan's military prowess saturated U.S. propaganda, cementing the American perceptions of Japan as a horrible monstrous enemy, as well as casting suspicion onto A/AAPI immigrants and citizens. During the era of COVID-19, the yellow peril, often characterized as a plague, seems altogether too fitting, reducing A/AAPI to an infectious and devastating disease both overtly and complicitly.

The Monster Trope and Monstrification

The monster trope is as it sounds—it turns attention from someone or something's normal attributes into that of a monster. Regardless of what form or figure the monsters saturating mythology, cinema, or generic urban legends might take, they share embodiment of a mysterious, horrifying, unknown Other. After all, creatures so ugly, devious, and evil could not possibly be like us. Monsters cannot be human.

And yet, the scariest monsters are very human. A wild animal's snarl cannot compare to the unearthly howl of a werewolf. Mosquitoes do not inspire the same spine chill as the silent approach of a blood-sucking vampire. Our frequent use of technology does not assuage the suspicion and panic of sentient robot attacks. In other words, the most horrifying monsters creep along the boundary between human and Other. Monsters are our deepest fears personified. They allow us to gaze upon something that is part of ourselves, but refuse to confront within ourselves. In doing so, monsters afford humans the perfect vehicle for violence we could never imagine inflicting upon humans—after all, subjecting humans to pain and suffering would make us ourselves monsters.

The monster trope is, at the very least, effective in mobilizing support against a common enemy through fear of the monster in question. Fear saturated reports from various news sources, with government officials like Governor Mike DeWine of Ohio explicitly monstifying the virus: "It's in our most rural counties. It's in our smallest communities. And we just have to assume the monster is everywhere. It's everywhere" (Achenbach). Trump himself used similar agency, calling the response to waves of infection as a medical war with COVID-19 itself as the "...genius, a hidden enemy, and a monster" (Burdick). In these instances, monstification displays its duality to personify and thus amplify agency. By giving COVID-19 agency as a monster, it is no longer just a coronavirus, like the common flu. This allusion to monstrosity in political speeches, official health announcements, and pandemic news updates draws attention to lives lost, economies shaken, and building tensions, giving our various pandemic hardships a common root cause and enemy worthy of fighting. Viruses do not have the literal capacity to fight, yet even scientists and health experts who are well-aware of the virus' non-agency tolerate

phraseology that connotes monstrosity to the public. While advocating for the importance of vaccination, Chief Medical Advisor Anthony Fauci “...agreed with MSNBC’s Mika Brzezinski when she suggested that a new “monster” strain could make the delta variant look like child’s play” (Goldiner). In examples like these, monstrification imbues something that is non-human with somewhat human characteristics, so perhaps one would call monstrification a form of personification.

By employing the monster trope in our arguments and affect, we employ a uniquely powerful form of simultaneous dehumanization and amplification. Through monstrification, we not only distance ourselves from our chosen enemies, but we produce an amplification via simplification—generalizations of monstrous behavior or characteristics become the foundation for our justified violence against Others. If seeing an individual as human is the antidote to monstrification, then drowning individuals within a multitude produces the opposite effect. As noted by political activist and historian Mike Davis, we lose personal connection in favor of widespread ambiguity: “Great epidemics, like world wars and famines, massify death into species-level events beyond our emotional comprehension. The afflicted, as a result, die twice: their physical agonies are redoubled by the submergence of their personalities in the black water of megatragedy...” (Davis, 45).

Monstrification plays a critical role in application to AAPI communities because it replaces the dehumanizing trope of silent and diligent compliance, or as Hong describes, the “efficient cyborg” symbolization, with the monster trope’s dehumanization and amplification that depicts A/AAPI as foreign enemy. A/AAPI have constantly suffered from the trope of erasure, whether

it be from maintenance of the model minority myth or the poor generalization of various A/API communities into an Asian monolith. However, COVID-19 and the subsequent monstrification of A/API as bearers of the virus forced these people groups struggling to garner national attention into the bonfires of a monster hunt.

