

'What Does a Manicure Have to Do With Sex?': Racialized Sexualization of Body Labour in Routine Beauty Services

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After Minhee Cho¹ immigrated to New York City from Seoul in 2003, she immediately sought work at a nail salon. She explained, 'My hairdresser told me that I should work in a nail salon because it was a very popular and easy job for Korean women...easier than a grocery store or laundry. But my husband argued with me, saying people would think I was a low woman, even like a prostitute. I couldn't believe it and argued back, "What does a manicure have to do with sex?"' Minhee, who goes by the name Minnie at the salon, ignored her husband's protests and found a job as a nail technician. She is now a skilled manicurist and has accommodated to performing all aspects of this work, from its physical to its emotional demands: 'It's not a problem for me to have physical contact. I don't feel closer to the customer, because the customer is paying me money for a service. It's just my job – I don't put my emotions into it. I think that customers do feel closer when we give them really good and exceptional service.'

Minhee insists that a manicure has nothing to do with sex and that any positive feelings that arise in the exchange derive from exceptional service rather than sexual desire or objectification. For her, the dynamics of physical contact do not foster a sense of either emotional closeness or sexual intimacy, as she views this contact simply as a necessary part of the service that she is paid to perform. However, whereas most manicurists and customers interviewed for this study expressed similar sentiments, their constructions of the meaning of nail salon work contrast with those of certain customers, policy makers and popular representations that insist on sexualizing the manicure and the body contact that occurs in this exchange.

The impetus for this article came from a puzzling public reaction to my book, *The Managed Hand: Race, Gender and the Body in Beauty Service Work* (Kang, 2010). An ethnography of service relations in Asian-owned nail salons in New York City, the book examined these sites to explore the dynamics of what I refer to as 'body labour', the paid exchange of physically and emotionally intimate services and the increasing commercialization of body-related services. Although the book focuses on mundane beauty services, I was surprised that the first several media inquiries that I received all focused on the sexualization of this work. Although I intentionally downplayed these themes and emphasized labour rights and occupational safety and health issues such as toxic chemical exposures, low wages, lack of breaks, and the emotional and embodied challenges of performing this work, pundits seemed intent on sensationalizing issues such as whether nail salons sometimes serve as a front for sex work and trafficking.

A possible connection between 'trafficking', especially 'sex trafficking', and nail salons has been identified by several sources. The US State Department's 2010 Trafficking in Persons Report lists nail salons as one of the most high-risk sites for trafficking, asserting, 'Trafficking occurs primarily for labor and most commonly in domestic servitude, agriculture, manufacturing, janitorial services, hotel services, construction, health and elder care, hair and nail salons, and strip club dancing' (US State Department, 2010). Criminal justice authorities in various locales have determined enough cause for suspicion of trafficking in nail salons to warrant investigation (Martin, 2010). While acknowledging these concerns, I am wary of the blanket categorization and criminalization of various forms of work that span a broad spectrum of sexual commerce, illegality and exploitation. In any case, this article is not about 'trafficking', however it might be defined, and does not track or assess its actual incidence in nail salons. I have not investigated this question myself and it is very difficult to collect empirical data or to evaluate claims that nail salons are involved. My reason for mentioning it is rather to indicate the existence of an elision between nail salon workers and sex work that is emerging in the US, and which forms part of the wider context for examining the concerns raised by nail salon workers and managers.

How is it that certain types of body labour performed by certain groups of people become sexualized, whereas others do not? What are the specific characteristics of body labour, the contexts in which it is performed, the workers who perform it and the discourses of race, gender and sexuality surrounding it that lead some forms of body labour to be sexualized, and not others? How do workers, owners and customers fuel, deflect, deny and complicate the sexualization of this work? In particular, why do nail salons, which overwhelmingly perform mundane beauty services, so easily become conflated with sex work? This conflation relies upon and reproduces what I

refer to as the 'racialized sexualization' of Asian women in the body service sector, and of immigrant women workers more broadly in various forms of service work. The concept of racialized sexualization delineates processes in which specific historical and situational racial constructions imbue certain kinds of services and service providers, especially those engaged in contact between bodies, with sexual meanings, whether or not the work entails commercialized sexual exchanges.

