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Article

“Divide, Divert, & Conquer” Deconstructing the Presidential Framing of White Supremacy in the COVID-19 Era

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Abstract: Based on the analysis of President Donald J. Trump’s social media, along with excerpts from his speeches and press releases, this study sheds light on the framing of white supremacy during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Our findings reveal that the triad of *divide, divert, and conquer* was crucial to Trump’s communications strategy. We argue that racist nativism—or racialized national threats to American security—is key to comprehending the external divisiveness in this strategy. When Trump bitterly cast China as the cause of America’s pandemic fallout and Mexico as the source of other key American problems (i.e., crime and low-paid jobs for U.S.-born Americans), he sowed clear racialized divisions between the United States (U.S.) and these two nations. We further argue that nativist racism—or the framing of descendants from those nations as incapable of ever being American—is key to comprehending the internal divisiveness in the former President’s pandemic rhetoric. Trump’s framing of China and Mexico as enemies of America further found its culprits in Asian and Latino Americans who were portrayed as COVID-19 carriers. Trump’s narrative was ultimately geared to *diverting* attention from his administration’s mishandling of COVID-19, the dismal structural conditions faced by detained and undocumented Latinos, and the anti-Asian bias faced by some of his Asian American constituents. In the conclusions, this article makes a call for countering white supremacy by developing comparative approaches that pay more attention to how different racisms play out for different groups.

Keywords: nativism; racism; Asian Americans; Latino Americans; white supremacy; COVID-19; China; Mexico; Trump



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1. Introduction

President Donald J. Trump successfully brought a conservative populist movement, rooted in white supremacy principles, to the highest office in the U.S. As President from 2017–2021, he spent most of his communications (e.g., rallies, tweets, briefings) trying to energize his political base rather than appeal to the broader population of Americans (Kumar 2020). In this article, we investigate Trump’s framing of two key policy planks that informed his agenda (Qiu 2016; Lewandowsky et al. 2020; McCann and Jones-Correa 2020), namely “China” and “immigration”, as they played out in the COVID-19 era. This study’s main goal was two-fold. First, we analyzed how Trump blamed China, a longtime economic rival to the U.S., for America’s war against the novel coronavirus—which Trump called the “China plague”, the “China virus”, the “Wuhan virus”, and the “Chinese virus” among other terms. Second, we examined how the Trump administration used the coronavirus pandemic to advance its plans to build a wall in the U.S.–Mexico border towards excluding Mexicans and, particularly, undocumented Latin American immigrants from the U.S. Trump’s divisive framing of China and Mexico as enemies of America further found its culprits in Asians and Latinos in the U.S., on the basis of an inflammatory rhetoric that diverted attention from policy measures, which would have eventually led to containing

the spread of COVID-19 during his presidency. Ultimately, Trump's goal was to rouse his majority white electoral base towards conquering his political rivals.

This article shows how Trump's three-fold strategy of divide, divert, and conquer was crucial to his communications campaign and can only be understood within the longstanding context of immigration and white supremacy in the U.S. We argue that racist nativism—or racialized national threats to American security—is key to comprehending the external divisiveness in this strategy. When Trump bitterly cast China as the cause of America's pandemic fallout, and Mexico as the source of other critical American problems (i.e., crime, low-paid jobs for U.S. born Americans), he sowed clear racialized divisions between the U.S. and these two nations. We further argue that nativist racism—or the framing of descendants from those nations as incapable of ever being American—is key to comprehending the internal divisiveness in this strategy. Some leveraged Trump's China-blaming into harassing Americans who looked Chinese, casting them as “forever foreigners”, purportedly connecting them to the China that was the main target of the President's blaming stratagem (Benjamin 2021; Louie 2020a; Tessler et al. 2020). Trump's own rhetoric evolved to projecting the blame for the pandemic to Latino immigrants—mostly those entering the country via the U.S.–Mexico border. Overall, he deployed an all-encompassing white supremacist narrative that blamed Latino immigrants not only for being carriers of COVID-19, but also for bringing crime and drugs along with allegedly stealing jobs from American workers (Menjívar and Bejarano 2004; Chavez 2008). Trump and his supporters further framed undocumented Latinos already working in the U.S. as COVID-19 carriers and, alternatively, disregarded and demonized their economic contributions. Trump even succeeded in creating in-group divisions among Latinos, as certain members opposed other (mostly undocumented) Latinos, by expressing their own internalized racism.

The motto of this article “divide, divert, and conquer” informs the presentation of our findings. First, Trump's divisive rhetoric diverted attention from his administration's mishandling of COVID-19, the dismal structural conditions faced by detained and undocumented working Latinos, and from the nativist racism giving rise to the anti-Asian bias. By the same token, Trump's diversions served him well to unify and galvanize his mostly white electoral base against our nation's purported enemies—China and Mexico. The ultimate goal of the “conquest” was Trump's continued political sway. The events of 6 January 2021 are a poignant example of how successful that strategy ended up being. By then, the enemy within was embodied by the U.S.'s elected political leaders and democratic institutions.

Our study reveals how all of this happened, with a focus on the divisive and diversionary aspects of the strategy, along with what we can do to prevent it from happening again. A deeper understanding of Trump's three-fold strategy (divide, divert, and conquer) is key to understanding how the discursive stigmatization of particular ethnic/racial groups translates into the symbolic and political violence perpetrated against those groups during pandemic times (Viladrich 2021). Furthermore, and in order to counter white supremacy, we need to pay more attention to how different racisms play out for different populations. In this vein, a core contribution of our paper lies in its *comparative* approach. Asians in the U.S. have been typically represented as striving racial minorities, whereas Latinos are seen as not striving hard enough; and both are deemed as culturally superior to African Americans, who supposedly lack the cultural resources to make it in America (Louie 2011, 2012). Strikingly, our comparative analyses reveal how the nativist racism in the wake of Trump's rhetoric was *similarly* deployed to divide Asians and Latinos from each other as well as from the rest of America. Whether they are seen as “good” or “bad” minorities, they both have been lambasted with equal force as forever foreigners. This is not surprising if we recall that the U.S. has had a long history of dividing groups from one another for the purpose of diverting attention from their common bonds in service of white supremacy principles. Despite the existing voluminous scholarship on anti-Black, anti-Asian, and anti-Latino racisms, our research shows that the divide, divert, and conquer strategy con-

tinues to have immense power. Our study's final goal was intended as a contribution towards undoing this power by making publicly visible the ways in which different racisms intersect and differ from one another, particularly through a divide, divert and, conquer strategy.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *White Supremacy at Work: Racist Nativism and Nativist Racism in Perspective*

Trump's 2016 campaign for the U.S. presidency was built upon an openly populist platform intrinsically connected to white supremacy principles (Agnew and Shin 2019). White supremacy is a system of domination in which racial, ethnic, and social inequalities are morally sanctioned, publicly legitimized, and legally reproduced. Rather than operating in isolation, white supremacy works in tandem with global capitalism and other systems of domination and exclusion, such as patriarchy, that together support unequal labor markets where racial and ethnic minorities experience exploitative oppression (Golash-Boza et al. 2019).

