

ASIAN AMERICAN SEX WORKERS BOOK CLUB

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## ABSTRACT

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The narratives of Asian American female sex workers are stories that demonstrate pain, pleasure, and power. These depictions often portray a woman as desirable (submissive and obedient because she was “saved” by a White man) or undesirable (war prostitute disrupting the purity of America). This is due to the failed efforts from policymakers and English educators to look beyond simple Black versus White racial relationships and beyond the needs of White feminists. When this occurs, the Asian American female student finds herself invisible.

The purpose of this study was to look specifically through the niche demographic of Asian American female sex workers. This study was not meant to exclude other women, men, and humans of Asian descent, or sex workers of other races, but these are the first individuals I had the privilege of accessing as I am only beginning my sex work scholar journey. These particular women are of Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese descent, and this specified the research of my literature review. Because they also all identify as cisgender, gender dynamics were explored in this context. The participants were sampled to explore the historical and current conditions of Asian American females, the curriculum they received (or did not receive) in their

high school English classes regarding Asian American female protagonists or storytelling of the body, and how these factors affected their sex work experiences. This research also moved to deepen the definition of sex work. As sex work is traditionally a consensual sexual service or erotic performance in exchange for money or goods, many women provide their services without consent or without money—and sometimes without both. The sex work, or sexual abuse, is then more of an unwanted labor they are forced to carry with them painfully. This research was not out to prove sex work is wrong or right; rather, it talked across the pain, pleasure, profit, problems, and power of these experiences. It also presents a more modernized take on sexual ways of being. I reached an authentic understanding of how these women's bodies were navigated in the classroom, the bedroom, and beyond. With their stories, new policies and pedagogies are proposed to better serve forgotten female students in the English classroom by using the body as an entry point for unique storytelling.

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“God is within her, she will not fall.” Psalm 46:5

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E. S.



## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

#### Statement of the Problem

##### Asian American Studies

Sex positivity should exist within Asian American Literature, Asian American Studies, and any other field, but the purposeful legal exclusion of Asian American females in U.S. history is also mirrored in school curricula. Any racial and, more specifically, feminist racial concerns betray American solidarity and continuance. Many existing history books overlook Asian Americans altogether, unless Asians fit problematic issues in American growth, such as the Vietnam War, 9-11, or the Coronavirus, framing the Asian student with guilt. Kang (2002) detailed this historical absence:

While this scenario of disciplinary dissolution has not materialized, it suggestively maps on possible itinerary for Asian American history not merely as a reconfiguration of *who* can belong to “America” but as an exploration of how to write a genealogy of unbelonging. This would entail a critical consideration of the narrative desires, disciplinary protocols, and linguistic mediations of Asian American history itself.... The *presence* and *significance* of Asian Americans against this double erasure, the vexatious implication that it too is a partial, situated discursive production has rarely been taken up in a sustained manner. (para. 1918)

Ethnic Studies often touch on the history, cultures, and traditions for communities of color in the United States, but the focus on resistance and liberation of sexual exploitation finds slower welcome in academic spaces. Despite the passage of much time and history since Europeans

began settling in North America and importing Africans into enslavement for profit, “there remains in US society today no ethnic boundaries more sexualized or scrutinized than the color line dividing blacks and white,” making Black sexuality a preoccupied experiment of White America (Nagel, 2003, pp. 117-118). With lynchings and castrations of Black women and men for corrupt sexual misdeeds, the prevailing narrative is that the White woman is the most deserving of sexual protection and the White man is the most deserving of sexual experimentation. There is a need to expose more of colonized sexploitation in American history, such as 19th-century Asian immigrant prostitutes—a commodity that was brought back from a tourist gift shop from war and supposedly influenced the young White soldier away from his patriotic duty. Without confronting this, the Asian body remains a site where colonization can be promoted.

### **Asian American Literature**

Much of the content provided for Asian American literature is universalized and pan-Asianized so that no further elaboration is pushed. The colorblind axioms “are meant to end conversations, not to start or continue them” (Chang, 2012, p. 247). Race has already been socially constructed (Omi & Winant, 2015), our stories fated before we even attempt to begin telling them, and it is a mass fantasy in which we all participate, not searching deeply enough for complexities. A bitter sacrifice that Asians have had to make is being content with the total devaluation of their ethnicity to function comfortably in a daily pan-minority society. If “they stomach it, they get caught in a cruel bind: [because] to become acceptable to a racist society, one must first reject an integral part of oneself” (Wong, 1993, para. 1146). “Minority Literature” is a sobering term, replicating hegemonic cultural values unconsciously in the English classroom,

and it serves the colorblind philosophy for a convenient fix, temporarily shutting up the complainers. Wong (1993) described this configuration as the racial shadow that has emerged in Asian American literature, whereas if the American audience, some Asians included, find the story profitable, then it is satisfiable:

This literature is found to share a motif—the double—with words in the European and Anglo-American traditions, some quite remote from it in both subject matter and tenor. Nevertheless, careful intertextual reading reveals that the motif takes a particular form determined by the place Asian Americans have been occupying in the United States. Asian American examples of the double are not—perhaps cannot afford to be—parables of human nature in the abstract or case studies in the intricacies of human psychology. Still, in Asian American literature, depoliticization of the double is less fully veiled, and historical contextualization is much more essential to profitable reading, than in Western “mainstream” literature. (para. 1713)

For instance, *The Joy Luck Club* received much significance for Asian women, enough to warrant a reported advance for \$4 million for *The Kitchen God's Wife* in 1991 (Bow, 2001). It helped produce a brief moment, a mainstream moment, to qualify an ethnic woman's experience as justifiable enough to tell. But with such significance came criticism, with undesirable Asian female protagonists stereotyped as submissive, negative, and manipulative. Angry women undergoing traumatic and treacherous experiences in America drive the plot, revealing inconvenient truths for the preference of canonized texts in the traditional English classroom where colored characters are seen struggling—very performative for White readership. These continuously recycled stories keep women stuck within the framework of sexual victimhood, dismissing them as subjects of multiple desires and without positive storylines.

### **Asian American Sex**

In attempts to include stories beyond the typecast protagonist, gendered rights within minority literature disturb simple and pure First World values of marriage. Having no access to

education or employment, sex work was the females' first job. The conditions under which Asian women were granted to immigrate, "first as prostitutes, then as picture brides, war brides, and now mail-order brides," reflect that sex weighs stronger than other qualifying factors for a Green Card (Bow, 2001, p. 380). Although sought out by American men for this submissive role, the Asian woman could be viewed as creative and courageous. As her American quest began, she had to engage the cultural and national ghosts from her past all while understanding the sexual liberation and romantic hopefulness promised in her future by an American husband. Her body has become the organizing principle of her American experience. Any unruly behavior of female sexuality is a threat to national honor and inclusive reproduction. How, then, do patterns of "ethnosexual consumption in tourist markets and the international sex industry mirror and reproduce patterns of domination, inequality, colonization, and imperialisms," upsetting the power balance within a nation (Nagel, 2003, p. 201)?

Another over-popularized Asian American author in the English classroom is Maxine Hong Kingston, praised for her depiction of another group of miserable Asian women. Critics cannot ignore the three parts of her famous name because "as her name reveals, Maxine Hong Kingston is somewhat distanced from her Chinese-American origins by marriage to a Caucasian," implying she is a sell-out, continuing the historical implication of White ownership over colored bodies (Kang, 2002, para. 440). How, then, do young readers in the English classroom associate falling in love through sex if it is through the validation of the colonizer? With storylines of uncomplicated, pure, and triumphant love being dominated by White authors, marginalized readers will interpret their desires as fated. Lying down in bed with a colonizer is a question of belonging.

## **Research Questions**

1. How does storytelling in the English classroom represent “sex work” of the Asian/Asian American female?
2. How has America’s historical climates affected the Asian/Asian American female’s conception of herself and her relationship with her body?
3. What does culturally conscious teaching look like within a classroom of an Asian American feminist teacher committed to supporting the academic, socioeconomic, and emotional needs of marginalized female students?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Feminist Theory**

Feminism has been most invested in the protection and improvement of the lives of White heterosexual women, oftentimes at the expense of other women. Now that feminism is moving away from the “You are an angry, sex-hating, man-hating victim lady person,” there should not be one essential feminism to dominate all womankind (Gay, 2014, p. xiii). When one feminism exceeds, the others are lost. It would be unfair to homogenize the diversity of all women’s experience. Marginalized women are more ambitious and focused because they are forgotten as long as White women are more comfortable. There is a necessary need to understand how each local and global positioning impacts struggles of specific women.

White middle-class ideals about female purity and domesticity became major considerations in the early 20th century anti-Asian immigration regulations. Feminism has traditionally been associated with “Anglo, upper-class, educated women, so Asian American

women seem to want to adopt feminism particular to their own experience as evinced in the radical writings and performances on contemporary Asian American women” (Kim-Kort, 2012, para. 973). Feminist scholars have recognized the dangers of characterizing women’s freedom in storytelling because of inconvenient issues like coerced marriage, female infanticide, limited access to birth control and family planning, or domestic abuse as problems of “Third World women” which disrupt White feminism (Bow, 2001). What is growing are the notable feminist plot structures across Asian American women’s texts for their use of gender freedom as a gauge of progress, but these have found little to no exposure in the English classroom.

Wanting to reclaim sexual agency for freedom gives the woman a choice to not have to submit to monogamy against her own best interests, but women find sexploration burdensome because of having to justify a non-monogamous choice. Willey (2016) explained:

Heterosexuality is a problem for feminists in that it perpetuates social and economic privilege of men and separates women from one another. Feminist critics of monogamy have similarly put monogamy on the map for feminism. These thinkers have passionately articulated the asymmetrical expectations and costs of monogamy for women and men and critiqued constructions of women as property. They have explained how overinvestment in one person can make it difficult to leave an unhappy relationship and can contribute to the devaluation of friendships and communities. (pp. 4-5)

Well-behaved minority women are more credible, where audiences prefer to see minority characters behaving in these ideal heteronormative ways. Gay (2014) further emphasized:

There are books written by women. There are books written by men. Somehow, though, it is only books by women, or books about certain topics, that require this special “women’s fiction” designation, particularly when those books have the audacity to explore, in some manner, the female experience, which, apparently, includes the topics of marriage, suburban existence, and parenthood, as if women act alone in these endeavors, wedding themselves, immaculately conceiving children, and the like. Women’s fiction is often considered a more intimate brand of storytelling that doesn’t tackle the *big* issues found in men’s fiction. Anyone who reads knows this isn’t the case, but that misperception lingers. (p. 173)

We do not ignore anything the White man has to say; even if the male character is flawed, he is categorized as the antihero or tragic hero. He is still traditionally received and somehow that unlikability factor promotes likeability among audiences (i.e., Hamlet, The Joker, Darth Vader). All readers read books by male writers, but men do not necessarily read books written by women. Male authors are catered to all audiences, whereas female authors are catered to female audiences. Men's topics are about society, and women's topics are about, well, women.

Women writers are witnessing for each other, performing for each other, and voicing for each other. If we are in competition with each other, the oppressor will sit back and wipe his hands clean while he enjoys the show. English teachers need to challenge more the naturalized idea of coupling in stories in order to decenter the dominant nuclear family as the only means to successful womanhood.

### **Postcolonial Theory**

Feminism and colonialism are historically entwined. The female is literally reproducing her own race and nation. Colonization operates on the control of land and bodies. Sexual behavior, preferably hetero, can strengthen national boundaries through the control of sexual boundaries. The tone of the nation is set by what citizens should and should not do sexually and with whom. Reproduce with your own kind within your own boundaries. In postcolonial cases, "our" women should not be having sex with "their" men—particularly "enemy" men (Nagel, 2003, pp. 141-142). During times of national conflict, men's sexual misconduct in war is almost never punished, if not praised. Some women might even want to do their patriotic duty by making themselves sexually available to White men as long as racial and ethnic boundaries go back to their proper place after the exchange (Nagel, 2003).

Gender and colonialism cannot be separated as nationalist scripts were written primarily by men, for men, and about men. The women are placed as supporting roles

as mothers of the nation, as vessels for reproducing the nation, as agents for inculcating national culture into new members, and as national housekeepers responsible for maintaining home and hearth for the nation's men who are out and about on important official business—fighting wars, defending homelands, representing the nation abroad, manning the apparatus of the state. (Nagel, 2003, p. 159)

Because behind every great man is a fertile uterus.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Another way to seize the land was to reproduce more slaves, “especially oversexed savages who would breed and produce more slaves, and more especially oversexed female savages who would hold special salacious appeal to those Christian men who bought and used them” (Nagel, 2003, p. 96). African women were marketed as willing sexual partners who found White men attractive, if not preferred, in hopes of the benefits they might receive for birthing lighter-skinned offspring. There are countless parallels in the “content and logic of depicting Africans as sexually lascivious and portraying American Indians as inclined toward sexual debauchery” (Nagel, 2003, p. 97). With curiosity making sex happen across color lines, the belief that female sexuality is structured in the ability to satisfy the White man makes that “if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment” (Lorde, 2007 p. 45). Sexual conversation about diminished groups directs attention towards the true sexual treatment from Whites—breeding programs, castration, rape, sexual servitude, and so on.



What is considered erotic has been defined by Whites and used against Others. It has made the performer confused. Institutional racism creeps into sexual fantasies and is played up in many storylines in pornography. Lorde (2007) explored this misinterpreted fetishization:

For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with the opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling. (p. 54)

To discuss sexual treatment of women of color would force the uncovering of such histories, but many White women have invested in ignorance as a comfortable way of not having to realize the differences. The bedroom is an extension of race and gender where positions (top/bottom or penetrator/penetrated) reveal fantasies about power and control. Colonization gets kinky.

### **Embodiment Theory**

The sexual sciences are deeply enmeshed with the process of racialization. Sexology must be understood

as part of the colonial project and its experts' fantasies about geographically distanced Others as constitutive of its knowledges...image of a natural, patriarchal family, in alliance with pseudoscientific social Darwinism, came to constitute the organizing trope for marshaling a bewildering array of cultures into a single, global narrative ordered and managed by Europeans. (Willey, 2016, p. 27)

Promoting monogamous marriage helps promote the superiority of these Christian nations, marking the woman's body as responsible for the maintenance of civilized races.

There has always been a failure to comprehend the "oriental" body, especially with Arab nations or SWANA (South West Asia North Africa) being of other dominant religions, as conflicts with the United States are never resolved with these countries, causing Asian Americans to carry the burden of some of the greatest global conflicts in history (Nguyen, 2002).

Asian American females have been stigmatized as icons of military prostitution during these infamous wars and that hostility is taken out on her in the bedroom. When servicing an American soldier in her Asian homeland, she is a whore. When servicing her White husband on American soil, she is a wife. It is through this remarkable navigation of the body that she might control her outcome. A form of national passing entails a deliberate erasure of her sexual self as a sign of American assimilation.

### **All Together Now**

American bruteness has been defined in opposition to powerhouse Asian countries. Asians have been “subjected in the United States partly as a response to American economic and military interests” as Americans have long believed that Asians are the answer to economic crises and political alliances, making Asian American significance fleeting (Bow, 2001, p. 17). The exchange of sex with an Asian woman is directly tied to colonial relations where the Asian woman is both dominant and dominated (Shimizu, 2007). Willey (2016) explained:

Bodies, then, are reduced to this detail through the positioning of an inconsistency in an “avowed” commitment to the body and a “distaste” for data. In this move, feminist theories of embodiment and corporeality are represented as disingenuous—theories not really of the body but of something else, ostensibly the body’s outside culture.... All critiques of science are rhetorically subsumed into the category of “anti-biologism,” where they serve as implicit evidence of the hypocrisy of feminist claims to care about the body. (p. 19)

Colonization is just as much about the body as it is about race in the service of global domination. Colonization “utilizes metaphors of binaried and heterosexualised genders, deploy these metaphors to describe a gendered distribution of values and virtues, exploit a feminized division of labor, and create women as objects over which white men and men of color fight” (Nguyen, 2002, para. 7772). Trying to stabilize gender and sexuality is as important as trying to

stabilize race and class after the perpetuation of colonial rule. Colonial displacement is a theme in almost all stories of color. As students begin to make cross-curricular connections in their history classes and biology classes, the English classroom is a platform to value colored bodies through counter storytelling.

## **Significance of the Study**

### **Degradation of Sex Culture**

In the United States, there is a general sense that sex is degrading. Sex has been portrayed as an act solely performed for procreation reasons that was sinful to enjoy and a vice of only men, where women were the dutiful and unenthusiastic receivers. The attempted erasure of pleasure has made it difficult for complicated and nuanced discussions on female sexuality to arise (Rosenstock, 2017). All associations of life—religion, culture, gender, and so on—have some common association of sexual activity being linked to shame. Sex outside of these associations not of same-religion, same-race, or heterosexual marriage are “frequently dismissed as unworthy of narration—runaway, prostitute, drug addict,” or queer, making much challenge in considering sex positivity for all the variations of sexual identity and would require defending (Shimizu, 2007, p. 9). Those that obtain a “monogamous like emotional exclusivity or bondedness remain by and large naturalized and privileged as the highest experience of human relationships,” making heteronormative stories too stable in the English classroom (Willey, 2016, p. 80). All aspects of sexuality, even the heteronormative situations, are regulated both legally and in private spaces. These aspects might include types of sexual desire, styles, frequency, times and places of sexual activity, choice and methods of reproduction (or not), choice of partner (or partners), and the like. Then, what even is the point of sex? Procreation, recreation, interpersonal

connection, personal actualization, emotional fulfillment, political expression, identification, rebellion, experimentation? Sex mandates heterosexual monogamy and “is repressive as characteristic of sex-negative US culture coded in terms of race, class,” and gender (Willey, 2016, pp. 88-89). If one can withhold sex, your self-restraint is honorable. So don’t have sex, but if you do, don’t talk about it.

### **White vs. Others Sex**

Border control is sex control. Men of a country join together to form a barrier that holds some people in and keeps others out, defining the pure and protected versus the impure and harmful. When fashioning feelings of sexual desire and desirability, we are provided with “seemingly ‘natural’ sexual preferences for some partners and ‘intuitive’ aversions to others, to leave us with a taste for some ethnic sexual encounters and a distaste for others” (Nagel, 2003, p. 1). Sex is the silent subtext in racial discourse, as heard in racial slurs, ethnic stereotypes, and national imaginings. It is forbidden or disloyal to love outside one’s border lines. Examining the gentrification of sexual spaces, Willey (2016) expressed:

What kind of impoverishment is this to withhold emotion, *to restrain our passionate nature in the face of a generous life just to appease our fears?* A man or woman whose mind reins in the heart when the body sings desperately for connection can only expect more *isolation and ecological disease*...power of underlying sexual drives, which people repress only to their detriment, or even which they are unable to repress at all. (p. 85)

Because of this, geographic locations are sexually zoned in the United States. From “red light districts” to “gayborhoods,” to single bars, to housing in good school districts, to Jewish families—these sex zones are separated spaces for sexual contacts and preferences with some being able to shift between these neighborhoods easier than others. Those with the privilege to move around geographically have better access to the “forbidden races” and sexploration.

Colonization has granted first-hand (literally) experience. White men were the first to have sexual access to all women of color.

### **Male vs. Female Sex**

Working women in the sex industry are not included in decisions regarding marriage, reproduction, or sexual identities (C. Lee, 1999). Almost all women today live in a culture where there is a high chance of sexual assault and where such behavior is considered “locker room talk” by some. Women today are aware that they may at any time be raped (Ninh, 2011). But then, women who get “properly laid” are supposed to be fine with rape humor (Gay, 2014, p. 181). Along with historical gender discrimination for access to voting rights, property, and economic independence, sexual safety and worthiness become another medium on how to track the nexus of power relationships through sex and money for women (Maséquesmay & Metzger, 2009).

Girls are singled out to be threatened and warned through cautionary stories of other failed daughters who strayed from the paths of sexual purity and met some combination of rape, “madness, death, or disownment” (Ninh, 2011, para. 2654). Sons are not routinely ordered and restricted by measures of their bodies, showing that gendered practices at home reinforce power. There is more failure in being female. Many narrative representations reveal that for a girl, there is a price for sex, and it is reputation. An unmarried daughter becomes the subject of gossip and scrutiny. It is not a female’s parents alone but the community that gossips, sometimes leading to the entire race as a whole being attacked. Where it is the stranger who might rape, or designated governmental authorities that monitor her body, or the parents that micro-manage her behavior, signs of sexual slippage are always being sought. The English classroom is another

environmental factor that might be continuing this reductiveness. It is time for alternative narratives that reframe and reconfigure that female.

