Whose Trust?

Anti-Asian Racism and the Technologic of Dis/Trust in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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When thinking through the pandemic, the concept of institutional trust quickly surfaces; one then rightly asks, "How can I rebuild trust?"; however, to suppose that trust can be rebuilt implies a certain logic with respect to the concept of trust. This logic implies an instrumentalism, a structure that can be broken and pieced back together. Forward and backward, it is assumed that parties can move on the spectrum of trust, to offer the logic a fair level of flexibility that is still not enough to give an adequate account of it. It is important to understand the movement of the spectrum itself, through time and space. This history of trust then informs the ways in which trust is co-created, between parties but even still there are further issues. The spectrum is not only from one point to another, but rather a complex network of nodes wherein definite parties become confused and blurred. On top of this, through this increasingly complex, moving network, one must create plans to increase trust in the future tense, accounting for the elusive, transient present. After beginning with a historical context of the late 1800's U.S.A., I will demonstrate the ways in which technological relations affect networks of dis/trust by examining the breakdown in trust between Asian Americans and their fellow citizens in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. After documenting the immense oppression resulting from this loss of trust, I will look to the future of creating trust, problematizing the notion of connection through the aforementioned oppression.

The Temporality of Trust

It is well understood that repeated violations of trust diminish an individual's propensity to trust;[1] however, I would like to propose that this understanding lacks a degree of complexity that comes with temporality. To begin,

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1. Wouter van den Bos, Eric van Dijk, and Eveline A. Crone, "Learning whom to trust in repeated social interactions: A developmental perspective," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 15, no. 2(2011): 244.

there are a host of examples of anti-Asian racism throughout U.S. history. One can look to governmental legislation such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the first racial-based exclusion law, which suspended Chinese immigration to the U.S. for ten years in response to a belief that Chinese individuals were a threat to U.S. culture,[2] or the 1922 Cable Act that prevented Chinese immigrants from becoming citizens even after marrying a U.S. citizen.[3] To be sure, this sentiment was not restricted to the public sector, as can be seen in the example of an 1886 soap advertisement that pushed "for kicking the Chinese out of the U.S."[4]

While it may be simple to agree that these are violations of trust, one must explore the ways in which they violate trust to fully grasp the temporal nature of trust. One can say that these violations are simply events along a linear notion of time, thus aligning with the theory of repeated violations as previously mentioned.[5] However, I would like to propose that these violations change the very way in which trust is negotiated. In these cases, trust is not negotiated between two distinct parties of people, but also two identity markers. In cases of anti-Asian racism, it is not just the Asian Americans that are being negotiated with (if it can be called negotiation in these instances), but also the identity marker of "Asian." As such, these violations do not simply diminish the propensity of the individual oppressed at that time to trust their fellow citizens, but also the propensity of Asian Americans of the future, that are identified as Asian, to do so. In this way, the temporality of trust is not only limited to the space-time between two parties, but across history, in that the parties of trust were identity markers rather than individuals, despite individuals bearing the effects.

The Present Pandemic

While many results of violations of trust bear resemblance to past instances such as hate-inspired violence, advances in technology have also shaped the ways in which trust is co-created as well as the networks involved, and thus changed trust violation. From past to present, violence is no stranger when trust falls through. As of July 2020,

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2. Thomas K. Le et al., "Anti-Asian Xenophobia and Asian American COVID-19 Disparities," *American Journal of Public Health* 110, no. 9(2020): 1371.

3. B. L. Wilson, "Virtual Town Hall Examines Anti-Asian Racism" *GW Today*, April 20, 2020.

4. B. L. Wilson, "Virtual Town Hall."

5. van den Bos, van Dijk, and Crone, "Learning whom to trust," 244.

Asian Americans experienced an enormous surge in hate crimes against them,[6] mere months after the COVID-19 pandemic had begun. Hate crime is dishearteningly a familiar feature of society, but the level of amplification and mass of networks (e.g., Twitter) is new. In a study conducted on hateful tweets during the pandemic, a dataset of over 30 million tweets was compiled, containing tweets relating to anti-Asian hate. It not only found that there were 900,000 hateful tweets and a mere 200,000 counter-hate tweets, but also that bots made up only 10% of the hateful users, and that hateful bots were much more successful in attracting followers than counter-hate bots. As well, it was found that counter-hate messages (which were identified via a set of anti-racist hashtags) can discourage users from becoming hateful in the first place.[7]

Beyond the sheer size of hate (which is both the cause and consequence of distrust), the positionality in space-time is altered by social media's resistance to geographical localization. With the understanding that users can be largely anonymous and that the targets of hate can be ambiguous, the question must be asked: Whose trust is being broken? The present pandemic presents a situation that further complicates understandings of trust. The network of trust is massively amplified through increased social connection via social media, but the nodes of connection are blurred by anonymity. As such, an Asian American in a context where meaningful discourse occurs online may not be able to know between which party a loss of trust has occurred. Thus, to state the problem, distrust becomes an insidious, visible yet invisible, state of being. One must walk through one's society unsure of their levels of trust with any given party, breeding anxiety, fear, and discomfort. This can be seen in a massive increase in the Asian/White mental health gap, which displays that Asian Americans have suffered disproportionately in the area of mental health in relation to White individuals during the pandemic,[8] as well as in indicators that heavily point to a further decrease in mental health for Asian Americans in the coming future.[9] With the issue of trust now taking on

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6. Angela R. Gover, Shannon B. Harper, and Lynn Langton, "Anti-Asian Hate Crime During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring the Reproduction of Inequality," *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 45, (2020): 648.

