



Asian American Voices from the Pandemic, Part Two

The Unmargin Collective is creating a space for Asian Americans to share their stories and perspectives during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This is the second collection of voices in an ongoing series. These short essays and op-eds were edited by various members of the Collective.

Racism was never about being logical

They loved us when we made them money. They hated us when we "took their jobs".

They mocked us for our food. Then they turn around and love our food without seeing the people behind it.

Now they understand COVID19 is highly contagious and they should practice social distancing...but they'll harass and attack an Asian person who they believe is carrying COVID19.

Racism was never about being logical.

-**Kai Hsu** is a writer based in Minneapolis who's love of boba and tea is only slowed by his sensitivity to caffeine.

Working the Night Shift

I stock yogurt thinking where I'll be in May after finishing my MFA, organize the milk considering when it'll be safe to travel and see family in Boise and Portland, pull produce pallets around 3am to the refrigerator planning ways I can provide emotional support to those close to me. Since the pandemic began, I've been working a second job as a 3rd shift night stocker at a grocery store from 10pm to 7am, 45 hours a week, while I finish up my master's degree and continue working my first job as the Asian American Affairs Graduate Assistant for Minnesota State University, Mankato. I became an essential worker to strengthen my emergency fund with the uncertainty of the coming months.

I've always seemed too husky to people to be Southeast Asian and people never know what Laos is. At every job, I deal with questions like "What tribe do you belong to?" or "What country are you from?" When I arrive at the grocery store, the last shopper's push their overloaded carts out around 9:50pm. In the bright store guided with markers for 6ft distancing, I get my temperature check and answer questions about my current health or if I traveled out of state before I can clock-in.

Working in the dairy department, it's unthinkable how much cheese, yogurt, milk, butter, eggs, biscuits, juice I must restock to make the shelves look full and still, the grocery trucks may not bring the store enough supplies to get through the day. Stocking the shelves in the early hours without any customers roaming is comforting, in a sense, I know I won't be walked up on by people with covered mouths. I'm concerned

that some people will reach around or over me to grab items. My hands become drier by the hour and vulnerable to cardboard cuts as I wash them consistently through my shift.

One day a week, the grocery store opens an hour early at 6am for elderly shoppers. It shocks me to see how afraid some of them are as they rush the aisles to complete their grocery list. The atmosphere shifts with urgent shoppers inside because they look at me like I'm spreading the virus by stocking shelves with my bare hands and no protective gear covering my mouth. Some costumers avoid eye contact with me and will ask the maintenance person to grab milk in the back for them.

Walking out of the store each morning at 7am, I watch costumers scurry in, grab a cart, wipe down the handle then run into the store. They will bump into the back of each other, their full weight over their toes leaning onto the carts to push through anyone and find items before the shelves empty. The customers outside with masks or bandanas over their mouths, winter or latex gloves hiding their hands leave no prints as they shove forward breaking the 6ft social distancing advisory.

-Sengarone Peter Vetsmany is a Laotian writer and angler in Minnesota.

At the Salons

If a terrible condition exists long enough, you adapt, develop a coping mechanism, numb yourself, and it becomes your normal. For Vietnamese-American nail and hair salon workers, they've done that all their lives carrying the burden of intergenerational trauma and poverty. I'm talking about thousands of years of war and occupation, a century of colonization,

a lifetime of oppression and poverty, forced fleeing from your homeland, living an existence where you get used to feeling left out, unimportant, picking up scraps and getting by when all the rules are made against you. The covid-19 pandemic is just a cherry on top.

My older brother is a self-employed independent contractor at a hair salon, his wife a nail technician at a nail salon. They work 10-12 hours per day, 6 days a week. Some days business is better than others, but on average, including tips, they make \$7-\$11 per hour pre-tax, which means they can make below minimum wage if business is slow. No paid sick leave, no paid vacation, no paid breaks, no healthcare coverage, no life insurance, no retirement contributions, no pension, no inflation-adjustment raises, no merit raises, no unemployment benefits, no workers compensation coverage. Nothing.

Their dream is to save enough money to open their own hair and nail salon someday. One might wonder, if it's not good job, why do they keep doing it? That question assumes that the only thing standing between a shitty circumstance and a better one is personal choice, as privileged people pre-pandemic would insist.

Born in the most intense years of the Vietnam War, my brother grew up fatherless because his father was drafted to fight a war for the first 8 years of his childhood. When the war was over, his father was imprisoned as a prisoner of war for 10 years, which meant my brother grew up fatherless. His mother raised three kids on her own in a war-torn broken economy, which meant he didn't have an opportunity to pursue a college education. He did whatever job he could get to help his family make ends meet. He came to the U.S. in his late 20s not knowing English, with kids to raise and the responsibility of sending money back home to Vietnam. A salon job made practical sense.

Then covid-19 happened. Him and his wife needed to keep working & risked getting sick until salons were mandated to close. They don't speak English fluently, so I helped them apply for unemployment benefits under the recently passed CARES Act. Me, who has a graduate degree and who works for state government, found the unemployment application process extremely convoluted and difficult to understand. How could someone not fluent in English navigate that confusion to access their benefit?!

The system is designed with the assumption that cash-strapped, unemployed workers are lazy. It creates obstacles through which applicants must jump or else get punished, from applying the same week they're unemployed, to indicating a desire to work within 3 days by navigating an overcomplicated website to build a resume and apply for jobs, to keeping a detailed job search journal and reporting its content, to asking for unemployment payments every week or else lose it for that week. As I walked my brother and his wife through the mandatory steps, he asked questions about a system designed against people like him, "What is a resume?"

It has been more than a month since they're out of work and still they are nowhere close to getting unemployment benefits. Under this pandemic condition, an overburdened system requires an applicant to apply for regular unemployment first, wait to get rejected, then apply for pandemic unemployment by calling numbers that are constantly busy, beeping and hanging up on them. Poor people who work hard and do everything according to the rules still can't pay their bills on time while corporations are getting \$500 billion bailout and their multi-millionaire and billionaire executives are still getting paid very well.

My brother and sister in law's situation is not unique. Behind every salon worker is a strong warrior who have won more battles than they can count. Covid-19 pandemic is just another battle. Scarcity and rules that

shut them out or not designed for them have existed so long that they normalize this trauma. "If unemployment benefit is too much of a hassle, never mind," he said with an exhausted resignation of a lifelong warrior. His alternatives are to go without some essentials, to borrow money at a cutthroat interest rate meant for those who don't have a credit history, to take from his savings and thus moving further away from his dream of owning a salon, and to go back to work as soon as possible regardless of covid-19 contagion, because he expects the system to fail him as it always has.

-Angelina Nguyen is a Minneapolis-based Vietnamese photographer and blogger at thefoblog.com (<http://thefoblog.com/>).