### **Triple the Marginalization**

#### **The Asian, the Asian Female, the Asian Female Sex Worker**

For women of color, one aspect of multiple subject positioning is the competitive relationship between feminism and cultural nationalism. The either/or view that one's primary identity must be based either in peoplehood or in sisterhood sets up a mutually antagonistic opposition (Bow, 2001). Within feminist analysis, how does one locate sex among gender, nation, and other competing affiliations? How does what one places first read as a means of producing, defending, or solidifying allegiances? C. Lee (1999) further explained:

...over the changing grounds of Asian American political critique is that gender issues may take a secondary place, considered irrelevant or less important than these global debates over whether diaspora, exile, postcoloniality, or transnationalism shall replace the nation as an alternative identity formation for border-crossing Asians. (p. 181)

What can become erased is the specificity of the intersection between gender and race, how it is often figured as the competition between collective alliances. Gay (2014) explored this multiple marginalization, saying "On my more difficult days, I'm not sure what's more of a pain in my ass—being black or being a woman. I'm happy to be both of these things—but the world keeps intervening" (p. 17). Women that are African Americans, Asian American, Latinx Americans, Native Americans, Indigenous Americans, immigrants, and/or LGBTQ+ are deemed not American enough to have obtainability to full American resources. The dominant feminist narrative in the United States is not as concerned with issues unique to minority women, such as quality of life for newly immigrated women or racism during the Trump era, which is annoying

for White conservatives to deal with. Women's body concerns have been lumped together in national loyalty in order to have one voice, rather than an expression of individual needs and desires.

Known as the quiet voice and passive model minority, Asians motivate curiosity as “exotic erotics with the slanted cunt to match our slanted eye or the small dick to match our small size” (Hune & Nomura, 2003, para. 8172). From picture brides to recreational military sex during wars to Internet mail-order brides, the Asian woman is viewed as a commodity that can be bought, perceiving the Asian woman as less human and a literal product (Cheng, 2010). These bodies are being used by the dominant culture as a space for the construction of racial and gender stereotypes combined—doubling, sometimes tripling, the marginalization. The Asian female bound by representations, as well as the bondage of hypersexuality both from her own family and her new American life, also sees this reproduced in her classrooms. Just like the “Black Power Movement, the Asian American movement was sexist, hetero-sexist, and homophobic,” proving that it will take some time for a sex-positive Asian female discourse to surface (Hune & Nomura, 2003, para. 8295). The construction of Asian women's sexuality is accomplished by narratives of seduction in which she is characterized by servile sexual availability. This hides realities of Asian women's physical abuse and forced servitude. Such a discursive overlaying has specific consequences on how to negotiate a process of racialization that represents sexuality as disruptive to nationalism and ethnic solidarity (Bow, 2001). This leaves little space left over for sexual defiance and exploration.

## Chapter II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### **A History of Asian American Displacement**

##### **Neither Black Nor White But Yellow**

The Asian has a failure to be Black, White, or even mulatto—the historically known legible terms. The introduction of yellow into a black and white equation disrupts the preferred clear binary balance (Maséquesmay & Metzger, 2009). Asian immigrants often see themselves being caught between the White and Black polarizations of American racial order, belonging to both, yet neither. This White mythology was racially defined first against Native Americans and then against Blacks, understanding them as “the most visible object of American violence” (Nguyen, 2002, para. 1500). Whiteness as a sign of inclusion and Blackness as exclusion leave no position for Asian Americans, as well as Native Americans, Indigenous, and Latinx. In G. Lee’s (1994) book *Honor and Duty*, the main character Kai recounts how his Black peers are unsure of whether he is White or Black—as if no other option exists. This position is “both contradictory and opportune for Asian Americans as they seek to assimilate, either *into* whiteness or *against* blackness,” and those who wish for solid socioeconomic placement would strive towards Whiteness (Nguyen. 2002, para. 1500).

From “Yellow Peril,” a racist color metaphor that the people of Asia are a danger to Europe and North America during the rise of colonial imperialism in the 1800s, to “Model Minority,” where sociologist William Petersen in 1966 emphasized the educational and financial



success of Asians in comparison to other immigrant groups in the United States, there is both racial injury and racial privilege. The Asian presence has been used per conditional situations to exemplify an unassimilable Other, somewhere between the elitist deserving “melting-pot-ready” White immigrants and the “irredeemable negativity” of Black slaves (Wong, 1993, para. 1649). To refer to a person as a color is racist categorization. There is no country named “Black” or “Brown” or “Yellow”—or even “White.” Some Asians may have light skin, but they surely are not White as sometimes identified. South Asians of deeper pigmentation cause further confusion of categorization. According to Kang (2002), being yellow upsets the attempted simple categorization strategy, referring to the *assumed* visible difference of Black and White. Many legal contortions have resorted to suggesting the exclusion of Asian Americans from properly assimilating into America because of this peculiar form of colored.

### **The Space Inbetween (Races) and the Space Inbetween (Her Legs)**

This dynamic of dancing in the middle explains why White working-class Americans may “resent black welfare recipients, Latino ‘illegal immigrants,’ or workers in India to whom jobs are ‘outsourced’ to a much more volatile degree than the bankers or politicians they could otherwise hold responsible for their suffering” (Chang, 2012, p. 186). These fantastical colors exaggerate racial positions in America pinning minorities against each other to compete for work. As American laborers began to resent Chinese workers who were willing to work for lower wages, Chinese immigrants began to be detained at Angel Island Immigration Station where men and women were questioned separately and asked bizarre questions that their English proficiency could not process.

The United States began to find itself caught in its own contradictions, arguing that it was waging a war to protect freedom overseas yet exercising racial discrimination domestically. This realization of contradiction compelled the United States to repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, finally allowing Chinese immigration at a rate of 105 per year (Nguyen, 2002). This began a moderate shift in the conditions for Asian Americans. From a legal perspective, the peoples previously known as Orientals and now labeled as Asian Americans have almost all, at one time or another, been excluded from U.S. citizenship. Even those born in the United States were still placed in Japanese internment camps during World War II. Following the hysteria of Pearl Harbor, the Japanese community and religious leaders found their assets frozen, homes, and fishing boats impounded—suddenly bused away to violent “centers.” Refugees and immigrants from Southeast Asia in the wake of the Vietnam War constitute an exception (Wong, 1993).

Often at the fate of her Asian male counterpart, at the sexual exploitation of a male counterpart, or using her own sexual creativity by herself as a last means, Asian American women came to exist in the United States with the needs defined by men. These modes of exclusion, detention, segregation, deportation, and denaturalization of the Asian female according to nationality, class, and sexuality proved a jumble of cultural restrictions as she attempted to begin her life in the United States (Kang, 2002). Foucault (1976) categorized these needs by stating that mistresses we kept for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of the household. This gives the wife the stress of competition where her status is determined by her uterus factory. The equilibrium of married life reflects society’s definition of the good wife--pleasure, fertility, and domesticity. This common discourse finds two kinds of women in

America: “those who are chaste (and who are usually white) and those who are eroticized (and usually of color)” (Nguyen, 2002, para. 1085).

### **Enter the Asian Prostitute**

Patriarchal Chinese attitudes privileged sons over daughters, causing families to sponsor men in the family as more worthy of immigration to America than the women. Chinese women would later be dependent on their male counterparts, husbands or fathers, already in the United States to file for them. But because the sexuality of Asian women had been embedded into White Americans’ conceptions as dirty or of the laboring class, it required an extra hurdle to reach over to the United States. Now there was also a racialized characterization of Chinese immigrant men as a “cunning, dishonest group, willing to victimize their own women,” with Chinese women linked to prostitution (Hune & Nomura, 2003, para. 2058). The belief that Chinese male applicants and their supposed wives were merely dishonest importers and prostitutes in disguise, social reformers and anti-Chinese politicians led campaigns to limit all Chinese immigration. The Page Act of 1875 was the first federal law to restrict immigration, targeting Asian contract laborers and women, specifically Chinese women, on entering for immoral purposes. Chinese prostitutes came to be viewed as “moral and racial pollution” (Hune & Nomura, 2003, para. 2047). Kang (2002) further explained:

Even after the passage of the Page Law, medical experts, elected officials, labor unions, and xenophobic groups continued to point to the corrupting and contaminating powers of Chinese prostitutes who “were believed to be infected with a particularly virulent form of syphilis that was almost impossible to cure.” Such prejudicial speculation was supported by professional medical opinion. In 1875 the American Medical Association drew up a report that characterized Chinese women engaged in prostitution as a “risk to national health.” (para. 1605)

A year prior, in August 1874, a steamer arrived in San Francisco from Hong Kong with 89 Chinese female passengers. The commissioner of immigration deemed 22 of these women to be prostitutes and detained them “based on his observations of the women’s demeanor and manner of dress and on the evasive and unsatisfactory responses they had given to questions put to them about their marital status” (Kang, 2002, para. 1580). American fears about Chinese prostitution caused immigration officials to racially profile all Asian women, Chinese or not Chinese, for this scrutiny during the Exclusion era. The interrogation and investigation processes were to prove their standing as “moral women and their status as exempt-class Chinese” (Hune & Nomura, 2003, para. 2034). Whether a woman had bound feet, much like a tiny waist in Victorian England, was a commonly used criterion for judging her class and moral status, symbolizing female refinement and upward mobility (Kang, 2002). The requirement of sexual respectability made these women begin their American journey with an immoral reputation. During this period, exaggerated stories about Chinese prostitutes in San Francisco appeared in local newspapers and other media, which described them as “reared to [lives] of shame from infancy” and with such claims as “not one virtuous Chinawoman has been brought to this country” (Hune & Nomura. 2003, para. 2568). Immigration officials considered language and geography as markers of purity. This caused a heightened sensitivity to the Asian immigrant women’s sexuality—slutty until proven innocent.

### **Asian American Assumptions**

#### **Pan-Asian Pussy**

Asian American culture is characterized by this constant tension between American racist efforts to construct Asians as a category of singular body when there are instead multiple ones.

The category of “Asian American” has grown to encompass over “fifteen different ethnic and national backgrounds from sixth-generation Chinese Americans to Hmong refugees to Pacific Islanders” (Davé, Nishime, & Oren, 2005, p. 3). Given the immigration history of different ethnic groups arriving at different times with different advantages and disadvantages, this has meant that older, more established groups such as the Chinese and Japanese have produced more leadership in the community and have also had the opportunity to establish a higher level of economic success on the average (Nguyen, 2002). This contributes to the assumption that all Asians are Chinese or Japanese and have financial privilege, whereas Asian Americans have the greatest financial gap between rich and poor within one race—and also the greatest varying skin pigmentation within one race. The group identity is always in flux.

According to Kim-Kort (2012), regardless of ethnic differences within the Asian American community, people still speak of “American” as if it means those of European descent and “minority” as if it means anyone non-European. The dominant culture in this country still has the tendency to ignore the rich diversity of Asian groups, which has resulted in the creation of singular, negative, and often destructive stereotypes of the numerous Asian communities. The major controversy of the recent 2018 Harvard University affirmative action lawsuit, where the school’s admission process was accused of requiring Asian Americans to clear an even higher bar to get in, explored whether there is an identifiable “Asian American personality, with its many, by white standards, antisocial traits” (Wong, 1993, para. 1263). While there are many loud-partying Asians, the quiet Asian could be a result of dysfunctional cultural baggage or a survival tactic against racist policies. When the Model Minority title was once a compliment from the White community that an obedient voice is a quiet voice, it was quickly turned against the Asian community. These “antisocial” traits now turned to be an anti-model minority trait

shows how fleeting the Asian American existence is. This honorary badge of Whiteness is unwillingly awarded but then suddenly stripped away once it threatens that Whiteness.

In 2005, Grace Lee released *The Grace Lee Project*, a documentary exploring the most basic Asian American female name, whereby women with this name were all assumed to be obedient, sweet, quiet, piano-playing nerds. Through this nation-wide experiment, she redefined categorization, with many of the Graces fitting the stereotype, but others—like a goth artist, a community activist, and one who tried to burn down her high school—show subcultures of a pan-Asian name. While these parents named their daughters a simple name for easy American assimilation, many developed counterintuitively. Asian American literature is universalized as a singular Grace Lee experience, which serves a colorblind philosophy. With existence at extreme opposite ends of the spectrum, the Asian woman is either a stereotype threat or a sexual treat. Even though Asians are assumed to have conquered White-approved realms, the sexual reduction remains with the mockery of the slanted vagina and the small penis—lady in the streets but still a prostitute in the sheets.

### **Model Minority Myth**

After many decades of invisibility and singularity went by, the model minority myth was born. This label filtered into college textbooks where it promoted Asians as the ones who made it in this land of opportunity, managing to even surpass Whites in their “own” country. Chang (2012) explained this:

As scholars of Asian American studies have been established, Asian American racialization comprises two major facets. First, Asian Americans are model minorities whose putative success and assimilation is pointed to as evidence of America’s color-blind meritocracy and openness. Second, Asian Americans are construed as a perpetual foreigner, seen as alien to American culture regardless of nativity or citizenship. Using a psychoanalytic schema we might view these two facets as different

elements of national fantasy. The notion of Asian Americans as the model minority is used to support a certain vision of American exceptionalism: its openness to the world in providing limitless opportunity regardless of race or national origin. (p. 332)

Having no room for error, those Asian Americans who do not fit the model minority stereotype are altogether erased from not only the family, but also mainstream society.

Second-generation children become viable capital investments, raised to enter steady high-paying math and science professions as an attempt to repay their parents' sufferings and sacrifice. A model child is "required to be a model minority, dutiful and grateful to family and nation both" (Ninh, 2011, p. 375). One must obtain perfection to exist.

Nguyen (2002) stated that "unlike the stereotype of the yellow peril, which is resolutely negative and therefore easily rejected by those who are labeled with it, the stereotype of the model minority is regarded by Asian American intellectuals as insidious precisely because of its ability to be internalized by Asian Americans" (para. 2290). Through hard work based on a system of social values that prioritizes education, family, obedience, hierarchy, and sacrifice, Asian Americans are reluctant to blame others for any lack in their social position and are willing to accept this title with gratitude. The structure of domination that favors Whites loves Asian Americans because they demonstrate to other minorities what can be achieved through self-reliance rather than government assistance, self-sacrifice rather than self-interest, and quiet restraint rather than vocal complaint in the face of perceived or actual injustice (Nguyen, 2002). Being successful in areas approved by White society offers better quality of life.

### **Racial Scapepanda**

Although there are worse stereotypes to have, this colonized terminology implies that the Model Minority myth is a successful modeling of Whiteness, pinning all marginalized

communities in a fight for survival against each other. Rather than positively impacting all minority groups, this creates a divisive wedge between all groups, ignoring the systematic measures oppressed upon them to block success. Some Asian Americans are able to raise themselves out of poverty without public assistance or special consideration, such as scholarships, representing a silent but willing rebuke against the vocal Asians who demand changes from the system rather than strive to succeed by its rules (Ninh, 2011). This provides a platform for the White community to use Asian Americans as a political and social hammer against other disadvantaged groups.

This also discounts the success of other communities. The comparison becomes competition rather than connection. Since perceptions of Asian Americans were generally docile, especially in comparison to the seemingly more recalcitrant African American and Latinx populations, Asian Americans became the preferred race to love versus the race to hate and fear because they had, by the 1960s and 1970s, accepted their place as Model Minority subservient to Whites (Nguyen, 2002). Kim-Kort (2012) emphasized:

First, the myth is a gross simplification that is not accurate enough to be seriously used for understanding ten million people. Second, it conceals within itself an insidious statement about African Americans along the lines of inflammatory taunt, “They made it; why can’t you?” Third, it is abused both to deny Asian Americans’ experience of racial discrimination and to turn Asian Americans into a racial threat. (p. 390)

The Model Minority has become the scapegoat, as seen in the exploitation of Korean American small-business owners by politicians, police, and the media during the 1992 Los Angeles race riots to “absorb African American and Latino rage and characterize that rage as the jealousy of the have-nots is not an enduring example of the ideological process that the model minority thesis critiques” (Nguyen, 2002, para. 2345). This has led to resentment towards Asian



American success, making them a target of hatred and violence from other minority groups (a stereotype threat), yet Asians are still not accepted fully by Whites (a stereotype treat).

### **Model Minority Mulan**

Many works of Asian American literature center on the Model Minority identity crisis and these books are reproduced repeatedly in the English classroom. Ultimately, “the model minority literature shares a similar function to the model minority in American society generally: it serves as a model of panethnic entrepreneurship selling American society on the value of Asian American” (Nguyen, 2002, para. 2385). This is the major feature in how these stories are identified and then marketed. This benefits the canonization of Model Minority literature in the American culture pantheon—that minorities should behave and cater to White readership. This is a silencing strategy. Nguyen (2002) reinforced the issue of the gatekeepers of English curriculum:

While canonization itself may be a problematic term or event, entailing, possibly, a submission on the part of artists and critics toward a dominant set of literary and cultural values, it also may entail a contestation of those literary and cultural values through the inclusion of heretofore excluded participants. The standard critique of canonization in this regard is to point to multiculturalism as an example of how the conditions of those they represent or are chosen to represent by cultural arbiters. Nevertheless, canonization and contestation are dialectically related forces, operating perhaps unevenly but nevertheless in tandem, as the discourse of the bad subject demonstrates. (para. 2385)

The trait of submissiveness is further intensified and gendered through the formulaic portrayal of the obedient Asian female protagonist, not only in the heteronormative household and popular culture representations, but also in the English classroom that holds her story in print. This fits the expected belief for Asian and non-Asian communities that Asian women would make quiet victims, be receptive to sexual advances, and not fight back. *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club* are some of the first examples of this narrative and, still as

dominant examples of stories today, do not question the validity of pluralism and authentic inclusion.

With pressures from immigrant parents and an established reputation of successful socioeconomic status, failure would bring unimaginable shame to the family. Confucian belief regards marriage and procreation as the individual's societal duties, thus obligating men and women to abide by traditional gender roles (Maséquesmay & Metzger, 2009). Men are expected to have children to pass on the family name, and women carry the pressure of bearing male children for their husbands. The polarities between feminist and masculinist assertions of identity were already in place in the traditional east Asian patriarchal constructions of society (Kang, 2002). Relations or actions that result in failure to fulfill these duties are considered disruptive and should be harshly condemned. Immigrant parents tend to consider American culture too liberal and will influence their children to stay with heteronormative traditions (Maséquesmay & Metzger, 2009). The blow for Asian American children is struck against a sexist family in addition to a racially stratified society. The further away a young Asian girl moved from these expectations, the further away her family's chances became for success through the assimilation of Whiteness. As the most famous Asian American female globally, Mulan serves the Model Minority storyline. This is how the designated daughter is identifiable and profitable. Literary values show cultural values.

## **Ethnic Entertainment**

### **Peril, Pain, Pleasure, and Profit**

Before colored television, an exaggeration of Asian caricatures with slits as eyes, small inferior bodies, and crooked teeth was used as entertainment. Although skin pigments are later

studied, they may not be distinguishable if the complexion of Chinese or Japanese is White, so the shape of the eyes distinguishes “yellow” from “white.” Kang (2002) analyzed how eye-slitting became enjoyable for White actors to portray:

...to encode a body cinematically as “Oriental” or “Asian” and therefore distinguishable *at a glance* from both white and black cinematic bodies; and to “mark” that a white actor was *performing* an Asian character. The practices of “blackfacing” and “yellowfacing” are certainly linked but also differentially premised on a racist fortification of the unique plasticity and malleability of the white body. Turning that around, I would say that such practices were also necessary reassurance that *only* a white body can be remade, can remake itself to “look like” its racial others. Characterizing “cosmetized whites” in the 1920s as “a means of getting Asian characters to conform more readily to white racist perceptions and characterizations of Asians.” (para. 1378)

There is a strange implication that we should enjoy certain movies or television shows representing us simply because they exist (Gay, 2014). Although problematic, stereotypical representation is perhaps better than no representation, the effort is now exhausting in having to unlearn these stories in English classrooms. With standardized plots used over and over again, people of color are supposed to be grateful for leftover scraps from the table. An Asian writer might feel pressured to use the same storylines as an appropriating White writer, such as Lisa See, in order to feed the audience’s expectations so money can still be made. In stories of race and gender, it has to be painful to be profitable.

The act of reading a variety of multicultural literature is usually first exposed in an English classroom. In the most reductive understanding, the reader is supposed to identify seamlessly and harmoniously with the protagonist of the story, strengthening and reinforcing her own ethnic-racial identity through comparison. Chang (2012) referred to this traumatic intrusion that brings pain as well as pleasure:

This is because *jouissance* goes beyond the pleasure principle experiencing such an excess of pleasure that the pleasure becomes painful and unbearable. In the unbearable, it is a sensation that threatens the very foundation of the subject. Lacanian theory

formulates *jouissance* as the excruciating convergence of suffering and satisfaction, in which one finds satisfaction in one's suffering as well as suffering in one's satisfaction. (p. 131)

Perhaps this is the most authentic way to read works like *The Woman Warrior*, *Invisible Man*, or *Beloved*, where differing versions of the protagonist are of a basic figure who has come face-to-face with a racially or ethnically-based identity crisis. It is important to consider why certain kinds of texts are written in certain ways during specific historical moments of repression as there will always be an ethical burden of representation for artists of color. The narrative must be racially painful to be considered. If we begin to write away from this, are we being dishonorable? This idea of streamlining ethnic literature for Western audiences shows directional values. Wong (1993) further explored this blessing-and-curse situation:

For Chicano literature, the directions of symbolic value, roughly corresponding to the West/East values of Anglo-European Americans, are North and South. For Afro-Americans, too, the original westernly journey could scarcely hold the liberating, hopeful connotations of the founders' tradition, and the return to the home continent is necessarily more fraught with anxiety. Like the Chicano culture, Afro-American culture, through the heritage of the Underground Railway and escape in general, finds the North a locus of freedom and betterment.... For the native Indian, deprived of his homeland and forced to migrate to a government reservation, going west could never mean progress but only despair and death. (para. 2445)

The controversy surrounding famous authors like Hong Kingston and Tan are that these protagonists are wracked with pain and self-hate about their racial condition. Many non-Asian readers, completely ignorant about Chinese Americans, take Hong Kingston's Chinese feelings as Asian facts, viewing them only according to a flat-footed factivity (Kang, 2002). Writers who do not reproduce stereotypical images of their group are up for commercial risk of failure in trying to leave their ethnic niche in the industry. Asian Americans become preoccupied by the artists' alleged economic "parasitism" on the community, luring the entire general public into a singular narrative of the Asian American experience (Wong, 1993, para. 3102).