Our particular discussion of white supremacy focuses on the multiple forms of racism that have historically been present in the U.S. and which Trump tapped into. Building on the Black/White binary of race relations that has traditionally been the focus in this country, we seek to understand the "pluralist conceptions of racism" that speak to the particular experiences of immigrants of color and their descendants in the U.S. (Sundstrom and Kim 2014, p. 39). In doing so, we intend to shed light on how those experiences might intersect with, and also stand apart from, the African American case (Huber et al. 2008). To be clear, even though we acknowledge the central role that the Black/White binary has played, and continues to play, in the reproduction of white supremacy, we argue that the latter has kept evolving according to specific contexts and groups. Furthermore, a deeper delineation and discussion of the multiple racialized logics constituting white supremacy needs to occur for successful collective efforts to mobilize against it.

Structural racism, or the policies, practices, and norms that support white supremacy, affects people of color across race, ethnicity, and immigrant status (Browne 2020; Flores 2020). As U.S. history has shown, it also targeted European immigrants before they were racialized as white (Kraut 1995). The internal division among immigrant groups, as in the case of Latinos in this study, speaks to internalized racism. This occurs when individuals of a racially marginalized group (whether they are immigrants or not) accept the stereotypes and disrespect towards one's own ethnic/racial group and "tolerate, minimize, deny, and perhaps even justify racism" (David et al. 2019, p. 1063; David and Okazaki 2006; Louie 2012).

Two forms of racism are particular to immigration and immigrants. Racist nativism is distinctly related to the relationships between the U.S. and other nations and refers to either the denial of entry of particular foreign groups or national tensions; nativist racism speaks to the rejection of specific groups of immigrants and their descendants, after entry has occurred. Both are part of the pluralist racisms that ultimately capture the diversity in experiences among people of color, and predominantly those framed as the "other" in the U.S.

In this study, racist nativism involves one country (i.e., the U.S.) keeping out perceived threats from other nations that are framed as enemies. Racist nativist threats are deemed as counter to native white Americanism, one that is Anglo-Saxon, Christian, and largely Protestant (Saito 1997). An historical perspective helps us understand how racist nativism formulates "threats" that are alternatively construed as foreign religions (i.e., Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam), political systems (i.e., communism, Nazism, socialism, and anarchism), goods (i.e., trade wars that damage our economy), and disease and peoples (regarded as inassimilable) from other so-called inferior nations (Kraut 1995; Fairchild 2003; Gerstle 2007). All are conceived as either contrary or dangers to America. Racist nativism culminated in the Immigration Act of 1924, which effectively shut the door to large-scale immigration for the next four decades and favored newcomers from Northern and Western Europe—who

were seen as more aligned with Americanism. While the Border Patrol was established to monitor all our borders, it was mainly the Southern (U.S.–Mexico) frontier that was surveilled, as compared to the Northern frontier with Canada (Ngai 2003). The goal of racist nativism is to keep “dangerous” people, illnesses, ideas, and things out of the nation state.

Once people and ideas entered the U.S., however, different exclusionary processes unfolded, dependent on race (Lee 2019). The historical record documents an eventual elasticity of boundaries that welcomed white European immigrants after decades of vilification (Ignatiev 1995; Brodtkin 1998; Alba and Nee 2003; Alba 2009).¹ In contrast, nativist racism has characterized the reception of Asian and Latino immigrants,² and their descendants, who are perceived as “perennial foreigners”, regardless of how many generations their families have been in the U.S. (Tuan 1999; Wu 2002; Dhingra 2003, 2004; Golash-Boza 2006; Lima 2007, 2020). Racism is thus experienced differently by Asian and Latino Americans as they are always seen from a binational perspective, coming from somewhere else and never fully belonging here—no matter how long their ancestral roots extend.³

Further, these immigrants’ sense of not belonging has been legally inscribed. From 1924 to 1943, all Americans from every part of Asia were denied the right to become citizens through naturalization. Chinese aliens, who were barred from naturalized citizenship starting in 1882, were allowed to become American citizens in 1943; however, other Asians had to wait until 1952. In several states, aliens ineligible for citizenship could not own land, a measure designed to prevent wealth accumulation and to discourage future immigration. Meanwhile, Asian Americans were denied the right to join unions, obtain professional licenses, testify in court, marry local women, and bring over wives from the homeland (Louie 2004). The racialized aspects in who does not have authorized status continue today, as Mexican and Central Americans comprise the majority of undocumented immigrants.⁴

2.2. *The Interplay of Racist Nativism & Nativist Racism*

How have these two racisms—one external, as centered on the nation state’s impulse to exclude foreigners from entry, and the other internal and rooted in the nation state’s urge to otherize those already in its territory—become interconnected? Nativist racism, typically propelled by white labor unrest, has certainly provoked exclusion from entry. During the American economic recession of the 1870s, white working class labor, threatened by employers’ use of Chinese immigrant labor, pushed for the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act—the first federal legislation that excluded labor migrants by national origin, race and ethnicity.⁵ Until 1943, this Act, and its successors, effectively barred mass working class labor migration from China to the U.S. (Louie 2004; Lee 2015). Similarly, when white workers felt threatened by Mexican Americans during the Great Depression in 1929, more than a half million were repatriated or deported—with estimates showing that more than half were U.S. citizens. In response to white labor unrest, Operation Wetback (1953–1954) was enacted, resulting in the deportations of more than one million Mexicans, including those with authorized status (Huber et al. 2008).

Racist nativism has also taken nativist racism to a fever pitch, oftentimes during war. Japan’s bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1942 brought the U.S. into World War II and led to Executive Order 9066, which resulted in the internment of Japanese aliens (ineligible by American law for citizenship) and U.S.-born Japanese Americans. The terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 (or 9/11) led to civil rights violations against Muslims, Sikhs, Arabs, and South Asians in the U.S. (*Civil Rights Implications of Post-September 11 Law Enforcement Practices in New York* 2004). More recently, Trump’s rhetoric and policies to exclude travelers from Middle Eastern nations, based on the idea that Muslims are terrorists, have been associated with hate violence against South Asian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Middle Eastern, and Arab communities (Modhi 2018). In all these cases, the powerful external threat, rooted in racist nativism, led to the denial of rights and hate crimes against Asian Americans, who ended up becoming stigmatized as

forever foreigners on the soil of their adopted or birth country over several generations (Louie 2020b; Viladrich 2021).

