



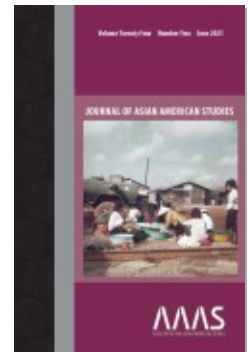
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Traffic in Asian Women by Laura Hyun Yi Kang (review)

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American studies can better ask “What is an Asian American Pacific Islander?” To interrogate “Asian American Pacific Islander” requires more than just disaggregation that may lead to easy disavowals of the roles played by Asianness as well as Asian and Asian diasporic peoples in settler colonial projects. Without such a reckoning, we may rightly be considered complicit in the logic of possession by whiteness.

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***Traffic in Asian Women*, by Laura Hyun Yi Kang. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020. xi + 339 pp. \$104.95 cloth; \$28.95 paper. Cloth ISBN 978-1-4780-0880-4; paper ISBN 978-1-4780-0966-5.**

On December 6, 1991, three Korean women filed a lawsuit at Tokyo District Court. The plaintiffs, with Kim Hak-sun as the only one giving her real name, identified themselves as survivors of the Japanese military “comfort system” during World War II and demanded an official apology and reparation from the government. Though the so-called comfort women issue had not been entirely unknown, it was not until the 1990s that it attracted due international attention. Why, after almost half a century, did it emerge as a newsworthy matter? To this question Laura Hyun Yi Kang’s new book *Traffic in Asian Women* attempts to offer a thorough historical account. While providing extensive examinations of the comfort women issue itself, Kang endeavors to locate this topic at the intersection of a much broader geohistorical problematic of transnational trafficking in Asian women: “the category of ‘Asian women’ and specifically the ‘comfort women’ case importantly shaped the negotiated categorization and recalibration of injuries and violations in need of proper certification and adjudication” (13). Through its detailed historiography, the book documents how multiple political, legal, and ethical frameworks have ultimately proved inadequate to fully acknowledge violence against Asian women throughout the twentieth century and beyond. In each chapter, the figure of “Asian women” repeatedly reveals racist, sexist, and imperialist limits embedded in universal humanitarian discourses. It is not until we situate the current “super-visibility” of the comfort women issue, Kang argues, that we begin to make “critical sense of the transnational circulation of ‘Asian women’ as distinguished figures of female injury and women’s empowerment in the 1990s” (1).

After a brief, preliminary first paragraph, the introduction proceeds to barrage us with a detailed chronology of the comfort women issue so that it could leave those readers not very familiar with the topic behind. This stylistic

choice recurring throughout the book, however, should be understood not only as a manifestation of the author's exhaustively meticulous engagement with historical details but also as a performative declaration that the issue will never be truly approached without going through the entangled international contexts surrounding this long-neglected issue. Chapter one, also serving as a kind of longer introduction, proceeds to critically assess the development of Asian American studies in the US academy as responsible for at once illuminating and institutionalizing—and even commodifying, one might add—the comfort women issue (42–44). The remaining six chapters are split into two in ways of approaching the issue: the first three focus on the international institutions in the twentieth century such as the United Nations, many of which were instituted under the decisive influence of the United States, and their efforts to capture (Asian) female vulnerabilities; the latter on the forms of redress, the problematics of belated compensation that would pose questions far beyond Japanese responsibility.

Chapters two and three examine the “Asianization” of “trafficking in women” and “sexual slavery,” respectively. Chapter two deals with earlier iterations of racialized frameworks such as “white slavery” in the nineteenth century or a series of reports issued by the League of Nations; Chapter three focuses on the decisive role of the 1966 *Report on Slavery* penned by Mohamed Awad, the special rapporteur on slavery appointed by the UN Economic and Social Council. In each case, those UN reports would create enduring obstacles in addressing Asian women's sufferings into the 1990s. Chapter four traces the shift in the definition of “violence against women”: in the 1990s, it came to be viewed as an impediment to public health and economic development that must be calculated by the World Bank.

Chapter five would be of special interest to Asian Americanists. While illustrating how US military archives and memoirs of Korean comfort women circulated throughout the English-speaking world in the 1980s, this chapter highlights the fact that these documents and photographs were created by Asian American, above all Japanese American, military personnel. “No one has paid any sustained attention,” Kang observes, “to the peculiar fact that it was mostly Nisei and Kibei soldiers, many of them recruited from the U.S. concentration camps to be trained at the Military Intelligence Service and Language School, who conducted the interrogations and composed the reports” of Korean women. Chapter six, “Just Compensation,” historicizes such Orientalist discourses as a Japanese or Asian “Miracle,” critiquing the US postwar politico-economic interventions in Asia manipulating intra-Asian financial arrangements. Chapter seven explores multiple cultural memorializations of comfort women. Taking the now-famous Statue of Peace originally erected in 2011 across the street from the Japanese Embassy in Seoul and

then reproduced in several major cities in the United States, Kang traces how it “came to be deployed as a pawn in inter-state [Korea-Japan] negotiations” (254) and explores how to make critical sense of its transpacific circulation and international proliferation.

With its diverse appeal to varied audiences, *Traffic in Asian Women* represents a significant contribution to such scholarship as (transnational) American studies, Asian studies, Asian American studies, and transpacific studies. While sharing several critical viewpoints expressed in Lisa Yoneyama’s *Cold War Ruins* (2016), Kang’s historical vigor empowers her own work to extend its scope far beyond the limit of the Cold War. In addition to women’s studies and critical race and ethnic studies scholars, human rights scholars would also find this book illuminating; Kang’s way of shining light on the underside of US-manipulated liberal and universalist humanitarian discourses can be profitably read with such cultural studies texts as Christal Parikh’s *Writing Human Rights* (2017). “Perhaps Asian women might be impressed,” Kang suggests at the end of the introduction, “to open up and out to alternate modalities of thinking together about the hows and whys of what we do not know but cannot not want” (18). The “alternate modalities of thinking together” the book proffers would indeed reach far outside the book’s particular topic, “traffic in Asian women,” compelling us to interrogate “what we do not know but cannot not want.”

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***Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*, by David L. Eng and Shinhee Han. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019. 232 pp. \$25.95 paperback. ISBN: 978-1-4780-0160-7.**

In *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*, David L. Eng, a humanities professor, and Shinhee Han, a psychotherapist, consider how Asian Americans navigate racism, loss, and grief in the contemporary era. The book centers around two concepts in generation X and Y Asian Americans, respectively: racial melancholia and racial dissociation. While racial melancholia refers to the way racial loss is “condensed into a forfeited object whose significance must be deciphered and unraveled for its social meaning,” racial dissociation describes “histories of racial loss that are dispersed across a wide social terrain, histories whose origins and implications remain insistently diffuse and obscure” (1). Each chapter focuses on case histories involving Asian American patients and students. Drawing on critical race theory and psychoanalysis, Eng and Han consider how psychic processes