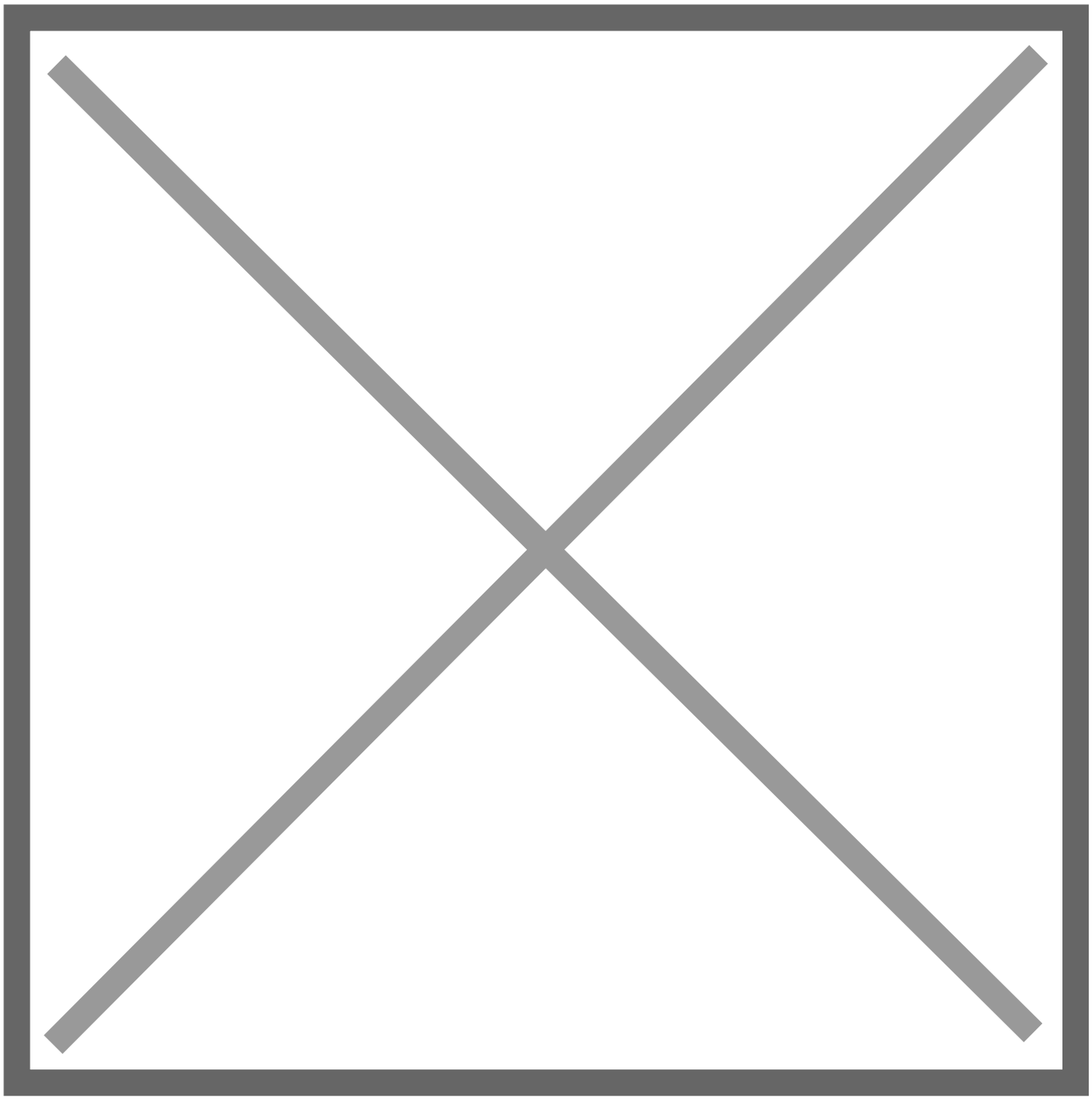
News



People in New York City are seen during a Rally Against Hate March 21, 2021, to end discrimination and violence against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. (CNS/Reuters/Eric Lee)



by Madeleine Davison

View Author Profile
mdavison@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

April 15, 2021
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

When Flora Tang was 14, she was pulled out of class by the principal at her evangelical Christian school. Her offense? Wearing a qipao, a traditional Chinese dress, to class.

