

DISCOVERY GUIDE

KRISTINA WONG, SWEATSHOP OVERLORD

**WRITTEN & PERFORMED BY
KRISTINA WONG**

**DIRECTED BY
CHAY YEW**

A CO-PRODUCTION WITH



With additional support from the
Skirball Cultural Center

**CENTER
THEATRE
GROUP**

...the one thing that has been passed down from the older women in my family is the skill of sewing. Also, Costco memberships and guilt.

—Kristina Wong



In March 2020, Kristina Wong is isolating in her Koreatown apartment when she begins making masks with her Hello Kitty sewing machine. A few days later, she finds herself spearheading the Auntie Sewing Squad, a nationwide network of hundreds of volunteers working from home to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) and other supplies to essential workers and the most vulnerable communities.

Stitching together our most recent history—from mask mandates and vaccine drive-thrus to Blacks Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate—the self-proclaimed “Sweatshop Overlord” recounts her own pandemic journey with humor and wit and invites the audience to reflect on what we have endured together and to imagine what we want to become.

My health is your health. All health matters.

—Kristina Wong



SETTING

TIME

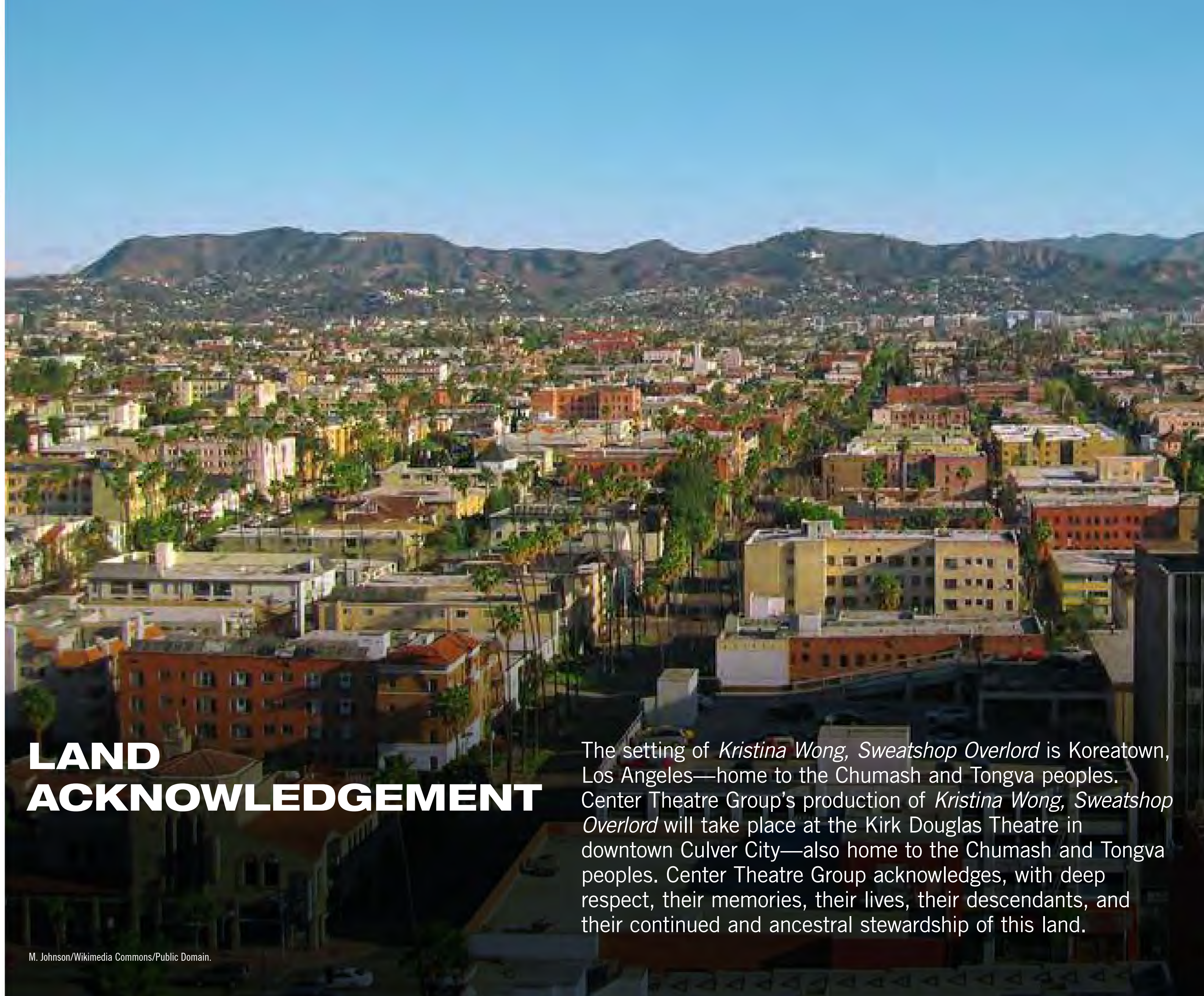
March 2020 to Present Day

PLACE

At-home sewing space in
Koreatown, Los Angeles



Now, I have to start with some trigger warnings: This show takes place in the pandemic. I'm on a set right now which is a representation of my sewing space in Koreatown Los Angeles. —Kristina Wong



LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The setting of *Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord* is Koreatown, Los Angeles—home to the Chumash and Tongva peoples. Center Theatre Group's production of *Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord* will take place at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in downtown Culver City—also home to the Chumash and Tongva peoples. Center Theatre Group acknowledges, with deep respect, their memories, their lives, their descendants, and their continued and ancestral stewardship of this land.

CREATIVE ARTISTS

Artists are the ultimate hope for real social change.

—Kristina Wong



Created and Performed by
KRISTINA WONG

Performance artist, comedian, and writer Kristina Wong describes her aesthetic as “subversive, humorous, and endearingly inappropriate.” She utilizes humor to explore difficult subjects, highlight marginalized experiences, and help effect social change.

