



# IRRESPONSIBLE STATE CARE AND THE VIRALITY OF NAIL SALONS

*Asian American Women's Service Work, Vulnerability,  
and Mutuality*

Preeti Sharma

**ABSTRACT.** This article examines the discourse surrounding Asian American service workers through a focus on nail salon workers' efforts for advocacy and mutual aid. It is situated in a lens of Asian American and women of color feminisms and analyzes the necropolitical and biopolitical ways that essential workers and nonessential workers, in the various phases of reopenings, are differently valued and devalued as expendable for their service work and/or affective labor. It draws from state policy and media discourse in relation to the advocacy efforts of Asian American community-based or worker organizations.

On May 1, 2020, a coalition of New York advocacy organizations came together virtually to commemorate immigrant workers impacted by the coronavirus global pandemic and the current economic recession on May Day, which is International Workers' Day. The event, "Invisibilized Workers Rise Up," brought together key organizations that organize and advocate with Asian American workers, including domestic workers and nail salon workers, as well as Representative Alexandria Ocasio Cortez (D-NY) and Representative Ro Khanna (D-CA). The event sought to shift the discourse surrounding the "essential workers are heroes" platitude to one that underscores the longer context of the racialized and gendered inequities that low-wage immigrant workers face. Through storytelling, it highlighted the ongoing gaps in federal and municipal policy responses to

the pandemic, which have only exacerbated the vulnerability of low-wage workers of color, including Asian American immigrant and refugee women.

The event, like others held for May Day, was a part of the immediate response across the United States in the previous two months from Asian American and other community-based organizations, worker centers, and unions that centered racial and gender justice efforts for mutual aid and support, when policy and media discourse had not. While the universal construction of essential workers has centralized the trope of hero, emerging articles also assessed the sacrificial, burdensome, or poorly compensated workforce that did not choose that role.<sup>1</sup> Even then, such dominant discourse elides who the workforces are and how low-wage immigrant and women of color populations are made to be exposed, including predominantly Asian American immigrant and refugee women workers. At a time when anti-Asian sentiment is also on the rise, impacted service and care workers—from Filipina nurses and caregivers to South Asian domestic workers and South Asian and Southeast Asian nail salon workers—continue to bear the brunt of state-sanctioned vulnerability, expendability, and disposability. The lack of federal guidance to protect essential workers, the differential access to the CARES Act relief, and the allowance of reopenings on a state-by-state or municipal level for phases of workers all demonstrate the gaps in response that place immigrant and women of color workers, as argued in this article, as necropolitically necessary for the state and the economy to survive.

In this article, I examine the discourse surrounding Asian American service workers through a focus on nail salon workers' efforts for advocacy and mutual aid. Using a lens of Asian American and women of color feminisms, this article situates the necropolitical and biopolitical ways that essential and, in particular, nonessential workers in various phases of reopenings are differently valued and devalued as expendable for their service work and/or affective labor. I focus on state policy discourse in relation to the advocacy efforts of two Asian American community-based or worker organizations to address how low-wage nail salon workers are made to die because of the pandemic crisis, couched in a false dichotomy of life versus economic livelihood. I also argue that such labor was already (in)disposable due to the affective relations central to the beauty service industry and that COVID-19 has only amplified and heightened this dynamic.

### **The Necropolitics of Essential and Nonessential Labor and Asian American and Women of Color Feminisms**

The U.S. emergency shelter-in-place, stay-at-home, and safer-at-home orders mandated a set of populations to stay home, while deeming those whose labors provide the safety of human life and property as “essential,” rooted in racialized and gendered necropolitics. With most paid, in-person work at a standstill, the state category of essential workers created a body of workers whose labor is required to sustain life for others in the face of a pandemic.<sup>2</sup> It placed a predominantly low-wage, immigrant, women of color workforce—from healthcare to restaurant and grocery store workers—in daily and regular exposure to COVID-19 at a time when not enough was known about the virus’s rates of transmission or mortality.

Such measures were administered as a state of exception for the emergency pandemic crisis, relevant to Achille Mbembe’s formulation of sovereignty. Mbembe notes that necropolitics is sovereignty’s expression of its “power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die,” detailing how subpopulations are made to die in benefit of the whole.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Foucault refers to biopolitics as sovereignty’s administration and management of populations to sustain and ensure life of the whole.<sup>4</sup> Naomi Paik, too, focuses on the United States to assert that colorblindness and racist state violence are organized around tiered rights to manage perceived crises: “the rightful—as worthy, deserving subjects—enjoy the protection of rights only because other rightless subjects are so devalued that they are excluded from those protections.”<sup>5</sup> In the current context, rightful subjects are asked to and can stay home to do their part for life, while the rightless are re-marked as essential and heroic precisely because they are giving up their life. In other words, even though the notion of the hero offers a nominal value, their value lies in their potential deaths.