New artists recognize the exposure of the founding mothers, but there is a desire to move towards more impactful representations, such as Netflix's 2019 *Always Be My Maybe*, where in a relatively normal romantic comedy, two childhood sweethearts reconnect as adults. These are two characters who happen to be Asian, not two Asian characters. In the national imagery, "racial subjects are often perceived as the source of jouissance, which they supposedly embody through their excesses of violence, sexuality, anger, ecstasy, and so on" (Chang, 2012, p. 96). If a minority story does not contain the pain viewers want, then we are catering to a viewing pleasure that underlies a national and imperial fantasy of race. Writers and artists are forced to stage miserable versions of themselves to obtain recognition.

### **Sad Sex Sells**

For women of color who are gaining a foothold in the storytelling industry, it has to be through the obvious difference of body that that voice seems to gain attention. Sex sells, but sad sex sells even better. Women who have been "Othered" have been seen as oversexed, undersexed, raped, infected, perverted, or impregnated. According to Nagel (2003), such ethnosexual mythologies include visions of Others with large or exotic genitals who are possessed of unusual sexual prowess (p. 19). The figure of the sex worker, who provokes both desire and disdain, lingers in the imagination about Asian women.

### **Pornography for White Men**

Forbidden racial connections, the literal touching of varying skin colors, and the diluting or mixing of possible procreation disrupts the expected norm—and is enjoyed in the dark. The search analytics on porn sites are higher for women, colored women, and sexual minorities (Shimizu, 2007). It is interesting to think about what investments a non-Asian viewer, especially

a White American fan, has in ethnic porn, specifically Japanese porn, “which even more than Korean porn has been fetishized in the marketplace, or Hong Kong martial arts” (Maséquesmay & Metzger, 2009, p. 376). Why do White Westerners have interest in the purity, or pollution, of racial others? Early stag films use exaggerated skin color contrast in their “meat shots” (close-up shot of penile insertion), most apparent in Black and White sex, because “a penis inside a vagina is not racial unless marked by extreme difference in color” (Shimizu, 2007, p. 106).

Hypersexuality straddles the line of pleasure and pain, and the desire to enjoy viewing this offers up tremendous political critiquing. Shimizu confronted how the once historical phobia of Asian prostitutes publicly now generates private desires about the race:

Persons of color or racial Others are not narrativized as immoral. They are not a sexual threat but a sexual treat. They do not correspond to larger ideologies that posit them as the demise of normalcy and of the good social order. The shooting style of the films captures how Asian women are redeployed not as yellow peril but as yellow pleasure. (p. 138)

Ethnic entertainment has now sparked ethnic desirability. White “skin color that serves as a password” can be used to enter “exotic sexual worlds of Otherness, remain for a long or short stay as ethnosexual sojourners or adventurers, and then safely pass back into a world of white privilege” (Nagel, 2003, p. 120). Entering and existing sexual spaces safely are experienced by the White writer, White reader, and White viewer.

As seen with Arthur Golden (1997) in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, a fictional geisha working in Kyoto was “saved” after World War II and relocated to New York City. The 1960 British American film *The World of Suzie Wong* was directed by Richard Quine. Aspiring American architect, Robert, relocates to Hong Kong and falls in love with Suzie Wong, a local prostitute in the area where Robert can afford to live. As his paintings do not sell, Suzie offers to resume prostitution to support him. Can we take a moment to direct attention to the fact that an Asian

prostitute just paid a White man's rent? Through a quarrel over love, sex, money, and race, Robert is uncomfortable with Suzie being a female, an Asian, *and* a prostitute who helps him. Supporting the stories of these authors is the rape of minority women in a passive aggressive form.

The 1988 play *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang explores a young French man trying to overcome his failure not only as a diplomat but as a lover. Awkward and unimpressive, Rene Gallimard assumes that surely an obedient submissive Asian woman could be under his Western domination. His "butterfly," Song Liling, is actually very confident and smart, beginning decades of an affair. Song manages to play the role of passivity and timidity, to keep Rene close enough to provide intel, as Song is a spy for the Chinese government—and a man. Song insists on staying clothed during sex and pretends to play coy with sexual inexperience, turning on Rene's chauvinistic ego even more. Rene, the Western man, and Song, the Chinese man, both self-destruct due to their exploitation and ideals of Asian women. This classic and infamous story of White-Asian love is a pessimistic romance. This relationship could never exist due to the sexist and racist ideology of the colonizing White male having been trained to dehumanize the other oppressively.

### **Pink Pussy Privilege**

Stories of White eroticism, such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *Sex and the City*, offer other examples of how dominant White characters have sexual stability, taking away space from queer and colored subjects. The promise of being White not only includes comfortable socioeconomic status, but also access to safe pleasure. Sex and wealth run closely together. Elite White heterosexual patriarchal violence dominates the American Dream. Even the "colourisation of the

movie poster—from white to gray to black—signifies a dominant imaginary that always and already posits white as good, and black as bad, and the movement toward black (Gray/Grey) as dubious and dangerous” (Charania, 2006). Is it in this darker space of Whiteness that pleasure can be experimented with? Christian Grey, although wealthy, powerful, and controlling, presents his White body as suffered and his muscular male body as fragile—which is horrifically insulting to colored bodies. As the spectacle of White feminism continues to be perfected, it comes at the expense of brown, Black, and queer bodies. These capitalist sex stories that have an obvious absence of people of color allow continued focus on the tiny pink pussy as the means to power and beauty.

### **Asian American Female Archetypes**

#### **Boys Are Better**

Economic use, or misuse, of children is based on economic means. With little access to education and employment, girls in farms and villages have little hope of becoming independent money-making adults. Daughters primarily represent domestic labor, such as seamstresses, who have always been paid low wages, so they are ultimately pegged as a negative investment for the family’s future. As narrated in *The Woman Warrior*, “There’s no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls” (Hong Kingston, 1976, p. 46). This is how the history of prostitution began, a girl’s proactive prospect of financial hope.

As families immigrate, much of this gendered mindset remains embedded in the household and continues to be inherited generationally. In 1993, Fae Myenne Ng’s novel *Bone* navigates the lives of three daughters in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Their father, Leon, says his ill fortune of birthing three daughters fated his unsuccessful American life. His wife cheats on



him and branches out on her own business that becomes more successful than his laundromat. The eldest daughter runs away to New York and marries without her parents' knowledge. But what haunts the family the most is when the middle daughter jumps out of the 13th floor of a building while high on drugs, killing herself. The disbelief and hushed gazes of the elders in Chinatown are ways that male patriarchy, and in this case failed male patriarchy, is hereditary by superstition. This bleeds into the emotional health and development of Leon's wife and daughters. Leon could just change his attitude as his life is still blessed in many ways, but letting go of male preference is a form of letting go of his former home.

Immigrant parents depend on their children, who are biliterate, to sustain the family. This includes translating and mediating for their parents in public spaces, oftentimes critical places like the courtroom or doctor's office. Immigrating to America means the devaluing of one's native language, education, and racial status in an effort to assimilate quickly. Bow (2001) explained this more deeply:

In an American context, progressive narratives of women's liberation have specific relevance for texts dealing with first-generation immigrants and their American-raised children; gender dynamics are necessarily inscribed with messages about citizenship and racial progress. By linking the hope of genealogical transmission ("You will inherit a better life because of my suffering") or, more generally, an increasing liberalism regarding gender rights ("Don't the Chinese admit that women have minds?") to acculturation, these Asian American works map a development about the First and Third Worlds onto narratives of women's bonding or struggle for autonomy. (p. 72)

Because of this immediate demotion in social status and conditions of low-wage immigrant work, children of immigrants are keenly aware of the entire family's vulnerability and disempowerment. The daughters are conflicted, as abandoning their father is culturally frowned upon (ahem, Mulan), but this depressive dependency of the parents and gendered framing of the culture hinder their progress towards their own self-interests.

Asian American parents are characterized to be overly strict, authoritarian, and unidimensional—reversing years of trying to unshed Communist stigma. It can be argued that the damage to daughters is for good intentions because the parents are willing to bring about some measure of harm to their children in order that their will of their American Dream be done. The mother in *Woman Warrior* threatens the daughter to avoid a shameful lesson: “Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful” (Hong Kingston, 1976, p. 5). A convenient way to go about this is parents having daughters live at home until marriage to enforce a heavy emphasis on chastity. Using the fear of losing virginity in a traumatic way is also a weapon to scare daughters into staying at home. It is okay to harm the psychological development of one’s daughter as long as she does not turn out to be a whore. The children of immigrants are more likely than their parents to cross local ethnic boundaries to build alliances—and then have sex with non-Asian people. This opens up sex across national lines, disrupting the purity and survival of that race. In *Runaway Diary of a Street Kid* by Lau (1989), she is accused of being a “lying, whoring, ungrateful, uncontrollable daughter” (p. 202). The entire family’s reputation is dependent on the virginity of the daughter.

### **The Model Minority Daughter Is Actually a Whore**

Sex work writers like Liu (1997) of *Oriental Girls Desire Romance* and Lau (1989) of *Runaway Diary of a Street Kid* have suggest/ed that children of Asian immigrants are forced to enter math and science fields to continue the Model Minority title. The characters also judge themselves against the imagined home country they know nothing about which the parents use as leverage against them. There is very little sense of self. Ninh (2011) specified:

And as the narrators' repeated references to depression, insanity, and suicide suggest, the stakes of disappointment can be high. Though both based on principles of disciplinary formation, there is a line between school and prison, a difference between enclosure and its fathers application of captivity; and for power to lose the distinction is to confuse whether it is making docile bodies for a profitable citizenry, or simply breaking them down. (para. 2351)

This shows in the mother monitoring her day-to-day activities to manage her development into a future payoff, a return on the parents' investment. Both in Liu's and Lau's narratives, the characters grow up to be writers, and later sex workers, instead of the Model Minority-perceived industries, portraying writing as an inverse to the market-driven family. Deemed to be worthless in the economy, "to 'do' literature is to 'do nothing' in the sense of inactivity, avoidance, resistance rather than action...to do 'nothing' is not a fearful challenge to power but an inoffensive coping mechanism, a subdued refusal, a quiet falling" (Ninh, 2011, para. 2031). To then publish a public indictment of their parents is also a ballsy act of aggression against her family.

Before the girls were old enough to have sex-workable bodies, literature was a passive escapism and rebellion. They got away from their parents by losing themselves in these exotic places, distant locations, and imagined alter egos of drugs and alcohol. The usual manifestations of sovereign power are to come home at the stated time, to get straight As, to stop crying, to shut up upon command, and to submit to parental directives—however large, small, or ridiculous. But the girls, realizing that destruction is the ultimate prerogative of ownership, need to prove that "my life was my own to destroy" (Lau, 1989, p. 17). When older, both protagonists take up drug habits, high-risk sexual work with exposure to disease and physical attack, but this purposeful suffering is the greatest revenge on the constraint of not only the parents, but America's racist expectations of the Model Minority child. In this particular case, it is not by desperate means that

one becomes a prostitute and one a stripper. The rebellion to harm the family is planned and intentional. The risks of dangers such as rape, pregnancy, and disease are worth it to them.

In a 1995 dramatic short film written and directed by Hyun Mi Oh, *La Senorita Lee* features a young Korean American woman who is pregnant by her recently deported Mexican boyfriend but is now set to be married to a boring parent-approved Korean doctor. Jeanie Lee's character explores conflicting cultural values, where a marriage to Dr. Harry Kim would be just fine, where he even lovingly accepts her baby, but the haunting relations with Tomas, which threaten her minority family's stable future and pure Korean blood, could ruin her family's Asian American dream. To maintain a commitment with a non-Asian illegal immigrant would be an unstrategic move for Jeanie. With whomever an Asian woman is having sex, her whole family is also having sex with that person.

Tracy Quan, writer and former sex worker, published the literary series *Diary of a Manhattan Call Girl* (2001), *Diary of a Married Call Girl* (2005), and *Diary of a Jetsetting Call Girl* (2008). Quan centers on her protagonist, Nancy Chan, a millennial Upper East Side of Manhattan call girl, who is conflicted with desires: making love vs. making money (sometimes both), relationships with multiple clients vs. a fiancé, pregnancy vs. independence. What Quan has done is made the world's oldest female profession have privilege and the entitlement of choice. Quan (2001) said, "Prostitutes have to be incredibly self-centered in order to survive and succeed," to love being a love object but trying to not fall in love (p. 3). Where the control of women's bodies is of governmental concern, sex work can be a refreshing complicated choice.

## **Slut Shame Is Slut Fame**

In *Cho Revolution* (2004), the popular comedian Margaret Cho lists roles typically available for Asian American women on screen: “manicurist, geisha, opium smoker, chicken-wielding peasant, Korean store owner, and Bond Girl” (Shimizu, 2007, p. 7). Kang (2002) reinforced this by explaining two basic types: the Lotus Blossom baby (China Doll, Geisha Girl, shy Polynesian beauty), and the Dragon Lady (Fu Manchu’s various female relations, prostitutes, devious madams) (para. 914). But it is through slut shame that these archetypes maintain and continue fame.

The famous musical *Miss Saigon* that first debuted in 1989 by Claude-Michel Schonberg continues to show Vietnam through a Westernized lens. It is by White men, for White men, using exaggerated cultural costumes, violence, and sexual shame to reinforce the threat of Asia. As two of the longest-running shows on Broadway, *Miss Saigon* and *Madame Butterfly* show the profit of slutifying Asian bodies.

## **From Asian Ho to American (Ho)usewife**

### **Toxic Mascumilitary**

Sex-working women have quickly learned the themes of male bonding, fraternity, and objectification for masculine military needs. This requires adult men to imagine the expectations of certain women, usually non-White women from “corrupt” countries, to be more available due to their distress than women from their own countries. Just as there are preconceived notions about them, do these women also not enter into playing their own myths of American men? What is the harm in exaggerating that role to receive cash within a few hours? Looking at a First World man (Western/European war-causing) and a Third World woman (Asian war-stricken)

together challenges the power dynamics circulating between them in their conjoined (literally) representation. It is a co-dependency, the sex worker and customer, and could be seen as being deeper than just an economic exchange. Nagel (2003) explained:

Ethnosexual consumers and providers link the West with the East, the North with the South. Brides-by-mail and sex tourism operations represent libidinal commercial spaces where dreams of improving one's own and one's family's fortunes connect with desires for sexual encounters with exotic others. These real and phantasmic exchanges are not unique to Third World settings; ethnosexual frontiers are not only found in the economic borderlands of developing economies designated for investment, enterprise, or export processing. Globalization, especially the migration of workers in pursuit of higher wages, has established ethnosexual beachheads in the developed world as well. Ethnosexual frontiers can be found in industrial countries in factories and agricultural production sites using imported workers, in the growing service sectors of postindustrial economies, and in the informal, grey, or shadow economies of developed countries. (p. 235)

Asian women promote military machismo. A man's apparent success and indulgence in "aggressive sexuality to the exclusion of other ideal masculine qualities, such as discipline and comradeship, may prevent marking him as a 'loser' in the military" (Cheng, 2010, p. 138). The use of ethnically distinct women in wartime is a collective enterprise, involving the camaraderie of military units, sometimes a piece of military operations. If a man is not depicted as hypersexualized, then he is homosexualized. Chang-Rae Lee's (1999) *A Gesture Life* and Nora Okja Keller's (1997) *Comfort Woman* both represent Asian American characters haunted by their connections to Korean prostitutes in recreation camps who are beaten, raped, and impregnated by Japanese soldiers, sometimes dozens at a time. The protagonists both struggle with relationships with their daughters, as they have carried their PTSD into America.

Ethnosexual exploitation is the greatest victory of war in the eye of the invader. *Camp Arirang* by Diane S. Lee and Grace Yoon-Kung Lee is a 1995 documentary exploring prostitution in American military bases in South Korea. Although there are restaurants and

shopping venues in these towns, the primary economy is prostitution, which is an essential element not only to boost morale for American soldiers but also, in the most private and intimate way possible, to maintain morals between two political beasts in this global dynamic. The documentary becomes uncomfortable when these women try to raise their biracial Americasian children in these camp towns. These women are used as national ambassadors and possibly spies, bringing in much needed foreign money, yet they are greatly shunned by their own communities. This is national infidelity at its finest. Thus, local Asian men are pimping out their sisters to institutionalize the use of their own women's bodies. Do White men do this to White women? The bars and brothels that purposely surround U.S. military bases show how local groups are involved in this economic sex industry. But why not take advantage of American soldiers? Are they not bombing our land anyway? Might as well take their money. Might as well get a free plane ticket to America.

### **Recreational Rape**

Many needs are to be served in the war sex industry. Money is to be made, stress to be released, troops to be entertained yet military intel to be protected, and most importantly, boys to become masculinized. Gang rape of "enemy" women and patronage of wartime brothels run or protected by military authorities are filled with women who are abducted, economically desperate, or displaced by war; throughout history, they have been among the spoils of war and the perquisites of victors (Nagel, 2003). Of course, war is guns and combat, but bodies can be used as weapons too. Rape is an important weapon of war. Nagel (2003) elaborated more on why the presence of U.S. military is resented in many countries:

Moving or occupying armies use the rape of “enemy” women and girls with both a carrot and stick: raping local women is a spoil of war for the troops to enjoy, and rape is also a technique of terror and warfare designed to dominate and humiliate enemy men by sexually conquering their women. Rape in war, as in many other ethnosexual settings, is best understood as a transaction between men, where women are the currency used in the exchange. Sexually taking an enemy’s woman amounts to gaining territory and psychological advantage. In countries around the world, rape often is defined as a polluting action, a way to soil the victim, her kin, and her nation physically and symbolically. Sexual warfare can extend beyond the moment of violation in situations where victims are reputationally smeared, physically mutilated, or when pregnancies or births happen from sexual assaults. (pp. 181-182)

Perhaps rape is deemed to be less of a crime if committed across enemy lines. Men from both parties use the Asian female body for powerful promotion. This rewards the troops by terrorizing and humiliating the enemy, while also gaining economic means for the local men. Ethnic loyalty and ethnic loathing join hands in rape in war (Nagel, 2003).

### **Desperate Househos**

The beginning of “American fever,” where there is a desire to emigrate to a superior America, is now a popular mindset. Camp towns provided close access to Korean women and American men, with Korean women as cashiers, clerks, secretaries, waitresses, and, of course, prostitutes. In a social context, where “America was viewed with awe and American men were figured as knights in shining armor in contrast to Korean men, who were cast as sexist pigs, marriage to an American soldier could become the ideal expression of a Korean woman’s desire for a different and better life” (Hune & Nomura, 2003, para. 5745). The base association is mirrored from the husband’s rank and promotions, so the woman’s hierarchy is inherited from the military husband via marriage.

This portrayal of the Asian woman’s body as a project for colonization shows it as a product of dominant global intervention. Her sexuality has to be either abused or saved. This is a



fun homework assignment for the White man with “Yellow Fever” to invest in. Asian women now invest in these migration projects with sex work as an entry point because they desire the commodities, lifestyle, and first-world luxuries that overseas marriage seems to promise. But when they reach the better side, conservative immigration attitudes and new jobs only allowing them laborer status come with a new set of vulnerabilities and microaggressions, especially when the prostitution stigma already follows them. The struggle for survival goes beyond physical to emotional and cultural as well, where “the women are isolated from both Korean and American societies and from their own relatives and within their own families. They also face various kinds of disapproval, discrimination, and humiliations from all these sources, as well as pressures to change and conform to American ways and minimize, even erase, their Korean identities” (Hune & Nomura, 2003, para. 5697). Another displacement is the confusion of reproduction, where an American household is expected to raise purebred children, not biracial and bicultural Americanized children. For these mothers, raising Americanized children has meant raising children to view their mothers as foreign and perhaps inferior in comparison to their White fathers.

