

Autoethnographically Interrogating School-Based Anti-“Asian” Racism in Post(?) -Pandemic Times: An AsianCrit-Informed Composite Palimpsest

Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies
2023, Vol. 23(5) 451–462
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DOI: 10.1177/15327086231176098
journals.sagepub.com/home/csc



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Abstract

The ongoing racialized violence against “Asian” communities—that was simultaneously illuminated and amplified during COVID-19—is not a geographically isolated phenomenon. Vis-a-vis the Atlanta Massacre of 2021 and other senseless attacks on “Asian” Americans stemming from white supremacist fears of the Yellow Peril, “Asian” Australians have likewise been, and continue to be, victims of everyday old and new racisms rooted in Orientalist discourses and concomitant fears of the invading Other. As microcosms of society, schools are germane for the analysis, confrontation, and transformation of such racialized injustices and so, as a means of intervening in these everyday inequities, this paper weaves an AsianCrit-informed autoethnography with palimpsestuous composite narratives drawn from semi-structured interviews in a broader project with other migrant “Asian” Australian teachers to chronicle personal and professional race-making practices in the face of racism before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, while also rethinking and re-stor(y)ing a way toward more hopeful, inclusive futures in schools.

Keywords

critical autoethnography, Asian Australian teachers, Australian education, anti-Asian racism, gold noise

Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting¹

It felt like my rapidly beating heart was about to erupt from my chest. Despite the negligible distance between the car park and the school hall’s entrance, the nervous anticipation sent adrenaline coursing through my veins and cold sweat dripping down my spine. Having graduated at the end of the previous year, it was my first official day of employment as a full-time high school teacher.

I am one of the first to arrive in the spartan school hall, and, as I make my way to the bleacher seats, I am deeply embarrassed by the squeaking of my freshly polished shoes on the linoleum flooring. My only consolation is that this squealing masked the loud thumping from my chest, which, by this point, had crescendoed to a loud ringing in my ears.

I notice the small smattering of colleagues in the hall already deep in conversation with each other, so I tip-toe toward the back row of the bleachers, conscious of avoiding all eye-contact. I am satisfied with my vantage point and grateful for the lesson planning that will take place in the student-free week ahead. As I see more bodies slowly enter the room, I feel my heart rate slowly decrease.

The white noise from the ongoing conversations eventually engulfs the entire space, providing a more sustained reprieve for my nerves. With ten minutes to spare and no one beside me, I decide to whip my newly issued work laptop out—after all, the lesson plans for next week were not going to write themselves.

Suddenly—to my mind at least—I hear someone yell, “HIII YAAA!”

Utterly confused, I look up from my laptop.

“Aaron, right? Heard you do kung fu! I’m in charge of the inter-school sports program here, and it’d be great if you could run a kung fu program for our students.”

The bald, white, male colleague standing in front of me accompanies his lazy assumption with a toothy grin and a range of flailing arm movements more reminiscent of tai chi.

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I am stuck in my seat, completely aghast. As he continues flapping his arms about, I quickly scan the hall—first for a quick escape, to no avail, and then to survey its demographics. I am immediately hit—like a freight train at full speed—with the realization that I am the only “Asian” in the room, and that this was, unsurprisingly, a racist micro-aggression (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012).

*Erratum: Kung Flu Fighting

It is two hours after the official end of the school day at a more advanced point of my teaching career. The other teaching staff had cleared out at least an hour ago, with the faint droning of a distant vacuum cleaner lingering as my only company. It is perfect. As had become convention, I was staying back to cogitate on the day’s teaching and compose future lessons without the encumbrance of the time pressures and white noise of the regular school environment.

The cessation of the vacuum’s droning coincides with a break in my concentration as I am suddenly hit—like a freight train at full speed—with a flashback of the incident with my (now ex) kung fu loving compatriot. I am aware by this stage of my teaching (and budding researching) career that the egregious racialized homogenization of “Asian” teachers—or “Asian” communities writ large, for that matter—is not a one-off aberration, nor is it a geographically isolated phenomenon. As I recall the initial pose my ex-colleague strikes, I am reminded of a small pocket of scholarship from the North American context which chronicles racialized assumptions or overt racist acts where “Asian” teachers are mocked with stereotypical interpretations of “Chineseness” (Cho, 2010), constructed as unable to communicate productively with parents, cater for classroom difference (Xu, 2012), or effectively manage classroom behavior (Zhou & Li, 2015). As I replay the way he raises his right arm in a sweeping motion, I think of how “Asian” teachers in the Australian context face race-related barriers to hiring and promotion, name-calling, and accent-related ridicule (Collins & Reid, 2012), “gate-keeping mechanisms” and marginality in workplace relations (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2007, p. 111), as well as peripheral positioning and subsequent isolation (McCluskey et al., 2011). I vividly remember how he brings the flats of his hands together just in front of his chest and shake my head as I reflect on the transnational convergences of racialized violence against “Asian” communities² and its commensurate collective memory of racial trauma (Asian Australian Alliance et al., 2020).

