

# A Digital Turn: Recognizing Asian Gendered Resistance During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

Anti-Asian racism has escalated significantly during COVID-19, yet scholarly attention to this increase in racial violence has been scant. With rising cases of physical and verbal violence against the Asian community in the Global North, Asian activists have taken to social media and digital activism to contest anti-Asian racist tropes and to broaden global awareness around increasingly hostile anti-Asian hate. After the Atlanta Massacre which led to the death of six Asian women, Asian women have been instrumental in leading anti-racist coalition building, virtual forums, and online campaigns in the protection of Asian women and girls, workers, and undocumented communities. The use of social media and online organizing at a time of ‘stay-at-home’ orders exposed the significance of the Internet in Asian feminist and anti-racist resistance. These channels have given Asian women the opportunity to call attention to the gendered and racist systems of oppression that have dispossessed them of their rights. This piece recognizes the Internet as a space where Asian women have been creatively organizing alongside other women of color in vocal and subtle ways. It reveals how digital media have unearthed Asian women's hidden leadership in oftentimes racially exclusionary environments within mainstream feminist movements in the Global North, and highlights the importance of Asian women in advancing a new line of progressive anti-racist politics. This piece calls upon scholars to interrogate the use of digital media by Asian activists, and in particular Asian women, to give credit to Asian communities' oftentimes neglected and overlooked leadership in anti-racist movements.

## Keywords

Anti-Asian racism, COVID-19, digital activism, gendered resistance

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## Introduction

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian communities in the Global North have experienced an alarming rise in racial violence and xenophobia. From verbal abuse and racial slurs to physical beatings and killings, reported attacks on Asian people globally have increased manifold (Gao and Liu, 2021; Gover, Harper, and Langton, 2020). While governments around the world mandated people to ‘stay at home,’ anti-Asian hatred permeated online forums and news, revealing the jeopardized safety of racialized communities even in private spheres, and the scapegoating of East and Southeast Asian communities for the millions of COVID-19 deaths and cases (Abidin and Zeng, 2020; Li and Nicholson, 2021). Global awareness around mounting anti-Asian racism seemingly reached its zenith in March of 2021 with the Atlanta massacre, when a white gunman stormed three spas and murdered eight people, six of whom were Asian women (Malekoff, 2021). This public display of a gendered and racially motivated hate crime served yet again as a harsh reminder to Asian women of their increased vulnerabilities, cyclical trauma, and societal subordination heightened by the pandemic.

Immediately, Black, Brown, and Latinx communities were quick to denounce acts of white supremacy and fundraise for Asian advocacy organizations across North America in solidarity, restoring and maintaining a deep history and legacy of inter-racial solidarities. Yet, because the Atlanta shootings occurred at a time when stay-at-home mandates largely confined activists and immunocomprised communities of color to remain indoors, they augmented possibilities for another form of activist leadership. Asian women and feminist organizations mobilized on the virtual frontlines, forcing a public and global reckoning of the racial and gendered experiences faced by Asian women in a white supremacist and male-dominated world. The Atlanta massacre, and the subsequent online organization of Asian activists demonstrated the significance of online space in revealing an oftentimes overlooked leadership by Asian women activists.

While Asian activism in anti-racism movements has been robust, it has not been frequently documented in mass media, popular culture, or scholarship (Lee et al., 2020). From historical participation in the Third World Liberation Front to the contemporary Asians4BlackLives movement, the Asian community has historically and continuously worked alongside other marginalized groups to contest white supremacy and racism (Chang, 2020; Ho, 2021). Despite this, dominant narratives around racism have frequently focused on a Black-white racial binary, which has at times concealed the suffering of diverse groups of Asian communities, such as immigration injustice, intergenerational migratory trauma, the hypersexualization of Asian women, and the *model minority myth*, a trope which perpetuates myths of meritocracy to create often untenable expectations for the Asian community and to oppress non-Asian racialized folks (Lee et al., 2020; Li and Nicholson, 2021). Scholarship has similarly overlooked Asian contributions to racial justice movements, and disregarded how white-curated tropes of meekness and apathy have obfuscated Asian-led sustained efforts for justice (Lee et al., 2020).

