“Understanding” Asians: Anti-Asian Racism, Sentimentality, Sentiment Analysis, and Digital Surveillance

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Grace Kyungwon Hong, and Lisa Nakamura

During the summer of 2020, Chinese-Filipino American Jordan Eli Chan recorded and posted a video in which white restaurant patron Michael Lofthouse verbally attacked her and her family during her aunt’s birthday celebration at the Bernardus Lodge and Spa in Napa Valley, California. As Chan told news station KION, a white man sitting by himself began hurling racist insults, saying “F—you, Asians,” “Go back to whatever f—ing Asian country you’re from,” and “You don’t belong here.” In the video, Chan and other members of her family immediately respond with “Whoa, say that again, say that again.” A white woman server, Gennica Cochran, enters the scene, shouting at Lofthouse, “I’m sorry, you need to leave, that is not appropriate.” Lofthouse, an immigrant from the UK, replies, “No, you need to leave,” while flipping off the family and saying, “Trump’s going to f—you, you Asian pieces of shit.” Cochran shouts that the family are “valued guests.”

This work has been made possible in part by funding from the Mellon Foundation and the Canada 150 Chairs Program. Portions of this article have previously appeared in Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “The Space Between Us: Network Gaps, Racism, and the Possibilities of Living in/Difference,” Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience 7 (Fall 2021): 13; hereafter abbreviated “S.”


Cochrane had been watching Lofthouse all night, as he had previously switched tables, sent back food, and complained to her manager.
to which Lofthouse replies, “they’re valued guests in a pandemic,” echoing racist framings of Asians and Asian Americans as COVID disease vectors. As Lofthouse continues to swear and call the family “Asian f—s,” the combined efforts of the waitress, family, and other customers finally get him to leave.

Chan’s video went viral on Instagram and Facebook and was picked up by news outlets that disseminated it as evidence of a rising tide of anti-Asian racism—a consequence of then-President Trump’s claims that COVID was manufactured in China. It also seemed to show that this hate was being challenged: in the video and its aftermath justice appeared to have been served. Lofthouse was forced to resign from his position as CEO of Solid8, a tech startup in San Francisco, while Cochran—the hero of the video—received over a hundred thousand dollars in tips on a GoFundMe page started by a viewer. But Chan, like so many other women of color online, was harassed and forced to deivate her social media accounts. All the while, social media platforms capitalized on the voluminous outpouring of clicks that the video helped feed. Social media companies’ business models depend on provoking users: user outrage drives engagement and thus advertising revenue and stock valuations.

In sum, those who profited from this video were social media platforms and the white woman hero rewarded for her liberal antiracist benevolence toward the Asian American family, who were erased by the many headlines that framed this event as a battle between Cochran, Lofthouse, and trolls. What accounts for the hypervisibility of the two white combatants and the corresponding erasure of this family? And what does this incident reveal

3. See CBS17, “Waitress Steps in to Kick Out Racist Customer,” YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ibcDgSgQ44. See also The Young Turks, “Waitress Kicks Racist Tech CEO Out of Restaurant,” YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=IzxeqT8eEkA


Wendy Hui Kyong Chun et al. / “Understanding” Asians
about social media and the limitations of framing anti-Asian racism as a battle between white love and white hate?

To answer these questions, we trace how Asian US racialization grounds contemporary social media experimentation on—and comprehensive surveillance and agitation of—all users. To make this point, we focus on the relationship between the sentimentality of white benevolence as an expression of US empire and the social scientific history of sentiment analysis. Sentiment analysis, the practice of computationally quantifying the sentiment expressed in a text, drives social media profitability and allows for the wholesale and endless surveillance of all users. Sentiment analysis and public-opinion mining more generally as forms of human management also derive from early twentieth-century analyses of women workers and, as we analyze more closely here, Japanese internment camps. The drive to “read” the inscrutable other—framed as a benevolent alternative to direct coercion—underlies methods to better capture and control individuals by understanding their reactions within experimental and disruptive environments. Sentiment analysis—like so many social-engineering tools adopted by social media companies—both foster and negotiate disintegrating social structures. In tracing these histories, we contribute to larger efforts to unpack the centrality of racial formations to current forms of social media and to reveal how contemporary digital campaigns to “protect” Asian Americans sustain the mutually constitutive logic of white love and white hate.

The use of white love to justify comprehensive surveillance also seeks to circumvent the most recognizable forms of resistance—protest, rebellion, or critique—through the extractive logic of sentiment analysis that is designed to capitalize on any kind of affective reaction, whether positive or negative. At the same time, however, this mode of pacification inspires user responses

---


that are marked by what Édouard Glissant would call “opacity,” or the refusal to be transparently known.8 We conclude by reading for moments of Asian affective opacity as ways to move beyond the sentimental economy of love and hate that so easily feeds the digital economy of sentiment analysis. These examples of opacity make possible contradictory meanings to any particular affective response and makes possible practices of care that coexist with, but exceed, the extractive logics of sentiment analysis.

