What explains white male animus against Asian women? We address this question by examining the murders in Atlanta, GA, which reflect a larger global pattern of violence against what are perceived as hypersexualized Asian women. Dominant discourses on these murders promote either a narrative of racial xenophobia or a stance for or against sex work. Neither discourse adequately accounts for the simultaneous racial and gendered determination of Asian women’s experiences. In this commentary, we provide a racial–gender analysis and underscore how the gendered racialization of Asian women as hypersexual can result in their perception as disposable bodies for white male rage. As we explain, hypersexualization implies immorality, which in turn threatens the social order and thereby justifies Asian women’s disposability. This commentary establishes Asian women’s hypersexualization as a century-old view in American society perpetuated in cinema and the law.

Keywords: hypersexualization; gendered violence; anti-Asian racism; gendered racism; legal violence

On March 16, 2021, eight people were murdered, ambushed with a 9 mm handgun, by a self-described sex addict who targeted three Atlanta-area massage parlors. Soon Chung Park, 74 years old; Hyun Jung Grant, 51; Suncha Kim, 69; Yong Ae Yue, 63; Delaina Ashley Yaun, 33; Paul Andre Michels, 54; Xiaojie Tan, 49; and Daoyou Feng, 44, all perished. Tormented by his sex addiction, the perpetrator, a 21-year-old white man, thought of killing himself but eventually decided to “eliminate the temptation”
His “temptation” had been Asian women. He killed six Asian women. How does temptation lead to murder? It can happen because of the gendered racialization of Asian women as villainous temptresses, a paradoxical “controlling image” (Collins 1990) that renders them sexually desirable yet a threat to the social order and thereby expendable.

Due to this gendered racialization, the violence in Atlanta was not an aberration. It is a gendered racialization that haunts Asian women across time and space. On March 3, 1995, at the King County Courthouse in Seattle, WA, Susana Remerata Blackwell, a 25-year-old Filipino woman and her friends, 46-year-old Phoebe Dizon and 42-year-old Veronica Laureta, were shot and killed by Remerata Blackwell’s estranged American husband. The murderer claimed that Remerata Blackwell duped him into marriage to immigrate to the United States and had filed for an annulment that would have led to the latter’s deportation. He killed the victims after they testified about his abuse. In Hong Kong, two Indonesian women, 23-year-old Sumarti Ningsih and 28-year-old Seneng Mujiasih, were raped and tortured to death by a high-flying British banker for three days. No one knows when they died, but their bodies were found on November 1, 2014. The murderer took pleasure in violent pornography and recorded their torture on his phone (Effendi 2018). The perpetrators of violence against Asian women can be members of their own ethnic communities (Abraham 2000). In 1932, Celine Navarro, 28 years old, was accused of adultery, stoned, and buried alive by members of the Filipino American community in Stockton, CA (Shimizu 2020). All these murders point to a global pattern of misogyny and violence against Asian women.

Dominant discourse frames our understanding of the violence against hypersexualized Asian women as an issue of either race or gender (for the same criticism, see Hoang 2021). In this commentary, we amend this epistemological limitation. The murders in Atlanta reflect neither just gender nor just racial animus. Instead, they indicate how race and gender co-constitute in shaping Asian women’s vulnerability to violence. We illustrate how the gendered racialization of Asian women as morally dubious villainous temptresses in cinema and the law perpetuates their hypersexualization (Shimizu 2007) and consequent constitution as disposable bodies for white male rage.

**DOMINANT DISCOURSE: RACIAL OR GENDER ANIMUS**

In the United States, the spewing of anti-Asian rhetoric by former President Donald Trump and his references to COVID-19 as the “China
“Virus” and “Kung Flu” have fueled a surge in hate incidents against Asian Americans. Since March 2020, Stop Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Hate has recorded nearly 3,800 hate incidents from verbal harassment to physical assault. Yet these incidents are not just about race; in the current climate, women are more than two times more likely to be victimized than men. This has not always been the case. In the past, the fear of Asian men stealing jobs that had been the bigger threat. In the summer of 1982, Vincent Chin, a 27-year-old Chinese American, was repeatedly bashed on his head with a baseball bat and brutally murdered. One of his murderers declared loudly: “It’s because of little motherfuckers like you that we’re out of work” (Tizon 2014, 58).

This anti-Asian rage fits a much longer historical pattern. Historian Lew-Williams (2018) documents in The Chinese Must Go that in the late 19th century at least 168 Chinese communities had been driven out of the American West by European laborers who saw them as competition. This violent dehumanization continued in the early 20th century, resulting in the lynching, arson, and physical assault of Filipino migrant workers (Baldoz 2011). Asian dehumanization also extends to U.S. military interventions in Asia: the annihilation of Filipinos forcibly confined in overcrowded and disease-ridden concentration camps during the Philippine-American War; the nuclear evisceration of noncombatants in two Japanese cities during World War II; the forced prostitution of Korean women to military brothels during the Korean War; and the massacre of hundreds of unarmed South Vietnamese civilians by U.S. troops during the Vietnam War (Francisco 1973; Lee 2021b).