Their immigrant status, lack of familiarity with White culture, limited English proficiency, and limited knowledge of transportation and location made these women vulnerable all over again, oftentimes leading to entrapment, deportation, or violence. With similarities to labor jobs, work conditions, and marginal pay, it is difficult to argue that life in the United States is actually better for Asian American women. A social contract becomes a sexual contract, where cross-racial marriages become a cross-racial alliance towards democratic freedom. This movement is measured through the proximity of Caucasians (Bow, 2001, p. 54). Kang (2002) explained the evolution of marital politics:

Thus, the Supreme Court held in 1868 that only “white women” could gain citizenship by marrying a citizen. In this legal calculus, then, the ideal citizen woman would be the “white wife of a white man.” As Lauren Berlant points out in consideration of such variously stratified claims to U.S. nationality already in place in 1850, “Being an American citizen wasn’t ‘natural’ for white men, but it involved the possession of a gendered and racialized body. (para. 1821)

As an early representation of ethnic wives in America, they are expected selectively to have traits of docility and domesticity that their Anglo-American husbands expect from Oriental women. This prejudice is often seen as better than other modern American women because they match the criteria of traditional old-fashioned women. Hune and Nomura (2003) found that “since the 1970s, the women have also been increasingly asked to serve as a window to another culture and thereby to provide non threatening multicultural experience for America and to contribute to the multicultural milieu of American society, one that conveniently glosses over persisting racial and cultural inequalities” (para. 5776).

Now the new goal in obtaining the housewife role is to seek out an Asian American counterpart. This strategy could take her from Asian farm child to American housewife. This immigration to the West is an escape from gender constraints and economic bondage. Hune and Nomura (2003) elaborated:

Housewives, for example, were married to men who could afford to support their wives and families with their incomes alone. Laborers’ wives, by contrast, needed to engage in paid labor outside the home and thus could not claim the status of housewife. The idea of female domesticity had been critical to bourgeois class identity among white Americans since the nineteenth century. That immigration officials were so readily admitted picture bride housewives suggests their adoption of these gendered definitions of class; by granting entry to housewives, they attempted to admit members of non laboring classes. (para. 2411)

Knowing this, Korean American men sometimes used pictures to lure prospective wives. Men sent pictures from their younger days, standing in front of their boss’s automobile, or renting a nice suit for the day. Invariably, a picture bride’s initial meeting of her future husband was a

devastation, with his dark tan from working outside and tattered clothes implying a life of disappointment. But going back to their homeland was not an option for these young picture brides. First, although “the prospective husband sent money for the bride’s one-way passage to Hawai’i, he would not pay for her to back out of the marriage and go back to Korea; nor could he have afforded to do so. Second, going back meant a life of unbearable shame in Korea” (Hune & Nomura, 2003, para. 2383). It may seem strange to imagine that one can make a marriage agreement based on pictures with vague descriptions on the back, but they were willing to risk life with total strangers in exchange for the chance of better education, an ending to a life under an oppressive government, and pursuit of religious freedom. Despite a sometimes disappointing beginning, many picture brides had happy marriages and received their American Dream. But in some cases, “husbands became abusive out of paranoia. Some husbands, afraid their new wives might run away [towards the abundance of White men available], had them locked up before going to work each day. Other picture brides eventually divorced their husbands” (Hune & Nomura, 2003, para. 2847). In a country where women could soon obtain employment and learn English, this threatened the Asian husband. *The Buddha in the Attic* is a 2011 novel written by Julie Otsuka. She profiles a group of young Japanese women brought to San Francisco as picture brides. They were documented as brides and not prostitutes, but this Japanese-American experience ranged from rape by their husbands to serving White women to being rejected by their own biracial children. Just as baby step of progression assimilated, Pearl Harbor happened.

Shimizu (2007) recalled the historical context of sexuality that inscribed the immigration of Asian women into the United States as it significantly called for better representation in texts to explore the sexuality of these “working” girls:

At the turn of the century, Chinese women prostitutes were routinely harassed on the street. Japanese women entered the United States as picture brides at the beginning of the twentieth century and as war brides after World War II. In Filipino American history, a woman was stoned to death for her adultery, which was considered a gender and racial traitorship. Korean women “war brides” arrived in the United States with their American G.I. husbands after the Korean War. Mail-order or pen pal brides from the Philippines are introduced through catalogues today. Mail-order brides are especially vulnerable because their legal status is conditional upon their marriage to a U.S. citizen or permanent resident, regardless of domestic violence. Asian sex workers travel to the United States to become transnational sex workers. (pp. 17-18)

The 1997 novel *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden was streamlined enough for an American audience to become an “Asian” film. In 2005, many Asians flocked to the theaters in excitement. But the conflicted criticism happened again with the choice of no representation vs. stereotypical representation vs. misrepresentation. Golden, who is a White man who briefly lived in Japan and met a friend whose mom was a geisha (indeed making him an expert), sexualized and eroticized geishas for the western audience where the Asian female’s virginity can be bid on, bought, and saved, eventually relocating to the United States. One might argue why a “real” geisha did not defend and speak out about this story, but it is unethical to discuss professional matters. Hence, Asian women do not sex and snitch.

Many audiences still prefer the colonized story even long after wars are over. Nagel (2003) explained:

Like all literature, fictional captivity narratives reflected the customs and assumptions of the times, and since many readers were interested in the tales told by women captives, scholars have read the narratives as morality plays about the proper and improper place of women in American colonial and national society depending on the era in which the narrative was written and edited. Examples of popular nineteenth-century novels featuring women captives include James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*. The familiarity of the title of this 1826 novel to contemporary Americans is evidence of the enduring popularity of tales of early American gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. (p. 71)

There is a solution to the problems of Asian placement in stories. We need more and we need different. This way, the clumsy stories that already exist would not matter as much because there would not be all that there is. The struggle has been real because the story has been wrong.

### **Model Minority Vagina**

#### **Love Me Long Time**

The idea of “love” is not a forgotten idea of these migrant women, making them cultural and social actresses. In the pursuit of love, they act their way out of gender, sexual, ethnic, national, and capital constraints. Romance is a way to develop self and pleasure as they work for the pursuit of a better future through obtaining migration, with the possibility of shifting mentality that their sex work can actually be enjoyable. As “love” being performed versus being real begins to blur, who is actually the victim? Love becomes a way to define social order because “contrary to the stereotypes of marriage between Chinese and Filipina women and US American men, some well-educated professional women may use migration to realize their dreams of marriage, rather than use marriage for migration” (Cheng, 2010, p. 34). Traditionally, the man provides the woman materially and the woman offers herself sexually. But if she is also enjoying the sex, she actually gets to win twice!

There is a sad and happy tone entwined together. It is a supposed bad life—but very much a party too—of love, exploring sexuality, and a strong “go get it” attitude. These women work with romantic and erotic expectations, blurring the boundary between love and labor. It is somewhat public yet private, both performance and organic. They are obviously sexualized on the job, performing ideals of Asian feminine beauty to act out emotional and sexual scripts for their clients. It takes equal parts brain and vagina. Their job site gives them a space to explore

gender and sexual behavior they most likely would not dare try at home. Most importantly, it continues to emphasize the imperialism between the United States and Asia. Desire can be matched to an economy where desire for relationships with others represents gender and national hierarchies on a large global scale.

### **Lust Me Short Time**

Animals cannot help having sex, but humans are supposed to. What makes us civilized is the ability to have this self-control. Those involved in sex work are seen as animalistic and unemployed; furthermore, these women are assumed to have been unsuccessful at monogamy, which is the preference in maintaining a healthy and successful society. Promiscuity and the failure to love is a virus in the socioeconomic well-being of an environment, implying something is wrong with that human. From a young age, girls are inculcated with fear about being sexually defensive and responsible anywhere they go. This includes how to avoid rape by a man yet still seeking protection from a man. By allowing only one man to access a woman's entire body, she is now protected from all other men, emphasizing monogamy as the main element in sexual power and protection.

Willey (2016) discussed the three distinct systems that have evolved to promote human monogamy: lust, love, and attachment:

Lust, associated with testosterone and estrogen, keeps us on the lookout for a mate. Love, associated with dopamine, is the new relationship energy high that keeps members of a potential pair in one another's company for long enough to form an attachment. Attachment is associated with vasopressin and oxytocin and is what ostensibly keeps pairs together for long enough to get their offspring through critical stages of development. (pp. 49-50)

As with most endings in storytelling, the best way to avoid the risk of being seen as promiscuous, a witch, a lesbian, or a societal failure is to settle down with one man. Sex work is

seen as an abnormality and a failure to love or be loved. Lust, as second to love, will always make the sex worker second to the White wife.

Chapter III  
METHODOLOGY

**Research Site Context, Selection, and Access**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of real, as opposed to fictionalized, Asian American females and the stories of their bodies. This study was not conducted in a traditional English classroom nor even in a school environment. This course does not exist and conversing with my underage students about sex is a legal concern. I conducted this as a collective case study of three Asian/Asian American women in a nontraditional classroom setting. As the women ranged in age, profession, and location, they came together for a virtual book club. With the selection of the women and the intention of this study being identity-driven and experience-specific, “a cultural studies or feminist perspective reads a text in terms of its location within a historical moment marked by a particular gender, race, or class ideology” and qualitative research serves as a set of complex interpretive practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 6). My hope is that this study provided the women with a moment to self-reflect on their walk in the world in an Asian body and, through that documentation, their experience with micro-aggressions in both professional and personal settings will now be translated into my teaching space to disrupt colonized representations of bodies in the English classroom.

As I was struggling to find these very niche women I desired for my study, I considered getting dressed to visit nightclubs and massage parlors around the Dallas area to approach women, but the endless number of scenarios I imagined left me stressed to the point of wanting



to change my entire dissertation to something convenient in my classroom. I figured it would not hurt to reach out and recruit. I found these women through other women. After scrolling through my contacts, social media, and email, I reached out to those I knew were trusting, confidential, and reliable—and who hopefully would not respond strangely to my assumption that they knew a sex worker. Some responded but did not follow through; other connections fizzled due to the time commitment; and mostly all were interested in why I texted them, “Hey, do you happen to know an Asian stripper?” Many responded with interest and encouraged me to continue this research—or as one friend put it, this “secret slut study.” After a scavenger hunt for very specific Asian women, these stories have come together from varying corners of my life. Snowball sampling was essential for finding a more hidden community.

The first woman, connected by my cousin, is a Korean Chinese American residing in Massachusetts and she is in her mid-30s. She is referred to as Emma for this study. She recalled and reshaped her sexual abuse by a family member during her childhood. The second woman, a former colleague and my Brooklyn big sister, is a Vietnamese Canadian in her 40s residing between New York City and California. Referred to as Tien/Vicky for this study, she explored her sexual revolution through sex work and relationships during the decades of her adulthood. The third woman, whom I found via a Craigslist post, is a Chinese American in her 20s born in California and currently residing in New York City for school. She is referred to as Iris for this study. She shared her understanding of sex work through a financial lens. Since the three women were all in different geographic locations, exchanges were digital, meaning I did not see body language, facial expressions, nor tone of voice during the book club. After meeting on Google Doc for the book club, I had a video conference with each woman individually to close the

experience. This research was conducted from 2019 through 2020. Before this study, these women did not know each other.

## **Data Collection Methods**

### **Phase One: Introduction Survey (Just Her)**

To begin my research, I reviewed my research questions and designed introduction questions stemming from those research questions for each woman to answer individually. These were about 10 questions, generally the same for each woman and tweaked in some areas since I knew some preliminary information about their sex journeys. As I did not conduct this research within a school or place of work, I had a bit more freedom in how far I wanted to take the content, but based on the comfort level I sensed from some of the women more than others, I adjusted according to these needs. In essence, each participant did most of the talking or, rather, typing.

As a grounded theory study, I devised a few broad, open-ended questions. Then, as common themes aligned with the women's responses, I encouraged more detailed discussions based on those themes to prepare for the book club. With open-ended, non-judgmental questions, I hoped to encourage unanticipated statements and stories to emerge. The combination of how a researcher constructs the questions and conducts the interviews shapes how well one achieves a balance between making the interview open-ended and focusing on significant statements (Charmaz, 2014, p. 26).

These questions were shared on a Google Doc which only that specific woman and I were able to view. The women were not able to see each other's responses. Aside from the third participant I found through Craigslist and who was compensated, the women did this as a favor

to me, so I was flexible with the deadline. I was mindful that they work, have children, and might not have been motivated to discuss this very private and perhaps painful part of their lives. As I anticipated that some of the women's responses might be generic, I commented on those sections of their responses on the Google Doc to encourage more conversation. Charmaz (2014) explained further:

Grounded theorists collect data to develop theoretical analyses from the beginning of a project. We try to learn what occurs in the research settings we join and what our research participants' lives are like. We study how they explain their statements and actions, and ask what analytic sense we can make of them. (pp. 2-3)

With these introduction questions, I had an adaptable mindset for collecting qualitative data. Through this, I was open to surprises that refreshed my inspiration and pushed my analytic skills.

### **Phase Two: Book Club (All the Hers)**

After the introduction questions were completed, all the women met on Google Doc to analyze Amy Tan's "Rules for Virgins" short story. Due to travels, time zones, work, and children, there was no consistent time for us to all meet in a video conference. I imagined this book club to be an opportunity for the women to analyze their own narrative along/against a fictional sex worker story from a famous canonized Asian American author. Although I sought them out as sex workers and they were aware of this, I was not expecting them to release all that information to strangers. I did not want to frame "sex worker" too much on them as I also wanted them to respond to the story as natural recreational readers. Sometimes the researcher "will find that the meanings [s]he has learned to attach to an object have no relevance for the people [s]he is observing" (Denzin, 2009, p. 9). These responses to the short story shaped the final video conversation and drove the structure of my overall assumptions of how sex workers read and process.

I also reflected on how all women in the group being of the same race and gender is an exclusive experience. Charmaz (2014) pointed out:

Interviewing women poses other dilemmas. When the interviewer is a man, gender dynamics may enter the interview. When the interviewer and participant are both women, class, age, and/or race and ethnic differences may still influence how the interview proceeds. Nonetheless, women from diverse backgrounds often volunteer to be interviewed for a variety of sensitive topics. The quality of women's responses may range widely when other people have silenced them about the interview topic. Their responses to the interview may range from illuminating, cathartic, or revelatory to uncomfortable, painful, or overwhelming. The topic, its meaning and the circumstances of the participant's life, as well as the interviewer's skills, affect how women experience their respective interviews. (p. 28)

I saw this group as an opportunity for Asian/Asian American women to find solace in their sex work experience as it can be a very alienating, shunning, and painful experience. When given an opportunity to explicitly (literally) talk about their experiences, if not at least about the explicit experience of the fictional character, then the space for this topic can be pushed further towards a more powerful narrative.

### **Phase Three: Video Conversation (Just Me and Her)**

I conducted closing interviews with each woman individually via Google Meet video conference using a semi-structured interview style that focused on my research questions and specific points of interest I gathered from Phase One and Phase Two. Research participants often expect their interviewers to ask questions about the presented topic and lead the session. But most importantly, I just wanted to have an exchange of listening to each woman talk freely.

Although conversational, I followed Charmaz's (2014) etiquette:

The researcher should express interest and want to know more. What might be rude to ask or be glossed over in friendly agreement in ordinary conversation—even with intimates—become grist for exploration. As the interview proceeds, I may request clarifying details to obtain accurate information and to learn about the research participant's experiences and reflections. Unlike ordinary conversation, an interviewer

can shift the conversation and follow hunches. An interview goes beneath the surface of ordinary conversation and examines earlier events, views, and feelings afresh. (p. 26)

I remained open to the ways the women's stories shaped my research and guided my analysis, being flexible to my own perceptions of how my research shifted after connecting with each woman. Charmaz (2014) suggested:

- Break silences and express their views.
- Tell their stories and give them a coherent frame.
- Reflect on earlier events.
- Be experts.
- Choose what to tell and how to tell it.
- Share significant experiences and teach the interviewer how to interpret them.
- Express thoughts and feelings disallowed in other relationships and settings.
- Receive affirmation and understanding. (p. 27)

As these women had to recount a private time(s) in their life, this interview resulted in them reliving these episodes. Since this interview was anticipated for this specific purpose, these women who have experienced crises sought direction from me on where to take the interview, while I had to gauge how deep to go and when to explore a point further while also being sensitive to the participants' concerns and vulnerabilities (Charmaz, 2014, p. 27). Verbal utterances, nonverbal gestures, mode and style of dress, and manner of speech all provided clues to the symbolic meanings that became translated into and emerged from the conversation (Denzin, 2009, p. 7). At the end of the interview, each participant was asked her suggestions on how to better the rhetoric surrounding Asian American female sex workers in academic spaces.

## Data Analysis

As this was a case study, I analyzed data through the theme of my intended research desires and the themes that began to cluster as I learned the women's stories. Then, I cross-referenced the themes to see how, although strangers, these women's lives connected. I investigated how any information was related to my literature review. After I transcribed the interviews, I used Charmaz's (2014) suggestion of reaching for quality data to prepare conclusions:

- Have I collected enough background data about persons, processes, and settings to have ready recall and to understand and portray the full range of contexts of the study?
- Have I gained detailed descriptions of a range of participants' views and actions?
- Does the data reveal what lies beneath the surface?
- Is the data sufficient to reveal changes over time?
- Have I gained multiple views of the participants' range of actions?
- Have I gathered data that enables me to develop analytic categories?
- What kind of comparisons can I make between the data? How do these comparisons generate and inform my ideas? (p. 18)

During all three phases of the process, I used my own journaling, observations, and field notes to transcribe my initial thoughts and next steps of actions as quickly as possible to avoid the likelihood of forgetting. Memo-writing constituted a crucial method in grounded theory because it prompted me to analyze data and codes early in the research process. Certain codes stood out and took the form of theoretical categories as I wrote successive memos (Charmaz,

2014, p. 72). Once I established the main categories of findings, I used them as inspiration to uncover more readings for my literature review. I assumed most of the themes as expected since I structured the questions with that intention, but I needed to reflect on my own assumptions of these women, as unexpected surprises caught my own thoughts and redirected my pursuits. I followed the direction of Charmaz (2014) to take notes:

- Stop and think about your data.
- Treat qualitative codes as categories to analyze.
- Develop your writer's voice and writing rhythm (let your memos read like letters to a close friend; no need for stodgy academic prose).
- Spark ideas to check out in the field setting.
- Avoid forcing data into your extant concepts and theories.
- Develop fresh ideas, create new concepts, and find novel relationships.
- Demonstrate connections between categories (e.g., empirical events and social structures, larger groups and the individual, espoused beliefs and actions).
- Discover gaps in your data collection.
- Increase confidence and competence. (p. 85)

With the color-coding of themes, my results began to cluster into organized findings, which sped up the writing process. I elaborated on each section through sub-codings and sub-categories, clarified relationships between the categories, decided which categories were not significant, and then branched out between the sections to work towards bigger conclusions. For the finishing touch, I humanized the data. In collecting descriptive data, qualitative research might have caused me to cherry-pick my findings. As Bogdan and Biklen (2006) described, many of us are locked in our worlds, oblivious to the details of our environment and to the

assumptions under which we operate. The qualitative research approach demands that the world be examined with the assumption that nothing is trivial, that everything has the potential for being a clue that might unlock a more comprehensive understanding of what is being studied (p. 6).

My design in this was to form a group to better understand each other's perspectives as Asian/Asian American women who are deeply conscious of their sexual selves. I hoped to create a brave and unique space for this specific discussion. I have been transparent in my communication about this to all the women. As I am a researcher who speaks from the same gendered, racial, cultural, and ethnic community perspective, "the gendered, multiculturally situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology), which are then examined (methodology, analysis) in specific ways" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 11). To keep a healthy balance and awareness of my role, I tried to seek a method that would allow me to record my own observations accurately while also uncovering the subjective meanings the women brought to their life experiences.

### **Researcher's Positionality**

As I am typing this, I am a 36-year-old Taiwanese-American cisgender female. Not married. No children. I am very aware of this in the classroom and in the bedroom, and when all the annoying Asian aunties bring it up. My role as the researcher researching the trauma, sex lives, education, and cultural displacement of women with a shared identity has been not only a professional journey, but a deeply personal, confusing, and vulnerable experience. Although I am close to the identity of the women I was studying, my work was not without limitations. I have been overly conscious of and empathetic with my participants because of this, given that there



were times when I could not separate myself from them; there was even one episode where we were frozen in tearful silence for several minutes during a video chat. Where does my personal life stop and where does my professional life begin—or should it be separated? “The sociologist must operate between two worlds when [s]he engages in research—the everyday world of [her] subjects and the world of [her] own sociological perspective” (Denzin, 2009, p. 9). I often wondered if this doctoral process would have taken less time if it had not been so personally entangled.

I must self-reflect on the biases I may have brought to my research, as the biases against my own community are the same biases the oppressor has put on my community. There is danger in repeating that. From researching so much about the Asian woman’s sexual displacement and marginalization in the history of the United States, did I front-load my questions or thoughts in a way to hope for the desired responses to align conveniently with these historical findings? Have I been assisting the oppressor? Sociological explanations ultimately given for a set of behaviors are not likely to be completely understood by those studied; even if they prove understandable, subjects may not agree with or accept them, perhaps because they have been placed in a category they do not like or because elements of their behavior they prefer to remain hidden have been made public (Denzin, 2009, p. 9). They are not Asian sex workers, but Asian women who, at one point of their life, encountered sex work.

