

Goals

- Connect past and present patterns of anti-Asian racism.
- Understand the role of portraiture in resisting racist narratives and raising awareness.
- Experience joy in the struggle for racial justice.

Materials

- News stories that document anti-Asian racism
- Jeff Wall's artwork *Mimic*
- Selections from primary sources: The Chinese Immigration Act, 1882, U.S. Library of Congress and Canada's Chinese Exclusion Act of 1885⁴⁸
- The film *The Chinese Exclusion Act* from WGBH/PBS⁴⁹
- Chinese exclusion posters
- Instagram portraits by artist Red Hong Yi

Anti-Racism Resistance Portraits

Background Information

In 2020, incidences of anti-Asian racism increased in the U.S.⁵⁰ The news media reported that a young family from Myanmar was stabbed, including children ages 2 and 6 years old, because the perpetrator believed they were Chinese and would spread the so-called “China virus,” a racialized term used and promoted by President Donald Trump and fringe media to erroneously refer to COVID-19.⁵¹ This is just one example of a broad pattern of racial events across the world perpetrated against children and adults who “look Asian.”

It is part of a much longer history of xenophobia, exploitation, and violence against people of Asian descent. Alienation and demonization of Asian people is motivated by global white supremacy and nativist sentiment that casts White people as belonging and people of Asian descent as foreign, unhealthy, and dangerous.

Guided Practice

- 1 Resistance portraits have a long history among marginalized groups. Perhaps this is because they allow an artist to reframe how a person or group is seen. In essence, portraits are as much about the gaze as they are about the sitting subject. Begin with a discussion of portraits: What is a portrait? Where have you encountered portraits? How are they made and what forms do they take? What is the purpose and significance of portraiture? What is the relationship between a portrait and reality? How do portraits influence perceptions of identity?
- 2 Share age-appropriate news stories of slurs or other forms of attack against people who “look Asian.” Stories may be recent, as with COVID-19 pandemic-related violence and hate speech toward people who “look Asian,” or they may be more historic, as in the murder of Vincent Chin in 1982 in Detroit, Michigan,

by auto workers Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz who, believing Chin to be Japanese, attacked him for the success of Japanese automotive imports at a time when U.S. domestic car industry was in decline.⁵² In the aftermath of Chin's death, artist Jeff Wall created *Mimic*, a cinematic photograph staged to depict a racial incident he witnessed in which a gesture of anti-Asian hatred was used.

- Animosity toward people of Asian descent goes back even further in history.⁵³ Watch PBS's *The Chinese Exclusion Act*. Older learners may read excerpts from primary texts. Examples include the 1882 passage of The Chinese Exclusion Act in the U.S. and selections from Canadian officials in 1898 who falsely blamed Chinese communities for smallpox epidemics. Posters from that period also reflect the dominant anti-Asian narrative in which “the White man is on top.” A mixture of these sources is preferred as it offers a richer context in which to view the systemic and protracted nature of white supremacy and xenophobia (racialization based on intolerance of people from other countries).
- 3 Against the backdrop of news stories, show artist Red Hong Yi's series of anti-racist resistance portraits in its social media



6.11 Poster in support of Chinese Exclusion Act. Image courtesy of the Royal BC Museum.

Pedagogical Principles

- 1 Political clarity
- 2 Protective care
- 3 Witnessing

Chapter Connections

- Institutionalized racism (2)
- Racial prejudice (2)
- Gaze (2)
- Identity (4)
- Stereotype (4)
- Racial microaggressions (5)
- Allyship (5)

Suggested Encounters

“Masked Kids,” a podcast created by a group of sixth-graders about the anti-Asian harassment at their school during the COVID-19 pandemic⁵⁴

Highly readable research briefs about anti-Asian racism from the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council’s campaign “Stop AAPI Hate”⁵⁵

Films for educators at the Center for Asian American Media⁵⁶

A profile about Red Hong Yi published in Mashable SE Asia⁵⁷



6.12 Red Hong Yi, From the series #Iamnotavirus, 2020. Black/purple rice. Courtesy of the artist.

context and lead an open-ended discussion. Revisit the questions raised earlier in relation to the series: What is a portrait? What is the purpose and significance of Red Hong Yi’s portraiture? What is the relationship between the portraits and reality? How might the portraits influence perceptions of identity? How are the portraits made and what forms do they take? Why did Yi exhibit her work on social media?

