

It's Time to Reckon with the History of Asian Women in America

To see these women's lives in fullness requires that we reckon with overlapping histories of racism, militarism, and policing that have made Asian diasporic women invisible to Americans except when condemned through ideas of illicit sex.

BY DURBA MITRA, SARA KANG AND GENEVIEVE CLUTARIO / MAR 23, 2021



ELIJAH NOUVELAGE GETTY IMAGES

Asian women in America know about having a really bad day. They know of days doing labor no one else is willing to do, days of touching hands and feet of indifferent women who refuse to make eye contact while getting their nails done or getting a massage, days of cleaning houses, days of hiding in fear without documents, days upon nights of this routine, repeated again and again. In

the poetic language of Ocean Vuong, the most frequent English word uttered by salon workers is *sorry*.

We know these bad days, because we have seen these lives up close, firsthand with our mothers. We have seen that woman, neck bent over a hand or a foot, 12 hours a day, cleaning, clipping, coloring. She wakes up at 5 a.m. every day, no sleep after a grueling shift, to make sure the kids get off to school. Her tired face is barely visible from the back of the salon, spa, or store where the children of workers and massage therapists spend their childhoods finishing homework. She massages her hands, sore, raw, cracking from chemicals, and then uses those hands again after work to prepare dinner, bathe children, and touch faces as she puts children to bed.



These women were born in an era of devastating U.S. wars across homelands in Asia.

Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Delaina Ashley Yaun Gonzalez, Paul Andre Michels, Soon Chung Park, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, and Yong Ae Yue. The Asian women killed in Georgia likely knew about having bad days recently in the pandemic, as working-class Asian women faced crushing unemployment and exposure to COVID-19 in care professions. At least four of the women murdered in Atlanta on March 16 were above the age of 50. Two of these women were around the age of 70. These women were born in an era of devastating U.S. wars across homelands in Asia. They came of age in an empire built on the sexual exploitation of women. Their movements were defined by war and displacement, their immigration structured by a system of unequal laws that exploit labor from migrant communities through temporary visas and limited citizenship that invisibilize immigrant work. At least one victim, Yong Ae Yue, migrated directly as a result of war, as the wife of an American with whom she moved to Fort Benning in 1979. To see these women's lives in fullness requires that we reckon with overlapping histories of racism, militarism, and policing that have made Asian diasporic women invisible to Americans except when condemned through ideas of illicit sex.

The history of Asian-American womanhood is one of simultaneous opprobrium and desire, a history that is at least 150 years old. It is a history found in the Page Act of 1875, which prohibited Chinese women from entering the United States by classifying them as “prostitutes” and casting them as a threat to American morality. This racist history was built through the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which closed U.S. borders to people of Chinese descent and would later be used to ban most people from Asia from entering the country for decades. It is a history put into cruel verses in Rudyard Kipling’s famous call in 1899 to “take up the White Man’s burden” as a demand for white men to “search your manhood” through the sexual subjugation of the Philippines, a people he condemned as “half devil and half child.” It is a history of U.S. soldiers killing more than 200,000 Filipino people in a brutal U.S. colonial takeover of territory. Countless archival documents testify to the brutalities Filipina women experienced as a result of U.S. military occupation, including incarceration, forced labor, and sexual coercion, as Genevieve Clutario shows. They faced forced prostitution, rape, and the abandonment of mixed-race children. While America would hold formal control over the Philippines until 1946, these systems of sexual coercion continued long after as part of official U.S. policy, until at least 1991.



We must grapple with the overlapping histories of racism, militarism, and policing

On December 31, 1950, the Eighth Army, working with the Japan Logistical Command, formally introduced the military program known as R&R, formally understood as rest and recuperation. Modeled on the Japanese *ianjo*, a term initially used to describe hot springs and spas, and later translated as “comfort stations,” this was a system of U.S. military sexual exploitation built across vast geographies in Asia and the South Pacific, as Sara Kang argues. The military slang for R&R reflects the troubling history of this program in the deeply misogynist language used by American

soldiers: “rock and ruin,” “rape and run,” and “rape and restitution.” By the time U.S. troops began to advance into Vietnam in 1965, the system had spread across territories of former Japanese occupation such as Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Okinawa, Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, among many others.

The mass murder in Atlanta and its aftermath reveal ongoing legacies of this global patriarchal system. These histories lay bare the racist notion that American men require “comfort” in the form of sexual exploitation of Asian women. Even as Asian women migrated from those territories to the United States, they continued to find employment in care work professions, in domestic labor, cleaning, nursing, or massage, as low-wage providers of “rest” and “comfort” in spas. The history of these women’s migration reflects the complex and intimate histories of militarism, conquest, and the global exploitation of care labor.



The most frequent English word uttered by salon workers is sorry.