A third-generation Chinese American, Kristina Wong was born and raised in San Francisco. She spent much of her early childhood in her grandmother’s care at their Chinese laundry and later majored in English and World Arts and Cultures, with a minor in Asian American Studies, at UCLA.

Wong has toured a solo show about depression and suicide among Asian American women; directed and devised an original streaming

production featuring members of the API community who were formerly incarcerated; created a show about global poverty informed by her travels to Uganda; and theatricalized her personal experience campaigning for local public office. *Kristina Wong for Public Office* was made available on CTG’s Digital Stage in October 2020.

Wong is a recipient of Center Theatre Group’s Sherwood Award and a member of the Creative Collective. In 2022, she became the first Asian American woman to be named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama.

When I was in college... People kept telling me, “You’re so funny! Do you do clown work?” even though I was trying to be really deep.



Directed by
CHAY YEW

Playwright, producer, and director Chay Yew was born in Singapore and came to California in 1981. At age 16, he studied theatre at Pepperdine University and reassured his sensible father that his courses were business-related. When a professor explained that Yew was not cast in a role because he “did not look the part,” Yew replied, “You think I’m going to be playing *The King and I* for the rest of my life? No way.”

Yew explored directing, moved to Boston, and completed his MFA in Communications. In 1988, Yew returned to Singapore, started acting again, and began his career as a playwright. In London, he garnered accolades for his play *Porcelain*. Subsequent plays would premiere on stages in Los Angeles and New York.

Being an immigrant coming to this country, the only family I ever had was the theatre.

Co-produced by



Named by the Ford Foundation as one of “American’s Cultural Treasures,” East West Players (EWP) is the nation’s largest and longest running Asian American theater. Founded in Los Angeles in 1965, EWP produces innovative theatrical productions, offers developmental opportunities for artists of color, and provides youth education programs that feature the Asian Pacific American experience. Its main stage at Union Center for the Arts in Little Tokyo serves more than 25,000 people each year.