But in the same consideration, would these women have shared less if the researcher had not been an Asian woman? I confidently walked into this study knowing I am probably not completely oblivious to the findings as an Asian American cisgender female, feeling both invisible yet hypersexualized in institutionalized and intimate spaces. I reflected on Denzin’s (2009) placement of the researcher:

That is, the investigator must indicate how shifting definitions of self are reflected in ongoing patterns of behavior. [She] must, therefore, view human conduct from the point of view of those [she] is studying—“take the role of the acting other in concrete situations”—and this may range from learning the other’s language to capturing the salient views of self. Taking the role of the acting other permits the sociologist to escape the *fallacy of objectivism*; that is, the substitution of [her] own perspective for that of those [she] is studying. (p. 8)

Because this was not a teacher-to-student or teacher-to-teacher study, the exchange felt less pressured without any worry of power imbalance. I also realized that as I have introduced this exchange as a need in my doctoral studies, the participants are still actual humans and not just “data.” One of the participants is my friend, and I am embarrassed to admit that I was out of touch with her until this work, so did she think I was just using her or genuinely rekindling an old friendship?

I am grateful to have found three women who made this experience rich. Realizing the intensity of the information I received, I carefully interpreted the data. Charmaz (2014) elaborated on this aspect:

This approach means we must test our assumptions about the worlds we study, not unwittingly reproduce these assumptions. It means discovering what our research participants take for granted or do not state as well as what they say and do. As we try to look at their world through their eyes, we offer our participants respect and, to our best ability, understanding, although we may not agree with them. We try to understand but do not necessarily adopt or reproduce their view as our own; rather we interpret them. (p. 19)

I am eager to carry these women’s stories with me as we all move our separate ways. I am humbled by the privilege of having access to those stories and satisfied at the tiny dent we have made for the Asian female community. I intended to help guide them through their storytelling, but, in turn, they have guided me.

Chapter IV  
THE WOMEN

**Emma**

**Her Story**

I reached out to my cousin, copying and pasting the same message I had sent to a select few asking if they knew any Asian sex workers. She responded saying that she had a previous patient who was sexually abused. I froze. I was seeking out prostitutes or strippers or mail-order brides, as those stories could also contain abuse but fit my simple categorization of “sex work” as an economic exchange. But “work” does not have to mean payment in the traditional sense, as consensual and nonconsensual sex undoubtedly requires physical, emotional, and psychological work. I was humbled at this stranger trusting me with her story, motivated to shift my research, but mostly anxious about how I honor someone’s pain.

I planned to give it some time, as I was relying on someone else relying on someone else to release a heavy story. I did not imagine someone would release this story quickly. Only a few days later, my cousin’s text message pinged. The story was forwarded. I vividly remember reading, with a stillness in the kitchen, letting my tea grow cold. Was she able to write this in one sitting? Has she told this story many times? Did she have to reopen a wound for me? Why do we never hear about Asian girls getting sexually abused in the news?

Emma is a 36-year-old residing in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She identifies as an Asian and/or Asian American female, feeling fine when having to check whichever boxes are provided

on forms. She is 3/4 Chinese and 1/4 Korean, relating more to her Chinese culture than Korean, because even though the Korean portion is from her mother's side, her father grew up in China. With her father being 100% Chinese, this also revealed the dominant patriarchal structure in many mixed Asian American households. Emma was born and raised in Massachusetts and was also the first generation to be born in the United States. Emma's journey of growing up in America has given her a broader bicultural perspective of "growing up with an Asian culture at home while going to an American school" (Interview, June 20, 2019). However, she has come across random people who automatically have preconceived ideas because of her physical features, resulting in odd and uncomfortable comments. "Where are you from? I see some Orient in your eyes" or "Hey! Chinese! I'm talking to you!" or "You know, my wife is from the Philippines," just to name a few (Interview, June 20, 2019). The term "Orient" is used to describe a tradable good, such as rugs or spices, continuing the tone that Asians, or benefits of Asian commercialism, are a commodity that can be bought. Moreover, although she is part Korean, there is a blanket assumption that all Asians are Chinese or are synonymous for each other, as if there is no consideration of what the varying Asian American identity can consist of. Asian identity "is in the 'eye of the beholder' and race is detached from biological bodies and reassigned to the realm of the cultural, political, and geographical" (Davé et al., 2005, p. 267). Many cannot tell the difference and do not care, which disregards the complex history of specific Asian experiences. As there is a need for pan-Asian solidarity to have strength in numbers, this is not to be interpreted as a nod to the Chinese. Much of the pan-ethnic heterogeneous approach to Asian American literature waters down all communities of Asian descent into one identifiable body.

## **Her Body**

These strange comments continued into Emma's late teens and early 20s. These comments would make her feel offended and insecure, such as "You're taller than most Asian women" or "Oh, you look Asian! You must be exotic in bed" (Interview, June 20, 2019). Emma reflected that over time, she has learned to cope with it and thinks of it as positive features that make her different and unique in her own way. Nowadays, "I'm either able to turn a blind eye or let it roll off my shoulders. Also, I try to think of it as a learning experience such as 'Okay, maybe I didn't respond gracefully to that. How could I do better next time?'" (Interview, June 20, 2019). As a behavior adopted from many home countries, Asians are trained to practice silence as a well-mannered response to situations. This obedient mindset is beginning to be questioned and is starting to shift through the generations, as silence is a practice in complacency, continuing to cater to the invisibility of Asians.

When Emma was 7 years old, her older cousin (referred to here as John), who was about 13 or 14 years old, came from South Korea to live with her family in the United States. In the beginning it was fun as he introduced her and her sister to video games, superhero/fighting movies, and playing around like he was a big brother. One day, while sitting on the couch watching TV in the living room without her sister or mom in the room, he asked, "Do you want to do something grown up?" She excitedly agreed, like any little kid wanting to be like an adult. Reflecting back as an adult now, "I was too young to realize that his version of grown-up activities was different than mine. Then he sexually abused me. My mom was coming down the stairs and he stopped immediately. After she walked away from the living room, he said to keep it a secret and I did" (Email, June 16, 2019). Sometime in the near future, the sexual abuse occurred again in the dining room when no adults were around. Emma said she told John, "I

don't want to do it anymore, but he said to keep trying." Again, in the basement this time, "he said to keep trying and to keep going...keep trying and keep going" (Email, June 16, 2019). Eventually, John moved out of the home and moved in with his father. Before he left, he told her that what happened was a secret and to not tell anyone.

As Emma got a bit older, "I started to think what happened between us wasn't...okay" (Email, June 16, 2019). She would still see John once in a while for birthdays or holidays. Part of her looked forward to his visits and another part of her was also uncomfortable. She would pretend like nothing happened, until he would always find a small window of opportunity to ask, "You didn't tell anyone, right? This is a secret" (Email, June 16, 2019). John moved back to South Korea and there was relief that he was far, far away. When Emma was about 18 or 19, John's sister was getting married in the United States and she knew he would be at the ceremony. After the ceremony,

he asked me if I told anyone about our secret and I told him I didn't. He then walked away. Immediately, I felt...disgust, very displeased, and several other emotions (can't think of the right words to describe it). His mere presence and his small action of confirming took a deep toll on me. At that point, I knew I never wanted to see or be near him ever again. (Email, June 16, 2019)

After graduating college, Emma started dating a close friend. He was the first person to know about the sexual abuse and she did not know "why I chose so long to tell anyone and why he was the first person to tell" (Email, June 16, 2019). After a couple of boyfriends, it was still a secret. Reflecting on this boyfriend, "Maybe it was because I felt a deep connection towards him that I didn't feel with past relationships. After I told him, he took my hand and held me in his arms. It gave me great relief and I didn't feel alone anymore" (Email, June 16, 2019). Within that year, this gave her some encouragement to tell her mother. Her mother

eventually called her sister and told her that her son did things to me that only married people should do. Her sister said since it happened a long time ago, we should let it go and forget that it happened. My mom relayed me their conversation and she agreed with her sister that we should forget that it happened.... I was confused, hurt and upset. I regret telling my mom. To this day, I still wished I never told her. (Email, June 16, 2019)

I had to re-read this paragraph several times and asked Emma if this was a way to “save face” in the community and if it strained her relationship with her mother. She said it was most likely due to a lack of education and awareness of how to deal with sexual abuse. She wondered if this was even a topic of discussion in China during the 1950s and 1960s. From that time forward, it was stressful living with family and she wanted to move out. As seen in *The Joy Luck Club* published in 1989, sexism, identity transitions between immigrant generations, and the conflict between mother/mother-in-law and daughter are common themes.

A couple of years later, Emma was diagnosed with Clinical Depression and Anxiety. When she saw a psychiatrist and a psychologist regularly, they thought her depression and anxiety were triggered from what happened. As an adult now, “I haven’t seen John ever since the wedding. Once in a while I’ll have flashbacks of the incident, but I try to move on and not dwell on it. If I do, my mind will repeat the experience over and over again in my head and it might lead to a downward spiral” (Email, June 16, 2019). As the Asian culture works to hide and forget shameful family issues, therapy and counseling are not as taboo in America.

### **Her Representation**

The final conversations with Emma led to her experience as a student in her classroom. When asked about her exposure to Asian American females being included in her schooling, she responded, “I can’t recall any exposure [to] Asian American females in any curriculum in my past education” (Interview, June 20, 2019). This caused her to realize how underwhelming her

representation was, or if there was any representation, then it was probably lackluster in significance. Perhaps the lack of representation and the pressure to be the quiet compliant Asian girl made it hard to say something about her abuse. With her own mother trying to pretend it never happened, it only added to her invisibility and that her body was not worth protecting, just as an Asian curriculum is not worth teaching.

However, Emma was satisfied with the storytelling of Asian American females in the media. Her memory of the shows and characteristic traits is vivid. From what she has seen of Asian Americans on TV and in the movies, she feels they were portrayed with various personalities like the following:

- Firm and practical with Keiko O'Brien (Rosalind Chao in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*)
- Motherly and protective with Sue (Amy Hill in *50 First Dates*)
- Confident and ferocious with Ling Woo (Lucy Liu in *Ally McBeal*)
- Awkward, concerning, and blunt with Dr. Chi Park (Charlene Yi in *House, M.D.*)

Emma reflected that "It's good to portray women of any race or ethnicity with various personalities and not stick to stereotypes.... Women in general may have similarities but we are all different and unique due to the sum of our life experiences which comes with a range of emotions and personalities" (Interview, June 20, 2019).

Emma named several movies, such as *The Joy Luck Club*, *Karate Kid Part II*, *The Road Home*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and *House of Flying Daggers*. These were all commercialized high-profit stories. Kung Fu content in theater shows how American audiences are attached to displays of violence on Asian bodies and how other storylines are beneath serious consideration. Asians viewed as bloody, violent, and defensive bodies rather than of quality



minds create the preferred narrative. During the height of Kung Fu Theater and Blaxploitation in the 1970s, these movies stood for a time where urban minorities had a non-White hero fighting back on political policies (Davé et al., 2005, p. 253). It is perhaps Emma's increasingly hostile environment of having no representation in her school curriculum, to abuse from a family member, to lack of support when confiding in her own mother about it, that she found a connection to martial arts films through overcoming bodily trauma. With abuse being a serious part of her identity, "The collective act of being made to watch and witness acts of violence and violation becomes a way to assert a powerful collectivity and, ultimately, a resistance" (Davé et al., 2005, p. 255). As I was once bothered by the tiring martial arts movies that were the same repeatedly, and reminded of them by others who yelled "HI-YAH!!!" on the playground, Emma has directed my attention to a new light. This genre of storytelling was not only one of the first vehicles with which Asians could signify freedom and survival of the body, but it demonstrated power and control of the mind.

Recently, Emma finds less connection with Asian representation in popular culture; "For some reason, the more recent movies that have been released like *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Always Be My Maybe* don't seem to be of interest to me. I haven't seen either of them. For some reason the trailers made them seem unappealing. The overall quality seemed too polished, like there was a veneer" (Interview, June 20, 2019). As there has been a gap of Asian representation in cinema with not much between the Kung Fu theater hype to today's more modernized storylines, the high expectations and excitement of the comeback of Asian characters serve as a caution for some viewers.

Thinking about the character displays, Emma reflects on why some have stuck with the general public more than others, such as "being good at math, timid or shy, and being exotic in

bed” (Interview, June 20, 2019). This preference serves as another way to keep Asians in their Model Minority role and limited ways of being. This is evident in Emma’s daily encounters. “I dislike when these characters are portrayed in the media and then *certain* people generalize that is how Asian females are. Those same people automatically place these characteristics on me and they open up conversations with those stereotypes” (Interview, June 20, 2019). Emma has a great sense of her representation in film and how to adapt her positionality in relationships. With “Michelle Yeoh, Lucy Liu, Mindy Kaling, Margaret Cho, etc.—I think they’ve made great strides. I feel fortunate to have seen this in my lifetime, along with the first African American president” (Interview, June 20, 2019). For the future, Emma envisions fairness, reason, love, and respect. Even though the number of Asian females in media is small, there is continual growth, and with that growth comes the reclaiming of the body.

## **Tien**

### **Her Story**

Small and sexy. Confident and charismatic. Unique and unbothered. My Brooklyn big sister. For 5 years, our lives crossed at our place of teaching. I took to her immediately. A young modern mom, Vietnamese Canadian (the Canadian part being more interesting to me), an ESOL teacher, a yoga instructor, and married to a Spanish-speaking Australian—just to describe the top layer. I was fascinated by this Asian woman, so different from the ones I was exposed to being from a small Texas suburb. Was this her life by choice or chance? Did she break the standard or has she become the standard? Those 5 years, longer than any time I’ve spent in employment, residence, or relationship, were filled with endless happy hours, house parties, relationship

discussions, and confusing moments of tears, as we were both “lost” in Brooklyn, seeking a new definition of home.

During one of our last meals together, we decided to try a new “Asian” restaurant in the hipster-infested Williamsburg. I shared about my summer in Texas and she shared about her summer of travels. We laughed. But her laugh, usually unexpectedly booming and strong from that petite body, was lower in volume. She eased me into the situation, beating around the obvious, that her marriage was over. She cheated. Our conversation bounced from “But men cheat all the time...my husband called me a whore...what will my daughter think...but the other man also knew you were married...can you be in love with more than one person...is marriage sexual suppression...how, just how, do I move forward now...” I looked across our white-washed Asian entrées, amazed that she was actually flawed, beautifully flawed. Yes, she lost that marriage. But she won at carrying on with an intense realization of sexual freedom and vulnerability.

Our lives moved on. Communication fizzled on and off for probably another 5 years. Certain smells and sights triggered her to float into my thoughts. But one night, I woke up at 3 a.m. to message her a long, random, sporadic text about sex workers. In a simple response, she replied, “How may I help?” Big sister came through. We picked up lost time quickly and seamlessly, making me grateful for her warm digital embrace, traveling me back to the 22-year-old alone in Brooklyn who would also suddenly wake up at 3 a.m.

Tien identifies as Asian. She is “Vietnamese by birth. Chinese by ethnicity. Canadian by nationality. And American by resident” (Interview, June 25, 2019). Her reply depends on who is asking and where she happens to be. Lately, she has been leaning towards her Vietnamese side, rediscovering it. Her family (mom, brother, and uncle) left Vietnam as refugees after the Vietnam

War in 1979. She was 8 years old and her brother was 10. Her story is “typical of many Vietnamese refugees” (Interview, June 25, 2019). They were boat people adrift on the high seas. “Death and pirates awaited...but so did new lives” (Interview, June 25, 2019). After being lost at sea for 30 days on a rickety fishing boat filled to overcapacity, they arrived on the shores of Hong Kong. They lived for nearly a year in a refugee camp. “Filth, illness, thousands cramped together in small spaces under armed guards and barbed wire fences. This too was a very typical experience for refugees” (Interview, June 25, 2019).

In 1980, Tien’s family was sponsored by a church community in Canada. Their new home was in the small town of Nova Scotia. The town had a Chinese restaurant run by a long-established Chinese family. They helped them get settled. “We spoke no English and knew nothing of western ways. We had to learn how to eat with a knife and fork, and poop sitting on the toilet rather than squatting on the rim. Life was much easier. We had food in the cupboard and our own beds to sleep in. My mother and uncle got ESL classes. My brother and I went to school” (Interview, June 25, 2019). Tien quickly realized she was different. No kids in school looked the way she did. Everyone was White except for the “few native kids” (Interview, June 25, 2019). She quickly learned that

the native kids were no better off. I learned also that only Whiteness was valued. No one taught me to be proud of my cultural heritage. I grew ashamed of being Vietnamese, of being a refugee, of being poor, wearing hand-me-downs that kids in school said used to be theirs. I decided not to be Vietnamese anymore. I would recreate a new identity for myself. I didn’t know what that was yet. But at least I could repress the old one. (Interview, June 25, 2019)

Abruptly, Tien stopped speaking Vietnamese at home. She clung to whatever she thought was Chinese. “Bruce Lee was Chinese. The kids admired Bruce Lee” (Interview, June 25, 2019). Since she would not change her physical appearance, taking on a more Chinese-like identity

accelerated assimilation and acceptance. She only spoke Cantonese at home, no more Vietnamese.

Outside their home, she began to take ownership of the English name the townspeople gave her. The townspeople, and even her own mom, started calling her Vicky; although her English name alone was not enough to convince her that she had shed her shameful Vietnamese self, she worked harder and harder to re-brand her identity. Even her own mother caught on quickly to how to lean towards Whiteness, disclaiming the very name she gave her own daughter at birth. These Asian-to-White comparisons became evident with Tien's first crush.

At age 11, I saw so little value in myself that I deflected the attention of a boy, whom I liked in class. He was blond with pale skin and light blue eyes. Mine were almost as black as my hair, and my hair and skin the same brown as native kids, which I learned hadn't much value. We secretly liked each other, but I didn't think I was good enough for him or deserved his affection. My dark hair and complexion were all wrong. I thought the blond girls in class were a more appropriate match. I thought he would soon see the logic. (Interview, June 25, 2019)

From such an early age, Tien assumed that her physical presentation was not worthy enough for a White boy.

After a few years, her family moved to a larger town because her mom could not find work. She dreaded the process of making new friends and having to endure the teasing and bullying all over again. Settling into the new town was somewhat easier. She was already fluent in English and accustomed to western life. Six months later with still no work for mom, they moved to Toronto—another move Tien dreaded because she had already made good friends.

However, with the diversity of a big city,

things in Toronto were different, people were different, they were all different, from different places all over the world. In school I had all kinds of friends—Portuguese, Greek, Caribbeans and Asians of all kinds, including many Vietnamese refugee kids like me. But by that time, I had succeeded in convincing myself that White was best. It didn't matter that the other kids were from different places, Vietnamese was still least desirable.

So I held firm to my mantra: If I couldn't be White, at least I didn't have to be Vietnamese. (Interview, June 25, 2019)

As many assumed all Asians look alike or are all Chinese, Tien experimented with the idea of identifying as non-Vietnamese in a Chinese transcultural shift to stretch a bit closer to White acceptance—the appropriation of another Asian race to assimilate towards Whiteness.

When teachers in Toronto did roll call, she purposely ignored the botched pronunciation of her Vietnamese name. Raising her hand previously for correction garnered much ridicule from the kids in class. She found a new strategy: “Waiting until the teacher was finished taking attendance, then approaching her desk to identify myself and say I prefer my English name. It was a relief for us both when she wrote Vicky next to my legal name. Less pressure on us both” (Interview, June 25, 2019). Each year, with every teacher in every class, Tien relived the shame of being a boat person, a Vietnamese refugee, not being Chinese enough, not being White enough, not being deserving enough. While observing her Vietnamese classmates, “the other Viet kids didn't seem to be bothered by this. They spoke Vietnamese with each other. They knew who they were and appeared confident anyway. I envied their self-assurance while I hid my humiliation” (Interview, June 25, 2019). Many high school friends did not know she was born in Vietnam or was a refugee. Later, after everyone graduated and became adults, she spoke more openly about her background. “Oh, I didn't know you were from Vietnam. How come I don't know this about you?” It was such an unloaded response—no teaching, judgment, or ridicule. “I wanted them to ask me why I felt I had to hide it or lie about it. They didn't. I realized this information was so inconsequential to them. It changed nothing in the way of our friendships, and there I was feeling ashamed about it all these years. So, to the old shame added a new shame. The new shame was that I was even ashamed at all!” (Interview, June 25, 2019). After all the

years of working to suppress her Vietnamese background, she could have worked towards claiming it. The years of humiliation had cemented certain thoughts and behaviors that were hard to undo.

When Tien met her children's father at 19, she felt uneasy telling him about her background and how she came to be in Canada. Nothing in his reaction made her feel shameful. This acceptance was significant coming from a White man. But when she met his family and spent summers with them at the chalet with the kids, her otherness was made evident again. They were "small-town Quebecers. Ignorant of other people and cultures. Ignorant of their ignorance. They often made comments about my cooking, some were appreciative, others about cooking smells or eating things that weren't fit for human consumption" (Interview, June 25, 2019). Tien had to relive the shame and humiliation that she hoped was behind her, but this was now also her children's family. It wasn't until Tien moved to New York and subsequently married an African American Brooklyn native that she began to take pride in her otherness. She described him as "a proud Black man. His 'Black is Beautiful' slogan reached the eleven-year-old in me. He may not have understood my self-loathing, but he at least understood self-loathing. With him I felt united in color. I felt safe being me. Slowly I began to reflect and introspect, chipping away at the years of shame I kept hidden" (Interview, June 25, 2019). This fascinating insight led to great self-discovery and supreme understanding. One of the crowning moments was re-claiming her real Vietnamese name during this relationship.