The seemingly extraordinary necropolitical situation also exists beyond the category of essential worker, and beyond the current pandemic crisis for immigrants and women of color, including Asian American service workers. Rather, the pandemic has exacerbated an already vulnerable, racialized, and gendered workforce that had been made to die under the conditions of racial capitalism that centered low wages and the lack of healthcare and paid sick leave, amongst a lack of other standard labor protections. As Angela Davis points out, “so many people at the frontlines of this crisis are women, women especially from the countries of the Global South.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, Davis asserts, racial capitalism in this moment includes the racism directed at Asian Americans as much as it does the exacerbation of health disparities through a lack of testing in Black neighborhoods.<sup>7</sup> For frontline

workers and Black and Brown populations, the terms of race, gender, and capital speak to the lack of personal protective equipment and testing at the workplace and in impacted neighborhoods, coupled with the ongoing structural issues of each industry and community. Though the configurations of racialized and gendered vulnerability across communities are not the same, the impacts of anti-Asian racism and Asian American conditional belonging—whether as a diseased body, enemy alien, terrorist, or unruly immigrant—intersect with being an essential worker and reify expendability and disposability.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the essential worker, though, the protests that called to reopen the economy on a state-by-state basis of phases have rendered another set of racialized and gendered workforces—nail salon workers—expendable by way of exposure. Again, in the seemingly negligent absence of federal level guidance, state-level reopening in April 2020 varied from state to state and included anything from sit-down restaurants at 25–50 percent capacity in Florida, Georgia, and Texas, to shops with curbside pick-up only in California. The public imagination and part of the public protests for reopening have fixated on the barbershop, the beauty salon, and the nail salon, each of which requires touch, and the inability to maintain six feet of distance. The nail salon sector, in particular, is 81 percent women and 79 percent immigrants. A predominantly Vietnamese workforce, it is also comprised of Nepali, Tibetan, Chinese, Korean, and Latinx people across the United States.<sup>9</sup> Once a luxury service provided by lower-class Black and White women to upper-class White women, its very transformation as an affordable service readily available in varying neighborhoods is one that speaks to the labor of Asian immigrant and refugee women and Black women owners and workers.<sup>10</sup> In the pandemic, as the nail salon closes and reopens, it has also been a site of organizing, including feminist practices of mutual aid, care, and relief for its industry.

As such, in this article, I also ask: How do Asian American and women of color feminisms intervene in notions of life, death, safety, survival, and rights? In their new anthology, Fujiwara and Roshanravan retheorize Asian American feminisms in asking how to make sense of the “specific impact of racialized and gendered oppressions on the lives of Asian American women and our communities.”<sup>11</sup> Revisiting the political project rooted in the coalitional politics crafted through women of color feminisms and queer of color critique, an analytic using Asian American feminisms conceptualizes the “historically and culturally specific logics and theoretical frameworks . . . of resistant possibilities, violent realities, and political solidarities.”<sup>12</sup> Scholars reflecting on mutual aid in relation to feminist practice point to its roots in the Black Panther Party’s free food programs as well as disability

justice in the absence of state-sanctioned care.<sup>13</sup> Asian American feminist practices rely on an intersectional framework that not only understands how race, class, gender, and sexuality are mutually constituted, but also underscores the concerns of Asian American women as more than single-issue, relevant to the state-sanctioned violence impacting essential and nonessential Asian American low-wage workers.<sup>14</sup> In using a lens of Asian American feminisms, I too ask how do Asian American community-based organizations and worker centers not only respond to racist state violence and necropolitics of the moment, but also construct mutuality through a reconfiguration of care?

### **State Failures I: CARES Act and Ongoing Exposure to Poor Labor Conditions and Toxins for Misclassified Workers**

As a response to the emergency shutdown and the rising unemployment levels, on March 26, 2020, the Senate passed a \$2 trillion coronavirus response bill that was meant to provide relief, the CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act. The CARES Act operates as a biopolitical project that facilitates life-managing support to those whose jobs were terminated or hours were cut due to the coronavirus economic recession. Situated in a discourse of care reflected in its acronymic naming, it is one of several existing and forthcoming aid packages. Government officials, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), even insisted on it being noted as “emergency relief” as opposed to an economic stimulus package to center its notions of care for populations over business.<sup>15</sup> The seven groups it sought to reach broadly included individuals, small businesses, big corporations, hospitals and public health, the federal safety net, state and local governments, and education, but many were left out. While individuals received a one-time cash payment of \$1,200, and those with children would receive an additional \$500 per child, the CARES Act remains inaccessible to undocumented workers or college students claimed as dependents but too old to qualify as a child. The act also offered \$600 per week in unemployment insurance on top of what a state offers, but the challenges and complications for self-employed populations to access those funds abound.