CRAFTING THE SHOW

As a director, you go into another world, and you kind of help flesh out a world that other people have created. —Chay Yew



Kristina Wong, Jenna Selby/La Jolla Playhouse.



Photo courtesy of Kristina Wong.

I think we need a catharsis because we've been so alone, we've been burying our own traumas in a way. —Chay Yew

No stranger to solo performance, Kristina Wong started developing stories about the Auntie Sewing Squad within the first forty days of the group's inception. These segments streamed live to colleges and theaters, and Aunties would attend and participate in Q and A sessions from behind their sewing machines.

Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord first emerged as a 30-minute Zoom production that Wong streamed from her Los Angeles apartment in May 2021. As part of New York Theatre Workshop's development program for theatre artists, Wong collaborated with Yew to flesh out a 90-minute play that could be fully staged later that fall in New York.

I realized I'd have to spend more time laying out context that we might've forgotten, and also trying to think about the bigger meaning of all this... —Kristina Wong

After a hiatus from in-person performance, Wong needed to ease back into performing in front of a live audience. To help her, the stage manager posted stock photos of people's faces around the rehearsal room.

The full production—complete with sets, props, costumes, lights, projections, and sound—debuted at New York Theatre Workshop, premiered on the West Coast at La Jolla Playhouse, and is now playing at Center Theatre Group before heading to Portland Center Stage. It forms part of the resilient emergence of live theater amidst the ongoing pandemic.



A PANDEMIC RECAP

Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord takes us back to March 2020, shortly after the World Health Organization (WHO) declares the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic. Wong recounts her personal journey over the course of the 18 months that follow. A lot happened.

Making the masks that the most powerful country in the world has failed to provide. This is my ancestral destiny!

—Kristina Wong

2020



Winter

JAN 1

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) confirms first COVID-19 case in the United States

FEB 3

In Georgia, White residents chase down, shoot, and kill jogger Ahmaud Arbery in a racially motivated hate crime.

FEB 29

A California woman is the first confirmed COVID-19 death in the US.

Spring

MAR 13

President Trump declares a national emergency while schools across the US begin to close.

MAR 13

Breonna Taylor is shot and killed during a police raid of her home in Louisville, KY.

MAR 16

Trump tweets “China virus,” which sparks anti-Asian hashtags on COVID-19-related tweets.

MAR 20

CA Governor Newsom issues a statewide shelter-in-place order.

MAR 28

The CDC recommends that people avoid all nonessential travel and updates messaging to recommend masking in public.



APR 30

Tensions rise over public health safety measures. At the Michigan State Capitol, hundreds of protestors—some heavily armed—rally against stay-at-home orders.

MAY 25

In Minnesota, George Floyd dies after being pinned to the ground by police officers.



MAY 26

Over several weeks, protestors march against police brutality and systematic racism as part of Black Lives Matter, the largest civil movement in US history.

MAY 27

US death toll for COVID-19 reaches 100,000.

JUNE 2

Thousands of National Guard troops are deployed to Washington, DC despite nationwide BLM protests being largely peaceful.

JUNE 18

The California statewide mask mandate requires people to wear masks in public, at work, and in crowded outdoor places.

JUNE 20

At a rally, President Trump refers to COVID-19 as “Kung Flu,” fueling anti-Asian sentiment.

Summer

JULY 17

Pfizer and Moderna begin large-scale trials of possible COVID-19 vaccines.

AUG 18

California, Oregon, and Washington declare a state of emergency due to major wildfires.



Fall

SEP 8

The death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, champion of gender equality, ignites a political battle of who will fill the Supreme Court vacancy.



SEP 16

In Milwaukee, WI, teenagers rape, beat, and leave Ee Lee to die; stoking fear in the Asian American community.

SEP 22

US death toll for COVID-19 reaches 200,000. *Global death toll tops 1 million.*

SEP 26

President Trump holds a “super spreader” event at the White House and soon after announces that he has tested positive for COVID-19.

