

## PANDEMIC-INSPIRED BIGOTRY AGAINST CHINESE-AMERICANS: WHAT WOULD DUBOIS SAY?

In 1903, Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois famously began *The Souls of Black Folk* by warning that “[T]he problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.” A century later, that problem remains. The pandemic has brought to the fore another such line that runs throughout American history—bigotry toward our Chinese-American brothers and sisters. We of the Berkshire County NAACP see it as our organizational and personal responsibility to call out this bigotry as un-American, inhumane, immoral—and a threat to the public health of our community.

The history of American discrimination against Chinese Americans is clear, even if unfamiliar to many. In *“These Truths,”* historian Jill Lepore writes that after the massive Chinese immigration of the 1850s following the gold rush, Oregon’s constitution barred “Chinamen” from owning real estate; California barred Chinese immigrants from testifying in court. The Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870, dodged the question of whether Chinese immigrants could become citizens by limiting its prohibition of the denial of citizenship to matters of “race, color or previous condition of servitude.” The first national legislation regarding immigration was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited Chinese immigrants from entering the U.S. It declared that the Fourteenth Amendment did not apply to people of Chinese ancestry and deemed those Chinese living in this country to be permanent aliens ineligible for citizenship. Historian Eric Foner tells us in *“The Second Founding”* that Justice John Marshall Harlan, generally regarded as a hero for his lone dissent from the Supreme Court’s horrific “separate-but-equal” ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, “shared prevailing anti-Chinese prejudices.” He objected to a Louisiana law that allowed Chinese passengers to sit in the same train car with whites, and even dissented from a later Supreme Court decision that applied the Fourteenth Amendment’s principle of birthright citizenship to American-born children of Chinese immigrants.

This racist strain from our past has reached us today and threatens our present and future. President Trump’s promotion of COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” is a dog whistle calculated to stir this bigotry. Unfortunately, it is succeeding. In the Berkshires alone, in the last few weeks, members of our Branch have experienced a spike in anti-Asian reactions (because bigots, in their ignorance, regard all Asian cultures as one). For example:

- One Asian member, wearing a mask while working, was told to leave the building by someone who assumed she had the virus, when in fact she was wearing the mask for protection.
- One entry on a social media platform included “Covid-19 Warning Signs: fever, dry cough, troubles breathing, slanty eyes, tiredness, bad driving, aching muscles, nasal congestion, short stature, runny nose, good math skills...knows kung fu.”
- One member’s children told her not to wear a mask in public because the children feared she would be seen as having the virus because they had seen how non-Asians view them and their mother.
- Teachers have reported that children of Asian descent were quitting extracurricular activities because their parents’ businesses were suffering even more than others because of xenophobia within the community.

Under other circumstances, any single incident, while troubling, conceivably could be written off as a misunderstanding, a misperception, or an isolated inappropriate comment. But the

composite of our members' reports is a pattern. That pattern leaves some of our members afraid to leave their homes.

Beyond being morally reprehensible, this vitriol harms our public health. Deterring people from seeking appropriate medical advice or treatment will prolong the pandemic, putting everyone at higher risk. Mistreating Chinese-Americans, or any Asian Americans, in this way, also impairs the efforts of health care providers and other essential responders and staff who are protecting and serving all of us at their personal peril.

Furthermore, the pandemic is already heightening everyone's stress. That stress exacerbates pre-existing medical, physical, or mental health conditions, further straining our already-overburdened health care system. No one in our community, at any time but particularly now, should be victimized by such harassment.

The NAACP was founded in 1909 to combat racism against Blacks in America. In the face of the then-current scourge of lynchings of thousands of Blacks and numerous forms of pervasive discrimination, we named our magazine "The Crisis." Today we all face a different type of crisis. The only moral response to an attack upon one victimized group is to treat it as an attack upon us all. Our collective conscience commands us to take action and to call for all members of our community to do so as well.

What can we do? We at the Berkshire County NAACP urge us all to take personal responsibility to do the following:

1. Call out such bigotry when we see it or hear it in our presence. Asian Americans who are subjected to it understandably may elect not to respond, to protect their own safety, but the rest of us must act. Perpetrators cannot be allowed to escape sanctions. A stern reprimand in the presence of others can be a powerful sanction.
2. Comfort our family members, friends, and neighbors who have been the objects of such harassment. Experiencing discrimination is stressful and can be humiliating. We cannot allow members of our community to endure this alone. We can provide emotional support while practicing social distancing.
3. To the extent we are patronizing any businesses, continue to patronize those owned by or which employ Asian Americans. Staying away because of an assumption that these owners or employees somehow pose a greater risk is unfounded discrimination.
4. Insist that our elected officials publicly criticize those leaders who still cultivate this repugnant impulse in our culture. Silence is unacceptable.
5. Vote.

Less well-known than Dr. Du Bois' "color-line" warning that began *The Souls of Black Folk* is the prayer with which he concluded that same essay 117 years ago:

*Hear my cry, O God the Reader; vouchsafe that this my book fall not still-born into the world-wilderness. Let there spring, Gentle One, from out its leaves vigor of thought and thoughtful deed to reap the harvest wonderful. (Let the ears of a guilty people tingle with truth, and seventy millions sigh for the righteousness which exalteth nations, in this drear day when human brotherhood is mockery and a snare.) Thus in Thy good time*

*may infinite reason turn the tangle straight, and these crooked marks on a fragile leaf be not indeed.*

Dr. Du Bois speaks to us today. We must hold accountable those whose vulgar language and foul deeds would make a “mockery and a snare” of our common humanity. Doing so requires each of us to commit to “vigor of thought and thoughtful deed to reap the harvest wonderful”—of fulfilling our pledge to live as one nation, indivisible.