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Media depictions following the mass murder have conflated the spaces of spas and these women’s work with illicit sex work, many addressing these murdered women as “trafficked” without evidence. The police statements and reports that followed the violence made deeply reductive statements that erased women’s lives and equated spa work with trafficked sex. As they dehumanized the women killed, the police deployed a language of sexual “addiction” to humanize a white killer. These twinned ideas of the hypersexualization and victimhood of Asian women are built on histories of U.S. Empire, which continues to shape representations of Asian and Asian-American women today. As Laura Kang argues, the idea of the “trafficked Asian woman” has produced a global carceral system of racist policing and governance that threaten the lives and livelihoods of women. White supremacist ideologies blame Asian women for causing “temptations,” and powerful people continue to erase

documented histories of exploitation and portray Asian women as “prostitutes.” These racist stereotypes of Asian women’s hypersexuality and deviancy create entire systems of knowledge based in the control of women’s sexuality while obscuring the complex decisions, forms of labor, and institutions that shape women’s lives and work.

To think of the lives of these women solely through misunderstandings of victimhood and the reductive language of illicit sex deflects attention away from the real problem: There’s a system of white supremacy built on gendered violence in empire and anti-Black and anti-immigrant racisms and xenophobia in the United States. The hypersexual depictions of Asian women conceal the exploitation that shapes the many forms of Asian women’s labor in the United States and abroad. Immigrant women engage in diverse forms of labor and care work, from unpaid and underpaid domestic work, childcare, sex work, and nursing work to painting nails and licensed body work in spas. They face many modes of labor exploitation, sexual and otherwise.



The hypersexualization and victimhood of Asian women are built on histories of U.S. Empire

As Asian-American women who have dedicated our lives to researching and writing complex histories of Asian women, we bear witness to the social worlds and the many forms of care labor and unremunerated work that define the lives of these women beyond sexual commerce. We mourn the loss of these women’s lives and futures. The term *Asian-American* is a constructed pan-ethnic idea that emerged out of social movements of the 1960s and 1970s to forge political links between heterogeneous communities. Asian-American was always a political idea, a term imagined in solidarity with movements for democratic rights against institutional racism, in solidarity with anti-Black racism, the dispossession of Indigenous communities, and Latinx movements for citizenship. Only recently have heterogeneous communities of Asian-Americans in Georgia translated their growth

into political power, now 7.46 percent of Fulton County. In the 2020 presidential election, Asian-American and other immigrant groups were mobilized to access the vote through the efforts of Black organizers and leaders who built infrastructures across the working classes. These political alliances across communities of color threaten the very tenets of white supremacy in the segregationist geography of Atlanta.



We mourn the loss of these women's lives and futures.

Even as they navigate a profoundly unequal world, Asian-American women also know of very good days. From emerging testimonies of family and friends, we learn of the good days these women had and the good days that were to come, with their children, birthdays with strawberry cakes, fantasies of travel, and dance parties. These women's lives are a testament to their survival, enduring systems of war and global labor that displace millions, force migrations, and continue to exploit women's work through systems of low-wage care work. It is time to narrate these women through their lives, not solely through the circumstances of their deaths. These women made lives in this country, had good and bad days, did many kinds of labor with their tired hands, laughed, dreamed, and built lifeworlds in a country intent on disappearing them.

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Letter to Ma

Merle Woo

Dear Ma,

January, 1980

I was depressed over Christmas, and when New Year's rolled around, do you know what one of my resolves was? Not to come by and see you as much anymore. I had to ask myself why I get so down when I'm with you, my mother, who has focused so much of her life on me, who has endured so much; one who I am proud of and respect so deeply for simply surviving.

I suppose that one of the main reasons is that when I leave your house, your pretty little round white table in the dinette where we sit while you drink tea (with only three specks of Jasmine) and I smoke and drink coffee, I am down because I believe there are chasms between us. When you say, "I support you, honey, in everything you do except . . . except . . ." I know you mean except my speaking out and writing of my anger at all those things that have caused those chasms. When you say I shouldn't be so ashamed of Daddy, former gambler, retired clerk of a "gook suey" store, because of the time when I was six and saw him humiliated on Grant Avenue by two white cops, I know you haven't even been listening to me when I have repeatedly said that I am not ashamed of him, not you, not who we are. When you ask, "Are you so angry because you are unhappy?" I know that we are not talking to each other. Not with understanding, although many words have passed between us, many hours, many afternoons at that round table with Daddy out in the front room watching television, and drifting out every once in a while to say "Still talking?" and getting more peanuts that are so bad for his health.

We talk and we talk and I feel frustrated by your censorship. I know it is unintentional and unconscious. But whatever I have told you about the classes I was teaching, or the stories I was working on, you've always forgotten within a month. Maybe you can't listen – because maybe when you look in my eyes, you will, as you've always done, sense more than what we're actually saying, and that makes you fearful. Do you see your repressed anger manifested in me? What doors would groan wide open if you heard my words with complete understanding? Are you afraid that your daughter is breaking out of our shackles, and into total anarchy? That your daughter has turned

into a crazy woman who advocates not only equality for Third World people, for women, but for gays as well? Please don't shudder, Ma, when I speak of homosexuality. Until we can all present ourselves to the world in our completeness, as fully and beautifully as we see ourselves naked in our bedrooms, we are not free.