The editors' invitation to contribute to this volume serves as an opportunity for me to address this persistent sexualization of nail salon work, its context and consequences. Body labour encompasses a wide range of services, from massages, to haircuts, to cosmetic surgery to sex work. Some forms of body labour clearly involve sexual commerce, but others just as clearly do not, yet still become laden with sexual meanings. In this chapter, I discuss manicurists' attempts to de-sexualize and de-stigmatize their work by emphasizing their technical skills and emotional management of customer relations. In contrast, I discuss how a small but significant minority of both men and women customers sexualize this exchange, and how the dynamics of body labour make workers vulnerable to racialized sexualization. Finally, I discuss the significance of these findings for theoretical linkages between body studies and intersectional frameworks for studying race, gender, immigration and labour, specifically for those examining the conflation of racialized bodies with sex work, disease and other forms of social pollution.

Sexualization of body labour

What is body labour, how is it performed in specific sites, such as Asian-owned nail salons, and what dynamics shape the sexualization of this work? Elsewhere, I have developed the term 'body labour' to refer to paid work which involves direct contact with the body and attention to the physical and emotional comfort, pleasure, health and/or appearance of customers who purchase these services (Kang, 2003, 2010). Body labour entails work in which bodies are simultaneously the instruments, the sites, and the objects upon which embodied services are performed for a wage. In contrast, I use 'body work' as a generic term encompassing both paid and unpaid work *on* the body. This work focuses on maintaining, improving or enhancing the health, comfort, pleasure or appearance of the body, one's own or another's. 'Physical labour' refers to work *by* the body as the tool or vehicle of labour, whether or not it involves actual contact between bodies. Thus, the term 'body labour' focuses specifically on the exchange value of services performed both *on* the body and *by* the body for a wage or other form of compensation.

While drawing distinctions among body work, physical labour and body labour, I recognize significant overlap in these concepts. Furthermore, I

acknowledge the lively debate among body scholars with regard to defining the boundaries and performance of body work, in particular, whether such work must involve actual servicing of others' bodies or whether attention to one's own body (its appearance, comportment or constitution) also qualifies as body work (McDowell, 2009; Wolkowitz, 2006). Finally, I build upon Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour. The extensive management of feelings also comprises a significant dimension of body labour, as workers must negotiate their own feelings regarding the corporeality of their work while also attending to the feelings of their customers in embodied service exchanges.

This article also engages with the scholarship on sex work, which has challenged the pervasive lumping together of a range of labour practices within a single, catch-all category, arguing instead for greater precision in differentiating and documenting a continuum of sexual services whose performance and categorization is shaped by the global politics and economics of migration and security (Aradau, 2008; Bernstein, 2007; Kempadoo, 2004; Parreñas, 2011; Shah, 2011). In this chapter, I build on this discussion by developing the concept of 'racialized sexualization' to refer to work that is given racial and sexual meanings by customers, workers or public discourse, whether or not it involves direct sexual contact, stimulation or innuendo. I discuss how even routine, non-sexual body labour such as manicuring has the potential to be given sexual meanings due to its association with bodies, intimacy and pleasure, even if its actual practices do not involve direct sexual provisions. Thus, while it is not sex work, manicuring work can become sexualized in certain customer interactions and service contexts, and this process is heightened when it involves the labour of racialized migrant women. Thus, nail salon work carries the stigma of sexualized work as a result of the gendered and racialized dynamics of physical contact, emotional intimacy and sensual gratification in services performed by Asian immigrant women.

Research methods

Data collection for the study on which this chapter draws spanned over a decade, with several distinct periods of intensive fieldwork and over one hundred semi-structured interviews. The most extensive research was conducted over fourteen months from 1997 to 1998 in New York City and focused on Asian (mostly Korean) nail salon workers and owners, black and white customers and community leaders, and industry representatives and workers of other ethnicities (Vietnamese, Latina and Eastern European). With the help of research assistants, I then conducted both new and follow-up interviews and participant observation intermittently from 2003 to 2010, concentrating in these later interviews on talking with members of labour

rights, public health and community organizations regarding organizing and regulatory efforts to upgrade work in the nail industry. In addition, I conducted dozens of informal interviews with owners, workers, and customers in various public settings, including organizational meetings, restaurants and public transit. The most recent research also included Vietnamese workers and owners in Massachusetts and the San Francisco Bay Area.