Temporarily, the CARES Act expanded who could qualify for unemployment—self-employed people—through the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program offered through the end of 2020.<sup>16</sup> While thirteen states notably changed unemployment insurance to incorporate misclassified workers, PUA importantly reconsiders the benefits afforded to

only those who fit within the traditional state definitions of a worker and of work on a federal level.<sup>17</sup> Such understandings of traditional work craft an employer structure with a forty-hour workweek and regular shifts to enforce classic and necessary labor protections, from minimum wage and overtime to breaks, mandated through the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act. Yet even in its inception, the instrumental 1930s New Deal labor protections made racialized and gendered elisions, leaving out the largely Black domestic worker and farm worker populations of the time as a concession to Southern elected officials.<sup>18</sup> In the contemporary moment, neoliberalism's dismantling of traditional forms of work and their labor protections has impacted the protections accessible to the growing service industry in the United States and its racialized and gendered workforce.

The United States' predominantly service-based economy currently operates with a range of unprotectable labor concerns, like "underwork" in the retail sector, or notably, misclassification in the nail salon sector. The nail salon industry in and of itself has a rate of 30 percent self-employment, which is three times higher than the national rate of self-employment.<sup>19</sup> This rate raises concerns that there is rampant misclassification in the industry, where employers are evading labor laws and protections.<sup>20</sup> A properly classified independent contractor, which has its own history of entrepreneurship in the beauty service industry, is based on the degree of control the self-employed person has in setting their own hours and customers, amongst other parameters.<sup>21</sup> Even then, the structure of commission inherent in the beauty service industry is concerning, including the abuse of tip-based work, and even normalized systems of split pay where the employer still holds control over desirable clients, services, and hours.<sup>22</sup> It further demonstrates the existing vulnerability of the low-wage nail salon sector, and the beauty service industry at large, where classifications fall outside typical labor protections.<sup>23</sup>

The lack of health and safety at the salon demonstrates another ongoing vulnerability for salon technicians, misclassified or otherwise. This includes a lack of access to health insurance or paid sick leave due to misclassification as an independent contractor. It also includes regular exposure to toxic chemicals, particularly the toxic trio—formaldehyde, toluene, and dibutyl phthalate—found in many cosmetics and salon grade beauty service products. Specifically, salon workers are exposed daily to such chemicals whether through inhalation, ingestion, or skin absorption, where the workplace conditions themselves are already viral for disease-making. Such repeated toxic chemical exposure in an enclosed and poorly ventilated space has had negative effects on breathing and pregnancy, and exposed workers to skin irritations and lung or thyroid cancer.<sup>24</sup> Put

together, salon workers' lives are made expendable for such labor without access to the very health infrastructure that could monitor or counter repeated exposure to toxic chemicals at the workplace. COVID-19, often described as a respiratory virus, has only made more legible the precarities that nail salon workers have always faced in the United States.

As a stopgap measure for self-employed workforces, PUA has already been complexly implemented and distributed. Its extension of unemployment insurance offers biopolitical protection for independent contractors, even those misclassified, who are unable to work under the shelter-at-home parameters. PUA manages the life of self-employed workforces as it seeks to stop sudden poverty from a lack of income. Though a federal program, it has been placed at the state level for implementation.

Its uneven deployment across the nation but also across workforces due to existing structural concerns only reifies vulnerability for the nail salon workforce. As nail salon workers and beauty service workers work part-time, or different days at multiple salons, they may be ineligible for PUA. For example, one salon may hire the nail tech as a worker for a few days a week, while another salon may rent out a booth to an independent contractor or a misclassified worker for a separate set of days. However, any applicant with W-2 from the previous eighteen months signals an employee, and disqualifies access to PUA. Furthermore, the language of state forms, websites, and hotlines makes it difficult to comprehend the application and follow up on an application's status. And, lack of access to technology increases barriers to apply online for unemployment. Last, many salon workers are left out of such benefits due to their immigrant status.

While the CARES Act and PUA were facets of state policy to intervene in the impact of shelter-in-place for much of the service economy that was shut down, they were never created for the racialized and gendered workers who occupy the most vulnerable and precarious positions. The rush to phase-based reopening of the economy further reveals the vulnerability and expendability of the mostly Asian American nail salon workforce.

### **State Failures II: Reopenings, Beauty Service, and Affective Labor**

State policy initially necropolitically used essential workers and then biopolitically stipended unemployed workers, but the calls for reopening in terms of social normalcy, liberty, and leisure have also placed Asian American and other women of color beauty salon workers in (in)disposable exposure of the coronavirus. While the predominantly White, and at times,

heavily armed protesters aggrieved over public health measures fostered a spectacle rife with affective tensions at state capitols and city halls, their protest signs demanded freedom and the right to work, but also haircuts.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, a handful of states began to reopen in spite of warnings about the potential renewed spread of COVID-19. Both state-level governments and protestors alike have pushed for a rapid reopening to change the terms of who is allowed to work, but ultimately who can return to being a consumer of services of leisure, emotion, and affect. In each instance, the image and discourse surrounding the beauty service industry has been used to ask and answer questions about state readiness as well as core American values of liberty and consumption over life and death. And yet, in each of these discourses, the contrast of the White consumer-protestor against the impact on the Asian American nail salon is masked to privilege the affective relations of normalcy and the need to save the economy.