On the eve of COVID-19, Trump's presidency rested on these dual racisms. A key part of his electoral base was embodied by white working class Americans, who felt left behind by the end of traditional manufacturing in the U.S. caused by global flows of labor (i.e., outsourcing), along with increasing streams of immigrants of color into low-wage service jobs. Trump appealed to white working class resentment against "the other" (Inglehart and Norris 2017; Speed and Mannion 2017), which explains why he privileged campaigning over governing, and rewarded those who showed unquestioned loyalty to his mandate rather than to all Americans (Davis 2017; Holzer 2020; Kumar 2020; Jacobs et al. 2020b). In spite of the fact that the American working class did not do better under Trump's neoliberal policies, the cultural bond between him and his followers became more relevant than resolving the latter's economic troubles.

3. Data and Methods

This study aimed to investigate Trump's framing of economic, health, and immigration policies related to China and Mexico and the implications therein for the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, our data searches centered on his social media posts, speeches, and press releases, between January and October 2020. Because of the intensity of the advent and first surge of COVID-19 in the U.S., which occasioned numerous coronavirus-related briefings in a single month, along with hundreds of tweets, we focused on the China planks from January to April 2020. The bulk of the data on Latinos/Hispanics included the period from June to September 2020.

Data searches were conducted via LexisNexis, White House statements (www.whitehouse.gov; accessed from 18 May through 2 November), Factbase (<https://factba.se>; accessed from 27 July through 4 November), and Trump Twitter Archive (<http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com>; accessed from August 13 through 2 November); the latter allowing a thematic selection of Trump's tweets. Until he was permanently banned from the site, Trump's preferred platform was Twitter (Kumar 2020).⁶ We analyzed about 435 releases, remarks, and press briefings and more than 650 tweets. The main speaker/writer was President Trump and, to a lesser degree, Vice President Pence and other members of the administration. The following search terms were chosen for identifying relevant passages leading to deeper analysis: "Asian, China, Chinese, Coronavirus, COVID, Hispanic, illegal, immigrant, Kung (for Kung Flu), Latino, undocumented, and Wuhan".

The analysis that follows presents a chronological and systematic in-depth account of Trumpian rhetoric. This approach is needed to situate his words in real time and in the context of the pandemic pressures that he was facing and that evolved over the year 2020. We used multiple close textual readings of Trump's social media posts, speeches, and press releases to chart the evolution of his rhetoric and to analyze how different aspects of his verbal statements intersected with one another. Lastly, we examined how the discourse ebbed and escalated in urgency and why.

4. Results

4.1. Trumpian White Supremacy in the COVID-19 Era

Trump portrayed himself as a wartime president leading the U.S. in its fight against COVID-19. In March and April 2020, he made at least 20 plus references along these lines while also calling the coronavirus the "invisible enemy". Yet, similar to the agenda of other wartime national leaders, Trump's "real" war was actually geared to advancing his nativist and racist agenda. These ideological tenets can be traced to Trump's blaming rhetoric that mostly targeted two nation states, China and Mexico, as will be examined next.

4.2. China as the External Enemy

4.2.1. Trade Threat & the Cause of America's Pandemic Problems

Trump used the bully pulpit to portray China as directly responsible for the viral outbreak in the U.S. and the ensuing challenges in this country as well as globally. As with the Mexico Wall, he drew on a well-used script—the trade wars between the U.S. and China (Qiu 2016). These feuds had long resulted in sizable losses in American manufacturing jobs and agricultural revenues, as the U.S. had been unable to successfully compete against the goods produced in China. Phase 1 of the trade agreement that Trump brokered, signed on 15 January 2020, was a U.S. victory. China agreed to purchase USD 200 billion more in goods in 2020 and 2021 than in 2017 (Tully 2020). With COVID-19, Trump's China soon became the source of disease and the cause of America's stunning pandemic fallouts. By highlighting the same narrow set of themes, and talking points, Trump spotlighted China as the external enemy. The more he was held accountable for America's poor response to the pandemic, the more he singled out China.

This double-barreled strategy had a slow ramp up. The headline for Trump's communications in January and February 2020 was the signing of the U.S.–China trade agreement. He portrayed himself as the forceful change agent able to redress the past history of "China's misbehavior on trade". These tweets served to extol his leadership at a time when the impeachment proceedings were directly questioning his leadership. Trump maintained a measured tone in social media posts around the coronavirus, in his own tweets and retweets. In late February, Trump issued 13 re/tweets about the Coronavirus, offering praise for the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO), all while applauding his own decision to "close the borders" to international travelers from China. The U.S.' temporary denial of entry to foreign nationals, who had previously traveled in China in the past 14 days, was announced on 31 January 2020. That set of restrictions, and those made effective about a month later, including banning travelers from Italy and parts of South Korea, were found to be somewhat effective in slowing the spread of the virus in the U.S. during these early weeks, and Trump emphasized the need for the world to work together against the virus.

The end of February (2/28) foreshadowed what was to come. In one tweet, Trump called out the virus's origins in China and, in another, emphatically stated being unjustly blamed by political rivals for the deleterious impact of COVID-19 on the U.S. "[T]he Coronavirus is now being blamed, by the Do Nothing Democrats, to be the fault of 'Trump.'" Here, Trump set up the playbook for his racist nativist public approach to the pandemic. In sum, to avoid blame, he made China the source of America's pandemic woes. Still, his full set of strategies was not deployed immediately. COVID-19 morbidity and mortality rates were still relatively low, and on 7 March, Trump noted the nation only had 240 cases, and 11 deaths; therefore, he did not see himself as having a problem on his watch.

On 11 March, he did say that the virus "came out of nowhere", "out of China", as if to suggest that his administration could not have expected its arrival, and he highlighted his willingness to cooperate with Chinese officials. Even on 11 March, when the WHO announced that the coronavirus was now a global pandemic, the then President continued to maintain his composure. Terming COVID-19 a "foreign" virus, he announced the deployment of full government resources to expeditiously defeat it. On 13 March, he issued a national emergency. The next day, at a press briefing, Trump was flush with optimism from the initial legislative efforts for what would become the economic stimulus package. While reporting on 50 reported deaths from COVID-19 in the U.S., Trump ended the briefing with words of unity and, once again, noted that the virus had originated in China. Still, he did not point fingers.

We're all in this together. It's something that nobody expected. It came out of China, and it's one of those things that happened. It's nobody's fault. We all—we all will solve this problem; we'll solve it well.

However, the health indicators were presenting a false picture. Because of the nation's lack of adequate testing, the numbers of infected Americans was artificially low (Wallach and Myers 2020).

4.2.2. The China Playbook: High Gear

By mid-March, the situation had dramatically changed. New York City, which had become a COVID-19 epicenter in the Spring of 2020, was experiencing a grim and steady rise in daily cases and deaths. By 24 March, New York City had 20,011 cases and a death toll of 280 (De Blasio Calls Stimulus Deal's Treatment of N.Y.C. 'Immoral' 2020). New York State followed California's lead in issuing a stay-at-home order on 22 March. Due in part to the nation's improved testing capacity, by 27 March, there were 100,000 reported cases of COVID-19 in the U.S., as compared to only 10,000 on 18 March (Wallach and Myers 2020).

