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**Murder Through the Looking Glass:
What we're really talking about when we talk about the killing of
Annie Le**

By Pang-Mei Natasha Chang

We all know her story. She was a beautiful, bright 24-year-old graduate student in Yale's pharmacology department who went missing just four days shy of her wedding. Her body was found on what was to be her wedding day hidden behind a wall in her laboratory, a Yale building at 10 Amistad Street in New Haven. A few days later, a 24-year-old animal technician who also worked at her laboratory was arrested for her murder.

I first read about her in *The New York Times* in my apartment in Manhattan. Across the globe, my brother read about her on *Bloomberg News* in his office in Hong Kong. We felt the pain and horror of her death and of the tragedy facing her family.

Annie Le was also Asian-American. As her story appeared all over the Internet and on 24-hour news updates, blogs, commentaries, Facebook and Twitter posts, the fact that she was an Asian-American female was to become an important part of her narrative, speaking to uniquely American anxieties about sex, violence, gender and race.

I'm an Asian-American woman from Hamden. My father, who was born in China and immigrated to the United States as a high school student, was a physics professor at Yale. My mother, who immigrated from China during grammar school, worked for the New Haven school system. I graduated from Hamden High, Harvard College, and Columbia Law School. Once married to a Jewish man, I recently left Hamden to live and write in New York City.

I know what happens when you're a cute little Asian girl: Guys of all races hit on you. A lot. "Ni hao" they say as an opening line. "How do you say this in Chinese/Japanese/Korean?" Or worse, a phrase that has entered popular parlance — *me so horny* — from Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. We're the thinking man's blonde — Woody Allen's Soon-yi Previn, Nicolas Cage's Alice Kim, Rupert Murdoch's Wendi Deng — or frankly, any man's fetish. We like to submit, they think, or be sexually dominant. We are appreciated for our, pick one: smooth skin, petite size, silken hair. They call it Yellow Fever.

Look at porn sites dedicated to Asian women. Look at Thailand's sex industry. Everything you need to know is there. Richard Bernstein's newest book, *The East, the West and Sex*, argues that Western male fascination with Asian femininity is as old as colonial times.

Annie's photos, courtesy of Facebook, showed a Wonder-bra'd-up Asian bombshell, all 4 feet, 11 inches, 90 pounds of her. Seeing her in strapless dresses, breasts as much an accessory as her smooth skin and warm smile, I couldn't help imagining a young man in the same laboratory falling in love with her and then killing her in a jealous rage on the eve of her wedding. It made perfect sense. Or it seemed to.

It was hard to see the story of the real Annie through the maze of competing stories trying to explain her death.

And I wasn't alone in confusing fiction for fact.

First, there was the story of "The Yale Missing Bride." A few days after Raymond Clark III was charged with murder, media pundits began wondering why Annie's story had taken the nation by storm. Much was said about her being a Yalie. People want to know what happens to the Iviied elite, said *Slate's* Jack Shafer:

"If you plan to be murdered and expect decent press coverage, please have the good sense to be a Harvard or Yale student or professor. America's top dailies and the cable networks will rush to the scene of the crime and ... scrape your personal history and publish enough information to serve as a foundation for a made-for-TV movie about you."

The media elite comes from Harvard or Yale, Shafer wrote, so news about them is automatically newsworthy. Violence at a place as powerful as Yale, the institution associated with George and W., Bill, Hillary and the last three U.S. Justices, is guaranteed to boost circulation and ratings.

Her nuptials were the center of attention. We learned she embroidered her own veil and gushed about marrying her "best friend." The *Times* interviewed her hairdresser, who affirmed with feeling that a woman's wedding was "the most important day of a girl's life."

Meanwhile, the face of a young Asian woman was peering at us. Which is a novelty.

Rarely do Asians appear in the pages of tabloids. Whether Annie was ascribed as Asian-American, Vietnamese-American, whatever hyphen American — her ethnic background and ethnic physiognomy clearly influenced our perceptions of her.

A white girlfriend of mine confessed after seeing a picture of Annie that she first thought: Oh, a mail-order bride. She must have run away.

Then, the story of "The Crime of Passion." Enter person of interest Raymond Clark III. "LAB RAT: Lovesick Yale Tech Suspect in Murder" said the *New York Post* headline on Sept. 15. And not just any passion.

Raymond belonged in high school to the Asian Awareness Club, the *Times* reported. In the club's yearbook photo, Raymond stands between two Asian girls. "Good Morning, America" interviewed a forensic psychologist who declared Annie's "rejection" of Raymond might have been affected by the particulars of Annie's being Vietnamese and America's experience in Vietnam.

