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Manicuring Intimacies: Inequality and Resistance in Asian-owned Nail Salons

The increasing purchase of manicures not only implicates individual bodies in intimate commercialized exchanges, but also expands the boundaries of the service economy to encompass formerly non-market practices of personal hygiene and physical adornment. While popular culture romanticizes beauty salons as havens for women to pamper themselves and build community with each other, ethnographic research in New York City Asian-owned nail salons reveals unequal and contested relations between diverse women. This paper illuminates how nail salon customers, owners and workers exercise limited agency in negotiating and resisting against the terms of intimate labor in the form of the manicure. It also examines different strategies by Asian American community organizations to upgrade work in this industry, including popular education and community-based participatory research, partnerships between federal, state, and local governments and ethnic business communities addressing occupational health and safety, and coalition building between nail salon workers and other low-wage and undocumented women workers within a gendered framework of immigrant and worker's rights.