The research design included ethnography at three kinds of salons (six sites) in New York City: (1) *nail spas* (Uptown Nails and Exclusive Nails) providing *pampering body labour*, upscale services, including massages, for predominantly white, middle- and upper-class customers; (2) *nail art salons* (Downtown Nails and Artistic Nails) providing *expressive body labour*, acrylic extensions and elaborate designs, for mostly black (African American and Caribbean) working- and lower-middle class customers; and (3) *discount nail salons* (Crosstown Nails and Convenient Nails) providing *routinized body labour*, quick, cheap and rudimentary manicuring services, for racially and socioeconomically mixed customers. This research design allowed for comparisons across different kinds of nail salons while also exploring variation within each category.

Racialized sexualization of nail salon work

Asian manicurists and the body labour they perform are easy targets for racialized sexualization because of the embodied intimacy of the work combined with projections of racialized sexual desire and antipathies onto Asian women by both men and women customers. As more and more men patronize nail salons, the potential for sexualized encounters based on heterosexual norms increases. At the same time, women customers can also imbue these interactions with homoerotic undertones.

Asian women, especially those raised with more traditional gender socialization, often experience discomfort and stress in their embodied service interactions with men and attempt to downplay or ignore any sexual meanings. Jinny, the manager at a nail art salon, when asked what she regards as the most difficult thing about her work, answered, 'I don't like to [serve men]. Sometime when I finish the manicure, I have to massage their hands and I don't like that. I don't like that feeling. I hate it... [Some men come here] just because they want to hold a woman's hand. Yeah, sometimes I feel that's what they like to do... I don't say anything, I just ignore it.' Jinny told me about one particularly challenging instance in which a man suggestively rubbed her hand and asked her to go home with him. 'I just told him he can go right away, because in front of my store, there always is a police car.' Her reference to the police car revealed her assessment of this customer's overtures as both uncomfortable and threatening. Although she had no problem

speaking up to customers in other situations such as negotiations over fees, queues or quality of services, Jinny, consistent with the behaviour of other manicurists, refrained from confronting customers who engaged in sexual behaviour and instead simply tried to quell or overlook it.

Although Jinny does not explicitly attribute this kind of forward behaviour by men to the fact that she is an Asian woman, other respondents regarded such encounters as stemming from widespread stereotyping of Asian women as highly sexual and sexually available. One manicurist connected these perceptions to the US military presence in South Korea, starting with the Korean War in 1950 to 1953 and extending to the present ongoing tensions with North Korea. Military camptowns around the US bases have spawned an expansive growth in commercialized sexual services. She explained, 'Some think that we're easy, like bar girls. They've seen movies, or some may have been GIs in Korea and visited the camptowns.' Thus, the sexualization of Asian women in service interactions has deep historical roots in US-South Korean relations and complex military and business ties (Moon, 1997; Sturdevant and Stoltzfus, 1993; Yu, 2002). This larger context fosters racial and sexual associations in which certain customers come to sexualize manicurists and bring expectations of sexual services into the manicuring exchange.

In order to avoid such sexualized encounters, some salons limit services in attempts to discourage such expectations. An owner of a discount salon that opened in the mid-1980s explains:

We don't have many problems now, but in the beginning when people were not so familiar with nail salons, sometimes we got men who came in and looked around. They acted like something else was going on here besides manicures! That's why we decided not to do hair waxing here, because you had to go alone with the customer to a back room and that gave some men the wrong idea.

Although many other salons profitably offer waxing services, this owner instead curtailed her business opportunities in order to avoid potentially sexualized encounters, particularly with male customers.

