



# Dancing in the Aftermath of Anti-Asian Violence

## An Introduction in Three Parts

SanSan Kwan and Yutian Wong

### Introduction: Part I

*By SanSan Kwan and Yutian Wong*

Antoinette Solis was assaulted because she is Asian.

Hua Zhen Lin was assaulted because he is Asian.

Noriko Nasu was assaulted because she is Asian.

Noel Quintana was assaulted because he is Asian.

Vilma Kari was assaulted because she is Asian.

Denny Kim was assaulted because he is Asian.

Kathy Duong's mother was assaulted because she is Asian.

Vincent Chin was murdered because he was Asian.

GuiYing Ma was murdered because she was Asian.

Yao Pan Ma was murdered because he was Asian.

Ee Lee was murdered because she was Asian.

Vicha Ratanapakdee was murdered because he was Asian.

Delaina Ashley Yaun and Paul Andre Michels were murdered because they were in a spa outside of Atlanta, Georgia, where Asian women were working. Xiao Jie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha

Kim, Soon Chung Park, and Yong Ae Yue were murdered because they were Asian women working at a spa.

The COVID-19 pandemic has spurred a correspondingly virulent spate of anti-Asian sentiment in the West, particularly in the United States. Fueled by xenophobia and racism, attacks on Asians in North America, the UK, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand have increased at alarming rates, but the convergence of anti-Chinese rhetoric, anti-science conspiracy theories, police violence, the lack of nationalized healthcare, and the lack of will to pass or enforce gun control laws in the United States has translated into a moment in which Asian life, like that of other Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) life in the United States, is once again deemed disposable. The contours of this hatred—and the violence through which it is expressed—are far from new. The mass shooting at three spas in Atlanta, Georgia, on Tuesday, March 16, 2021, was only one of the most horrific of a string of daily incidents that the Asian diasporic community has endured.

Anti-Asian violence in the United States has existed for hundreds of years; and it is the result of a long history of racist immigration laws, the legacy of empire building, and militarism. The year 2022 marks the 140th anniversary of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which was the first race-based immigration law in the United States. It provided the blueprint for subsequent anti-immigration policies, as well as current-day anti-Asian rhetoric. The COVID-19 pandemic has merely re-invoked nineteenth- and twentieth-century formations of Asian bodies as vectors of disease, contamination, and infiltration.

We offer this issue of *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies* in response to the anti-Asian violence that existed well before and has continued well after the murder of those eight people in Atlanta, Georgia; well after the murderer blamed his victims for his actions; and well after the captain in the Cherokee County's Sheriff's Office described the murderer as having "a really bad day." This issue of *Conversations* is a forum for scholars, artists, and organizers living in Asian America to reflect on working, teaching, dancing, or surviving

amidst anti-Asian prejudice and violence. The entries range across rants, poetry, songs, videos, essays linking personal history to scholarship, artist statements, and research in Asian and Asian American dance.

The introduction to this issue is written in three parts—the first part collaboratively, and the second and third parts by the two co-editors individually. This structure serves to acknowledge that “Asian America” is a term and a notion borne out of political necessity for pan-Asian coalition in the face of crisis, but this term can also gloss over differences by simplistically imagining Asian America as singular and monolithic. Like the contributors, the two guest co-editors come to this moment of dance studies in the aftermath of anti-Asian violence with different experiences and perspectives that shape our intellectual and artistic investments in dance and dance studies. The stories told by the contributors in this issue of *Conversations* make clear that the decolonization of dance studies must include the multiplicity of the Asian diasporic experience.

## **Introduction: Part II**

**By Yutian Wong**

*“This is not okay”*

Right now, the biggest pop music/dance act on planet Earth is BTS (Bangtan Sonyeondan), a seven-member group of quintuple threats (actors/dancers/singers/models/cultural diplomats) from South Korea, who are the subject of countless TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter edits celebrating the liquescence of their body rolls, the chaos of their onstage energy, the wackiness of their reality television personae, and their overall ability to seduce millions of people down what has become affectionately known as the BTS rabbit hole. On March 16, 2021, just two days after BTS closed down the Grammy

Awards ceremony with a pre-recorded live streamed performance of their chart-topping English-language disco-inflected bop “Dynamite,” a 22-year-old white man walked into three different spas outside of Atlanta, Georgia, and killed eight people, six of whom were Asian women. Four of the six Asian women were Korean immigrants.

