

ANTI-ASIAN RACISM

David Haekwon Kim and Ronald R. Sundstrom

ABSTRACT Over the last twenty-five years, philosophers have offered increasingly more sophisticated accounts of the nature and wrongness of racism. But very little in this literature discusses what is distinctive to anti-Asian racism. This gap exists partly because philosophy, like much of U.S. culture, has been influenced by civic narratives that center anti-black racism in ways that leave vague anti-Asian racism. We discuss this conceptual gap and its effects on understanding anti-Asian racism. In response to this problem, we offer an account of anti-Asian racism not beholden to the black-white binary. In our view, xenophobia, as a form of civic ostracism, plays a distinctive role in anti-Asian racism and admits of a complexity that is worth philosophical study. We also begin an exploration of a correlated phenomenon, namely xenophilia. It has a peculiar, often pernicious, presence in anti-Asian racism and sexism, but it is morally more complex than xenophobia.

KEYWORDS racism, anti-Asian racism, xenophobia, xenophilia, Asians, black-white binary

I. INTRODUCTION

Anti-Asian racism has long been a fixture of national life in the U.S. and has become viciously resurgent of late. What is its basic anatomy? We believe most sense something unusual about this form of subordination.¹ Over the last twenty-five years, philosophers have offered increasingly more sophisticated accounts of the nature and wrongness of racism. But very little in this literature discusses what is distinctive to anti-Asian racism. This gap exists partly because philosophy, like much of U.S. culture, has been influenced by civic narratives that center anti-black racism in ways that leave vague anti-Asian racism. In addition, the lacuna can be explained partially by the discipline's tendency toward ever wider abstraction, especially macro-level analyses, which can leave aside interesting

meso-level studies, precisely like the distinctiveness of anti-Asian racism (Alcoff 2011). In noting this gap, we stress the need for serious and ongoing opposition to anti-black and other forms of racism. This is non-negotiable. But racism in the U.S. has a hydra-like complexity that theoretical accounts of U.S. racism will need to track properly, and the critique of anti-black racism is compatible with robust critiques of other forms of racism. Importantly, the need to address the gap has acquired new urgency with the spike in anti-Asian racism, sometimes deadly, during this Covid moment.²

This essay addresses that conceptual gap and is a meso-level project about anti-Asian racism not beholden to the black-white binary. In section two, we discuss the conceptual problem of anti-Asian racism in the

American context. In section three, we discuss xenophobia as a form of civic ostracism and its special role in anti-Asian racism. In doing so, we offer a sympathetic critique of the classic work of Claire Jean Kim on civic ostracism and what she calls “racial triangulation.” We also begin an exploration of a correlated phenomenon, namely xenophilia. It has a peculiar, often pernicious, presence in anti-Asian racism and sexism—e.g., “yellow fever”—but it is morally more complex than xenophobia.

2. THE PROBLEM OF ANTI-ASIAN RACISM

The peoples with ancestral origins in Asia and the Pacific Islands have been subjects in accounts of human “races” since the concept’s inception in the seventeenth century to its evolution into the nascent scientific idea in the work of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach. In Blumenbach’s 1775, *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*, he labeled “Mongolian” and “Malay” as two of his five principal varieties of humankind, along with, of course, Caucasian, Ethiopian, and American (Bernasconi and Lott 2000, pp. 27–37). He brought together two groups that, in the U.S. and other social conceptions of race, are collected under the single category of “Asian and Pacific Islander.” From early on, each race got caught up in the racist projects of categorizing and rankings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Those projects maintain that there is a distinct division between the races; that each group possesses a heritable set of physical traits that correspond to a set of specific moral, cognitive, and cultural characteristics; and that the groups can be thus physically, morally, and developmentally ranked.

As objects of racism, the way racial stigma is affixed to Asians follows the typical patterns: racist attitudes (conscious or not), beliefs, and emotions are applied to them. The classic examples of such attitudes blend racist, xenophobic and xenophilic elements.

These include the idea that Asian people form an amorphous, threatening, and foreign “yellow” or “brown” mass and that Asians in America as individuals are fundamentally exotic and inscrutable—even to the point where their presumed otherness (including their cultural products) becomes erotically fetishized. Therefore, because of how racism targets and essentializes them, we will, from here on, refer to this branch of racist and racist application as “anti-Asian racism.”