Yet even when manicurists avoid secluded, one-on-one interactions with customers, they are still subjected to encounters in which the customer sexualizes the service, the service provider, or both. One salon owner, Cara Park, said that there is a higher turnover of manicurists when there are many men customers: 'Even though most men are good customers, if a worker has one bad experience, she feels really bad and doesn't want to come back. Most Korean women never touched another man's hand except their husband's.' I came across two salons in my research that regularly

refuse services to men in an attempt to minimize the potential for sexualized interactions driven by racial perceptions of Asian women as easy and willing sexual targets.

Consistent with this owner's description of most men as 'good customers' the bulk of customer interactions with men that I observed were appropriate and respectful. However, the few times that services did take on sexual overtones loomed large for owners and workers and created an atmosphere of suspicion or discomfort when men entered the salons. These encounters played out in both similar and distinct ways with black and white men, revealing ways that race, class and gender simultaneously shape sexualized body labour.

At the upscale Uptown Nails, I observed an older white man in business attire exchange light-hearted yet still provocative banter with one of the manicurists: 'Don't you want to marry me? I bet I'm richer and better looking than your husband.' The manicurist laughed nervously and ignored him and the scene did not escalate. While fairly benign, this interaction nonetheless dramatized the proprietary assumptions of the customer in introducing romantic overtones to the provision of body labour, as well as the vulnerability of the manicurist to being objectified in this manner.

In another instance, I watched as a young black man came into Downtown Nails and insisted on being attended by one particularly attractive young manicurist. The owner responded that the desired manicurist was serving another customer in a lengthy acrylic application and pointed him toward another manicurist – a middle-aged woman. The customer surveyed the proposed manicurist disdainfully and scoffed, 'I can do better at another salon', then left abruptly. His demeanour suggested both his sense of entitlement in judging and refusing a woman who did not meet his standards, not based on her ability to provide a skilful manicure but because of her inability to fulfil his eroticized desire for receiving the attentions of an attractive manicurist.

Contrary to media and popular discourse that characterizes men who get manicures as gay or effeminate, many black men frame their visits to nail salons as increasing their desirability to women. When I asked another black male customer what his male friends or co-workers would think if they saw him getting his nails done, he responded, 'They'd think I was a player.' Far from fearing that he would be mocked or diminished in the eyes of other men, this customer regarded his practice of regular nail care as increasing his sexual reputation as a 'player.' I was not able to ask follow-up questions to discern the precise reasoning behind his comments, but I can infer that it hinged upon both his enhanced physical appearance as a result of the nail services and, perhaps, his involvement in an intimate embodied interaction with an Asian woman in the course of this service exchange.

Such interactions reveal that a small but significant minority of men might frequent nail salons not only for manicuring services but also for gratification of unspoken desires based on perceptions of Asian women as sexually desirable service providers. Legal scholar Sumi K. Cho argues that these presumptions increase the vulnerability of these women to both subtle and overt forms of 'racialized sexual harassment', which she defines as 'the particular set of injuries' that derive from the unique configuration of power relations shaping the position in the workplace of Asian Pacific American women and other women of colour (Cho, 1997: 165). She documents how the converging racial and sexual stereotypes of Asian women as, on the one hand, the passive and submissive model minority and, on the other hand, as exotic and erotic 'Suzie Wongs', combine to fuel harassers' beliefs that these women will be receptive to, or at least not reject, their advances. Furthermore, Cho shows how these converging forces foster an environment in which recourse to take action against these unwanted advances is unavailable or discouraged. None of the women in this study recounted any instances where they directly confronted a customer about offending behaviour, nor did they describe this behaviour as sexual harassment. In addition, while some owners seemed sympathetic to their plight, not a single owner could claim that she intervened in an uncomfortable sexualized exchange, nor did I witness any such efforts. Even usually assertive and vocal workers, like the manager Jinny, who had no problem confronting women customers regularly with regard to problematic demands or demeanor, instead assumed a passive stance towards unwanted advances from men, even as she professed her 'hate' for such sexualized interactions.