Our simultaneous fear of the unknown and fascination with the horrific play against one another—rather than escape their scariest monsters, people return to gape in terror and fight back with greater fervor. As both the diversity and population of monster-based media has multiplied over the years, scholars responded in kind with the development of monster theory. In *Monster Culture in the 21st Century*, professors and editors Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui offer the rudimentary beginnings of a modern comprehensive monster theory, arguing “...that monstrous narratives of the past decade have become omnipresent specifically because they represent collective social anxieties over resisting and embracing change in the twenty-first century” (Levina and Bui, 2). In essence, without the human struggle synonymous with societal change, monsters would not have the space to thrive. With that in mind, Levina and Bui also claim “...monstrosity has transcended its status as a metaphor and has indeed become a necessary condition of our existence in the twenty-first century” (Levina and Bui, 2).

In all its monstrosity, what is COVID-19 if not an enormous catalyst of change? The representational approach links the concept of repression to the Other. Social norms dictate our preference for certain physical, social, and cultural characteristics, which we then internalize as the familiar. The dominance of metaphor builds upon these preferences, restricting human capacity to view and understand things through association and assimilation with the familiar (Sutton and Mifsud). Without the capacity to view and understand things outside the realm of the

familiar, "...The true Otherness is then a repressed unfamiliar familiar, or the uncanny" (Levina and Bui, 4). The wolf is never as scary as the werewolf, for a wolf lacks human intelligence and agency. In other words, the proximity to humanness makes a monster truly frightening. By that same reasoning, COVID-19 as a microscopic infectious jumble of genetic code and proteins is not as scary as A/AAPI monstrified into physical manifestations of the pandemic.

It is the culmination of such tropes that carve a distinctly vicious niche for A/AAPI transformation into COVID-19: "We don't have coronavirus. We are coronavirus." (Hong). The simultaneous erasure of a group's humanity while amplifying their monstrosity provides a scapegoat for those upset by the tragedies and hindrances borne of COVID-19. This metaphor not only enables racism, but grants reason for violent discrimination and hate crimes.

Anti-Asian metaphors and synecdoche, enabled by the monster trope and justified by elite messaging, becomes enthymematic to any discourse, political or social, pertaining to COVID-19 as "Chinese virus." For instance, a study from UC San Francisco analyzed over one million hashtags found in Tweets the week before and after Trump's March 16th use of "Chinese virus." The researchers found that "...One fifth (19.7%)...with #covid19 showed anti-Asian sentiment, compared with half (50.4%)...with #chinesevirus. When comparing the week before March 16, 2020, to the week after, there was a significantly greater increase in anti-Asian hashtags associated with #chinesevirus compared with #covid19 ($P < .001$)" (Hswen). Elite messaging, like that of former President Trump, combined with the ease of repetition enabled by social media platforms like Twitter, allow harmful metaphors like those encapsulated within "Chinese virus" to breed both violent sentiment and action. As the lead researcher, Yulin Hswen, observed: "These results may be a proxy of growth in anti-Asian sentiment that was not as prevalent

before...Using racial terms associated with a disease can result in the perpetuation of further stigmatization of racial groups” (Kurtzman). This data suggests a strong relationship between usage of “Chinese virus” and more frequent expression of anti-Asian hashtags. Tropical turning of attention helps explain how this referent encourages violence.

Analytical Framework

Before proceeding, I wish to offer descriptions of the general categories overt, complicit, and resistant. To briefly reiterate, by overt, I reference explicit and often intentional usage of anti-Asian sentiment. By complicit, I reference unintentional perpetuation of anti-Asian sentiment. By resistant, I reference criticisms and dismantling of overt and explicit anti-Asian sentiments.

In addition, Burkean critique is especially pertinent to this thesis. Burke’s concept of the terministic screen offers us another way to analyze inevitable tropes in public discourse, like the metaphors and synecdoche that enable monstrification, and his theories of dramatism and scapegoating help explain how the monstrification of A/API infects our media consumption so powerfully. A terministic screen “...necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another. Within that field there can be different screens, each with its ways of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology...” (Burke via Bizzell and Herzberg, 1344). Pertaining to the pandemic, one might consider how a biological understanding of COVID-19 as a viral molecule was racialized and politicized to blame China, and by extension, A/API. As this attribution proliferates via repeated elite messaging, news cycles, and social media sharing, it becomes an enthymeme, a syllogism that relies on implications inherently understood by the audience (Aristotle via Bizzell and Herzberg, 180).