Anti-Asian attitudes can motivate individual actions, infect institutions and social structures, and form the content of racist ideology (Garcia 1996; Blum 2007; Shelby 2014; Hardimon 2019). For example, some Asians are discriminated against in their applications to elite colleges and universities because admission officers think they lack “personality”—a type of *content*, a particular kind of American legibility.³ Or, because they hail from the U.S. foreign territories, they may suffer discriminatory effects when seeking federal benefits because of the racially discriminative results of the insular cases that have roots in America’s history of colonialism (Burnett and Marshall 2001; Kim 2004).⁴ Hence, following the typical two-part division in contemporary philosophical accounts of racism between *personal* and *structural* accounts, Asians can be the targets of racist attitudes and actions and be subjected to institutional or structural racism. Likewise, suppose racist attitudes are divided from racial ills, as Laurence Blum (2007) argues. In that case, there are distinct lines, with specific content and expressions, of racial insensitivity, ignorance, and discrimination regarding Asians. Therefore, most accounts of the meaning of racism, its moral wrongs, and resulting harms are fully applicable, with some adjustments for the intersection of xenophobia, to the case of racism against Asians.

This is unremarkable, but it bears repeating. And the reason is that racism in the

United States is always overlaid by the larger national narrative of American racial politics, a story dominated by the black-white binary (Sundstrom 2008; Alcoff 2006). It is a binary that leaves other racialized groups, except whites, blacks, and sometimes Native Americans, as bit players, on the sidelines and viewers—as incidental participants—in the essential American racist drama. Here is how Cathy Park Hong described the view from the sidelines:

In the popular imagination, Asian Americans inhabit a vague purgatorial status: not white enough nor black enough; distrusted by African Americans, ignored by whites, unless we're being used by whites to keep the black man down. We are the carpenter ants of the service industry, the apparatchiks of the corporate world. We are math-crunching middle managers who keep the corporate wheels greased but who never get promoted since we don't have the right "face" for leadership. *We have a content problem.* (Hong 2020, 9; our emphasis).

One way to understand this "content problem" is that Asians are taken to be characterless. "Asians lack presence," Hong writes, imagining how non-Asians regard Asians. She adds, "Asians take up apologetic space. We don't even have enough presence to be considered real minorities. We're not racial enough to be token. We're so post-racial we're silicon (2020, 7)."⁵ Silicon (a neutral colored mineral, or, as in the caulk made of it, blank) in the American context offers an interpretation: *racism that involves anyone who is not black or white is a hermeneutical problem for the viewed and the viewer.* Or a puzzle. And the way that the puzzle is decrypted is using the dominant American historical keys. Thus, we get the acronym "BIPOC" (short for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) that encodes the accepted racist hierarchy, with Asians, along with non-black Hispanics and Latinos folded into the vaguely brown-yellow-off-white "POC," or the concept of "model minority" which was flipped into an

accusation of "white adjacency" sometime around 2018.

2.1 *The Big Picture in Black and White*

The influence of the black-white binary in narratives about race and racism runs throughout American history, and it touches on current influential accounts. For example, consider sociologist Joe Feagin's analysis of systemic racism and the role the binary plays within it (Feagin 2006). In reaction to competing accounts of racial formation that cast racism as an essentializing racial project (Omi and Winant 1994), Feagin claims they miss "the big picture." And what is that? According to Feagin, the big picture is "the reality of this whole society being founded on, and firmly grounded in, oppression targeting African Americans (and other Americans of color) now for several centuries. Given that deep underlying reality of this society, all racial-ethnic relationships and events, past and present, must be placed within that racial oppression context in order to be well understood" (Feagin 2006, p. 7). With POC, and even the "I," stuffed into a parenthetical relation to America's primary racial drama, Feagin goes on to assert that,

Because of its power and centrality in this still racially hierarchical society, white-on-black oppression has shaped considerably all other types of racial oppression that whites later developed within this still white-controlled society. To make sense out of the experiences of all non-European Americans, we must constantly accent the role of whites, especially elite whites, as the originators, enforcers, and remodelers of systemic racism in the United States. (Feagin 2006, p. 7; our emphasis)

Feagin's big picture is an exemplar of black-white binary thinking. To unpack its assumptions, consider that there is a variety of black-white binaries, the most ambitious of which is the notion that "black" and "white" reference *prescriptive* patterns of racial organization (Sundstrom 2008, pp. 66–75).

If we accept Feagin's view, then we *must* understand racial life in America through the lens of black and white racial dynamics, and we can effectively describe it using black and white terms. This form of racial binary goes too far. The issue is not the claim that anti-Black racism must be central to understanding white supremacy; the problem is the exclusivity of this centralization in contrast to an historically-informed pluralization of centralized content. Critiquing the conceptual structure and claims of the black-white binary does not dismiss or diminish anti-black racism and the deep and enduring injustices that it has caused, contributed to, or perpetuated.

2.2 Content Problem

Retaining the black-white binary sets up and helps to perpetuate the Asian *content problem*, and it spills over and onto attempts to understand racism outside of the binary. Thus, anti-Asian racism becomes a problem that to be decoded requires keys from a historiographical and sociological framework that assumes the exclusive centrality of the black-white binary.