While Cho focuses on injuries based on racialized sexual harassment, the concept of racialized sexualization developed in this article more broadly addresses instances where sexual and racial meanings infuse interactions even if overt sexual victimization does not occur. This sexualized discourse further complicates the body labour that Asian manicurists already must negotiate in tending to the needs of the various customers they serve, and plays itself out in particular ways, both in actual interactions with women customers and in representations of the service relationship.

'Me love you long time': Sexualized representations of Asian women

In a blog posting entitled 'Asian Nail Salon Rudeness', the author, Jaime, who described herself as a stay-at-home mom living in 'Redneckville, United States', complained about an incident in which the owner of an Asian-owned nail salon treated her suspiciously when she wanted to buy some nail polish. Jaime not only attributed this 'rudeness' to the owner's Asian identity, but

she also confessed her desire to retort with a sexualized racial slur. Jaime mocks the way that the receptionist told her the price of the nail polish ('8 dolla') and says she had to 'refrain from asking, "Me love you long time?" and instead reach into my pocket book and pull out the money and hand it to her. Even then she stands staring at me.... This isn't the first time this has happened. I don't know what it is about asian [sic] nail salons.' After several readers criticized her comments, the author responded: 'The "Me Love you Long Time" thing was thought in my mind, as a JOKE [emphasis in original].... In the end, this is my avenue to blog and to be honest, I don't think I've been hateful or rude in any of my reflections in regards to any race or nationality. Being ill treated as a consumer, irregardless [sic] of a person race or creed is just plain wrong in my opinion' (<http://momaroundtheclock.blogspot.com/2007/11/nail-salon-rudeness.html>, November 21, 2007).

Jaime's comments on receiving service that she deemed rude reveal several rhetorical processes that situate nail salon interactions within a racialized sexual discourse, although she denies doing so. Indeed, Jaime may not know that the line 'me love you long time' references a well-known example of objectionable sexualized portrayals of Asian women in film, in this case, the words spoken by a Vietnamese prostitute in Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. As performance artist Allison Roh Park comments in an interview with MTV, the 'me love you long time' phrase has permeated popular culture in ways that backlash against Asian women. 'That phrase is so loaded. People don't understand the history behind that... Asian women get exoticized and hyper-sexualized to the point where it really affects our day-to-day life' (Vineyard and Kim, 2008). However, instead of acknowledging that she has used such a triggering phrase, intentionally or not, Jaime appeals to her position as an 'ill-treated' consumer to justify her reaction. By invoking the service ideology of 'the customer is always right' to sanction racist sexual remarks, Jaime demonstrates the almost unconscious ways that sexualized representations of Asian women are projected onto actual service interactions in the body labour sector. Even when the service interactions themselves are not sexualized, the fact that they occur in a site where body labour is performed by Asian women allows for easy slippage into prevailing racially sexualized frames.

These kinds of racialized sexual comments on the web unfortunately were expressed not only by random customers but also by purportedly more informed commentators. Surfing the internet for nail-related articles, I stumbled upon the following piece, and was immediately disturbed by its jarring depiction of Asian manicurists as simultaneously exoticized sexual objects and maternal caregivers. One moment, the author described being sexually aroused by her manicurist, the next she regressed into an infantilized state of passivity. Even more astounding is her insistence that this

exchange somehow qualifies as a feminist exchange simply because it occurs between women. I was ready to dismiss this piece as the unfortunate ranting of some adolescent blogger, when I noticed the name of the author. Jennifer Baumgardner, who penned this reflection on her nail salon experiences, is widely recognized as a feminist author and leader in the Third Wave feminist movement. Baumgardner wrote:

But finances and love aside, long, well-tended nails are sexy. And, the process that gets them that way has a nice sensual intimacy that is rare in a \$6 service... The manicurist kneads your palm and slides her fingers up and down on the fleshy nook in between your pointer finger and thumb. As she pulls on your hand and wrist, your fingers splayed open, arm vertical, palm toward her, you rock slightly in your chair from the force of her rubbing... When it's over, if it's cold out, your manicurist has to help you into your coat. Standing in front of you, she zips or buttons you in, and wraps your scarf around your neck like she's your mom and you're suddenly six again... A big reason that the manicure transaction works the way it does – as safe, inexpensive carnality – is because it is a relationship among women... I'd be lying if I didn't note that there is a class and race overtone to the New York manicure experience: the manicurists are small ladies who speak loudly in Korean to one another; the clients are yuppyish, mainly white, and talk too loudly into cell phones to other yuppyish, mainly white people. (<http://www.spoonbenders.com/nails.htm>. This link is no longer active).