The metaphors and synecdoches most commonly wedded to A/AAPI, such as perpetual foreigner or yellow peril tropes explicated previously, become enthymematic to any discourse referencing COVID-19 as “Chinese virus”. The violence this referent justifies and encourages needs no further outward explication, because the enthymeme’s deductive form already exists within the viewer. This induces active response rather than passive conveyance, paving the path for techniques known as dramatism and scapegoating: “If action is to be our key term, then drama; for drama is the culminative form of action...But if drama, then conflict. And if conflict, then victimage. Dramatism is always on the edge of this vexing problem, that comes to a culmination in tragedy, the song of the scapegoat...” (Burke via Bizzell and Herzberg, 1347). Here the attribution of COVID-19 to A/AAPI is a contemporary instance of dramatism, presenting Asian-Americans and passing peoples as a scapegoat for any and all inconveniences and tragedies associated with the virus.

However, Burke also offers us an avenue of both resistance and prevention through the comic frame. Frames of rejection, found in literary forms like elegy, burlesque, and grotesque, are ill-suited to bring about social change. This is primarily because they tend to single out a particular human vice and proceed to lament on its shortcomings, rather than offering resolutions to the issues in questions. Generally, frames of rejection do not present society with new perspectives, and so do not easily inspire changes in personal philosophy. In contrast, frames of acceptance, examples including epic, tragedy, and comedy, do equip people with the capacity to accept jarring events and their place in the world: “...the comic frame is not about seeing humor in everything; it is about maximum consciousness— “self-awareness and social responsibility at the same time.” The comic frame is...a flexible, adaptive, charitable frame that enables people to be observers of themselves, while acting...” (Ott). In other words, comic framing helps mitigate the

problems of scapegoating by allowing audiences to empathize with those at fault, leading them to a kind of humane enlightenment. It promotes humility over humiliation, presenting a more receptive environment for learning.

Overt Rhetoric: Trump’s “Chinese Virus”

Regardless of one’s opinion of Trump, his former position as President of the United States inherently magnifies the importance of his words. This is especially true amidst the panic and chaos of a traumatizing event like a pandemic outbreak. The general populace, whether willingly or begrudgingly, do look to the government for a sense of direction concerning the threat to their daily lives. Trump’s language and overt rhetoric during this time did provide a direction—by turning attention towards and scapegoating, Asian and Asian-passing bodies as causal to the tragedy wrought by COVID-19.

Trump’s Twitter activity presents us a general timeframe for the initial usage of “Chinese virus” and similar phrasing. On January 24, 2020, his initial response to news of the highly contagious virus was complimentary of China’s President Xi: “China has been working very hard to contain the Coronavirus. The United States greatly appreciates their efforts and transparency. It will all work out well. In particular, on behalf of the American People, I want to thank President Xi!” (Sippell). Trump quickly shifted his tone of praise to one of indignant blame as COVID-19 spread and devastated the U.S. On March 18, 2020, Trump tweeted: “I have always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning, including my very early decision to close the ‘borders’ from China...” (Sippell). While his explanation for the term was based on geographical origin— “It’s not racist at all...It comes from China—that’s

why. It comes from China. I want to be accurate...” (Choi)—Trump’s coinage of COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” aligned with his narrative of pointing an accusatory finger towards China.

Further Tweets further confirmed Trump’s intentional linkage of China with COVID-19, suggesting that his repetitive and frequent use of the referent was not unintentional. These included the following on May 28, 2020: “All over the World the CoronaVirus, a very bad “gift” from China, marches on. Not good!” (Sippell), July 5, 2020: “New China Virus Cases up (because of massive testing), deaths are down...” (Sippell), and July 20, 2020: “We are United in our effort to defeat the Invisible China Virus...” (Sippell). Trump and his administration’s attribution of blame intensified when Trump himself fell ill from COVID-19. Republican Senator Kelly Loeffler tweeted “...China gave this virus to our President...WE MUST HOLD THEM ACCOUNTABLE...” and Trump campaign fundraiser Blair Brandt claimed “...Chinese Communist Party has biologically attacked our President...” (Griffiths). Only a few days after being discharged from the hospital, Trump concretized his blame narrative by promising revenge on China: “We are making tremendous progress with this horrible disease that was sent over by China...China will pay a big price for what they did to the world and to us...” (Walsh).

