United States & beyond – From colonialism to Covid: Viet Thanh Nguyen on the rise of anti-Asian violence

Saturday 3 April 2021, by NGUYEN Viet Thanh (Date first published: 3 April 2021).

Anti-Asian racism is on the rise around the world. The Pulitzer-winning author reflects on his own experiences as a Vietnamese American – and the dark history that continues to fuel the current hate.

On 16 March eight people were killed in Atlanta, Georgia, by a 21-year-old white man: all but one were women, and six were Asian. The shootings take their place in a much longer story of anti-Asian violence. The Covid pandemic has given us a particular insight into this phenomenon: verbal and physical assaults against Asians have accelerated in the US over the last year, with 3,800 documented incidents involving spitting, knifings, beatings, acid attacks – and murder. The majority of the victims have been women.

Though the Atlanta killings took place in Asian massage parlours, the shooter has said he did not target the women because of their race. Instead, he claimed to be a sex addict bent on "removing temptation". Regardless of his denial – whether it is a lie or self-deception – it is obvious that he targeted these women because they were Asian. "Racism and sexism intersect," says Nancy Wang Yuen, a sociology professor. This intersection has been a driving force in western attitudes towards Asia and Asian women, who are routinely hypersexualised and objectified in popular culture.

Ever since Puccini's 1904 opera *Madame Butterfly,* which inspired the hit 1989 musical *Miss Saigon*, Asians have been portrayed in romantic terms as self-sacrificing women who prefer white men to Asian men, and who willingly die for the love of white men. A more brutal version of this orientalist fantasy is found in many American movies about the war in Vietnam. Perhaps the most striking example is Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* of 1987. Young US Marines arriving in Vietnam are immediately greeted by a Vietnamese sex worker who sashays before them, saying: "Me so horny." That line was turned into a massive hit by 2 Live Crew in 1989, and a generation of Asian American women would be subject to hearing it, along with "me love you long time", over and over.

Underneath the sexual objectification of Asian women lurks something much more threatening, as Kubrick made clear by the end of the movie, when the Marines are picked off by a sniper. When they finally capture the shooter, they discover she is a Vietnamese teenager. The movie concludes with the Marines surrounding her, and though only one of them pulls the trigger, it is clear this is a gang killing. The Asian woman, who began as a sexual temptation, ends as a mortal threat that must be eliminated by young men trained in boot camp to march with their rifles on their shoulders while they clutch at their crotches, chanting: "This is my rifle, this is my gun, this is for fighting, this is for fun."

Kubrick clearly understands that war, in the masculine imagination, is erotic. The novelist Larry Heinemann understood that, too. Reading his novel *Close Quarters* as a boy, I was shocked by a

scene in which American soldiers gang-rape a Vietnamese sex worker whom they only call Claymore Face because of her acne scars. Immediately afterwards, the soldiers go to battle against their Vietnamese enemies. Heinemann wanted to disturb his readers because war, which he experienced as a combat soldier, is disturbing. In *Close Quarters*, idealistic young men go to war and become monsters.

"The US is a colonising country. The difference is that Americans call their colonialism 'the American Dream'"

My novel *The Sympathizer* is the story of "a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces", whose task in 1975 as a communist agent is to flee with the remnants of the South Vietnamese army to the US and undermine efforts to recapture Vietnam. In writing it, I too wanted to question noble fantasies of heroism and war, to show that they are inseparable from cruelty and hatred – to force the reader to see what patriots and politicians too often deny.My aim was to attack an American exceptionalism that pretends that it has nothing to do with European-style colonialism. But the US is a colonising country. The difference is that Americans call their colonialism "the American Dream".

So when it comes to the American fetishisation of the Second Amendment, let's destroy the myth that the right to bear arms is simply about fighting off tyrants real or imagined. As I wrote in *The Sympathizer*, "nothing was more American than wielding a gun and committing oneself to die for freedom and independence, unless it was wielding that gun to take away someone else's freedom and independence." How else to characterise the founding of the US, built on land stolen from Native peoples?