Much of the national conversation at the time was about the lack of ventilators (Jacobs et al. 2020a) and of personal protective equipment (Kulish et al. 2020), including hospital beds and medical personnel in areas with large case surges. This was concomitant to the job loss and shuttered industries (restaurants, the airlines, and tourism taking the most direct hits) that followed the state shutdowns. The president received considerable pushback over his reluctance to deploy the Production Defense Act aimed to mandate the production of needed equipment, and to implement a cohesive federal response that would combat both the pandemic and the resulting economic crisis. He was questioned about the U.S.' performance as compared to New Zealand, South Korea, and Taiwan, which were doing better (Hatcher 2020). Trump's diversionary strategy was to link these dismal national indicators to China rather than to himself and the lackluster response that he was spearheading.

Beginning on Twitter, Trump started to adopt a defensive, racist nativist posture. From 13–27 March, the President issued 12 tweets/retweets, all alternatively containing the following terms: the "Wuhan virus", the "Chinese virus", or the "China Coronavirus". In a series of short tweets, Trump blamed China for the virus's arrival in the U.S. and the bonanza of problems that ensued, while diverting blame from his leadership. In a 16 March tweet, for the first time, Trump publicly referred to COVID-19 as the Chinese Virus that caused the airlines' lost revenue along with the financial woes experienced by other key industries at the time. He specifically mentioned companies "that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus" and the states "being hit hard by the Chinese Virus". He also remarked on how he signed the Defense Production Act to combat the "Chinese Virus".

The President's speeches during this time period amplified the racist nativism stand captured in his tweets. On 17 March, Trump met with tourism industry executives and used a similar strategy, as he did the day before with the airline industry, by subtly deflecting blame from his administration to China. Both industries had already suffered large economic losses from the stay-at-home orders, social distancing guidelines, and people's fear of travel. The President announced: "We'll talk about . . . What's happened since the Chinese virus came about". Then he repeated what Arne Sorenson, CEO of Marriott, had already shared at the meeting, "And this all started in China . . . That's where you first saw the problem and it's where you first got hit". After Mr. Sorenson confirmed this, Trump followed up with, "I hope you all heard that". The next day, Trump met with nurses and other frontline workers, another potentially nettlesome constituency for him since they faced the brunt of caring for COVID-19 patients given the shortage of personal protection equipment. Trump again opened with: "We're using the full power of government in response to the Chinese virus". This is another example of Trump's rhetorical strategy to locate the pandemic problems of the U.S. with China, rather than with his administration's policies.

April brought a shift in Trump's tone and language around the coronavirus, as compared to March. Both in his public remarks and tweets/retweets, the heated references to the so-called China virus, Chinese virus, or the Wuhan virus were noticeably fewer. This dialing back of nativism mirrors the different pandemic contexts that Trump faced in these

two months. His tone, starting in mid-March, was especially strident because so many events—directly linked to the pandemic—were new to all. These include the shutdowns, the virus itself, and the escalating number of cases and COVID-19 death counts. The fever pitch of Trump's racist nativism, along with the nation's growing nativist racism against Asian Americans, paralleled the frenzied ascent of the viral attack: the virus was winning.

By April, Trump's tone had softened. Although the COVID-19 medical indicators of distress were still trending upward, they were nearing an apex—signaling a welcome descent to come. April 10th marked the first high point in the nation's new coronavirus cases, and April 15th showed the first peak in daily deaths ([Grim Day in U.S. as Covid-19 Deaths and Hospitalizations Set Records 2020](#)). Not until late June would new cases reach such a level, and not until December 2 would the nation exceed such a high daily death count ([Robertson et al. 2020](#)). Throughout April, Trump spread notes of optimism from the slowing of the viral spread and reassured the public that the (first) high point had already passed. In his public communications, he referenced states' plans to open up and praised himself for expediting the economic relief payments that came from the Congress's passage of the stimulus package. He reminded us of the country that existed prior to the pandemic: "The greatest economy ever put together", with the "best employment numbers" for African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans and record stock market returns.

Still, China was not absent from Trump's rhetoric as he began to focus more on the U.S./China economic rivalry, the countries' new trade deal, the "China Ban" on foreign travelers from there—all positive things from his perspective. China was also present in Trump's disparagement of the WHO, for what he now saw as its favoritism of China. On April 14, he announced that the U.S. would stop funding the WHO until the results were in from an investigation of its role in managing the early pandemic.

However, Trump did not entirely abstain from blaming China for the pandemic. There were at least four instances, from April 18 to April 30, that riffed off this line about the virus: "It came from China—in whatever form, 184 countries now are suffering because of it. And it's too bad, isn't it? And it could have been solved very easily. When it was just starting, it could have been solved really very easily". In three of them, the line was prefaced by a triggering reference. For instance, at a 30 April 2020 meeting, Trump was asked about the nation's unemployment rate of about 19 percent, not seen since the Great Depression. Trump immediately brought up China:

We just got hit by a vicious virus that should have never been allowed to escape China. They should have stopped it at the source. They didn't do that. A hundred and eighty-four countries have been devastated by it, including China, by the way.

Meanwhile, some Americans were holding Asian Americans responsible for the pandemic, casting them as perpetual foreigners, and the President played a key role in that narrative as well.

4.2.3. China Blaming & Nativist Racism

Trump missed several opportunities to address head-on the nativist racism that was flaring in the U.S. against Asian Americans and those who looked to be East Asian, regardless of their country of origin. Just as he was publicly casting China as the source of the U.S.' crises, other Americans were finger-pointing at Asian Americans, seeing them as the face of China and, thus, blaming them as well. Again, COVID-19 became a case of racist nativism that whipped up nativist racism to a fevered pitch. Perhaps Trump did not intend for this to happen, but he also did not back away from his nativism stand once he was apprised of its effects.

On 18 March, Trump opened a briefing with "our war against the Chinese virus" and was challenged on his use of that term to describe COVID-19. Journalist Yamiche Alcindor especially called out "reports of dozens of incidents of bias against Chinese Americans in this country" and claimed that language like Trump's only fuels these incidents. Trump's

lengthy exchange with the reporter occurred during this infamous “Kung Flu” briefing, where he was asked about whether it was acceptable for an unnamed White House official to refer to the coronavirus as “Kung flu”, a pun on the virus’s origins in China. Denying knowledge about this, Trump further rejected the possibility that his use of “Chinese virus” would put Asian Americans at risk by seeming to give permission to others to target them.

Notably, Trump did not address the incidents of bias against Chinese Americans in the U.S. nor did he publicly reflect upon how Asian Americans might be put at risk by this kind of vitriolic rhetoric. This was despite the fact that, as the reporter noted, Asian Americans who looked to be of Chinese descent had already become the target of bias and hate crimes. The next day, on 19 March, the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council and Chinese for Affirmative Action launched a website for reporting hate incidents. In late March, ABC News referenced an FBI report warning of a potential surge in hate crimes against Asian Americans, allegedly perpetrated by fellow Americans who had associated the virus with China and Asian Americans (Louie 2020a).

