

# White Whispers 2: An Asian Experience

Karen V. Lee<sup>1</sup> 

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## Abstract

The author writes an evocative autoethnography about living through another racist experience that dislodges pain, shock, anger, and sadness. Her firsthand article, *White Whispers* (2008) had already exposed another moment of suffering. As teacher, writer, mother, musician, and daughter, she reflects, again, on living in both a culture of diversity and culture of racism despite social efforts at advancing equity for people of color. Overall, she tries to make sense of the cultural and social phenomena of racism as, “one’s own storytelling can be a source of healing.”

## Keywords

racism, autoethnography, ethnographies, methodologies, narrative, politics and culture

“I like talking to you because you don’t have an accent.”

Vacant, I plunge into a dark territory in the blink of an eye. His white whispers make it difficult to breathe. Creates a lump in my chest and makes my heart heavy. I move away from him at the gym and say nothing. No one knows how words can sting and make me feel alone. But my gut knows.

I didn’t see it coming but just a stone’s throw away. Some reverb in my collarbone and down my body. People might say he is harmless, a guy who makes an off-the-cuff anodyne remark. We had chatted many times at the gym about weather, workouts, vacations, and current events. His voice always neutral; we were exercise acquaintances. But now an off-handed droll takes its toll.

Farewell, Bub. I blot out his face. Wish I had a delete button to press down hard. In the corner of my mind, I want to erase my race. Pollyannish, I wish he could respect people of color. I replay the sequence from the beginning. Re-establish the chain of events, I arrive, remove my jacket, move to the shoulder press machine. A wave from him, I smile. How are you doing? No idea his brewing response. White shirt, runners, sweatpants, it was a bland uniform.

A warm surge courses back and forth between mind and body like a short circuit as I sing my body electric, apologies to Whitman. A stormy tide within, swept away by his casual aside but blindsided. Stay out of sight from him. Now, my workout has lost its bounce. A lay-low workout, one, two, three, four, five presses. A deep breath, another breath. Work on my shoulders. A robot has assumed command and continues my routine. Inhale, exhale with each press. Focus on the machine as a barrier, a partition. I make a wide pass and move onto the leg press. One, two, three, four, five. Insistent second thought to consider a quick exit but I repress it. Veto the idea. *If I do that, he’s won.* Vow to continue my workout. *Only the weak leave.* Six, seven,

eight, nine, ten. Inhale, exhale with each press. I won’t let him destroy leg day for me; I need bigger and stronger glutes. But my mind’s taken flight and resolve dissipates. Should I leave and be a legend in run’s own lifetime?

The encounter jars a memory and cold clarity floods my mind. A dozen years ago, I was walking along a sidewalk when a white woman slowed her car and rolled down her window. Did she need directions? “Go back to China!” she hissed. I could have died and shook for days. Shudder at the prospect of running into the harridan again. I mourn the moment anew; recall her rancid white whisper. My heart rate increases at the thought the world has not changed. Suddenly, my face is hot.

I move to the lateral pull-down machine in full range. *Thank you for lifting me up when I’m pulling down.* One, two, three, four, five. I won’t quit but complain. I continue to make my way through the gym. Move to the chest press machine. One, two, three, four, five reps. I rep faster than usual. Stop, again. Train for the bridge tournament. I want to purge his blooper as it becomes an endless ear worm. Maybe leave without witnessing those who voice sympathy for the devil. As I accept darkness and obliterate the prelim, I work my core, go to the triceps extension bar. Think of a joke: what did the tricep say to the muscular receptionist? Answer: Bye, cep. *Maybe, I should just say bye. And leave without protest.*

I try to shift my mood with two repetitions of ten. Feel stronger and stronger to get a ripped back. One more rep to install the back. Tense, I pull my neck forward. Stretch, two,

<sup>1</sup>The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

## Corresponding Author:

Karen V. Lee, The University of British Columbia, 2125 Main Mall, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada V6T 1Z4.

Email: kvlee@mail.ubc.ca

three, four, five. Certainly, there was an awkward silence when he failed to acknowledge my unease. Tense, I pull my neck backward. Stretch, two, three, four five. Maybe there's an innocent explanation for his ineptitude. Maybe he's flummoxed by accents, Australian, Scottish, British or South African. A hearing issue? My better angel pleads for defense: *Was that an offensive remark? Who else would take umbrage? He says his preference is for clarity in conversation. Is that so bad?*

I wish I heard different words as there is a loss of connection and safe space to pump iron. At the pall that falls over this place. It dies today, along with the last vestiges of my naïveté and optimism. It will haunt. Despite opposing arguments, it becomes clear, I reassure myself, *you know when you've been assaulted.*

A huge sigh as I continue to ache in my academic and personal life from racial intolerance. I acknowledge it but spontaneous prejudice erodes my mental health. Mine is an ongoing quest to heal through writing and sharing ideals. I used to think my doctorate would grant inner peace. Haven't I earned my stripes for a modicum of respect? Not for some who judge on color and appearance.