I write this piece as an Asian woman to provoke discussions around Asian women’s leadership in anti-racism movements. Specifically, this piece examines how Asian women used digital platforms to craft an intersectional narrative by organizing with other racialized women and Asian feminist groups, and to advance a new line of Asian American political argument that centers Asian women in conversations around racialized criminalization of labor, and white supremacist and patriarchal violence. This piece calls upon scholars to further interrogate how subjugated groups within activist movements use digital media to challenge certain hegemonic narratives around *who* is equally leading coalition building efforts and anti-racist organizing in the digital age. By examining the subtle and visible ways in which Asian women are organizing online to challenge racism, this paper offers new insights into how Asian feminist organizers are using the Internet to claim ownership over their leadership and contributions in contemporary anti-racist movements, and to challenge the perils of whiteness and patriarchy heightened by the pandemic.

## Complex Histories of Asian Racialization

### *From the 'Model Minority' to 'Yellow Peril'*

The assumption of the Internet's presumed neutrality is a common and harmful misconception of the Internet and the ideologies that circulate online. Many scholars have written about the corporate and white infrastructure of the Internet, which has produced racist tropes and white knowledge production in online spaces (Brock, 2011, 2018; Noble, 2018). However, scholars have also optimistically noted how activists have used the Internet globally to contest hegemonic media narratives, political crackdowns, and to build solidarity and anti-racist coalitions (Ash, Kitchin and Leszczynski, 2018; Stewart and Schultze, 2019). This dichotomous use of the Internet was further visible during the pandemic, where a deluge of misinformation online cost preventable COVID-19 deaths and emboldened the anti-vaccine and anti-Asian movement. While anti-Asian narratives had pervaded public discourse pre-COVID, the media wielded and manipulated tropes around the Asian community, quickly deviating from the 'model minority' and shifting back to 'yellow peril' during the pandemic (Li and Nicholson, 2021). When the six Asian women were murdered in Atlanta, the media was quick to delegitimize and invalidate the shootings as racially or sexually motivated, instead attributing the perpetrator's behavior to a 'bad day.' These instances demonstrate how easily representations of the Asian community can oscillate to serve dominant white supremacist voices.

### *AsianCrit and the Evolutions of the Asian Activist Movement*

Growing criticisms in scholarship and public discourse over the exclusion of Asian bodies in racial discourse led to the development of AsianCrit, which shed light on the diverse realities and racial experiences of Asian communities (Kolano, 2016). The AsianCrit framework, a theory rooted in critical race theory (CRT), centers the voices and experiences of Asian scholars, who write about the diverse experienced realities of Asian communities. The framework responds to heavily pejorative narratives around Asian identities that labeled them as *yellow peril*, a term meant to demonize Asian people as inferior and dangerous (Iftikar and Museus, 2018; Wu and Nguyen, 2022). Instead, scholars of AsianCrit proposed a framework that reflected the racial injustices experienced by Asian communities in the US, from Japanese Americans who were interned during the Second World War to more contemporary forms of subjugation of Hmong American students in education (Chang, 1993; Matsuda, 1995; Kim and Hseih, 2021).