NOV 3

Election Day: US citizens vote for the next president.

DEC 11

The FDA approves emergency use of the Pfizer vaccine, followed by Moderna. States prioritize vaccines for health care personnel.

2021



Winter

JAN 6

As Congress meets to certify the 2020 election results, violence erupts when a mob of Trump supporters attacks the US Capitol.



JAN 12

The vaccine rollout expands to people 65 and older.

JAN 19
US death toll for COVID-19 reaches 400,000. Global death toll surpasses 2 million.

JAN 25
CA Governor Newsom lifts stay-at-home order.

JAN 28
Vicha Ratanapakdee is attacked while walking in San Francisco. His death and other attacks on elderly Asians awaken the nation to rising anti-Asian violence.

JAN 16

LA County schools begin to reopen.

FEB 27

FDA approves Johnson and Johnson vaccine for emergency use.



MAR 5

California theme parks and outdoor events reopen under strict guidelines and with limited capacity.



MAR 13

Stop Asian Hate becomes the slogan for nationwide rallies in the wake of the Atlanta Spa shootings in which most of the victims were Asian women.

Summer

JUNE 22

The more contagious Delta variant spreads and accounts for more than 80% of COVID-19 cases in the US.

JULY 15

LA County requires masks be used again indoors, regardless of vaccination status.

JULY 20

Amazon billionaire Jeff Bezos goes to space on his own rocket.

AUG 12

FDA authorizes third Pfizer and Moderna vaccine for certain individuals.

SEP 7

The US surpasses 40 million confirmed COVID-19 cases.

Spring

APR 1

Vaccines become available to all California residents 16 and over.

APR 11

BLM protests continue over the deaths of Daunte Wright and others.



MAY 12

CDC recommends Pfizer vaccine for children ages 12 to 15.

JUNE 15

US death toll for COVID-19 reaches over 600,000. Global death toll surpasses 3 million.

Since 2020, more than 1 million people have died in the United States of COVID-19— more than in any other country. The global death toll surpasses 6.5 million. In addition to bringing sickness and death, the pandemic has emphasized longstanding inequities in education, employment, health care, food security, and housing. The most severely impacted groups have been the most vulnerable: ethnic and racial minorities, older adults, people with disabilities, and rural populations. As new variants emerge and vaccines and treatments continue to develop, our nation continues to process and reflect upon the momentous events of recent past.

If there's a community that can't afford to support our work with a donation, then guess what, they are who we should be sewing for first.

—Kristina Wong

SWEATSHOPS

— FACTS ABOUT — SWEATSHOPS TODAY

- Women make up 85 to 90% of sweatshop workers
- 250 million children work in sweatshops worldwide
- Most child laborers are found in Asia and the Pacific
- Common sweatshop products include garments, cotton, bricks, cocoa, and coffee
- Many apparel factories have poor conditions that include unguarded machinery, exposed electrical wiring, unsanitary bathrooms, poor ventilation and temperature control, and insufficient lighting
- Los Angeles is the largest garment manufacturing city in the United States
- The Garment Worker Protection Act (SB62) passed in September 2021 makes California the first US state to require hourly wages for garment workers

✕ **SWEATSHOP:** a factory or workshop—particularly in the fashion industry—in which employees work for long hours and low wages in unsafe, unhealthy, and/or unfair conditions

The Industrial Revolution in England gave rise to the first organized sweatshops. In the 1800s, workers were forced to produce clothing under horrible conditions to keep up with demand. These sweatshops exploited impoverished immigrant women and children.

In the early 1900s, New York became the epicenter of cheap textile production, exploiting Italian and Eastern European Jewish immigrants. In the 1950s, the workforce shifted to Puerto Ricans and African Americans. After World War II, Los Angeles became the new hub for underground sweatshops, exploiting mainly Asian and Latinx immigrants.