After what seems like hours of talking, I realize it is not talking at all, but the filling up of time with sounds that say, "I am your daughter, you are my mother, and we are keeping each other company, and that is enough." But it is not enough because my life has been formed by your life. Together we have lived one hundred and eleven years in this country as yellow women, and it is not enough to enunciate words and words and words and then to have them only mean that we have been keeping each other company. I desperately want you to understand me and my work, Ma, to know what I am doing! When you distort what I say, like thinking I am against all "caucasians" or that I am ashamed of Dad, then I feel anger and more frustration and want to slash out, not at you, but at those external forces which keep us apart. What deepens the chasms between us are our different reactions to those forces. Yours has been one of silence, self-denial, self-effacement; you believing it is your fault that you never fully experienced self-pride and freedom of choice. But listen, Ma, only with a deliberate consciousness is my reaction different from yours.

When I look at you, there are images: images of you as a little ten-year-old Korean girl, being sent alone from Shanghai to the United States, in steerage with only one skimpy little dress, being sick and lonely on Angel Island for three months; then growing up in a "Home" run by white missionary women. Scrubbing floors on your hands and knees, hauling coal in heavy metal buckets up three flights of stairs, tending to the younger children, putting hot bricks on your cheeks to deaden the pain from the terrible toothaches you always had. Working all your life as maid, waitress, salesclerk, office worker, mother. But throughout there is an image of you as strong and courageous, and persevering: climbing out of windows to escape from the Home, then later, from an abusive first husband. There is so much more to these images than I can say, but I think you know what I mean. Escaping out of windows offered only temporary respites; surviving is an everyday chore. You gave me, physically, what you never had, but there was a spiritual, emotional legacy you passed down which was reinforced by society: self-contempt because of our race, our sex, our sexuality. For deeply ingrained in me, Ma, there has been that strong, compulsive force to sink into self-contempt, passivity, and despair. I am sure that my fifteen years of alcohol abuse have not been forgotten by either of us, nor my suicidal depressions.

Now, I know you are going to think that I hate and despise you for your self-hatred, for your isolation. But I don't. Because in spite of your withdrawal, in spite of your loneliness, you have not only survived, but been beside me in the worst of times when your company meant everything in the world to me. I just need more than that now, Ma. I have taken and taken from you in terms of needing you to mother me, to be by my side, and I need, now, to take from you two more things: understanding and support for who I am now and my work.

We are Asian American women and the reaction to our identity is what causes the chasms instead of connections. But do you realize, Ma, that I could never have reacted the way I have if you had not provided for me the opportunity to be free of the binds that have held you down, and to be in the process of self-affirmation? Because of your life, because of the physical security you have given me: my education, my full stomach, my clothed and starched back, my piano and dancing lessons – all those gifts you never received – I saw myself as having worth; now I begin to love myself more, see our potential, and fight for just that kind of social change that will affirm me, my race, my sex, my heritage. And while I affirm myself, Ma, I affirm you.

Today, I am satisfied to call myself either an Asian American Feminist or Yellow Feminist. The two terms are inseparable because race and sex are an integral part of me. This means that I am working with others to realize pride in culture and women and heritage (the heritage that is the exploited yellow immigrant: Daddy and you). Being a Yellow Feminist means being a community activist and a humanist. It does not mean "separatism," either by cutting myself off from non-Asians or men. It does not mean retaining the same power structure and substituting women in positions of control held by men. It does mean fighting the whites and the men who abuse us, straight-jacket us and tape our mouths; it means changing the economic class system and psychological forces (sexism, racism, and homophobia) that really hurt all of us. And I do this, not in isolation, but in the community.

We no longer can afford to stand back and watch while an insatiable elite ravages and devours resources which are enough for all of us. The obstacles are so huge and overwhelming that often I do become cynical and want to give up. And if I were struggling alone, I know I would never even attempt to put into action what I believe in my heart, that (and this is primarily because of you, Ma) Yellow Women are strong and have the potential to be powerful and effective leaders.

I can hear you asking now, "Well, what do you mean by 'social change and leadership'? And how are you going to go about it?" To begin with we must wipe out the circumstances that keep us down in

silence and self-effacement. Right now, my techniques are education and writing. Yellow Feminist means being a core for change, and that core means having the belief in our potential as human beings. I will work with anyone, support anyone, who shares my sensibility, my objectives. But there are barriers to unity: white women who are racist, and Asian American men who are sexist. My very being declares that those two groups do not share my complete sensibility. I would be fragmented, mutilated, if I did not fight against racism and sexism together.