"My principal told me that because my dress had a slit … that it might cause temptation to my male classmates, and my teachers," Tang said. "As a 14-year-old, I should have thought, 'Why would my teachers be looking at me sexually?' But instead, I was asked to go change into a T-shirt and some pants."

This humiliating incident was echoed years later in the words of a white man suspected of shooting and killing eight people, six of whom were women of Asian descent, in three Atlanta massage parlors on March 16.

Police said the 21-year-old white man, who is a Christian, claimed he shot the victims, who ranged in age from 30 to 74, because of sexual "temptation" he wanted to "eliminate."

The shooter was acting on a combination of anti-Asian racism, misogyny and Christian theology around sexual purity, said Tang, a doctoral student in theology and peace studies at Notre Dame, in an April 8 panel hosted by Notre Dame's Liu Institute for Asia and Asian Studies.

In a time of escalating racist violence against Asian American people, U.S. Catholics need to look inward at the structural racism and sexism entrenched in the church and in the United States, she said, starting with the church's history of violently colonizing non-European peoples in the name of evangelization.

"We need to refuse our easy tendency to dissociate ourselves from the violence that we've seen in Atlanta," Tang said, "And to really interrogate our own legacy … that perpetuates acts of anti-Asian violence in both really big ways that are lethal, and in everyday ways that harm our own psyche."

Advertisement

Tang and other speakers on the panel, titled "Processing Anti-Asian Violence: A Roundtable Discussion on the Atlanta Shootings," said the massacre had left them devastated.

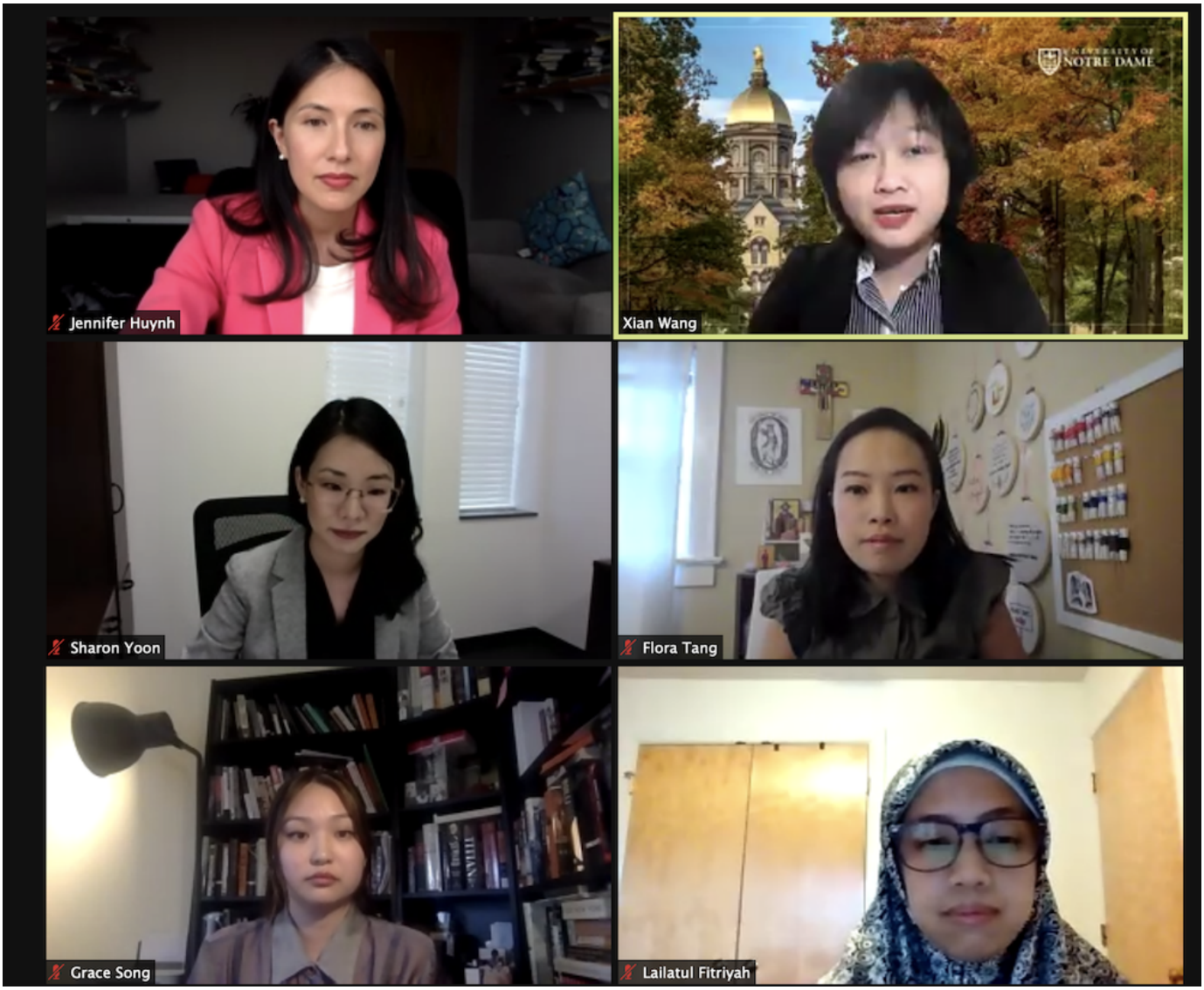
"How can I survive if I cannot become white? What kind of ways of being or survival [are there] if whiteness is the standard of survival?" said Lailatul Fitriyah, a doctoral student in the world religions and world church program at Notre Dame.