AsianCrit scholarship has also drawn attention to the intentional erasure of Asian history and activism through the *model minority myth*, a myth that essentializes the Asian community as hardworking to deny the existence of systemic racism and demonize other racial groups, particularly Black folks (Kim, and Hseih, 2021). While historically Asian people have been depicted as politically passive, AsianCrit has more recently drawn attention to the racial tensions that are replete within the diasporic Asian community (Wu and Nguyen, 2022). For instance, there has been longstanding criticisms of anti-Blackness within conservative and immigrant Asian communities, which have been saliently observed in social movements, such as the Korean American resistance to the Rodney King Riots in 1992 (Yellow Horse et al., 2021). More recently, contemporary indifference towards anti-Black racism and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement amongst some Asian communities has demonstrated the intergenerational divides between older Asian immigrants who do not support BLM and Asian youth who have mobilized in solidarity (Yellow Horse et al., 2021). Still, the Asian community have been chastised by other racialized activists for not supporting racial justice movements and for contributing to anti-Black racism, particularly through the normalization of the model minority myth.

In contrast, AsianCrit scholars have criticized the erasure of Asian solidarities in racial justice movements throughout history. Historically, Chinese railroad workers fought for equity within the workplace to demand equal wages as their white counterparts and to unite against corporal punishment

(Karuka, 2019). Pan-Asian identity in the Global North centered around an acknowledgement of transracial struggles, and Asian people have been instrumental in racial solidarity strikes, from the ethnic studies strike of the 1970s to the joint Asian and Latinx factory strikes mobilizing against exploitative work practices in Los Angeles (Chang, 2020; Kim and Hsieh, 2021; Omi and Winant, 1994). More recently, alliances with BLM have existed in the form of #AsiansForBlackLives (Chang, 2020; Kim and Hsieh, 2021) where Asian youth organized alongside Black activists, and campaigned for their elders to challenge their anti-Blackness. Despite this, Asian contributions in transnational anti-racist movements have been erased, often intentionally to pit them against communities of color and prevent solidarity building across racial lines. Moreover, while AsianCrit scholars have denounced the erasure of Asian voices and resistance, the erasure of voices has not been uniform, whereby recognition of Asian leadership has frequently omitted Asian women's voices, like Yuri Kochiyama and Grace Lee Boggs, who fought for Asian and Black liberation. Yet, with the increased use of digital technologies, especially during COVID-19, Asian women have been driving a new line of progressive Asian politics by organizing online in ways that are combatting their erasure.

### **Asian Gendered Resistance in Virtual Spaces**

#### ***'I am not your model minority'***

While the incidence of anti-Asian violence continued to escalate since March of 2020, the George Floyd protests and the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement resuscitated public discussions on anti-racism. However, these discussions around policing and incarceration fomented public debate on the Black-white racial binary, which at times led to an oversight of anti-Asian racism in white-dominant mainstream media, despite racist incidents occurring on a parallel timeline. While the Internet represents an ecosystem of diverse voices, discussions around anti-Asian racism during the early months of COVID-19 had been minimal or ephemeral, much like the general acknowledgement of anti-Asian racism in history and contemporary times.

Since the Atlanta attacks, Asian activist groups organized on the virtual frontlines, leading new discussions around justice and recognition. They used social media and forums like Twitter and Linktree to debunk false information about vaccines and circulate petitions calling upon workplaces and governments to take anti-Asian violence seriously. Asian activists were quick to call out the tendency for Asian women to be treated as subservient and hypersexualized objects, criticizing dominant media narratives that overlooked the racist and misogynistic underbelly of the Atlanta shootings. Organizations and collectives like Asian Americans Advancing Justice (2022), Young Asian American Health Survey (2022), and Red Canary Song (2022) raised the intersectional issues faced by members within the Asian community, such as youth, undocumented people, women, and immigrants and refugees through digital advocacy and research. While some of their organizational activism remains local, the digitization of information and physical restrictions on movements necessitated by the pandemic expanded the ability for Asian activists to organize transnationally over common issues and interests. Asian activists partnered online with other racial justice organizations, hosting panels to discuss how the Asian community have collectively suffered in their mental and physical health from the pandemic response and events like the Atlanta massacre. Facebook groups like "Subtle Asian Traits" (SAT) have allowed Asian communities to reflect online on their shared lived experiences of racism and how they navigate around their experiences in subtle and sometimes humorous ways (Abidin and Zeng, 2020).

