



A reclamation of the disposable

maura nguyễn donohue

It's the end of April, nope,

now . . . it is actually the first day of May.

In the crush of MFA colloquia, admissions interviews, two different curriculum committees, chairing an anti-racism committee, a(nother) damn search committee, teaching, jury duty, and solo parenting for a month, I show my work in an Open Studio as part of my visual art residency with the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Arts Center on Governor's Island. Maybe it's middle age, maybe it's a mild form of long Covid, but I'm constantly worried about my energy levels and capacity . . . I'm exhausted. I'm fraught . . . as in freighted and weighted.

Didn't we learn that the grind was someone else's gauge for glory?

But I do it. Get through it. People come, dancers dance, art gets shown, and my teens don't feel ignored. Everyone's one step closer to graduation or admission or recognition. And, I admit . . . my fatigue is a result of my own choices. I'm here. It's a warm Mayday morning after a frosty, biting spring, so *Let's hear it for New York, New York, New York . . . These streets make you feel brand new, there's nothing you can't do. . . .* Dirty chai in hand, I hit Central Park at 9 a.m. on a Sunday and dance my one-person Spotify soul train to the bridal path to sit under the cherry blossoms before they pass the peak. I let a gentle pink fall from the green and blue above me. I breathe. I think about

relaxing . . . contemplate the potential for relaxing. I take a picture to share on the Gram . . . and bam:

- There's the @jackfruit post of the GoFundMe for Kaitlyn Lau, a 14-year-old girl in Queens who was just shot in the neck while walking home from school with friends a couple days ago.
- There's @perryyungofficial reposting @umasianalliance about a man spitting in two Asian women's faces on the train a couple days ago.
- Four hours ago a Chinese food delivery worker was shot to death while on a scooter in Queens. Zhiwen Yan was a father of three and working three jobs.

This

is just

TODAY.

is just

ONE DAY

is just

ONE MORNING of mourning.

Welcome to #AsianHeritageMonth2022

This is just what happens to cross my feed. This is just what crosses my feed while I'm looking cuz I'm not EVEN looking for this. I. am. Trying. to-ride-the-delicate-balance-of-being-informed-AND/OR-staying well.

Every day feels like *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* ALL THE Damn TIME.

Welcome to our soft apocalypse.

Someone just shot up the subway in Brooklyn? Near Sunset Park? That's Brooklyn's Chinatown! Oh, not anti-Asian? Back to work.

I only have to reach back a year to when I was "holding space" in community facilitation and panel participation for Dance/NYC's 2021 Symposium with so much rage in my heart in the immediate wake of the shootings in Atlanta.

But, I'm g o i n g numb.

I only have to reach back a few days to when I was staring up to the ceiling in the adjunct office so I don't meet my colleagues' "Kai is zooming in (sighhhh), they're too anxious to leave home again [sigh]" with anything other than a light "Yeah, I understand. My anxiety has been hard to handle" instead of a "WHAT ARE YOU NOT GETTING ABOUT THIS!"

But, I'm g o i n g dumb.

I only have to reach back about a month to when I was holding back tears and explaining to my colleagues that . . . After a year carrying mace, and years carrying a whistle, I now also carry a kubotan. You can hear me jangling from an entire floor away.

But, I'm run . . . n . . . ing out . . . of . . . fight.

I only have to reach back to the beginning of this semester to when I felt Darvejon Jones laying his hand on my shoulder while I didn't hold back tears in the Anti-Racism Committee meeting I was chairing and explaining to people that this wasn't a theoretical exercise. This was urgent. My life, my biological and chosen kin's lives, and all my found family need to be able to move through space without fear.

But, I'm l.o.ooooosing my hype.

I make, I mentor, I melt down. . .

I make, I mentor, I meltdown. . .

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meltdownmeltdownmeltd

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I reach back to one year ago.