On Saturday, April 24, Georgia became the first state in the nation to reopen select businesses, with a range of high touch but notably high intimacy service industries, like nail salons. After a markedly brief statewide shutdown of all nonessential businesses, the list of businesses to reopen included those organized around leisure, entertainment, and affective and body labor. Work that produces emotions, affects, feelings, and sensations as the product, or affective labor, and work that changes the body or delivers the body-related services, or body labor, are central in its first phase of reopening.<sup>26</sup> This included bowling alleys and movie theaters, key for leisure and entertainment. But it also included personal services that offer affective labor and require body labor and forms of touch in proximity of less than six feet, like massage therapists, barber shops, hair salons, and nail salons. The ability to physically distance at a salon is limited, at best. The *New York Times* piece entitled, "The Workers Who Face the Greatest Coronavirus Risk," highlights that manicurists, pedicurists, hairdressers, stylists, cosmetologists, and barbers all have an in-person contact rate of ninety or higher, alongside an exposure rate. The physical proximity required for a service that generally lasts about thirty minutes is in addition to the risks of regular exposure to toxic chemicals and low wages. As such, the state necropolitically placed salon workers in harm as a way to reinstate physical closeness otherwise restricted by CDC physical and social distancing policies.

Inherent in these discourses is the role of salon workers' value, which is rooted in reinstating aspects of social relations and intimacies through consumption hindered by social distancing. Beauty service work is a part of regular practices of body maintenance and beautification that offer a customer comfort, connection, and control. Miliann Kang's research on



Korean nail salons in New York highlights the racialized and gendered hierarchies in service delivery from Asian American women workers to customers in White and Black neighborhoods that foster differential social relations of connection.<sup>27</sup> The intimate and the affective are all central to maintaining such racialized and gendered social relations. Prior to the shutdown, feminist magazines like *Teen Vogue* too noted how the intimacy and affect produced between manicurists and customers allow nail salons to function as “coping mechanisms for navigating the world.”<sup>28</sup> Yet in doing so, at the start of the pandemic, it asked customers to participate in acts of solidarity by not going into the salon, as a way to protect workers. While essential workers and phase one workers are not the same, the beauty service industry has a central role as sustenance for social, emotional connection, and it is also becoming a test case for racialized and gendered service workers’ bodies.

The legibility of nail salon work as a viral meme and a polarizing apparatus in discourses to reopen the economy speaks to both biopolitical need for social normalcy through existing racialized and gendered hierarchies of intimate and affective labor, as much as it speaks to the necropolitical need to save the state’s economy over care. Georgia’s orders have multifaceted implications for the state’s economy. If a business were to open up, and a worker were to refuse to go back to work because of fear or health concerns, the worker would become ineligible for unemployment benefits. The shift in responsibility for care moves from the state to the individual worker. Considering this shift as an individual dilemma, an *Atlantic* article states, “If a business does reopen, your options are either to go back to work and risk infection or stay home and no longer be eligible for unemployment. That is not an equal decision. That is a decision that the state has seemingly purposefully weighted toward you going back to work and risking infection, because it’s no longer willing to support your pursuit of safety.”<sup>29</sup> And yet, even with choosing to reopen, the same structural issues persist—salons now also need to search for PPE, in addition to the existing concerns of lack of health insurance or paid sick leave, and poor wages.

Such measured thinking of life or economy is also apparent in a *New York Times* op-ed by an Asian American salon owner, “Why I’m Reopening My Georgia Nail Salon.” Conveying that she is both relieved and scared at the ability to reopen, Jenna Cao justifies her position to reopen with the state failure to fund her as she is still in limbo with the Small Business Administration’s Economic Injury Disaster Loan as well as the Paycheck Protection Program. Cao continues that not only will she go above and beyond the Georgia State Board of Cosmetologist and Barber’s guidelines, but given that the service is touch-based and intimate, she also looks out for

her clients: "It's true that service providers like nail technicians are literally hands-on. It's an intimate service. So I'm asking any of my clients who have compromised immune systems or fragile health—and those living with family members who are older or have questionable health—to remain at home."<sup>30</sup> For customers who are well and do come to the salon, she has crafted an elaborate screening, cleaning, and salon-admittance process. Her efforts are thoughtful yet not quite the normalcy that protestors crave. Elijah Nouvelage's now infamous photo capturing a heavily masked and covered woman of color salon worker in Georgia visualizes similar tensions, but also of the role of the worker. His images have circulated on *Bloomberg*, *Time*, the *Washington Post*, *CNN*, and *Rolling Stone*, to name a few, but one became a meme, signaling it as "the most American photograph," for the hierarchy posed in the need to reopen the economy and foster normal social relations at the necropolitical sacrifice of its immigrant and women of color workforce.<sup>31</sup> Again such social relations are predicated on a need for, and the disposability of, Asian American nail salon worker's affective labor to perform services rendering comfort and normalcy despite the risks of the virus.