As I sit slumped at my desk, I wa/onder how these convergences converged with conversations with other migrant “Asian” teaching colleagues.³ I wa/onder as well about how to do *meaningful* work (Bochner, 2013) with these conversations from my standpoint as an “Asian” Australian high school teacher and teacher educator who immigrated from Singapore over a decade ago, and who is neither fully

“Asian”, not completely “Western” (Ang, 2001)—a standpoint of relative class, race, gender, and ability privilege that prevents me from fully representing a “pan-Asian” experience. I remain slumped, knowing my stories of race and racism are not exceptional, but at the same time, wa/ondering if it is perhaps the “common nature of them that provides insight” (Oh, 2018, p. 107).

I sit there, listless, allowing the aimless tapping of my right index fingernail against the composite filling in my right incisor to fill the silence momentarily.

As the vacuum’s droning restarts, my train of thought is suddenly wrenched to the right toward a composite memory of the strengths of composite narratives, particularly in engaging dialogically with others who share my identification (Denzin, 2009), while also remaining “contingent on the stories, authors, and audiences as they interact” (Adams, 2008, p. 179).⁴

I wa/onder as well about the precariousness of “speaking as” an “Asian”,⁵ and problems of speaking *on behalf of*, and if there is some way to consolidate the two in an ethical fashion.⁶

Concurrently, I am concerned about the relational ethics and care that necessarily converges with conveying such conversations. I am cognizant that any account I provide is always seen through my “own point of view at a particular place and point in time” (Lapadat, 2017, p. 592) and that my interpretations cannot fully capture lived experience, meaning that any textual representation is always a partial and temporary inscription (Lapadat, 2017). I am conscious that “language can never contain a whole person, so every act of writing a person’s life is inevitably a violation” (Josselson, 1996, p. 62 as cited in Ellis, 2007). I contemplate my authorial and privileged role as researcher (Ellis, 2007) and the commensurate narrative privilege that should motivate me to discern who I might hurt or silence in telling stories (Adams, 2008), that is, taking care to let “the politics and ethics of research . . . permeate every phase of the research process” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a, p. 21 as cited in Lapadat, 2017), especially since “narrativizing, like all intentional behaviour . . . is a site of moral responsibility” (Richardson, 1990, p. 131).

I concentrate on the conundrum that composite narrativizing necessarily prevents colleagues purposefully consenting to their representations in the writing (Wall, 2008) and that every time I write my story, I escape textual debate with the people I textually implicate (Adams, 2008). I concede that I don’t have an inalienable right to tell the stories of others (Ellis, 2007) and that the very act of “listening to and engaging in others’ stories is a gift” (Ellis, 2007, p. 26). I concede as well that decisions around *what* and *how* to convey are

complex in terms of integrating our own moral positions with society’s call for scholarship that contributes to social justice;

readers' demands for truthful and multifaceted accounts; and research participants' and characters' desire for privacy, positive representation, and control over the stories of their lives. (Ellis, 2009, p. 23)

While I am challenged not to commodify others (Lapadat, 2017) as I compose composites, I am also challenged by how I can possibly "do representation knowing that I can never quite get it right" (Pillow, 2003, p. 176). I consider how challenging it is addressing the "lingering question of whether I have the right to write about others without their [full knowing] consent, especially when what I say shows them complexly, including some of their prejudices" (Ellis, 2009, p. 10).

Conversely, if I were to censor this complexity entirely, I would be compromising the charge to write honestly or critically about anything in our lives (Ellis, 2009). As I continue composing a tooth and nail counterrhythm to the vacuum cleaner's toing and froing, I confess a certain degree of confusion since there is no simple rule that can be applied (Lapadat, 2017) and no one set of rules to follow (Ellis, 2007); a confusion that stems from not "know[ing] how I can tell this story without the messiness" (Ellis, 2009, p. 10).

As the vacuum's droning gets louder, I hear the tandem countermelody of Adams (2008) and Ellis (2007, 2009), who encourage a-way forward through acting from my heart and mind *while* acknowledging interpersonal bonds (Ellis, 2007) in line with a "politics of openness" (Zylinkska, 2005, as cited in Adams, 2008). I recall the reminder that it is likely that I will never know how others might interpret or respond, nor will I ever know who I help or harm with what I compose—nevertheless, I can commit ethically to a "simultaneous welcoming and valuing . . . [of] endless questioning without ever knowing if [my] life writing and reading decisions are right or wrong" (Adams, 2008, p. 188) while also "struggl[ing] with [my] ethical choices time after time . . . repeatedly questioning and reflecting on my ethical decisions" (Ellis, 2007b, p. 5). In thinking through the issues beforehand as well as I can, I claim responsibility for what I write (Ellis, 2009), and as I write what I think is right, I hope that it will turn out for the best and accept that I am responsible for my choices (Ellis, 2009).