As the representative leader of the U.S., Trump’s preference for referring to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” and “Wuhan virus” was never private, but glaringly public. However, the moment Trump chose to utilize his overt blame narrative and scapegoating strategy during G7 meetings, he officialized the monstrification of A/AAPI. No longer was “Chinese virus” a part of internet slang, that while still harmful, could be potentially dismissed due to the casualness of Twitter—it became the primary language used to represent the United States’ stance on COVID-19 amidst global elite discourse. The controversial nomenclature played an especially prominent

role in March 2020, as “...Foreign leaders from the group of Seven countries failed to agree on a joint declaration because of disputes on what to call the coronavirus pandemic...” (Choi). As demonstrated by the stalling that occurred during the G7, naming is powerful. The overt enthymematic racism imbued within the phrase “Chinese virus” contained enough virulence to halt progress on geopolitical decisions. Regardless, Trump continued to use this language even after admonishment from critics warning of xenophobic behavior. In September 2020, Trump again referred to COVID-19 as the “China virus” during his U.N. speech and suggested: “That Chinese government and World Health Organization—which is virtually controlled by China—falsely declared that there was no evidence of human-to-human transmission. Later, they falsely said people without symptoms would not spread the disease...” (Neuman). Disregarding the potential validity of his claims, Trump’s persistent association of “China virus” with his blaming China for COVID-19 creates avenues for scapegoating anyone with connections to China, legitimately assumed or not.

In short, the Trump administration’s insistence on using the terms “Wuhan virus” and “China virus” in these official international declarations gave them power. “Wuhan virus” and “Chinese virus” could no longer be dismissed as jokes or casual labels. It is for this main reason—that being the combination of Trump’s authority as President combined with the very public and frequently expressed nature of his remarks—that Trump’s Tweets and quotations from G7 meetings are crucial tipping points in the explicit monstrification of A/AAPI. In other words, through the monster trope, “Wuhan virus” and “Chinese virus” become more than just descriptive labels for COVID-19. By referring to the virus as such, it gives COVID-19 agency, scapegoating ability, and ultimately the rhetorical capabilities to erase humanity through amplifying monstrosity. Trump’s language is overt rhetoric that encapsulates centuries-old

stigmas towards Asians in America, the very human fear of the savage unknown, and the tensions rife in current geopolitics into a neat little package perfect for mass media circulation.

Even if one were to buy Trump's defense that "China virus" does indeed impart more accurate data about the virus, they might assume that should any scapegoating occur, it would solely target the Chinese. However, hate crimes do not only happen to Chinese people. The trope of Asia as monolith rears its head here—anyone who fits American physical perceptions of Asian-ness becomes "Chinese" and therefore, a source of COVID-19, regardless of their actual cultural background or relationship to China. Such racialization, dependent on assumed phenotypical categorization, plays directly into the perpetual foreigner trope, further alienating the Asian Other from the familiar American. As professor Wenshan Jia and scholar Fangzhu Lu observe: "...it is President Donald J. Trump who used "Chinese virus" that triggered the American society's anti-Asian sentiment. When influential politicians label a group of people in a racist term, it acts like a call for their constituents to take up racist action against the members of the target group..." (Jia and Lu). In other words, Trump's overt rhetoric builds upon the complex web of tropes which historically acted to suppress A/AAPI through a homogenous, perilous, permanently foreign identity. During the rising tensions and panic era of COVID-19, his preferred terminology of "Chinese virus" creates an excuse for people to act upon their prior assumptions that all Asians are the same, or more specifically, that all Asians are Chinese—a synecdoche that swallows A/AAPI individuality all to create an easily identifiable scapegoat for the hardships of the pandemic. This synecdoche has a second violent consequence. A/AAPI distract themselves by seeking to separate themselves from the monstrified Chinese in "China virus," diminishing the root problem of stopping violent hate crimes and instead exacerbating further discord among Asian communities.