I present to you: the most American photograph



Figure 1. This is image circulated online as a meme captioned with the original text, "I present to you: The most American photo." (Elijah Nouvelage/ Bloomberg via Getty)

Yet the polarizing meme also speaks to Asian American diseased bodies and the role of the service economy as a test case for reopening in distinct state-based phases. For all of Georgia's rapid reopening placing Asian American salon workers' bodies in harm's way, California has cautiously placed salons in its phase three of reopening. On the surface, placing salon workers in a later phase of opening signals a protection of owner, worker, and consumer. Yet, on May 8, in response to a question asking about why salons are placed in phase three of its reopening plan rather than sooner, Governor Gavin Newsom haphazardly and incorrectly singled out nail salons as the start of community spread for the state of California.<sup>32</sup> Newsom's targeting of nail salons relies on tropes of Asian women's bodies and niche economies and spaces as diseased, with Vietnamese women making up much of the workforce, also in relation to other facets of the beauty service industry that include South Asian women in threading salons. The singling out also amplifies the rampant anti-Asian sentiment at a time when the federal government has perpetuated the discourse of the "Chinese virus" and blamed China for the spread. Newsom's lack of retraction or apology only further instigates such hate alongside rising salon worker fear, the confusing county-by-count reopening, and then the near statewide reclosing as COVID-19 cases increased in the summer. Furthermore, his allowance of such salons to temporarily operate outdoors as a stopgap to business closures only continued the confusion as accessibility to outdoor space and ability to perform services in outdoor conditions was limited and challenging.

In contrast to complicated state-led efforts to stipend workers and hastily reopen the economy, the organizing and advocacy response from Asian American feminist organizations, including community-based organizations and worker centers and unions, have paved the way for shifting the discourse away from representations of vulnerable immigrant and women of color workers toward a collective vision of care and mutual aid. These organizations' focus on ongoing expendability through systemic issues is a part of their own discourse of community care.

### **Asian American Feminist Organizational Responses, Mutual Aid, and Solidarity**

In March 2020, in light of the shelter-in-place nonessential business shutdowns, two different Asian American community-based and worker center organizations immediately came together in their respective regions to respond to the impact of the pandemic crisis for the nail salon worker community via activities rooted in mutual aid. In California, the California

Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative (CHNSC) and in New York, the New York Nail Salon Worker's Association (NYNSWA) both created online mutual aid funds, resource guides, platforms, and virtual events. Both organizations' mutual aid funds directly support salon workers and their families' needs in the short term and envision a long-term future grounded in collective care that will sustain them through the pandemic crisis and well after it.

These mutual aid networks reflect a collective care that CHNSC and NYNSWA had long been practicing in their communities, not out of any obligation to charity but out of a commitment to reimagining existing relations through organizing and support—that is, a commitment to survival. In writing about the longstanding practices of mutual aid from queer and trans liberation and prison and border abolitionists, Dean Spade notes that “mutual aid is a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions . . . by actually building new social relations that are more survivable.”<sup>33</sup> In the context of COVID-19, Mariame Kaba, too, conveys that “one of the most important parts about mutual aid has to do with changing the social relationships that we have amongst each other, in order to be able to fight beyond the current crisis.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, different from charity rooted in morality and deservingness, mutual aid locates care as a collective process of responsibility and participation, which also envisions new social relations, all relevant to the nail salon workers' efforts.

The CHNSC, founded in 2005, has long been a proponent of healthy and safe salon workplaces, noting the impact of toxins from cosmetics products on the predominantly Vietnamese salon worker community in California. The CHNSC uses a feminist intersectional approach, in which their efforts move beyond the single-issue framework deployed in social movements in order to address workers' and workplace issues holistically. For example, the organization created the Healthy Nail Salon Recognition program at the municipal and county levels—applying their racial, environmental, and gender justice lens—to shift to toxic-free practices within salons, challenge wage theft, and garner community support.<sup>35</sup> In assessing the initial impact of COVID-19 on salon workers and owners, the CHNSC crafted a resources page, compiling local and statewide information, given the “many pressing issues that nail salon owners, workers, and families are facing at this time,” but also as a way to list the multifaceted, complicated state programs available, their numbers and websites, and their limitations.<sup>36</sup>

CHNSC also launched the “California Nail Salon Community Care Fund,” and other public statements, rooted in an analysis of the racialized and gendered vulnerabilities and anti-Asian sentiment alongside their future

visions of justice. The Community Care Fund, which directly supports manicurists, cites how the Vietnamese refugee and immigrant, women, and low-wage workforce are made to navigate the current financial crisis without access to the protection most needed in a pandemic: healthcare. The CHNSC also acknowledges that the emergency assistance is support as much as it is a way to see a just future.<sup>37</sup> Importantly, such futures also challenged Newsom's statements that compounded anti-Asian racism and xenophobia in the nail salon. In a call to Newsom, CHNSC notes the nail salon "has long dealt with unhealthy workplace environments" and that reopenings must include "worker and owner trainings, paid sick leave, proper worker classification, as well as education about anti-Asian racism and how to address this safely."<sup>38</sup> Both the fund and the press statement address ongoing structural conditions exacerbated in the pandemic.