I chew on a further encouragement that ethics is not simply a set of guidelines about what *not* to do, but also about how research contributes positively to the world (Lapadat, 2017), and since "stories teach us how to act, we must critically evaluate these stories to observe hidden and problematic politics" (Adams, 2008, p. 179). The countermelody reminds me that talking about beliefs and prejudices I find harmful is central to relational ethics (Ellis, 2009) and that the narratives I compose serve a larger social justice purpose (Ellis, 2009)—one which importantly allows us to "see the depth of the feelings that some have toward difference and to try to understand how and why these feelings

developed and are maintained so strongly" (Ellis, 2009, p. 21).⁷

The vacuum cleaner is now within eyeshot, so I sit back upright as I start gathering my belongings. It is time to clear out, and even though I know where to go next, some questions still linger. I question if there are more questions to ask, since not asking questions risks a dangerous comfortable complacency (Pillow, 2003). While I'm cognizant that these stories are for the greater good, I question if my definition is just for my own good (Ellis, (2007). At the same time, I cannot help but question if, at the end of the day, telling these stories⁸ is the *only* ethical thing to do (Poulos, 2009, as cited in Ellis, 2009).

Those Cats Were Fast as Lightning (Exclusion ↔ Belonging)

The emphatic ringing of the lunch bell comes as a huge relief. Having either been teaching in back-to-back lessons or on yard duty, I am eager for the opportunity to finally catch my breath.

With arms full of a menagerie of student resources, detention slips, and work laptop, I use my right heel to shut the classroom door and scurry on my relatively short journey back to the staffroom. I see a few white colleagues walk by, but quickly perish the thought of smiling at or greeting them.

But when it comes to you, it may be even harder for YOU to get in touch with them or to have a small talk or whatever to them because they view you differently. A few teachers, when you walk past them, they don't even look at you. I'm not sure if it's the teacher or it's me. Even if you want to say hi to them, they don't even give you a chance to have eye contact.

The pained but jovial sounds of Indy's laughter which dominated an earlier conversation replay in my head as I waltz past the white noise of student chatter and drop my shoulder to barge the staffroom door open. I quickly deposit my belongings onto my desk, peeking over the cubicles to decide whether I would have my meal at my desk or in the lunchroom today. I am relieved to see a few friendly faces nestled away in the far reaches of the lunchroom—the Remote Oriental Island (see Lee, 2012, for a discussion of "Asian" urban communities as isolated and homogeneous islands), or ROI, a term my fellow "Asian" teaching colleagues—Indy, Demeter, WB, John⁹—and I had affectionately coined for our segregated seating.

And I fit in with the other staff, to some degree, but in general, I still have a lot to go . . .

As I return the student resources to the respective folders in which they belong, my mind waltzes about who, and

what, is permitted to belong. I immediately think about the age-old question I am frequently asked upon first meetings with white teaching colleagues—*where are you from, and, you know, where are you REALLY¹⁰ from, where are your ancestors from, and stuff like that.* A question that demonstrates the “inescapability of my notional Chineseness” (Ang, 2001, p. 28) and carries with it “the expectation, the requirement even, that I would mention another space”—a space, somewhere in “Asia” that embodies the “mysterious, inscrutable other—presumably the ‘natural’ land for people with my ‘racial’ features” (Ang, 2001, p. 11); a seemingly benign query that instantiates the “denaturalisation of our status as coinhabitants of this country, and in the automatic assumption that because we don’t fit the stereotypical image of the typical Australian, we somehow don’t (quite) ‘belong’ here” (Ang, 2001, p. 144).

They say things, you know . . . White people, they do not like me, okay?

“Wait, is someone thinking of moving house?”

I manage to catch the tail end of a discussion about choosing suburbs as I head over to the ROI.

“Hey, Aaron! Good lessons so far? No, no one’s moving. We were just talking about what we’d be most concerned with IF we did move.”

“Yeah, Aaron, I was just saying to Indy that *I may have this concern that if the suburb is full of white people, will it be hard? Will I feel comfortable living in this street if everyone is white, and, how will they treat me? You know, like, will they be FRIENDLY to me, or will they hold some hostility towards me? Because I’m different, I WILL have this kind of consideration. There ARE concerns about being discriminated against . . .*”

Indy bobs her head knowingly to Demeter’s comment before responding quickly.

“I understand what you mean about difference. *I suppose Australians . . . they don’t have a strong, like American, racism. [See.] I’ve been welcomed by my ex-husband’s family and all the family members and by the neighbours and everything. Yeah, not as much negative there, but when it comes to teaching, some students, and I think to some degree, the parents as well, because I’m a Chinese . . . [I mean,] it’s not exactly bullying . . . they just view you differently.*”

I nod my head knowingly in response to Indy this time.

“Yes, I suppose you’re right in saying that ‘Australian racism generally is far less overt and direct, and far less easy to delineate’ (Hage, 2014, p. 234). We often struggle to ‘prove any “hard” racism here while still feeling objectified, subjected to scrutiny, othered’ (Ang, 2001, p. 144).”

“Exactly, Aaron, the other thing is that *only YOU need to fit in, not the other way round. And I realised SOME teachers, when we’re in meetings, or just teachers from other departments . . . they’re not as friendly [to you] as they are*

to white people. Yeah, because they think you are [a] migrant.”