Unfortunately, Baumgardner's stature as a prominent feminist thinker stands in stark contrast to her sexual objectification of the Korean immigrant woman who performs her manicure. While she conceded that the exchange is shaped by race and class inequalities, this concession did not lead her to consider the manicurist's perspective on this exchange and what it means for her. Instead, she commended herself for turning the supposedly un-feminist obsession with her nails into what she sees as an empowering act. Baumgardner further congratulated herself for confronting an Asian male manicurist for groping her and her mother, while confessing, 'I didn't really want him to stop-I just didn't want him to go further.' Rather than owning her sexual objectification of both Asian men and women who serve as manicurists, she positioned herself as the hapless victim. In so doing, she discounted her own participation in this unequal exchange, and her reinscription of stereotypical representations of Asian service providers as exoticized others, even in ostensibly non-sexual services.

These blog comments are much more extreme than those voiced by participants in this study (which most likely was influenced by my Korean

ethnicity and the hesitancy of customers to express such views directly to me). Nonetheless, these comments are consistent with processes which were observed at the research sites, such as customers' strong reactions to embodied exchanges, the underlying themes of cultural otherness that shaped performance of body labour and the sexual meanings given to these exchanges.

Discussion

A key link in the racialized sexualization of body labour performed by Asian women is the historical and ongoing construction of Asian women themselves as erotic and taboo objects of desire. The mix of fear and desire which fuelled the discourse of the 'yellow peril' over a century ago now fuels a new, contemporary version. Focusing her attention on Hollywood depictions, film studies scholar Gina Marchetti writes that 'the yellow peril combines racist terror of alien countries, sexual anxieties, and the belief that the West will be overpowered and enveloped by the irresistible, dark, occult forces of the East... [T]his formulation necessarily rests on a fantasy that projects Euroamerican desires and dreads onto the alien other' (Marchetti, 1993: 2). In this fantasy, which is often linked to fears and desires of miscegenation in relationships between Asian women and white men, Asian women are rendered as the spoils of war, trophies that symbolize the triumph of white, civilized men over a heathen, disease-ridden and threatening Asia (Chan, 1991; Lowe, 1996; Peffer, 1999; Yung, 1995).

The gender, racial and sexual subtexts of the yellow peril play themselves out in intimate labour relations even apart from the sexualization imputed to the relations between white men and Asian women. Views of Asian-owned nail salons that reveal the ongoing discourse of the yellow peril in contemporary sites of social interaction are also evident in the relations between women of different racial, class and citizenship status, as previously indicated, and in the wider anxieties connecting Asian-owned nail salons and the spread of disease that may be expressed by women customers. Current discourses targeting the health risks of nail salons easily trigger yellow peril fears of Asians as contaminants. A number of news shows and articles have spotlighted concerns about Asian-owned salons as spreading disease (Ahrens, 2000; Greenhouse, 2007; Rost, 2008). Fuelled by this flurry of negative media attention, the framing of Asian discount nail salons as the new yellow peril thus combines fears of physical contamination, cultural pollution and economic threat. These fears of contamination in these salons tap into deeply rooted historical beliefs that physical contact with Asian women's bodies breeds disease and degradation.