Rather than revise his racialized nativist narrative around China, or at least distance it from the racism facing Asian Americans, Trump deepened his China blaming as if the two were not linked. According to Trump, China should have been more transparent and provided the U.S. a two- to three-month head start on how to combat the coronavirus. Here again, Trump drew an intentional linkage between the U.S. crisis and China’s past policies, diverting the conversation from his administration’s own policies.

24 March 2020 is notable because Trump did not open his remarks with the Chinese virus. Rather, he started with the Asian American community and the need for national unity. The previous day, he had tweeted against the blaming of Asian Americans for “the spreading of the virus”, that it “is NOT their fault in any way, shape or form”. Still, he did not back away from claims that China should have told the world sooner about COVID-19. Yet, generally, Trump cast China in an overall more favorable light—noting that the country had stepped up its purchases of American agricultural goods, as per the trade agreement and that, despite their longstanding rivalry, the two countries still had a good relationship. The U.S. was now winning, thanks to him. But on 26 March, Trump doubled down. When asked why he was backing away from his use of “the Chinese virus”, he replied:

I talk about the Chinese virus and—and I mean it. That’s where it came from. You know, if you look at Ebola, if you look at all—Lyme. Right? Lyme, Connecticut. You look at all these different, horrible diseases, they seem to come with a name with the location. And this was a Chinese virus.

That same day, Trump was asked about the need to protect Asian Americans from bias related to China’s role in the viral outbreak. He described such bias as “nasty language”. Further, he declined to provide specific measures to protect Asian Americans. Still, this became the fullest articulation of anti-Asian discrimination that he would address during the entire first quarter of the pandemic (January–April). Meanwhile, both online and in person, Asian Americans were being called racial and ethnic slurs and were told “you are the face of the disease” and “you brought the virus here, go back to China”. Reports further indicated that the bias went beyond “nasty language”, as some Asian Americans were physically assaulted (Louie 2020a). According to the New York City Human Rights Commission, 133 anti-Asian reports were filed from 1 February 2020 to 15 May 2020, as compared to only 11 reports during the same period in the previous year. In response, in late April, the New York City Commission on Human Rights launched a COVID-19 Response Team (Louie 2020a). Instead of addressing such matters, Trump ended the month with China. What Trump did yet again on 26 March was say that the outbreak started in China and that no one could have known this pandemic was going to happen in the U.S.

Finally, in the latter half of April, Trump repeatedly asked why Democratic Representative Nancy Pelosi (California) thought it was safe to dine in San Francisco’s Chinatown back in late February. He mocked her intentions: “Let’s all have the big parade—Chinatown parade”. (In fact, the Lunar New Year typically celebrated with a parade in Chinese communities had already occurred in late January). Trump said Pelosi was marching in

Chinatown, having a street fair or partying there, and thus not taking the virus seriously. He ignored reporters' questions about why he was calling out Pelosi if he himself had held several rallies in February and March.

On 19 April, he retweeted a reference to Pelosi's interview on Fox News about this visit. Pelosi said she wanted to show support for the local ethnic economy, which was taking a hit with the blaming of Chinese Americans and associated businesses for being COVID-19 carriers. Customers were staying away from Chinatowns out of a mistaken fear of catching the disease. However, the post by Arthur Schwartz, which Trump retweeted, mentioned "the China virus" and portrayed Pelosi as doing the bidding of China's top leader: "She calls it 'the flu' and says that calling it the China Virus is racist towards Asian Americans. Just as Xi Jinping ordered". Neither the tweet nor Trump's own retweet mentioned the Asian American community being under siege.

4.3. Mexico as the External Enemy

4.3.1. Building the Wall: Keeping COVID-19 Carriers Away

Trump further deployed the blame game of COVID-19 to justify his campaign promise to build the Southern Wall—a classic example of racist nativism. His obsession with "building the wall" became a continuation of his prime communication strategy of connecting health security with border security, which dates to the beginning of his presidential campaign. In a written statement that was well covered in the media, candidate Trump openly claimed that infectious diseases were coming to the U.S. by way of Mexican immigrants: "The United States has become a dumping ground for Mexico and, in fact, for many other parts of the world" (Walker 2015).

Early on during Trump's presidential campaign, stopping "illegal immigration" had turned into the centerpiece of a political platform that hyped up the "hordes" of people flooding the country—including human caravans of immigrants coming in via Mexico. On this issue, it is important to note that the representation of the U.S.–Mexican border as a source of disease is not new and actually became a foundational principle of white supremacy in the north (Markel and Stern 2002). Coercive controls and attempts to stop all traffic across the border, characterized by mandatory "disinfections" and "fumigation" of Mexican travelers coming into the U.S., was a staple of the public health campaigns against typhus that were launched in 1917 and continued throughout the 1940s (Mckiernan-González 2012).

During his mandate, Trump's systematic obsession with finishing the construction of the U.S.–Mexican border wall continued to rank high among his political priorities. From January to October 2020, there were several tweets on "his" progress as he found ways to tie in COVID-19 with amplified racist nativism rhetoric. In Trump's rants about foreign countries being responsible for the rising COVID-19 infection and fatality rates in the U.S., he openly blamed "illegals" (in allusion to Mexican and Central American border crossers) for carrying the virus and endangering the country's safety. When the pandemic first struck the U.S. early in 2020, Trump saw the wall as an opportunity to merge his fight against "illegals" with his commitment to stopping the "China virus" from entering through the southern border. While rallying around the country, early in February and before any COVID-19 fatalities had been identified in the U.S., he was quick to blame Mexicans and other border crossers for bringing the virus. Then, on 10 March 2020, he tweeted: "Going up fast. We need the Wall more than ever". He also retweeted @charliekirk11's message:

Now, more than ever, we need the wall with China Virus spreading across the globe, the US stands a chance if we can control of our borders. President Trump is making it happen. I explain why this matter and & SO MUCH MORE. [sic]

Trump's prime-time speech the next day (11 March) about the pandemic set the tone for his "war against the foreign virus", which would continue to take on militaristic features consistent with racist nativism as time went on. Under the motto "keeping America safe and protected", in April 2020, the idea of COVID-19 as a "threat from the South" was used by the U.S. Government to end the asylum seeker program (Blue et al. 2021). Trump's

“build the wall” battle cry was then added to the slogan “law and order”, which together encapsulated his tough stance on immigration, along with his rejection of Black Lives Matter and other social justice movements (Hutzler 2020). In one roundtable in Yuma, Arizona in June, he remarked:

Without these public health measures, the southern border would be a global epicenter of the viral transmission. And if you look at some of the towns on the other side of the wall—as an example, in California, we have a certain area that is heavily infected on the Mexico side. And if we didn’t have a border wall there, it would be a—it would be really a catastrophic situation.