Indy’s observation prompts a moment of somber silence, which is broken by the whisper of John’s agreement.

“Yeah, that’s why I always used to make excuses about being busy when the Australian colleagues at my previous school asked me along for Friday afternoons at the pub. *I was just like, I live here, I work here. [But] I don’t know if in that sense, I belong here? Then again, I don’t like the things people say or do to affect my thinking because . . . [Well,] because my background’s Chinese, you know, I’m always Chinese no matter what. And Australia is always going to be a foreign country to me?*”

“I wonder though, John—and Aaron—if that’s more about nationality than race per se¹¹?”

I take a moment to process WB’s question. Instinctively, I want to launch into an explanation about the fact that there are different referent points for being positioned as “Asian” in different contexts depending on historic, geographic, and demographic factors, and that being “Asian” in Australia is immediately associated with anyone remotely East “Asian” or Southeast “Asian” in appearance (Ang, 2001). I want to highlight convergences with the North American context in terms of non-East/Southeast “Asians” living as racialized bodies (Endo, 2021b) to address his nationality versus race question. I want to challenge John’s resignation, given that “Chineseness is a category whose meanings are not fixed and pregiven, but constantly renegotiated and rearticulated, both inside and outside China” (Ang, 2001, p. 25), and that “Chineseness” in Australia is a marker of his minority status, “torn from its historical, cultural and political embedding and lodged in a biologically constituted racial category” (Hall, 1996, p. 472) that imparts “an externally imposed identity given meaning, literally, by a practice of discrimination . . . highly effective in marginalising the other” (Ang, 2001, p. 37). I want to tell the rest of the ROI that “Asianness” in Australia often involves being confined “within the particularist ghetto of ethnicity” (Ang, 2001, p. 191) based on an asymmetrical hegemonic relationship of *difference* from the west (Ang, 2001), where we are subjected to a perpetual foreignness (Nicolacopoulos & Vassilacopoulos, 2004) external to the symbolic space of Australianness. Unfortunately, I am rudely interrupted by the end-of-lunch bell.

I still feel . . . (chuckles) I’m just a Chinese. Now, we have a saying in Chinese, 落叶归根. Yes, it means your roots are still in China (laughs).

In Fact, It Was a Little Bit Frightening (Culture ↔ Race)

Like remember at the start of the year when COVID was happening? We were all like, “Shit, they’re going to come for

us, like Chinese . . . Chinese looking people. We're going to be racially profiled on the street and stuff like that." And it's happened . . .

I was at Coles [supermarket] or something out wearing a mask and then some guy . . . when I passed him, he said something like, you know (shaking head), F you Chinese and your masks and things.

The staffroom door closest to my desk bursts open, and I hear a huge, exasperated huff before I can even turn around.

"Everything ok, Yvette?"

"Ha! Do you know what, Aaron? Us Asians might as well walk around with a huge sign that says 'ROI' on our backs!!"

"ROI as in return on investment?"

"Well, yes, our kind are essentially just cash cows in different contexts (Yao & Mwangi, 2022)—among other things—but I was more thinking risk of infection . . . One of my students told me earlier that [I'M] the COVID-19 virus."

I think back again to the kung fu incident and feel a mixture of righteous fury and protectiveness boil from within—after all, Yvette was brand new to the school and to teaching. I screw my face up in disgust.

"I know! What a pest, right? *It doesn't bother me as much, I guess.* But it reminds me of one of my Singaporean Chinese teacher friends. She's been *preparing herself for the kids to ask her some sort of racist questions . . . [I mean,] for her to have that mindset of, 'I need to be prepared if this question is asked,' even though she's not Chinese and she just looks Asian . . .* I can't imagine how insecure she must feel."

"Who's insecure, Yvette?"

"Oh, hey, Indy—didn't hear you sneak in with all the white noise in the staffroom. I was just telling Aaron about how one of my Singaporean Chinese friends has been in this perpetually hypervigilant state since the pandemic hit (Sims et al., 2022). And of course, the discussion started because one of my students referred to me as the virus in period two."

"哎呀!¹² Some of these students are just horrible! Don't worry, Yvette, it happens to me, too. Lots of Asian and Chinese jokes, especially from the *naughty one[s]*. Or the other one, before COVID, was a subtle sort of bullying of the Asian-looking students in my class—like, oh, this task was done well or poorly purely *because he or she is Asian.* Anyway, 先吃饭—see you at the ROI?"

But I do find sometimes it's hard to fit in . . . culture-wise. Yeah . . . It's just a culture thing. And it's, I don't know, maybe [it's] only me?

"That sucks, Yvette. But I do know what you mean. *I notice that . . . when I walk by [white students], they kind of*

like check on me and things, and some kids, they laugh [and snigger at me], you know."

This new piece of information from John made it much clearer as to why he felt so resigned to his assigned foreignness.

"Hmm, my white students don't laugh overtly at my difference—they just tell me off when I pronounce something wrong. And I suppose *I don't really see it negatively . . . since I'm still learning [English] . . . I'm happy to learn THEIR accent [since] Australia has Australian accents. But . . . you know sometimes when you say a word, it's probably the English [or] American version, just not the Australian version. But they think your English is wrong because that's not THEIR version* (Baratta, 2018)."