Similarly, the NYNSWA formed in 2016 to address the pervasive concerns of wage theft in the nail salon sector in New York through a worker association. Though situated in the labor union NY/NJ Regional Joint Board-Workers United, NYNSWA includes partnerships with Adhikaar, an organization focusing on the Nepali-speaking community in New York, and the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health (NYCOSH), an organization seeking to foster safe and healthy workplaces. And though not explicitly an Asian American feminist organization, the partnership addresses both Asian and Latinx workers in the region, including a range of Cambodian, Chinese, Korean, Nepali, and Vietnamese immigrants and refugees. In writing about the New York nail salon movement, Adhikaar also uses an intersectional analysis, noting that the salon is a "flashpoint for many of the most pressing issues of our time" related to "environment, work, safety, health, immigration, gender, race, class, ethnicity, and immigration status," relevant to their efforts in the pandemic.<sup>39</sup>

Making linkages with its ongoing campaigns, the NYNSWA launched its mutual aid fund and virtual community events focusing on unity, not charity, through the framework of addressing injustices. In its "Nail Salon Worker Resilience Fund," the NYNSWA recognizes that nail salon workers already lived "not only paycheck to paycheck but day by day" without an existing social safety net and with the difficulty of accessing funds to meet their needs.<sup>40</sup> They pose similar language in their "COVID-19 Nail Salon Worker Relief & Resilience Platform" with a broader platform of seven points that address the political conditions of the future: (1) Access to Medical Care, (2) Access to the Social Safety Net, (3) Relief for Workers, (4) Rent Suspension, (5) Improved Worker Protections, (6) An End to Employee Misclassification, and (7) End the Criminalization of Immigrants & Stop the Spread of COVID-19 In Detention Centers, Prisons, & Jails.<sup>41</sup> Embedded in

these points is also the call for the Nail Salon Accountability Act to link business licensing with raising the standards for labor, health, and safety.

To hone in on these points, at their May Day event for “Invisibilized workers,” Araceli Torres, a nail salon worker for fourteen years, focused on the “Relief & Resilience” platform as a call to action. She shared that its purpose was to “highlight the systemic injustices in our economy and society, using this moment to reimagine and transform the nail salon industry.” While the fund and solidarity are important, and she loves seeing her clients happy after their nails are done, the prepandemic conditions in the industry are unacceptable, and the government needs to support workers during and after this crisis. In creating these virtual events that brought together a range of vulnerable workers, the NYNSA also sought to fight the isolation that comes from both social/physical distancing and economic insecurity: “we know that we may be isolated, but we are still united.”<sup>42</sup>

### Conclusion

State-led efforts to manage and save its population first through essential workers and then through different phases of workers have both biopolitical and necropolitical implications for Asian American women service workers. As essential workers at hospitals and grocery stores were necropolitically sacrificed to sustain the U.S. population, state definitions of workers who should receive stipends and benefits moved beyond traditional classifications of work, and included misclassified workers. Yet, the inability to access those funds by Asian American immigrant and refugee women workers, namely beauty and nail salon workers, demonstrates its complicated failures. State-by-state efforts to hastily reopen the economy also continued to fail beauty and nail salon workers, given the ways that Asian American nail salon workers have become a vulnerable population for the purposes of being a test case for social and affective connections, for the economy, and for measurements of death. And in instances where a state chose to slowly reopen, its discourses of racial injustice perpetuated anti-Asian racism in singling out the nail salon as the start of community-spread of the virus.

However, the organizing and advocacy response from Asian American feminist organizations, including community-based organizations and worker centers and unions, has paved the way for shifting the discourse of vulnerable immigrant and women of color workers. From offering immediate response through funds and collective virtual spaces for coming together online, the CHNSC and the NYNSWA deploy projects of support

rooted in Asian American and women of color feminisms. Such calls for mutual aid not only offer a discourse crafted through industries left out of the classical definitions of work, including aspects of properly classified and misclassified work or invisible work cast as ordinary and reproductive, they also offer mutual aid as a form of “radical collective care that provides a transformative alternative.”<sup>43</sup> Both organizations imagine a future for the nail salon industry rooted in health, safety, and just wages, but also one of connection and unity across the beauty service industry.

### Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Crystal Mun-hye Baik, Jolie Chea, Lisa Fu, Rahim Kurwa, Jacob Lau, Do Lee, Keith Miyake, Stephanie Santos, Lina Stepick, and Wendi Yamashita, as well as the reviewers, for generative feedback and comments that have shaped and improved this paper.

