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Confronting Anti-Asian Racism: A Statement on (In)visibility and Targeted Online Harassment

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Abstract

Despite the recent spotlight on targeted online harassment affecting universities and faculty members, its effects on libraries and library workers remain largely invisible. To address this gap, Reanna Esmail recounts her recent experience of anti-Asian racism resulting from the media's coverage of an event originally intended to confront anti-Asian racism. To set the record straight, she provides and contextualizes the original transcript. To shift the spotlight back from herself onto systemic issues, she examines the social construction of visibility in other recent cases of targeted online harassment affecting library workers and threatening academic freedom.

Keywords: *anti-Asian racism, history of libraries, invisible labor, library instruction, targeted online harassment*

At the end of the semester in spring 2021, I suddenly became the target of online harassment after statements I made at Cornell University's Teach-In on Confronting Anti-Asian Racism were misreported by a left-wing campus newspaper and sensationalized by right-wing media.[1] An event meant to *confront* anti-Asian racism made me the *target* of anti-Asian racism.

The biased and inaccurate coverage sought to undermine my expertise, to damage both my reputation and that of my employer, and to threaten academic freedom, especially work being done to address systemic issues related to racism. My reflections on this experience and the larger issue of targeted online harassment are meant to function as both an intervention in the current narrative and an attempt to shift the spotlight back from myself onto systemic issues. To reclaim the narrative, I have chosen to break the silence around targeted online harassment, which allows harassers to have the final word. My aim is to provide the context that was missing from the media's coverage and to consider the consequences that targeted online harassment can have on historically excluded library workers and their academic freedom.

The university-sponsored event that I spoke at—originally under expectations of privacy—was planned in response to the Atlanta Spa Shootings and the rise of anti-Asian racism resulting from COVID-19 misinformation. As the organizers emphasized, the event's purpose was to provide a "safe space" for teaching and learning about the histories and contemporary experiences of racism against Asians and Asian Americans. I was invited to present based on my identity as a South Asian Muslim woman and my position as an instruction librarian and the library liaison to the Asian American Studies Program. In response to the organizers' questions and guidelines, I researched and prepared remarks based on facts and current scholarship in library science.

Although I spoke for only two minutes out of a two-hour event, multiple newspapers, tabloids, blogs, and other media outlets immediately ran stories focused solely on me rather than the entire event. They included my name, employer, and photographs of me taken without permission from my professional pages and social media accounts. None of these media outlets contacted me to confirm their sensationalized stories, which were shared and commented on thousands of times. I was repeatedly misquoted: factual inaccuracies made by reporters were misattributed to me, and (mis)quotations were taken wildly out of the original context of the teaching and learning event.

As a result, I have received death threats and other hateful comments from strangers disparaging my work, my employer, and my identity. Privately, I received positive feedback from my colleagues, the

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event organizers, and those who attended the event. Publicly, my name, likeness, and falsified stories were shared across countless media platforms, and new harmful search results continued to pile up. Without any warning, the media made me *hypervisible*. The privilege of relative anonymity I had enjoyed prior to this event was no longer available to me.

To regain some sense of privacy, I deleted or privatized my social media accounts, requested that my contact information be temporarily removed from institutional websites, and took a step back from this and other work I do related to race, equity, and social justice.[2] In short, I wanted to make myself *invisible*. Regardless of these efforts, I remained hypervisible, as was made clear when the tabloids continued attempting to revive the story weeks later, or when I went to a local business where an employee whom I'd never met already thought they knew my entire story based only on the tabloids.

Despite the recent spotlight on harassment affecting universities and faculty members,[3] its effects on libraries and library workers remain largely invisible. Library workers hardly need another reminder of the dangers of misinformation and the ways in which our labor can be rendered invisible. Underrepresented library staff, in particular, are already intimately familiar with how our very presence within libraries can make us stand out. When library workers experience online harassment as a result of doing their jobs, it can exacerbate issues related to invisible labor and delegitimize the work that goes into making information accessible and visible.