Complicit Rhetoric: “Sick Man,” “Chicom,” and Hard Work

As COVID-19’s rapid infection spurred a wake of socioeconomic disruption and geopolitical tension, the American public demanded any information surrounding the novel coronavirus and the potential threats it harbored, biological or otherwise. Among the cascade of articles released every hour crowded with updated outbreak statistics, stories of tragic loss, and discussions of international relations implications, one particular opinion piece released by the Wall Street Journal turned attention with its complicit rhetoric, first and foremost present in its harmfully troped, racialized title: “China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia” (Mead). The title itself relies upon the trope of yellow peril discussed before, the historical association of Asians with disease. This play on words posited a specific target on China and Chinese communities, drawing attention from Chinese scholars who identified such references as “...a subtle call to the world to isolate China or put China into quarantine so that China would no longer be strategic competitor for the United States...” (Jia and Lu). Beyond the title, editor and columnist Walter Russell Mead’s commentary of China’s unstable financial status parallels COVID-19 economic impacts with the infamous bat soup and pangolin rumors: “The mighty Chinese juggernaut has been humbled this week, apparently by a species-hopping bat virus...”, and “China’s financial markets are probably more dangerous in the long run than China’s wildlife markets” (Mead). These sentences validate early attributions of COVID-19 to the long-held American stereotype concerning Chinese diets—namely, that Chinese people eat weird food. This might seem silly at surface value, but this assumption employs the monster trope. The association of Chinese consuming foods considered unfit for most people only serves to further establish their status as foreign Other, monsters who devour what humans should not.

Even within spaces meant to expose discrimination and violence against A/AAPI, harmful synecdoche occurs via appeals to free speech. During the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties in March 2021, Representative Chip Roy of Texas presented: "...I'm not going to be ashamed of saying I oppose the Chicoms, I oppose the Chinese Communist Party and when we say things like that and we're talking about that, we shouldn't be worried about having a committee of members of Congress policing our rhetoric because some evildoers go engage in some evil activity, as occurred in Atlanta, Georgia. Because when we start policing free speech, we're doing the very thing that we're condemning when we condemn what the Chinese Communist Party does to their country..." (Roy, HJS).

Synecdoche is a master trope of rhetoric, wherein a part comes to represent a whole. Though it is often used colloquially or as a literary device, when used in arguments like Roy's, synecdoche has the capability to destructively erase identity. Within Roy's assertion, the Chinese Communist Party comes to represent all Chinese or those who appear Chinese, regardless of their actual political affiliation or cultural sympathies to the Chinese government. He utilizes the common American rejection of Communist ideology to justify harmful language towards A/AAPI, such as the slur Chicoms. Further context of the evil activity he references serves to confirm the dangerous synecdoche—half of the Atlanta spa shooting victims were not Chinese: "An official from the South Korean Consulate in Atlanta, citing the Foreign Ministry in Seoul, confirmed...that four of the eight killed in the shooting spree were ethnic Koreans..." (Fausset).

In light of this information, Roy's synecdoche no longer contains itself to blame the Chinese Communist Party but legitimizes violence against any A/AAPI who fit observational criteria of East Asian-ness.

Analysis of complicit rhetoric is crucial to revealing and attempting to dismantle the monster trope and scapegoating of A/AAPI, especially within A/AAPI communities. In other words, A/AAPI themselves often internalize and so perpetuate harmful tropes like the perpetual foreigner and model minority myth. Former Democratic candidate Andrew Yang's article, "We Asian Americans are not the virus, but we can be part of the cure," exemplifies this complicity. Granted, the first part of his title does attempt to invalidate the overt association of A/AAPI to COVID-19, like that found in Trump's Tweets. In his writing, Yang attempts to rally and encourage A/AAPI amidst the anxiety and fear of rising COVID-19 and hate crime cases alike. He references his answer to a question posed while he was running for president, "How do we keep the coronavirus from inciting hostility toward Asians in this country?". Yang responds: "The truth is that people are wired to make attributions based on appearance, including race. The best thing that could happen for Asians would be to get this virus under control so it isn't a problem anymore. Then any racism would likely fade" (Yang). To be fair, as Yang himself notes following this quote, his response occurred before Trump publicly labeled COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus." Regardless, Yang's approach to the question frames the racism and xenophobia as a problem that can be mitigated by stopping COVID-19, rather than as a problem itself. He acknowledges that synecdoche of phenotypic perceptions act as foundation for racial assumptions, but his argument mainly pivots around the idea that managing COVID-19 will provide solvency for anti-Asian sentiments.

