

We, the faculty members of the Asian and Asian American Studies program at UNLV, offer our condolences to the families and friends of the victims in the Atlanta shootings, and we stand in solidarity with all those grieving and made to feel unsafe by this most recent instance of violence against Asian American and Asian Immigrant communities.

On the evening of March 16th, a 21-year-old white male gunman went on a shooting spree at three Asian owned/operated massage parlors and spas in and around Atlanta, ultimately killing 8 people, 7 of whom were women, 6 who were of Asian descent. Over the past year, AAPI organizations have tracked and reported over [3,800 hate crimes and incidents targeting Asian and Asian Americans](#). The majority of these have been against women. This is an increase from past years that many scholars, politicians, and activists have linked to the rhetoric of the previous presidential administration, an administration that eschewed the widely used scientific identifier of “Covid-19” in favor of the racially charged “China virus” or “Kung Flu” to refer to the virus that continues to fuel the current global pandemic. As more and more people have been speaking out about their experiences of being the target of anti-Asian, anti-immigrant hostility, this recent tragedy adds to growing fears and uncertainty that many in the AAPI community have been experiencing. For many, this fear is not new.

Anti-Asian sentiment and hate have a long history in the U.S. and many other nations. The Atlanta shooting, for example, will draw significant comparison to the 1982 murder of Chinese American Vincent Chin, who was stalked and beaten to death with a baseball bat by two disgruntled auto workers in metro Detroit. At the time, the metro Detroit area (then home to the 3 largest auto manufacturers in the nation) was a powder keg of racial animosity against Asians and Asian Americans, as many in the city scapegoated them to rationalize the widespread layoffs in the U.S. auto industry due to foreign competition, specifically from the popularity of cars imported from Japan. Chin’s murder galvanized the U.S. AAPI community, as many realized that they too could be similarly targeted simply for being Asian. Local and state authorities did not classify the murder as a hate crime, and the perpetrators served no jail time. Fears over Asian immigrants taking jobs from white Americans has inspired racialized violence for over a century, and in 1882, such fears culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act, a federal law banning Chinese immigrants from entering the U.S. The immigration act of 1917 went further, banning the admission of most other Asian ethnic groups in what amounted to an “Asiatic barred zone.” The banning of Asian immigration was only repealed in a piecemeal fashion during WWII when the U.S. was actively seeking wartime allies in the Pacific, and hoping to quell civil rights activism at home. The incorporation of Asians into the American family was at once a geopolitical tool to woo post-colonial non-white nations as cold-war allies and client states, and a domestic method of tamping down accusations of white supremacy rule in the U.S. The semi- incorporation of Asians into the U.S. and their subsequent characterization as “model minorities” has had the effect of justifying federal inaction towards the racial violence, dispossession, and discrimination experienced by historically marginalized communities of color.

While the Atlanta shooter has claimed no racial bias against Asians, saying instead that his objection was attributed to the sexual vice he associated with the spas he targeted, we must not forget that for Asian women in particular, racialized and sexualized violence are inextricable. Asian women have long been exoticized as submissive, sexually available, and immoral. In fact, the first federally passed statute to restrict immigration in the U.S. was rooted in white America’s understanding that Asian women were more sexually promiscuous. The U.S. medical community widely believed that Asian women were vectors of sexual contagion and that they threatened the

perceived health and well-being of moral white families. The act (which specified immigrants from China and Japan) emphasized that customs and immigration officials should deny entrance to any women they *suspected* of being prostitutes and effectively stemmed Asian women's entrance into the country. Indeed, it was these very ideas of Asian women's sexual immorality that helped launch Euro-American imperialism in India, Vietnam, Japan, Hawai'i, and the Philippines, to name a few. The remnants of the wider Euro-American empire across the Asia-Pacific continue to characterize Asian women as such, making their lives all the more precarious. Specifically, as the U.S. collected military bases in formerly colonized areas, it also built up the sexual economies that are so irrevocably tied to the "rest and recreation" of American soldiers. The racialized sexualization of Asian women was also learned in Vietnam, where many U.S. soldiers often made no distinction between enemy and ally, nor were they encouraged to do so. The Asia-Pacific region is subsequently home to many hundreds of thousands of Amerasians, those born to an Asian mother, and left behind by an American G.I. It has been the work of many empires and nations that have created the racial and sexual precarity of Asian and Asian American women, and it is too often the stereotype of the hypersexualized Asian woman that informs their experiences here in the U.S. and abroad. It has also become clear that much of the media coverage of the shootings in Atlanta have also begun to pivot to this very old and durable understanding of Asian women, letting white supremacy, (despite being so intimately twined with the creation of stereotypes against Asian women), slip through the cracks yet again.

While local law enforcement and the FBI have yet to determine whether *they believe* that the Atlanta shootings were racially motivated, and thus constitutes what is federally recognized as a hate crime, they should not be blind to the evidence of history. They should not be blind to the salient truth that, in this contemporary moment as well as historically, to be Asian has been and continues to be a target, the forever foreigner, a scapegoat, and outside of the fabric of the U.S. nation. Vincent Chin was killed because he was Asian. The spas were targeted because they were racialized and imagined as an "Asian" place, regardless of the racial backgrounds of the victims inside. The six victims in Atlanta were killed because they were Asian women. A recent report by U.S. intelligence agencies on the problem of domestic terrorism has plainly stated that racially motivated extremists are the "most likely to conduct mass-casualty attacks against civilians." While the current tragedy has all the momentum to go the way of the Chin case, it is our hope that federal, state, and local officials will heed the voices of those most impacted and unequivocally denounce anti-Asian violence and recognize this as one of the worst demonstrations of anti-Asian violence in recent history.