The Rewards of Sentimentality or The Problem with Green Goddesses

As the consequences of the video and GoFundMe make clear, audiences read Gennica Cochran as the main character of Jordan Chan’s video. The GoFundMe page features Cochran wearing a flowing green goddess gown and a crown of flowers that invoke earlier salvific icons of American generosity and white female benevolence against racism (figs. 1–2). According to Cochrane, she was driven by an “almost maternal” feeling; overcome by emotion and feeling “very protective,” she “just did what needed to be done.”9

This episode and Cochrane’s protective embrace repeat historical battles over Asian immigration. In the nineteenth century, white sentiment about Asians took two related forms. The first, a resentment-based white working-class masculinity, was perhaps most explicitly expressed in American Federation Labor president Samuel Gompers’s 1902 tract Meat vs. Rice: American Manhood vs. Asiatic Coolieism: Which Shall Survive?10 The second was embodied by the emerging middle and elite classes’ comparative benevolence toward Asian immigrants, which both distinguished them as an enlightened strata and allowed them to conveniently legitimize and benefit from exploitative immigration and labor policies.11 In the GoFundMe image, Cochran resembles Columbia, a classic personification of the US as a white woman in flowing robes standing in defense of the helpless that was often portrayed in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century elite media. For example, in

9. Woodrow, “EXCLUSIVE.”
February 1871, Harper’s Magazine published a cartoon entitled “The Chinese Question” that depicted a white-clad white woman with flowing hair staring over her shoulder at a mob of angry white men while holding her hand protectively over a crouching Chinese man. Her heroic love for exploited and voiceless Asian coolie laborers against white labor unionists contrasts sharply with the hatred of the angry working-class white mob, represented by a wall of flyers that say “coolly, slave, pauper, and rat-eater,” “the lowest and the vilest of the human race,” “degraded labor of Asia,” and “trades-union meeting: importation of Chinese barbarians must be stopped by the ballot or the bullet” (fig. 3).

If Cochrane’s maternal orientation references Columbia’s, Lofthouse’s racist slurs repeat these fears over “degraded labor”—borne of proximity and competition in the workplace—as a war between white love against white hate. At the same time, his sentiments also refract contemporary American anxieties about everything from Asian capital to China as a geopolitical rival. Lofthouse’s role as CEO of a technology company in San Francisco meant that he worked and lived in close proximity to Asians and Asian Americans. His racist claims repeat anti-Asian sentiment that

13. “Though predictions of Asian productivity supplanting European economic dominance have gripped European and American imaginations since the nineteenth century, since World War II ‘Asia’ has emerged as a particularly complicated ‘double front’ of threat and encroachment: on the one hand, Asian states have become prominent as external rivals in overseas war and in the global economy; on the other hand, Asian immigrants are still a necessary racialized labor force within the domestic national economy” (Lisa Lowe, “The International Within the National: American Studies and Asian American Critique,” Cultural Critique 40 [Autumn 1998]: 35).
14. As AnnaLee Saxenian writes: “One third of all scientists and engineers in Silicon Valley’s technology industries in 1990 were foreign-born. Of those, almost two thirds were Asians, with the majority of Chinese and Indian descent” (AnnaLee Saxenian, “Silicon Valley’s New Immigrant High-Growth Entrepreneurs,” Economic Development Quarterly 16 [Feb. 2002]: 22).
has for a long time registered the contradictions of US politics. The spectacle of two white people shouting “You need to leave” at each other exposed and asserted a range of related claims: the conditional hospitality of the host and the assumed rights of the customer, unsettling the Asian American family’s place as either “valued guests” or unwelcome invaders. Once again, Asian Americans—regardless of our ethnicity, citizenship status, or natality—are figured as negligible and nonagential people whose right to exist in the US and Canada is secured by the invitation of white people, in this case, Cochrane. Accordingly, Cochrane’s admonition—“That’s inappropriate”—focuses on manners and public comportment rather than the issue of anti-Asian racism.

Given this context, racial resentment (Lofthouse’s performance of hate) is not the opposite of racial sympathy (Cochrane’s performance of love); rather, they constitute a closed and mutually constitutive affective economy that has undergirded liberal humanist epistemology and is intrinsically unable to counter anti-Asian and Asian American racism. The “weaponization of white feelings in everyday life” has a long history, and the sentimental battle of love versus hate has historically cast nonwhite populations as unready for liberal citizenship. This liberal formation has framed civilized versus savage through the capacity to feel properly. Sentimentalism is built on sympathy, defined as the ability to experience love for the other and thus to turn

15. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a contradiction emerged between the US’s need for a homogeneous citizenry and capital’s need for differentiated labor. In the post-World War II era, capitalism requires economic internationalism that encourages porous national boundaries but also incentivizes nation-states to refortify in order to influence that internationalism to their advantage. See Lowe, Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics (Durham, N.C., 1996).

Figure 3. Thomas Nast, “The Chinese Question,” Harper’s Magazine, 18 Feb. 1871, p. 149.
difference into similarity, to create love where there might be hate (see D, p. 13).\(^{17}\)

In the nineteenth century, sentimentalism became the defining affective structure of the proper bourgeois subject epitomized by white womanhood undergirding bourgeois domesticity.\(^{18}\) Feminine subjects, who ostensibly were morally superior due to their “heightened faculty of feeling” and in particular their greater powers of sympathy, allegedly tempered the rational masculine subject of the market and the public sphere.\(^{19}\) Within this framework, as Kyla Schuller notes, “black bodies were overwhelmingly dismissed as animalistic savages, Asian bodies as ‘enervated’ and ‘stagnant’ remnants of the past, and Native bodies as animated fossils destined to go the way of the dinosaurs—all of which, at best, fitted a body to labor on behalf of the capital accumulation of the civilized and disqualified the person from political rights.”\(^{20}\) This allowed for seemingly contradictory representations of Asian immigrant bodies as both languid and shiftless opium addicts and as hyperproductive automatons, exceptionally suited for the repetitive and inhuman pace of industrial labor (fig. 4).\(^{21}\)

If European colonialism developed the notion of sympathy as a racializing apparatus, US empire arguably has taken it to its most logical extreme. Scholars have observed that the framing of US empire as both reluctant and benevolent made US exceptionalism (that is, the idea of the US as a revolutionary and egalitarian society that broke with European feudal and colonial relations of inequity and hierarchy) compatible with its deeply racialized settler-colonial and imperialist structure.\(^{22}\) US exceptionalist discourse has long disavowed its status as empire by casting itself as saving

17. Noting that sympathy “emerges from the colonial imposition of the Enlightenment episteme,” Yao points to Adam Smith’s argument in Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759): “By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him.” Predictably, Smith’s elaboration takes a decidedly colonial turn as, “‘civilized nations’ are said to be ‘founded upon humanity,’” while “the ‘rude and barbarous nations’ are focused on ‘self-denial’” (D, pp. 12, 12–13, 13).


