

White Whispers

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The autoethnography in this article explores the author's struggle with racism. The emotional landscape causes her to blur the boundaries between the individual and collective human experience. She reflects on memories of discrimination and reveals the irony of how she lives in both a culture of diversity and a culture of prejudice. Reflecting challenges the author to realize that racism still exists despite societal efforts at advancing the notion of tolerance and multiculturalism. She explores constructs of ideology and hegemony, power and powerlessness, domination and resistance, representation and misrepresentation, normality and abnormality. By blending autobiography and ethnography, the author resolves a deeper understanding about the personal and cultural influences shaping racism.

Keywords: *racism; autoethnography; discrimination; diversity; sociology*

“Go back to China,” a woman yells from her car window as I cross the street. Her White Whispers soak in and echo. Drench my body like the agony of song. Sting as it raises mental welts. Through my mind like a dirge. A total stranger attacks my face. Dehumanization shreds dignity.

After many years, so much education, I suffocate by the ignorant ranting of a deranged local resident. Due to my outer casing, I represent a race almost as alien to me as that shrieking shrew. The dynamics of dysfunction. Victimization. Drawn and quartered by a phrase. Face down in a damp stretch of mud. Personal proof of humanity's decay. Nevertheless, c'est la vie. Deflated and discouraged, I plunge into a dark abyss and dream of Martin Luther King.

I enter Starbucks, and my eyes scan the customers. Chinese, Jewish, Indo-Canadian, White—a multicultural mix of coffee consumers. Citizens of color are never unaware of ethnicity. I sigh. Walk slowly toward the counter. This country still harbors bigots. Racism. Typically, I receive respect and appreciation from my career. The ideology of teaching at the university. The hegemony of acceptance. I am comforted by the acceptance of students who graciously treat me with respect and dignity. But a stranger on the street sabotages my confidence.

Usually, I am unconcerned about being a Chinese Canadian. But an armor-piercing bullet barrels through my bones as I look for ways to nurture my mind, body, and spirit. I pass a fresh-faced Chinese woman eating a biscotti. An older Iranian fellow sips coffee while he reads the local newspaper. I blush. A wave of heat singes my senses. Subversive ghosts haunt me.

“Chink!” exclaims Sonya, as she slants her eyes with her fingers. I am 10 years old. She spits at Peter Wong and yells, “Stupid chink, get off the blacktop play area;” Agnes Lai runs to tell Mrs. Hildebrandt, our Grade 5 teacher, who says, “Stop those bad comments, Sonya. Stop it!” My Grade 5 teacher makes me smile. She gives me straight As and tells me I am smart. Ignore bad comments. But the hurtful teasing. About slanted eyes. About black hair. About saying my mother wrapped my feet in cloth to make them small. No choice but to endure excoriating racist remarks. A normal–abnormal way to live. Mom says, “Don’t tell the teacher. Don’t make trouble,” and “Stay off the blacktop.”

A sudden sense of shame sweeps over me. Why? My parents were born in Canada. They grew up in a working class neighborhood. Second generation Chinese Canadians with strong academic values. Pragmatists. Neither politically active nor religiously affiliated. Both were raised in Vancouver, Chinatown, which sprang up around 1858, as Chinese emigrated from California, attracted by the lure of gold. My father was a merchant and my mother a high school business teacher. Over time, they shared stories about racism affecting their lives and friends. How life had marginalized their day-to-day realities.

“Lots of prejudice,” Mom shakes her head. “Terrible stories about the way Whites treated the Chinese when I grew up in Chinatown.” Recalling institutionalized humiliation. Grappling with painful memories. After each story, she walks into the kitchen and sweeps the floor. Rising vapors from her tortured eyes. She breathes to inhale strength back into her lungs. I cannot see her face, only her furrowed brow. A long silence. Her wrinkles deepen. My mother’s face is like no others. She does not want emotional support. She stands alone in her formidable dignity. It is the Chinese way.

But she tells stories. Of both power and powerlessness. Of political dominance of Whites. Of hurtful comments. Exclusion. Isolation. My ears ache from listening. I sense only Asians know what she knows. Most Chinatown people came from villages of southern Kwangtung province. Chinese contract brokers convinced men to leave villages to work in the dangerous Rocky Mountain range. My grandmother came to Canada through the Amnesty Act during the building of the national railroad. Empowered as someone else’s daughter, my grandmother left her family to live the irony

of powerlessness. Oriental lives were cheap. Driven to perform harrowing tasks in mining and laying tracks. They died at a faster rate than their White colleagues.

“Go to Gold Mountain,” made the Chinese believe there was gold in rivers. Migrants promised to send wages home and return rich. By 1923, thousands had sailed to Canada. On July 1, 1923, the Dominion of Canada passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. This terminated human traffic between China and Canada. Women were not permitted to arrive; families were divided. Invariably, Chinese men employed at Gold Mountain risked their lives to work on the railroad. Those who did not die or get maimed sent a few dollars a month to families back home. Often, the few jobs found ended in betrayal by wealthy contractors who returned to China. Many committed suicide; others went insane. For Asians, July 1 not only celebrates the birth of Canada but also marks our national racism. A day of joy, a day of shame.

“White guys break into my store and steal leather jackets,” my father complains. I am 16 years old. A self-made businessman, his integrity and hard work fostered good fortune. In its heyday, his tailoring store grossed six digits. I have fond memories of working at his business, Lee Brothers’ Men’s Wear. An active, small business for 45 years. My father experienced prejudice and bigotry. Dying in 1989, his admonition rings in my ears, “Stay away from Whites and Japanese.”