"I'm not sure it's about accents, though, Demeter."

Demeter throws a quizzical look WB's way in response to his statement, which is enough of an indication that further explanation is required.

"I think about the Asian international students I teach at university and at school, and the way they interact amongst themselves and with students from other countries, and I reckon *their culture . . . [teaches] them to behave a certain way . . . or it could be [because of] their language barrier. It seems to me [they're] just being cautious about, you know, associating with . . . Australian people, because they feel they could be targeted, or laughed at on the language stuff. And because of the language barrier, maybe they're thinking about racism in their head, like, they don't want to engage, because they have really bad English [and] people are gonna laugh . . . [at] their language skills.* I think it's the same for us—I mean, I ended up being the butt of several racist jokes when I first migrated because my English wasn't great."

"Yes [WB]! *I think the language may still be a barrier as well for me. Because if your language is a bridge to the culture—*

"I don't agree, WB and Indy, *even [if] you speak fluently, your accent . . . you know . . . reveal[s] that you're different; [that] you're not originally from here"* (Beinhoff, 2013).

My upbringing in ostensibly postcolonial Singapore (Dziedzic, 2020) where I was educated in English, along with a keen ear for accent modification (Baratta, 2016) afforded me the privilege of not being able to fully participate in this discussion, but I see that Demeter's comment about difference resonates with the rest of the ROI.

"Whether it's accent or language, I know *I'm not the norm—the culture that I have is not the cultural norm that is shared by my colleagues.* Maybe all we can do is try our best to adapt into their . . . culture."

"Yeah, John, when I first moved here for high school, I was so focussed on ASSIMILATING myself *into the new culture [while] making new friends and all that . . .*"

“Yvette is right. It’s so difficult though—I realise some teachers or some Westerners, they’re not interested in [other] culture[s] and [keep to] their own circle of friends.”

Demeter nods furiously in agreement with Yvette and Indy before adding her twopence.

“I guess one good thing is that, in my situation at least, they are tolerant to you because they know you’re a Chinese teacher. So, you’re here to teach languages . . . and English is not your first language so they can tolerate when—”

“But doesn’t that mean that they’re the only ones with the ability to tolerate? Doesn’t that place white Australians in pole position of power when we talk about tolerance (Hage, 1998; Liu, 2017)? Doesn’t merely being tolerated completely devalue our linguistic and immigrant experiences and abilities (Tomic, 2013) and play into a form of linguistic racism (Wang & Dovchin, 2022)?”

I see the cogs in Demeter’s brain whirring in response to my questions just as I notice Christine, the second of the two new “Asian” hires approaching. John and Indy catch her up on the conversation as she grabs a seat.

I notice her screw her face up at certain points of the recapitulation.

“See, this is exactly why I usually don’t sit here. Sticking together—it’s understandable—it’s a sense of a security. But you have to realise this is the main culture. This is the mainstream. YOU get used to it; it’s not other people get[ting] used to you. I think it really depends on how YOU open up to the new culture; it’s not how the new culture welcomes you. As a new immigrant . . . I always [had] that [fear about language]. So . . . even [if your] language is okay, you are still hesitant to say something because you might be wrong. And you don’t want to be judged by what you say. But, after getting married to my Australian husband and having been here for some time, I feel more confident, more comfortable . . . I’m not afraid of expressing my thoughts. But that’s not what new immigrants or you know, people who do not blend into the mainstream culture would experience.”

As Christine finishes her sentence, I jump in almost instinctively.

“I . . . don’t quite agree, Christine. I think most of us here would prefer to fit in rather than stand out, but I think we need to acknowledge that while it may be a refusal to adapt, this desire to belong can also be ‘contradicted by an incapability’¹³ to do so (Ang, 2001, p. 28).”

“Even then, Aaron, it’s HOW you perceive yourself. It’s not how other people perceive you. I think lots of people complain about being ridiculed or excluded for being Asian, but for me, even before this school, I’ve had students saying things like *ching chong chinaman* [to me], yelling it out . . . [but] I feel they are just NAUGHTY. I don’t feel particularly they are racist, or [that] it’s because of me. Racism is not as big [an] issue as people think.”

I throw my head back in disbelief just as WB’s strained laughter cuts through the tension.

“Ha! Ha. Maybe we can just agree to disagree? For me, it’s a problem, but *the more people are exposed to Asian people, ENGAGE with Asian people, they’ll start to know and understand about [our] culture—oh, they’re not, you know, they’re not evil, they’re not bad. And then, you know, I know a really good Asian, I know a really good Chinese bloke, or girl, and they’re just amazing. They make amazing food and invite us over and stuff like this. So, the more people interact with each other, I think the problem will get less and less serious.*”

WB concludes with a wry smile, which Christine takes as her cue to leave.

And when migrants are not welcome . . . you can spit on them and chase them out, as you wish, right. And that’s nothing to do with malice necessarily on any individual’s part—it’s built into the system.