7. Caleb Ziems et al., "Racism is a Virus: Anti-Asian Hate and Counterhate in Social Media during the COVID-19 Crisis," CLAWS, May 25, 2020.

8. Cary Wu, Yue Qian, and Rima Wilkes, "Anti-Asian discrimination and the Asian-white mental health gap during COVID-19," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44, no. 5(2020): 820.

9. Supriya Misra et al., "Psychological Impact of Anti-Asian Stigma Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Call for Research, Practice, and Policy Responses," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 12, no. 5(2020): 462.

a deeply-rooted, insidious nature, one must look to the ways in which this issue implicates itself into other conceptual structures, given its departure from previous understandings of trust.

Networks of Love

It is without question that love, compassion, and care (I will use the three interchangeably) rely upon relationships of trust. What all four of these concepts harbour in common is a feeling of togetherness, connection, or relation; however, as has been seen, the very nature of trust is warped given different technological settings that affect feelings of togetherness, connection, or relation. This then raises the question as to whether the expression of love is contingent upon technological considerations. This is quite a considerable departure from the most prominent pedagogical theories of love and will require substantial deliberation.

Pedagogical theories have long centred love as a lens through which to engage the world, emphasizing oneness, camaraderie, and most importantly to the ends of this paper, compassionate interconnected subjectivity. The notion of compassionate interconnected subjectivity is used as a way in which to understand love in the works of two of the most prominent pedagogical scholars: Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*[10] and *Pedagogy of the Heart*[11] and bell hooks' *All About Love*.[12] In these works, love is represented as compassionate interconnected subjectivity, posited as an ideal towards which one must strive to truly reflect one's deeply interconnected nature. However, what they do not capture are the technological aspects of love—the operation of love within material constraints such as space-time. Emblematic of this consideration is the work of Helen Fisher in *Anatomy of Love*[13]. Fisher discusses love from a biological anthropological perspective, recognizing the neurological and psychological components of love that are undoubtedly affected by technological circumstance. It is clear that in this perspective, while I may or may not be infinitely interconnected with those inhabiting the universe, I cannot actually evoke the feeling of love without being able to do so under material constraints (i.e. I cannot love someone who I am not even

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[10] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2018)

[11] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart* (Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2021)

[12] bell hooks, *All About Love* (Harper Perennial, 2000)

[13] Helen Fisher, *Anatomy of Love: A Natural History of Mating, Marriage, and Why We Stray* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2016)

aware of). Taking this perspective forward, technological considerations become incredibly important for the conceptual analysis I intend to engage in.

Fragmentations

Within the latest information and communication technologies, it is often argued that one is the most connected they have ever been; however, as has been explored with the concept of trust, one must explore the ways in which connection itself must negotiate with the form it is being made through. To do this, one must carefully consider the technological functionalities of a given medium, I shall dilate upon several. In Martin Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology*,[14] he takes the stance that Being is revealed through a type of concealing, that the only way in which the world can be made intelligible is through the concealing of some ontological truth. Yet, if one takes it to be true that all Being is in some way interconnected, it does seem apparent that one can move closer or further from understanding the Other through connection and knowledge of various kinds. One might readily admit that it is easier to connect with another individual through one medium over another. For example, developing connection within a Zoom meeting quite obviously is easier than engaging with another individual through an asynchronous, anonymous message board; the differences here being largely technological. Thus, it seems that my ability to *be* with another person (love them, trust them, etc.) is mediated by varying levels of technological constraints; I shall term these *onto-technological fragmentations*.

Recalling the large amount and proportion of anti-Asian hateful tweets found during the pandemic,[15] one now has points of examination to discern the ways in which connection, a foundational pillar of trust, was shaped and altered through various onto-technological fragmentations. The onto-technological fragmentation of note (among many) is anonymity. Anonymity appears to be a fragmentation because it separates one's ability to connect with another through nominal identification, a convention of quotidian operations. As I go through my life, I expect to be able to tie the content of my engagement with another individual to a certain name to distinguish it from

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[14] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings, revised and expanded edition* (Routledge, 1993)

[15] Caleb Ziems et al., "Racism is a Virus."

content associated with someone else; this is meaningful in the majority of interactions humans have where identifying features cannot be escaped (through vision of someone's physicality, hearing of someone's voice, etc.). However, anonymity serves to flout this conception of connection. In the technological space of Twitter (through the usage of a Twitter handle), acts of anti-Asian racism lost their identifying anchor; one cannot tell if two different users (whether hateful or not) are in fact the same user, where the user is located, what they look like, or any other useful information one might readily desire if power is being enacted upon oneself. Without this critical information, one loses a key touchstone for navigating the world. Audiey C. Kao describes this as "hesitancy and trepidation about walking out the door…because some hate you enough to harm you…just because of how you look."[16] In this way, one can see how the onto-technological fragmentation of anonymity severs the connection necessary to both physically and mentally navigate a connected world (which might manifest in hesitancy to physically leave one's abode or negative mental health outcomes, respectively).