Well, you have to see San Diego. So, on the other side of San Diego is a tremendously big problem with COVID and other things. And they wanted that wall so badly—they were calling. Everybody was calling—I won’t even tell. I won’t embarrass them by saying who called. But people that didn’t want the wall outside wanted the wall. [. . .] And I built the wall, and it worked 100 percent. You know what I’m talking about. And then, I see one of the politicians two weeks later. “They should take down the wall”. By the way, it worked so well. But he was saying, “They should’ve taken down the wall”. But now they don’t even say that, because now it stopped COVID; it stopped everything. It stopped the whole deal.

During a photo-op with Arizona Governor Doug Ducey on 23 June, the two joined forces to turn that special day into what one journalist called “Blame it on the Mexicans Day”. Ducey set the stage by blaming the uptick in COVID-19 on “Mexican travelers coming to Arizona for getting health care” (Diaz 2020). By this time, it was clear that a correlation existed between the poor handling of the crisis (not passing mask-wearing regulations, keeping non-essential commercial establishments open, and promoting large gatherings, including rallies) and the peak in COVID-19 cases. However, rather than taking responsibility, either Trump for the nation or Ducey for Arizona, others—Mexicans—were to blame. Thereafter, the wall was “needed” more than ever before.

Over the summer of 2020, newspapers such as USA Today had obtained e-mails and notes, exchanged between the Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar and the Department of Homeland Security, seeking evidence to prove that the virus was being brought by Mexicans at the border (Murphy and Stein 2020). Looking for a “Cinco de mayo effect”—in reference to a Mexican national celebration—government officials were hoping to blame Mexicans for the COVID-19 surge. Right-wing think tanks like the Center for Migration studies backed these claims by stating they were allegedly in possession of data demonstrating that severely ill Mexican Americans, dual citizens, legal permanent residents, and Mexicans infected with the virus had been flooding the U.S. in order to seek health care they were unable to obtain in Mexico (Southern Poverty Law Center 2020). Called the “COVID refugee flood”, a number of news outlets reported on an allegedly sick caravan of immigrants that had traveled into Texas before moving northwards (Bensman 2020). Trump ran with these narratives exhorting the U.S. to quickly crack down on immigration and close the southern U.S. border.

4.3.2. Latino Detainees and Latino Workers: Unseen, Unprotected, and Unvalued

To bolster the exclusion strategy, Trump himself publicly drew on evidence from Latinos already in the nation, including those that were sent to detention centers after trying to cross the border. He emphasized their “getting infected with COVID-19” as affirmation that they were carriers of disease and that they should be kept out to begin with. Meanwhile, ICE detention centers became a breeding ground for COVID-19 because of a lack of health care, overcrowding, and unsanitary conditions (Wilson and Stimpson 2020). However, the latter structural conditions (subject to policy interventions) were not part of Trump’s talking points. Instead, he deployed a long-known strategy of diverting attention from the impact of structural racism in public health issues, one that has historically targeted

immigrants and Blacks. This discourse shifted attention from the fact that immigrants' and Blacks' working conditions were unhealthy and their neighborhoods were "often untouched by public health" (Falk 2020).⁷

Trump and his adherents also focused on undocumented Latinos in Florida's agricultural industry as well as in the Midwestern meat packing plants. In all these cases, the structural racism occasioning crowded, unsanitary working conditions—perfect for the spread of the virus—went unmentioned. Further, the contributions of Latino workers to obtaining food to grocers went unsaid. In one remarkable tweet from 4 April 2020, Trump generally acknowledged the work of food workers and producers who had kept Americans fed during the pandemic. However, he failed to mention the crucial role played by undocumented Latinos in the U.S. food production industry:

America owes our very hard-working food supply workers so much as they produce and deliver high quality food for us during this horrible COVID-19. Join me in thanking our Farmers, Ranchers, Processors, Distributors, and stores!
@JohnBoozman

Trump quickly made clear that federal COVID-19 financial relief would not reach undocumented immigrants by further admonishing governors, mostly Democrats, for having approved emergency measures that allegedly benefitted undocumented families during this crisis. Although Latinos in these jobs were doing essential work, their omission in Trump's speeches framed them as subordinate outsiders. Certainly, they were not publicly acknowledged either as immigrants or Hispanics and, using Saito's terminology (Forthcoming), were deemed "digestible" as if they were feeding the national body with their labor force.

Rather than acknowledging the deep health disparities that make ethnic/racial minorities more susceptible to disease (Viladrich 2020), conservatives allied with the U.S. executive branch in order to reproduce a scapegoating narrative. For instance, during a June press conference in Tallahassee, Florida governor Ron DeSantis blamed essential workers for the rapid increase in COVID-19 cases, stating that "overwhelmingly Hispanic" day laborers and agriculture laborers were at the root of his state's surge in COVID-19 cases (Santiago 2020). In a circular logic, those who were on the frontline feeding American households along with those working at farms and meatpacking factories—being the ones most exposed to the virus—were blamed as "virus carriers", instead of being acknowledged as victims who had been forced to put themselves in harm's way for the sake of protecting the common good (Murphy and Stein 2020).

4.3.3. Framing the "Good" Versus the "Bad" Latinos

During the COVID-19 crisis, Trump kept tapping into internalized racism for the sake of dividing the "good" from the "bad" Latinos, on the basis of garnering the former's support for his campaign against the latter—all while encouraging racist nativism. On 4 March 2020, a tweet by @Latino Coalition posted a link to Trump's goal of "closing the border to save lives". This was followed by additional tweets in which he praised himself for stopping immigration to the U.S. during the COVID-19 crisis. In the video linked to the original tweet, he applauded Hispanic border patrol agents for keeping the border safe:

The Hispanic Americans courageously serving in our armed forces include the brave Hispanic Americans protecting our nation on the front lines as border agents. We have a lot of border agents doing a great job and we are actually up to mile 138 on the wall, they [Hispanic Americans] understand the border . . . You know who wants this more than anybody else? The Hispanics, because they get it! They are here, they want to be safe and they know that some of the people coming across are not the people you want to be with . . . And the Hispanics, they understand the border. A poll came out with very high numbers and people saying: 'I can't imagine why Hispanics like President Trump so much' . . . Do you know why? Because they understand the border better than anybody

else and they want a safe border . . . It is estimated that more than half of our nation border agents, even higher, are Hispanic Americans and they are doing an incredible job! We are immensely grateful for their amazing job in seizing drugs in stopping human trafficking, which is so terrible and ensuring a safe, human lawful system of immigration . . . The nation is grateful for their defending our American flag.

Three claims transpire from the excerpt above, which, together, contribute to a “divide and conquer” stand on the basis of racist nativism. First, Trump’s quick decision to close the Southern border in early March 2020 was rhetorically framed as a strategic measure to protect the population of “legit Hispanics”—the ones legally living on this side of the border—from the criminal and diseased horde waiting to cross from the other. Second, Trump’s reference to “the people coming across” is faceless: they are human traffickers, dealers, MS-13 gang members, criminals and “bad hombres” (Kulig et al. 2020). Contrary to his well-celebrated “Hispanic American” allies, which in Trump’s speeches are typically addressed by their first names, such as Jorge or Maria; “illegals” are nameless, anonymous aliens whose only motivation to come to this country is to bring crime, drugs, disease, and unrest. As noted in the literature (Viladrich 2019), the conservative framing of immigrants is most successful when using general categories (e.g., immigrants, illegals, aliens) that avoid references to either personal or socio-demographic specificities.