Sharon Yoon, an assistant professor of Korean studies at Notre Dame, said mainstream white media humanized the shooter but provided few details about the Asian women victims, instead relying on stereotypical portrayals of them as hard-working, uncomplaining immigrants.

"What made me so upset about learning about these women who were killed, who I felt very connected with, was not just that they were murdered, which was in itself very troubling and difficult to handle," Yoon said. "But also that their lives, even at the very end of this brutal massacre, were not dignified enough that people would pay attention, and try to understand who they were as people."

Anti-Asian violence is deeply embedded in the United States' past and present, said Jennifer Huynh, an assistant professor of American studies at Notre Dame.

For instance, the first major immigration restriction in the U.S. was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Huynh said. This law banned all Chinese immigrants for 10 years and kept Chinese people from becoming American citizens. In 1871, a mob in Los Angeles lynched 18 Chinese men and boys.



"Processing Anti-Asian Violence: A Roundtable Discussion on the Atlanta Shootings" panel discussion April 8, hosted by the University of Notre Dame's Liu Institute for Asia and Asian Studies, included these Notre Dame scholars, clockwise from top left: Jennifer Huynh, assistant professor of American studies; Xian Wang, assistant professor of Chinese; Flora Tang, doctoral student in theology and peace studies; Lailatul Fitriyah, doctoral student in the world religions and world church program; Grace Song, doctoral student in history; and Sharon Yoon, assistant professor of Korean studies. (NCR screenshot)

In the winter of 1899-1900, amid an outbreak of bubonic plague, Hawaii's Board of Health started systematically burning down blocks of Honolulu's Chinatown, a neighborhood with mostly Chinese, Japanese and Native Hawaiian residents. After seeing that the first few victims of the disease were Chinese, white officials targeted

Asian and Indigenous residents for racist violence, claiming they were infected and dirty.

"These are untold histories of structural and systemic violence against Asians … violence against Asians was the means by which European immigrants became Americans in the 1800s," Huynh said.

Huynh also recalled how the U.S. government rounded up and incarcerated over 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II, and how a pair of white men beat Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man, to death in 1982.

"We have this dark and long history of violence against Asian bodies … . These histories have been erased from our public consciousness by the model minority stereotype, which portrays Asians and Asian Americans as successful, hardworking and docile," Huynh said.