And this is when the pain of the struggle hits home. How many white women have taken on the responsibility to educate themselves about Third World people, their history, their culture? How many white women really think about the stereotypes they retain as truth about women of color? But the perpetuation of dehumanizing stereotypes is really very helpful for whites; they use them to justify their giving us the lowest wages and all the work they don't want to perform. Ma, how can we believe things are changing when as a nurse's aide during World War II, you were given only the tasks of changing the bed linen, removing bed pans, taking urine samples, and then only three years ago as a retired volunteer worker in a local hospital, white women gave themselves desk jobs and gave you, at sixty-nine, the same work you did in 1943? Today you speak more fondly of being a nurse's aide during World War II and how proud you are of the fact that the Red Cross showed its appreciation for your service by giving you a diploma. Still in 1980, the injustices continue. I can give you so many examples of groups which are "feminist" in which women of color were given the usual least important tasks, the shitwork, and given no say in how that group is to be run. Needless to say, those Third World women, like you, dropped out, quit.

Working in writing and teaching, I have seen how white women condescend to Third World women because they reason that because of our oppression, which they know nothing about, we are behind them and their "progressive ideas" in the struggle for freedom. They don't even look at history! At the facts! How we as Asian American women have always been fighting for more than mere survival, but were never acknowledged because we were in our communities, invisible, but not inaccessible.

And I get so tired of being the instant resource for information on Asian American women. Being the token representative, going from class to class, group to group, bleeding for white women so they can have an easy answer – and then, and this is what really gets to me – they usually leave to never continue their education about us on their own.

To the racist white female professor who says, "If I have to watch everything I say I wouldn't say anything," I want to say, "Then get out of teaching."

To the white female poet who says, "Well, frankly, I believe that politics and poetry don't necessarily have to go together," I say, "Your little taste of white privilege has deluded you into thinking that you don't have to fight against sexism in this society. You are talking to me from your own isolation and your own racism. If you feel that you don't have to fight for me, that you don't have to speak out against capitalism, the exploitation of human and natural resources, then you in your silence, your inability to make connections, are siding with a system that will eventually get you, after it has gotten me. And if you think that's not a political stance, you're more than simply deluded, you're crazy!"

This is the same white voice that says, "I am writing about and looking for themes that are 'universal.'" Well, most of the time when "universal" is used, it is just a euphemism for "white": white themes, white significance, white culture. And denying minority groups their rightful place and time in U.S. history is simply racist.

Yes, Ma, I am mad. I carry the anger from my own experience and the anger you couldn't afford to express, and even that is often misinterpreted no matter how hard I try to be clear about my position. A white woman in my class said to me a couple of months ago, "I feel that Third World women hate me and that *they* are being racist; I'm being stereotyped, and I've never been part of the ruling class." I replied, "Please try to understand. Know our history. Know the racism of whites, how deep it goes. Know that we are becoming ever more intolerant of those people who let their ignorance be their excuse for their complacency, their liberalism, when this country (this world!) is going to hell in a handbasket. Try to understand that our distrust is from experience, and that our distrust is *powerless*. Racism is an essential part of the status quo, *powerful*, and continues to keep us down. It is a rule taught to all of us from birth. Is it no wonder that we fear there are no exceptions?"

And as if the grief we go through working with white women weren't enough; so close to home, in our community, and so very painful, is the lack of support we get from some of our Asian American brothers. Here is a quote from a rather prominent male writer ranting on about a Yellow "sister":

... I can only believe that such blatant sucking off of the identity is the work of a Chinese American woman, another Jade Snow Wong Pochahontas yellow. Pussywhipped again. Oh, damn, pussy-whipped again.

Chinese American woman: "another Jade Snow Wong Pochahontas yellow." According to him, Chinese American women sold out – are contemptuous of their culture, pathetically strain all their lives to be white, hate Asian American men, and so marry white men (the John Smiths) – or just like Pochahontas: we rescue white men while betraying our fathers; then marry white men, get baptized, and go to dear old England to become curiosities of the civilized world. Whew! Now, that's an indictment! [Of all women of color.] Some of the male writers in the Asian American community seem never to support us. They always expect us to support them, and you know what? We almost always do. Anti-Yellow men? Are they kidding? We go to their readings, buy and read and comment on their books, and try to keep up a dialogue. And they accuse us of betrayal, are resentful because we do readings together as Women, and so often do not come to our performances. And all the while we hurt because we are rejected by our brothers. The Pochahontas image used by a Chinese American man points out a tragic truth: the white man and his ideology are still over us and between us. These men of color, with clear vision, fight the racism in white society, but have bought the white male definition of "masculinity": men only should take on the leadership in the community because the qualities of "originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity" are "traditionally masculine."²