April/May 2021. DanceNYC Symposium Community Asynchronous Virtual Moment of Solidarity and La MaMa Moves Asian Heritage Panel Opening. This week I sent a virtual shoulder squeeze, hug, or fist pump to Asian American Pacific Islander friends around the country and wept through faculty meetings. It's yet another painful moment for ancestors, offspring, and me. I recognize the repetition of history in the acute pain I feel in response to the radio silence from people I thought weren't just allies, but friends. Be more than an ally, be a human. Reach out to Asian folx and recognize this horror with us, especially if you know us, work with us, watch us, eat with us, or sleep with us. I'm not just busy, there isn't just "a lot on my plate." I am distraught. I have been making my kids carry mace. I have been called "Covid" and "Coronavirus" on my block of 25 years. I spent the entirety of my life proving that I didn't need to get back on that boat, go back to my own country, or have a sideways slit just like my eyes. I made dances called *Lotus Blossom Itch* and wrote about "Ambivalent Selves: the Asian Female Body in American Concert Dance." I know this bullshit. I know the racial misogyny that has filled law enforcement, news media, and the silence of my own supposed community of art makers through increasing calls to #stopasianhate.

I don't need an MFA to understand that me and my sisters are as disposable as ChoCho San in *Madame Butterfly*. That in the imagination of the good ol' boy (think: spa shooter Robert Aaron Long) I am here as nothing other than lethal temptation.

I recognize I am here today standing upon the shoulders of many as I ask you viewers to look out for our elders or bring them some food because Asians actually have the largest income inequality of any community in America today.

And, since it's still contentious to demand Black, Brown, Indigenous, Latino/a/x, and Asian histories as American histories, I can't blame any of us for not knowing that it was Asians who suffered from the largest mass lynching in US history in 1871 or that the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was the first, and remains the only, law to have

been implemented that prevented all members of a specific ethnic or national group from immigrating to the United States—although that Muslim ban tried in a different way—or that the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII put 120,000 citizens into concentration camps, and/or that the origin story of Asian America that was the murder of Vincent Chin includes the fact that neither of the men who beat him to death in 1982 spent a day in jail because, as Judge Charles Kaufman put it, “These weren’t the kind of men you send to jail.”

There is so much more . . . this #stopasianhate era, this 21st Century Yellow Peril ploy, asks us to remember the work of intersectional sisters like Grace Lee Boggs, Yuri Kochiyama, and so many other unrecognized women warriors fighting for freedom and solidarity for all oppressed peoples.

Soon C. Park, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Yong A. Yue, Delaina Ashley Yaun, Paul Andre Michels, Xiaojie Tan, and Daoyou Feng left full, human full, dream full, family full lives.

March 2021. Potri, Nicky, eugene the poogene, Perry and our kids, and I find Andy and Nai-Ni Chen on the edges of a Columbus Park #stopasianhate rally in the spring. Before the year ends, Nai-Ni will be swept off the planet, drowned in a swimming accident when it seemed like we’d made it through the worst of the pandemic.

January 2021. Memorial for Corky Lee, our photographer laureate of Asian America. Zoom prayer circle brings me back in proximity with Ava Chin. February 2021 Zoom memorial at La MaMa brings Nicky Paraiso, Perry Yung, Lisa Gold, Andy Chiang, Potri Ranka Manis, Mia Yoo, and me into a fleeting planning community. The FaceTime stream of his funeral car procession from Rick Ebihara puts me back in contact with Wayland Quintero. Covid.

March 2020. Right at the beginning of Covid’s arrival, Perry’s Uncle Philip and La MaMa’s resident designer Jun Maeda were the first to go. My visual art is full of Maeda’s legacy . . . reclamation of the disposable. Plastic bags, tin cans turned into ribbons, detritus.

Reclamation of the disposable. I'm not your trash. I know these elders don't match the sensationalist streetfront, subway, road rage incidents . . . but systems are sneaky, sweetheart.

A letter to a principal:

I want to begin with an expression of deep thanks for the education and care that my son, Jet Yung, has received at your school. Although the pandemic hit before he had completed his first year in high school, he had quickly made good friends and would often share things he was learning with us whether that was a bit of dance from Miss Francis or thoughts that had arisen from his trip to DC for the profoundly important 1619 Project encounter. We have been grateful for how he was welcomed into the community despite once again being a racial minority at school. He has maintained connections to classmates and on the rare occasion I caught a bit of class or advisory coming out of his screen in the past year, felt he was still being engaged and attended to.