The model minority stereotype, she said, is rooted in anti-Blackness and is used to protect white supremacy by driving a wedge between Asian Americans and other communities of color.

Stereotypes can directly influence violence against Asian Americans, panelists said. Huynh said her research on COVID-19 media coverage has found that Asian Americans have more often been depicted in masks or in medical settings (being tested or treated), making them appear foreign and possibly diseased. They are also disproportionately shown in Chinatown, regardless of the content of the story, reinforcing the stereotype that all Asian Americans are "forever foreigners" living in segregated immigrant communities.

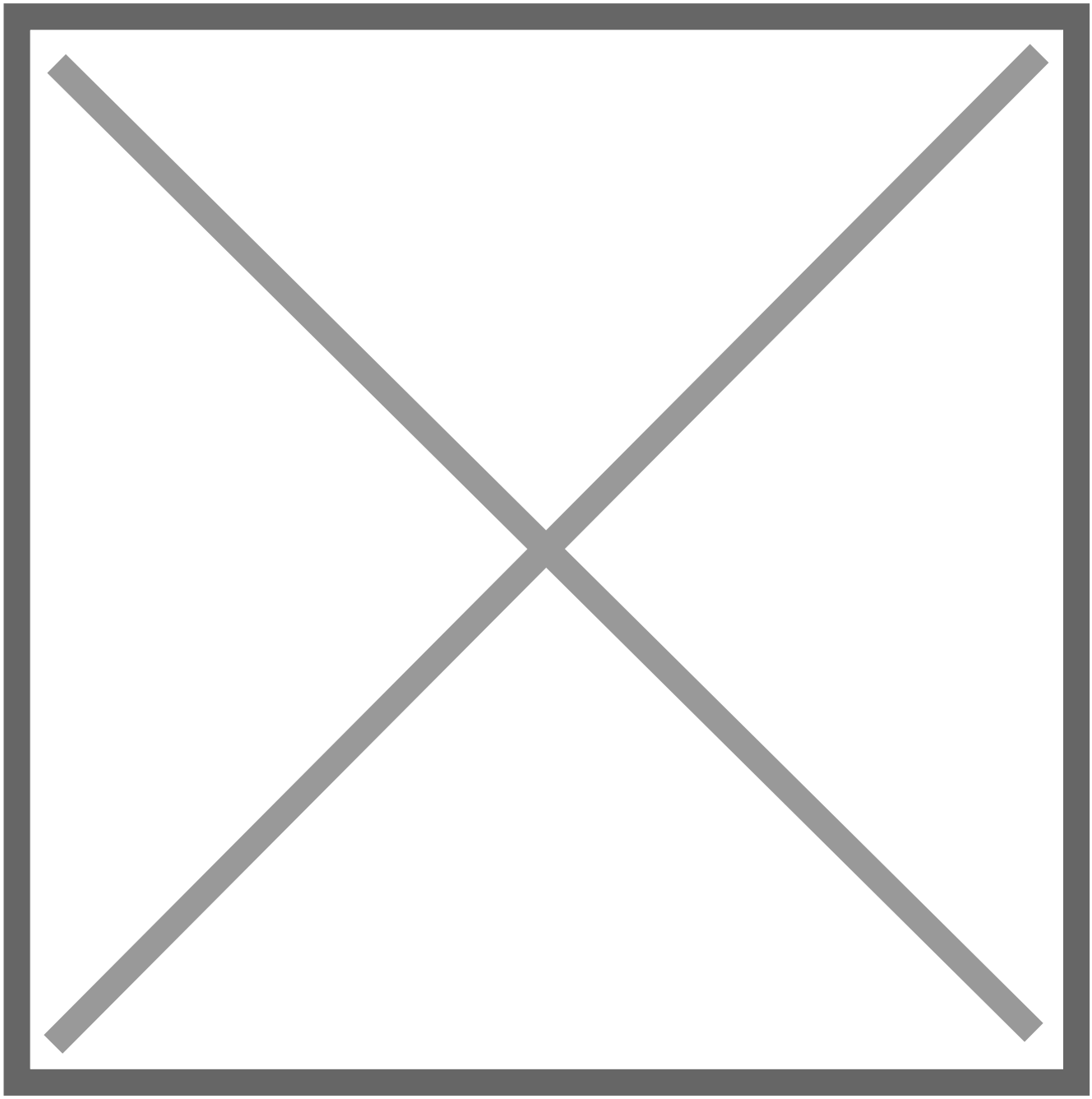
Xian Wang, an assistant professor of Chinese at Notre Dame, said shortly after she arrived on campus in 2008 as a graduate student, a white man stopped her on the street asking if she was Japanese. She was taken aback by the question, and was still deciding how to respond when the man said he knew she must be Japanese because she "seemed so polite."