But They Fought With Expert Timing

There is an AVERAGE Australian—I forget the word; I’ll think of it. But there is an average Australian, who happens to be white. Possibly from the country, possibly wears a Stetson.¹⁴ Yeah, thing, things like that . . . there’s, there’s a national myth, and YOU are not part of the national myth. You came here in the last 30 years. You came here to get a job. And you’re welcome here, as long as you behave, right, things like that.

Indy has politely moved the conversation on, but I have lost my appetite for polite conversation. I feel a great deal of ambivalence at my exchange with Christine.¹⁵ The embodied and metaphorical distancing from other members of her racialized group (Trieu & Lee, 2018) suggested a conscious (or unconscious) acceptance of the dominant white racial hierarchy and its associated beliefs (Kohli, 2014) to the extent that she had “internalised a superiority to her community” (Kohli, 2014, p. 368) and shifted the onus to the minoritized themselves, absolving [white] Australia of any responsibility for exclusion (Liu, 2017). Inevitably, much of what was said silenced the “subtle and ubiquitous” effects of being raced and conveyed the “contradiction and internalized harm . . . [that] confuses identity” (Oh, 2018, p. 113). In seeing herself and her community through dominant cultural representations, there was the risk of erasing our “sense of humanity and individuality” (Osajima, 2007, p. 140).

There was also Indy, who, like the rest of the ROI, had conflated culture with racial or ethnic identity (Said, 1978), and who, despite the invisibility and marginalization (Ang, 2014) she endured over the past decade, had “neutralise[d her] experience of racism to . . . cultural barrier[s]” (Liu, 2017, p. 790), all the while clinging to the “illusory promise of equality on the basis of a strived-for but never achieved

sameness” (Ang, 2001, p. 12)—a case of “almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 89) since she would never be fully or truly white (Nicolacopoulos & Vassilacopoulos, 2004). This was white hegemonic domination at its finest in “render[ing] the oppressed complicit within their own oppression” (Seet, 2021, p. 217).

WB, on the other hand, had admitted that racism was a problem, but seemed unaware of (or unfazed by) the fundamentally imperialist and Orientalist character of the Australian discourse of multiculturalism (Liu, 2017) he was advocating. His reference to commodified artifacts of difference (Ang, 2014) such as food (Flowers & Swan, 2012) and face-value solutionism through increased interracial interaction instantiated an internalized (mis)understanding of multiculturalism’s “simultaneous encouragement and containment of cultural diversity” (Ang, 2001, p. 14)—an insidious strategy of keeping cultural difference in check (Bhabha, 1990). Alas, the very “repression of ‘race’ in [WB’s] multiculturalist discourse” failed to acknowledge the “persistence of ‘race’ as a key marker of [the] absolute and unacceptable cultural differences in everyday understandings” (Ang, 2001, p. 100); differences that were permitted and tolerated only when defined in the white majority’s terms (Liu, 2017).

Indeed, WB’s conscious (or unconscious) glossing over of the power of race to fix the “infinite differences and diversities of human beings through a rigid binary coding” (Hall, 1998, p. 290) rendered race the absent culture, thereby neglecting “the ‘trace of race’ [that] continues to lead a subterranean life which remains effective in . . . [everyone else’s] everyday understandings” (Ang, 2001, p. 107) of simultaneously inhabiting “inside” and “outside” positions in the national imaginary (Hage, 1998). Put differently, was WB aware that this was a form of anti-racist racism that involved promoting a different form of racism internal to his own community (as opposed to promoting a non-racist society) (Hage, 2014)?

Keep On, Keep On, Keep On

*But I would say I AM yellow. And, and we call ourselves yellow, in Chinese—
炎黃子孫. And what’s wrong with THAT??*

“You know, ‘welcoming someone into one’s own home doesn’t represent an attempt to undermine privilege; it [actually] expresses it’ (Spelman, 1988, p. 163).”

“What was that, Aaron? 什么意思?”

I had since emerged from my emotional abyss and was ready to reengage in conversation.

“Sorry, Demeter. I was just thinking about the earlier discussion—I know you’ve all moved on since. I’m not talking about visiting someone’s home in the literal sense. I just don’t think we can simply disregard the centrality of

race and racism in these conversations. It’s so easy to think of our marginalisation as a matter of accent, language, or culture, but that is EXACTLY the language multicultural—white—Australia wants us to use. This multicultural discourse presents itself as ‘having overcome the language of race, and therefore that or racism. But [the thing is]—the discourse of race cannot be so easily repressed, especially not as it has been one of the master discourses of the very (self-)constitution of the Australian nation’ (Ang, 2001, p. 15), which means that our very ‘Asianness’ functions as a key marker for racialisation alongside Indigenous peoples (Ang, 2001). In other words, it’s ‘precisely the “not quite” status of [us] “Asian[s]” in multicultural Australia [which] enables this sign to be filled with meanings of “Asianness” which can operate as a function of Australia’s nationalist desire’ (Ang, 2001, p. 147). Of course, this racialisation empowers white Australia to tolerate, value and feel enriched by other ‘cultures’ and extract value from a commodified otherness (Hage, 1998), i.e., choosing who, and what, you welcome into your home. And I mean, this ongoing lack of discussion around disarticulating racism and nationalism from the national imaginary ‘is one crucial reason why the presence of [us] “Asians” in Australia remains, for better or worse, an object of anxiety—or at least of anxious concern’ (Ang, 2001, p. 121); an anxiety that spills over into more overt hostility during something like the pandemic (Asian Australian Alliance et al., 2020).”