Yang does attempt to de-monstrify and re-humanize A/AAPI, but his suggestions still articulate Asian Americans as Other. He does so by calling for Asian Americans to work harder: "We Asian Americans need to embrace and show our American-ness in ways we never have before.

We need to step up, help our neighbors, donate gear, vote, wear red-white-and-blue, volunteer, fund aid organizations, and do everything in our power to accelerate the end of this crisis. We should show without a shadow of a doubt that we are Americans who will do our part for our country in this time of need” (Yang). Assuming, as he mentions within the text, that Yang’s primary audience are Asian Americans—a term which typically refers to either natural born or legalized citizens of Asian descent—this begs the question...why should Asian Americans have to prove their American-ness more than any other racial group? Yang’s plea implies that Asian Americans lack American-ness, and that in times of discrimination and hate, the perpetual foreigner must provide evidence for their right to belong through loyal, dedicated, hard work. The model minority must continue to act as model in order for Americans to look past their foreign status—or else, they become monster.

Resistant Rhetoric: Cultural Inoculations

But not every speech or article about COVID-19 contained overt or complicit rhetorics against A/AAPI. During the previously mentioned March 2021 House Judiciary Subcommittee hearing regarding discrimination and violence against A/AAPI, Congressman Grace Meng of New York adopts a spirit of resistant rhetoric as she directly responds to Rep. Chip Roy of Texas. She uncovers the synecdoche he uses to justify hatred of A/AAPI because of an implied association to the Chinese Communist Party, revealing this logic as not only faulty but as enabling hate crimes: “I want to go back to something that Mr. Roy said earlier, your president and your party and your colleagues can talk about issues with any other country that you want, but you don’t have to do it by putting a bull’s-eye on the back of Asian Americans across this country, on our grandparents, on our kids. This hearing was to address the hurt and pain of our community and to

find solutions and we will not let you take our voice away from us” (Meng, HJS). In her critique of Roy’s argument, Meng refocuses attention to A/AAPI, drawing a distinction between Asian Americans and China, more specifically, the Chinese government. By doing so, she clearly identifies victims of anti-Asian hate crimes as scapegoats for American scorn of Communist ideology. In summation, Meng’s comments eliminate erasure of A/AAPI in two ways. First, she unravels the Asia as monolith trope by distinguishing Asian Americans as a group of people separate from American perceptions of all East Asian and East Asian-passing peoples as Chinese, and by extension, surrogates for the Chinese Communist Party. Second, Meng advocates for A/AAPI by demanding physical and emotional space for A/AAPI voices.

Additionally, amidst the elite messaging and monstrification that enables overt and complicit violence against A/AAPI, there also emerge opportunities for future rhetorical resistance—a cultural vaccine to inoculate American society, better protecting those most vulnerable from the virulence of the monster trope moving forward. As Hong points out, “...the coronavirus at least burned away any illusions that East Asians are almost white...I kept imagining the coronavirus as an irradiating purple light lancing through the cracks of our white-supremacist world” (Hong). COVID-19 was not the origin of anti-Asian hate. COVID-19 was a catalyst for exposing the deeply rooted erasure of discrimination towards A/AAPI, and Trump’s justification for scapegoating through repeated use of “China virus” was the last drop that caused the boiling cauldron of xenophobia to finally boil over. The consequent monstrification and rising trend of hate crimes against A/AAPI communities forced American society at large and A/AAPI as individuals to remember that A/AAPI are minorities too, manipulated by the same systematic racism that pits marginalized groups against one another: “White supremacy ensures that once the pressure of persecution is lifted even a little from one group, that group will then fall upon

the newly targeted group out of relief and out of a frustrated misplaced rage that can never touch, let alone topple, the real enemy” (Hong). Hong writes her worries about her family’s health, her anger over racially motivated violence, and her confusion the slur “Chink” resurged. But she also writes with Burke’s comedic corrective, acknowledging how “...In the past, I had a habit of minimizing anti-Asian racism because it had been drilled into me early on that racism against Asians didn’t exist...I’ve been conditioned to think my second-class citizenry was low on the scale of oppression and therefore not worth bringing up...” (Hong). Hong recognizes her own internalization of harmful tropes like the model minority myth, and by doing so, resists remaining entrenched within the myth. Rather than solely dwell on the tragedies and victimization of A/AAPI, this writing encourages us as readers to reflect on our actions, arguably one of the first and most important conditions for long lasting social change.