### **Her Body**

Since youth, Tien has been navigating her Asian female body. She disliked her Asian legs. Thick and muscled. They weren't delicate enough, or slim enough, or long enough. Her

mother always disliked her wide flat nose. That insecurity was passed on to her, but it never crossed her mind to get a nose job in the way her mom had thought about it for years yet never got one. She recalled her Vietnamese friend in high school using a wooden clothespin on her nose at night, hoping it would make it thinner and higher, but “I never bothered with that after the first attempt. Mostly I’ve had a positive relationship with my body. Even after two pregnancies. Staying active helps me love and appreciate my body for all that it does for me” (Interview, June 25, 2019). Tien has always been intrigued by her sexuality. Even as a young person masturbating, it was her first sexual revolution—that she could be excited by her own body and give herself pleasure. Intimately, she has been regarded as “the exotic one—a prize for some, an up in status for others. This doesn’t bother me. I enjoy participating in their experience of me. I want to show my unique life experiences, and bountiful culture. I don’t mind being most of my partners’ first Asian girlfriend/wife. I think being Asian brings richness to our union” (Interview, June 25, 2019). Not with school, nor her mother, nor friends and family, but it was with her sexual relationships with men that Tien found her Asian body a positive factor.

The first body-involved work Tien did was at a massage club when she was about 25 years old in Toronto. It was a Chinese establishment. It was a legit massage place—no happy endings or genital massage. The clients were mostly Chinese businessmen. It was an evening part-time job while she took care of the kids at home during the day. She was propositioned by a couple of clients to be their mistresses. The arrangement seemed interesting, but she declined. Years passed as she raised her children and attended graduate school. In 2013, she did some work as a dominatrix in a BDSM dungeon in New York. The work was interesting and pushed her boundaries. This was Tien’s second sexual revolution. These scenarios opened up her



sexuality and she discovered many things about herself through these sessions. She enjoyed this work as

every client had their preferred fantasy. Some enjoyed dressing up as women. Others like being humiliated and called names. Foot fetishes were common. Body worship also. Some liked to be dominated and others preferred to dominate. Clients ranged from professionals to city workers of all ages. Orthodox Jews were common. Money was decent. But the experience was more worthwhile. Some of the sessions were fun and didn't seem like work. Others were down-right laborious and sometimes a little painful. (Interview, June 25, 2019)

During this time, she also began working for a sex club near Manhattan Chinatown. It was marketed as a swingers' club, but single men often came for free sex if they were lucky. The club was "owned by a couple of cold case cops" (Interview, June 25, 2019). Tien was the hostess in charge of greeting the clients and explaining the rules. She also did some pole dancing to entertain the men when they were not getting any action. Cover charge was \$20 for women, \$120 for men. She saw lots of people having sex but "live sex isn't like watching porn. It wasn't pretty most of the time. Men, women, and couples propositioned me for sex but that I also declined" (Interview, June 25, 2019). In these professional sexual spaces, she found herself to be relatively safe and in control. She earned a significant amount of money, knew she could quit at any time, and had the power to accept or decline sexual invitations.

Tien's most recent foray into sex work, and the final stage of her sexual revolution, was opening up her own Tantra massage practice. She created a website, offering sensual massage without happy endings or other sexual acts.

Most clients were men. Some were couples. Most men were touch-deprived. Many were married or in committed relationships. Some had erectile dysfunction. Others had premature ejaculation. Some had been abused as children. It was therapy for many and a sexual release for others. I did chakra openings, taught them meditation and visualization, deep breathing—the many aspects of yoga. Clients came to my home studio in Brooklyn. Professionals and common folk alike. Many became regulars. Orthodox Jews were also common. (Interview, June 25, 2019)

Work was consistent and became exhausting as it depleted her energetically. Seeing 6-10 clients per week was draining and more than enough money than she needed.

As Tien reflected on her relationship with her body today, she said that she has “always felt desires and sexy, even more now as I’m approaching fifty. What minimal body issues I had before are mostly nonexistent now. My husband loves my body. He tells me often. Sometimes I wish for a flatter stomach, but it’s not an obsession. Men—young and old—still make eyes at me” (Interview, June 25, 2019). Oftentimes, women’s security about their own body is dependent on the male gaze, but with Tien, by having White and non-White men in her intimate life, and control over all kinds of men in her professional life, she has developed extraordinary confidence over her body.

### **Her Representation**

Thinking back on her schooling, there was no exposure at all to Asian stories in Tien’s education. Worried about her own daughter’s development, Tien said that “it hasn’t occurred to me that stories could and should have Asian female protagonists until my daughter was born.... Not until after my children were born I thought about writing books for children with Asian lead characters” (Interview, June 25, 2019). Until then, she did not question the status quo. Had she been exposed to books, films, and art created by Asians in her youth, it would have definitely changed her educational outcome. According to Pew Research (2017), the Asian population in the United States has grown 72% since 2000 and accounted for 20,416,808 of the population in 2015, yet there is still almost no thorough or committed content in K-12 and undergraduate curriculum. Tien could not identify with “Robert Davies and Anton Chekov literature in high school, neither Shakespeare nor the World Wars which they were taught” (Interview, June 25,

2019). Asian American studies or literature-exclusive courses are only usually accessible in expensive liberal arts universities.

With almost no representation of Asians in the school curriculum, Tien remembered *The Joy Luck Club*. Reflecting back 25 years, she said, “I didn’t read the book but I understood it was a breakthrough in cinematic storytelling. Asian females. Mothers and daughters. Asian and Asian Americans stories intertwined. Finally the public, and us Asians, got a glimpse of our lives on the big screen. It was supposed to change Hollywood. But it didn’t” (Interview, June 25, 2019). This narrative was supposed to emphasize “women’s rebellion against social restrictions and her subsequent economic and social triumphs over the catastrophic events that perpetually threaten her survival,” but it became a universal Asian womanhood hyper-identification (Davé et al., 2005, p. 138). Generations of mass suffering of Chinese communism, viruses, and global political conflict were the backdrop of misery that shadowed Asian women. In other words, “these women have become representative of universal and depoliticized notions of history, trauma, geography, migration, family, and home” (p. 140). The discourse of victimization and the status of the Vietnam War in the American imagination allowed Vietnamese voices to attain a certain limited stature in American discourse (Nguyen, 2002, p. 28). As a child of the Vietnam War, Tien does not want to continue the renditions of famine and fleeing. Through her sexual revolution, she is choosing triumph. As an adult, Tien has enjoyed many great Asian books and films. Some of her suggestions are:

- *Waiting* by Ha Jin
- *Balzac and the Little Seamstress* (both novel and film by Dai Sijie)
- *In The Mood For Love* (a film by Wong Kar Wai is my absolute favorite)
- *The Scent of Green Papaya* by Tran Anh Hung

- *The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen
- *Red China Blues* by Jan Wong
- *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck

Although Tien realizes there are more Asian stories and cinema available now than when she was growing up, they are often still “renditions through the White lens” (Interview, June 25, 2019). With the recent hype of *Crazy Rich Asians*, “it irked me to watch it. It pained me to see how stories, especially when given this much attention as was this movie, have been reduced to nothing more than Hollywood clichés. The evil mother-in-law, the smart handsome son, the poor bride-to-be, the cast of cliché supporting characters, the over-the-top extravagance” make it interpretable as a modern-day ethnic Cinderella (Interview, June 25, 2019). There must be other ways for modern Asian narratives to connect with today’s less discerning audiences without resorting to trends and stereotypes. When asked about an Asian female that Tien found reflection in, Lucy Liu is still the only Asian American female reference for most people. Tien spoke of underrepresentation, that it’s “not just in numbers, but also in variety. Our stories have mostly fallen within conventional boundaries, as if portraying real lives and real stories would dishonor our community and reduce us to the ‘lesser’ cultures” (Interview, June 25, 2019). There will always be trends and stereotypes, but when it becomes high-stakes representation and profit, the storyline is predictable.

## **Iris**

### **Her Story**

After several weeks of fizzled communication and connections, I was brainstorming ideas on how to find the final participant. Knowing the story of Emma and Tien, I was searching for a

specific example to make my exploration of Asian American female sex workers more complete. Perhaps a young stripper, or a mail-order bride, or an overseas war story, or a Southeast Asian. But in reality, I had to get what I could find. I posted a Craigslist ad about an Asian American female sex worker study group, to which two women responded. However, only one of them followed up again, and that was how I found Iris. She has been a consistent communicator, always timely and cordial with her emails. I was worried that since this was an undocumented paid yet informal exchange, would she stay committed through the entire process? What if she lies about her entire story just for the quick cash? Is getting money while talking about her sex work experience also considered sex work? But as each exchange continued, I found my experience with her to be especially interesting, as she was a mysterious stranger.

Iris identifies as an Asian American female. Her ethnicity is Chinese; her parents are from the northeast area of China and came to the United States in the 1980s. They met in California where she and her sister were raised. Growing up in Orange County, where half of the city's population is Asian, she said, "I never really felt any confusion or dysphoria towards my identity" (Interview, July 26, 2019). Growing up with such a large Asian community, she never noticed if being Asian affected any of her relationships. As she never felt marginalized or minoritized in her childhood spaces, she has an unexpected view on cultural appropriation. "I tend to have the opposite view than some of my fellow Asian American friends, as I don't believe cultural appropriation is bad most of the time. Of course, if someone is being rude or insulting about anything, then there should be an issue. But when non-Asian girls wear qipaos or kimonos, I don't see anything wrong with it. In fact, I actually enjoy the cultural sharing" (Interview, July 26, 2019). Iris grew up not worrying about finances. Her family is an upper middle-class family with a household income in the "top 2% of the United States" (Interview,

July 26, 2019). Her seemingly stable childhood would make one wonder why she needed to pursue sex work, as sex work connotation is usually the poor girl's way out of a desperate situation.

### **Her Body**

Iris described her physical appearance as resembling that of a stereotypical Asian female body. She is slim, petite, and light-skinned. She has long black hair with bangs and an “innocent” face (Interview, July 26, 2019). She currently attends a top design school in New York City, one filled with many wealthy students. Although she grew up with affluence, “my school is a whole new level. Many students have CEOs, factory owners, and other influential people as parents. Casually purchasing the newest Jacquemus purse or spending two hundred dollars on sushi is no problem for them” (Interview, July 26, 2019). She believes that the wealth gap between the ultra-rich and slightly less rich in the school created the trend among the less wealthy, which is signing up for a Seeking Arrangements account. In the beginning of the school year, Iris made a profile as a joke. She was surprised to see the variety of messages flowing into it within such a short time. Most conversations with the men were nice, but all of their words quickly led to sexual connotations. She was startled and confused, thinking, “Wasn't this app just for having dinner or something with people? But of course, who would be willing to pay for just that? Maybe if I looked very glamorous or like a supermodel, but that's not the case. I'm just the 'girl next door' who enjoys dressing casually with very limited/natural make-up” (Interview, July 26, 2019). School began to pick up and she did not really pay any more attention to the account while being so busy, but it was always in the back of her mind. Nearing winter break, she started talking to a man whom she actually found attractive, unlike the others. He was “a 32-year-old

Asian male who worked in the Financial District. However, because I liked his face so much, I became self-conscious of myself and thought, ‘This guy could [easily buy] another girl who is much more attractive and sensual than me,’ and so, I stopped replying to him” (Interview, July 26, 2019). She told herself she would never log on again.

But there she was, in the middle of summer, talking to a middle-aged man. He was “a 44-year-old Asian male and liked how I was ‘untouched.’ In that moment, I felt really dehumanized but not surprised” (Interview, July 26, 2019). Because Iris had business experience, she understood the pricing of products. But “I still felt as if I was some car that had never been driven or shoes that have never been worn” (Interview, July 26, 2019). This particular guy also enjoyed the idea of having a “dom/sub dynamic since he believed I would be a ‘good sub’ since I was so ‘pure’ and inexperienced” (Interview, July 26, 2019). She tried to play along with the idea while conversing with him, but it became very tedious and difficult since she never knew what to say.

When Iris was working on a personal financing spreadsheet, despite how lucrative it seemed, she decided she would never again step foot in the sex industry. Even “with the \$100 and \$150 per hour rates (I guess since I wasn’t open to penetration, the guys weren’t willing to pay as much), the income wasn’t worth it” (Interview, July 26, 2019). She would spend hours getting ready, making herself look as presentable as possible. She usually prefers sporty/casual underwear, so she would have to purchase lingerie. Everything became stressful and draining to maintain and “even more so, the emotional baggage and regret that would follow after.... I was not prepared for that” (Interview, July 26, 2019). There was also the risk of contracting some disease because she did not know how honest the men she talked to actually were.

Even though she could now afford more clothes, shoes, and home decor, her main wish-list expense was to study abroad for a winter program in Seoul. Iris has wanted to visit South Korea for 8 years now and her credits would transfer. Given that her curriculum at school was the most intense during her junior year, this was her last chance. As her sex work ended, even though it was extremely profitable, she said, “I don’t think I could ever forgive myself for anything” (Interview, July 26, 2019). She now believes it would have been much more rewarding if she worked hard to make her own money through an online shop or picking up a part-time job. I hope that Iris is now experiencing her South Korea travels and that my payment for this project helped her as one of her “part-time job” options.

### **Her Representation**

When asked about her education, Iris could not recall any significant portrayals of Asian Americans females in her education. “I think maybe there was some story about a Japanese American girl during World War II, but it was a very short description squished into a textbook column. More exposure would have been interesting, but I didn’t actively seek it” (Interview, July 26, 2019). The interesting analysis here is that even though she was part of a majority population in her state, she still was not represented in the classroom—but she did not seem to care. According to Pew Research (2017), one third of the Asian population in the United States lives in California. Most Asian American studies programs, coalitions, and representations are therefore active in California. Having grown up in this environment, Iris did not express any racial angst or displacement. This shows “the importance or relevance of Asian American studies as a discipline and Asian Americanness as a meaningful identity based on anything other than shared racial oppression” (Davé et al., 2005, p. 267). Although California carries the ugly history



of Japanese internment camps and Chinese laborers building the transcontinental railroad, those of Japanese and Chinese descent have had more years to assimilate and therefore have more political and educational presence, re-emphasizing Iris's fairly confident upbringing.

### **Book Club Cross-Case Analysis**

In reviewing the comments the women provided in the "Rules for Virgins" book club, it is likely that this was the first time for each of them that they discussed their sex work in such a setting. Moreover, while the comments with each of the women differed, I could sense an awkward trust as they were all strangers, but also a sense of relief that their situations lived in others all over the country. With this book club, I was not trying to fix them or "out" them. I tried to set the tone as a reflection activity, where any reaction, question, connection, or memory would be wonderful in trying to make some sense of their positionality as Asian American female sex workers. They were all strangers, and the common person was me, so I emphasized an expectation of confidentiality for all of us. I understand they did not completely let go of all their personal details, but based on what I knew of their stories individually, their reactions to certain points of the story were interesting to connect.

In "Rules for Virgins" by Amy Tan, old Magic Gourd is training a virgin courtesan, Violet. This is the first work from Amy Tan after a 6-year hiatus, and it is startlingly sensual in consideration of her previous work as she spares no graphic details. It is set in a hidden world during 1912 in Shanghai. These beautiful courtesans viciously compete for the patronage of rich and powerful men. It is a serious and competitive game of survival, and if planned strategically and played well, they can be set for life. The job expects absolute physical and emotional perfection, with erotic perfection being the greatest challenge. Violet is young and aspiring, but

inexperienced—hence the Virgins. Magic Gourd, formerly one of Shanghai’s “Top Ten Beauties,” provides knowledge of her ancient tips and tricks. She brings lessons of her past alive, from years of manipulating men who did not know it was even happening to them. “Rules for Virgins’ could be considered historical fiction, as these sexual spaces existed and still do. According to Good Reads (2011), by “inviting us inside a life that few writers but Tan could conjure up, the intimate confessions of Magic Gourd add up to a kind of military manual for the War on Sexes’ female combatant. The wisdom conveyed is ancient, specific, and timeless, exposing the workings of vanity and folly, calculation and desire that define the mysterious human heart.” I chose this text because all of the women mentioned *The Joy Luck Club* in their surveys. I wanted to see if the women thought that Amy Tan, a commercialized and well-known author in all communities, represented sex work accurately. This text was also shorter, making it less of an overwhelming commitment for the women.

### **The Asian Woman as Profitable**

Magic Gourd advises little Violet that “you are creating a world of romance and illusion” (Tan, 2011, para. 14). Iris responded by saying, “I feel that this phrase perfectly describes the nature of sex work. Even if there isn’t genuine chemistry involved with the client, workers have to maintain their personas” (Book Club, August 31, 2019). Iris felt that her persona has helped her work, or potential work, due to “certain clients having Asian fetishes and the like. However, I think that my appearance and seemingly docile personality has held more influence” (Interview, July 26, 2019). Fetishizing an Asian woman does not qualify as accepting them. However, this is worth pondering because as much as stereotypes are framing, if a worthwhile amount of money is available, playing up those stereotypes could in turn be beneficial. Are sex workers sell-outs

for capitalizing on their gendered and racial conditions? Texts like these “have one thing in common beyond their various treatments of the shifting and at times treacherous nature of loyalty and allegiance; they all engage realist strategies for storytelling” (Bow, 2001, para. 3569). Emphasizing more conversation around the body as a political message forces the reader to situate their own pain as possible profit, without meaning to sidestep other issues and progress that has made strides. As Iris grew up in a community where being Asian American did not make her a minority, there is a more solid sense of self identification since childhood, even feeling grateful that her Asian-ness has earned her more money. As she was not as displaced for her Asian-ness in her school, she did not have any disruption successfully shuttling this identity into her sex work space.

### **The Asian Woman as Painful**

Emma also responded to this chapter, particularly to this quote, “He asked if our house had a virgin courtesan, and Madam was happy to say she has a new one, fresh, and naive. He was pleased and said he liked a variety of ages, for interest” (Tan, 2018, pars. 11). Emma said that “even though this culture/lifestyle was in the past, I couldn’t help but think of statutory rape and how girls should not have to go through something like this at such a young age” (Book Club, August 27, 2019). Emma did not view this as empowering or economically desirable. The comparison to rape is concerning, as sex work can be interpreted as organized rape hidden in music, clothing, and make-up. Confronting this fantasy as traumatic enjoyment, “these Asian American protagonists assume responsibility for the national unconscious...these narratives as ethical acts of confronting the alien at the core of the nation, and indeed at the core of the human” (Chang, 2012, para. 3735). Students in the classroom find themselves drawn to

narratives of pain as a reassurance of comfort and perhaps it makes their trauma understandable as they heal with the protagonist. Emma's experience of trauma with her body as a child forces many to realize how her experience of sex work, or rather, sex repair, is not from a position of privilege. She was a young child and had no control over consenting to make her body available. As Magic Gourd is preparing the arrangements, Emma connected with the paragraph, "I tell you these things so you can avoid the pain of truth later. Our world is will of temporary promises and guile. It is necessarily so. We are not evil people, this is just how we survive. There are only a few students that separate success from failure. Understand this and you will not suffer from disillusionment as often as I did" (Tan, 2018, para. 157). As the colored female body serves as a vehicle of suffering, these characters could be positioned differently in the English classroom, using the suffering to assert more understanding. It is through these unapologetic stories that healing can begin.

### **Mad at the Madam**

As Emma's connection with the text was more about reclamation, Iris responded with a financial point of view, responding to "But the madam will choose whoever she feels is the best for your defloration, the one who offers the most.... Just remember, the first week is the most profitable" (Tan, 2018, para. 160). Iris said, "In the end, past any emotions and values, the industry is usually just about money. Oftentimes those in desperate or unlucky situations will have to ignore their own thoughts to accommodate for compensation...some men preferred experienced girls. When I answered 'no' to if I had ever participated in oral sex, the guy was no longer interested" (Book Club, August 27, 2019). Iris considered furthering her sex work experiences, whereas Emma was working to recover from it. Emma found it "fortunate that

Violet had such a good mentor to catch her when she falls and to guide her along the way. She's like a big sister to Violet. It's nice to see when women support each other instead of betrayal or shaming" (Book Club, August 27, 2019). However, Tien felt "uneasy about the older woman grooming the young girl for her deflowering, carrying on traditions that view women's bodies and virginity as commodities. It makes me sad that women are taught it's their duty to please men" (Book Club, August 29, 2019). Tien also reflected on her sexual revolution during adulthood, where "a woman only comes into her full glory when she matures. But our patriarchy only values the beauty of youth. And the older generation of women in our society help to upload these values" (Book Club, August 29, 2019). Tien questioned Magic Gourd's exploitation of a young girl even more, wondering why a woman's worth only seems measurable by the pleasure she can bring a man and if their characters ever feel a sense of freedom. From war brides to prostitutes, the Asian American female image and the actual social conditions that fueled them has become increasingly complex (Maséquesmay & Metzger, 2009, para. 124). Her body has become a site of either assimilation or resistance. It is the responsibility of the English educator, who controls story exposure to students, to unlearn, reshape, and redefine bodies.