Wang was so uncomfortable that she still didn't say anything. The man then said, "You probably don't speak English," and left her standing stunned.

"I was flattened and reduced to labels … I had no voice," Wang said.

Anti-Asian racism intersects with misogyny in the "China doll" stereotype that fetishizes Asian and Asian American women as demure yet hypersexual, Tang said.

Whether or not the women killed in Atlanta were actually sex workers, they became victims of hatred against Asian women and sex workers, said Grace Song, a doctoral student in history at Notre Dame.



People in Newcastle, Washington, wave signs during a March 17, 2021, rally against anti-Asian hate crimes. President Joe Biden March 30 announced plans to crack down

on attacks against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, including a review of how the Department of Justice can bolster its efforts to track and prosecute hate crimes. (CNS/Reuters/Lindsey Wasson)

White Americans have fetishized Asian women since at least the late 1800s, Song said. Media productions such as "Madame Butterfly" and "Miss Saigon" reinforced the idea that Asian women were submissive sex objects, Song said, making them more vulnerable to violence.

"Violence towards Asian women is connected with histories of imperialism, global capitalism and turning human bodies and labor into commodities," Song said.

Christian purity culture stigmatizes anyone deemed sexually impure, Tang said, leading to justifications for violence based on sexual temptation, as in Atlanta.

"At this intersection of this evangelical tradition — and often Catholic demand — for both racial and sexual purity, this created this othering of those who do not conform in their imagination to what is pure," Tang said. "This includes women, and it includes racial minorities. And at the intersection of the two emerge stereotypes about almost every single [group of] minority women."

Countering anti-Asian violence requires Asian Americans to dismantle the model minority myth and form coalitions with other communities of color, as students and other activists did during the 1960s, Huynh said.

Black students rallied with Asian students and other students of color to fight racism on college campuses and establish ethnic studies departments at their universities, Huynh said.

Song said in the 1960s, Asian American activists supported the Black Power movement in fighting imperialism and white supremacy. In recent years, this solidarity has been revived within the Black Lives Matter movement, Huynh said.

At the same time, it's not Asian Americans' responsibility to stop anti-Asian racism, Huynh said. All Americans need to look at the larger structures that enable and promote racism.

Fitriyah said white people need to face their own "inherent racism inside [their] cultural complexes."

Tang said she and many other Asian and Asian American colleagues of hers are tired of dealing with microaggressions from white people on campus. She said she's been confused for other people of Asian descent, has gotten emails addressed to other Asian students and has seen faculty ask Asian students to speak their native tongues in class for entertainment.

She said even though Asian and Asian American people can stand up for themselves, white people should also look for ways to interrupt racist acts and comments in their classrooms, dorms and friend circles and center Asian American women's work in their syllabi.

Tang said she did not want the panel to conclude on a note of hope or resilience, both of which have been used to stifle Asian Americans' resistance against racism.

"We as Asian women are still hurting," Tang said. "Our grandmas are still being attacked in the streets and pushed to the ground. Our aunts and uncles are still being made invisible every day by the American public — their imagination, and their bodies. Our own minds are so exhausted and angry at the racism and sexism that we experience on a daily basis."

Huynh said she is looking for ways to work with other marginalized groups, so that Asian Americans are not made invisible again until the next horrific act of violence.

"How do we make this more sustainable? How do we organize?" Huynh said. "How do we build cross-coalitions with other folks of color?"