It shapes our society's historical, sociological, economic, and political explanations. Consequently, it elides and obscures the particularity of racism that targets non-black racialized groups. This includes Native Americans, Jews, Hispanics and Latinos, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and people of Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) ancestry.⁶ Differences from the black-white experience, for example, involving xenophobia, can only be understood and interpreted in light of white inclusion and black exclusion, which leads to only recognizing those aspects of racism that match the frame in the first place. Therefore, the problem is *not* that anti-Asian racism cannot be explained as a form of racism by using current personal, structural, or ideological accounts of racism; the problem *is* how the black-white binary frames those

accounts and distorts their interpretations and applications.

Let us consider a controversial and relatively recent incident from the San Francisco Bay area as an example. Allison Collins, as part of her ultimately failed progressive plans for the SF School Board, decided to criticize Asian American parents for not stepping up and being anti-racist in the way she and some of her progressive colleagues thought was required of them. She chose to tweet out several comments about what she judged was their lack of anti-racist commitment. Among the gems of wisdom she shared, she wrote of Asian American parents, "Do they think they won't be deported? Profiled? Beaten? Being a house n****r is still being a n****r. You're still considered 'the help.'" And, "Many Asian Americans believe they benefit from the 'model minority' BS. In fact many Asian American teachers, students and parents actively promote these myths. They use white supremacist thinking to assimilate and 'get ahead.'"⁷

The local cross-cutting interests at play in this case are complicated, and plenty of Asian Americans do endorse the "'model minority' BS" (E. Lee 2020). Nonetheless, Collins assumed that the behaviors, attitudes, and positions of Asian individuals and families are gauged in relation to the black-white binary. Essentially, she accused Asian parents in her school district of participating in, perpetuating, and profiting from an anti-black racist ideology. According to the reductive and absolutist logic of the binary, you are either friend or enemy—anti-racist and apart from whiteness, or you are white adjacent and racist. The specificity of Asian American experiences and the conditions and circumstances of those experiences are, well, "white-washed" away, but, converse to the usual meaning of that phrase, instead of hiding the fault, it is coated on through the identification of Asians with whiteness.

2.3 *Who Are You Calling White Adjacent?*

Perhaps what is meant by the ascription of white adjacency is a mere statistical description, such as how some Asian Americans have rates of wealth as high or higher than whites in contrast to blacks and Latinos, or that Asians intermarry with whites at higher rates than blacks.⁸ White adjacency in this narrow sense is purely descriptive rather than an act of ideological or value ascription or moral condemnation that Asians are, as a group, complicit in anti-black white supremacist racism. Another interpretation connotes the perception of Asians by non-Asians as “Other White People,”⁹ who gained white adjacency through their acculturation to mainstream American social and economic life. Except, that is not how Collins employed it or how other political pundits and cultural critics wield it. With something like Feagin’s white racial frame in mind, they mean to accuse Asians of complicity in whiteness, anti-black racism, and capitalism. As an accusation, it is an example of motivated reasoning prompted by two ideas: (1) the black-white binary and (2) the idea of racism as a monocausal source for all racially-inflected disparities and divisions. Feagin’s view explicitly models both ideas. In its simplest form, the latter claims that all disparities, if characterized by race and adverse in their effects, are linked in a tight causal and self-reinforcing chain to some significant past racist injustice. The former holds that within that dynamic, groups function as either white or black adjacent. It is a theory and accusation that falls flat, even for those willing to accept its background claims about racial injustices or the harms of capitalism.¹⁰

We are not claiming Collins’ statement is racist. However, for those opposed to politically progressive rhetoric about systemic racism, accusing the likes of Collins of being racist will be a compelling counter-accusation, but we do not think it is terribly elucidating. In fact, it demonstrates how

charges of racism can quickly unspool to the point of ridiculousness. It is an example of why we should narrow the scope of the meaning of racism. On that matter, we accept a *discursive deflationary* account of racism that refines the idea and conserves its function as a moral opprobrium (Garcia 1996; Blum 2007, but see Hardimon 2019).¹¹