Some Asian men don't seem to understand that by supporting Third World women and fighting sexism, they are helping themselves as well. I understand all too clearly how dehumanized Dad was in this country. To be a Chinese man in America is to be a victim of both racism and sexism. He was made to feel he was without strength, identity, and purpose. He was made to feel soft and weak, whose only job was to serve whites. Yes, Ma, at one time I was ashamed of him because I thought he was "womanly." When those two white cops said, "Hey, fat boy, where's our meat?" he left me standing there on Grant Avenue while he hurried over to his store to get it; they kept complaining, never satisfied, "That piece isn't good enough. What's the matter with you, fat boy? Don't you have respect? Don't wrap that meat in newspapers either; use the good stuff over there." I didn't know that he spent a year and a half on Angel Island; that we could never have our right names; that he lived in constant fear of being deported; that, like you, he worked two full-time jobs most of his life; that he was mocked and ridiculed because he speaks "broken English." And Ma, I was so ashamed after that experience when I was only six years old that I never held his hand again.

² *AHHEEEEE! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, editors Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, Shawn Wong (Howard University Press, 1974).

Today, as I write to you of all these memories, I feel even more deeply hurt when I realize how many people, how so many people, because of racism and sexism, fail to see what power we sacrifice by not joining hands.

But not all white women are racist, and not all Asian American men are sexist. And we choose to trust them, love and work with them. And there are visible changes. Real tangible, positive changes. The changes I love to see are those changes within ourselves.

Your grandchildren, my children, Emily and Paul. That makes three generations. Emily loves herself. Always has. There are shades of self-doubt but much less than in you or me. She says exactly what she thinks, most of the time, either in praise or in criticism of herself or others. And at sixteen she goes after whatever she wants, usually center stage. She trusts and loves people, regardless of race or sex (but, of course, she's cautious), loves her community and works in it, speaks up against racism and sexism at school. Did you know that she got Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker on her reading list for a Southern Writers class when there were only white authors? That she insisted on changing a script done by an Asian American man when she saw that the depiction of the character she was playing was sexist? That she went to a California State House Conference to speak out for Third World students' needs?

And what about her little brother, Paul? Twelve years old. And remember, Ma? At one of our Saturday Night Family Dinners, how he lectured Ronnie (his uncle, yet!) about how he was a male chauvinist? Paul told me once how he knew he had to fight to be Asian American, and later he added that if it weren't for Emily and me, he wouldn't have to think about feminist stuff too. He says he can hardly enjoy a movie or TV program anymore because of the sexism. Or comic books. And he is very much aware of the different treatment he gets from adults: "You have to do everything right," he said to Emily, "and I can get away with almost anything."

Emily and Paul give us hope, Ma. Because they are proud of who they are, and they care so much about our culture and history. Emily was the first to write your biography because she knows how crucial it is to get our stories in writing.

Ma, I wish I knew the histories of the women in our family before you. I bet that would be quite a story. But that may be just as well, because I can say that *you* started something. Maybe you feel ambivalent or doubtful about it, but you did. Actually, you should be proud of what you've begun. I am. If my reaction to being a Yellow Woman is different than yours was, please know that that is not a judgment on you, a criticism or a denial of you, your worth. I have always

supported you, and as the years pass, I think I begin to understand you more and more.

In the last few years, I have realized the value of Homework: I have studied the history of our people in this country. I cannot tell you how proud I am to be a Chinese/Korean American Woman. We have such a proud heritage, such a courageous tradition. I want to tell everyone about that, all the particulars that are left out in the schools. And the full awareness of being a woman makes me want to sing. And I do sing with other Asian Americans and women, Ma, anyone who will sing with me.

I feel now that I can begin to put our lives in a larger framework. Ma, a larger framework! The outlines for us are time and blood, but today there is breadth possible through making connections with others involved in community struggle. In loving ourselves for who we are – American women of color – we can make a vision for the future where we are free to fulfill our human potential. This new framework will not support repression, hatred, exploitation and isolation, but will be a human and beautiful framework, created in a community, bonded not by color, sex or class, but by love and the common goal for the liberation of mind, heart, and spirit.

Ma, today, you are as beautiful and pure to me as the picture I have of you, as a little girl, under my dresser-glass.

I love you,
Merle

LABOR ORGANIZING SEX WORK Q&A

Migrant Massage Workers Don't Need to Be Rescued

Wu, a member of the sex worker collective Red Canary Song, discusses body work at the intersection of class, race, gender, and whorephobia.

By Rosemarie Ho

APRIL 2, 2021



The members of Red Canary Song at a community dim sum. (Courtesy of Red Canary Song)

On March 16, a white man walked into several massage parlors in Atlanta operated by people of Asian descent, and he shot and killed eight people. Six were Asian women,

some immigrants, most of whom were workers at these parlors. Predictably, the shooting set off a frenzy of news and speculation: Was the killer motivated by his religious fervor? Were these killings a harbinger for even more horrific anti-Asian violence yet to come?