However, to view anonymity in this fashion is to operate under Heideggerian pretenses, that onto-technological fragmentations empiricize the human into a historical reality rather than an agent acting on and with constraints. In *History of Sexuality*,[17] Michel Foucault rearranges power (which onto-technological fragmentations constitute) to be rearticulated as a form of generative production with his conception of biopower. To examine the ways in which onto-technological fragmentations can serve as not only constraints, but as levers for production, one needs only to revisit anonymity with a different ethical choice. The prior example presumes that one wants to navigate the interconnected world using the structure of identification, which is a choice made in the realm of ethics. If one takes a different ethical route and subordinate identification, anonymity proves to be an effective onto-technological fragmentation through which to navigate the interconnected world. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, anonymity also allowed Asian Americans and others to express anti-hate in a way that keeps

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[16] Audiey C. Kao, "Invisibility of Anti-Asian Racism," *AMA Journal of Ethics* 23, no. 7(2021): 507.

[17] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Introduction* (Pantheon Books, 1978)

themselves relatively safe and untargeted. For many marginalized groups, subverting the gaze of the hegemon is a useful navigational tool, as has been widely noted in the fields of feminism, and Islamic studies.

With both negative and positive results stemming from the conceptual analysis of connection, it becomes rather difficult to discern how one might move forward in an age of rapid technological advancement and thus rapid conceptual change. However, hidden within the two (Heideggerian and Foucauldian) sides of examining the onto-technological fragmentation of anonymity is the navigational hinge. In both cases, the polarity of anonymity's effect is determined by the way in which a given individual desires to navigate the interconnected world. It is thus necessary that an ethical choice be made in order to discern the path forward: How might one best navigate the interconnected world? To this end, I shall delve a little deeper into who the 'we' might be.

Forming the Future of Trust

To answer, "Whose trust?": The answer is simply 'yours'. Regardless of whether you are hateful, counter-hateful, trusting, distrusting, Asian, or not, when the parties have become anonymous, the parties have become you. One may have trouble experiencing this when they are the privileged party and do not feel distrust towards Asian Americans, but it can be understood clearly. If an Asian American, due to advances in technology, must face massive, anonymous waves of hate, they cannot be sure who in their environment is hostile to them, how many people are hostile to them (due to bots and the global nature of social media), nor even the level of hostility (due to the limited expression inherent to social media), among other unknowns. Due to this, along with historical oppression, the structure of trust becomes universalized. Each citizen becomes a source of potential violence, fear, and uncertainty.

However, we do not have to simply accept this as the new normal. I purport that we have a politico-ethical responsibility to take up this issue of trust in the modern age along several lines. As I have demonstrated, trust in this case (and many other similarly identifiable cases) is not between myself and another, but rather, myself and everyone. In the new technological power structures that we find ourselves in, striated with onto-technological fragmentations, there is an ethical imperative to orient oneself toward transparency and togetherness rather than

anonymity and isolation. The imperative can be built upon many foundations, but the biological anthropological foundation makes the case clearly. In order to deal with the challenges of life such as pandemics or regimes of racism, an individual is not enough. One must be able to connect with others to prosper through trusting relationships and thus is ethically obligated to maintain structures of connection they must necessarily draw on in order to navigate human life effectively. This conclusion, although based in different foundations, expands upon Simone de Beauvoir's central argument in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*,[18] that we must work to design, develop, and maintain the structure of equality. Focusing directly on materially human affairs, this structure cannot exist without the necessary components of connection and trust, upon which relationships can be built in order to solve the pressing issues that face humans as a species.

Therefore, it follows that one might take up this duty in personally, without anonymity, expressing counter-hate. We must recall that counter-hate can prove effective at halting hate before it begins.[19] However, this is not the only way to go about the maintenance of a structure of trust nor the point of most salience. The key problem, as we have seen, rests in the anonymity. Size can be countered with oppositional size, but an invisible opposition blurs the entire network of trust. As anonymous hate and distrust attempts to draw the world into darkness, it is we who may project ourselves into the vast night as a constellation of stars that guide us to trust, for while the hateful individuals may inhabit the shadows, we do not lose access to the light we possess. Both in and out of trust crises, we must position ourselves without anonymity as allies to the structure of trust we know we can navigate in order to avoid being forced into anxiety and general discomfort. I have demonstrated the universalization of trust in situations such as the widespread anti-Asian racism I have engaged; thus, if one desires trust and security against this and other forms of racism and/or oppression, it follows that one has a responsibility to light up their node on the network of trust through public expression. For even if you do not require that network now, there may come a time when you will, when the weight of oppression is too heavy for you to lift on your own.

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[18] Simone de Beauvoir, "Pyrrhus and Cinéas: A Cette Dame," *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings* (University of Illinois Press, 2004): 77-151.

[19] Ziems et al., "Racism is a virus."

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