Although many Asian American scholars situate the Atlanta murders within a 150-year history of anti-Asian violence (Baldoz 2021; Lee 2021a, 2021b), feminists utilize them to draw attention to women’s subjugation. Many feminists have turned these murders into a platform for or against sex work, disturbingly ignoring the fact that none of the victims ever publicly admitted to being a sex worker. Instead, they use the admitted sex addiction of the perpetrator to conclude that the victims had been sex workers. The Barnard Center for Research on Women (2021) denounced these murders as a “targeted attack against Asian women and sex workers.” Likewise, anti-trafficking groups, such as Restore New York City (NYC) linked the murders to sex trafficking and suggested these murders were bound to happen because “illicit massage businesses” are “inherently violent” (Kelly, Estwick, and Mansfield 2021).

Although the “interlocking systems” (Glenn 1992) of gender and race oppression relegate many women of color and immigrant women to poorly paid and unregulated caring jobs, including domestic work and sex
work, we should not assume that the murdered massage workers had been sex workers. Making that assumption perpetuates the fetishization of Asian women’s bodies and their gendered racialization as hypersexual Asian women (Shimizu 2007). Esther Kao, an organizer for New York-based Red Canary, an advocacy group for Asian sex workers, cautions us against making this assumption. She warns, “The majority of massage parlors are licensed businesses that also provide professional, non-sexual massages” (Whitehurst and Price 2021). We must, therefore, recognize the victims in Atlanta not as sex workers but as sexualized workers whose gendered racialization made them the target of violence.

Furthermore, correlating the Atlanta murders to sex work inadvertently perpetuates the unconscious bias of prioritizing the perspective not of the victims but instead that of those who marginalize them. This is precisely what the Cherokee County Sheriff’s Office did in their press conference when they exhibited greater sympathy for that perpetrator than for his victims. Standing behind a podium, Capt. Jay Baker, a spokesperson, showed no emotions as he took questions from reporters. Is this a racially motivated crime? Not according to the perpetrator. What motivated it then? According to the perpetrator, his sex addiction. Baker then ponders aloud, “He was pretty much fed up and had been at the end of his rope, and yesterday was a really bad day for him, and this is what he did.” This sympathy-for-the-devil is also implied in the narrative that the perpetrator, who has been described as a devout Christian, was driven into committing such heinous acts by his religion, not gendered racism toward Asian women.

**THE GENDERED RACIALIZATION OF ASIAN WOMEN AS VILLAINOUS TEMPTRESSES**

According to sociologist Baldoz (2021), equating the targeted deaths of “Asian sex workers” in Atlanta to someone having a bad day reinforces the idea of white (male) victimhood. White terrorists, Baldoz analyzes, justify acts of legal violence by claiming self-defense against groups that disrupt the social order, if not contaminate society; they self-identify as victims of racial minorities and immigrants who steal jobs, spread disease, and promote immorality (Baldoz 2021). Using the perpetrator’s Christian religion to explain his motivation for the Atlanta murders likewise perpetuates the idea of white male victimhood. Yet it had been animus and not religion that propelled him to commit these murders.

Gender as much as race shapes this white male animus. The contempt for Asian women that resulted in their targeted killings tells us as much.
For Asian women, it is their hypersexualization as well as the presumption of their moral duplicity that render them ill-fitted for American society. Together, such “controlling images” (Collins 1990) portray Asian women as villainous temptresses who represent a “temptation” that invites social disorder and must accordingly be annihilated. As we now illustrate, this racialized sexualization of Asian women is perpetuated in their cinematic representation as well as in the law.

Villainous Temptresses in Cinema

In Hollywood, the racialized sexualization of Asian women as villainous temptresses emerged from an amalgam of cinematic archetypes of Asian femininity: the Lotus Blossom, the Dragon Lady, and the Little Brown Fucking Machine (LBFM, Powered by Rice). The image of a Lotus Blossom characterizes a “self-sacrificing, servile, and suicidal” (Shimizu 2007, 59) sexualized Asian femininity first ushered into the silver screen by Anna May Wong in the 1922 film *Toll of the Sea*. In the film, Wong portrays Lotus Flower, a Chinese woman who rescues and falls in love with an American who abandons her and marries a white woman. Pathologically devoted to him, she gives up her mixed-race child to the American couple and then drowns herself.

A polar opposite of the passive Lotus Blossom, the Dragon Lady defines the excessive sexuality of Asian women as “desirable, deceitful, and dangerous” (Espiritu 2008, 106). This figure is also embodied by Wong in the 1924 film *The Thief of Bagdad*, in which she portrayed the scantily clad Mongol slave dispatched to spy on and try to win the hand of the princess of Bagdad for the evil Mongol prince. While Chan (2007, 209) observes Wong as “glow[ing] in her uncompromising sexual intensity and dynamism,” her captivating sexuality is also threatening as she projects a treacherous foreign femininity that imperils an unguarded white man.