It is not that the volitional or doxastic accounts are especially vulnerable to the problems of conceptual inflation and ideological capture (as illustrated by “white adjacency” framing) that come with “wider-scope” definitions of racism. They are vulnerable to them, but these issues are not inherent to those accounts. Asians can be falsely described as having racist beliefs, accused of possessing race-based antipathy, or a race-based ill-will toward some other racialized group. Likewise, Asian individuals can express or have such racist attributes; some certainly do, and such racist attitudes towards blacks, Latinos, or whites circulate among Asian American communities. If you do not believe us, go ask an Asian friend.¹² However, they do not have these attitudes *because they are not interested* in some school district board members’ political projects. The vulnerability to this “white adjacency” framing might be more of a problem for conceptions of racism as an ideology because those accounts may be tied to particular political worldviews and, thus, are more welcoming to ideas that work well within their critical frames. What racism as an ideology consists in, and what its implications might be, are informed by the content of those ideologies. For example, a classically Marxist account of the lives and aspirations of the managerial class will tend to reductively interpret them as complicit in the domination of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. Therefore, the aspirations and achievements of any individuals and groups in a white supremacist society—marked by standards of merit set by the white racial frame and operating in systems dominated

by racial capitalism—must be complicit in racism and ultimately in anti-black racism. Again, to be clear, we are not claiming that Asians do not participate in structural racism, but whether they do or do not depends on the provision of empirical evidence and sound explanations rather than guilt by association or flights of theoretical fancy.

All that being said, Feagin is correct in his assertion of the independent social experience of anti-black racism and is, perhaps, correct about its irreducibility. Likewise, he is right to point out that white and black function as poles, principal reference points, in American racial dynamics. But where he sees a bipolar relation and one linear trajectory (with the other American racial and ethnic identifications plotted on that line) and with all of its monocausal implications for the way race functions in the United States, the social reality is that there are multiple poles—like a pinwheel (Sundstrom 2008, pp. 66–67)—with experiences plotted between each them. And just as anti-black racism does not reduce to class discrimination or generic xenophobia, anti-Asian racism does not reduce to anti-black racism. They are distinct, and to understand the particular expressions and harms of racism experienced by different racially-ascribed groups in the United States (and other national social contexts), that distinctiveness should be respected. The rhetoric of “white adjacency” ignores that; it elides the social and cultural dynamics, including intragroup differences, inside of Asian communities and accuses them of racism for their efforts to survive and flourish in American society.¹³ In the final analysis, it is a performative and insulting ad hominem attack. What is more, in addition to failing descriptively, it is not likely to achieve its political goals because it is a sure way to alienate Asian Americans and others who see it as a species of *ressentiment*.

So if anti-Asian oppression has distinctive elements, then without the obscurations of

the black-white binary, how should we conceptualize these?

3 XENOPHOBIA AND XENOPHILIA

We begin with a basic and uncontroversial historical pattern: In the U.S., people of Asian descent have been depicted as culturally foreign, deviant, or inferior in ways that have jeopardized their social and legal standing in the civic or national community. This perception involves an ascription of difference or alienness that is often negative, sometimes neutral, and sometimes imbued with a positive exoticizing valence. In many cases, this perception also attributes second-order properties having to do with limits on the personality or communication abilities, like unassimilability or inscrutability. This form of regard can be expressed in a variety of ways. One of the most extreme is the formation of policies or other forms of governmental action that deny rightful substantive inclusion in the body politic. Legal blockades of immigration, like the 1875 Page Act and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, and legal barriers to citizenship, like *Ozawa-vs-the U.S.* (1927) and *Thind-vs-the U.S.* (1928), constituted epic acts of state in the social engineering of borders, civic status, and American identity itself. But perhaps the most common expression is in the apparently innocuous notion that the Asian person does not naturally belong to the nation, as when such a person is asked, “But where do you *really* come from?” or only belongs on the condition that certain assimilation thresholds have been crossed or sufficient patriotic gratitude is displayed. These remarks about social facts or processes—normative signification being another matter—seem to be incontrovertible. So the real issue concerns how to characterize this phenomenon. We contend that this type of exclusion is paradigmatically xenophobia and that the intersection of xenophobia, racism, and sexism is central to understanding what is distinctive to anti-Asian oppression.

3.1 *Xenophobia*

We conceptualize xenophobia as civic exclusion or ostracism, a form of unjust group subordination that is normatively independent of racism but easily and powerfully enmeshed with it. Though we conform to common parlance and use the word “xenophobia,” our conception of the phenomenon does not follow its etymology. The original meaning of the word is too narrow in a couple of ways. In our view, xenophobia includes but is not merely about fear of the foreigner, and it includes but is not restricted to individualized and purely psychologized forms of wrongful regard. Xenophobia can configure nationalistic “intuitions” about who belongs, resentment of foreigners taking jobs, and the like, without fear of the other’s foreignness per se. And it can take on group-calibrated forms, as when federal immigration or naturalization policies exclude whole groups of people, quintessentially like Asian peoples, citing their alienness and unassimilability.