Finally, the excerpt above meets the goal of welcoming segments of the subaltern into the umbrella of whiteness. By highlighting the role of Hispanic border agents in keeping “illegal aliens” away, Trump reaffirmed his commitment to assimilate them into the national “us”, while reminding Hispanics of their patriotic duty to defend the physical and symbolic boundaries of the American nation. The President’s keen maneuvering of divisional politics achieved its maximum expression when praising Hispanic Americans for being “vigilant” against the nation’s enemies—namely, Latino trespassers.

Just as he was building the wall to keep out the “bad hombres” from entering the U.S., Trump put forth policy initiatives to help his Latino base. On July 9, the White House Hispanic Prosperity Initiative and the Interagency Working Group were created by one of Trump’s Executive Orders. These programs sought to improve access to educational, training, and economic opportunities for Hispanic American students by promoting school choice, personalized learning, family engagement, civics education, and pathways to in-demand jobs. Without apparent contradiction, Trump continued addressing his Hispanic audiences by saluting their efforts to exclude those illegally crossing into the U.S. For instance, in August 2020, Trump visited Yuma (Arizona) for a second time that summer, a town that was hit hard by COVID-19 and stated:

And you know, nobody understands the border better than Hispanics. They know what’s good, what’s bad. They don’t want bad people coming into our country, taking their jobs, taking their homes, causing crime. Hispanic Americans are the people who are the most in favor of what we’re doing at the border.

As suggested earlier, one way for Trump to emphasize racist nativism was by reminding his Latino base of the large number of border agents and home security employees serving his country. Yet, who, among the large Latino population, would constitute the ideal supporter eager to join Trump’s political base? Trump’s recruitment efforts targeted those who bought into his internalized racism diatribe against the Mexican threat from without (the hordes waiting to invade) as well as those fighting the Latino threat from within (the undocumented immigrant).

Our analysis of Trump’s social media and public speeches reveals that his cherished Hispanic audience was far from homogenous and included a diverse group of first- and second-generation Latinos who “played by the rules”, including immigrants, who were legally in the U.S. They are factory managers, small business owners, independent contractors, and disenfranchised employees who, in many cases, felt betrayed by the Democratic Party. Contrary to monolithic images of Latinos, recent work has shown the enormous

diversity of the Latino electorate that favored Trump during the past two presidential elections (Alamillo 2019; Galbraith and Callister 2020; Gonzalez-Sobrinho 2020).

Despite Trump's overt anti-immigrant stance and his openly derogatory remarks against Mexicans, he scored records of votes among the Hispanic population—even surpassing previous Republican candidates (Alamillo 2019). His Latino followers seemed to identify with the white majority in as much as they did not endorse pro-immigrant agendas nor hold anti-racist stands. A study based on the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study found that, among Hispanics, denial of racism was the strongest predictor of support for Trump, a relationship that remained above even party identification and ideology (Alamillo 2019). This includes denial of racism against Hispanics as well as against Blacks and women.

From January to October 2020, Trump's tweets mostly focused on praising himself for Hispanics' steady economic and educational achievements since taking office; one popular tweet clearly summarizes this sentiment: "We have achieved more for Hispanic-Americans in less than 47 months than Joe Biden has achieved in 47 years" (25 September 2020). Trump's social media entries seemed to reflect an alternative reality that ignored the hardships largely experienced by minority ethnic and racial groups in the U.S., as seen in this tweet from 12 July 2020:

@realDonaldTrump is a champion for the American worker. Under his leadership, Hispanic unemployment reached a record low and median income for Hispanic households reached a historic high, surpassing \$50K for the first time on record.

We close this section with a quote from one of Trump's speeches that keenly demonstrates his maneuvering skills to draw Hispanics' divisive sentiments against both Joseph Biden (his political opponent for the U.S. Presidency) and the "China virus". Referencing Biden, he said:

But he betrayed the Hispanic Americans. Prior to the China virus, the plague that came in from China, we achieve the lowest Hispanic American unemployment rate in history of our country ([. . .] It was six months ago we are building it up again you know make an America great again we say now make America great again. Make America great again because we did it. Now I have to do it again.

5. Conclusions

To divert attention from his poor pandemic leadership, Trump deftly assumed the mantle of a wartime president and delved into his racist nativist playbook to divide the public by framing China and Mexico as enemies of the U.S. His racist nativism, in turn, spilled over into the blaming of Asian and Latino Americans. With Asians, Trump minimized the scapegoating done by others, without noting the role of his racist nativism in fueling it, and, as in the case of Pelosi "dancing in the streets of Chinatown", he ignored it altogether. With Latinos, Trump actively amplified his racist nativism by accusing Mexicans, along with undocumented immigrants, of purposely bringing the virus into the U.S. and sought nativist racism alliances with "legit" Hispanics—who purportedly joined the federal government's aims to combat, and expel, "illegals".

The end result was that, in the U.S., the COVID-19 pandemic turned into a prime medium for the production and dissemination of white supremacist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Semitic rhetorics, which fueled the antagonism against immigrants and refugees (Human Rights Watch 2020). No matter that Asian and Latino Americans are typically portrayed in counterpoint to one another, as the so-called "good" and "bad" minorities (Louie 2011, 2012). The "Chinese virus" and Latin American "illegal immigrants" ended up being depicted similarly as human invaders that trespass into the U.S. for the purpose of destroying the nation. As a symbolic extension of the immigrant body, the infectious pathogen was ultimately merged with the nameless MS-13 gang member, the Chinese visitor, the forever foreigner Asian American, and the freeloading Latino. Furthermore, the connection between the Asian and Latino culprits in the COVID-19 saga was both

chronological and semiotic. At the onset of the pandemic, Asians were blamed for bringing the virus to the U.S., while Latinos were accused of spreading it. As time passed—and the virus reached border towns and inner states—“illegal” Latinos became pictured as COVID-19 carriers crossing into U.S. territory. By initially ignoring the impact of COVID and later on shifting the blame for the administration’s poor handling of the crisis, Trump and allies unearthed some old tricks of white supremacy and reinvented the “other” as their prime culprit.

How can a president who calls Mexican immigrants drug dealers and rapists and whose immigration policies are characterized by images of families separated at the border (and children held in cages) be appealing to a Latino minority? To be maximally effective, white supremacy must grant the right to inclusion to not only one marginalized group over the other (Smith 2016; Saito Forthcoming) but, particularly, to subsets of subaltern ethnic/racial groups. In this vein, our analysis revealed the hierarchical distinction between those Latinos welcomed into the national polis (e.g., border patrol agents, business owners) and those excluded (e.g., mostly undocumented immigrants).