Bearing arms was crucial for European settlers in their violent colonisation of the so-called New World, and for American settlers as they conquered the west, all the way to California. According to the historian Richard Slotkin, American mythology casts white settler violence as "regenerative", versus the "degenerative" violence of Native peoples, enslaved black people, and their descendants. In this mythology, a black man with a gun is a threat, even if it is only a 12-year-old black boy with a toy gun, as in the case of Tamir Rice, killed by police. A white man with a gun – coloniser, settler, cowboy, soldier, or cop – is a hero.

My parents and I fled from the war-torn Vietnam depicted by Kubrick and came to the US, where it did not take long for us to encounter guns. My parents opened a Vietnamese grocery store in San Jose, California, in the late 1970s, where they were shot in their store one Christmas Eve. Flesh wounds, fortunately. A few years later, a gunman pushed his way into our house and pointed a gun in all our faces. I remember that the barrel was thin and long. My father and I did as we were told and knelt. My mother saved us all by running past the gunman and into the street, screaming for help.

There is a long history of anti-Asian violence in the US. The positioning of Asian Americans as a model minority since the 60s – in other words, as desirable neighbours, classmates, co-workers and sexual partners – has masked the latent anti-Asian feeling that has existed in this country as long as there have been Asian immigrants and Asian Americans.

I write from Los Angeles, where, in 1871, 19 Chinese men were massacred by an armed mob of hundreds. Throughout the American west of the 19th century, Chinese immigrants were targeted for murder, beatings and violent evictions. They had been brought to the US to help build the transcontinental railroad, but when their usefulness was over, newspapers and politicians stoked white working-class fear of Chinese economic competition; the result was violence. This climaxed in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. This act was prefaced by the 1875 Page Act, which prevented women suspected of low morality from entering the country, the assumption behind it being that all

Chinese women were potential sex workers.

This idea that Chinese women specifically, and Asian women in general, are both sexual temptation and sexual threat, to be used or to be punished, or both, seems directly connected, a century and a half later, to the self-proclaimed impulse that drove the Atlanta gunman to Asian massage parlours. Over that century and a half, with American wars in Asia bringing hundreds of thousands of American servicemen into contact with Asian women, both as sex workers and as brides, "the Asian woman became an object of hatred, and lust, a thing to loathe, then desire, the distance between yellow peril and yellow fever measured in flashes", as the journalist May Jeong puts it.

Yellow peril and "yellow fever" – the fear of an Asian invasion, on the one hand, and the desire for Asian women, on the other – are not exclusively American phenomena. The fusion of these opposites arose through orientalism: as Edward Said argued, British and French colonisers justified their conquest of the east with narratives of oriental inferiority, docility, lust and treachery. Said was mostly thinking about the Middle East and north Africa, of Arabs and Muslims, but these exoticising and eroticising narratives extend to east and south-east Asia. The oriental as Other is a mask that can be slipped on many different people for different reasons.

Before the pandemic, for example, the Chinese in France already felt that they were being racially targeted as victims of crime. During the pandemic, Chinese and other Asians have protested against being called bearers of Covid-19, even adopting the hashtag #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus (I'm Not a Virus). The spike in anti-Asian sentiment has been global. "From the UK to Australia, reports of anti-east and anti-south-east Asian hate crimes have increased in western countries as the pandemic took hold this past year," CNN reports, including a 96% increase in hate crimes against people of East Asian appearance in the UK between June and September 2020. In Germany, where Vietnamese migrant workers were the subject of racist riots in the 90s, there has been a rise in anti-Asian sentiment, verbal assaults and physical threats. There has been harassment, shunning and bullying of Asians in Sweden, and more of the same in New Zealand, Australia and Canada, with women being the majority of the victims in the latter two countries. And these are only the reported incidents.

The pervasiveness of these verbal and physical attacks, triggered in part by Donald Trump and others characterising Covid-19 as the "China virus" and the "Kung flu", suggests a deep well of anti-Asian racism. When I was a child, a couple of my pre-teen classmates were familiar enough with Asian stereotypes to pull their eyes into slants and ask me if I had carried an AK-47 in the war in Vietnam (I was four years old when it ended). During the 15 months I have spent in France over the years I was called *Chinois* by both a black woman and a white woman and mocked with a ching-chong accent by teenagers in Provence, which was more times than I had been called "Chink" in a lifetime in the US.