Again, our concern ultimately is with group subordination, and we have discussed this elsewhere (Kim and Sundstrom 2014). Briefly, in the modern polity, effective agency is facilitated and meaningful identity affirmed by community-based entitlements, confidence about these entitlements, and social competencies regarding them. Subjects require not only a proper set of legal entitlements, like civil rights, and extra-legal entitlements, like social respect, but also a modicum of confidence in effectively possessing these in virtue of mainstream denizens of a polity regularly, if imperfectly, condoning and complying with the granting of these entitlements. In addition, processes by which people claim, enact, or insist upon these entitlements involve social competencies by virtue of which they can feel confident about eliciting appropriate regard from other denizens. These competencies can range from English language use to certain enculturated types of eye contact and scripted ways of displaying anger, distress,

or confidence itself. In fact, often scripts themselves—something so very basic—are needed. Returning to a point raised in section two, U.S. civic narratives of racism, typically configured by a black-white binary, and civic narratives of anti-racism, typically devoid of Asian American political agency, can create a conceptual, and perhaps also affective, void in which Asian American insistence on civil rights or basic social respect can be truly heard only if it arises in terms that are not centrally of Asian American experiences. This alienation *in civic anti-racism itself* is a deep and subtle indication of civic ostracism. Earlier, we critically discussed a progressive councilperson and a well-known progressive scholar. So even *progressive* anti-racism can get caught in the snares of civic ostracism.

The denormalization of subjects in xenophobia potentially inhibits the relevant forms of civic confidence and competencies and thus diminishes the agency and identities of the relevant people. Crucially, this is not simply about everyday insults, complex oversights, or abstract cultural scripts and narratives. Xenophobic denormalization can lead not only to mainstream people denying the allocation of fundamental rights to those deemed to be alien or foreign but to civic agencies or the government itself doing so. A critical history of the U.S. reveals that the line between alien and citizen is thin and dynamic, and as Arendt has taught us, human rights are mediated through citizenship (Cole 2003; Sheth 2009). So xenophobia, combined or not with other forces, does not simply diminish citizenship but jeopardizes that fundamental status itself. The internment of Japanese Americans during WWII is a powerful paradigm of the Arendtian insight and of profound xenophobic injustice. It was clearly more than this since racism was front and center as well, but there is no denying a vicious projection of alienness, surely amplified by racism, and a resulting legal de-naturalization of, and thus radical

diminishment of basic rights for, Japanese American citizens. With the anxiety in the current U.S. outlook on the Middle East and parts of East Asia, the lessons of the Japanese American internment continue to resonate.

Xenophobia, as broadly conceived civic exclusion, can intersect with racism to form a potent form of subordination. But it can act autonomously, and its normative logic is not identical to racism. A case in point is the surge of intra-black, intra-African xenophobia in South Africa in the last couple of decades. The xenophobia there intersects deeply with class, and it is surely linked to a legacy of colonial deprivation. Some black South Africans resent black migrant laborers from neighboring countries for the labor threat they are deemed to pose, which has elicited hostile projections of foreignness and of not belonging. In the face of such scorn and exclusion, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo reports: “I was selling clothes on the street when nine South Africans carrying sjamboks and sticks came. They were beating people, shouting ‘You foreigners, go home! We don’t need you here! You are taking our jobs and money!’ I started to run away, but I was beaten, and my two bags of clothes were taken.”¹⁴ In the U.S., Americans have generally sided with Ukraine in the midst of the Russian invasion. One of the distinctive side effects is the proliferation of Russian eateries and businesses publicly affiliating with Ukraine, often posting the Ukrainian flag on their storefronts. There is foresight here. These public declarations in blue and yellow preempt or ward off a xenophobic backlash by white non-Russian Americans against white Russian Americans. In contrast to this intra-white xenophobia, when South Asian and MENA peoples waved American flags in their storefronts after 9/11, they defended against a vicious combination of xenophobia, Islamophobia, and racism.

A pointed example of xenophobia can be found in the comments of Amy Wax, a law

professor at the University of Pennsylvania. The trouble with Professor Wax began with an editorial essay wherein she and her coauthor lamented the weakening of bourgeois values in the U.S.¹⁵ She blamed the influx of foreigners from Africa, Latin America, and Asia.¹⁶ Asians, especially elites, drew her ire as exemplifying the ill-fit of such immigrants to the American political and cultural milieu. Her fears about these elites are not that they demonstrate what she calls “underclass behavior” but that they threaten the nation’s traditions: “Does the spirit of liberty beat in their breast?”¹⁷

Here, again, is the Asian content problem. What does Wax think is on their unas-similable minds? It is nothing less than their willingness to please authoritarians, and in the American context, these are America’s progressive Democrats. From her blinkered view, she muses that,

We can speculate (and, yes, generalize) about Asians’ desire to please the elite, single-minded focus on self-advancement, conformity and obsequiousness, lack of deep post-Enlightenment conviction, timidity toward centralized authority (however unreasoned), indifference to liberty, lack of thoughtful and audacious individualism, and excessive tolerance for bossy, mindless social engineering . . .¹⁸