In response to the murders, BTS posted a letter written in Korean and English on their twitter account [@BTS\\_twt](#) with the hashtag #StopAsianHate. With a global fan base (officially known as ARMY) of over 42 million followers on just one of several online platforms used by the band and their company Big Hit Entertainment (now HYBE), BTS are the most visible Asian celebrities in the world. Their message was retweeted 1 million times, making the post the most retweeted message of 2021. In their letter, BTS made references to the discrimination they have faced as Asians: “we have endured expletives without reason and were mocked for the way we look. We were even asked why Asians spoke English.” The letter also included a disclaimer acknowledging that their own experiences of racism pale in comparison to physical assault and murder, but the subtext suggests that they know exactly what the verbalized sentiments are that often precede, accompany, or enable actual physical violence.

The very ordinariness of what BTS shared—“enduring expletives without reason,” “being mocked for the way we look,” and “asked why Asians spoke English”—speaks to the banality of how anti-Asian sentiment forms the day-to-day experience of being Asian in the West. Viewed as a disruption to the Western and particularly American music industry, the more visible BTS becomes, the more virulent the racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and misogyny are in response to their Asianness. Jokes abound comparing BTS to COVID-19 or referring to them as girls or gay Chinese boys.

BTS’s recounting of their experiences with anti-Asian discrimination is in some ways unremarkable. Anti-Asian immigration laws, Alien land laws, colonization, and a series of US American wars in Asia (including East, Southeast, and West Asia) have cemented a legacy in which 60 percent of the world’s population is perceived as passive,

weak, compliant, and inconsequential. Whether it comes in the form of colonial rule and military occupation, or children, conditioned by the history of said rule and occupation, hurling racial epithets on the playground, the effect is a spectrum of normalized violence such that being Asian means that a violent death is an option. It is possible to have someone verbally abuse you and your family at a restaurant, a park, or a hiking trail just as it is possible to be assaulted while standing at a bus stop, beaten in front of a doorway, shot to death at work, or pushed in front of a train.

After the murders in Atlanta, I found myself writing a statement for my department. I didn't ask anyone for feedback. I just wrote it and sent it to my colleagues and said, "I am writing this, if you want to post it on our department's social media sites, I can change the 'I' to a 'We'." Not in the mood to write by committee, I made the conscious choice not to solicit feedback about my statement on the murders in Atlanta after the experience of writing by committee about the murder of George Floyd. In that process I found myself in a meeting going back and forth over word choice. When the discussion started to resemble something that happens in a very dry policy-writing committee meeting, I started to feel uncomfortable and finally said something to the effect that wordsmithing does not do the actual work of anti-racism. Later, in conversation with my colleague ArVejon Jones, his words, "why can't people just say it's not okay to kill Black people and leave it at that?" stayed with me.

What is the purpose of a statement? It is too easy to be flippant and dismissive and say "performative politics." While many people were understandably too traumatized to organize their thoughts about the escalation of violence that resulted in a mass murder, I found that the act of trying to find the precise words to name the violence prevented me from crawling deeper into the pandemic cave I was already living in. Perhaps it was a rant, and my statement was written for myself. What would I want someone like me, who isn't me, write for me to read? Charmaine Chua ended up publishing my statement on anti-Asian violence on a [forum](#) with other statements written by Asian

American academics working across different disciplines. Some were chock-full of historical facts and figures, others dense with theory and links to resources, and there were those palpable with grief and exhaustion. Read as a whole they reflected the different ways that people were responding in the moment to the same event and served as a reminder of just how far-reaching anti-Asian violence is—so far that it makes perfect sense for critiques of settler colonialism to sit alongside critiques of racism in the wellness industry.

This issue of *Conversations* emerged after a series of events that took place in response to the Dance Studies Association's (DSA's) public statement on anti-Asian violence which, at the time, I found worse than not posting anything at all. Truth be told, I probably would not have noticed if DSA had not written a statement. Such is the reality of being Asian American that one has no expectations that anyone cares about anti-Asian violence. In that original post, DSA stated that it supported the statement on anti-Asian violence written by another academic organization . . .

Okay . . . that's a little weird . . . but I guess it's okay? . . . if the other organization wrote a good statement? . . .

But the post did not just end with a statement of solidarity, sympathy, or empathy. What followed was a long explanation about the DSA Board's bylaws and policies, and how the Board could not write its own statement until they followed a specific process and timeline. I think this is when I lost it. The post was ultimately about DSA's administrative procedures and not about the horrific murders. And so I wrote to the DSA Board to say this is not okay. What emerged was a new statement and a series of action items that included making space for an affinity group for Asian and Asian American-identified faculty at the 2021 DSA annual meeting and a proposal for what has now become this issue of *Conversations* on anti-Asian violence.