20. Ibid., p. 12.


those it colonized or militarily occupied: from William McKinley’s description of the colonization of the Philippines as “benevolent assimilation” to the framing of US militarism in Southeast Asia, the Balkans, and Afghanistan as protecting those regions from the evils of Communism and/or religious fundamentalism.\(^{23}\) In contrast to racist hate, which presumes that Asian Americans are entirely unassimilable, racist love contends that we are eventually assimilable: “little brown brothers” who can over time become civilized under the care and tutelage of liberal whiteness.\(^{24}\) Of course, that eventually never comes; it is always a suspended and vestibular temporality that simply binds agency and humanity to whiteness.

This brief analysis of US exceptionalism as sentimental love for the forever-other highlights the futility of appealing to white love as an antiracist strategy. In the next section, we examine what happens when this older imperialist affective formation becomes sutured to mid-twentieth-century social science. Perhaps nothing better illustrates the violence of white love and its pernicious demand to read sentiment than the example of sociological, psychological,

---


and anthropological studies of Japanese and Japanese Americans interned in camps during World War II. The architects of these studies legitimized them—amongst the first examples of the sentiment analysis so central to contemporary social media infrastructures—by framing them as a kinder, gentler means of racial management, vital to the effective governance of these people and of occupied peoples more generally.

**Understanding “Orientals”**

During World War II, the US government forcibly removed all Japanese immigrants and Japanese American citizens living on the West Coast from their homes and placed them in internment camps further inland within the US.\(^{25}\) The decision to intern en masse only Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans was explicitly and unapologetically racist, linked both to beliefs in “Oriental” inscrutability and in the implicitly biological loyalties of the Japanese. General John DeWitt, who oversaw the internment, justified the incarceration of Japanese American citizens by arguing:

> The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on United States soil, possessed of United States citizenship, have become “Americanized,” the racial strains are undiluted. . . . It, therefore, follows that along the vital Pacific Coast over 112,000 potential enemies, of Japanese extraction, are at large today. . . . The very fact that no sabotage has taken place to date is a disturbing and confirming indication that such action will be taken.\(^{26}\)

DeWitt reiterated this point in his 1943 Congressional testimony against closing the internment camps. “There is no way,” he argued, “to determine their loyalty”: “It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen, he is still a Japanese. . . . you needn’t worry about the Italians at all except in certain cases. Also, the same for Germans except in individual cases. But we must worry about the Japanese all the time until he is wiped off the map.”\(^{27}\) This emphasis on the power of racial affinity to work against assimilation erases the massive state apparatus of legal prohibitions against the naturalization of nonwhite immigrants, intermarriage, and property

---


27. Quoted in ibid., pp. 221, 66.
ownership that made assimilation impossible, and the lack of evidence of sabotage becomes evidence of impending betrayal.28

At the same time, DeWitt’s attitude was supplemented by other, less overtly hostile views, and in 1943, the War Relocation Authority (WRA) gave some Japanese Americans permission to leave camps to work if they could demonstrate “loyalty, a means of support, and community acceptance in the areas where they planned to move.”29 Just as Cochrane/Columbia sought to protect Asians against racist mobs, so too did benevolent administrators, not through maternal instinct, but rather by developing methods to read the sentiments of the seemingly inscrutable and hostile Japanese and Japanese Americans. To do so, as Brian Masaru Hayashi has argued, they employed applied social scientists who, given their prior experiences in the Philippines and with Native American reservations, argued that “‘race,’ ‘culture,’ and ‘loyalty’” did not always overlap, as people of DeWitt’s ilk claimed.30 Because these researchers “knew” the Japanese, they—like the “special friends among the white people who would often stand up for them [Japanese Americans] as individuals and protect them”—could “distinguish the thoroughly loyal.”31 As allies of a sort, they claimed to be able to discern individual and group sentiments through a program of continuous surveillance and assessment. As such, white sympathy became yoked to the ability to know the other, and in particular to extract from the disaffected other knowledge about their feelings.

28. See H. R. 40, Naturalization Bill, Annals of Congress, 1st Congress, 2nd Session, p. 1463 (1790), memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llac&fileName=002/llac002.db&recNum=95; U.S. Const. amend. XIV, § 2 (1868), memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=015/llsl015.db&recNum=739; and Friend William Richardson, “Chapter 113, Section 1,” The Statutes of California and Amendments to the Codes Passed at the Fortieth Session of the Legislature 1913: Began on Monday, January Sixth, and Adjourned on Tuesday, May Twelfth, Nineteen Hundred and Thirteen (Sacramento, Calif., 1913), p. 206.

29. Nellie Nakamura, My First Hundred Years: The Memoirs of Nellie Nakamura from 1902–2002, ed. Shizue Seigel (San Francisco, 2019), p. 180. Lisa’s grandmother, aunt, and uncle were permitted to move to Minneapolis because they answered job advertisements for people sympathetic to the Japanese who “would write to the camp administrator and ask for a Japanese couple . . . to do some kind of work.” These white employers who lived “inland” were perceived as “special friends” who could help the Japanese by getting them out of camp “early” (p. 182).

