

A Call for Diaspora as a Space for Intersectional Belonging

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I teach sociology at the University of Toronto. I was born and raised in South Korea, but for the past 17 years spent most of my adult years in the US and Canada. These past weeks made me finally realize that I am an immigrant, a member of a diaspora.

When I first read about the Atlanta shootings, I was in shock and numb. But then, it felt as though it confirmed the fear that many of us in Asian communities have experienced for more than a year. I wish it didn't take a mass shooting for people to see the gravity of the situation. In my own neighborhood in Toronto, I was attacked on the bus last February for being "Chinese" and "bringing Covid to *our* country." That fear for me still comes and goes. But while I had the choice of staying mostly at home—however sad and unfair choice that may be—many of my fellow Asians who work in essential jobs, or run a small business, did not have that choice. And like the victims in Atlanta, they were the ones who bore the brunt of the anti-Asian violence and hate.

When an American news media contacted me for an interview, I said yes, because I thought it was an important task. And when I was on the phone, the journalist asked me, "how did the gender and economic inequality in South Korea push these women to immigrate to the US?"

I refused to answer that question. The gender and economic inequality in South Korea is, in fact, one area of my research expertise. But at the moment, I was so tired of people treating us like we are from somewhere else and belong somewhere else. This suggests the sources of our struggles and problems somehow belong *there*. Like many of us here today, the four Korean women who lost their lives last week spent more of their adult lives outside of South Korea, even from 1970s and 80s. Their stories, and the heartbreaking end of that story, is *an American story*.

We talk about intersectionality as a word, but to me, the question is ultimately: who claims these women as their own? Who is left out of that claiming? Why isn't America claiming them?

I told the journalist that the story here is the US labor market that relegates South Korean and other [immigrant women into low-wage, service sector jobs](#). Whether they held middle-class jobs in their home countries or not, in the United States, their educational and work credentials are not recognized, and their English fluency and accents are ridiculed. Many can only find employment within the immigrant ethnic market, whether it's a restaurant, cleaning service, laundromat, nail salon, or spa, into their later years.

It is a story of gun control, or the lack thereof. It is a story of dehumanizing Asian women in the context of US imperialism and militarism. Whether they were working in sex industry or not, it is of [criminalizing and stigmatizing sex work](#) and making them vulnerable to gender-based violence and workplace abuse. None of this, not surprisingly, made into the paper. (Naturally, they found someone else to comment on gender and economic inequality in South Korea that pushed the women away.)

Perhaps I was too hasty to refuse to fill in the Korean story, I also realized in the next few days. Denied as fully American, these women's lives are also not fully claimed as Korean story in South Korea either. This made me disappointed and saddened in a different way. While the Atlanta

shootings and the deaths of four Korean women did appear in Korean media, it was not front page news as I think it would have been had the victims been Korean or Korean-American doctors, professors, or others who fit the model minority myth. Even college students and tourists would likely have garnered more, and different, coverage in the Korean media.

Now that we have gathered as scholars and community members in Korean diaspora, I think it is we, as members of the diaspora, who should claim and remember these women and commemorate their deaths as fully our own. Diaspora isn't just an immigrant space, but a space of belonging for people who are in between, for those who don't have an easy way of assumed belonging. It is, rather, a space that we need to consciously create. This is a space where [intersectional resistance](#), that of race, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and class, can emerge, based on people's lived realities that are intersectional, and already multiracial. Solidarity across boundaries can emerge, if we fight for it.

And it is this emerging space that I hope we can come together and remember these women's deaths, and their lives.

(Spoken at the Roundtable [“What does the Atlanta Tragedy Mean? Korean Diaspora Speaks”](#) on March 24, 2021)

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