NATALIE ESCOBAR, BYLINE: It's kind of bizarre, really. Asian Americans, as a whole, tend to be invisible historically, culturally and otherwise - until something like this happens.

REBECCA WEN: So a couple of weeks ago, I was organizing a birthday party for a friend.

ALLISON PARK: I was getting on the D.C. Metro.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: I was having dinner at one of my regular restaurants.

DEVIN CABANILLA: My family and I - we were going out to lunch.

JANE HONG: I was walking with a colleague at lunch.

ROGER CHIANG: I was on the BART train for my morning commute to work.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #1: Some guy at the bar, whom I had never seen before, said, do you have the corona?

CABANILLA: They told my wife and son to get away.

PARK: Get out of here. Go back to China.

SARA AALGAARD: People call us Corona. People ask us if we eat dogs.

WEN: And this kid said, well, you're Chinese, so you must have the coronavirus.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #2: Coronavirus.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON #3: It's probably coronavirus.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

CHIANG: The woman then replied that she isn't racist, but she just doesn't want to get sick.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GENE DEMBY, HOST:

You're listening to CODE SWITCH from NPR. I'm Gene Demby.

SHEREEN MARISOL MERAJI, HOST:

And I'm Shereen Marisol Meraji. The news about COVID-19, aka coronavirus, has been unsettling. And as the virus spreads, so does suspicion and harassment of Asian Americans.

DEMBY: And we have been here before in the United States because fear of disease and xenophobia have often gone hand in hand - or unwashed hand. SARS was associated with Chinese people. Ebola was associated with Africans.

ERIKA LEE: Irish as, you know, typhus carriers, or Jewish Italians and others from southern Eastern Europe as bringing tuberculosis and smallpox.

MERAJI: That's Erika Lee. She's a historian at the University of Minnesota and author of "America For Americans: A History Of Xenophobia In The United States."

LEE: Historians have pointed out that in times of epidemics like this, that existing prejudices, existing ideas about certain groups get medicalized. So it's no mistake that certain diseases get attached to immigrant groups that are the perceived threat of the time.

MERAJI: Groups like the Irish and Italians eventually folded into whiteness and are no longer considered a threat. Now, Italy has the highest rates of coronavirus deaths outside of China as of when we recorded this episode.

LEE: You know, I doubt that we're going to see the same types of exclusions or informal acts of discrimination targeting Italians or Italian restaurants or Italian communities in the same way that we're seeing this with China.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MERAJI: Professor Lee, welcome back to CODE SWITCH.

LEE: Thank you.

MERAJI: We heard from a lot of people from across the country who've experienced discrimination. They've experienced name-calling, bullying, you know, being told to cover their mouths and people walking away from them if they're Asian and they happen to sneeze - these kinds of things. And this has all been in the wake of the coronavirus news. What have you been hearing?

LEE: So I think there have been a number of incidents that I began to read about and hear about in January, most of them outside of the United States - restaurants in Vietnam putting signs on the outside of their doors barring Chinese people, a lot of so-called yellow peril rhetoric that was being circulated in French newspapers, the incident at UC Berkeley that was, I think, initiated by the Health Services that said - I think it was an Instagram post, and it essentially said that there may be very common responses to anxiety about the coronavirus, including xenophobia directed at Asians. And because of a backlash, that post was then deleted.

But then, of course, there are countless incidents similar to the ones that callers have just relayed of informal, as well as just explicit racism, assuming that because someone is Chinese- or Asian-appearing that they are carriers of this disease.

DEMBY: You've written that these fears have actually influenced American immigration policy. Tell us a little bit about that?

LEE: Some of them predate even, you know, Chinese immigration to the United States as part of a larger Oriental discourse of China and Asia being uncivilized, impoverished, unsanitary and, you know, crowded - you know, the teeming hordes of millions living in filth. And then, as Americans who traveled to China and then came back to the United States, they spread those ideas. And then as Chinese people started to migrate to the United States, those ideas became even more entrenched in popular culture, and then also in public policy.