30. Brian Masaru Hayashi, Democratizing the Enemy: The Japanese American Internment (Princeton, N.J., 2004), p. 16; hereafter abbreviated DE. Hayashi argues that this benevolent attitude was linked to colonial experiences in the Philippines and in Native American reservations. He writes, “The Philippines shaped not only W. Wade Head’s wartime governing of Japanese Americans but also the experience of others as well. . . . Federal government officials were often ambivalent, while social scientists were more insistent on the separation of these ideas, though the reasons why the latter thought so had little to do with the colonial experience in the Philippines and more with the history of the American Indians” (p. 16).

The Bureau of Sociological Research (BSR) in Poston, run by Lieutenant Alexander Leighton, a psychiatrist who had previously studied Navaho and Inuit communities, makes clear the coercive nature of the supposedly gentler motivating power of social science-based management techniques. Poston was the largest internment camp within the US and the only camp managed by both the WRA and the Office of Indian Affairs (OIA). The OIA provided the WRA with the expertise and blueprints necessary to “democratize the enemy” (see DE). As Jodi Byrd stresses, then-OIA Commissioner “[John] Collier viewed reservations as exceptional and romantic spaces of American multicultural democracy, and fought for ‘the federal recognition and nation-to-nation status of Indigenous nations colonized by the United States’ because he believed ‘American Indian democracies to be deeper and thicker democracies than those of the West’” (“S,” p. 13). He sought to create reservations as exceptional states of sovereignty, models of true democracies, “founded in neighborhoods and reaching over the world.” Collier’s views, as Byrd stresses, lie at the “intersection of colonial and racist agendas that collude to oppress on the one hand and offer the seductive recognitions that maintain state hegemony on the other.”

In Collier’s mind, “Poston . . . built on principles in accord with the ‘general administrative experience of the Indian Service,’ . . . sought to promote self-governance and self-sufficiency” while incarcerating evacuees and subjecting them to extreme privation and exploitation. “It ‘encouraged’ Japanese Americans to become independent and gain self-respect through work to overcome the ‘great shock’ of internment and to prove their ‘future usefulness as members of the American nation . . . [and] to make a record that the rest of the country could appreciate.” Further, by developing the land around Poston and establishing self-government, the WRA intended to use “Poston and the other internment camps . . . to show that ‘the United States could carry out a program of evacuation and relocation in a democratic manner that would provide the greatest possible contrast to population shifts in Axis countries’” (“S,” p. 13).

The importance of developing camp self-governance went beyond good PR for the US during World War II. According to Leighton, understanding the camps was crucial to taking on the challenges of governing occupied lands that the US would face postwar: “Administrative problems in countries where . . . the people are very different from the average American in racial descent, traditional values, and predominant attitudes. These problems will

33. Ibid., pp. 193–94.
include such matters as outright occupation, relief and rehabilitation, the establish-ment of public health measures, and the supervision of plebiscites.”

Leighton correctly foresaw a future “in which many relocations will occur all over the earth” and thus “regarded the camp, which is primarily designed to meet the needs of the moment under optimal democratic methods, as affording also an opportunity for gathering experience in dealing with relocated or disintegrated communities.” Leighton also saw his work at Poston as relevant more generally to understanding the human element in management.

The OIA understood social scientists as key to its governance of both camps and reservations. As soon as Collier became responsible for Poston, he hired Leighton to conduct “scientific analysis.” While Leighton’s initial goals were to “analyze the attitudes of the evacuees,” both toward the purpose of assessing their responses to administration and to be able to predict other “dislocated communities in occupied areas,” the level of suspicion and hostility that the interned communities directed toward the administration and the term “Bureau,” which unfortunately had “notations of the FBI for some among the evacuees,” made finding cooperative study participants in the camps particularly challenging (GM, pp. 373, 379). They addressed this issue by using participant observers and thus, a few months in, added another goal, that is, “to train field workers of Japanese ancestry in social analysis so that they could be helpful in occupied areas of the Pacific, during or after the war” (GM, p. 373).

“As a sign of its importance, Poston was the subject of three different research projects: the BSR (June 1942–September 1943); the more “secretive” Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Study (early 1942–summer of 1945), run by researchers at UC Berkeley; and the WRA’s Community Analysis section” (“S,” p. 14).


36. Tellingly, Assistant Secretary John McCloy objected to the early release of Japanese Americans from the camps because doing so would entail “missing a very big opportunity . . . to study the Japanese . . . [and to] find out what they are thinking about and [how] we might very well influence their thinking in the right directions before they are again distributed into communities” (quoted in DE, p. 138).


The WRA perceived these applied social science projects as crucial to managing and dissipating protest and growing disaffection, and similar community analysis units were created in other camps because of their role during the general strike at Poston 1. “Despite the early presence of and leadership by ‘volunteers,’ who ostensibly ensured a ‘harmonious relationship’ with the administration, Poston and many camps did not become the model communities the OIA and WRA envisioned. For one, they hardly provided the needed quotient of ‘security and . . . acceptance as fellow Americans and friendly aliens’” that Leighton outlined as necessary for “Japanese American internees to become prototypical ‘model minorities’” (“S,” p. 14). Instead, internees were subjected to hastily constructed, ramshackle accommodations that left them vulnerable to the harsh desert elements, extremely low or nonexistent wages for backbreaking work, and changing administrative directives that amplified distrust and fear of the state and FBI informants amongst the internees. Things broke down in November 1942 with a general strike in Poston 1, supported by many who had previously sided with the administration.