At the same time, a notable trend emerged with increasing calls for Asian support, with Asian women's forums and collectives like the Asian American Feminist Collective (2022), Project 1709 (2022), and the National Asian Pacific Women's Forum (2022) taking charge to lead anti-racist initiatives online. The activists at the forefront of online organizing for greater recognition in the anti-racism movement have largely been Asian women, who created specific Asian hashtags and Linktree resources

by Asian women for Asian women. Zines, social media posts, comics, tweets, and artwork served as crucial sites of knowledge production whereby Asian women were able to express their resistance explicitly and tacitly, to work towards the protection of marginalized Asian women through online fundraisers and legal advice.

### ***The Rise of #ImReady***

One notable organizer since the Atlanta shootings has been AAPI Women Lead (2022), a grassroots movement mobilizing across the US and globally for Asian women's liberation. Since the Atlanta shootings, they were instrumental in online organizing, from leading virtual healing circles, to sharing online post-trauma toolkits to young Asians, to hosting transnational virtual vigils. They were among the leading Asian organizations to launch the #ImReady movement, which sought to identify the specific gendered violence that Asian women face, such as the hypersexualization and fetishization of their bodies. This hashtag was created by Asian women in response to the #MeToo movement, which has often neutralized race as a factor in sexual violence.

Feminist organizations like AAPI Women Lead joined forces online with other women of color and Asian feminist collectives like Red Canary Song, to host YouTube webinars on community self-defense against racial attackers for Asian women and girls, write online petitions for transformative justice and alternatives to carceral punishment, and hold cultural tea vigils for women whose lives were lost due to racially-motivated attacks during the pandemic. Through inventing or circulating hashtags like #ImReady and #NotYourAsianSidekick on Facebook and Twitter, Asian women have breathed new life into discussions around Asian suffering, and the double burdens that Asian women face due to their gendered and racial discrimination.

In the wake of the Atlanta attacks, AAPI Women Lead launched a petition to call attention to how the criminalization of Asian labor is significantly gendered. Asian women in collectives like AAPI Women Lead sought alliances with Black feminist abolitionists, given that Black women have also been neglected in discussions around mass incarceration vis-à-vis their male counterparts. Feminist groups like Asian American Feminist Collective, AAPI Women Lead, and Red Canary Song issued and circulated petitions on feminist websites calling to shut down Asian Hate Crime Task Forces created by police forces like the New York Police Department in response to rising Asian hate crimes (Asian American Feminist Collective, 2020), noting the reverse harm they cause on Asian women by criminalizing their labor, such as the case with the Atlanta shootings.

Interestingly, what is notable about this wave of Asian organizing is the networking and movement building occurring within and between Asian feminist organizations and other women of color, rather than general movement building within Asian community organizations. Given the longstanding tensions within the Asian community on issues like BLM, Asian women have used the visibility and global outreach of social media and websites to advocate and push for radical agendas of prison abolition, decriminalization of women's labour, and dismantling of patriarchy with other women of color who mutually experience similar struggles.

The use of digital activism to drive a new, more radical wave of Asian women-led activism has also been fitting, given the appeal of social media to Asian youth, who are more likely than the masses influenced by white supremacist media and ideologies, to share similarly progressive politics. Mobilizing online has advanced a new line of Asian politics, one where Asian women have been on the frontlines, situating Asian narratives within abolition discourses and #MeToo movements, which historically have omitted their voices, and widening youth participation around Asian solidarities and racial struggles. Asian organizers' intentional use of the Internet to collectively mobilize for women of color has motivated the increased participation and interest of younger Asian activists and allies to join a new line of Asian political argument, one that also centers Asian women's experiences in discussions around

racialized incarceration, criminalization of labor, and gendered freedoms. While there are clear tensions within the Asian community on solidarities with other racialized struggles like BLM, Asian women used social media sites like Twitter or Facebook, and organizing sites like Linktree, to visibly reveal their progressive stance and activism.

