Many Years After: A Letter On Anti-Asian Violence

Emily Hu

Dear Future Asian Generation,

It seems like you can’t avoid it. In every social media outlet, every news article, every radio broadcast, we are faced with the reality of a spike of brutal attacks on Asians. Originally, politicians were hesitant to talk about the attacks. However, after all of the outcry in the media, people have become more aware of the harassment and physical abuse Asians face, not only in America, but also in countries around the world. It seems as if everyday brings new videos of elderly Asians being shoved to the ground, defenseless citizens being robbed and kicked like they are worthless, or even worse. Whenever I watch these clips, I feel millions of bottled up emotions swirling in my head and heart. This or that person could have been one of my grandparents, my mother, or anyone in my family, had they been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic shut the world down, Asian Americans have been blamed for it. Former President Trump only fueled the flames of anti-Asian hate with his use of the term “China Virus,” spurring people to express racist anger through both physical and verbal abuse. From March 2020 to March 2021, The Stop Asian American Pacific Islander Hate organization tracked over 6,600 attacks targeting Asian Americans. These are only the ones that have been tracked; there are thousands and thousands of incidents that go unnoticed and unsaid, owing to the embarrassment those who wish to report might feel. After all, many of the targeted victims have been senior citizens: those who are vulnerable, who cannot fight back, and who might not even speak English. Prior to the pandemic, I used to see members of the elderly Asian community walking around the park for exercise, going to meet up with their friends to catch breakfast at a dim sum restaurant, or simply strolling around the block. I rarely see that these days. They are not afraid of getting COVID-19; they are afraid of being attacked.

Meanwhile, young Asian Americans like me are also at risk. Being a petite, 5’1” Chinese girl living primarily on her own, I have been hugely concerned about safety. I see the way some people look at me when I'm in public. It’s almost as if they cannot wait to say something rude and racist to my face and–my worst nightmare–physically try to assault me. My family worries about me every single day, especially given what is going on. Consequently, they try to make sure my boyfriend is with me at all times if I leave the house. In fact, I refuse to leave the house if my boyfriend is not with me. He is not Chinese, but he is South Asian and Black; racism means that this tends to discourage people from harassing me. At the same time, everyone sees him as Latinx; racism means I still feel the negativity people have towards us when we are together. Racism in America, I’ve experienced first hand, is rarely ever just directed against a single group.

I have noticed that, like my boyfriend, more people from every ethnicity have become aware of the horrendous attacks in the Asian community, and are starting to stand up against this insanity alongside us. It makes me happy to see that so many Americans have vocalized their solidarity with us. Still, it's disheartening that this happened to begin with, and we Asians must do more to protect ourselves, especially those in our community who cannot defend themselves. Ironically, the attacks on our elders have made us revisit the way that those elders might have brought us up. In many households, Asian Americans have been raised to keep quiet and stay out of trouble. We rarely ever want to be seen as disruptive or not accepted amongst society. Now, however, we must refuse to stay silent.

As vaccines have been rolling out and offices are starting to open again, many Asian Americans still fear going back to the office, or to any environment that can leave them vulnerable to hate crimes. A recent *New York TImes* article titled “For Asian Americans Wary of Attacks, Reopening Is Not An Option” explains the hardships that we continue to go through in our own country. It follows a Chinese American family in Philadelphia that resorted to their own mode of exercise, pacing back and forth in the building's parking lot. They don’t know what to expect from the people outside and do not want to be the next victim plastered all over social media of being yet another victim of an unprecedented attack.

The article also explains the consequences of the fact that, statistically, a majority of Asian Americans continue to remain in fear of being racially profiled, harassed, and/or attacked in public places or places with big crowds. Although COVID-19 rates have significantly dropped, attacks against Asian Americans are still rising. Asian citizens, like myself, are still afraid of simply riding public transportation such as trains or buses. We also are scared of visiting places that we once loved or at which we were regulars. Some of us refuse to even eat at restaurants during this current situation because we live in so much fear. If remote working ends, and we are all forced to return back to the office, what will be done to stop the ruthless attacks on civilians trying to live everyday life, just like everyone else?

My memories of life before this era seem almost like a fantasy. I can no longer imagine walking outside, taking the train, or minding my own business without people simply staring at me. I miss simple daily pleasures, like being able to run errands on my own, go to the laundromat by myself, or similar tasks that make me feel independent. I think about my family every single day as they go to work or do basic everyday routines, hoping that they are okay. Like many others my age, I now fear for my family more than I do for myself. When I am in public, especially on the train, I notice that Asian people stay together, even if they are strangers. They simply feel safer that way. I find this so sad. No one should have to feel this way, or have to go to work or run errands fearful that someone will target them just for their identity. Our new reality is to live in fear, to always watch our backs, even if we are going on a simple stroll or just going grocery shopping.

In spite of it all, I continue to hope. I hope the fear changes soon. I hope that, as a society, we can collectively agree that the attacks on Asians throughout the world are getting so out of hand that we are scared to even live our daily lives. I hope that those committing these atrocities can learn to respect our elders. I hope they realize that, if the same thing happened to their grandparents, they would feel the same kind of anger that boils inside of us when we see it happening to members of our community.

Above all, I hope that our collective treatment of each other will change and shift for the better. After all, I remember when I first saw the video of George Floyd’s murder and heard countless similar stories of deaths within the Black community. I felt so angry that I didn’t know how to express my emotions, though. Like many people, I initially felt like I had no voice. With the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, however, I never saw so many people stand up, come together, and fight for what is right. Similarly, I hope that we can act as a group to fight anti-Asian racism, and that we all can become aware of the racial injustice and violence happening around the world. When you’re reading this, many years after 2021 has passed, I hope things have indeed changed.

Sincerely,

Emily Hu

Reference

Healy, J. For Asian Americans Wary of Attacks, Reopening Is Not an Option. *The New York Times* (2021). Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/08/us/asian-american-attacks.html?searchResultPosition=2. (Accessed: 13th June 2021)