According to Leighton, the BSR helped turn this crisis into an opportunity by exacting more “cooperation” from the internees. Working against those more stereotype-minded lower administrators who wanted to run Poston as a concentration camp and use military force:

The heads of the research project gave it as their opinion that if the Administration negotiated carefully, it would come out of the situation with much better influence in the community than it had previously wielded; whereas, if it used force, there would be violence, loss of life, the permanent alienation of many hitherto cooperative residents, and a costly disruption of the community lasting many months. [“A,” p. 663]

According to Leighton, who frequently consulted with camp leadership regarding policy issues, the results justified the BSR in that its supposed effectiveness proved that violently repressive modes of control were not necessary and indeed were counterproductive to governance (see “A,” p. 663).

In Leighton’s view, the BSR was so successful because it moved beyond classic anthropological analyses of “traditions, patterns of leadership, predominant ideas, and recent history” towards providing knowledge regarding “what continuous modifications of administration are needed for the sake of effectiveness” (“A,” p. 653). That is, it could answer the question “What new attitudes and new types of social behavior will have come into existence, and how will they affect plans and policies already inaugurated?” because they had developed methods to discern who was thinking what and
why ("A," p. 653). They could do so, Leighton argued, because their fundamental postulates—that “in all the different peoples of the world there are universal, basic characteristics inherent in human nature; and . . . there are profound differences in belief, sentiment, habit and custom among the various communities, tribes and nations which make up human-kind”—enabled them and like-minded thinkers to realize that only “‘our laziness and ignorance’” made the “‘Oriental’” seem inscrutable or mysterious (GM, p. 249).

Crucial to Leighton’s ability to understand the internees was his linking the effects of “individuals under stress” to “systems of belief under stress” and to “social organization under stress” through surveillance and sentiment analysis (GM, pp. 252, 287, 322). Specifically, they deployed a five-pronged method that gathered data through: general observation such as the surveillance of publications and written recordings of conversations in homes, mess halls, shower rooms, and so on; intensive interviews with persons “who occupied positions—either in the Administration or among the people—which gave them a good view of at least one phase of community life”; record collection “from every available source data of social significance,” including “the census office, the employment division, the schools and churches”; public opinion polls, conducted using the newly developed Gallup methods; and psychological profiling of a small group of individuals who represented a “wide range of types” ("A," p. 658).

In attempting to explain the importance of sentiment, Leighton offered a diagram that the BSR used to determine the success of any response (fig. 5). Sentiment, analogous to “conditional reflexes . . . studied extensively in lower animals,” was situated as crucial to successful social engineering under conditions of captivity and stress (GM, p. 384). The team produced weekly sentiment charts that displayed satisfaction and dissatisfaction on key issues, and this diagram reveals how Leighton drew from and extended F. J. Roethlisberger’s analysis of workers at the Hawthorne Western Electric Plant, an oft-referenced study that first identified the importance of sentiment to worker behavior and management. If Roethlisberger’s research

![Figure 5](image-url)

**Figure 5.** Leighton’s diagram to explain the importance of sentiments. Leighton, The Governing of Men, p. 384.
revealed how cooperation with management could be fostered among workers in danger of embracing unionization and other modes of cooperation, Leighton’s theorized how this could happen in carceral environments by taking into consideration life history and the need for social equilibrium.

Although a full accounting of the relationship among Leighton, the other social scientific methods developed during World War II, and those used by social media companies in the early twenty-first century goes beyond the scope of this article, it is crucial to note that the five-pronged system used to both foster and manage disaffected internees foreshadows the computational methods currently used by social media companies to capture users and their attention.39 These analyses of sentiment enabled consumer and public sentiment analysis, which then became ingrained within automated digital sentiment-analysis programs that read online content in order to determine user sentiment, promote engagement, and manage user dissent.40 Sentiment analysis manages and implements behavioral change through models built by distilling negative or positive sentiments of texts and emojis; as Jaron Lanier has argued, “The gradual slight, imperceptible change” in user behavior is the goal.41 The outrage in 2012 when Facebook revealed that it had altered user feeds to provoke specific sentiments misses the point that these changes are not accidental or occasional but both completely legal and indeed fundamental to social media as a form of social engineering.42

Again, Leighton’s model of data collection as surveillance predates what would become standard operations within social media companies and organizations such as Cambridge Analytica and Facebook: the constant collection of records, sentiment analysis, and personality studies to comprehend what is deemed illogical, as well as the fundamental presumption that the population being studied is disaffected or on the cusp of being so. Sentiment analysis depends on this history of surveillance and soft and hard management of hostile communities. As Mika Mäntylä and others have revealed,

39. This is the topic of a current book-length manuscript in progress by Chun.
contemporary sentiment analysis draws from efforts by applied social scientists such as Leighton who published in *Public Opinion Quarterly* in the late 1930s and into the 1940s. These efforts sought to systematically understand the opinions of the people affected by the war, as for example with publications about how to conduct a “Japanese Opinion Survey,”43 or findings of “Italian Public Opinion.”44 They also grappled with questions of what would become consumer sentiment and the impact of seemingly irrational feelings on markets and economies. Leighton’s work was also cited in Elihu Katz’s and Karl Lazarsfeld’s *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*, which inspired network theory and its move away from mass impacts towards mapping the impact of influencers.45

The transformation of affect into data to effect change and preserve institutional or platform dominance is the exact goal and logic of social media. In tracing the sociology of race and sentiment, we see the epistemological infrastructure for contemporary arrangements of digital capitalism, which, as Phil Agre has argued, is based on capture.46 Capture systems not only track and store actions in the name of efficiency; in addition, through a metaphor of human activity as language, they impose a normative “‘grammar of action’” as they move from analyzing captured data to building an epistemological model of the captured activity.47 Our analysis reveals how seemingly metaphorical notions of capture currently popularized in docudramas such as *The Social Dilemma*, which portray users as lab rats or marionettes to be