In every good crime narrative, especially one driving a 24-hour tabloid-driven news cycle, there is a clearly-drawn villain and victim, a duo whose drama is repeated so often and so uncritically they no longer resemble real people. The Villain: Raymond, 5 feet 9 and 190 pounds, the testosterone-driven baseball and football team member. Raymond, whose old girlfriend surfaced on national television saying he'd forced her to have sex in high school (she'd gone to the police, but hadn't pressed charges). Raymond, who'd thrown up when his friends tried to get him to chew tobacco. Raymond, the red-faced devil cavorting with friends in sexy poses. Raymond, whose nature turned controlling when he couldn't control women. Raymond, whose arrest was cheered by his Middletown neighbors.

Later: Looking doughy, an athlete gone to seed.

A frustrated castrated raging straight white male.

The Victim: Annie, the brainy bombshell, the model-minority Asian-American Ivy-Leaguer, America's classic immigrant success story. Annie had all the criteria: a scholarship to the University of Rochester, entry to Yale, a pinnacle of American higher education. Working on research that could save human lives, yet savvy enough to write about not getting hurt on the streets of New Haven. A woman with her professional and romantic trajectory set — about to marry a nice Jewish boy from Long Island's north shore.

What doesn't fit this caricature, what was reported once and then forgotten about, is the time she sent a picture of her rear end to Princeton's admissions director after being rejected, and the time she teased a girlfriend about not having a shapely butt, then gave her a card with sewn-in buttock pads as a joke. Nor did we hear much about her parents' divorce, how she was raised by an aunt and uncle in a different town from her single mother.

But reality is hard to understand.

Stereotypes? Easy.

So we stuck with the Asian-American immigrant mythology — Annie, the beautiful and intelligent product of the self-sacrificing achievement-oriented upper-middle-class Asian-American machine that sent her to Yale.

We all expected unrequited love and rejection. We all expected sexual assault, violation.

And yet, none.

Instead we have *this* cause of death: asphyxiation.

That's slowly choking the life out of someone face to face. How are we supposed to understand that?

Police are calling it an act of workplace violence. Her murder will not go down as the Yale Murder, the New Haven Murder, or the Annie Le Murder. It will be known as the Workplace Violence murder.

Annie, the martyr of a new America.

Violence at the workplace is no longer a disgruntled former employee returning and going "postal." It's not an outsider coming in and shooting the guard or robbing the bank teller. Now, it's an inside job, one co-worker against another. Two people each with magnetic swipe cards in a secure building with numerous surveillance cameras. Co-workers who had to meet each other to discuss work issues.

"I don't feel safe anymore," complained a female friend. "You can't trust anyone."

Human resource departments are being alerted to the stresses at work, where Americans spend the majority of time. Raymond was obsessed, after all, with cleanliness and lab protocol, according to the *Times*, whereas Yale grad students like Annie were not, and such tension might explain the randomness of workplace violence. Maybe.

"Violence doesn't just happen at home," announces a poster hanging at a friend's office.

Perhaps this is the perfect crime for a recession, one of the worst to hit since the Depression. Worried about getting laid off? Forget about it. Worry about getting killed by a colleague who might want your job or who merely resents you. We are all potential targets now.

In the laboratory where Annie and Raymond worked, there is a clear hierarchy of power: professors on top, then postdocs and research technicians, then graduate students (Annie) and finally, at the bottom of the totem pole, there are animal technicians like Raymond Clark.

What will be the social and political significance behind the individual tragedy that was Annie Le's death?

She was on the professional track, and going places.

Raymond? He was stuck in idle.

If Raymond is found guilty of murder, will his crime be seen as one committed by a low-level employee against one whose professional career awaited?

Or will it be seen as a man against a woman?

Or a white American against a *not*-white American?

Four out of five jobs lost in this recession belonged to men. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics says 9.4 percent of men ages 30-54 were jobless in 2008, up from 3.4 percent in the 1960s.

This so-called "hecession" is happening amid a global economic shift from West to East, from the U.S. of A. to Asia, particularly China. Some are signalling the end of American primacy.

Maybe "workplace violence" has become a catchall phrase that aims to encompass the unsettling social changes and anxieties that define today's Obama America.

Step back from the looking glass for a view of America in which an inversion of the established order is taking place, with the white man losing ground.

Step closer for a view of the lab where Annie and Raymond worked.

Look hard and notice.

It looks like the same thing.

Hear the silence? It's deafening. There's nothing about race or gender in the talk about workplace violence.

Would our story be different if Annie were a black woman, or even a white woman? Would Al Sharpton or Skip Gates make a statement? Would the National Organization for Women have felt compelled, as they did amid revelations that David Letterman had sex with female subordinates, to declare Yale's lab "a toxic environment"?