### **For/Against/Without the Male Body**

The women also had varying responses to men's behavior after transactions. Emma said that "sadly there are still men nowadays that still behave this way" (Book Club, August 27, 2019) as a response to "They give them everything in one night, but the next day those young men are courting another. They want only to trample as many flowers as they can. They compete and brag about how little time it took. They describe the pudendum, as proof he entered her gates" (Tan, 2011, para. 221). While Emma was more appalled by the men's response in

gloating, Iris was more interested in the financial response. She had a reaction to “Now he has the opportunity to offer you more jewelry to your liking. If he says nothing, then that will be the last evening he comes to your boudoir until he offers a suitable form of admiration” (Tan, 2011, para. 262) by saying “it is very materialistic how admiration is determined by the value of gifts rather than actual emotions, but then again, that does go along with how this is all a business” (Book Club, August 27, 2019). When Iris was involved in sex work, she worked hard to stay emotionally disconnected, thinking to herself in her head to “[not] worry, it’s just a character you’re playing, this isn’t the real you...just pretend this is a movie...” (Book Club, August 31, 2019). Iris and Emma were both trying to comprehend their emotional placement after their sex work, but Iris was by choice and Emma was by force. Tien also wondered about the emotional state of the women afterward, pondering “if these characters ever feel a sense of freedom of heart and imagination to explore and discover herself outside the confines of the pleasure house. Does she dream of other things? Want another life? Or are silk and pearls the extent of her wanting?” (Book Club, August 27, 2019). Tien was not concerned about the men’s response, but questioned the female representation. “That a woman should be pleased with fine silks and costumes and jewelry reduced them to soulless beings” (Book Club, August 27, 2019).

As the exchanges are scheduled, the story takes readers into the private spaces that Magic Gourd experienced in her younger years in an effort to teach Little Violet of what is to come. During the scene of hosting a party, Emma responded to “No, he enjoys having a woman take the punishment for him. After all, a little cup is not like a beating. But it weakens her a little, makes her drunk so she loses her calculating ways, especially in the boudoir.... A man should not brag about the size of his stem. He should not make false promises. He should not piss in front of the courtesan” (Tan, 2011, para. 209) with a concern of possible danger: “A man with this mentality

should be handled with caution. He might be capable of more immoral things.... I think these are good basic rules for men in general” (Book Club, August 27, 2019). As Emma responded with more accountability on the man’s part, Iris focused on the accountability of who is supposed to pay. Responding to “My plan is to pay off your debt to Madam in three years or less” (Tan, 2011, para. 251), Iris said, “This reminds me of when trainees in entertainment companies don’t get the chance to debut, so they have to pay off their debt working for the company. Sometimes the darker aspects of this debt also include sex work and other illegal activities” (Book Club, August 31, 2019). Just as Asian American studies are heavily heterosexist, this compares women’s experiences to men’s stories (Maséquesmay & Metzger, 2009, para. 178). With much of the Model Minority rhetoric being centered around work, family, and reproduction, revamping the curriculum should begin to move away from bodies being reducible to just biology or death counts of war. This opportunity can be a new site for investigating how sexed individuals are formed by the male gaze, male colonization, and male maintenance.

### **Not Impressed**

The “intervening slash in Asian/American women is a diacritically awkward shorthand for the cultural, economic, and geopolitical pressures of the continental (Asian), the national (American), and the racial-ethnic (Asian American) as they come to bear on an implicitly more solid gendered ontology (women)” (Kang, 2002, para. 45). The very different reactions to the short story have proven that Asian and/or Asian American women have been profusely represented. I want to push educators to question the collective yet individual inaccuracy of the representation of female bodies in storytelling.

Emma expressed that she overall found

this short story to be several things—interesting, disturbing, educational, and sometimes nauseous. It’s amazing how they have this ‘job’ down to a science. It’s like they have a template on how to behave and entice for many different male personalities. It also made me think on the other gender side, womanizers are like this too and they know what words, actions, etc. to use on females to get what they want. It’s still a bit hard for me to think that at age fourteen or fifteen that girls were being trained for this. I know this was the norm in the past but when I was that age, I thought it was hard enough to maintain good grades in school and deal with mean kids and social situations. (Book Club, August 27, 2019)

Tien’s overall response to the short story was that it reminded her of Arthur Golden’s *Memoirs of a Geisha*, where one’s body is dependent on someone else to be saved (Book Club, August 27, 2019). Iris’s final reflections were that “this story, although interesting, was difficult to read at times. Everything in the business is so calculated and like a blueprint. I think that this is one of the few fortunate sex worker situations as Violet has a determined mentor and a comfortable setting to ‘work’ in. Unfortunately, many others are much less privileged” (Book Club, August 31, 2019). There is no one right way to read Asian American literature; rather, we should practice “disentangling Asian American literature from Orientalist expectations,” establishing a new refined American character and presence that has been long overdue (Wong, 1993, para. 203). This book study has revealed how varying accounts of knowledgeable and conscious Asian American women can begin to disrupt stories that serve as lackluster efforts to include inclusive representation in the English classroom.



## Chapter V

### DISCUSSION

#### **Implications for Practice**

##### **Don't Matter If You're Black or White**

This study offered several implications for practice, specifically implications for English education curricula and pedagogy that often have a binary focus. This study revealed the ways in which current curricula have caused some identities to be dismissed. These issues were proven to be heightened in sexual spaces, as revealed by these three women. These women, of different ages (20s, 30s, 40s) and educational backgrounds, all stated there was absolutely zero representation of Asian American females in any of their school subjects. This American schooling “demonstrates the accommodation to the racist, sexist, and capitalist exploitation of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans” (Nguyen, 2002, p. 3). As the progress of Black curriculum certainly is not without problems, educators should be more mindful of the Black vs. White narrative and the White-washed feminism that is dominating classroom content. As White feminism does not cover all female experiences, Black curricula do not cover all marginalized experiences. The literature that is chosen is a reflection of that teacher’s positionality and sends a message of what certain students are worth. The classroom is a place where educators can push back on hegemonic racial formation in the United States, as “hegemony is the political process by which the dominant class of a society extracts the political consensus of subordinate classes whose interest may be contradicted by that dominant class” (Nguyen, 2002, p. 11). Subsequently,

teachers should invest in inconvenient and uncomfortable texts that go beyond a lazy representation of sexism and racism.

If a particular school district requires a classic reading list, it can still be an entry point. The Shakespearean play *Othello* is packed with themes of sex, love, race, and privilege. Traditional founding mothers like Amy Tan and Tony Morrison are still a voice in the conversation—but not the only voice anymore. *Mulan* should not be cancelled as it is a signifying moment in childhood development. Invite students to question alongside with you and challenge them to find new canons that better represent their evolving generational identity. In the year of 2020, social distancing and virtual schooling have led students to share vignettes of their life on TikTok. The #WAP challenge, #bodyposi, and #thick are just a few hashtags that collect storytelling of the body. These online performances are not paid through money but through “likes.” Study the data of desire from dating apps with students. Invest in social media literacy as sex work stories are multimodal.

### **Don't Matter If You're Chinese or Japanese**

In addition to invisibility in school curricula, the women in this study revealed the preference and dominance of specific Asian representation. Chinese and Japanese have had more years in the United States, more attention in the news, and more success in capitalist markets such as movies and international trade. This panethnic categorization in which all Asians are Chinese or Japanese reveals the American view of Asian-ness. Many scholars overlook the Asian curriculum all together, unless it fits the narrative of stunting American growth, such as the Vietnam War, 9-11, or the COVID-19 pandemic. Asian kids are framed with guilt when they enter an American school. Even Iris, growing up in a country with a population that is 50%

Asian, did not receive any Asian studies in her school. The need for political progress with powerhouse countries such as China or North Korea versus authentic cultural diversity in the entire concept of “panethnic entrepreneurship, with its basis in race as a product or function of economic capital and its connotations of ‘selling out,’ is antithetical to Asian American academic specifically and to Asian American intellectuals generally” (Nguyen, 2002, p. 5). The findings in this study showed that the easy approach to handling stories of race and gender is not meeting the need to build confidence in young Asian women. The Asian American body politic as a term, a formal entity, speaks to the fact that merely invoking the identity “Asian American” erases the distinction between the individual and the collective, gesturing instead to the United States’s long history of treating Asian Americans as an indistinguishable group rather than as an aggregate of individuals—hence inevitably politicizing them and their bodies (Nguyen, 2002, p. 17).

There is a responsibility to pour knowledge back into the teaching community based on the stories uncovered in this research. There is a need to revisit teacher preparation programs to expose subraces within races. Curriculum cannot be satisfactory just because a distinct initiative is checked off a list. Storytelling must be complete. Beyond the slave narrative, beyond the Communist country, beyond the White damsel in distress—we must collectively be better in digging for the underdog stories that were bypassed and hidden, such as the young Asian female protagonist. White readership and White comfort should not be the goal. While the recognition of an Asian American curriculum should not take away from the most marginalized curriculum of Blackness, the effort to explore the multiplicity of representation would bring more sophistication in solidarity.

## **The Body as Literature**

In addition to reproductive rights, there is a pressing need for honest and positive sex scholarship that centers around women's sexual agency as a need for inquiry. The STD unit in health class should not be the only "body" lesson. The body should be a thematic way of reading, writing, and deeper understanding. Since the law reflects bodily practice through the maintenance of White masculinity, Asian American literature can be seen as a way to reclaim the body, bringing out students' attention to unlearn a politicized body, making it a "prime vehicle of narrative [significance] that produces different meanings at different historical periods" (Nguyen, 2002, p. 19). With advances in medical science and social media, people now have more control over the cultural and political definitions of their body, opening up more authentic production, reception, and interpretations. Shifting our relationships with our bodies is shifting our racial significance, and "the cultural (re)signification of the body is thus an important component of body projects in general and racially formed bodies in particular, and within the realm of literature-as-culture the body [will be] of great significance" (Nguyen, 2002, p. 19).

## **Implications for Policy**

### **Invisible Educators**

Asian American female teachers make up 2% of the K-12 teaching population in the United States, whereas 84% are White men and 79% are White women (Characteristics of Public School Teachers, 2020). With the Model Minority identity emphasizing that the Asian American is "a good citizen, productive worker, reliable consumer, and member of a niche lifestyle suitable for capitalist exploitation," some of these few Asian American educators might be tempted to assimilate towards Whiteness to maintain what is already set in place for Asian American

Studies and not cause any unnecessary disruption (Nguyen, 2002, p. 10). As the women in this study revealed, they found more representation in movies, so there is no wonder why Asian storytellers are seeking platforms like social media and Netflix since “we as academics or intellectuals make very little economic capital, *relative* to something like the world of corporations, but this is partially a function of our investment in the idea of Asian America as a place of resistance to capitalist exploitation” (Nguyen, 2002, p. 5). If there are positive forms of Asian representation growing in areas of pop culture storytelling, then educators should bring these forms of media into the classroom.

### **Model Minority Sellouts**

There is an uncomfortable realization that some Asian Americans are appropriating the term *Model Minority* themselves. The ones providing the learning have to unlearn themselves in the classroom space. This is an ironic example of “‘articulate silence’ deployed by Asian American intellectuals and can be witnessed in their adoption of the panethnic strategy in order to attain a greater degree of political influence in the United States’ pluralist system of representation” (Nguyen, 2002, p. 15). With Chinese being the highest population and therefore the highest economic success compared to other Asian subgroups, “promising equality but practicing hierarchy when it comes to dealing with various Asian American panethnic coalitions being built upon an alliance of unequal partners—those who represent are those that are represented” (p. 15). The historical domination of most Asian policymakers has been of Japanese and Chinese backgrounds, causing exclusion when it comes to specific concerns and priorities. It is also important to realize the insensitivity of pan-Asian categorization as many Asian countries have historically had serious tensions. This silence has become a compliance to White-washed

curriculum. Using the Asian American female body to disrupt and then restabilize would benefit in more racial sophistication. There is a clear benefit that the Asian American female body as an opportunity for storytelling would displace “black-white dualism race relations, introducing instead racial multiplicity and the possibility of an Asian American position in American politics and culture” (p. 22).

### **Healing the Bodies of Nobodies**

Deployed as a strategy for colonization, genocide, rape, and expropriation, women of color are specifically devalued within a tiered system of racialized erotic capital (Taormino, Shimizu, Penley, & Miler-Young, 2005, p. 107). Simultaneously desirable and undesirable, it is time to confront the needs of the White male gaze. It is time to re-imagine sex work and colored bodies as a way to understand how pleasure is not equal, to address gender hierarchy and heteronormativity definitions of sex, to flip the power exchange of colonization in the bedroom, and to acknowledge this expression as a re-claiming of identity (p. 10). By alternatively viewing images, consider sexual representation an intervention. Many women’s sexuality has been hijacked by pornography and other ways of capitalist profit, “using it as a symptom of weakness, demonstrating lack of imagination, self-knowledge, and critical judgment” (p. 52). In addition to women having a hand in producing, writing, and directing sex work in media, the English educator can use her platform to host a discussion to re-purpose marginalized bodies.

There will always be a dominant or *hegemonic* sexuality that defines socially approved sexualized bodies (fat or thin, strong or weak, Black or White) and types of sexual partners (e.g., a monogamous relationship with a cisgender same-raced same-religion partner), and approved sorts of sexual activities at appointed times and place (e.g., vaginal-penile intercourse in the

bedroom, out of public view) (Willey, 2016, p. 8). Positioning White male sex as normative automatically condemns the hypersexuality of colored women.

## **Limitations**

### **Socially Distanced Book Club**

The entirety of this experience was digital. The women could not see each other's body language or hear each other's tone of voice. This was a small case study that focused on one educator and three women in a non-educational setting. These three women were in three different locations (Boston, New York, Los Angeles) and varied in age (20s, 30s, 40s). This made it difficult to generalize findings that represent all Asian American female sex workers and all English classrooms in the United States during one specific time period. However, all women, regardless of sex work journey, age, location, or nationality, received absolutely no Asian American curriculum nor representation of Asian American females in their schooling. As not all English educators may be comfortable discussing sex work in their classroom, this study could still push them to examine the content they have been providing in their classroom. As there must be consideration about K-12 censorship regarding sex work content, this journey could begin in college classrooms. If there is an effort to bring forward forgotten identities like the Asian American female, more and more marginalized bodies will benefit.

### **Stranger Danger**

As the women did not know each other, did not see each other's body language or hear each other's tone of voice, and only had one digital exchange on a shared Google Doc at varying times, they probably were not comfortable enough to be themselves and share their sex work

experiences as they did with me individually. The only person they had in common was me, yet even to varying levels. Emma is a friend of my cousin, Tien is a dear colleague of mine, and Iris was a complete stranger I found on Craigslist. As evident in my findings, Tien's exchange was the most detailed and emotionally attached for me, followed by Emma and then Iris. With Emma, I approached the study cautiously as her experience with "sex work" involved abuse and having to reconstruct a painful memory from many years ago. With Tien, I approached the study as a way to rekindle a friendship. With Iris, I approached the study as a simple business exchange.

### **Cisgender East Asian Women**

Although it perhaps provided a simple comparison and consistent factor to their analysis of their male counterparts, all the women identified as cisgender. A possible limitation to this is the privilege that cisgender women hold in leading the conversation on sex work, dominating other LGBTQ+ experiences. Another limitation was that Emma and Iris are Chinese, whereas Tien is Vietnamese. With two of the women being Chinese American, there is a significant amount of history and presence in the United States, making my exploration of Tien's Vietnamese Hong Kong Canadian identity off-balance. Had it been accessible, it might have been more effective to research women of the same field of sex work or the same nationality, as each Asian identity is historically unique. For example, a study of all cisgender Thai American sex workers in massage parlors only might provide more specific results, as would accessing strippers only but of several different races.



## Suggestions for Future Research

### Asian Male Sex Workers

Feminist rhetoric goes back and forth on how much the male voice should be involved, but males in the sex work industry are a minority. Men are usually implied to be the client or the viewer. “Pornography programs men’s sexual instincts and can have only one possible trajectory—to ever more encounters with sexually explicitly imagery and towards more and more ‘extreme’ material” causing them to become desensitised in their own relationships (Taormino et al., 2005, p. 53). Many studies surround the emasculation of the Asian American male on screen where

the perception of asexuality, effeminacy, and queerness...is met with a demonization of difference and the valorization of severely constrained genders and sexualities. The understanding of Asian American female hypersexuality as a companion to Asian American male hyposexuality would describe the female as the one in an empowered position over the disadvantaged Asian American male. (Shimizu, 2020, p. 3)

While African American and Asian American masculinities differ in certain contexts, they both share the concern of their manhood already being assigned, with the hypersexuality of Black men (big dicks) and the hyposexuality of Asian men (small dicks). Both deviate from normal sexuality—that of being White men (normal dicks).

It is our responsibility as English educators to re-examine our texts and realize we might be continuing to reproduce these limits in how students see themselves in the mirror. In classrooms, bring attention to the history of the Asian male body in the United States, as laborers who built the transcontinental railroad but were forbidden to ride it, to the phenomenon of martial arts in filmmaking. How we experience gender should not be measured by how Asian men beat up other men. The Asian American male body is a location of “racial wounding, gender

grief, and sexual problems falling short of the norm...where the identification becomes of castration becomes a rally cry for changing and protesting hurtful images that lead, when unwatched, a seduction by patriarchy and heteronormativity” (Shimizu, 2012, p. 4). Future directions for my research will provide support for the overall Asian American community, to better understand varying experiences that are not just my own, and to provide better visibility to educators, policy holders, students, and their families.

### **Survival Sex Workers**

Another prospect of research that will broaden the culture of sex work representation is investigating survival sex work. Given that two of the women in this study voluntarily sought out sex work for recreational and experimental factors, this shows how some identities have more access to sexual freedom and exploration. Many spaces of survival contain unbelievable working conditions, safety concerns, and illegal measures. As this has been the preferred way to represent sex work in popular culture to frame women of color, it is vital to acknowledge socioeconomic variants and classist restraints. There has been segregation within the sex work community where White women can practice sexual exploration in relatively safe spaces (swingers), and Asian women can practice their sex work in hidden private spaces (massage parlors), whereas Black and brown women are more visible in public spaces (strip clubs). Future research will identify instances of resistance and reclaiming of ownership in survival sex work environments.

## **Conclusion**

This research has only re-emphasized the invisible identity I have experienced as a daughter, student, educator, and lover. It is not surprising, given the historical way that the Asian female body has been used to feed dominant racial hatred in America. Bodies of color are fetishized yet feared. The existence is fleeting. In order to gain control over centuries of misrepresentation, many Asian American feminist writers are now working to counter the consequences of their representation. The status of Asian American female bodies is changing, and I feel privileged to be able to use my educational platform to invest in this change. I invite my colleagues and students to join this liberation beyond the simple questioning of gender, racial, sexual, and, now, body normativity in how we read the world. You are enough, in the classroom and in the bedroom.

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## Appendix A: Introduction Questions

1. Do you identify as an Asian and/or Asian American female? May you provide any details of your identity? What has been your journey or positionality with this? This could be family history, stories of immigration, a community you are in, or situations in which you have defended or been offended by this labeling.
2. What has been your exposure to Asian American females being included in the curriculum in your education? Perhaps it was briefly addressed regarding a war in history class, or a book was read in your English course, etc. What was your experience with this (or lack of this)? Did it/would it have change(d) your educational outcome?
3. What are your thoughts on the storytelling of Asian American females via books, movies, media, etc? Is there a particular story/movie you like (or dislike)? Is this something you seek when choosing a book/movie? What are your thoughts on the representation of Asian American females out there?
4. How has being an Asian American female affected your relationships (personal, professional, or intimate)?
5. Do you feel that you are in an Asian American female “body” and has that affected you? Any experiences? Have any of the areas from the questions above (but not limited to) affected your relationship with your body, sexual journey, or body politics issues?
6. May you share your “sex work” experience? Who/What/Where/When/Why - or whatever you are comfortable with...
7. What hopes do you have for Asian American females in the future?
8. *Please leave any further thoughts or questions below!*



## Appendix B: Craigslist Post

Title: Asian / Asian American Female Sex Worker Needed for PAID DISCUSSION Focus Group (not for “services”)

Location: Anywhere USA (Dallas/Fort Worth preferred)

Description:

Graduate studies is seeking Asian and/or Asian American Female Sex Workers to participate in a focus group study. This is not for your “services” but for your story. Participants must be:

- 18 years or older.
- Identify as an Asian and/or Asian American Female.
- Have experience in “sex work” which includes (but is not limited to):
  - stripper
  - massage
  - mail-order bride
  - arranged marriages
  - geisha
  - comfort woman
  - military sex work
  - prostitution
  - pornography
  - peep shows
  - Internet cams / webcam model
- Your privacy is protected. If chosen, a confidentiality agreement will be signed.
- The participation includes:
  - questionnaire
  - reading a short story (about 20 pages)
  - video interview
- Compensation \$150 via your payment preference (PayPal, Cash App, Venmo, Zelle, etc.)
- Everything done online from the comfort of your own home!