This greater attention to Asian women's activism in the online sphere is critical for many reasons. One, it directly challenges the model minority myth that create a false depiction of the Asian community as a meek and non-confrontational monolith group that has willingly assimilated into society through hard work and strong family values. Two, while there have been clear divisions around racial solidarities within the Asian community, it reveals the progressive power and leadership of Asian women, who have often been characterized and fetishized by white-moderated mass media and popular culture as submissive and obedient beings. Thirdly, it demonstrates how Asian women have subverted a politically charged and white dominated space like the Internet, to contest their invisibility, and to challenge both the whiteness of traditional feminist organizing in the Global North and the patriarchy within the Asian community and beyond to drive a new line of Asian radical politics.

The use of online space during the pandemic has enabled Asian women to publicly claim ownership over their contributions to anti-racism movements by developing a narrative in discussions around prison abolition that underscores how Asian women's labor is criminalized, and how their experience of sexual violence, in response to an often white-led #MeToo movement, is a direct consequence of racial fetishization and hypersexualization. The use of online petitions, virtual vigils, toolkits, and collaborative podcasts with Asian women and other women of color, have produced new narratives that challenge a tendency in white feminist movements in the Global North to silence racialized women in organizational leadership. Asian women used online mediums to not only denounce anti-Asian violence, but also to advance an agenda to dismantle the whiteness in existing feminist movements and contest projected tropes of Asian women's docility. While scholars have posited credible arguments on the dangers of the Internet, its importance for Asian women activists during COVID-19 has been emphatic. Asian women used social media to call attention to the widespread anti-Asian violence that they face, undergirded by an intimate relationship between misogyny and white supremacy. Interrogating online spaces offers greater understanding not only of *what* is being said, but *who* is leading these discussions. This is of fundamental concern in geographical scholarship, as studying online narratives can reveal the hidden leadership of social justice and activist movements and avoid the omission of critical voices who express their resistance in vocal and non-vocal ways online.

### **Celebrating Asian Resistance**

I write this piece to spark a dialogue with critical geographers and anti-racist scholars and to call upon them to acknowledge the multiple contributions and leadership of the Asian community, particularly Asian women, in anti-racism movements. While acknowledging the flaws of the Internet, scholars should continue to examine online spaces as critical areas of scholarly inquiry that have provided underappreciated voices with a platform to express their resistance. Scholars of digital activism and AsianCrit should think about how recent responses to rising Asian hate crimes, which predominantly affect older Asian people and women, have been led by Asian women in digital spaces. Particularly in times of COVID where mobility is constrained, Asian women used the opportunity to reach out to other Asian feminist collectives and women of color to establish and center new Asian narratives online around racial issues that are currently gaining traction, such as prison abolition and racialized mental health. Furthermore, the scholarly community needs to closely examine the multiple forms of visible and non-visible, overt and covert, written and verbal forms of creative resistance that have been historically and fundamentally apart of Asian cultural expressions to pursue a just and anti-racist future. Although social media is still relatively new, this piece sheds light on the transitions that the Asian community has undertaken to re-spatialize their activism from physical organizing to online spaces.

Centering the actions and leadership of anti-racist resistance led and sustained by Asian women can avoid the erasure of Asian-led anti-racist action and properly acknowledge their contributions and relevance in racial justice movements. Finally, examining these narratives produced by Asian women not only offers insights in their short-term mission to denounce acts of racial violence, but also long-term priorities to dismantle all systems of racial and gendered oppression inside and outside the Asian community. As activists and scholars, it is imperative to broaden our focus to celebrating all communities and forms of leadership in the anti-racist movement. This intervention encourages us to acknowledge how Asian women have been instrumental in re-spatializing racial oppression and challenging normative gender and racist tropes in society during the pandemic.

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