This mess of ideas is not simply racist. It is racist insofar as it brazenly essentializes all Asians as worker drones without personality and an authentic concern for freedom and who kowtow to rules and authority—“does the spirit of liberty beat in their breast?” It is racist for its anti-Asian invective and its willful disregard for the individual humanity of Asians that borders on moralistic disgust. Racism, however, is inadequate to capture Wax’s cultural nationalist viewpoint. In spite of her offensive comments about the IQs of African American students she encounters in her legal teaching and about how the country would be better off with less black immigration, she concedes that African Americans are

civic insiders. Asians, on the other hand, in her estimation, are *civic outsiders* and their attitudes inconsistent with the “American Creed.”¹⁹

Now that a general account of xenophobia and its role in anti-Asian racism has been offered, some clarifications and caveats are in order. First, xenophobia is not unique in diminishing the good of civic agency described earlier. But, at this meso-level of consideration, we can see that often what matters is the different group-specific ways in which the good noted is inhibited or eliminated. Straightforward biological racism, sexism, homophobia, and the like can lead to the same oppressive ends as xenophobia, even as they constitute various distinctive oppressive conditions. So the highlighting of xenophobia here is not a claim to some utterly unique form of subordination. Second, Asians are not uniquely diminished by xenophobia or xenophobic racism, as any critical history of Latino (Mendoza 2020) and MENA (Foullas 2022) peoples in the U.S. amply reveals. At this meso-level of theorizing, comparative studies can be illuminating. Importantly, this genre of research would also need to consider the situation of contemporary African immigrants whose complex experience will likely involve some elements that resonate with the aforementioned groups. Native American experience is also relevant to this topic given how some aspects of their interface with mainstream America focus on the alterity of their cultural traditions. Third, we have concentrated simply on what constitutes xenophobia and anti-Asian racism. An important further matter is the deeper psychological and sociological sources—and thus a pluri-causal as opposed to monolithic monocausal structure—that trigger or sustain these features of Asian American oppression—for example, existential anxieties about threats to one’s being-at-home in the nation, white positional advantage preservation (Silva 2015), white supremacist crossover action that racially

configures xenophobia, American nativist crossover action that xenophobically configures racism, and so on. Fourth, our focus has been on domestic subordination, but a fuller study would examine the global reach of American nationalism and white supremacy in the form of imperialism, in contrast to, say, the more land-locked Canadian and Australian forms of xenophobia and racism.

We have discussed the nature of xenophobia, the goods it inhibits or eliminates, its relative autonomy from racism, and related areas of research. A recent classic on this general topic is Clare Jean Kim’s work (1999) on the racial triangulation of Asian Americans. Our emphasis on civic ostracism and references to civic insiders and outsiders is inspired by her work, but it also diverges in some important respects. Kim argues that studies of race cannot simply “go beyond black and white;” they must acknowledge that the racialization of whites, blacks, and Asians has, in fact, been a triadic or triangular *inter-racialization* involving two logics of subordination. The first, which she calls “relative valorization,” is a denigrative process of ranking peoples in terms of classic racist biological racialism, and the second, “civic ostracism,” is a racist exclusionary process in which peoples are evaluated as civic-cultural insiders or foreigners. She persuasively presents a critical history showing that U.S. white supremacy has marked whites as the most superior or valorized, blacks the most inferior, and Asians as lying somewhere in between. Her case also demonstrates that U.S. white nationalism has ranked whites and blacks as clear insiders and Asians as distinctive outsiders. Many take racial valorization, though under different titles, to be the singular general index by which to compare and understand racialization and, thus, subsume civic exclusion or xenophobia under this master variable. But Kim’s account helpfully shows why this is a mistake; her two-process/logic account of the field of racial positions rightly gives

some autonomy to civic exclusion or what we reference as xenophobia.

We affirm the general idea behind Kim's two-logic/process configuration of the field of racial positions, but we contend that her account does not go far enough in separating and clarifying these processes. As we have maintained above, there is nothing in the normative logic of xenophobia-as-civic-ostracism that requires it to be conceptually linked or causally operate with racism. And logic aside, the historical record and current events indicate that xenophobia can proceed without racism. Of course, these two forms of subordination can unite, and powerfully so. On Kim's account, relative valorization and civic ostracism seem to be *dual aspects of an overall racialization* involving an essentializing projection, where the former is more strictly biological and the latter more cultural. Though these two modes of racism are important to ferret out, it is also true that civic ostracism has its own subordinating logic and powers aside from racism. This is what we have called xenophobia. So civic ostracism, as an explanatory category, needs even more autonomy, and what Kim identifies as two modes of racism may originally have been and can certainly morph into the *intersection of two general forms of subordination*. With decades, even centuries, of fusion between xenophobia and racism, anti-Asian racism may become a kind of xenoracism and take on the dual aspects that Kim identifies.²⁰

3.2 Xenophilia

Importantly, a focus on the more aversive dynamic of cultural othering does not fully capture the phenomenon at issue. A crucial feature of anti-Asian oppression includes certain forms of what might be called "xenophilia," which is an ostensibly more positive ascription of cultural difference. In our view, xenophilia is a large and complex genus, but some of its species are morally problematic and have been historically significant features

of anti-Asianism, particularly in its connection to gender.

