

Q & A

THE HISTORY OF ANTI-ASIAN-AMERICAN VIOLENCE

The filmmaker Renee Tajima-Peña discusses the Atlanta shootings, the murder of Vincent Chin, and the complexities of Asian identity in the United States.



By Isaac Chotiner

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Demonstrators rally to raise awareness of anti-Asian hate crimes, which more than doubled between 2019 and 2020. Source photograph by Amir Hamja / Bloomberg / Getty

enee Tajima-Peña is a professor of Asian-American studies at U.C.L.A. and an Academy Award-nominated filmmaker whose work has focussed on the lives of Asian Americans, from the racism faced by immigrants in the second half of the nineteenth century to the internment of Japanese-Americans during the Second World War. She recently served as **R**showrunner on the PBS series “[Asian Americans](#).” One of her first documentary films, “Who Killed Vincent Chin?,” recounted the murder of a Chinese-American engineer in Detroit, a case that sparked a national movement for Asian-American rights. The Department of Justice brought a civil-rights case against the killers, the first time that Asian-Americans were treated as a federally protected class.

Tajima-Peña and I spoke by phone on Friday, at the end of a week in which eight people, six of them Asian-American and seven of them women, were murdered at three massage parlors in Atlanta, in what law-enforcement authorities are investigating as a possible hate crime. The past year has seen numerous reports of an increase in anti-Asian slurs and attacks. The Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, at California State University, San Bernardino, recently surveyed police departments in sixteen major cities across the country and found that anti-Asian hate crimes had more than doubled between 2019 and 2020. During my conversation with Tajima-Peña, which has been edited for length and clarity, we discussed why hate crimes against Asian-Americans tend to spike, the ways in which views of Asian-Americans combine racism and misogyny, and what a tense American relationship with China may mean for Asian-Americans.

What did this shooting evoke for you?

The seed of the Atlanta shooting goes back to the [Page Act](#), in 1875, which is the headliner for the Chinese Exclusion Act. That’s where Chinese women were really targeted, because they were seen as prostitutes. Some *did* come in as prostitutes, but it fed this whole idea of the sexualized Asian woman. They were seen as bearers of disease, as were all Asian immigrants. If you look at Angel Island, one of its prime functions was to do these medical tests on new immigrants. Quite a few people, a lot of South Asians especially, were turned back because they didn’t pass. They had hookworm or things that were easily treatable, but it was justification for sending them back.

I think for Asian-Americans, especially more in the contemporary period, it’s in times of national crisis that those fault lines erupt. That’s when the violence spikes, along with anti-Asian hostility and legislation and attitudes. For my family, it was World War Two. I’m Japanese-American. They were all either in concentration camps, or, if they were of age, they were in the U.S. Army.

I made the film “Who Killed Vincent Chin” in the eighties. It was the recession. U.S. car manufacturers were still producing gas guzzlers. The Japanese were selling fuel-efficient cars, and this sent Detroit into a tailspin. There was just this anger directed at Japanese car imports and, by extension, Japanese people and, because “we all look alike,” anybody who looked Japanese. There were new immigrants from Southeast Asia coming in, and there was a lot of hate and violence directed toward them. One of the first mass school shootings was actually in Stockton, California, when Patrick Purdy, who had white-supremacist views, went to Cleveland Elementary School and gunned down five Southeast Asian children on the playground and injured many more. The nineteen-eighties was a really bad decade.

The U.S. tends to—every decade there’s another group. In the nineteen-nineties, there was white men because of homophobic violence. Then you’ve got Muslims another decade, Mexicans. . . .

You are mentioning a lot of different historical trends and events that you see as connected to anti-Asian violence. How much of that is a top-down process where people in charge use this for their own political ends and how much do you see it as organic to the people doing it?

Trump's first "Chinese Virus" tweet was March 16, 2020, and, on the first anniversary, six Asian women were gunned down in Atlanta. You had this year of hatred that really came from the top. After he tweeted that, the anti-Asian posts on social media just completely spiked. When you have the President saying that, it's like racism on steroids. These images or these kinds of messages about Asians have always been deployed politically from the top. It's like this feedback loop in the culture.