Red Canary Song, a grassroots collective of Asian sex workers, massage workers, and allies, quickly mobilized in the wake of the shooting. They organized an online vigil that nearly 3,000 people attended, released a statement cosigned by many grassroots organizations that rejected policing as response to the violence, diverted an outpouring of donations back to local sex work advocacy organizations in Atlanta, and went on panels and news programs to help the nation understand how we got here. The collective began in 2017 after Yang Song, a Chinese migrant massage worker, fell to her death during a police raid; since then, Red Canary Song has been building worker power in these highly stigmatized industries and doing outreach in Flushing, Queens, where there is a substantial Asian immigrant population.

I had the privilege to speak with Wu, a sex worker, organizer, and member of Red Canary Song, over FaceTime this past week.

—Rosemarie Ho

ROSEMARIE HO: How do racism, homophobia, and xenophobia play a part in the murders? How do you think that has affected media coverage?

WU: Something that is really, really important to acknowledge is the fact that there is a very long history of hyper-sexualization of Asian femmes and Asian female-representing people. In America, that is rooted in stigma that has been codified into law and legislation basically ever since Asian people started immigrating to the United States. We see that in examples such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, we see that in Japanese internment camps, we see that in American imperialism in the Vietnam War, we see that in the My Lai Massacre. We see that very specifically in laws like the Page Act, which assumed that Chinese women were performing prostitution.

I also want to make it very clear that we don't know whether or not these women were performing any kind of sex work. Still there are a lot of policies that are rooted in whorephobia, xenophobia, racism, sexism that deeply, deeply affect the way that these women were (a) murdered and (b) how women like them are currently criminalized in the United States. There are a lot of people who do perform sexual services, but there are also things like anti-solicitation laws that are based on whether you look like somebody who would be soliciting or not to a law enforcement officer. When you break that down, that's very obviously rooted in racism—that has its own history for Black and brown and Indigenous communities. Elene Lam, who is an amazing organizer with Butterfly, was also talking about how hygiene procedures can be used against massage business owners and massage workers. Licensure is another place where [the state] is only going to go into businesses that they think are risky or look grungy, or where workers don't necessarily all speak English, in order to criminalize that kind of person.

So there are all these different factors that go into how a massage worker could have been criminalized, how a massage worker could have been put at risk, how Asian-presenting women have been produced and reproduced in American cultural consciousness as hypersexual people.

That is absolutely coming out in the way that the media has taken on specific narratives around the Atlanta shootings. There's a lot of press that is really interested in investigating the massage industry and is really interested in questions like: Are these women trafficked? Do they need to be rescued? Which comes with the assumption that (a) women need to be rescued and (b) migrant women need to be rescued! Migrant women in massage labor are just doing work; all they're doing is work so that they can feed their families and go the fuck home, just like the rest of us.

If you ask any restaurant worker whether that's their dream job, they're not going to say yes. They're gonna say, no. They do this job because they get paid to do it, and then they can go home. Nobody's trying to say like, "Oh, let's take a look at the restaurant industry. They're being paid \$2.13 an hour so they're obviously being trafficked." Those conditions are very exploitative, and we should be paying restaurant workers at least minimum wage, but nobody's arguing restaurant workers need to be rescued. It always is a labor rights issue for them instead of a moralistic, "We need to save them" type of issue.

RH: My sense is that a lot of Asian American organizations, writers, and activists have been emphasizing the anti-Asian racist nature of the murders and linking that to "stopping Asian hate." Is that adequate framing around these attacks?

W: So you're basically asking, all the people who are saying things like, stop Asian stuff—whether or not they're having an intersectional view of what's happening. The answer is no.

Race is a common thread that is happening that is being pulled through all of this, and that is something that should be acknowledged, but something that's really, really crucial—and I think a lot of Asian people are not acknowledging—is the fact that class and immigration status are also fucking huge. There are a lot of Asian people who are interested in speaking about oppression as it relates to them, but they're not interested in speaking about oppression as it has to do with somebody who doesn't have as much privilege as they do. They are interested in ignoring that intersection of class, race, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. If they can ignore it, then they can also feel this is hurting me, and I don't have to acknowledge that I'm also complicit in certain ways, or that I am actually like benefiting off of this in certain ways, because I have proximity to whiteness.

RH: Why can't increased policing protect sex workers?

W: These women sit at the intersection of multiple layers of criminalization. An increase in policing just means there's a heavier amount of surveillance that is happening in that neighborhood. It also feeds into this narrative that the police and social services are going to be the ones to save you, as opposed to we want to give you the resources so you can either stay in the conditions that you're in if that's something that you want or you can move out if that's something that you also want to do—offering them the autonomy to choose whatever it is the fuck they want. Heavier policing would

mean bigger crackdowns on businesses that might be precarious or businesses that are operating without licenses or migrant communities or communities of color. It actually puts them in higher danger, because the police are not your friend.

RH: Various self-identified feminists have argued that sex work is a form of patriarchal coercion, and in that sense cannot be voluntary and is a form of rape. Red Canary Song disagrees. Can you walk me through the argument that sex work is work? Why link workers' rights to sex work?