My mission is to find my voice and express it. To contribute to meaning behind critical discussion. To use auto-ethnographic approaches to research to show that I thrive and suffer as a third-generation Asian woman. During a workshop from Dr. DiAngelo, I learned about the reactions of white people who are challenged by their racial microaggression comments. DiAngelo's book on white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011) outlines that a powerful microaggression is invisible to the perpetrator who finds it difficult to believe they possess bias attitudes. Thus, would he defend it was a misunderstanding?

I write firsthand Asian narratives to share how I suffer from racism. One's own storytelling can be a source of healing (Bochner & Ellis, 2003; Minh-ha, 1989). As I navigate stories, I embrace other stories of those with similar experiences. I also discover how writing autoethnographically can relate to painful experiences as I encounter difficult moments during the research and writing (Raab, 2013). Creating moments for others to rethink and unlearn, I use writing to instill social change through pedagogical means (West, 2008). But it helps to know I am not alone. Though I have endured many racist experiences, I recognize this may be a hidden thread in the life of immigrant families who have lived here for generations. Nguyen (2017) writes about yellow storytelling and how he suffered as an Asian American. Does every Asian have personal experiences of being devalued? Is this a theme in Asian lives? Are racial slurs rare or common? And have others suffered? I reach out and collect stories from a random sample of Asians in Canada:

*I am a first-generation Chinese-Canadian immigrant. With English being my second language, I didn't make a lot of friends outside the ESL program. I remember being picked on*

*all the time by white kids in the playground. Everything from verbal disparagements to pushing me off swings, I've experienced them on a daily basis. One December, it snowed enough that kids got to play with snow during recess. A couple of the school yard bullies, white kids, decided it would be fun to hurl snowballs at me. To my surprise they were snowballs with rocks in the middle. That experience left a permanent scar and caused me to develop an animosity toward Caucasians. It was not until many years later that I could regain my trust in people—male Asian teacher*

*I was speaking Cantonese with fellow music students on a fourth floor lounge where the microwave was. Waiting for our turn, a younger undergrad male Caucasian was being very rude and loud who told us to speak in English and was mimicking us speaking in Cantonese. He was very loud and rude and basically shouted at us. Surprised someone can be so ignorant and rude.—female Asian teacher*

*When I was in grade 2, my school had a wave of Chinese immigrants and I had a teacher who was fairly racist towards Asians. I was a quiet kid who never spoke up but one day, I decided to speak up, so asked a question. I put my hand up. She looked at me and said, 'let's have someone who can speak English answer the question,' then asked a white blonde girl. She also kept insisting to my mom I should be in ESL classes though my mom kept telling her I was born and raised here my entire life.—female Asian teacher candidate*

*During first semester of my university degree, someone in our cohort asked, "What are you?" I said Chinese and she said, "Oh, I thought you were half-white like me." I said a lot of people think that and she said, "That's good. That's good you look half-white." I asked, "Is it?" She said, "Yeah, Asian people want to look white!" Well, she once said she's lucky she's half-white because, "halfers are hotter."—Asian female university student*

*There's one time at the gas station, I opened my door, an old man said, "I know you have an accent and probably won't understand what I'm saying is . . ." He said this before I even spoke. It's all assumptions based on my looks. That time, I felt really offended.—Asian elementary teacher*

*I recall one guy in university who presumed I was born overseas. He was embarrassed when I told him I was born in Ottawa.—male Asian journalist*

*An educational assistant at a school kept asking where I was from, until I said China, and was obsessed with my Aritzia coat and pants and kept fixating on the fact it was a very British thing to wear and kept bringing the staff's attention to it as if weird that someone Asian could wear it.—female Asian elementary teacher and graduate student*

*The experience was during SARS time. It was during PE class. My classmates, two Caucasian boys, yelled that we cannot go near them because Chinese people cause SARS. They would avoid us, made funny faces, pretend to look very scared. No*

*teachers stepped in because boys always did it when teachers were not around. It's always gym time.—female Asian teacher*

*A few weeks ago, I went to Costco, buying food for the restaurant and had to get quite a bit of groceries. Some lady made a face and made a snide remark to husband or friend about how she doesn't understand why Asians are overreacting [to the pandemic] and hoarding food.—male Asian chef*

*At a previous job, I was caught off guard when called, "a Chink,"—by another person of color, surprisingly. —female Asian music teacher*