"Racism and sexism spin like coins, two-faced. With one spin of the coin, we can be the model minority and the object of 'yellow fever'"

In America, of course, as elsewhere, I was bombarded by long-distance racism in the form of jokes on the radio, cliches in the movies and the fear-mongering of politicians. All of this occurred while Asian Americans were also being portrayed as the "model minority" that knew how to study hard, work diligently and keep quiet. *The Committed* continues the story of the man of two faces as he relocates to the immigrant quarters of Paris in the early 80s. The French people of Vietnamese descent that I spoke to mostly agreed that the French, as a whole, liked them because of these qualities. Almost no one discussed the idea that their acceptability was due not only to who they were, but who they weren't: Arab, Muslim or black, the usual targets of French racism.

Asian acceptability has always been contingent, whether we are the model minority in the US or the

"good immigrant" in the UK. Racism and sexism spin like coins, two-faced. With one spin of the coin, we can be the model minority and the object of "yellow fever". With another spin, we can be the Asian invasion and the yellow peril. The French who colonised Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were just as prone to these fevered fantasies as the Americans.

The ease with which "racist love" can turn to "racist hate" for an Asian minority or the Asian colonised is mirrored, in the terms of writer Frank Chin, in the way that Europe and the US have often looked to Asia as the source of wealth and danger. Take the American attitude towards China. In the 19th century, China was the ultimate goal of American expansionism; now that it is not so much a country to be exploited but a major competitor, the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations have adopted a consistent anti-China stance.

Positioning China as America's No 1 threat will inevitably produce anti-Chinese feeling. And since many Americans – and Europeans – cannot tell the difference between Chinese and other Asians, all Asian Americans and Asian Europeans will suffer the consequences. In the US, the most notorious incident of such racist misidentification occurred in 1982 in Detroit, when two white autoworkers beat Vincent Chin to death, mistaking the Chinese American for a Japanese. The autoworkers were upset at Japanese economic competition in the auto industry, a fear stoked by widespread discussion of a trade war with Japan.

The systemic violence of a US foreign policy designed to kill Asians in large numbers, or threaten to kill them, from the Philippines to Japan, from Korea to Vietnam, from Laos to Cambodia, reinforces the domestic, everyday racism and sexism with which many Asian Americans are familiar. The acceptability of microaggressions, racist jokes, casual sexual fetishisation lays the groundwork for an explosion of racist and sexist violence that can be literally murderous.

Calls to stop anti-Asian hate will have limited impact without an awareness of the enduring history of anti-Asian violence carried out in American wars in Asia and European colonisation. The French navy shelled Haiphong in 1946 and killed 6,000 Vietnamese people. I mention the shelling in *The Committed*: "The French saw our shared past as a tragic happenstance of history, a romantic love story gone wrong, which was half correct, whereas I saw our past as a crime that they had committed, which was completely correct." Ironically, many Asians fled or migrated to the very countries that had colonised them or fought wars on their lands.

Following these paths, the gunman's Asian victims came to the US from South Korea and China and found varying degrees of success. A few were working class, a couple were on the lower end of the middle class, with only one – Xiaojie Tan – the owner of her own business, Youngs Asian Massage. Of the two other victims, Delaina Ashley Yaun was a customer at Youngs and Paul Andre Michels was its handyman. Youngs is located in a shopping centre called Cherokee Village, named after the Cherokee people that once lived in Georgia. The American military forcibly expelled the Cherokee from Georgia in 1838 and compelled them to migrate west on what became known as the Trail of Tears, or, as the Cherokee called it, the Trail Where They Cried. More than 4,000 perished.

Yong Ae Yue, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Soon Chung Park, Daoyou Feng and Xiaojie Tan may or may not have known of this history. But when Asian immigrants and refugees come to claim our share of the American Dream, this history is also what we claim. And sometimes this history claims us.

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P.S.

• The Guardian. Sat 3 Apr 2021 09.00 BST: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/apr/03/from-colonialism-to-covid-viet-thanh-nguyen-on-the-rise-of-anti-asian-violence