44. See P. Luzzatto Fegiz, “Italian Public Opinion,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 11 (Spring 1947): 92–96. Mika V. Mäntylä, Daniel Graziotin, and Miikka Kuutila have attributed the birth of sentiment analysis to the various efforts to research public opinion that started in the 1930s and developed into the 1940s (during and after World War II); see Mika V. Mäntylä, Daniel Graziotin, and Miikka Kuutila, “The Evolution of Sentiment Analysis—A Review of Research Topics, Venues, and Top Cited Papers,” *Computer Science Review* 27 (Feb. 2018): 16–32. We would like to acknowledge Carina Albrecht’s work in making this connection.
46. Capture systems are justified and praised as inherently more efficient and empowering (and thus more democratic) than older disciplinary or firm-based ones because they translate and transform human transactions into market-based ones so that computerization equals (neo)liberalization. Although Phillip Agre stressed that this relation is historically contingent and itself the product of a “kind of representational crusade,” he speculated that this relation, which “presupposes that the entire world of productive activities can be conceptualized, a priori, in terms of extremely numerous episodes of exchanges among economic actors,” constituted the political economy of capture (Phillip E. Agre, “Surveillance and Capture: Two Models of Privacy,” *The Information Society* 10, no. 2 [1994]: 120, 121).
47. Ibid., p. 102.
manipulated at will, draw from experiments on and studies of literally captured Japanese Americans and Japanese immigrants. It is no accident that populations from internment camps to reservations to housing projects to factories became the basis for social media’s governmentality through capture.

Social media platforms and mid-century sociologists want the same things from Asians in the US: to optimize methods for the extraction of a community’s feelings ostensibly in order to protect them but actually in order to devise better devices for the capture and control of bodies. Drawing from Chandak Sengoopta’s work on the British colonial roots of fingerprinting, Tiziana Terranova and Ravi Sundaram write, “Fingerprinting emerged during a time of multiple colonial technologies aimed at developing knowledges of the colonized,” knowledges that make the South Asian body speak a language that imperial bureaucracy can understand.48 Likewise, the Asian body that cannot speak for itself but leaves digital traces that speak for it is the object of colonial technologies that produces and captures data about hate and love that were always meant to enhance control. Social media’s mining of our “likes” and “hates” was developed and honed on those populations deemed most difficult to understand, most alien in our affects and perceived as most miserly in sharing our feelings. It is because Asian has always been figured as alien that our feelings were among sentiment analysis’s first objects.

Leighton’s observations, however, also inadvertently convey the extent to which Japanese internees reacted with hostility and resentment to this widespread program of surveillance within the internment camp. For example, he characterizes as a success the fact that the members of the research team managed to obtain “most of the data they sought and were never subject to any physical attack, although one was directly threatened and all received indirect threats” (“A,” p. 657). If the process of data collection itself produced this level of antipathy, how effective were the management techniques informed by this data at stifling Japanese immigrant and Japanese American recalcitrance against the brutal and dehumanizing conditions of internment?

**Tracking Asian Recalcitrance: Opaque Possibilities**

In this section, we chart how Asian American mobilizations of opacity through irony, satire, disaffection, and dissociation simultaneously confound both the white liberal weaponization of sympathy and undermine

---

sentiment analysis’s methods for creating data out of affective responses. As Glissant writes:

If we examine the process of “understanding” people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgements. *I have to reduce.* [“FO,” pp. 189–90; our emphasis]

This “requirement for transparency” or, in other words, submitting to being known, is structured by an “accursed contradiction,” the simultaneity of the “worst pretensions and the greatest of magnanimities on the part of the West” (“FO,” pp. 190, 194, 193). This antagonism within the colonizing drive simultaneously upholds a “substantial, even if unconscious . . . ethnocentrism” and the “absolute and incomplete generosity that drove him to realize himself elsewhere” (“FO,” pp. 193–94, 194). While Glissant is describing turn-of-the-twentieth-century French ethnographer and archaeologist Victor Segalen here, it is not too far a stretch to apply it to Leighton, who likewise imagined his methods as capable of fully understanding the other toward the aim of hastening their assimilation.

These supposedly complete forms of understanding, however, never go beyond a reflection of their own apparatus, as the recalcitrance of Leighton’s own interned Japanese American researchers reveals.49 One such researcher, Richard Nishimoto, who eventually quit because he so disliked Leighton, leaves traces in the archive of a sardonic and deliberately performative commentary on the study and its leader.50 Nishimoto was both a researcher and a research subject and, as such, wrote a personality study/autobiography that he submitted to Leighton. In it, instead of offering the requisite earnest self-scrutiny, he turns the tables, subjecting Leighton to mockery. Nishimoto begins by implying that Leighton’s interest in his subjects is lurid rather than scientific:

Well, doctor! Don’t you think we better go in now? The overture for the second act has begun, you know. Oh, yes, I know you have been studying the personality traits of the lady standing over there. But don’t you think you have been looking at her long enough? . . . Yes,

49. The Hawthorne effect, for example, is the principle that people who are being observed change how they perform in response to this, and the characters involved in the relay test room complicate any easy reading of it.
yes. I know she is beautiful, glamorous, and all that, but I think the leading character of the drama is more interesting.\textsuperscript{51}

Nishimoto deploys a sardonic tone that, ironically given the BSR’s objectives, evades easy identification and categorization as it shifts the object of scrutiny from the interned subjects to question instead the objectivity and validity of the lead researcher and the research process. Casting oneself as a character in a play produces a structure of dissociation, a doubling of self as both observer and observed, fitting for someone who is at once a researcher and an incarcerated person who might have been in danger if his role as double agent were to be revealed. In that way, we might understand this passage as expressing that, as Glissant put it, “my identity is obscure to me,” observing that just as opacity might structure one’s relationship to others, it can describe one’s relation to oneself (“FO,” p. 192). We are characters, not marionettes in a drama called big data.\textsuperscript{52} However, in the transition between social science and social media data extraction, any power of irony can dissipate, becoming just more fuel for sentiment analysis. Such modes of analysis—because they read literally—cannot discern irony or the difference between character and double agent. If sentiment analysis works, it works because it flattens this difference into the literal.