Rising from the ruins of U.S. wars in Southeast Asia, the LBFM archetype represents the Southeast Asian prostitute whose femininity is characterized by a machine-like sexual drive and performance of eroticized poverty. This hypersexualized Southeast Asian figure comes alive in Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*, in which Papillon Soo portrays a Vietnamese prostitute who entices two American soldiers with the invitation “Well, baby, me so horny, me so horny. Me love you long time. You party?” In this now classic depiction of Asian women, she promises them cheap wanton sex of “me sucky sucky, me love you too much.”

These figures of Asian femininity have gone viral. They reappear and circulate in *Miss Saigon*, a musical that has played in hundreds of cities
across the globe, in box office hits such as *Charlie's Angels* and the Australian film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, and in rap music by artists such as 2 Live Crew. Their circulation across hemispheres and in various cultural productions perpetuates the century-old view of Asian women as dangerously hypersexual.

**Villainous Temptresses under the Law**

The U.S. laws also reinforce the construct of Asian women as villainous temptresses. The first restrictive migration legislation was the 1875 Page Act, which prohibited the entry of Chinese women to the United States under the suspicion of their moral duplicity. Assumed to engage in prostitution, they were banned from entering the United States. The American Medical Association believed that Chinese immigrants carried germs and disease that could endanger the lives of white people, and that Chinese prostitutes were the main vectors for transmission (Hwang and Parreñas 2020). Even President Ulysses S. Grant embraced the assumption that Chinese women are not only immoral but also pose grave risks to white men. “Hardly a perceptible percentage of them perform any honorable labor, but they are brought for shameful purposes, to the great demoralization of the youth of these localities,” Grant expressed in 1874 (cited by Kang 2002, 120). Not repealed until the Magnuson Act of 1943, the Page Act established the gendered racialization of Chinese women as diseased immoral prostitutes—in other words, villainous temptresses. The Atlanta murders indicate that this legacy continues to haunt Asian women today.

Since World War II, the United States has adopted a more inclusionary stance toward Asian women, enacting the War Brides Act of 1945 and allowing “alien spouses,” including Chinese women, to enter as nonquota immigrants. Yet the legacy of their assumed moral duplicity continues to shape U.S. laws. The United States enacted the 1986 Immigration Marriage Fraud Amendment due to concerns over Asian women’s pursuit of sham marriages and fraudulent use of spouse-based immigration. The pursuit of “mail-order marriages” by American men had burgeoned in the 1980s. The men would order print catalogs featuring pictures and short descriptions of foreign women, nearly all from the Philippines, with whom they would then simultaneously correspond by letter, frequently sending a generic correspondence to dozens at the same time (Constable 2003). During a 1985 Senate hearing, the Commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Alan C. Nelson, expressed concern over “mail-order brides” taking advantage of the loneliness of American men.
and deceitfully marrying them to obtain immigration benefits: “The alien admitted as a fiancé will go through the appearance of wanting to marry and build a future life until after the actual wedding ceremony. The alien then promptly abandons his or her spouse” (U.S. Congressional Record, Immigration Marriage Fraud Hearing [IMFH] 1986, 9). In this statement, Nelson vocalizes the pervasive assumption of Asian women’s moral duplicity and intentional duping of unsuspecting American men.

Following his recommendation, the United States imposed a two-year period of “conditional resident status” on foreign spouses. No longer would they automatically receive permanent residence in the United States. Instead, they must establish their bona fide marriage to a U.S. citizen and risk deportation upon the early termination of their marriage (U.S. Congressional Record 1986). This would include victims of domestic violence.¹ This law also fails to shield the women from deportation if their husbands divorce them during the period of their conditional residency. Last, it limits their ability to petition for a foreign spouse if they happen to divorce their American spouse and remarry a foreigner after securing permanent residency. In other words, this law aims to protect Americans, particularly men, from being exploited by conniving and morally duplicitous Asian women.

CONCLUSION

Collins (1990) prudently remarks that controlling images have detrimental effects. In the case of Asian women, their hypersexualization leads to violence. As observed recently in the New York Times, “Last year alone, women of Asian descent were screamed at, shoved, coughed on or spit at, shunned, assaulted and subjected to other forms of harassment or discrimination that coupled hateful remarks with sexist, misogynistic language” (Gupta 2021). The perception of Asian women as immoral villains normalizes their sexual harassment (Shimizu 2007), their workplace discrimination (Mukkamala and Suyemoto 2018), and, for massage workers, their policing and surveillance (Shih 2021). To different degrees, all are ultimately vulnerable to violent demise.

Controlling images inflict injury and engender material damages. While they do so, they overwhelm our perspectives about those they marginalize. The Atlanta murders have triggered a plethora of discussions on acts of violence against Asian American communities and the struggles of sex workers, yet we still know little about the lives lived by those who
died. Faced with the challenge of diversifying our depictions of Asian women, we should perhaps begin with those who perished.

NOTE

1. To amend this loophole, lawmakers subsequently passed the Violence Against Women Act of 1994, which was then reauthorized in 2000, 2005, and 2013. This initial law allowed certain victims of domestic violence to bypass the two-year conditional residency. Under the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, foreign spouses who are victims of domestic violence could qualify for a U-Visa and accordingly qualify for permanent residency. See Grosh, 2011. Also see Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000: Public Law 106-386, October 28, 2000.

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