In recognition that not all Asian and Asian American-identified DSA members do research on Asian/Asian American topics, SanSan Kwan and I organized a meeting for an affinity group and made it clear that the group was a space for Asian/Asian American-identified DSA

members and not necessarily about Asian/Asian American research topics. About 20 minutes before the meeting started, I received an email from a dance scholar wanting to confirm that the affinity group was only for Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI)-identified people and if that was the case, should they (as a white person) create a "White 'affinity' group for those involved in AAPI research, practice, teaching." I did not respond to the message because academia and area studies in particular have always been by default White affinity groups. Created during the Cold War in the name of national security, Department of Education Title VI funded the language training programs that would become the area studies departments (Asian studies, etc.) charged with producing US American scholarship about Asia, Latin America, and Africa with the goal of cultivating Asian, Latin American, and African support for American interests and institutions. I was not in teaching mode, and at that moment I did not want to explain why it was offensive to ask a non-white person if it is okay to start a White affinity group. I did not want to have to explain how in the day-to-day operations of my job my not showing up to a meeting means there is a good chance any meeting will default to White "affinity" group.

This is a three-part introduction because in our discussions as editors, SanSan and I agreed that we come to the table with different perspectives on what decolonization is and decided that our differences better reflect the act of decolonizing dance studies. If colonization is about holding everyone to a single set of aesthetics and values, decolonization involves the struggle over what will replace that single vision. Our readership is diverse. Some will recognize themselves in the contributions for different reasons. Others will say that this issue is overly focused and irrelevant to their personal or professional selves. Still others will say that this issue is overly focused and should have included x, y, and z. To this I will say, make another dance, write another essay/book/rant, compose another song, pen another poem, stage another action, donate more money, or scream again into the void from the edge of a cliff or canyon because any one issue of *Conversations* will not do all the work of decolonizing dance studies.

Decolonization requires continuous disruption to the existing order because disruption is an ongoing process and what needs to be disrupted is a moving target. If, in the early 2000s, decolonizing dance studies meant defending myself from an aggressive white person physically blocking a doorway until I would agree (I didn't) that it was okay to refer to Asian people as orientals, the goals for decolonization now include white people recognizing when a situation is not about *you*—meaning, don't send a non-white person an email before a meeting scheduled in response to a series of hate crimes asking if it is okay to start a White affinity group because the answer at that moment is “. . . I . . . don't . . . care . . . because the meeting about to start in 20 minutes is not about *you*.” Both incidents are acts of colonization. The first is an example of old-school racism and the desire to continue using colonial language to refer to Asian people. Old-school racism is believable as a relic of a past time if one buys into the narrative of civilizational progress even though it wasn't okay to call an Asian person oriental in the early 2000s, just as it wasn't okay to call an Asian person oriental in the 1980s, or even in the 1960s once Asian people in the United States decided to use the term “Asian American.” The second is an example of re-centering whiteness by using presumptive innocence to double down on whiteness (colonization) as default. Decolonization requires understanding how much space whiteness takes up by default and the harm one causes by insisting on occupying even more space by continuously encroaching on someone else's emotional, mental, and intellectual terrain.

Someone else might differ in opinion and say that the compassionate thing to do would have been to talk to the person and explain how their actions are hurtful. And this is why one person alone cannot do the work of decolonization. There is no one way to decolonize because colonization itself is multifaceted. Colonization is flexible and adaptable—able and willing to come up with all kinds of nuanced reasoning to maintain form. Decolonization is by nature formless because



we have not achieved it, so we can only experience it as a striving marked with obvious failures. Failure when one realizes that the Title IX office is mostly concerned with not being sued. Failure when one realizes that all the ombudsman is charged with doing is listening to a complaint and taking notes. Failure when one realizes that the term “decolonization” has become the new multiculturalism—defanged in its abstraction. Failure when one realizes that one is succumbing to demoralization—something that colonization finds useful. Success is harder to see because it is often a low bar.

Value different definitions of mastery—low bar.

Include different bodies/voices—lower bar.

Don’t be racist—really low bar.

Don’t verbally abuse, physically assault, or murder Asian people—really really low bar.