As such, if opacity has the power to undermine social media sentiment analysis, it is because its ability to evade knowledge dampens amplification. If we return to the video that started it all, we can see that Jordan Chan was not without agency, though in a manner that is much less legible than Cochran’s. If Nishimoto wields irony and sardonic disassociation from the self, Chan mobilizes incredulous disaffection. In the video Chan responds to Lofthouse’s attack with an incredulous, “What? Say that again!” an utterance that does not register on a continuum of moral virtue by, for example, expressing woundedness. Instead, when Lofthouse says “Go home, you Asian f–,” she says, “Oh, my God” in a disbelieving way, the same tone one might use in reaction to seeing something surprising, strange, and extremely out of place.

Chan’s affect differs significantly from the terror and disabling fear that make so many other social media posts documenting attacks on people of color so painful to witness. Instead, Chan describes her surprise, disengagement, disgust, and disaffection, states that complete the circuit of witnessing and estrange racism as fundamentally alien. This refusal to be viewed as affected precludes group affiliation and constitutes a refusal of amplification.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p. 9.

\textsuperscript{52} See Chun, “Big Data as Drama,” \textit{ELH} 83 (Summer 2016): 363–82.
Slipping out of the binary structure of love versus hate, it dwells in opacity. Documenting disaffection estranges and exposes racism as a performance that the offender cannot disavow and make disappear with an apology. It provides an alternative to the consumable spectacularization of Black and racialized suffering that is so often leveraged to provide pleasurable emotions of racial empathy to white liberal viewers who enjoy feeling the right feelings of outrage, compassion, and empathy. In so doing, Chan insists on a “right to opacity” as a strategy of relation, highlighting the fundamental incomprehensibility, the “irreducible singularity” at the heart of her relation with Lofthouse’s racism (“FO,” p. 190). A moment of incredulity rebuffs Cochran’s futile attempt at solidarity based on empathy, in that her disbelief refuses the guest-host relation.

Opacity is all around us, if we care to look for it. On 7 August 2021 Phil Yu posted a video to Twitter of an unmasked white man in H-Mart, an Asian grocery store in Arcadia, California, surrounded by a cloud of Asian women shoppers while a male Korean manager shouts at him to put on a mask or leave (fig. 6). This video documenting a spontaneous, communal response by Asian grocery shoppers to support a shopkeeper “uncle” faced with an aggressive white patron raises as many questions as it answers: it is ambivalent. It is not an invitation to white viewers to love Asians as a remedy to the spectacle of other white people hating them. If this is anti-Asian racism, it is not clearly so, and it is equally not clear how much we are meant to care whether it is or not. In this, it allows us to ask what might happen if we were to disaffect ourselves from being hated or loved as Asian people. What does it mean to not care? What opportunities for data opacity does this offer on digital platforms and the political forms of engagement that they engender?

On one level, digital content that doesn’t traffic in loving or hating Asians deprives platforms of the affective data, the more granular “loves” and “hates” that it needs to manipulate where and whether we are able to see content at the top of a feed or at all. Most importantly, it models an Asian American/Asian diasporic feminist mode of opacity as critique of and alternative to campaigns like #StopAsianHate, which appeals to the kind of white sentimentality and empathy represented by Cochran in Chan’s video. This

54. Phil Yu, “This Maskless Asshole Refused to Leave H Mart. So Some Ajummas Had to Get Involved,” Twitter, 7 Aug. 2021, twitter.com/angryasianman/status/1424089956696237444
event doesn’t lend itself to the same translation into “clean” data about our sentiments loving and hating each other as our first example.

We Seek to Be Obsolete, Not Profitable: Communities of Care beyond Data Extraction

Let us end with an example of an Asian American formation that explicitly framed itself against the appeasement or management of white sentiment and instead advances a strategy of irony as opacity, confounding both white, sympathetic liberalism and sentiment analysis while creating space for an alternative economy of care over and against that of capitalist (data) extraction. The Auntie Sewing Squad (affectionately abbreviated as ASS) was a group of volunteer mask makers located across the US and Canada who organized a massive mutual aid campaign, mainly through Facebook, to distribute masks and other supplies to marginalized and vulnerable communities during the
COVID pandemic. Founded by comedian and performance artist Kristina Wong, ASS made and distributed over three hundred and fifty thousand free masks to healthcare workers, incarcerated and unhoused people, essential workers in low-wage industries, First Nations and Indigenous people, migrants, and many other vulnerable communities before the Aunties officially “retired” in August of 2021. While ASS was eventually made up of people of a range of racial and gender identifications, it was not a coincidence that Wong and the earliest volunteers were Asian American women, as Asian American gendered racialization was the historically specific, material context that allowed ASS to emerge. That is to say, the Squad’s capacity to make masks sprang in large part from the ubiquity of sewing machines and sewing skills amongst Asian and Asian American feminized workers who have been pushed into low-wage garment production work by the global restructuring of the division of labor under neoliberal capitalism, which in turn produced this labor force through the displacement of Asian migrants from their previous modes of life through war, militarism, and capitalist development. ASS was thus a formation wrought by US militarism, war, empire, and the restructuring of the global economy that placed feminized Asian labor at the center of both the garment production commodity chain and the hyper-commodification of reproductive and care labor.