W: Literally all workers are exploited. The fact that anybody has to participate in work is exploitation, that anybody has to participate in work in order to survive is coercion. There are very clear cases in which somebody is voluntarily doing the work, and there are very clear cases in which people are trafficked, because that does happen. But a lot of the time, people don't acknowledge the fact that very often we land somewhere in the middle. You can't escape the fact that all sex is patriarchal in some way. There's sex that is deeply rooted in pleasure and joy, but there's a lot of sex that's happening that is rooted in choices around your safety and your survival, even when it's not paid.

The only reason why people specifically look at sex work the way they do has to do with how it's associated with femme-presenting people—very often women and trans people. It takes a look at that population's decisions around the way they want to use their bodies. It falls within patriarchal reasoning of why somebody would want to use their body, that women would never want to have sex, so why would she want to have sex for money? Obviously she's being raped and

obviously she's being coerced—when that is simply not the case. Sex workers see that as the best option considering the circumstances that they have.

RH: Red Canary Song is a member of the New York-based coalition Decrim NY. Can you walk me through what that means? Why decriminalize sex work? How does that help sex workers? And how is that different from other models of legislation surrounding sex work?

W: We have criminalization, we have legalization, we have the Nordic model, and we have decriminalization. Criminalization is currently the default in a lot of different places; it just means that if you were doing sex work, you can get arrested for it.

A lot of people think that sex work should not be criminalized, that it should be legalized. But there's a lot of issues with legalization as it is implemented, such as the fact that it requires a lot of regulation, like licenses for example, which is super prohibitive for a lot of people who are operating as sex workers, even if they are privileged. A lot of people who are operating just to survive would probably not take the time to go get a license, and legalization actually puts them at the risk of being criminalized. We can see that from places like Germany and Nevada.

The Nordic model is decriminalizing sex work for workers, but then also criminalizing buyers of sex work, which is still very harmful. The legal liability that the clients are taking on just turns sex work into a buyer's market, and then that

would just like be passed on to the market of people who are actually doing the work. It would opens up sex workers to a lot of exploitation.

If you do not want the most marginalized communities to be harmed, then you have to eradicate the police from that area. Even in the Nordic model, if you're seeing somebody who is a john or a client, a police officer would still be involved in that interaction, because there's a client that is being criminalized. That's why decriminalization is actually the best option for sex workers or anybody who's doing any kind of body work. Red Canary Song is an organization in favor of abolition and prison abolition; decriminalization just happens to be the only solution. It's not a perfect solution. It's a step forward towards a solution without the police, who have historically been the most fervent enactors of violence against sex workers.

RH: Besides prison and police abolition, what would make sex work safe? What would be the ideal situation for sex workers?

W: All of it is situational; all of it is super interdependent. The first thing that I can think of—aside from the complete and total downfall of capitalism—is access to health care. Things like employment services or immigration services would make sex workers safe. Things like mental health resources would help make sex workers safe. Very localized approaches to the community help keep the community safe. Also just generally, reduce stigma against sex workers and acknowledge that it's just labor.

RH: My impression of Red Canary Song in 2017 was that it was very much and it still is local New York organizing, but it has since become transnational. Can you walk me through why you guys choose to organize transnationally? Why is advocacy for sex work tied to advocacy for immigrant workers?

W: When we say that we're organizing transnationally, we primarily mean that we organize in coalition with other organizations that take on massage work, Asian sex workers, and of migrant labor, so organizations like Butterfly Project in Canada and EMPOWER in Thailand. These are all organizations that cover sex work in their country specifically. There's a lot of stigma about sex work from within the Asian community itself, and so for us, it's really crucial to be able to be in communication, and to be in coalition with organizations that are talking about sex work in an Asian country itself, so that we can understand how that stigma travels through the diaspora, and how it travels into these different immigrant pockets all around the United States. In this age of globalization, the way that things go down in one country is going to heavily impact the cultural conditions and the cultural consciousness in like New York. We can't just say, "Oh, we're organizing for migrant workers," without acknowledging that they are migrants from somewhere else. You deem these conditions better than where you were before, or maybe you're sending aid back to like where you were before. We have to acknowledge all the different contexts that might go into the decision to do this type of labor.

RH: Alright, let's shift gears a bit: This is a meta question, but what has it been like for Red Canary Song since the shooting—with all this attention suddenly falling on the organization?

W: Yeah, I think that the primary thing that we wanted, especially with the statement, was platforming the voices of migrant workers. In that statement we have six demands from different migrant workers on the way that they should be listened to. There are a lot of people who are focusing on us, because we happen to be one of the few in the nation that are hitting this specific intersection of being Asian, being sex workers, or dealing with migrant workers who do massage work. We do heavily encourage people to get involved in local organizing because local organizing is going to be what keeps our communities safe.