My mother remarried a retired, high school business teacher who has experienced racism. He himself was involved in a racial discrimination case with the auto insurance company for 25 years. In 1944, he went to the Crystal Garden Swimming Pool in Victoria, B.C. with three Caucasian friends. The ticket seller said Canadian Pacific Railway, the owner, would not admit non-Whites. In the 1960s, some Vancouver property covenants stated that owners could not sell to Orientals. My stepfather recalls the signs, “No dogs or Chinamen.” Words that have dogged my stepfather’s existence.

“I’m glad you’re not a real Chinese,” says my best friend Sandra. I am back in grade school. Her words weigh like underwater shadows on a cloudy day. Satisfied and relieved, her White words heal my body. A China glass moment, etched in my memory. The smell of victory. A hint of acceptance amid the threat of rejection.

“Why are Asians so technical and not creative?” he asked. I am chaperoning a high school band trip to Banff in April 2001. A stupid bus driver’s remark about Asians during dinner. My mind chills. His dry words stick in my throat. Heaviness of breath, pounds my heart. Well-honed articulation. No melodrama. Inchoate. Words choke by shameless bigotry. I want to defend but there is resistance. I retreat to a place where numbness churns

my body. The smell of gunpowder wafts in the air. I mentally walk away and grab a broom. How to respond when rage freezes reason?

“All Asians look the same,” says a university colleague in a meeting. Quiet, passive, I listen. Closing my eyes, I remain half-conscious. I had believed well-educated people were more open-minded. Blood circulates in my veins. An overhead flashes, but my mind clouds by my past. Prejudice, a leitmotif, snakes through my life. Hypocrisy thrives. Prejudice is defined as “negative feelings, beliefs, and behaviors, which are based on preconceived notions, inaccurate and unsupported evidence.”

“A White guy has to tell a White guy he is prejudice,” my business partner once remarked. “That’s the way it works.” A White himself, his Japanese wife and children relate how they have endured racist remarks. A lump in my throat. The glacial progress of societal tolerance. Searching for justice. Our country is not immune from toxins spewed by racists. Myths and old wives’ tales trump logic and compassion. A society saturated by merciless misnomers.

“Don’t let a Chinese play the piano, they can’t emote,” confides a sponsor teacher to my student teacher. No sensitivity to hurling fireballs. Dizzily, paint thinner fumes overwhelm me. I reel at the lack of professionalism. As I renew my vow to foster acceptance, encourage diversity, I make an appointment with the head of my department for advice. I ask for help in letting colleagues and sponsor teachers know that racist remarks to student teachers are inappropriate and offensive. Not only is our skin Other-colored, it is also thinner. Prejudice can rise to the surface from the slightest provocation. It is important that mentors remain open and accepting of other cultures. Bullying, intimidation, and veiled intimations of racial superiority must be discouraged. Offensive remarks can inflict bruises and wounds. What are the roots of racism? A sense of entitlement, lack of confidence, anger at perceived unfair competition. The hair-trigger of unprovoked rage at the universe and vulnerable inhabitants. Bigoted bile bubbles up like blood on the boil. Anti-Other.

“I believe they think you do not fit their stereotypical image of the Chinese. You are not part of the group they comment about,” the head of department explains. Strangely, I am comforted. On one level, I represent the Chinese but on another level, they consider me one of their own. My advisor validates my need to communicate with colleagues the inappropriateness of remarks that may be construed as racist. Highlight appropriate behavior. Provide tactful words. Innuendos. Give wise commentary about tolerance for others. Explain that stereotypes can erode kinship. Permeate into isolation, marginalization, acts of war, unexpected disaster.

“A decaf cappuccino, low fat,” I order. A soothing Starbucks, but my day has been shattered. There is something obscene about giving the White cashier my money. Severing memories, verse upon verse. Reliving that Whites have freedom of speech. Free to yell “chink” or “nigger.” But 19th-century New York was littered with signs warning establishments not to admit “the Irish, colored, or dogs.” Minorities in the 1960s and 1970s attempted to destigmatize ethnic slurs. But today, teenagers imitate Black ghetto and gansta style in music, clothing, and video games. White men doin’ Black man’s drummin’. Yet a local White drum teacher was told that he should not teach drumming as students must learn from a real Black teacher. Chinese musicians recognize tacit understandings that hinder our acceptance on stage; White Whispers discourage festival venues. Is this paranoia or fact? As shards of life blip past me, my throat aches. Racism continues to thrive in the halls of academe and on the streets. How to pretend things are normal?

“Have a nice day,” his voice rises while handing me the change. In Starbuck shadows, I watch patrons come and go. No one talks of Michelangelo. Measuring out lives with coffee spoons. A shiftless summer day stilted by memories. Carved in stone. I reach for my decaf. But my watch chimes. The sweet promise of the day has dissolved like sugar in a low-fat, decaf. Regrettably, I should have memorized the license plate. A victim of a drive-by assault. A beautiful Friday morning drives me into a haze of silent bitterness. There are two seats: one at a table with a White female, the other with an Asian male. Today, I’m drawn to sit on the fence. Tears well up in my eyes. A stranger’s bile has infected my world. Stained. Must scrub it off with a steaming shower. I resolve to leave through the side door. Shield myself from the slightest expression of bigotry. I pull the stinger from my heart, engage in self-therapy, “Chink” I repeat, as the word loses its power to demean. Sipping my decaf, a warm voice unexpectedly interrupts my reverie, “Dr. Lee, how are you?”

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