This is what makes his recent experience in advisory distressing. Without pointing too hard, I would encourage the teachers and community to educate themselves about the specificities of false narratives, stereotypes and divisive language used about Asian American Pacific Islanders in this country. I would also ask that teachers speak from a more globally minded perspective before they make dismissive comments about the value of the lives that were lost in Atlanta. I would want this for any student, but, of course, I recognize it has been especially painful for my two children to experience pervasive silence or to have white supremacist driven media and law enforcement language reinforced in the classroom. It is entirely possible for any NYC DOE school to address current events with care and without increasing trauma. Both I and Jet's father, Perry Yung, have spent the entirety of our lives and our professional careers fighting for increased representation for our people and we have done that in deep community and solidarity with other communities of color.

shed skin leave it in—
 grieve n grieve n grieve
 leave skin—snake kin—
 bereave—retrieve—retrieve—
 the Nagi, snake mother
 retrieve her
 believe . . . her
 believe . . . her
 believe . . . her
 leave her
 weaver
 love her
 mother
 other
 fucker
 maker
 faker
 take her
 break her
 Wake her! She waits, seas waits, why wait, for what fate?
 Wake the snakes!!!
 Naga rise, Nagini rise

For the record, I might be freighted and weighted, numb and dumb, running out of fight and losing my hype, but I am sure I would still fail the fucking bystander trainings being offered to teach harassment interventions After those security guards shut the damn door on that woman being attacked yt peepl tried to buys themselves a stand up self in ONE fucking zoom workshop . . . Check . . . I'm not racist, I did a 90-minute training on . . . pulling out my cellphone. . . . No shade, hollaback! It's not on you. Talk about triggers! Every proposed scenario set me off, I went off like a bomb for hours afterwards. But, here we are over a year later and still. . .

What Is Up, colleagues? What is up? I mean I already wrote a piece about White Fragility in the Ivory Tower for Gibney Dance. Did ya not get my memo? Did ya not see me crying? Did ya not hear my rant in the meeting. Did you even take one workshop . . . EVEN!!!!!! Why don't you get why a student is down in the melt. . . Why are students telling me you don't teach Orientalism or cultural appropriation when you teach Ruth St. Denis? Get beyond the damn book club!

How about this how about you do your People's Institute for Survival and Beyond or Border Crossers or Human in Common workshops and understand the whole standing on a box and looking over a fence (fucking google it) thang and the whole race is constructed and changing thang and it's built into the entire constitution and genocidal construction of our country and consciousness thang . . . and up your bystander tutorials . . . and wait for folx of color to explain basic concepts of survival. . .

. . . and then turn off the damn White Savior mode and learn "How to be a Real Human."

Author Biography

maura nguyễn donohue (she/they) is Director of the MFA in Dance at Hunter College. From 1995 to 2005, her troupe, *inmixedcompany* was produced regularly in New York City (NYC) and toured across North America, Europe, and Asia. She co-produces the Estrogenius Festival and has facilitated residency programs for Asian diaspora artists in the United States and SE Asia. She seeks networks of kinship through curation, advocacy, and a deep witnessing process of writing about the works of others, most recently as Writer-in-Residence for Danspace Project's 2021 and 2022 Platform: *The Dream of the Audience*. She has been a member of La MaMa's Great Jones Rep Experimental Theater since 1997. Since 2015, they have been creating installation and performance works in an ongoing "Tides Project," including during a winter 2022 residency at LMCC's Arts Center on Governor's

Island. Using reclaimed plastics and oceanic detritus to examine the legacies of bodies ecological and diasporic, she builds a mass of meaning out of the disposable. Born in Vietnam, amidst the war with America, they have a long-standing fascination with reclamation among those who are left adrift, survive off the sea, and soak in marginalized narratives.

She thanks the ancestors and offspring for keeping the path clearly lit.