Today, sweatshops can be found in the United States and worldwide, predominantly throughout Asia, Central and South America, the Caribbean, East Africa, and Eastern Europe.

In the play, Wong jokingly declares herself “Sweatshop Overlord,” likening the invisible work of the Auntie Sewing Squad to that of modern-day sweatshop laborers.

I feel like Asian Americans are so invisible and this labor is so invisible.

—Kristina Wong

ANTI-ASIAN SENTIMENT

IN THE UNITED STATES

I'm not wearing masks at the moment because I am trying to protect myself not from the virus... but from being the target of harassment and assault. —Kristina Wong

According to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, anti-Asian hate crimes increased 124% across major American cities in 2020 and 339% in 2021.

This occurred alongside increasing numbers of COVID-19 cases and ongoing negative rhetoric that associated Asian Americans with the virus. Reported incidents of anti-Asian violence and racism rose most notably in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.

The United States is home to over 20 million Asian Americans, whose ancestries stem from more than 20 different countries. Major Asian

groups in the United States include people of Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, Pakistani, Hmong, Cambodian, Thai, Laotian, Bangladeshi, Taiwanese, Burmese, Nepalese, Indonesian, Sri Lankan, Bhutanese, Mongolian, and Malaysian descent.

In both past and recent history, Asian immigrants and Asian Americans have faced discrimination and violence in the larger context of colonialism, racism, and capitalism in the United States.

IMMIGRATION FROM ASIA TO THE UNITED STATES

DID YOU KNOW?...

In 1756, Filipino sailors working as crew and indentured servants on Spanish galleons jumped ship and settled in Louisiana.



During the 1800s and early 1900s, immigrants from China and India came to the west coast and worked on farms, in the textile industry, in lumber mills, in laundries, and on the Transcontinental Railroad. In 1852 alone, the Gold Rush drew more than 20,000 Chinese miners to California, aka “Gold Mountain.” In Hawaii, tens of thousands of immigrants would arrive from China, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines to work on sugar and rice plantations.

Both the Korean War and Vietnam War brought refugees to the United States. When the US lifted discriminatory restrictions in the 1960s, more Asians were able to immigrate to the US. Since 1980, the Indian immigrant population has increased thirteen-fold as many skilled and educated Indian immigrants gained employment and brought family to the US. By 2055, Asians are expected to make up 36% of all US immigrants.

Sewing was passed down to us from our mothers and grandmothers who did it as a rite of passage to America! —Kristina Wong

EXCLUSIONARY AND DISCRIMINATORY LAWS

DID YOU KNOW?...

In 1905, California state law added people of Asian descent to an already existing list of people banned from marrying White people.

People say that if you don't love this country, then get the hell out. —Kristina Wong

Although Asian immigrants were initially welcomed to the United States, they quickly became the target of racism and xenophobia, which manifested in American policy and practice already embedded in White supremacy.

The Nationality Act of 1790 reserved naturalized US citizenship for “free whites” only. In the 1800s, California law barred Black, Asian, and Native American students from public schools. At the federal level, the Page Exclusion Act prevented the entry of Chinese women to the United States, and the Chinese Exclusion Act banned Chinese

laborers from immigrating to the US and excluded them from US citizenship. At the turn of the 20TH century, the Asiatic Exclusion League advocated for the prohibition of all Asian immigrant labor in the US and Canada. In California, the Alien Land Act targeted Japanese immigrant farmers by prohibiting all immigrants from Asia from owning agricultural land. In 1922, the Supreme Court upheld the ineligibility of Japanese immigrants for naturalization and in 1924, the National Origins Act established quotas for immigrants admitted from each country and essentially closed the door on immigrants from Asia.

HOSTILITY AND VIOLENCE IN THE US

DID YOU KNOW?...

In the Los Angeles Massacre of 1871, a mob of 500 Angelenos lynched 15 Chinatown residents.



THIS says, “I’m that person threatening your every way of life right now. Take it out on me.”

