

What does the Atlanta Tragedy Mean? Korean Diaspora Speaks

24 March 2021

Ann H. Kim

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, York University

Faculty Associate, York Centre for Asian Research

Director, Resource Centre for Public Sociology

Atlanta-area shootings – 16 March 2021

Thank you to Hae Yeon and Yoonkyung for bringing us together tonight, and to you, for joining us. I'm Ann Kim, an associate professor in Sociology at York with a long-standing research agenda on Korean immigrants - when I saw the list of speakers I immediately thought how rare it is that I'm the only Kim in a sea of Koreans.

Well, like all of you, my thoughts are with the victims and their family and friends. And I'm also trying to process how it is that this massacre, which took place only 8 days ago, was followed by 9 more mass shootings in the US, with one in Colorado on Monday resulting in 10 deaths. But we'll leave the important topic of gun control for another day.

(<https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting>)

Tonight, we're talking about violence and hatred towards Korean and Asian women. As I read about the shooting and its victims, I felt a range of emotions: incredulity, horror, anger, sadness, and desire. And then I realized that these were the same emotions I felt when I saw footage of the murder of George Floyd by a police officer last May and when I saw Joyce Echaquan's video recording of hospital staff taunting her before she died last September.

We know that Asian people occupy a space that is not Black or Indigenous and that is not white. We heard from Claire Kim of UC-Irvine at a virtual talk in November at the Resource Centre for Public Sociology about how we often try to understand Asians' structural position vis-à-vis white supremacy but that in order to fully understand Asians in the racial order, we must also bring into focus anti-Blackness. And in thinking about the murdered women in Georgia and other Asian victims of racial violence that we are hearing about, I keep going back to that thesis.

What is racism against Asians? What is racism and sexism against Asian women?

If I could offer my thoughts in a single word, it would be **invalidation**.

So, evidence of success in the educational system and in highly skilled and well-paid occupations and evidence of underrepresentation in the criminal justice system are all used to **invalidate** and **silence** claims of harmful or exclusionary treatment of Asian people, even among ourselves.

But what we can't deny or dismiss now is that Asian people experience physical and non-physical, or symbolic, violence, to borrow from Pierre Bourdieu. While the violence is different from other racialized groups, and in no way can we compare the ongoing colonization and dehumanization of other groups, racism against Asians is rooted in the same ideology, the same system of power, and it is violent nonetheless.

The most egregious physical violence is murder and we are also witnessing serious assaults, especially of seniors and women, and neglect – an example of which just emerged a couple of days ago, with Candida Macarine, an elderly Filipino woman found dead on the floor of a Montreal hospital.

Non-physical, or symbolic, violence is palpable in the model minority stereotype, which we've mentioned already. It manifests also in the apparent absence of boundaries around what is permissible and not permissible to say to an Asian person. This was pointed out to me by a young ethnic Korean man during a recent focus group discussion on anti-Asian racism. He remarked that there appears to be very little social mores on what you can and cannot say to Asian person – question their nativity and citizenship, comment on their English language abilities, accents, smelliness of food, physical features, and ridicule their names and the phonetics of their languages.

These types of experiences lead Asian people to take accent classes to sound more Canadian, undergo plastic surgery on facial features to appear more white, adopt Anglo first names to make it less uncomfortable for others and to get jobs, and pack sandwiches for school lunches to avoid being the object of derision from classmates. This is **invalidation**.

How does a former president call the coronavirus “Kung Flu” with impunity?

How does a Georgia police captain, in effect, make excuses for a murderer by saying he had a sex addiction and a bad day AND post an anti-Asian racist image on social media and still be *captain*?

How does an MP (formerly Conservative, now Independent) ask whether Dr. Theresa Tam, Canada's Chief Public Health Officer, works for Canada or *for China* and still sit in the Parliament building?

To see these men hold their positions of power **invalidates** the damage that the men inflict and trivializes Asian people's pain.

And we see both types of violence, physical and symbolic, in the segregation of Asian women in certain places of employment, such as massage spas, and in their exoticization and hypersexualization, and in assuming they are all sex trade workers.

Turning to the women of the Georgia shooting, more specifically, their stories are about more than gender, race, and class to me. Their stories are stories of migration and being American, entrepreneurship, their work ethic, intra- and inter-racial families, single and married mothers and grandmothers, mid-life and late-life, paid and unpaid labour, self-sufficiency and supporting their families, and much more.

I mentioned when I began that one of the feelings I had while reading about the shooting was a sense of desire. It's the desire for things to be equitable for Asian people, for Black people, for Indigenous people, and for a Civil Rights Movement Redux or a Civil Rights Movement Part II. I think it's about time, like others have expressed, for a multiracial coalition.