### Notes

1. Sarah Jones, “This Labor Day, Honor Labor By Compensating It,” *New York Magazine*, May 1, 2020, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/05/essential-workers-deserve-more-than-gratitude.html>; Alina Selyukh and Shannon Bond, “More Essential Than Ever, Low-Wage Workers Demand More,” NPR, April 28, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/27/843849435/hometown-heroes-or-whatever-low-wage-workers-want-more-than-praise>; Kim Kelly, “Essential Workers Don’t Need Our Praise. They Need Our Help,” *Washington Post*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/04/30/essential-workers-dont-need-our-praise-they-need-our-help/>.
2. It is important to note that unpaid social reproduction and reproductive labor have only heightened or increased for those who were able to work from home and do not have access to paid or unpaid childcare or in-person schooling.
3. Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11.
4. Michel Foucault, “Right of Death over Power and Life,” in *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1 An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 133–60; Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, trans. by David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).
5. Naomi Paik, *Rightlessness: Testimony and Legal Redress in U.S. Prison Camps since World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 4.
6. Angela Davis, YouTube video, 1:08:17, from an online event titled “Movement Building in the Time of the Coronavirus Crisis: A Left, Feminist Perspective on 21st Century Racial Capitalism in this Moment,” originally broadcast on April 2, 2020, posted by “The Rising Majority,” April 6, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUP0swVDmtg>.



7. Davis, "Movement Building in the Time of Coronavirus."
8. Paik, *Rightlessness* (above, note 5); Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2001); Monisha Das Gupta, *Unruly Immigrants: Rights, Activism, and Transnational South Asian Politics in the United States* (Durham: Duke U. Press, 2006); Junaid Rana, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* (Durham: Duke U. Press, 2011).
9. Preeti Sharma, Saba Waheed, Vina Nguyen, Lina Stepick, Reyna Orellana, Liana Katz, Sabrina Kim, and Katrina Lapira, *Nail Files: A Study of Nail Salon Workers and Industry in the United States* (Los Angeles: California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative and the UCLA Labor Center, 2018), 23.
10. Julie Willet, "Hands Across the Table: A Short History of the Manicurist," *Journal of Women's History* 17, no. 3 (2005): 59–80; *Nailed It*, directed by Adele Free Pham (San Francisco: Center for Asian American Media, 2019).
11. Lynn Fujiwara and Shireen Roshanravan, "Introduction," in *Asian American Feminisms and Women of Color Politics*, ed. Lynn Fujiwara and Shireen Roshanravan (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 3.
12. *Ibid.*, 5.
13. Dean Spade, "Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival," *Social Text* 38, no. 1 (March 2020): 131–51; Julia Bak, "Coronavirus Shows Care Work Isn't Just for Disabled Communities Anymore," *Bitch Media*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/care-work-disability-framework-becomes-coronavirus-response>; Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018).
14. Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
15. Kelsey Snell, "What's Inside the Senate's \$2 Trillion Coronavirus Aid Package," *NPR*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/26/821457551/whats-inside-the-senate-s-2-trillion-coronavirus-aid-package>.
16. "Pandemic Unemployment Assistance," State of California Employment Development Department, accessed May 8, 2020, [https://edd.ca.gov/about\\_edd/coronavirus-2019/pandemic-unemployment-assistance.htm](https://edd.ca.gov/about_edd/coronavirus-2019/pandemic-unemployment-assistance.htm).
17. Rebecca Smith, "Independent Contractors and COVID-19: Working Without Protections." (New York: National Employment Law Project, 2020), <https://www.nelp.org/publication/independent-contractors-covid-19-working-without-protections/>.
18. Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005).
19. Sharma et al., *Nail Files* (above, note 9), 21.
20. California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative & UCLA Labor Occupational Safety and Health Program (2018), unpublished survey data; California