Earlier, we noted the obvious historical record of U.S. xenophobia and xenoracism against Asian Americans. The cultural othering within these processes has been directed at Asian Americans broadly. For example, no special distinction was made in terms of gender when Japanese Americans were interned or when immigration blockades were legalized against the "barred Asiatic zone" after WWI. But because sexism is a significant form of subordination, and forms of subordination can interlock, the ascriptions of cultural difference often take on a pernicious gendered configuration in the form of a sexual or racial-sexual exoticization of Asian women (Arisaka 2000; Koshy 2004; Espiritu 2007; Sundstrom 2008; Zheng 2016; Kim 2021). Undeniably, the trope of the "oriental woman" or the phenomenon of "yellow fever" is familiar to the U.S. social consciousness or imaginary. Here, women of Asian descent are depicted as submissive, coy, subservient, and eager to please, where much of this is deeply eroticized. Images of geishas, sex workers, and "obedient" housewives come readily to mind, and actual venues configured by such notions abound in the form of dating, sex, massage, mail-order bride, and pornography industries. Although fetishism and exoticization exists in the LGBTQ+ community (Eng and Hom, 1998), the "classic" forms involve heterosexual male desire. The 2021 Atlanta mass murders at two Asian spas were a powerful and disturbing reminder of these realities. The perpetrator explained his rampage as an effort to eliminate the source of his sexual temptations, and the pattern of his actions indicated a xenophilic configuration to his desires.

So, clearly, xenophilia can be unethical by virtue of its links to racial fetishism, exoticization, domination, and violence. But unlike xenophobia (as civic ostracism), there is complexity in the moral dimensions of xenophilia. This is largely due to the apparently positive

regard and sentiment, even if irrational or superficial, in which the cultural ascriptions are couched. Presumably, the non-assaultive “exoticizer” of Asian women—the man who “just loves Asian women”—does not wish to hurt Asian women or spend time with people he deems to be repulsive or beneath him. Rather, he ostensibly *values* the company of Asian women and does not wish to repel them from the borders of his country or from his social networks.²¹ Another complication is that the *appreciation of difference* is linked to, even constitutive of, important virtues, like curiosity and open-mindedness. If only narrow-minded racial bigots could actually appreciate the cultures and political contributions of people of color and renounce their racism! Similarly, religious adherents sometimes remark upon how they are moved by the conversion of others to their faith. Since a general concern of ours is moral accountability (recall the accountability-focused deflationary account of racism), and this involves praise as well as condemnation, virtues as well as vices, xenophilia turns out to be more evaluatively complex than xenophobia.

We suggest that xenophilia be recognized as a large genus that includes both morally benign and problematic species. Thus, xenophilia as a category is not an insidious appreciation that necessarily has xenophobia lurking within; it does not reduce to xenophobia with subterfuge. A fuller account than can be presented here would offer a normative map of this category, clearly identifying why some instances are unethical and some are not. We only offer what we hope is enough to clarify the meso-level distinctiveness of anti-Asianism.

3.3 Conclusion

In the sections above, we identified the “problem” of anti-Asian racism in the American context, determined, as it is, by the black-white binary. Additionally, we indicated the fallout of this framing: a failure to understand the distinctiveness of anti-Asian racism, ideological depictions of Asians, and alienation from antiracist projects. Breaking from the black-white binary, we argued that xenophobia, as a form of civic ostracism, and distorted forms of xenophilia play a crucial role in anti-Asian subordination. The value of this analysis goes beyond the conceptual. When philosophical discussions ignore particular forms of racism, they are ill-suited to meet present challenges. The stakes are going to get higher as the U.S. deals with the after-effects of the Covid pandemic, simmering tensions with Asian nations, and the inevitable conflicts that will be unleashed when the U.S. Supreme Court (as we expect) strikes down race-based affirmative action in its impending decisions of *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina* and *Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*.