So we know from the very beginning, as West Coast Americans and as Americans in general are starting to debate the so-called problem of Chinese immigration, they are explicitly tying China, Chinese people, Chinese spaces with disease and contagion. Historians have shown that the rhetoric is about Chinatown as plague spots, as cesspools of - laboratories of infection. And we see in congressional records how these ideas get part of the public record, part of American public policy. And they're used as justifications for immigration exclusion, as well as specific policies to try to deal with outbreaks of disease.

MERAJI: I can hear people listening to this possibly being like, OK, yes, all of this was way back in the day. But right now, I'm rightfully anxious about getting sick and my family getting sick. How does being anxious and cautious transform into xenophobia?

LEE: So there's much that we don't know about COVID-19, but many of the things that we do know about it is that it is spread through contact and through not washing your hands, you know, just like the flu. So we know (laughter) that as long as we can use those just commonsense precautions, we can protect ourselves against the virus.

What is happening in this current environment with - I know there's a lot of global anxiety. I know there's a lot of anxiety within the U.S., as we see in the news headlines, the number of cases being reported, the number of deaths being reported. Racist scapegoating and outright discrimination does not have to accompany this anxiety. It is an unfortunate sort of echo of the past, but it doesn't have to be. It would seem that we should have learned some of these lessons. As we talk about this history and know how unjustified these ideas were and how racist and discriminatory the policies were, they have been discredited in the past. And to see some of the same both informal and formal discrimination happening today is pretty discouraging.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

DEMBY: After the break, we're going to get into more of this history with Professor Erika Lee.

MERAJI: And she'll tell us how she thinks the president's been handling things.

DEMBY: Oh, boy. Stay with us.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

DEMBY: Gene.

MERAJI: Shereen.

DEMBY: CODE SWITCH. And we're back with the historian and professor Erika Lee. And she was just telling us before the break about a bunch of the ways that Chinese Americans in particular have been singled out historically as conveyors of disease.

MERAJI: But there was another group I wanted to ask her about.

So you have a chapter in your book called Getting Rid of the Mexicans. And you also talk about how this is something that was used against Mexicans in the United States. You said that there was a near-hysterical campaign depicting Mexicans as dirty and diseased, carrying diseases like typhus, plague, smallpox. When was this, and what was going on at that time?

LEE: This campaign targeting Mexicans as an immigrant invasion but also as a racially inferior threat is happening (laughter) at the same time as the campaign targeting Chinese. And this is one of the ways in which xenophobia works. It uses an already-existing playbook. You know, certain immigrants are threats. They're threats because they bring crime, also because they take away jobs, but also because they bring disease. And they are sort of genetically carriers of disease.

So just in the same ways that American policymakers described Chinese and Chinese communities as places of filth and disease, lawmakers also described Mexican communities as, you know, places of laziness, of general squalor, of filth and disease. And when Mexican immigrants arrived across the border, they were routinely subjected to invasive, humiliating and harmful disinfecting baths using pesticides to rout out louse, but also (laughter) to cleanse, you know, Mexican peoples, their clothing and their baggage before entering the United States.

This is much harsher than what happened at Ellis Island, where European immigrants certainly faced scrutiny, but the medical exams were known as six-second physicals. They were pretty quick. So what's happening at the border is a reflection of the (laughter) idea that Mexican immigrants are a much greater threat.

DEMBY: Listening to your answer there, it reminds me of some of Shereen's reporting before on the language of vermin, as it pertains to immigrants, and sort of the dehumanization, as it pertains to immigrants to the United States. But it seemed like it also was actualized in policy - this idea that these people were almost like rats carrying bubonic plague. In fact, in 1900, the fear of bubonic plague among Chinese in San Francisco's Chinatown precipitated this quarantine of Chinatown. And they, like, disinfected the entire community. Could you tell us about what that process looked like?