As the self-described “Sweatshop Overlord,” Wong deliberately undermined the idea of charismatic leadership predicated on respectability and legibility. ASS’s structure was reticulated and networked rather than hierarchical and it did not seek to institutionalize itself. Indeed, the first principle of their “Core Values” was “We seek to be obsolete, not profitable.” While it clearly had a radical political philosophy, it did not require adherence to an orthodoxy. Such an orthodoxy would have been impossible, as ASS was composed of everyone from Wong’s septuagenarian seamstress mother and friends whom Wong brought out of retirement, to middle-class professionals, to anarchist organizers and artists, to parents and their kids learning to operate a sewing machine for the first time. From this structure came a

55. See the Auntie Sewing Squad webpage, auntiesewingsquad.com
56. A smaller group of Aunties called Aunties Not Abandoning Their Labor, or ANAL, still continues to do the work.
form of solidarity that highlighted the differential positions of various members of ASS as well as of the recipients of masks. ASS’s poetics of relation, then, resonates with Glissant’s framing of solidarity through opacity: “To feel in solidarity . . . it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (or become other) nor to ‘make’ him in my image” (“FO,” p. 193). Another word for the desire to “become the other (or become other)” might be empathy; another word for “‘mak[ing]’ him in my image” might be assimilation. ASS’s mode of solidarity, then, was entirely different from Cochrane’s empathy-based attempts at solidarity or Leighton’s assimilative desires.

Most relevant for our meditation on opacity is a brief statement in the FAQ section of ASS’s webpage. The response to the question “What makes the Auntie Sewing Squad distinct from other mask-making groups?” lists a number of political and interpersonal principles that differentiates them from others, from critiquing the state to smashing the patriarchy but ends by saying “Oh, we also think we are hilarious because we are.”60 More than just hilarity itself, it is ASS’s particular mode of humor, that is, irony and satire, that is incommensurate with the love versus hate sentimental economy of liberal politics (fig. 7).

Wong’s satirical persona as the Sweatshop Overlord, who ostensibly forced ASS members to work at home and exploited their children, referenced practices that are in actuality foundational to the garment industry: work that is paid by the piece rather than on an hourly wage; work performed in the home, which incentivizes workers to recruit children in order to complete more pieces; and the tendency of subcontractors to be coethnics with the sewers and cutters in their factories.61 Her ironic framing of the Aunties as “victims” of her exploitative practices highlights the incommensurability of capitalist extractive and mutual aid frameworks of production and undercuts any move toward a benevolent response to said exploitation for white people to pity or sympathize with.

In the process of short-circuiting white liberal sympathy, ASS’s deployment of irony and satire produced multiple simultaneous meanings for any expression and required a way of knowing that allowed for the simultaneous existence of incommensurate and contradictory tendencies. ASS engaged in an alternative economy of mutual aid incommensurate with capitalist labor extraction in that they attracted and connected its membership

through relations of care—for themselves as well as those for whom they were making masks. Very early on, ASS decided that caring for their members was an essential part of their work, not a peripheral or subordinate activity, and the contribution of certain members was solely to provide care packages and other forms of support for the others. In a section from an edited collection by and about ASS entitled “Community Care, Or What Makes the Auntie Sewing Squad Different,” coeditor and Cutter Auntie Preeti Sharma quotes Auntie Care Coordinator Gayle Isa as saying, “It’s such a powerful thing for all of us, in the face of so much injustice in this world, and in the structure of capitalism that we live in, to be able to say
yes, that there is enough for us to be able to share.” ASS operated in ways incommensurate with the extractive logics of capital—the same logics that undergird sentiment analysis as a means of extracting feelings as knowledge and then turning that knowledge into capital. Isa’s invocation of plentitude (“there is enough”) is a speculative imaginary that impossibly makes possible that which the material conditions of capitalism should disallow. Operating in an economy of provision rather than extraction, opacity rather than transparency, ASS operated on another register, caring with and for one another in the context of quotidian violence.

ASS thus represents a departure from a strategy of resistance, which, in the context of white liberal sentimentality coupled with social media sentiment analysis, does not necessarily evade extraction. Likewise, as we can see by how comprehensively #StopAsianHate discourses have captured the public imagination, appeals to white love sadly still remain the dominant horizon of political possibility.

To conclude, white hate and white love are not incompatible but rather constitute a closed and mutually constitutive economy. Further, this logic, in which white liberalism disavows its complicity with racist violence by representing itself as the better, more benevolent option in contrast to overtly racist modes of control, legitimated early applied social science, which in turn became the basis for the contemporary sentiment analysis techniques that enable social media governmentality. That is, early applied social scientists working in Japanese American internment camps developed sentiment analysis, deployed in earlier industrial and commercial contexts to create “cooperative” workers, explicitly as a means to overcome “Oriental” inscrutability and as part of a narrative of racial benevolence. They hoped that these methods could be widely applied, for they framed their studies as blueprints for managing the masses of people displaced by occupation which they anticipated (quite accurately, as it turns out) would be an increasingly common occurrence in the postwar global order. They desired to understand inscrutable Asians by discerning the sentiments of disaffected Japanese and Japanese Americans interned during World War II and turning them into data. They did so in order to govern them in an ostensibly less racist and thus more effective manner. This relationship between knowledge and control foreshadows the current social media drive to surveil all users in order to quantify and map user sentiment.

63. See ibid.
The accumulative economies of social media are rooted in earlier surveillance regimes that underwrite data collection on a mass scale. At the same time, however, when we understand sentimentality and sentiment analysis as racialized modes of management of affect and data it is possible to apprehend moments of Asian opacity through time and space. Such moments provide glimpses into a past, present, and future in which extraction—of affect, of data, of care—is not inevitable.