## Appendix C: Google Form

### Asian and/or Asian American Female Sex Worker Focus Group

\* Required

Email address \*

Your email

Preferred Name: \*

Your answer

Age: \*

Your answer

Location: \*

Your answer

Asian and/or Asian American Identification: \*

Your answer

Briefly Explain Your Sex Work Experience: \*

Your answer

Submit

## Appendix D: Glossary of Terms

### **9-11**

September 11, 2001: the day on which Islamic terrorists, believed to be part of the Al-Qaeda network, hijacked four commercial airplanes and crashed two of them into the World Trade Center in New York City and a third one into the Pentagon in Virginia: the fourth plane crashed into a field in rural Pennsylvania.

### **African American**

- (adjective) relating to Black Americans
- (noun) a Black American

### **Archetype**

a very typical example of a certain person or thing

### **American**

relating to or characteristic of the United States or its inhabitants

### **American Fever**

a “condition” where a foreigner becomes overjoyed by American culture, feeling the need to adapt as best as possible, including desiring large amounts of U.S. currency, wanting a husband/wife who is strictly American, and/or being extremely eager for a green card

### **American Dream**

the ideal by which equality of opportunity is available to any American, allowing the highest aspirations and goals to be achieved

### **Angel Island Immigration Station**

U.S. Immigration Station that functioned as the West Coast equivalent of Ellis Island from 1910 to 1940, enforced policies designed to exclude many Pacific Coast immigrants coming from 80 countries

### **Anglo/Anglo-Europeans**

a White, English-speaking American as distinct from a Hispanic American

### **Arab**

a member of a Semitic people, originally from the Arabian Peninsula and neighboring territories, inhabiting much of the Middle East and North Africa

### **Arranged Marriage**

a marriage planned and agreed to by the families or guardians of the bride and groom, who have little or no say in the matter themselves

**Asian**

- (adjective) relating to Asia or its people, customs, or languages
- (noun) a native of Asia or a person of Asian descent

**Asian American**

- (adjective) relating to Asian Americans
- (noun) an American who is of Asian (in particular East Asian) descent

**Asian American Literature**

the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of Asian descent

**Assimilation**

the process of taking in and fully understanding information or ideas

**BDSM Dungeon**

a variety of erotic practices or roleplaying involving bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, sadomasochism, and other related interpersonal dynamics

**Bicultural**

having or combining the cultural attitudes and customs of two nations, peoples, or ethnic groups

**Biliterate**

a person who can read and write proficiently in two languages

**Biracial**

concerning or containing members of two racial groups

**Black**

a member of a dark-skinned people, especially one of African or Australian Aboriginal ancestry

**Blaxploitation**

the exploitation of Black people, especially with regard to stereotyped roles in movies

**Blackface**

the makeup used by a nonBlack performer playing a Black role

**Boudoir**

a woman's bedroom or private room

**Bourgeois**

of or characteristic of the middle class, typically with reference to its perceived materialistic values or conventional attitudes

**Breed**

(of animals) mate and then produce offspring

**Brothel**

a house where men can visit prostitutes

**Canonize**

place in or regard as belonging to a canon of literary or artistic works

**Capital**

wealth in the form of money or other assets owned by a person or an organization, or available or contributed for a particular purpose such as starting a company or investing

**Castration**

- the removal of the testicles of a male animal or man
- the state of being deprived of power, vitality, or vigor

**Chastity**

the state or practice of refraining from extramarital, or especially from all, sexual intercourse

**Chicano**

(in North America) a person of Mexican origin or descent, especially a man or boy

**Chinese Exclusion Act**

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first significant law restricting immigration into the United States. Many Americans on the West Coast attributed declining wages and economic ills to Chinese workers. Although the Chinese composed only .002% of the nation's population, Congress passed the exclusion act to placate worker demands and assuage prevalent concerns about maintaining White "racial purity."

**Cisgender**

denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex

**Client**

clients of prostitutes or sex workers, sometimes known as johns or tricks

**Colonize**

the act of sending settlers from one country to another to establish a colony with political control over the country

**Colorblind**

not influenced by racial prejudice

**Colored**

wholly or partly of nonWhite descent

**Comfort Woman**

a woman or girl who was forced to engage in sexual activity with Japanese soldiers as part of a system of brothels operated by the Imperial Japanese Army in its occupied territories between 1937 and 1945

**Communist**

- (adjective) adhering to or based on the principles of communism
- (noun) a person who supports or believes in the principles of communism

**Concubine**

(in polygamous societies) a woman who lives with a man but has lower status than his wife or wives

**Coronavirus**

any of a group of RNA viruses that cause a variety of diseases in humans and other animals leading to a pandemic in 2020

**Courtesan**

a prostitute, especially one with wealthy or upper-class clients

**Critical Race Theory**

a theoretical framework in the social sciences that examines society and culture as they relate to the categorization of race, law, and power

**Cunt**

a woman's genitals

**Deflowering**

depriving a woman of her virginity

**Diaspora**

the dispersion of any people from their original homeland

**Dick**

- a penis
- a stupid or contemptible man

**Domesticity**

home or family life

**Dom/Sub**

a set of behaviors, customs, and rituals involving the submission of one person to another in an erotic episode or lifestyle

**Dragon Lady**

a stereotype of East Asian women as strong, deceitful, domineering, or mysterious

**East Asian**

a racial classification specifier used for people descended from the East Asian region which is usually described as consisting of Mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong, Mongolia, North Korea, and South Korea

**Emasculation**

Depriving a man of his male role or identity

**Embodiment Theory**

The thinking that people use their own bodily experience and processes to understand their own emotional experience, and the experience of others; provides a mechanism to understand emotional processing

**Erotic**

relating to or tending to arouse sexual desire or excitement

**ESOL**

English for Speakers of Other Languages

**Estrogen**

any group of steroid hormones that promotes the development and maintenance of female characteristics of the body, such as hormones produced artificially for use in oral contraceptives or to treat menopausal and menstrual disorders

**Ethnic**

relating to a population subgroup (within a larger or dominant national or cultural group) with a common national or cultural tradition

**Ethnicity**

the fact or state of belonging to a social group that has a common national or cultural tradition

**Ethnosexual**

someone who makes a point of having sex with members of races and ethnic groups not their own

**European**

- (adjective) relating to or characteristic of Europe or its inhabitants
- (noun) a native or inhabitant of Europe

**Exotic**

originating in or characteristic of a distant foreign country

**Explicit**

describing or representing sexual activity in graphic fashion

**Feminist**

an advocate of the rights or needs of women

**Feminist Theory**

the extension of feminism into theoretical, fictional, or philosophical discourse

**Fetish**

a form of sexual desire in which gratification is linked to an abnormal degree to a particular object, item of clothing, part of the body, etc.

**Foreigner**

a person born in or coming from a country other than one's own

**First-Generation**

- designating the first of a generation to become a citizen in a new country
- designating the first of a generation to be born in a country of parents who had immigrated

**First World**

the industrialized capitalist countries of western Europe, North America, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand

**Gang Rape**

- (noun) the rape of one person by a group of other people
- (verb) (of a group of people) forcing (a person) to have sexual intercourse against their will with a number of offenders

**Gayborhood**

a neighborhood containing homes, clubs, bars, restaurants, and other places of business and entertainment that cater to homosexuals

**Geisha**

a Japanese hostess trained to entertain men with conversation, dance, and song

**Gender**

- either of the two sexes (male and female), especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones; more broadly denoting a range of identities that do not correspond with established ideas of male and female
- members of a particular gender considered as a group
- the fact or condition of belonging to or identifying with a particular gender



**Green Card**

a permit allowing a foreign national to live and work permanently in the United States

**Harvard University Lawsuit**

*Students for Fair Admissions vs. Harvard* is a lawsuit concerning affirmative action in student admissions filed in 2014 claiming that Harvard discriminates against Asian American applicants in its undergraduate admissions process

**Hegemonic**

ruling or dominant in a political or social context

**Heteronormative**

denoting or relating to a world view that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation

**Heterosexist**

a type of discrimination or prejudice against homosexuals based on the assumption that heterosexuality is the normal sexual orientation

**Heterosexual**

(of a person) sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex

**Ho**

- a prostitute
- a woman

**Homophobic**

having or showing a dislike of or prejudice against homosexual people

**Homosexualized**

behavior or thinking that has been made homosexual in nature, character, or associations; regarded or portrayed as homosexual

**Housewife**

a married woman whose main occupation is caring for her family, managing household affairs, and doing housework

**Husband**

a married man considered in relation to his spouse

**Hypersexuality**

exhibition of unusual or excessive concern with or indulgence in sexual activity

**Hyposexuality**

also known as inhibited sexual desire (ISD), a sexual dysfunction characterized by a lack of absence of sexual fantasies and desires for sexual activity

**Illegal Immigrant**

a person who migrated into a country in violation of the immigration laws of that country, or the continued residence of people without the right to live in that country

**Immigrant**

a person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country

**Immigration**

the act of coming to live permanently in a foreign country

**Imperialism**

a policy of extending a country's power and influence through diplomacy or military force

**Indigenous**

originating or occurring naturally in a particular place; native

**International**

existing, occurring, or carried on between two or more nations

**Japanese Internment Camp**

Established during World War II by President Franklin Roosevelt through his Executive Order 9066. From 1942 to 1945, it was the policy of the U.S. government that people of Japanese descent would be interred in isolated labor camps.

**Kimono**

a long, loose robe with wide sleeves and tied with a sash, originally worn as a formal garment in Japan and now used elsewhere as a robe

**Kinky**

relating to, having, or appealing to unconventional tastes, especially in sex

**Kung Fu Theater**

martial arts movies that appeared on North American television nationwide during the 1980s

**Laid**

slang term meaning to have sexual intercourse with another

**Latinx**

a person of Latin American origin or descent (used as a gender-neutral or nonbinary alternative to Latino or Latina)

**Lesbian**

a homosexual woman

**LGBTQTIA**

lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning), transgender and/or transexual, intersex, asexual

**Light-skinned**

(especially of a nonWhite person) having pale or relatively pale skin

**Locker Room Talk**

a manner of conversation that polite society dictates be held privately, with small groups of like-minded, similarly gendered peers, due to its sexually charged language, situations, or innuendos

**Love**

- (noun) an intense feeling of deep affection
- (noun) a great interest and pleasure in something
- (verb) to feel a deep romantic or sexual attachment to (someone)

**Lust**

- (noun) very strong sexual desire
- (verb) to have a very strong sexual desire for someone

**Madam**

a woman who runs a brothel

**Mail Order Bride**

a woman who solicits or accepts a contractual marriage arranged by an agency or brokerage after a period of long-distance courtship, traditionally by written correspondence

**Marginalization**

treatment of a person, group, or concept as insignificant or peripheral

**Marriage**

the legally or formally recognized union of two people as partners in a personal relationship (historically and in some jurisdictions specifically a union between a man and a woman)

**Martial Arts**

various sports or skills, mainly of Japanese origin, that originated as forms of self-defense or attack, such as judo, karate, and kendo

**Masculinist**

- (adjective) characterized by or denoting attitudes or values held to be typical of men
- (noun) an advocate of the rights or needs of men

**Meat Shot**

a zoomed-in view of genitalia and penetration during a filmed sexual exchange

**Melting Pot**

a place where different peoples, styles, theories, etc. are mixed together

**Microaggression**

a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority

**Middle Class**

- (adjective) characteristic of the middle class, especially in attaching importance to convention, security, and material comfort
- (noun) the social class between the upper and working classes, including professional and business workers and their families

**Migration**

movement of people to a new area or country in order to find work or better living conditions

**Military Bride/War Bride**

a woman who marries a man whom she met while he was on active service

**Minority**

a relatively small group of people, especially one commonly discriminated against in a community, society, or nation, differing from others in race, religion, language, or political persuasion

**Mistress**

a woman having an extramarital sexual relationship, especially with a married man

**Model Minority Myth**

term used to refer to a minority group perceived as particularly successful, especially in a manner that contrasts with other minority groups; often applied to Asian Americans who as a group are often praised for apparent success across academic, economic, and cultural domains offered in contrast to the perceived achievements of other racial groups

**Monogamy**

- the practice or state of being married to one person at a time
- the practice or state of having a sexual relationship with only one partner

**Multiculturalism**

the presence of, or support for the presence of, several distinct cultural or ethnic groups within a society

**Nationalism**

identification of one's own nation and support for its interests, especially to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations

**Native American**

a member of any of the Indigenous peoples of North, Central, and South America

**Nuclear Family**

a couple and their dependent children, regarded as a basic social unit

**Offspring**

a person's child or children

**Old-Fashioned**

(of a person or their views) favoring traditional and usually restrictive styles, ideas, or customs

**Other**

- (noun) a term used to refer to a person or thing that is different or distinct from one already mentioned or known about
- (adjective) that which is distinct or different from or opposite to something or oneself
- (verb) to view or treat (a person or group of people) as intrinsically different from and alien to oneself

**Oriental**

of, from, or characteristic of Asia, especially East Asia

**Page Act of 1875**

This law prohibited the recruitment to the United States of unfree laborers and women for "immoral purposes," but was enforced primarily against Chinese.

**Pan-Asian**

of or relating to all Asian peoples

**Panethnic**

of or relating to all ethnic groups; affecting or embracing people of all ethnic backgrounds

**Partner**

- either member of a married couple or an established unmarried couple
- a person with whom one has sex; a lover

**Patriarchal**

relating to or characteristic of a system of society or government controlled by men

**Patron**

- a person who gives financial or other support to a person, organization, cause, or activity
- a customer, especially a regular one, of a store, restaurant, or theater

**Pearl Harbor**

- a harbor near Honolulu, on the island of Oahu in Hawaii; the target of a surprise attack by Japan on the U.S. naval base and other military installations on December 7, 1941
- any significant or crippling defeat, betrayal, loss, etc., that comes unexpectedly

**Peep Show**

an erotic or a pornographic film or live show viewed from a coin-operated booth

**Penetration**

the insertion by a man of his penis into the vagina or anus of a sexual partner

**Picture Bride**

the practice in the early 20th century of immigrant workers (chiefly Japanese, Okinawan, and Korean) in Hawaii and the West Coast of the United States and Canada of selecting brides from their native countries via a matchmaker, who paired bride and groom using only photographs and family recommendations of the possible candidates

**Pornography**

printed or visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity, intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic or emotional feelings

**Positionality**

refers to the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study, the community, the organization, or the participant group

**Postcolonial Theory**

body of thought primarily concerned with accounting for the political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social impact of European colonial rule around the world from the 18th through the 20th centuries

**Prostitute**

a person, in particular a woman, who engages in sexual activity for payment

**Promiscuous**

having or characterized by many transient sexual relationships

**Protagonist**

the leading character or one of the major characters in a drama, movie, novel, or other fictional text

**Pudendum**

a person's external genitals, especially a woman's

**Pure**

wholesome and untainted by immorality, especially that of a sexual nature

**Pussy**

- a woman's genitals
- women in general, considered sexually
- a weak, cowardly, or effeminate man

**Qipao**

a type of body-hugging dress with distinctive Chinese features of Manchu origin, popularized by Chinese socialites and upper-class women in Shanghai

**Queer**

relating to a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms

**Refugees**

a person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster

**Rape**

- (noun) unlawful sexual activity and usually sexual intercourse carried out forcibly or under threat of injury against a person's will or with a person who is beneath a certain age or incapable of valid consent because of mental illness, mental deficiency, intoxication, unconsciousness, or deception
- (noun) an outrageous violation
- (verb) to rob or despoil or carry away a person by force

**Reproduction**

the production of offspring by a sexual or asexual process

**Scapegoat**

a person who is blamed for the wrongdoings, mistakes, or faults of others, especially for reasons of expediency

**Sex**

- (chiefly with reference to people) sexual activity, including specifically sexual intercourse
- either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and more other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions

**Sex Club**

also known as swinger clubs or lifestyle clubs, formal or informal groups that organize sex-related activities or establishments where patrons can engage in sex acts with other patrons

**Sexology**

the study of human sexual life or relationships

**Sexuality**

- capacity for sexual feelings
- a person's sexual orientation or preference
- sexual activity

**Sexual Abuse**

abusive sexual behavior often perpetrated by using force or taking advantage of another

**Sex Industry**

prostitution and pornography viewed as an industry

**Sex Work**

the exchange of sexual services, performances, or products for material compensation, including activities of direct physical contact between buyers and sellers as well as indirect sexual stimulation

**Southeast Asian**

the countries and land area of Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam

**Survival Sex Work**

- a form of prostitution engaged in by a person because of their extreme need
- the practice of people who are homeless or otherwise disadvantaged in society, trading sex for food, a place to sleep, other basic needs, or drugs

**Slut**

- a woman who has many casual sexual partners
- a woman with low standards of cleanliness

**Statutory Rape**

(in some jurisdictions) sexual intercourse with a minor

**Stereotype**

- a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing
- a person or thing that conforms to a stereotypical image



**Stigma**

a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person

**Strip Club**

a club at which striptease performances are given in front of an audience

**Stripper**

a striptease performer

**Subcultures**

a cultural group within a larger culture, often having beliefs or interests at variance with those of the larger culture

**Submissive**

ready to conform to the authority or will of others; meekly obedient or passive

**Subrace**

- a division of a race
- a second or subsidiary race

**Subservient**

prepared to obey others unquestioningly

**SWANA**

acronym for South West Asia North Africa

**Swinger**

a person who engages in group sex or the swapping of sexual partners

**Tantric Massage**

erotic massage which massages the primary erogenous zones of the body, namely the mouth, the phallus (penis), the vagina, and the anus

**Testosterone**

a steroid hormone that stimulates development of male secondary sexual characteristics, produced mainly in the testes, but also in the ovaries and adrenal cortex

**Third World**

the developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America

**Top, Bottom, and Versatile**

sex position roles during sexual activity, especially between men; a top is usually a person who penetrates, a bottom is usually someone who receives penetration, and a versatile is someone who engages in either or both roles

**Toxic Masculinity**

concept used in academic and media discussions of masculinity to refer to certain cultural norms that are associated with traditional stereotypes of men as socially dominant along with related traits such as misogyny and homophobia

**Transnational**

extending or operating across national boundaries

**Upper Class**

- the social group that has the highest status in society, especially the aristocracy
- relating to the group that has the highest status in society

**Venereal**

- relating to sexual desire or sexual intercourse
- relating to venereal disease

**Victimization**

the action of singling someone out for cruel or unjust treatment

**Vietnam War**

a conflict, starting in 1954 and ending in 1975, between South Vietnam (later aided by the United States, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, and New Zealand) and the Vietcong and North Vietnam

**Virginity**

the state of never having had sexual intercourse

**War Bride/Military Bride**

a woman who marries a man whom she met while he was on active service

**Webcam Model**

a video performer who is streamed on the Internet with a live webcam broadcast, performing erotic acts online such as stripping, masturbation, or sex acts in exchange for money, goods, or attention

**White**

belonging to or denoting a human group having light-colored skin (chiefly used of peoples of European extraction)

**Whore**

- (noun) a woman who has many casual sexual encounters or relationships
- (noun) a person who is regarded as willing to do anything to get a particular thing
- (verb) (of a woman) to work as a prostitute
- (verb) (of a man) to use the services of prostitutes
- (verb) to debase oneself by doing something for working motives, typically to make money

**Women of Color**

a phrase used to describe female people of color; originally surfaced in violence against women movement, now referring to all women experiencing multiple layers of marginalization within race or ethnicity as a common issue

**Xenophobic**

having or showing dislike of or prejudice against people from other countries

**Yellow**

having a naturally yellowish or olive skin (as used to describe Chinese or Japanese people)

**Yellow Face**

makeup used by a non-East Asian performer playing the role of an East Asian person

**Yellow Fever**

a term usually applied to White males who have a clear sexual preference for women of Asian descent

**Yellow Peril**

- (in historical contexts) the alleged danger that predominantly White Western civilizations and populations could be overwhelmed by Asian peoples
- Asian peoples regarded as presenting such a danger

## Appendix E: Suggested Readings

*Aspara Engine* by Bishakh Som

*Breast and Eggs* by Mieko Kawakami

*Chemistry* by Weike Wang

*Comfort Woman* by Nora Okja Keller

*Dear Girls: Intimate Tales, Untold Stories and Advice for Living Your Best Life* by Ali Wong

*Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows* by Balli Kaur Jaswal

*Fantasy* by Kim-Ahn Schreiber

*Girls Burn Brighter* by Shoba Rao

*Good Talk: A Memoir in Conversations* by Mira Jacob

*How to Pronounce Knife* by Souvankham Thammavongsa

*It's Not Like It's a Secret* by Misa Sugiura

*Marriage of a Thousand Lies* by SJ Sindu

*Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee

*Sour Heart* by Jenny Zhang

*The Buddha in the Attic* by Julie Otsuka

*The Kiss Quotient* by Helen Hoang

*The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri

*The Rape of Nanking* by Iris Chang

*To All the Boys I've Ever Loved* by Jenny Han

*Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self Delusion* by Jia Tolentino