The model-minority myth is also something that's been deployed. It actually goes back to the nineteenth century. All of a sudden, you've got all these new people. You've got free Blacks, colonized Filipinos, Puerto Ricans, Hawaiians, et cetera. The tribal indigenous lands have been seized all over the mainland, and then you have all these Asian immigrants coming in, with the first Chinese immigrants. What do we do with these people? Are they Americans? Are they going to vote? Are they going to marry our women? Are they going to go to school with our children?

The answer was really no. It's reflected in the culture. You've got Filipinos displayed as savages, a thousand of them in the 1904 World's Fair. In that case, it was intentional. It was a part of the whole project of scientific racism and the justification for colonizing. The Philippines had "our little brown brothers." They're savages, so they need the protection and the guidance of the United States and justified imperialism. It's not as if every American was for an empire. There was conflict within the public where they asked, *Do we become an empire?* This was a justification for it.

How do you think about the connections between racism and the misogynistic way Asian women specifically are often viewed?

I actually wrote about this, thirtysomething years ago, this idea of the Asian woman as being either the dragon lady or the lotus blossom, with the lotus blossom being submissive, compliant, sexualized, and the dragon lady being evil, conniving, sexualized. That's the common denominator: this hypersexualized image of the Asian woman. It's the parallel to another lasting image of the Asian-American as a model minority or the perpetual foreigner. It's the feminization of that idea.

When you talk about the model minority as well as the perpetual foreigner, it's after World War Two, in the nineteen-fifties and the nineteen-sixties. The Japanese, like my family, in the forties were the enemy, the villain, and, within a really breathtakingly short amount of time, in the fifties, you start to see Japanese-American as the model minority. That's because two things were going on. You see this with Chinese-Americans as well. It was externally the Cold War, the fight against Communism, with the front lines being China and then Korea and then Southeast Asia. The U.S. was selling itself as the beacon of democracy and racial equality, and so Asian-Americans were part of that marketing. "Look, these were our enemies, and here they overcame this adversity and we accepted them." The first Asian-American Mother of the Year was Toy Len Goon. That was 1952. She was the good immigrant. They didn't say anything about her husband actually having come in as undocumented with false papers. She was a widow, and she had worked hard. Instead of going on public benefits, she took over her husband's laundry and raised these kids who went into the military and went to these good colleges and became professionals. The other thing that was going on domestically is the civil-rights movement in the fifties and sixties. Asian-Americans were pushed out as the model minority about whom it could be said, "Look, they don't complain, they don't march, they don't plan—they just work hard."

Looking forward, it seems pretty clear that the United States is embarking on what is probably going to be a decades-long geopolitical competition with China. It also seems clear that negative sentiments will appear on both sides of the American

political spectrum, from Donald Trump to human-rights advocates who are upset about camps in China where a million people have undergone “reeducation,” or people concerned about Hong Kong. How do you think about the need to be critical of the Chinese government while not allowing racism at home to take off?

I think we can hold two thoughts at one time. You can criticize China for its opaqueness with the pandemic. At the same time, to racialize the coronavirus as the “Kung Flu,” I mean, that’s a different story. It’s interesting because in the nineteen-nineties, there was controversy with China about toy imports. Chinese-Americans and Asian-Americans were really reluctant to criticize China. But now you have this dynamic where you’ve got this emergence of this Chinese-American and Asian-American right, and they’re very critical of China. It’s like the earlier waves—the Vietnamese who came right after the fall of Saigon were very conservative, very anti-Communist. Then you have the Chinese immigrants who are very anti-Communist. That plays into this whole world of Asian-American discourse. And, with the Uyghurs, it’s horrendous.

I want to ask about Vincent Chin, whom you made a documentary about. You alluded to that case in your first answer, but can you talk a little bit more about it and why you thought that case was so important?

In the midst of the auto recession in Detroit in 1982, Vincent Chin, an adopted son—the only son—of Lily Chin, a Chinese immigrant, was studying to become an engineer. He was just about to be married. He went out with his buddies to the Fancy Pants, a strip club, for his bachelor party. He encountered two auto workers, Mike Nitz and Ron Ebens. People always say Ron was unemployed, but he was not. He had a great job. Ron was a foreman. There was an altercation, and, by the end of the night, they had hunted Vincent down, and Ron beat his brains out with a baseball bat. This happened in June, 1982. In 1983, Ron and Mike pleaded guilty to manslaughter. Judge Charles Kaufman gave them a three-year probation and three-thousand-dollar fine. As somebody says, it’s kind of like a car payment—three years to pay off three thousand dollars. *[The exact number was \$3,780.]* First, the Detroit Asian-American community and then the whole Asian-American community across the country was just outraged, and there was a campaign for justice. When Vincent Chin was killed, Asian-Americans were not recognized as a legal class in federal civil-rights prosecutions because, again, there was this idea that Asian-Americans are a model minority, had no problems—even though he was killed during this decade of intense anti-Asian violence. That wasn’t the narrative that people knew. The case was a real turning point.