- Listen to Red Hong Yi’s words to learn how she only recently became activated to resist racism: “Honestly, I was very hesitant creating this series on racism. Speaking about race makes me uncomfortable. Also, the world is now hurting, scared and confused. However, the more I hear about things like this happening the more I want to take a stance to fight this horrible ‘disease’ that is racism. I recognise that racism exists in every country, every skin colour. We must squash it so we can build a better world for everyone. I’m making this 10 piece series to speak out against the anti-Asian that is happening right now, but this applies to all of us (even Asians can be racist to fellow

Asians!). I hope these posts inspire you to stand up for a more loving, tolerant and diverse world.”⁵⁸

- Build connections to other contemporary or historic racial events by creating anti-racist resistance portraits that humanize people who historically have been racially stigmatized, demonized, excluded, displaced, or made the target of racist speech and physical violence. Portraits may be inspired by Red Hong Yi’s artwork. Here are some things to think about and discuss along the way:

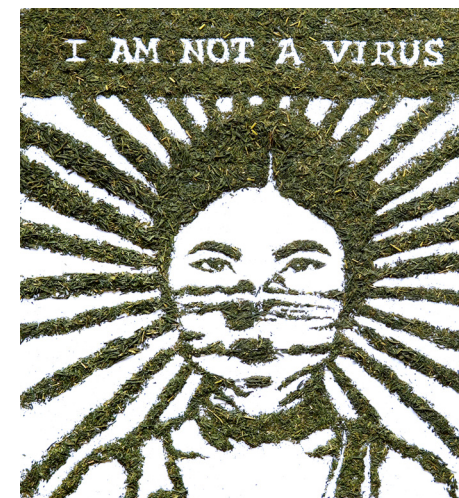
- Consider the location and audience for the work and how to

bring viewers’ attention to data and information about real-world racial injustices.

- Consider the materials. Each of Yi’s portraits is composed of a different material she had in her home. She uses kitchen staples such as matcha leaves, fennel seed, candies, and rice to create “paintings” that humanize her subject. The materials are relevant to her personally and culturally. When selecting materials, avoid ethnic and racial stereotypes.
- Consider the format. Yi’s choice of how to apply the materials—tiny granular specks accumulate until they become fuller renderings—exemplifies the cumulative effects of everyday racism. The artist chose to create a series of portraits in a compositional format that echoes the style of popular protest posters. What does the stylistic connection to protest posters suggest about the power of art in collective movements to resist racism?
- Consider the effect. What do you want the artwork to do? Will it call that viewer’s attention to a specific racist practice or marginalized community? Will it humanize a marginalized group and challenge stereotypes? Will it inspire self-reflection or solidarity?

Extension

What other artworks could be considered anti-racist resistance portraits? Explore works created by W.E.B. DuBois, Harmonia Rosales, Roger Shimomura, Nina Chanel Abney, Titus Kaphar, Wendy Red Star, Jordan Casteel, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Kehinde Wiley, and many others.



6.13 Red Hong Yi, From the series #Iamnotavirus, 2020. Matcha leaves. Courtesy of the artist.



Notes

- 48 “Chinese Exclusion Act: Primary Documents in American History,” U.S. Library of Congress Research Guides, <https://guides.loc.gov/chinese-exclusion-act>; Canada’s Chinese Exclusion Act of 1885, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=47>.
- 49 “The Chinese Exclusion Act,” WGBH/PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/chinese-exclusion-act/>.
- 50 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): 647–667.
- 51 Marc Ramirez, “FBI Says Texas Stabbing that Targeted Asian-American Family Was Hate Crime Fueled by Coronavirus Fears,” *The Dallas Morning News*, March 31, 2020.
- 52 Curtis Chin and Tony Lam (directors), “Vincent Who? The Murder of a Chinese-American Man,” 2009 film, Asian Pacific Americans for Progress and Tony Lam Films.
- 53 Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990); Peter S. Li, *The Chinese in Canada* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- 54 “Masked Kids,” <https://soundcloud.com/karin-patterson-148776835/masked-kids>.
- 55 Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council’s “Stop AAPI Hate” campaign, <https://stopaapihate.org/>.
- 56 Center for Asian American Media, <https://caamedia.org/films-and-projects/projects/asian-americans/>.
- 57 Mae Yen Yap, “This Artist Is Creating a Series of Portraits Titled ‘I Am Not A Virus’ to Criticize Anti-Asian Racism,” *Mashable SE Asia*, 2020, <https://sea.mashable.com/culture/9997/red-hong-yi-criticizes-anti-asian-racism-through-series-of-art-portraits-titled-i-am-not-a-virus>.
- 58 Red Hong Yi’s Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/B-uGvTHj3xE/?utm_source=ig_embed.