Targeted online harassment is a form of violence associated with cyberbullying, doxing (searching for and sharing personal information online without an individual's consent), and posting threatening comments or sending prejudiced messages. It aims to overshadow certain topics and silence individuals who speak about them by putting a spotlight on these individuals that distorts their work. BIPOC, women, and members of the LGBTQ+ communities tend to be disproportionately targeted with online harassment. When faced with this form of harassment, targeted individuals are commonly advised by university administrators and public relations professionals to disengage, to lay low until everything passes, and to minimize their presence as much as possible. Essentially, "Don't feed the trolls."[4]

Yet, as evident in many recent cases of harassment, this advice seems to do little to protect the targeted individuals, especially those involved in anti-racism work. As Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and Howard University Knight Chair in Race and Journalism Nikole Hannah-Jones points out, "The burden of working for racial justice is laid on the very people bearing the brunt of the injustice, and not

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the powerful people who maintain it."[5] Instead of placing the burden of dealing with targeted harassment onto the impacted individuals, those in positions of power should offer institutional support and work to address systemic issues.

Advising victims of targeted online harassment to erase themselves fails to recognize that it is not easy or necessarily helpful to become invisible. In exchange for any privacy one might regain, one can also end up perpetuating a cycle of silence and closing oneself off to support and solidarity. Reflecting on her own experience of targeted online harassment, scholarly communication librarian April Hathcock comments, "We feel so alone […] We feel like there's a spotlight on us and there's no one around to support us."[6] These conflicting feelings of visibility and invisibility, of isolation and notoriety are only further compounded when targeted individuals are already marginalized by their identity or positionality.

Targeted online harassment complicates the social construction of visibility. In the public sphere and the profession as a whole, historically excluded staff are underrepresented and, in this sense, less visible. Within their institutions, however, they are more visible by virtue of being an only or one of few. Thus, in cases of targeted online harassment, the identities of individual academics and library workers intersect with institutional visibility. As Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez notes, the targets of online harassment are frequently "outspoken, successful women of color working in academic spheres who dare to bring issues of race and racism to the forefront of discussion."[7] By targeting such individuals, online harassment makes their work appear to be an anomaly or outlier rather than an integral part of institutions, disciplines, and professions. In this way, targeted online harassment furthers the institutional erasure of historically excluded scholars and staff members.

Arroyo-Ramirez's point about the uneven distribution of harassment is illustrated by cases in which the harassment experienced by individuals working on the same project is racialized. When recounting the harassment they experienced after receiving an American Library Association research grant, Nicole Cooke and Miriam Sweeney noted that their harassment differed: Sweeney, who is white, received comments primarily about the project and her research; Cooke, who is Black, received threats and racist messages. As a result of these responses, they were ultimately unable to complete their planned project.[8]

Many library staff and those with the power to enact institutional, professional, and social change are still unaware of these kinds of real-world effects. While trolling, doxing, and cyberbullying may sound

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abstract, they have concrete consequences for individuals, their institutions, and their respective professions. Targeted online harassment may sound new, but it is reductive and misguided to dismiss the phenomenon as a byproduct of social media and the politicization of higher education. Instead, it needs to be understood as part of historical and systemic issues related to labor and equity.

Though appearing to make labor visible, the false spotlight provided by online harassment aims to distort the targeted individuals' actual work and prevent them from returning to it. By weaponizing labor, it saddles individuals with additional work—from the emotional and mental labor of sorting through hate mail to requesting one's contact information be removed from websites and working to repair one's damaged reputation. In this way, targeted online harassment reinforces the problems of "invisible labor."[9]

This weaponization of labor and (in)visibility can have the effect of delegitimizing not only the targeted individuals' work but their entire experience. Having already been forced to take on the emotional and mental labor of dealing with harassers, the victims are now expected to take on the additional work of repeatedly reliving their trauma to prove its validity. Put in an impossible position, they must explain their experience to their colleagues while simultaneously minimizing it. They must maintain professionalism while discussing seemingly unprofessional matters. They must acknowledge the existence of racism, sexism, and other forms of bigotry, while also reassuring others that they are not necessarily included in these categories. In short, the victims of harassment are expected to present their trauma in neutral terms to make it palatable for their colleagues. However, their lived experiences are not neutral, as Stacie Williams argues, because "neutrality denies our authority and ability to share information with context or history."[10]