It just really pissed me off when I heard the story. Like a lot of people, I thought, Oh, yeah, he was just minding his own business and somebody snuck up behind him and hit him with a baseball bat. I went to Detroit. I also talked to Ron and his friends and his lawyers. The gray area really was interesting to me because it said a lot to me about how your subjective lived experience really determines how you see these cases. For example, I don’t even see the case as aligned with the civil-rights prosecution, which rested on their racial slurs and this atmosphere of hostility because of auto imports. I think it’s more like Ron’s perception of Chinese-American masculinity. He goes to the strip club, and there’s this Chinese guy. He probably has in his mind, like many Americans, that he’s this emasculated Chinese male, turning the other cheek, compliant, whatever. Vincent was comfortable in multiracial Detroit. He was bantering with the dancers. He was a guy who played football in high school. When their altercation got out to the parking lot at the Fancy Pants, Vincent was kicking their ass. Ron is a big guy, six-two, over two hundred pounds—he hunted Vincent down for almost forty-five minutes. Here’s a guy with a great job, a family, no criminal record. What produced the rage where he would hunt him down, get a baseball bat, in front of witnesses, beat his brains out? I mean, what? Was it this idea that, Oh, Japanese car imports are kicking our ass? I think it was much more visceral than that. I think he was humiliated. All

of that, those layers, really interested me, but, just because things piss me off, what am I going to do? Either make a movie or just take a lot of drugs. Better to make a movie.

Better to make a movie than do drugs.

Yeah. Over the years, I was very troubled by the way Asian-Americans were using that case as grievance and not justice. A goal of the campaign for justice was recognizing Asian-Americans as a legal class, as a minority with a history of institutionalized racism, and hate-crime protections would add additional penalties onto the felony. Today, I think a lot of people are thinking, Is that justice? Is that going to protect us—more policing in communities that are already overpoliced? More prison time for people—is that going to protect us? There's been this convergence over the past year—and even going back before this past year—but really culminating with the death of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests. A lot of Asian-Americans, particularly young Asian-Americans, have really been involved in that movement and in those conversations, even looking at anti-Blackness within our own communities. Young Asians have done all these things, created these multilingual letters that people can give to their immigrant parents and grandparents in all these different languages, to explain the history of African-Americans and their relationship to Asian-Americans. And so, with that convergence, the epidemic of anti-Asian hate but also police violence—in particular, racial violence toward African-Americans and Latinos—people are really thinking about the what: What does it mean? What does the carceral state mean for our communities and mean for solutions and mean for justice? What does policing mean? How are we going to achieve justice? How are we going to protect our communities? And how are we going to do that across racial lines?

My sense is that there is a huge gap in thinking about these issues between activist groups and others, and between young people and older people, and that older Asian-Americans, like older people of all races, want more policing.

Absolutely. Yeah. People want to feel safe in their neighborhoods. If you have a good relationship with the police, then you look to the police for protection. Not all Asian-Americans feel safe. It's a disparate community. I think the identity of Asian-Americans is valid for various reasons within the civil-rights framework. At the same time, we're like this barbell demographic, where on the one hand you have people who are doing really well, going to elite schools. On the other end, you have Asian-Americans who have been left behind. For those Asian-Americans who have been left behind, they have a different relationship with the police. They have a different relationship with admissions and affirmative action, et cetera, et cetera. Asian-Americans are the most disparate population in the United States. In the past fifty years, as the United States has become socioeconomically really polarized, Asian-Americans have been the most polarized. There's a lot, and it's not only ideological.

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*Isaac Chotiner is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, where he is the principal contributor to *Q. & A.*, a series of interviews with major public figures in politics, media, books, business, technology, and more.*

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