David Haekwon Kim
University of San Francisco
2130 Fulton Street
San Francisco, CA 94117-1080
kim@usfca.edu

Ronald R. Sundstrom
University of San Francisco
2130 Fulton Street
San Francisco, CA 94117-1080
rrsundstrom@usfca.edu

NOTES

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1. The United States of America is the national context of this essay, so following standard American usage “Asian” simply refers to persons of Asian ancestry. It is an umbrella category that functions pan-ethnically and potentially pan-racially, because it gathers into one category a widely diverse set of people who trace their origin to Northeast, Southeast, and South Asia along with many neighboring islands, like the Philippines. This is consistent with the use of ‘Asian American’ to denote those Asians with American nationality. Depending on the context, and due to political reasons, those in the U.S. with ancestral connections to the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Islands are referred to as Pacific Islanders and not or not simply Asians. To respect the distinction between Asians (including Asian Americans) and Pacific Islanders, our references to Asians and anti-Asian racism does not necessarily include Pacific Islanders and anti-Pacific Islander racism, although we hold that our analysis of anti-Asian racism could apply to that case.
2. See Craig Timberg and Allyson Chiu’s “As the coronavirus spreads, so does online racism targeting Asians, new research shows,” *The Washington Post* (April 8, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/04/08/coronavirus-spreads-so-does-online-racism-targeting-asians-new-research-shows/>; and the organization Stop AAPI Hate’s website for their framing and response to situation, <https://stopaapihate.org/>.
3. We believe this can be true even if it is unjustifiably used by those seeking to abolish affirmative action.
4. On discrimination in college applications, see Anemona Hartocollis’s “Harvard Rated Asian-American Applicants Lower on Personality Traits, Suit Says,” *New York Times*, June 15, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/15/us/harvard-asian-enrollment-applicants.html>. See Sparrow (2006) and Burnett and Marshall (2001) for a history of the insular cases.
5. See Wang (2018) and Kang (2021).
6. See Alcoff (2007; 2011) for a discussion of the Latino case and Fourlas (2022) for MENA identity.
7. Collins thought that she was fighting to achieve what she imagined as racial equity in the San Francisco unified school district, which included an effort to change the admissions policies at Lowell High School, a selective high school in San Francisco. In 2020 the school ended its admissions policy of only admitting students with the highest grades and test scores in favor of a lottery system. After the recall of Collins, the previous selective admissions requirements were reinstated. See Thomas Fuller’s “‘You Have to Give Us Respect’: How Asian Americans Fueled the San Francisco Recall.” *New York Times*, February 17, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/17/us/san-francisco-school-board-parents.html?smid=url-share>.
8. Pew Research Center, July 2018, “Income Inequality in the U.S. Is Rising Most Rapidly Among Asians;” and Pew Research Center, May, 2017, “Intermarriage in the U.S. 50 Years After Loving v. Virginia.”
9. This choice turn of phrase plays on an advertising slogan from the 1980s. It comes up in Yang (2018, p. 8).
10. See Hong (2020, pp. 35, 89–90).
11. Unfortunately, explaining and defending a deflationary account of racism is beyond the scope of this essay.
12. While you may get some cringe-worthy anecdotes, it turns out that there is a paucity of quantitative research that documents the attitudes of Asians about other racialized groups in the United States. Park (2021) and Tokeshi (2021) are exceptions to this.
13. For an analysis of Asian American attitudes regarding academic and economic achievement, see Lee and Zhou (2015). See Kang (2021, p. 37).

14. “‘They Have Robbed Me of my Life:’ Xenophobic Violence against Non-Nationals in South Africa,” *Human Rights Watch*, September 17, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/09/17/they-have-robbed-me-my-life/xenophobic-violence-against-non-nationals-south>.
15. Wax, Amy, and Alexander Larry. “Paying the Price for Breakdown of the Country’s Bourgeois Culture.” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. August 9, 2017. <https://www.inquirer.com/philly/opinion/commentary/paying-the-price-for-breakdown-of-the-countrys-bourgeois-culture-20170809.html>.
16. For summaries of this controversy and Amy Wax’s statements, see Scott Jaschik’s “Is Penn Going to Punish Amy Wax?” *Inside Higher ED*. July 19, 2022. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/07/19/penn-going-punish-amy-wax>; and Graham Piro’s “Penn Law Dean Asks for ‘Major Sanction’ against Professor Amy Wax, Creating Tenure Threat for All Penn Faculty.” *Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression*. July 13, 2022. <https://www.thefire.org/penn-law-dean-asks-for-major-sanction-against-professor-amy-wax-creating-tenure-threat-for-all-penn-faculty/#:~:text=The%20report%20accuses%20Wax%20of,grade%20information.%E2%80%9D%20Wax%20lost%20her>.
17. Jaschik’s “Is Penn Going to Punish Amy Wax?”
18. Loury, Glenn. 2022. “Amy Wax Redux.” *The Glenn Show* (blog). January 2, 2022. <https://glennloury.substack.com/p/amy-wax-redux>.
19. See *supra* fn. 6.
20. For the phrase “xenoracism,” see Kyoo Lee (2014).
21. For an important critique, see Zheng (2016).

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