My aim in publishing the complete transcript of my two-minute presentation at the Teach-In on Confronting Anti-Asian Racism is to shift the spotlight that is on myself back onto these important conversations about our profession and our communities. By making certain individuals hypervisible, harassers try to make historical, systemic, and institutional issues invisible, while themselves remaining in the shadows. By redirecting the conversation from systemic issues to personal ones, they seek to prevent any possibility of large-scale change.

While it might seem ironic that an event meant to open a discussion about the larger history of racism against Asians and Asians Americans resulted in racism *against* Asians and Asian Americans, it is perhaps not wholly unexpected. As Jennifer Ho, the current President of the Association for Asian

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American Studies, observes, "To be an Asian woman in America means you can't just be what you are: a fully enfranchised human being. It means you are a blank screen on which others project their stories."[11] The Teach-In provided a space for us to tell our stories and histories, which is precisely what caused the outrage. As is clear in the following transcript, I spoke about my experience as an Asian American and the longer history of anti-Asian racism in libraries, but others ended up projecting their stories about whiteness onto me. By separating my words from their context, the media's stories attempted to overshadow the longstanding history of anti-Asian racism.

When used against those doing anti-racism work, targeted online harassment aims to undermine discussions about the history of race and racism. The racism I experienced ultimately attempted to prevent me from doing my job and engaging further with topics related to race, equity, and social justice. As Toni Morrison once said, "It's important […] to know […] the function, the very serious function of racism, which is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being."[12]

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The following are the prepared remarks that I made during Cornell University's Teach-In on Confronting Anti-Asian Racism on May 7, 2021. The organizers asked presenters to speak about their experiences of anti-Asian racism at Cornell and its larger contexts.

Thank you for the introduction and the opportunity to be part of this event. I'm sure there will be some great connections among our remarks. I'm going to focus on the relation between libraries and confronting anti-Asian bias.

As an instruction librarian, I often teach sessions about information literacy. And in these sessions, I try to give opportunities to think critically about how and where we find information, what's included and what's left out.

Information is power.[13] What information people have access to and what they deem credible is important as we've seen with the rise of misinformation that has no doubt aided the increase in violence and bias against AAPI communities.[14]

So as a librarian, I see the ways in which my profession has the capacity to confront bias and misinformation in the ways we approach and teach information and digital literacy.[15] However, as someone of South Asian descent who has experienced racism both during and prior to my time at Cornell, I also recognize that there is a tension here.

Libraries are a predominantly white field,[16] and Cornell is not an exception in this regard.[17] Libraries themselves also have a fraught history of being complicit in racism and in some cases upholding and disseminating racist ideas.

To give a few examples, the Dewey Decimal system, which is the classification system used by many public libraries, previously used the terms "yellow races" and "mongoloid races" to describe people of Asian descent.[18] The Library of Congress classification system, the system we use here at Cornell to organize books and other materials, previously included the phrase "Yellow Peril" as a subject heading.[19]

In February, a librarian named Ellen Ogihara at St. Olaf College, a private liberal arts college, publicly resigned citing bias and discrimination in an open letter to the administration where she detailed several instances of anti-Asian racism from her colleagues.[20] And as some may be aware, academic library vendors such as Thomson Reuters and Lexis Nexis have provided patron data to agencies like ICE.[21]

On Monday's talk on "The New Jim Code," Professor Ruha Benjamin encouraged folks to look at what is in fine print or what is often obscured from view in our own disciplines and institutions.[22] Hence, I think in order to confront anti-Asian bias, we need to hold our institutions accountable and to not hide these practices and histories but reckon with them.

I look forward to hearing the other panelists, and to your questions about libraries, digital literacy, and my own personal identity.

Acknowledgements

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