I started this section of the introduction with a paragraph on BTS to disabuse the idea that greater representation, recognition, or visibility will solve anti-Asian violence. BTS has pretty much won every major accolade and are a paragon of mainstream popular culture as pop stars, reality television stars, fashion models, and brand ambassadors who sell everything from sneakers to fast food and air purifiers. Their faces are plastered on mugs, mouse pads, key chains, tote bags, tee shirts, and advertising billboards, yet the growth of their popularity in the United States has happened alongside an escalation of anti-Asian violence. There is that branch of Asian American studies and even dance studies that believes representation in film, television, and, by extension, the performing arts is key to changing perceptions of and thus the treatment of Asian Americans in their everyday lives. I used to believe this too and once wrote a whole book about it. So, what are we left with when it becomes clear that representation on the mass scale that BTS can inhabit, a scale that includes meeting with US President Joe Biden at the White House on the last day of Asian American

and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander Heritage Month, has no bearing on anti-Asian violence?

In March 2021, I called out the dead—Pierre Loti, John Luther Long, Giacomo Puccini—dead white men. People keep restaging their work even though the dead themselves cannot write new work. I called them out—these dead men—for staging Asian female death as the natural state of being—but it is people, alive people, here people, now people, who keep making the decision to remake *Madame Butterfly* in the image of *Miss Saigon*. And someone called me out, sent me an email, and told me that part of my interpretation was wrong. And isn't that what this intellectual life is about? We write. We put things out into the world. Usually, we don't hear back unless someone is so moved to act upon their response.

As much as my inner fangirl enjoys the disciplined unison of a BTS dance break in which the members slide into recognizable choreography, I much prefer the cacophony and dissonance of a BTS encore where the members are crawling and vibing their way through the detritus of confetti bombs, streamers, and empty water bottles. These artifacts of impermanence, frenzy, and the discarded are a reminder that no matter how hard you work to stage a decolonial encounter (how else to describe what happened after the 2022 BTS concert in Las Vegas, in which BIPOC ARMY, Queer ARMY, and all ages ARMY assembled as strangers to disrupt the settler-colonial logic of a desert city that should not exist by descending upon stolen indigenous land to temporarily transform an underpass between two colossal monuments of desperation, terror, and indifference—one in the shape of a fake Egyptian tomb—into spontaneous outbreaks of life-affirming joy marked with gift giving and euphoric dancing), it is but a momentary event requiring continual work and effort to reproduce anew each instance of a decolonial existence.

The contributions in this issue of *Conversations* represent but a fraction of the responses, actions, and calls-to-action made in response to anti-Asian violence. The writing, performances, songs, dialogues, and

photographs mark attempts to create, capture, or remember a series of moments that offer glimpses of a decolonial existence.

## **Introduction: Part III**

**By *SanSan Kwan***

*“Wrong Asian!”*

Wrong Asian!

Not all Asians look alike. Our desire to separate the membership of the DSA Asian and Asian Diasporic Dance Studies Working Group from that of the DSA AAPI Affinity Group—and, in fact, our insistence that there be an affinity group for us at all—is in critical response to the structural ways in which our bodies are so often conflated with our research, our artistry with our ethnic identity, and the form of our politics with our race, without consideration for the heterogeneity of our lived experiences.

When I sit on a graduate admissions committee and we admit three Chinese diasporic students, it is not because (as a colleague claimed) I am “collecting advisees,” and, at the same time, it is also true that I am gratified to mentor these students. While it is reductive to presume that our research will align because of our ethnicity (it doesn’t, by the way), it is also not unreasonable to imagine that our shared cultural backgrounds might form the basis for connection and commiseration in the face of white-dominated academia. One step toward decolonizing dance studies involves asking that BIPOC artists and scholars be seen on our own terms, however complex.

When I am one of two Asian dancers in an ensemble, the other one male-identified, and the director rejects an auditioning Asian dancer because “he already has two” (a complete pair!), I am reminded that the spots for us are demarcated and delimited.

In response, this issue takes seriously the title of this publication. It is a multivocal *conversation*. And it is a messy one. Yutian and I do not do the work of decolonization in the same ways, and I think this difference has made our co-editing that much more productive in its tensions. It was not without an initial bit of discomfort on my part that we began to review some of the material that appears in this collection. But I firmly defend all of the contributions in our volume. Yutian reminds me that decolonizing is not supposed to be comfortable. I remind myself that I wrote a book on collaboration and love. So here I am stepping up into the messiness. If we are going to decolonize, we need to deploy a host of approaches. We defend multiplicity because we contend that there should be more than two spots for us in the ensemble. There are many ways to be Asian, to show up, to do the work, to decolonize. Some want to identify particular people and specific incidents because they are exasperated by the lack of progress toward anti-racism and argue that it is not enough to abstract white supremacy to its institutions. Others want to call in rather than call out. Some write poetry, some write songs. Some rant, some prefer to partner dance.