Our study of Trump’s public narratives reveals his attempts to conceal nativism and racism by stressing the idea of protecting the nation and its citizens against those portrayed as dangerous invaders. This brings to mind another recent president who used the wartime metaphor, and whose rhetoric did not often match his policies. President George W. Bush was called out for the discrepancy between his conciliatory words towards Muslim Americans in the wake of 9/11 and the actual law enforcement policies that targeted them—along with South Asian Americans who were mistaken for being Muslim (Civil Rights Implications of Post-September 11 Law Enforcement Practices in New York 2004; Greenwald 2016). In the case of Trump, there were mismatches between his rhetoric around winning the war against COVID-19 and his poor management of the health crisis, and between his conciliatory words around Asian Americans and his China blaming, which ended up fueling aggressions against Asian Americans. Further, Trump did not even attempt conciliatory words towards either undocumented Latino immigrants seeking to enter the U.S. or those already here. Instead, he simply went full frontal in his rhetoric towards them in a manner that did match his policies.

Our work further reveals that while the dangers framed in white supremacy vary, depending upon context, they all serve to otherize those publicly portrayed as “foreign”. In the COVID-19 era, the threats posed by Chinese nationals and East Asian Americans, who look like they might be of Chinese descent, are framed as health-related. Although Trump also connected disease with Latino immigrants, he further weighed in on their purported unethical and criminal nature. His claims to be “the least racist person he knows”, and being in favor of racial integration became compatible with the denigration of specific racial groups, whether undertaken by himself or by others—not on the basis of their phenotypic markers but on their assumed incompatibility with American wellbeing and values. In the end, white supremacy provides a screen for racist nativism and nativist racism. Native white U.S. citizens, the “real Americans”, are distinguished from those who are presumed to be essentially foreign and who either should not be let into the country or, if they are already here, can never and will never become true Americans.

Scholarly and public recognition of how a divide, divert, and conquer strategy otherizes across groups is crucial to efforts to dismantle white supremacy. If this strategy—and how it is used against multiple groups—continues to be publicly invisible, then enduring social change rooted in social justice principles will remain difficult to achieve. For instance, Asians and Latinos should know that the forever foreigner status ascribed to their groups has been used skillfully to diminish their interests and rights as Americans. Although East Asians have been particularly singled out here, Americans from every part of Asia have been touched by anti-Asian hate (Louie 2021; Viladrich 2021). Blacks, whites, and Native Americans must be part of this important dialogue as well, just as Asians and Latinos have to join the conversations about anti-Blackness and how it intersects and differs from the experiences of their own racial/ethnic groups. Certainly, even though the divide, divert,

and conquer strategy has been used with African Americans, a key difference, as shown by our findings, is *how* it has been used. As we have discussed in previous pages, regardless of how long they and their families have been here, Asian and Latino Americans are framed as forever foreigners—linked to nations typically seen as inferior—that are threatening the sheer core of native white Americanism. During times of white labor unrest, war, and pandemic diseases, as shown in this study, the two types of racisms can interconnect quite powerfully.

Our work highlights the need for public scholarship that moves beyond the confines of the academy into the public domain. Within a public scholarship framework, activists, media, and government officials could more quickly identify when people are deftly employing a divide, divert, and conquer strategy and call them on it. This is especially crucial today, when so many Americans are thought to be balkanized into disparate media silos with different understandings of the real facts. Coalition building can only occur if people have a clear baseline understanding of everyone's experiences and perspectives.

Our study has limitations, which will be addressed by future research undertaken by ourselves and colleagues. The year 2020 selected for our media analysis allowed us to deconstruct the nativist racism and racist nativism narratives that “went viral” during a novel pandemic and election year. However, our approach did not contemplate the full spectrum of Trump's discursive legacy. A fuller analysis would require a focus on Trump's rhetorics from the years preceding his election in 2016 into his entire presidency, and following the election of November 2020. Future research should also analyze whether and how Trump deployed the divide, divert, and conquer strategy with additional “otherized” groups and how different (and/or similar) this looked from his framing of Asians and Latinos. Future research should also pay attention to how public narratives impact individuals, coalition-building, and policies along with the long-term effect of these rhetorics on diverse audiences. For instance, we need studies on the enduring impact of white supremacy narratives on the portrayal of specific ethnic and racial groups as “disease carriers” vis-à-vis COVID-19's origin and risk factors.

Studies on framing effects are essential to assessing the discursive impact on people's beliefs and attitudes along with their emotional triggers to particular controversial issues. In this vein, upcoming scholarship will examine the short- and long-term impact of Trump's white supremacy rhetorics on the public's beliefs and emotional reactions regarding the cause and facilitators of COVID-19. Finally, we should investigate whether broader public discussions of otherizing do result in different perceptions and behaviors, including greater coalition building for broader equality. The resulting data drawn from such studies will be crucial to policymakers seeking to blunt the deleterious impact of white supremacy, which, with Trump as its main acolyte, has largely pervaded the latest discourses of race and ethnicity in the U.S. and the world.

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Notes

- ¹ Despite these strides, President-Elect Joseph Biden is only the nation's second Catholic head of state. There has not yet been a Jewish American president, and in 2020, the Anti Defamation League, which had been tracking reported incidents of anti-Semitism in the U.S. for 40 years then, reported that 2020 marked an all time high in reported incidents (Diaz 2020).
- ² Black immigrants represent another important case that is outside the scope of this paper. See Waters (1999); Kasinitz et al. (2008); Hamilton (2019).
- ³ The representation of Latinos as forever foreigners has a particular poignancy for Mexican Americans, some whose ancestral roots predate the U.S.-Mexico War (1846–1848): “Mexicans and Chicanas/os are perceived as foreigners, ironically, in a land that once belonged to them” (Lima 2007, 2020; Huber et al. 2008, p. 46).

- ⁴ In 2017, Mexicans represented 47 percent of the nation's undocumented immigrants, with Central Americans being another 18 percent, and Asians reaching nearly 14 percent (Kamarck and Stenglein 2019). This rise of the undocumented associated with Latin and Central America started in the wake of the Immigration Act of 1965, which, for the first time, limited immigration from countries in the Western Hemisphere (Passel and Cohn 2019).
- ⁵ Nativist racism against Chinese Americans did not disappear as they continued to face severe labor market restrictions (Liebersohn 1980; Louie 2004).
- ⁶ In 2017 and 2018, Trump issued more than 6000 tweets, and in 2019 alone, more than 4800 (Kumar 2020).
- ⁷ As Alan Kraut notes in an interview, "victim-blaming" of diverse groups including Irish Catholic immigrants in the 1832 cholera epidemic, Eastern European Jews in the 19th century for tuberculosis, and free blacks in the antebellum American South all shifted attention "away from issues like clean water, good sewage, alleviating over-crowding" (Falk 2020).

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