LEE: Yeah. This idea that immigrants, but particularly Chinese immigrants, are vermin-infested - I think we see some of that rhetoric today, too. But it has really deep roots. And it is, in one way, very applicable to lots of immigrant groups. But there is a particular way in which it has been racialized with Chinese - Chinese as dog-eaters, as eaters of weird and strange animals, including rats and mice. There's a pretty famous 19th century advertisement for a rat poison that's called Rough on Rats, and the image of it is of a Chinaman - you know, a stereotypically drawn Chinese immigrant male in Chinese robes with a queue and, you know, sort of colorized deeply yellow - eating - like, literally about to bite into a full-grown rat. You know, so on the one hand, that message is, hey, the Chinese are (laughter) good exterminators of rats, and so is this poison. Buy this poison. But also, of course, is the message that the Chinese have these completely strange and uncivilized eating habits and that they - if they are eating and consuming rats that are known to spread disease, then Chinese people as a race (laughter) are also carriers of disease.

So that message is very clearly in the minds of officials in San Francisco when bubonic plague is discovered in 1900. It's about pointing the finger at Chinese people as carriers of the disease, rather than rats. So when the plague struck and the first instance was found in Chinatown, the city ordered an immediate quarantine of Chinatown with orders to remove all whites from the affected area. So (laughter) the white residents of San Francisco were ordered to leave Chinatown, but Chinese people could not. And the mayor of the time, James Phelan - he would become a national spokesman in the effort to exclude Japanese immigrants in about 20 years. He also warned that no Chinese people should be hired or allowed to work outside of Chinatown.

DEMBY: So we know that during the period in which many Chinese immigrants to the United States were coming to the U.S. through Angel Island, which is in San Francisco Bay, that Chinese immigrants were separated out, even from other Asian immigrants, for special inspection because they were seen as specifically carriers of disease. And I know that you are a descendant of immigrants from China who arrived through Angel Island, correct?

LEE: Yes.

DEMBY: Has your family ever told any stories about their experiences coming through Angel Island?

LEE: They never talked about their experiences coming through Angel Island, but because I'm a historian, (laughter) I found the records. And I found the records of my grandparents' interrogations - but especially pertinent to this conversation, my grandfather's medical exam. And it was nothing like anything I've read before.

Immigration officials ordered my grandfather to be subjected to the most invasive and humiliating medical exam that I've seen in hundreds of these records. So they had the medical doctor at Angel Island, you know, examine him for diseases, but also to measure every aspect of his body - his teeth, his genitals, his, you know, his height - to determine what age he was - to determine whether his claim of being 17 when he was immigrating was actually true. And they included just all of these detailed notes in the record. And it was just quite shocking to read.

DEMBY: Wow.

MERAJI: God.

DEMBY: There seems to be this paradox here, right? Like, on one hand, Chinese immigrants and Chinese people - Chinese people in America are held up as, like, model minorities, right?

LEE: Yeah.

DEMBY: Uniquely adept at assimilating to culture in the United States - the dominant culture in the United States. But there's also this latent sense that they're still much these very, like, dirty, backwards others - right? - who are sort of scheming and, as you said, disease-plagued. How do we make sense of both of those things sitting next to each other?

LEE: You know, one of the things about the model minority is that it's always been a very - it's always been a very complicated and complex stereotype. And that is, on the surface, they seem like they're the right kind of immigrant, the right kind of American, but you really can't know for sure. They may still hold allegiances to China, to Japan, to Korea. You know, they may not fully be assimilated as we think. And so there's this - scratch the surface, and you might reveal the real, true nature of the inscrutable Oriental who is actually not assimilated or who is really loyal to another country.

This is also a stereotype that goes way back. I was thinking about not just the ways in which these anti-Chinese stereotypes are so endemic to U.S. history, but how global they are. And I think that's another aspect of what we're seeing today - how easily weaponized certain stereotypes about Chinese are not only, you know, enduring across the decades and centuries, but also how they're globally understood.