“Ah . . . I see what you’re saying. The problem for me, I think, is that *we were trained to be people pleasers . . . To not confront people since [young] . . . We as Asians, we’re more reserved. So, we’re afraid to say no or confront, even [when we]’re not treated nicely. Even if you have [a] different view . . . you may keep it to yourself . . . I have a fear [of confrontation] . . . It’s hard to change.*”

“I completely understand, Indy—us ‘Orientals’ have been constructed as silent for so long (Said, 1978). Other than the economic value we bring to white Australia (Liu, 2017), I think this propensity for silence is one of the main reasons we remain white Australia’s ‘pet people’ (Ang, 2001)! Honestly, our earlier discussion reminds me of this notion of the ‘debatability of racism,’¹⁶ where experiences of racism and the workings of structural racism are denied not just through a lack of attention to racism, but through an excess of other kinds of attention—denied not only through silencing, but through noise (Titley, 2019).”

“In our case, all this talk about culture and multiculturalism and its associated internalised deficit—which I’m going to call ‘gold noise’¹⁷—sadly acts as a form of ‘discursive racist violence’ (Lentin, 2020, p. 62). I reckon if we don’t try to reconfigure this ‘gold noise’ and just leave it as is, we will always be the stable, homogeneous Other (Liu, 2017)—exactly what white Australia wants.”

I sense WB’s apprehensiveness to my spiel and decide to press ahead quickly in case I lose him.

“You know, our very ‘Chineseness’ or ‘Asianness’ really is provisional and partial—something we constantly (re) negotiate and (re)invent (Ang, 2001), which means that we have every opportunity to push back through an ‘Asian’ Australian consciousness that mobilizes select differences to articulate our group identity (Ang, 2014)—a type of strategic anti-essentialism (Iftikar & Museus, 2018) that allows us to ‘hold on to our strategic multiplicity and celebrate our “difference” within a conscious construction of “sameness”’ (Mirza, 2009, p. 3), lest we act ‘unconsciously in complicity with a culture of domination’ (hooks, 1994, p. 173). I mean, if we’re inescapably ‘Asian’ by descent, we can also sometimes only be ‘Asian’ by consent—when and how is a matter of our own politics (Ang, 2001). I can’t speak for you all, but I certainly have a ‘personal cultural stake in the redefinition of “Australian identity” as an open space of diverse influences, traditions, and trajectories (Ang, 2001, p. 155).”

John jumps in with comparatively more gusto in his voice.

“You know what, Aaron, at the very least, I believe it’s important for *local teachers to realise the workplace is getting more and more diverse, and [that] they need to work with teachers from other backgrounds . . . work with teachers who speak English with [an] accent*. In terms of what you’ve said, I reckon *they can, and they SHOULD learn things and work with people from different backgrounds.*”

“哇! I think John is right about that as a starting point. I suppose, like Aaron was saying, recognising difference is not inherently problematic, but it can become a problem depending on how that difference is approached. For us as ‘Asian’ teachers, we need to first have a good understanding of marginalisation so that we can have right sorts of conversations with our students. *I think it’s not always a comfortable topic, but we MUST talk about it . . . in order to give the children a good direction in the future. . . for them to see [that] difference is okay and normal.*”

I smile to myself as I let the countermelody of Indy’s words transcend the lunchroom’s enveloping white noise.

Talking to you has actually made me think about these [experiences] I’ve had (voice breaks slightly). I don’t . . . I don’t really think about them, to be honest.

Authors’ Note

In this paper, I use inverted commas when I refer to “Asia” or “Asians” to acknowledge that the notion of “Asia” and “the West” are historically produced categories which stem from an emphatically homogenizing, Eurocentric system of geographic classification, and that “Asia” is an artificial construct with ambiguous boundaries (Ang, 2001). Such constructs stem from the Orientalist fantasy of an inscrutable yet homogeneous Orient that is incapable of self-definition (Said, 1978).