*My first recollection in the 1960's when my father was driving the family in Manhattan and stopped at an intersection. A white man crossing the intersection in front of our car shouted, "Chink—go home," and slammed his fist onto the hood of the car. My father, a professor, opened the car door and said, "That's ridiculous! This is America, and we're all equal members of this country—this is not what this country stands for!" "Sixty years later, I still recall the incident."—university president, Asian male.*

## Hope Is a Waking Dream—Aristotle

After a teacher read "White Whispers" (Lee, 2008), she approached another person, who had made a racist comment, to challenge that person's assumption about race. After patiently explaining, she felt gratified she spoke up and educated the person on making an ignorant microaggression comment. Bravo, I say. Kudos for you but could I do the same due to possible repercussions?

The roof of my mouth is dry and cannot swallow. There is a harsh tempo that beats under my fingers. For one frozen minute, I crumble by his mumble. *No mas*. Paralyzed, no desire to be cordial again. *Forget him*, I say. Suddenly somber, I am torched by a bonfire of emotions. There is a permanent scar.

*If only he had kept his damned mouth shut*. My innocence flees, cannot be around him. Cannot trust his words. Circling back, I think of a snappy comeback. Channel my inner Oscar Wilde. I may be a timid teacher, but no longer a timid Asian. Must do it for victims of racist remarks and stand up for racial equality, one stoopid (sic) person at a time. Do it for those who silence their voices to avoid awkward moments. But I mask doubt and agony. I want to defend and attack but had stayed mute. Didn't trust my voice. Cowardly, I lash myself for diffidence. But I need to challenge his comment and for him to hear the damage from his corrosive words. Would he care? Argue or stonewall? Though I've heard racist remarks before, a dull ache settles into my leg. I want to ruffle his feathers and score his image into my body. One offhand comment and my heart beats irregular pulses. *Is there a cardiologist in the house?* It's tight as a drum. Inhale, as I try to exhale. His words tattoo

my skin and I had just walked away. Does not please me I was passive. Across the room, his unshaven prickly face hits me with intensity. Go home for a long time, I want to say. Stay away from other Asians.

I blush, cross my hands to stop the spasms. Invisible yet in a crowded gym, I can't ignore this human neutron bomb. He becomes my focus. Standing there, with his white glory, he laughs with another patron and leans forward. His laughter slides off like slime. My eyes glue on him but with no effort to listen to his whispers. The old man keeps his arm at his side. They talk too long. Then, he saunters to another lady and chats her up. Such a charming lad, a real schmoozer. Why do I want to hide my face in my hands?

It is clear we lack a common language. No way to connect. When words don't work, body language is what we have. His language strips me of my vaunted ability to communicate. Speechless. My failure to respond disables me. In a few seconds, a black mood descends that no one can dispel.

I get a skipping rope, grip it tight. A fantasy uncoils with the grope of the rope. I attack him from behind. Won't see it coming. Shove my knee against his back, he can't reach behind. Tighten the rope, twist it around his throat. A loud gag and his voice gurgles. No offense and his words muffle with a constricted airway. His beguiling voice sings no more, stings no more. Who needs words when you have a rope? I hear a gasp, then wheeze. I close my eyes. And shake. But stop, I awake from the dream. It's only a poisoned thought.

In a room with countless mirrors, his reflection obscures. It fogs all directions; blurs from sanity. Minutes later, I shake as if t-boned at an intersection when I drive through a green light. Usually, I have a set time to finish at the gym but I am stuck in a time warp. I'm lost in white whispers. Now, when I want to leave, I cannot. I have lost my traction. How to move forward? My mind mires in a kind of oblivion. Then it awakens. Words pour from my heart. And suddenly, without warning, I find myself walk toward him. I look him in the eye and begin, "about your earlier comment. . ."

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## ORCID iD

Karen V. Lee  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2414-9320>

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## Author Biography

**Karen V. Lee**, Ph.D. is a Lecturer, Faculty Advisor, Area Coordinator, and co-founder of Teaching Initiative for Music Educators cohort (TIME), at the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B. C., Canada. Her research interests include issues of memoir, autoethnography, poetic inquiry, performance ethnography, creative-relational inquiry, women's life histories, writing practices, music/teacher education, and arts-based approaches to qualitative research. Her doctoral dissertation was a book of short stories titled *Riffs of Change: Musicians Becoming Music Educators*. She is teacher, writer, musician, teacher/music educator, and researcher. Currently, she teaches undergraduate and graduate students at the university in both traditional and online contexts alongside her academic and scholarly writing pursuits. In 2020, she received the Killam Teaching prize.