Contemporary debates about Asian discount nail salons reflect new 'yellow peril' stereotypes that are redolent of the virulently anti-Asian

sentiments of a century ago, but are rewritten to reflect the contemporary economic, political and social position of Asian Americans. Nayan Shah, in his book *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown*, documents historical depictions of Asian bodies as dangerous and impure. He writes, '[T]he journey from menace to model minority followed a deep undercurrent of ideas about citizenship, conduct and health... At the turn of the century, "health" and "cleanliness" were embraced as integral aspects of American identity; and those who were perceived to be "unhealthy," such as Chinese men and women, were considered dangerous and inadmissible to the American nation' (Shah, 2001: 12). While Shah focuses on Chinese immigrants, these representations have repercussions for all Asian Americans. These depictions of Asian-owned nail salons as health threats have deep historical roots in fears of Asian women as sexually immoral disease carriers. From the passage in the late nineteenth century of the first exclusionary immigration laws in the US, single Chinese immigrant women entering as labourers were immediately labelled simultaneously as prostitutes and disease carriers, a conflation between sex work, disease and racial contamination that persists today. As Sucheng Chan demonstrates, prominent court battles in California argued that 'allowing the alleged Chinese prostitutes to enter would be akin to allowing persons with contagious diseases to enter' (Chan, 1991: 101). Similarly, in 1875 the US Congress passed the Page Law, one of the first in a series of Asian exclusion laws that barred not only felons and contract labourers from China and Japan, but also targeted Asian women, who were again assumed to be disease-carrying prostitutes. Lubheid (2002) documents how medical advances of the late nineteenth century which linked hygiene to disease reflected and fuelled racial fears of contamination through commercialized, inter-racial, sexual intercourse. By singling out Chinese women for sexually amoral behaviour (while ignoring the much larger problem of prostitution by white women), these laws laid the groundwork for the persistent perception of Asian women as both sexually and racially suspect bodies.

Conclusion

Exacerbated by a harsh and pervasive anti-immigrant climate, Asian women's performance of body labour easily slips into popular perceptions as sexualized work. Such perceptions then fuel processes in which certain customers expect and create sexualized service interactions predicated on racial discourses, a process which I refer to as racialized sexualization. The imposition of sexual meanings on manicuring provision, or even the potential for such elisions, reflects the conflation of Asian women with sexual commerce through the processes of embodied work, migration and racialized sexual discourses.

How do the actors in these exchanges negotiate the racialized sexualization of body labour? The manager, Jinny, and other women cited share experiences that underscore the ways that racial discourses combine with gendered service provision to make certain women more vulnerable to particular kinds of sexualization. The psychological and physical toll of managing racialized sexualization is wearing. In addition, the dynamics of working in the body labour sector, with its expectation of physical and emotional attentiveness, also increase these women's susceptibility to racialized sexualization. Although the majority of men who patronize nail salons are respectful customers, the few who engage in racialized sexualization, even in the form of 'playful' innuendo, make it necessary for women to keep up their guard. Furthermore, women customers can also sexualize these exchanges through same-sex desire or projections of longing for maternal care. Thus, nail salon employment illuminates an often invisible dimension of body labour – the racialized sexual dynamics that casts a shadow over the already demanding work which manicurists perform.

Taking up the dynamics of racialized sexualization in nail salons suggests that body labour cannot be fully understood without bringing migration and racist constructions into the equation. It is not simply that particular types of worker-customer relations are typical of the labour processes that salon work involves, but that body labour seems to be deeply permeated by racialized and sexualized constructions of the meaning of ministering to the body for pay. In Asian-owned nail salons, the context of longstanding processes of racialized sexualization shapes and permeates the relations between workers and customers. It is ironic that although manicurists seek to distinguish what they do from sex work, we could learn something from the wider scholarship on sex work, along with studies of gender, migration and labour, in seeking to upgrade this work. The lessons include the need to consider the laws, policies and larger social and economic concerns that stigmatize migrant women, including manicurists, sex workers and other body labourers, and make them vulnerable to racialized sexualization, further complicating their efforts to upgrade this work. Thus, workplace issues like wages, working hours and toxic exposures interconnect with the racialized sexualization of body labour to heighten the potential for stress, insecurity and exploitation in these jobs.

Note

- 1 All names used for individuals and salons are pseudonyms. Sections of this chapter appeared in *The Managed Hand: Race, Gender and the Body in Beauty Service Work* (University of California Press) and are reprinted here with permission.

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