

Let Them Not Be Your Ten!

By Ada Cheng

It took me ten years.

In February 2020, I was invited by a faculty member from the Global Asian Studies Program at UIC to do presentations for his Asian American courses. The presentation was entitled "Sexual Assault on College Campus and Asian American Experiences."

This presentation was different for me for at least two reasons. It was the first time that I presented for college classes with predominantly Asian American students. Staring at faces similar to mine hit me viscerally. It was also the first time that I did something very different with my materials.

I started my talk with the following major topics:

- The American colonization in Asia, her military/political interventions in the Asian region, and the United States' racist and imperialist legacy in Asia;
- The constructed images of Asian women as docile, submissive, exotic, sensual, and sexually willing and the sexual fetishization of Asian/Asian American women;
- The historical symbolic/cultural emasculation and de-sexualization of Asian/Asian American men;
- The necessity to center race in sexual assault discourse.

Why is race or why are racialized images central to our understanding of sexual assault? If you are perceived to be submissive, docile, sensual, exotic, and fetishized, is it possible that your objections, even if they are firm, can be disregarded over and over? Is it possible that, if you are perceived to be sexually willing and available, your rejections, even if they are clear and persistent, can be fantasized in a twisted way to mean affirmations?

Immediately after the class, a student approached me and said, "Thank you for your presentation. I really appreciate the way

you approached this topic. You made this material relevant to me and my experiences.”

I knew what she meant. She didn't mean that my presentation was relevant to her as a woman. She meant it was relevant to her as an Asian woman in this country.

Her remark shook me to my core, not only in terms of how I should do training on gender-based violence in the future, but also how I had to re-examine my own sexual assault.

I had to ask myself: Why did I tell the story the way I did? Why did I leave out certain details? And most importantly, why was my identity as an Asian woman never given a proper place in my own public account of the story?

My sexual assault took place in 2010. He was a colleague of mine in the department at a well-known university in Chicago. He was a friend, a progressive faculty, and a comrade: one who would march with women and speak up for us.

Yet he sexually assaulted me despite my repeated rejections. I couldn't even name it as rape until another close colleague of mine named it for me.

I could not reconcile his good man image in public with the violence he committed in private. I am not sure if he was aware of the dissonance either.

I have told this story in public a few times and published it in print since 2016. I left out something important.

I decided not to discuss race in the story to mitigate the stereotyping that might ensue. My colleague is an immigrant man of color, a member of a marginalized community. I left out that detail because of the larger political climate of our time.

In 2015, when Donald Trump came out running for presidency, his campaign relied on demonizing immigrants, particularly immigrant men of color, constructing them as drug dealers, traffickers, criminals, and rapists. I didn't want this to become another statistic contributing to the portrayal of immigrant men of color as the villain in our larger cultural and political landscapes.

Since I didn't name his race, I didn't explore how my own race might have played a part in my own victimization. I have been troubled by my own omission since my racial identity as an Asian

woman has been central in my existence as an immigrant woman of color in this country and my experiences as an immigrant woman of color faculty in academia: in the way my colleagues have dismissed my presence, appropriated my intellectual labor, and discounted my contributions; in the way my students have disregarded my authority as a tenured faculty member; and in the way I have been told to go back to my country and consistently asked where I am from "originally", even after I became a citizen in 2015.

How could race be so salient in all my experiences as an immigrant woman of color, yet so absent at this moment of intimate violation? What other pernicious effects can this erasure of race have?

What I didn't say to students in 2020 is this: Is it possible that, because of these images, developed and constructed out of the American racist, colonial, and imperialist legacies, you will be perceived as a complicitous collaborator in your own sexual assault, not only by others, but also by yourself?

Is it possible that we also come to see ourselves as complicit in the violence against us?

I did, questioning myself in terms of the legitimacy of the rape because there was no brute force, because it was not in the dark alley, because he was no stranger but someone I trusted, because I didn't fight back and yell, because I thought I was trying to salvage a friendship, and because I stayed quiet and let it go afterwards, pretending nothing had happened.

Exactly the same way I dealt with anti-Asian racism early on in my life in this country.

On March 16, a White man murdered eight people in Atlanta, among them six Asian women. In the press conference, the sheriff minimized the violence against these Asian women by labeling it as the shooter's trouble with sexual addictions.

Within one month of my arrival in this country in 1991, I learned a particular form of racial profiling, unique to me as an Asian woman, via this phrase: I like Asian women.

This phrase has been said to me millions of times throughout decades, by men of all races, particularly White men.

The key word here is Asian, not women. Men are looking for a particular set of titillating images and stereotypes in me. I am

not important; the collective "we" that they have been fantasizing is what satisfies their sexual desire.

I am never just a woman; I have always been an Asian woman.

In an effort to protect my perpetrator, I never once asked how my identity as an Asian woman as well as the images based on the racist misogyny in his fantasies might have played a role in his repeated refusals to accept my rejections. I obscured the fact that I had consistently experienced racialized misogyny and sexism from men of color.

Even until this day, I still do not know how to address the harm done to one another within marginalized communities.

I wrote myself, the inseparable Asian woman, out of my own narratives and blended myself within the abstract category of woman.

When you write yourself out of your own stories, there is no story to tell about you or for you.

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