There has always been a fear of that which is different: the other, foreign, or strange. Minorities are blamed for unfortunate events across the globe. Throughout history, Jews have been associated with disease and blamed for the resulting casualties. Years of antisemitism have left their mark and the Jewish culture, seen as the source of evil, has endured continuous attempts of erasure. The roots of this culture go back to a group of outcasts, and their persecution starts in Biblical times. From this, they have become general scapegoats for everything from economic troubles to political systems, yet they are most often blamed for disease. Time and time again, throughout history, a bad event happens and is blamed on a minority. Blaming the racial “other” for disease and illness is a common thread throughout cases of epidemics and pandemics. Now, Asians are being blamed for the coronavirus pandemic and this discrimination parallels antisemitic persecution. This relationship with disease has invaded political spaces, language, and history.

One reason for the association with disease is due to supposed inferiority. There are numerous instances of Jews being seen as less than human. The Holocaust was the first time a state or regime organized an outright genocide, though the persecution itself was nothing new (Bauer). At this point, Jews were seen as something subhuman, who needed to be exterminated to protect the human race. This language is used in Gerda Weissman Klein’s memoir, *All But My Life*, when she and her friends are referred to as if they are vermin who carry disease (Klein 119). They are also seen as less intelligent for the same reason. A supervisor says to her that “‘[a task] requires thinking; I don’t know if you would be able to do it.’ I wondered if he wanted to hurt us, or if he really thought that we were some type of animal” (Klein 175). She is thought to be incapable of simple tasks, simply because she is Jewish during a time of persecution. It is so significant, that she honestly cannot tell if he really believes that she is less than human or if he is
simply being mean. The rhetoric used by those in charge, told them that Jews were different -- something to be contained.

Similarly, this was done in medieval times. Antisemitic propaganda spread throughout the Medieval times, with illustrations showing Jews as the devil and performing rituals involving the blood of Christian children (Why the Jews). These depictions, combined with the fact that Jews were forced to live in secluded areas, away from the rest of society in many places, meant that Medieval Christians knew very little about Jews (Why the Jews). This led to the spread of stories and lies that set the already weak group apart from everyone else, as something subhuman (Schweitzer, Marvin). These ideas led to the blaming of Jews, and something similar has happened to those of Asian descent. Xenophobic stereotypes of Chinese food led to the rumor that the virus started because a Chinese woman participated in “the apparently common practice of eating fruit bat soup” (Zeng). This is being cited as the event that started the pandemic, despite the video being debunked. The fear and panic in times of uncertainty leads to more damage than the actual event creating such chaos. Misunderstanding and a lack of empathy create damaging ideas and lead to violence and discrimination. A man from Singapore was attacked in London, due to locals blaming him for carrying the virus into their country (Haynes). This parallels the antisemitic violence that occurred throughout history, especially during the bubonic plague in medieval times. It is human nature to be afraid of that which you do not know, and there is always an unfamiliar group on whom to place the blame.

Jews, along with other marginalized groups, have been scapegoats for many things other than sickness. They have become synonymous with all sorts of negative events, be it plague, recession, or war, though they are no more responsible for it than anyone else. In Klein’s memoir, this is evident based on the reactions of the non-Jews with whom they interact. She
recalls that as a group of them marched down the street, children were called into houses and one woman scowled at them because “their propaganda told them that Jews were responsible for the war – so she hated us” (Klein 114). Though they had no part in starting the war, they were still blamed for it. In fact, Klein recalls the dread she felt when she realized that the war had started (Klein 8). She and her family did not want a war, yet somehow were still seen as the cause for it.

Jews have also been blamed for early Biblical events. The most prominent is that of the myth of the Wandering Jew. It is said that a Jew did not allow Jesus to rest on his doorstep when carrying the cross, and therefore was condemned to wander the world, while spreading suffering but not being allowed to die himself (Schweitzer, Marvin). This not only makes Christians more inclined to hate Jews for denying an important figure in their faith, but further perpetuates the idea that Jews inflict suffering on others yet are immune to it themselves. From this idea, it is easy to see how Jews were thought to spread disease. There is still tension between the two religions and shows that antisemitism has its roots in early history. Fear of the “other” is rooted in the early beginnings of many cultures and is hard to escape.

A more recent example is the AIDS and HIV pandemic in the 1980s. Many people were afraid to be near those who were infected. There was a period of time when it was thought to be transmitted through the air, so protective measures were similar to those used for the coronavirus. It was also colloquially known as “gay cancer”, which obviously targeted a specific group (A Timeline of HIV/AIDS). This spread fear and hate towards another group was nothing new. In fact, it also happened to Jews once again. In the late 20th century, radical Muslim groups used propaganda to blame Jews for the spread of AIDS and HIV (Laquer). This is just another example of misunderstanding and hate based on fear, and it is not the last time it happens.
Currently, fear of the coronavirus is rampant in many countries, particularly the US. Called the “Chinese virus”, the pandemic has caused an increase in Sinophobic acts. One woman was denied service at a nail salon because the employees were concerned that she could be carrying the virus, even though the virus had not yet reached the US (Tien). Others feel the pressure of microaggressions, even if they have not experienced any outright discrimination. Many people feel as if they need to be more careful around those of Asian descent, in case they are carrying the virus, which results Asian Americans feeling unwelcome, or uneasy. Ken Cheng took to Twitter to express his feelings regarding what he refers to as “coronaracism”: “Less than 0.001% of Chinese people have coronavirus, yet more than 99.999% have already experienced coronaracism” (Zeng). By this, he means that Chinese people, or even Asians in general, feel as if they have to qualify themselves and explain whether they have come into contact with the virus. Similarly, when Jews are accused of spreading disease, or “poisoning the wells” in some cases, others might choose to refuse to be near them (Laquer). They “were suspected of having caused [the bubonic plague] even though Jews suffered as much from it as the rest of the population – and the pandemic continued even after Jewish communities had been destroyed (Laquer). Communities decided to rid themselves of the Jewish population in order to eradicate the disease, but of course this was the result of fear and panic. The plague spread to areas where Jews never went. In these instances, other minorities were accused of starting the plague (Cohn). In all instances, there is the parallel between fear and groups that are unfamiliar to the general population. Outsiders are seen as something to be feared, and their different practices are often linked to disease.

In conclusion, the fear of the “other” has infiltrated our language, culture, and society, and is exacerbated when there is also the fear of sickness. Xenophobia has continued to invade our
language, culture, and society. Most recently, the uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has caused fear of the other, this time directed at those of Asian descent. Many people have reported acts of Sinophobia as a result of the panic, and there is fear of the racial other due to their supposed relation to disease. These racially aggravated attacks parallel antisemitic attacks during the bubonic plague and the Holocaust, and many other xenophobic incidents during times of hardship. Disease and xenophobia go hand-in-hand, and the long-existing trope of the “other” or the unknown being associated with agents of illness still exists today.
Works Cited