maura nguyễn donohue chooses to rant (she tells me that dispositionally she has no choice, but, make no mistake, she also hides under her covers after every outburst), while Mana Hayakawa celebrates the Japanese American World War II incarcerated whose forms of resistance were exceedingly subtle. Joyce Lu, Chuyun Oh, and Michael Sakamoto recount painful experiences of racism in the academy and in the dance community, possibly risking reaction. Meanwhile, Crystal Song considers the value of serving as the “follow” in ballroom dance and asks whether investment in uncompromised ideas of agency or resistance is even useful. Juliana Fadil-Luchkiw, Hye-Won Hwang, and Fangfei Miao contribute their academic scholarship as a form of decentering whiteness in dance studies. Gerald Casel, Li Chiao-Ping, Tiffany Lytle, Dahlia Nayar, and Johnny Huy Nguyen offer their creative work (in the form

of poetry, music, and choreography) as a way to decolonize. Rosemary Candelario, Al Evangelista, grace shinhae jun and MiRi Park, and J. Lorenzo Perillo and Kellee E. Warren reflect on their work as artists/scholars/teachers/humans and the ways in which this has intertwined with their commitments to allyship and intervention. The diversity of offerings in this collection represents a diversity of ways to do anti-racist work. The goal, though, is a shared one.

Stuart Hall talks about “a politics without guarantees.” By that he means that the danger in essentializing race is driven not only by racist thinking but also by a strain of liberal thought that seeks to rely upon identity as a guarantee for politics (and aesthetics). Rather than politics as “cure,” he argues, it is important to embrace debate:

So I want blacks to enter into what I think they’ve been reserved in doing, which is, you know the hard graft of having arguments with their own fellows, men and women who are black, about it. And that’s the difficult thing because in a way you have to mobilize effectively, you can’t depend on just the race to take you to your political objective.

(Hall and Jhally)

And that’s why we need affinity groups, so that we can argue safely among ourselves *and also* collectivize. And it’s why we need special journal issues, too. Because we need to take up more spaces and make room for all of our varied and even contentious voices.

We opened this introduction by naming some of the Asian Americans who have been victims of anti-Asian violence. We close this introduction by honoring some of the Asian and Asian American dance pioneers who have passed recently:

Hsueh-Tung Chen (1947–2022)

Nai-Ni Chen (1959–2021)

Yuriko Kikuchi (1920–2022)

## Author Biographies

**SanSan Kwan** is professor and chair in the Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies at UC Berkeley. Her recent book, *Love Dances: Loss and Mourning in Intercultural Collaboration* (Oxford UP, 2021), is winner of the 2022 de la Torre Bueno© Award. She is also the author of *Kinesthetic City: Dance and Movement in Chinese Urban Spaces* (Oxford UP, 2013) and co-editor, with Kenneth Speirs, of *Mixing It Up: Multiracial Subjects* (University of Texas Press, 2004). Her article on cartographies of race and the Chop Suey circuit, a group of Asian American cabaret entertainers who toured the nation during the World War II era, is published in *TDR*. Her article, "When is Contemporary Dance," on contended understandings of the term "contemporary" across dance genres and communities, is in the December 2017 issue of *Dance Research Journal*. Additional articles can be found in *Representations*, *Performance Research*, and other journals and anthologies. Kwan remains active as a professional dancer and has danced with H.T. Chen and maura nguyễn donohue, among others. She is currently performing with Lenora Lee Dance.

**Yutian Wong** is professor of dance studies in the School of Theatre & Dance at San Francisco State University. She is the author of *Choreographing Asian America* (Wesleyan University Press, 2010), editor of *Contemporary Directions in Asian American Dance* (University of Wisconsin, 2016), and co-editor with Jens Richard Giersdorf of *The Routledge Studies Dance Reader, 3rd Edition* (Routledge, 2019). Her other publications include essays in *Discourses in Dance*, *Dance Research Journal*, *Short Film Studies*; chapters in *Worlding Dance*, edited by Susan Leigh Foster; *Choreography and Corporeality: Relay in Motion*, edited by Thomas DeFrantz and Philippa Rothfield; *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Competition*, edited by Sherrill Dodds; and *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature and Culture*, edited by Josephine Lee. Her current research projects include a series of essays on dance and sincerity and co-editing

*Bangtan Remixed: The Critical BTS Reader* (under contract Duke University Press) with a seven-member editorial collective of researchers, writers, and artists comprising Patty Ahn, Michelle Cho, Vernadette Gonzalez, Rani Neutill, and Mimi Thi Nguyen.

## **Works Cited**

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