Perhaps one reason Annie can be so readily turned into an abstraction and her situation so readily made to stand in for workplace violence has to do with this:

The silence of Asian-American women in the workplace, and the Asian-American minority in general.

Annie was Asian-American. Asian-Americans are Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese and Cambodian, Thai, other Southeast Asians, Indians, other East Asians, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus. Have I forgotten anyone?

We are a large group fragmented by language, culture and class without a unified political presence.

Often we are hampered by our own self-definition.

Asian-Americans can mean those born elsewhere who immigrated to America and are naturalized as American citizens; or it can mean those born and raised in America.

By others, we are often considered the "model minority," because of our high educational achievement, high representation in white-collar professions, and, some say, over-representation at Ivy League universities.

Is it something about the role we play, in the culture we have chosen to live in, that keeps us quiet about Annie Le?

Do we resist race-baiting or suggestion of hate-crime in order to keep peace and save face? Is race and gender silent in this story, because Asian females as a group do not yet have an identity beyond their sexualized one?

Are we seen in the workplace as so hard-working and harmless as to be only victims — and not targets?

Here's what sometimes happens when you're an Asian woman in the workplace: Your colleagues dump assignments on you, because you don't

complain. Sometimes you are confused with the other Asian woman working in the office; sometimes people will call you by her name. Your boss likes that you are, pick one: smart, hard-working, meticulous, quiet.

Enter Yale's biomedical labs. Walk down to the basement where Annie's body was found, where the mice are kept. We're not talking just any old pet shop mice. We're talking transgenic mice with pronuclear injections costing thousands per shot. The pressure is as high as the professional hierarchy. Mess up and you contaminate other mice as well as ruin thousands of dollars and months of research.

Look around, especially during lunch. See all the Asian faces? You can't miss us. Sure, when we're alone, we're invisible. But more than one of us, and we become visible, a group, perhaps even a gang.

In one of these groups, Annie Le sometimes sat with other Asian women laughing and talking about her wedding. Of course, Annie had white friends as well, and associated with them, but what did Raymond see? Will we ever know?

Perhaps he saw no difference between different kinds of Asians. Perhaps he saw an insular community in which Asians have status, sometimes talk in their own language and keep secrets.

Perhaps he felt betrayed by a social order turned upside down, one in which he was seen by the silent, invisible Asians as more mouse than man.

My parents still live in Hamden. During a recent visit, I stopped for lunch at a small Vietnamese restaurant in New Haven on Whitney Avenue. It was late afternoon, not very crowded, so one of the managers and I talked about Annie Le.

I asked what had been written in the Vietnamese papers about her. Not much, he said. Then he pointed out that Annie was Vietnamese-American, so there wouldn't be much in the papers about her.

"I know everyone is making up stories," he says, "but this is what I think. Maybe when she ended up at Yale, she thought she was important, and didn't act very nice to Raymond. [Maybe] she was kind of proud and impatient. That happens in this town."

I nodded, recognizing the admixture of town versus gown, local versus transient that is New Haven. It's often the stories we make up about each other that make up much of the world as we know it.

I drove out to Branford, where Raymond Clark is from. Money still speaks in a discreet New England way here: Residents Ted Kennedy Jr. and his wife drive around in an old beat-up VW while Francine Farkas Sears, of the Alexander department store fortune, shops at the local fish market.

I turned down Alps Road a few hundred yards from where Raymond apparently grew up in a rented gray house. It's non-descript, a little depressed. A friend of Raymond's agreed to speak with me.

At Branford High School, Raymond Clark III was known as Ray Clark. He hung around with the Guido set, the kids who wore American Eagle and Abercrombie & Fitch, as opposed to the Preppies who wore Polo and Ralph Lauren.

The Guidos, Ray's friend said, had souped-up cars, muscled-up bodies, and were likely to become volunteer firemen and never leave the area.

I decided to ask Ray's friend about Ray's membership in the Asian Awareness Club. As far as I knew, no "Guido," especially a football player, joined the Asian Awareness Club. At Hamden High, the club only existed for new immigrants, and only because a teacher wanted to take them to Chinatown.

Ray's friend laughs.

"I wanted to talk about that," he said.

He paused to explain.

"Our yearbook photos were really lax and we used to play around."

Turns out Ray and his friends used to see who could get into the most photos. The funnier the better, like the jock in the knitting club.

"We'd do it to get out of class and see how many times you could get into the yearbook," he said. "They'd take the pictures, and then get everyone's name."

He stopped speaking for a moment.

"Ray probably did it as a joke, and now it's coming back to haunt him."

We all think we know the story of Annie Le and Raymond Clark.

But this is all we know.

A 24-year-old woman was murdered violently at her workplace.

A 24-year-old man stands accused.

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