As I was thinking about this, I remembered this just horribly racist book from Mexico that was published in the early 1920s. It was making the case for the restriction of Chinese immigration. And there's one cartoon - one illustration in it that's called "The Terrible Ills Of The Orient - Highly Contagious" (ph). And it shows Chinese people - Chinese immigrant men infected with syphilis, with trachoma, with leprosy. It's just really horribly drawn and very graphically drawn to see them as diseased and contagious. But the other part of the caption is that these Chinese people cover their diseases with very clean clothing when they work as waiters in cafes, as launderers or domestic servants.

DEMBY: Wow.

LEE: So they're spreaders of disease, but they cover it up really well.

DEMBY: Right.

MERAJI: Erika, I'd like to steer the conversation toward President Trump for a second. You wrote in an op-ed that he may be the most xenophobic president this country's ever seen. And I was wondering how you feel he's dealt with the coronavirus situation. Do you think he's been fanning the flames of xenophobia?

LEE: It certainly seems like he is. He's been reported as lumping in the virus as another failure of Democratic immigration policies that are allegedly allowing immigrants to overrun our borders. And so here, the message is that Democrats are also allowing disease-carrying immigrants to come to the United States and bring ruin and destruction.

And then there are other politicians who are feeding into a larger global anxiety about the so-called Rise of China, you know, not only as an economic competitor, but also as a competitor for world leadership and the Chinese government's alleged insidious plans to, you know, to steal secrets. And also, I think it was Senator Tom Cotton who alleged that coronavirus was, you know, formed or created in a lab by the Chinese government to explicitly cause harm to the United States and the world economy. These are - you know, these types of charges are part of a more recent discourse about China being malicious and deliberately threatening and a dangerous enemy to the United States.

MERAJI: At the beginning of your book, you said something like you were really surprised that Donald Trump's positions on immigration got him elected - or helped to get him elected. You were really unprepared for this United States of America, and that's what made you want to, like, dig into this history and understand it more. Do you feel differently heading into the 2020 election?

LEE: One of the things that I think is the most important aspect to remember about going into the 2020 elections is that Trump inherited these policies, these rhetorics from a long line of both Democratic and Republican presidents. And it's not going to be enough to simply reverse these executive orders, to undo what Trump has done. We know that migration, globally, is on the rise. We know how easily xenophobia is weaponized. It's going to take much more than just a new person in the White House to fully dismantle our xenophobic tradition.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

DEMBY: Erika Lee is the director of the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota. She's the author of "America For Americans: A History Of Xenophobia In The United States." Thank you so much, Erika.

LEE: Thank you.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MERAJI: And that's our show. Please follow us on Twitter. We're @nprcodeswitch. And don't forget to wash your hands.

DEMBY: (Laughter) It's very important. Like, 20 seconds under hot water is very, very important. You can follow Shereen @RadioMirage. That's @RadioMirage, all one word. You can follow me @GeeDee215. That's G-E-E-D-E-E 215. We want to hear from you, of course, so you can email us at codeswitch@npr.org, and subscribe to the podcast on NPR One or wherever you get your podcasts.

MERAJI: And we wanted to thank all of the listeners who wrote in with their stories, the ones that called in and let us record their stories. You heard them at the beginning of this podcast. Thank you so much. This episode was produced by Jess Kung and Leah Donnella, with help from Natalie Escobar and our interns, Dianne Lugo and Isabella Rosario. It was edited by Leah.

DEMBY: And shoutout to the rest of the CODE SWITCH fam - Kumari Devarajan, Karen Grigsby Bates, LA Johnson and Steve Drummond. I'm Gene Demby.

MERAJI: And I'm Shereen Marisol Meraji.

DEMBY: Be easy, y'all.

MERAJI: Peace.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

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