—Kristina Wong

The violence against Asian Americans that is on the rise today is part of a much longer history. In the 1880s, many Americans on the West Coast blamed Chinese immigrants for declining wages and a plummeting economy. Angry mobs attacked and murdered Chinese miners in massacres from California to Oregon to Wyoming. In the early 1900s, White workers attacked and drove Indian immigrant lumber workers out of town in Washington state.

From 1910-1940, Asian immigrants faced harsh interrogations and lived in deplorable conditions at Angel Island. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in World War II, the United States government placed over 125,000 people of Japanese descent—including US citizens—in internment camps.

Decades later in 1980s and 90s, animosity carried on. In Detroit, Vincent Chen was mistaken for Japanese and beaten to death

by two White men who blamed the rise of the Japanese auto industry for the loss of jobs. In Texas, Vietnamese refugees faced attacks and harassment from the KKK in fishing towns. In California, Korean-owned businesses were disproportionately targeted in the LA uprisings.

Today, violence against Asians and Asian Americans still permeates the nation. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001, Islamophobia led to a rise in hate crimes against South and Southeast Asians perceived to be Muslim. More recently, in 2021, a man on a shooting spree at spas in Atlanta left eight dead, six of whom were Asian women. Ever-increasing anti-Asian hate crimes and incidents have galvanized the Asian American community to rally against the ongoing violence.

For up-to-date tracking or to report an anti-Asian hate incident, visit [Stop AAPI Hate](#).

CHANGE AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

DID YOU KNOW?...

Chinese immigrants built the majority of the western part of the Transcontinental Railroad.



Despite xenophobia and racism, Asian immigrants and Asian Americans have made major contributions to society and helped achieve progress towards equity and justice.

*I'd like to offer this award in memory of **Corky Lee** who dared to remember Asian Americans as a part of American history.*



—Kristina Wong

- ✘ There are no longer racial restrictions on US citizenship.
- ✘ Birthright citizenship now applies to all persons born in the US regardless of race or parents' immigration status.
- ✘ The national origins quota system no longer exists.
- ✘ Labor organizer Larry Itlong and Filipino grape pickers united with Cesar Chavez and Mexican farmworkers to form the United Farm Workers and improve agricultural labor laws.
- ✘ The US documented significant contributions made by Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, and Korean American servicemembers during World War II.
- ✘ Thanks to activists such as Yuri Kochiyama, the US government apologized and provided reparations for all surviving Japanese American survivors of the WWII internment camps.
- ✘ Architecture student Maya Lin won the international design competition for the Vietnam War Memorial.
- ✘ In 2021, Kamala Harris was sworn in as the first woman, first Black person, and first Southeast Asian American to be elected Vice President of the United States.

SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND CULTURAL REFERENCES

In *Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord*, Wong uses wit and dark humor in her social commentary. Here are a few more things, people, and events brought up in the show that are helpful to know:

1992 LA UPRISINGS: a major outbreak of civil unrest that erupted in response to the acquittal of police officers charged in the beating of Rodney King

ANDREW CUOMO: long-time New York state governor who eventually resigned amidst sexual harassment allegations

ANTI-VAXXERS: a group of people who believe vaccines do not work or are not safe and refuse vaccines for themselves and their children

BANANA REPUBLIC: phrase that refers to any country with a leader who relies on the military and destroys state institutions in order to maintain power

BLACK LIVES MATTER: a grassroots movement founded in 2013, dedicated to eradicating White supremacy and anti-Black violence

CBD: cannabidiol, a chemical usually sold as an oil or extract derived from hemp or marijuana that has been touted for a wide variety of health problems

CDC: The Center for Disease Control and Prevention, a federal agency established to save lives and protect people from health threats

CONTAGION: a 2011 Netflix film, starring Matt Damon, about a deadly global virus

DON CORLEONE: the head of the mafia family in the fictitious novel and film *The Godfather*

“DRINK THE KOOL AID”: an expression that refers to blindly accepting something or obeying someone without thought or criticism

