

The Guardian

Being Asian-American in the time of Covid-19

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Anti-Asian hate crimes are on the rise. It's a scary time - but we must fight for diversity

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Chinese virus”, and on another, I’ll read the Chinese American writer Jiayang Fan report hearing a man call her a “Chinese bitch” while she was taking out the trash. At some point between the two, I stop thinking my sister was imagining dirty looks, and I think twice about whether or not I should take walks with earbuds in. “I wasn’t offended,” writes Fan. “I was afraid.”

An instinct towards fear before offense betrays a kind of racial pragmatism that I’m familiar with. I am not used to asserting pride in my race. I’m more likely to lay aside my ego and try to avoid conflict out of self-preservation. To ignore racism means to think like a white person, and if you think like a white person you might be able to live as one - so goes the myth of the model minority, which my mother subscribed to, when taking me as a child to the LA Philharmonic or the Huntington Library so that I could be schooled in western art.

When I see a petition circulating to ban wet markets, however, I can’t help but take it as a personal accusation. As if to say: no matter how high you rise in the world, this is still the savagery you come from. While I was born in America, the wet markets were part of my mother’s daily life growing up in the slums of Hong Kong. I only visited the Hong Kong wet markets once, in 2013, and remember live chickens in cages, about to be beheaded. Whole pigs dangled from hooks in market stall roofs, strung with light bulbs. The briny smell of fish stacked like bricks, and concrete floors dark with watered blood repulsed and thrilled me. Vendors shouted at me in Cantonese, a language I can’t speak, so instead I trailed after my uncle as I felt cocooned by sweaty bodies. Here, the agony between life and death was made palpable with a ravenous urgency I found masculine and barbaric. But this is where I come from. No matter where I end up.

I am not for or against banning wet markets, but it is possible to feel proud of a culture you don’t entirely approve of. For most of my life, I have been ambivalent about feeling proud of the coincidence of identities my family assigned me at birth. Though the pride I’m called to now isn’t about self-esteem located in some syrupy interior, but a moral act, for my sake as well as others. As the French sociologist Didier Eribon writes, “pride” - in his case, pride in being gay - “is political through and through because it defies the deepest workings of normality and of normativity.” Our neoliberal culture likes to promote certain notions of “normality” and with it the idea that populations - ethnicities, social classes, sexual minorities - automatically self-purify towards a greater good. To combat that lie requires the diversity that enlists pride in oneself and the other.

When, as early as late January, Rome’s Saint Cecilia Conservatory suspended “oriental” students

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