This is also kind of a meta answer, but I think something that I've learned particularly is just how lucky I am to be organizing with the people that I'm organizing with. Everybody in our core—and even people who have not been in our core, but have been dipping in and out of our collective for a really long time—just really stepped up to the fucking plate. It has really taught me a lot about how to rely on other people. It's so incredible to see that our work has slowed down in a way that allowed us to be really sustainable for a really long time, so that all of us could jump on board when it came to a crisis like this.

A co-organizer, Yves, brought in the issue of how to make sure that your organization is anti-racist. In the summertime we went through one by one the different elements of it; we were like, oh, how do we feel about this? Are we acting upon

urgency, or are we taking things in a way that is sustainable and allows us to do the work over a long period of time? We completely shifted our mindset after that. I think operating like that is something that really allowed us to be present and available and respond in the wake of such a horrible tragedy.

RH: I'm actually really curious about this. In New York City at least, paying for BDSM sessions is legal so long as there is no sexual contact. As a BDSM practitioner yourself, how do you build solidarity across professions that are criminalized to varying degrees, across people of varying minoritized statuses?

W: The definition of sex work is like very much a spectrum, and legality itself is also a spectrum—what is considered like legal or decriminalized so to speak versus what is not. I feel like BDSM is like a very in-your-face example, where there's a lot of interpersonal contact, but a lot of times, there is no genital-to-genital contact, so there are a lot of people who don't self-identify as sex workers when they're pro-dominatrices in New York. There are a lot of people in Red Canary Song that are BDSM practitioners. We talk a lot about what does it mean to identify as a sex worker, because a lot of older pro-dominatrices will not identify as a sex worker. They distance themselves from that terminology. At the same time, there are a lot of massage workers who do sex work but don't identify as sex workers, and that's also something that we need to respect.

Something that we do think that is very important is the fact that whorephobic legislation will affect them. It'll affect people who don't do sex work at all, who don't have any

proximity to sex work just because whorephobic legislation affects anybody who could be seen as a sex worker. For example, the passage of SESTA-FOSTA didn't actually criminalize sex workers themselves. It criminalized companies that could be seen as facilitating prostitution. It affects those companies' content guidelines and content moderation, which affects the sex workers' ability to work—their ability to market themselves, to express themselves, to receive payments, to send payments.

RH: How has the pandemic affected sex work and massage parlor work? And how has Red Canary Song mobilized in response to that?

W: That's a hugely important question, because the coronavirus itself is racialized. Not to go on a tangent, but there's the essay I really, really like, "Toxic Animacies, Inanimate Affections" by Mel Chen. It's one of the best essays I've ever read in my life. It's about this period where there were a lot of Thomas the Tank Engine trains that had lead paint on them. Because a lot of these trains were being manufactured in China, they basically assigned this foreign invader persona to lead, and lead became associated with Chinese manufacturers, even though it's not a Chinese chemical or anything! But when you say lead paint, in the same way that you say MSG, it's associated with a very specific race, and the same thing happened with coronavirus.

There is no foreign invader motive for the virus, and yet like there are a lot of people who are treating it that way. That's a sentiment that was exacerbated by the past presidency, and that sentiment has trickled down into all these different

communities. That intersects with body workers of all types, whether that's massage workers, whether that's in-person sex workers, BDSM practitioners, escorts, because a lot of these people are now operating in a space that is deemed dangerous. I remember the first two months of the pandemic. It felt it was illegal to go out on the street. It criminalizes the very public space that allows us to work, while it doesn't have that kind of impact on someone in corporate America who can work from home. People who are working throughout the entirety of the pandemic had to make certain risk assessments based on X, Y, or Z every time they work. There's a lot of moralizing around people who decided to work throughout the pandemic, or people who just need to see people throughout the pandemic, even though for some, it is very necessary.

The last thing is that the alternative to working in person is working online, which itself presents a series of risks. If I have to work online, that means I have to put my face online, is that something that I want to do, or do I put in the extra labor to shield myself from surveillance? Do I want to put in the extra labor where every time I receive a payment? Do I want to push this person to give me this payment in this specific fashion? That payment could be the one that shuts down my bank account.

To answer your question specifically, Red Canary Song has created an outreach routine for workers. During the pandemic we've been doing biweekly Flushing drop-offs, so we would do things like give out straight-up cash aid and groceries and things like that.

RH: How can interested people help support the work of Red Canary Song?

W: The first one that we recommend people do is just like, go to an Asian massage, and then tip your massage therapist very well. The thing that we advocate for more than anything is if you want to do something, go offer literal support to the people that you want to support. So, frequent that business. The second thing is find an organization that is doing the work on the ground. We've received a lot of support from all over the nation, and we really appreciate that, but if people can dedicate some of that energy to finding grassroots organizations that are near them, that kind of energy and effort would be very well spent. It would be well utilized doing work in your community.

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..... **COMMENTS (3)**