FAUCI: Dr. Anthony Fauci, iconic physician and immunologist who served on the White House Coronavirus Task Force

FEMA: the Federal Emergency Management Agency, a federal agency established to help people before, during, and after disasters

JOHN WAYNE GACY: a serial killer and rapist nicknamed “the Killer Clown”

JOY LUCK CLUB: a best-selling novel that focuses on the conflicts of Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-raised daughters, later made into a film and a play

PYRAMID SCHEME: a fraudulent business model in which participants make money by recruiting new members

ROSIE THE RIVETER: iconic image of the “working woman”



QANON: a political conspiracy theory/movement that falsely claims that the world is run by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles that President Trump was recruited to bring to justice

THE SILK ROAD: a vast collection of trade routes that linked Ancient China to the Middle East, East Africa, and Europe

YELLOW PERIL: originated in the 1800s, the racist idea that Asians pose an existential threat to the Western way of life

I love the term auntie... It's a term of respect.

—Kristina Wong

COMMUNITY

Community is a social group whose members have something in common, such as culture, heritage, location, interest, or goals. The Auntie Sewing Squad unites with the common goal of using their skills to alleviate the health crisis, and leader Kristina Wong connects with a nonbiological family bonded by mutual love and support.



Who are some people that you have close and meaningful relationships with?

Who is someone that you would consider an "auntie"?

Who are the people who helped you survive this?

—Kristina Wong



When you meet someone else who's willing to sacrifice so much in a moment for people they don't know, they become family. —Kristina Wong



As masks go, if you protect one person, then you protect everyone around them, which protects everyone around them. Masks are like the Pyramid scheme of prevention! —Kristina Wong

MASKS

Kristina Wong and the Auntie Sewing Squad fabricated more than 350,000 masks in 540 days. In addition to being a vital protective measure against the spread of COVID-19, masks can take on many more meanings.



Is there a mask you wear that you can't take off?

What other kinds of masks do you sometimes hide behind?

What do you hope for as we move forward? —Kristina Wong

This is a mask I can't take off; it already tells people that maybe I'm an immigrant from the monolith that is Asia. Maybe I don't speak English. Maybe I'm the one who brought the virus here. —Kristina Wong

GENEROSITY

Generosity can be defined as a willingness to give help or support without the expectation of anything in return. Generous acts are voluntary and come from a place of selflessness. Aside from monetary gifts and other material items, generosity can take various other forms such as giving your time, talent, encouragement, or forgiveness.

When has someone been generous to you?

When have you been generous to someone else?

Will you be generous in more than times of crisis? —Kristina Wong

We attempted to fight the odds for the love of people we will never know. —Kristina Wong

Alone in our homes, we were not essential, but we became essential for each other's survival. —Kristina Wong

Photos courtesy of Kristina Wong.



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FURTHER RESOURCES

Frontline PBS Coronavirus Pandemic Documentary <https://youtu.be/4DJtjyB1gvE>

Asian Americans Film Series on PBS SoCal <https://www.pbs.org/weta/asian-americans/>

Processing the Pandemic: Remembering a Year of COVID-19 Through Political Cartoons <https://www.choices.edu/teaching-news-lesson/processing-the-pandemic/>

National Museum of American History: *Sweatshops in America* <https://americanhistory.si.edu/sweatshops>

NY Times Interactive: *Inside the Diverse and Growing Asian Population in the U.S.* <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/08/21/us/asians-census-us.html>

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NY Times Interactive: *Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History* <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>

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Black Lives Matter <https://blacklivesmatter.com/>

Kristina Wong <https://www.kristinawong.com/>

Chay Yew <https://www.chayyew.com/>

East West Players <https://eastwestplayers.org/>

BIPOC Critics Lab Audio Interview <https://www.nytw.org/posts/bipoc-critics-lab-a-chat-with-kristina-wong-interviewed-by-gamaliel-arroyo/>

National Archives Educator Resources <https://www.archives.gov/education>



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Photos courtesy of Kristina Wong.