- Labor and Workforce Development Agency and Department of Industrial Relations (2017), *Report on Labor Law Violations in the Nail Salon Industry*.
21. Julie Willet, "Hands Across the Table" (above, note 10); Adia Harvey Wingfield, *Doing Business with Beauty: Black Women, Hair Salons, and the Racial Enclave Economy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009); Tiffany Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).
  22. Sharma et al., *Nail Files* (above, note 9). Kimberly Kay Hoang, "Nailing Race and Labor Relations: Vietnamese Nail Salons in Majority-Minority Neighborhoods," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 18, no. 2 (2015): 113–39.
  23. Sharma et al., *Nail Files* (above, note 9); Sarah Maslin Nir, "The Price of Nice Nails," *New York Times*, May 7, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/10/nyregion/at-nail-salons-in-nyc-manicurists-are-underpaid-and-unprotected.html>.
  24. Thu Quach, Anuja Mendiratta, Lisa Fu, Jamie Silberberger, Julia Liou, Nancy Chung, Amanda Allen, Peggy Reynolds, and Alexandra Gorman Scranton, *Framing a Proactive Research Agenda to Advance Worker Health and Safety in the Nail Salon and Cosmetology Communities* (San Francisco: California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative, 2010); Alexandra Scranton, *Beauty and Its Beast: Unmasking the Impacts of Toxic Chemicals on Salon Workers* (Bozeman, MT: Women's Voices for the Earth, Nov. 2014); Adhikaar for Human Rights and Social Justice, *Behind the Polish: Experiences of Nepali-Speaking Nail Salon Workers in New York City* (New York, NY: Adhikaar, 2015).
  25. Matt Stopera, "33 Signs From 'Reopen' Protests Across The U.S. That Are 100% Real," *BuzzFeed*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/mjs538/signs-from-covid-19-reopen-protests-across>.
  26. Michael Hardt, "Affective Labor," *boundary 2*, 26, no. 2 (1999): 89–100; Purnima Mankekar and Akhil Gupta, "Intimate Encounters: Affective Labor in Call Centers," *positions* 24, no. 1 (2016): 17–43; Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 117–39; Miliann Kang, *The Managed Hand: Race, Gender, and the Body in Beauty Service Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
  27. Ibid.
  28. Arabelle Sicardi, "Nail Salons are Starting to Close. How will this Affect Workers?" *Teen Vogue*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/nail-and-hair-salon-workers-coronavirus>.
  29. Amanda Mull with Katherine Wells and James Hamblin, "The Georgia Experiment," May 1, 2020, in *Social Distance*, produced by Alvin Melathe, podcast audio, 22:36, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/05/the-georgia-experiment/610993>.
  30. Jenna Cao, "Why I'm Reopening My Georgia Nail Salon," *New York Times*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/28/opinion/coronavirus-reopening-georgia.html>.

31. Madeleine Carlisle, "Scared to Return to Work Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic? These Federal Laws Could Grant You Some Protections," *Time*, May 6, 2020, <https://time.com/5832140/going-back-to-work-coronavirus-rights>; "Photos: Here are the places that are starting to reopen," CNN, May 8, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/24/world/gallery/coronavirus-after-lockdown/index.html>; Taylor Telford and Thomas Heath, "U.S. stocks post gains as states move to ease coronavirus lockdowns," *Washington Post*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/04/27/stocks-markets-today-economy-coronavirus/>; Shawn Donnan, "The Back-to-Work Math Gets Messy for America's Newly Unemployed," *Bloomberg*, April 25, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-25/the-back-to-work-math-gets-messy-for-america-s-newly-unemployed>; Jamil Smith, "They Are Giving You Death And Calling It Liberty," *Rolling Stone*, May 6, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/political-commentary/coronavirus-reopen-states-death-liberty-trump-994421/amp/>.
32. William Feuer, "California identifies nail salons as source of coronavirus community spread, Gov. Newsom says," CNBC, May 7, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/07/coronavirus-california-identifies-nail-salons-as-source-of-spread-gov-newsom-says.html>; Anh Do, "Coronavirus did not spread first from a nail salon. Now when can shops reopen?" *LA Times*, June 6, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-06-06/coronavirus-community-spread-nail-salon-reopening>.
33. Spade, "Solidarity Not Charity," (above, note 13), 136.
34. Mariame Kaba, interview by Amy Goodman, "Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid & How to Organize in the Age of Coronavirus," *Democracy Now!*, March 20, 2020, [https://www.democracynow.org/2020/3/20/coronavirus\\_community\\_response\\_mutual\\_aid](https://www.democracynow.org/2020/3/20/coronavirus_community_response_mutual_aid).
35. Preeti Sharma, "The Thread Between Them: Affective and Intimate Labor in Los Angeles Threading Salons" (PhD dissertation, UCLA, 2019), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1k62d82z>. See especially "Chapter Four: Raising Eyebrow: Unions, Worker Centers, and Healthy Collaboratives," 168–213.
36. "COVID-19 Resources," California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative, last modified March 26, 2020, <https://www.cahealthynailsalons.org/blog/covid-19-resources>.
37. "Donate: The California Nail Salon Community Care Fund," CHNSC, accessed May 8, 2020, <https://www.cahealthynailsalons.org/donate>.
38. California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative, "Nail Salon Workers and Owners Condemn Governor Newsom's Remarks on Attributing COVID-19 to Nail Salons," press release, May 8, 2020.
39. "Healthy Nail Salons Campaign: From The Grassroots Up," Adhikaar for Human Rights and Social Justice, accessed May 8, 2020, <http://www.adhikaar.org/nail-salon-campaign>.

40. "The Nail Salon Worker Resilience Fund," New York Nail Salon Workers Association, accessed May 8, 2020, <https://secure.actblue.com/donate/nailtechresiliencefund>.
41. "The COVID-19 Nail Salon Worker Relief and Resilience Platform," NYNSWA, last accessed May 8, 2020, <http://workersunitednynj.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID-19-Relief-and-Resilience-Platform-final.pdf>.
42. "The Nail Salon Worker Resilience Fund," New York Nail Salon Workers Association.
43. Spade, "Solidarity Not Charity," (above, note 13), 131.