

The Atlanta shootings have awakened a ferocious anger and grief among Asian Americans

It's about time.

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Vigil for victims of anti-Asian hate held in New York City's Union Square on March 19, 2021. Photo by [Andrew Ratto](#) on Flickr ([Creative Commons](#)).

Delaina Yaun, the mother of a 13-year-old son and an 8-month-old daughter, had a date with her husband Tuesday afternoon at a spa outside Atlanta, Young's Asian Massage. Soon after they arrived, Yaun was shot dead. So were Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, and Paul Andre Michels. A gunman had attacked the business. In total, he killed eight people at three spas and critically injured another. Soon Chung Park, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Yong Ae Yue were also killed. Six of the victims were of Asian descent. Seven were women.

The Atlanta killing spree has provoked something enormous, something untamed from within the Asian American community: a kind of [ferocious anger](#), exasperation, horror, and desperation that have long been dormant in our collective consciousness. The feelings we hadn't given ourselves the space to feel—the capacity to grieve our people and reckon with our experiences as Asian Americans—have now inevitably, [painfully](#) surfaced. And it's about time.

On Wednesday morning, as I re-read the line “eight people, including six of Asian descent,” a deep, vacuous pit began to form inside me. Not only because multiple Asian women were killed, but because the media was resistant to calling the killings a racial attack. The suspect, a 21-year-old White man, denied that his rampage was racially motivated. The media, police, and other authorities swiftly focused on economic instability and sexual addiction as potential factors. Others evoked the “lone wolf” trope, denying the possibility that the killer is part of a larger system of intertwined racism, sexism, and colonialism in which they too are complicit. Later in the day, a witness at one of the shootings reported hearing the shooter yell that he was going to “kill all Asians.” But the narrative had already been set.

Reading and listening to the carefully crafted rhetoric of countless White commentators agitated the pit churning inside of me. I thought to myself throughout the day: Why won't they just call it what it is? Why is America so uncomfortable recognizing anti-Asian hatred? Why must it take the lives of eight victims for us to confront the dark underbelly of racism against Asians that has hidden, marginalized, divided, scarred, and battered our community for generations? Why didn't Asian Americans speak out sooner?

As I sat in the frenzied waves of my own emotions, I considered how Asian American racial politics have played out since the start of the pandemic. The former president's sweeping attack on all Asians, encapsulated in his unforgettable labeling of COVID-19 as the “Kung-flu,” both stoked and made visible anti-Asian hatred. People began to realize that Asian Americans are victims not only of accidental micro-aggressions, polite ignorance, and unconscious biases but also of xenophobic, racist, and sexually motivated acts of violence.

It's often said that COVID-19 created a sudden rise in discrimination and hate crimes against Asian Americans. It's true that there has been a massive increase in anti-Asian attacks, with a [1900% increase in New York City in 2020](#) and more than [3,800 incidents of anti-Asian discrimination reported in the US in the past year](#), mostly

against women. In January of last year, security cameras recorded 84-year-old [Vicha Ratanapakdee](#) shoved to the ground while taking his morning walk in San Francisco; he died two days later. Then there was the assault of a 64-year-old [Vietnamese grandmother in a robbery](#) in San Jose, California, the attack on a 61-year-old [Filipino man whose face was slashed with a box cutter on a New York City subway](#), and the 91-year-old man who was caught on camera [being thrown to the ground in Oakland's Chinatown](#). These accounts are horrific. And the attacks this Tuesday, achingly fresh, remain shocking and egregious.

But bigotry against Asians, although it has been refashioned in the narrative of the pandemic and its origins, is nothing new. This is just the first time that people are noticing. As I make this claim, I feel the fresh, recurring pain of Black Americans, who are finally being heard after centuries of legal persecution in a system that was complicit in yielding to police brutality, racial assassination, and violence against them. Just as Black and Brown people are now reckoning with the forces that belie their safety and wellbeing—and in so doing, creating a global movement—Asian Americans are beginning to do the same.

In this context, social environment, and political space, Asian Americans have reached a point of judgment. Tuesday's violence has forced us to take a critical look at the world around us, the spaces we occupy, and ourselves. It isn't yet clear where this moment of outrage, social media activism, and anti-discrimination advocacy will take us. But I have a few suggestions.

As an Asian American woman, I understand [what it means to be invisible](#). Many factors contribute to the social, cultural, and political invisibility of Asians in America, but our own narrative remains in our control. We need to be done proving ourselves as “worthy” immigrants. Our culture of shame, saving face, and protecting the greater good has led to a culture of secrecy and detrimental internalizations. Similarly, the culture of sexism, racism, colorism, and classism within the Asian community erodes us and harms those outside our community. Changing both of these things will be integral for us to heal as a community and reach a point of greater racial justice.

On an individual level, Asian Americans can commit to the vital act of storytelling that has been lacking in our community. This means not only sharing our own experiences, but also listening. Sharing our stories in a safe space is healing in and of itself. But for collective healing, we need to be in more frequent, engaged

discussions with one another, familiarizing ourselves with the mosaic of perspectives and voices that exist in the Asian American community.

If you aren't Asian American, please listen to our stories of discrimination, suffering, marginalization, racism, and racialization. Please hear our pain when we say that the shootings in Atlanta feel like a hate crime against our community. Please know that misogyny and the fetishizing of Asian women are deeply connected with racism and colonialism. Please fight against anti-Asian hatred so it will stop demoralizing us, demonizing us, and killing us.