Conclusion

To conclude my thesis, I hope to have shown how elite messaging utilizes the monster trope, in its employment of precedent anti-Asian metaphors and synecdoches, to scapegoat A/AAPI communities as cause and embodiment of COVID-19. Through analysis of overt and complicit rhetoric, I demonstrate how enthymematic referents like “Chinese virus” and similar assumptions relying on anti-Asian sentiments justify violence against A/AAPI, both from external agents and internalized. However, I also provide instances of resistant rhetorics that push against the monster trope, beginning to dismantle its monstrosity and inoculating audiences to the pandemics of racism and xenophobia.

Part of the monster trope’s dangerously effective persuasion lies in its instinctive implicit call to retributive action. It is a tale as old as time, a prevalent theme popularized through the ages of

ancient mythologies, classic fairy tales, and modern fantastical epics. Heroes exemplify virtues, heroes unify against a common enemy, heroes do not tolerate evil—and so heroes must defeat monsters. When a particular agent becomes monstrified, they not only lose their humanity, but they become an intentional target for hatred and violence. In this scenario, Trump presents himself and his allies as the heroes fighting against COVID-19, which by extension of his using “Chinese virus” also paints him as oppositional to those characterized as the disease. The monster trope does far more than remove what makes one human from themselves. It transforms what is left into something vicious that warrants persecution.

And thus, monstrification is a necessary enabler of human v. human violence. It is a rhetorical technique on which we unconsciously rely, an easy way to turn attention against a particular agent without the penalty of guilt. As humans, how can we provoke hatred against other humans through any argument referencing and acknowledging our shared humanity? For any violence we would stoke in this paradigm must also, in some sense, reflect upon ourselves. Put differently, most people feel uncomfortable committing acts of violence against perceived enemies if they recognize that Other as human. It is when we are confronted with the humanity buried beneath monstrification that we, both personally and as a collective society, can begin to recognize the injustice of our violent actions.

“Chinese virus” cannot be passed off as a joke. Trump’s referent painted neon flashing arrows to a target already placed on backs of A/API. As Chairman Steve Cohen summarized in his House Judiciary Subcommittee opening statement: “Anti-Asian hate did not begin with the COVID-19 pandemic and will not end when the pandemic is over, All the pandemic did was exacerbate latent anti-Asian prejudice that have long—long and ugly history in America” (Cohen, HJS). It is not

enough to condemn overt anti-Asian rhetoric. Pointing our pitchforks towards elites only perpetuates the monster trope's capability for physical and cultural violence. As contributors to American public discourse, we must learn to recognize and critique complicit rhetoric. For those who identify as A/AAPI, we need to guard against and resist our own complicity.

In her work *Sorties*, rhetorician Helene Cixous explicates history's paradox of otherness, the way in which humans as individuals and communities conceptualize the philosophical nothingness of Other via violent power: "The paradox of otherness is that, of course, at no moment in History is it tolerated or possible as such. The other is there only to be reappropriated, recaptured, and destroyed as other" (Cixous, 71). Cixous seeks remedy to this paradox of otherness through a writing that desires recognition and knowing of the other, wherein "...each would take the risk of other, of difference, without feeling threatened by the existence of an otherness, rather, delighting to increase through the unknown that is there to discover, to respect, to favor, to cherish" (Cixous, 78). This is a writing that may begin to dismantle the monster trope's tangled web of metaphor and synecdoche, and our invented human necessity to surrender natural cacophonous difference for the sake of a granular generic understanding.

Perhaps there are ways the monster trope can be used positively. Perhaps the fear garnered via COVID-19's monstrification was the motivation humans needed to take the virus seriously. Perhaps we can signify the monster trope otherwise—in our monstrification of A/AAPI, we are the real monsters. Consider Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the story of a scientist who defied nature in pursuit of manufacturing the perfect man, who deemed his creation a monster that he needed to escape and destroy. The name Frankenstein brings to mind the popular Halloween icon derived from Shelley's work, a horrific, stumbling green monster brought back from the dead.

But in the original text, Frankenstein is not the monster's name. It is the name of the scientist.

When using the monster trope to justify violence, who is the real monster: those monstrified, or those employing monstrification?

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