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Professor Elizabeth Mackinlay, Dr. Christina Gowlett, and Dr. Susan Creagh for their ongoing support in undertaking this project.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. The headings in this paper draw on the chorus and bridge lyrics of the famous disco song, “Kung Fu Fighting” by Carl Douglas (1974). My reasons are twofold—first, each heading/song line corresponds to the rough thematic coverage of the ensuing narrative; second, the song uses a quintessential “Oriental riff” (otherwise known as the “Chinaman lick”) that was created and used by the west as a trope to represent a homogeneous, generic “Asia.” As explained by Chow (2014), the use of the pentatonic scale infuses the riff with its vaguely “Asian” quality—indeed, the riff itself doesn’t originate from Chinese folk music, but is instead, a western caricature reminiscent of the Fu Manchu/Yellow Peril stereotype, that is, a form of musical Orientalism.
2. Convergences that were simultaneously illuminated and amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a growing repository of (counter)stories from a range of North American stakeholders in the higher education teaching (Endo, 2021a, 2021b) and learning space (Dai & Arnberg, 2022; Hau Lam et al., 2022), as well as the Australian context in schools (Teo, 2023a, 2023b) and broader societal settings (Asian Australian Alliance et al., 2020; Monzon & Bapuji, 2020). Consequently, this paper seeks to extend the transnational conversation on Anti-“Asian” racism by chronicling “Asian” Australian teachers’ personal and professional race-making practices in the face of racism before and during COVID-19.
3. The stories in the following sections come from semi-structured interviews with 13 teachers from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Vietnam, and India, who had varying years of teaching experience within the Early Childhood to Secondary context—some were pre-service teachers; others had been teaching for nearly a decade. Some had migrated to Australia in their early teen years; others were new arrivals.
4. Such dialogic engagement “entwine[s] poetic and philosophical fragments with analytical and self-reflexive elements . . . [where] reflexivity is to be understood as an expression of the subjective experience of doing research, in which the involvement of the researcher in the research process, manifested by the dynamics of interaction and relationship between the

- research and the researched, gains decisive meaning in and for the interpretation”. (Dai & Arnberg, 2022, p. 736)
- In other words, individual narratives are unified with my own reflexive understandings which “affords the reader the ability to explore the ‘felt-sense’ of the experiences conveyed” in this paper (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 8).
5. Since my subjectivity is never fully immersed in the modality of the speaking position I inhabit at any particular moment (Spivak & Harasym, 1990).
 6. I address this methodologically by including verbatim interview responses in the following sections in the palimpsest style, where the “underlying [interview tran]script[s] and the [current manu]script that overwrites it can be equally significant as they simultaneously coexist” (Binswanger et al., 2011, p. 26). Because the underlying text and the current manuscript are not “static or teleological” (Binswanger et al., 2011, p. 26) in and of themselves, a range of meanings from both scripts merge and entangle in perpetuity, meaning that they can only be deciphered as an inextricable collectivity (Dillon, 2007). Consequently, the use of palimpsest results in the confines of cultural script—as it relates to culture and history—and narrative script—empirical or fictional—becoming blurred in the process of (re)writing (Binswanger et al., 2011). Furthermore, the use of palimpsest is particularly apropos in re-stor(y)ing the “Asian” Australian experience, which is regulated by racial-colonial discourses that position “Asians” outside the national imaginary (Curthoys, 2000), and thus as perpetual “othered” foreigners within the White Australian state (Nicolacopoulos & Vassilacopoulos, 2004). As such, this illusory inclusion of “Asians” in Australia is mirrored in the layers of a palimpsest which create an “illusory intimacy” stemming from the shared physical space—layers where the dominant attempts to suppress the Other, but layers that are nonetheless marked by an inextricable relationship (Binswanger et al., 2011, p. 26), thereby leaving room to deviate from what has come before.
 7. I hope what I write here moves us to think about, and respond to, these harmful feelings in meaningful ways as such understandings justify any possible “exposure and damage that might occur to individuals—myself included—as a result” (Ellis, 2009, p. 21).
 8. These stories in the subsequent sections are told through palimpsestuous composite narratives—with verbatim interview responses included palimpsestuously as indicated in *italics*, and where appropriate, aligned to the right—in ways that account for the practical exigencies of ethical writing, where I “omit things . . . alter the plot or scene, position [my] story within the stories of others, [and] occasionally decide to write fiction” (Ellis, 2007, p. 24).
 9. Composite characters.
 10. Upper case is used in dialogue to indicate a spoken emphasis on particular words.
 11. This line of thinking is founded in the Australian discourse of colorblind multiculturalism, where migrant groups are designated an ethnic identity—usually based on national origin—instead of a racial one. In fact, raced categories and the racial label “Asian” do not appear officially at all in the national vernacular (Ang, 2001).
 12. I abstain from providing English translations to refuse white colonial logics of epistemological possession.
 13. As a result of an imposed “Asian” or “Chinese” exclusionary identity by the Australian mainstream that is inscribed on the physical body—a type of “corporeal malediction” (Fanon, 1970, as cited in Ang, 2001).
 14. Otherwise known as a cowboy hat.
 15. In an earlier version of this paper, I expressed disappointment at Christine but have since reframed this as part of my efforts to understand, to the best of my ability, how I can (re)present her, tempering any demonizing sentiments while still letting my story unfold (Adams, 2008). I have opted to describe and analyze key aspects of the conversation, with the aim of allowing the reader to make their own judgments (Ellis, 2009), simultaneously aware that leaving the “details [from our exchange] out would be dishonest to readers” (Ellis, 2009, p. 11). I wholly embrace these internal conflicts, since they address the ethical issue of what it means to interact with people holding values different to mine (Ellis, 2009).
 16. Coming from a media studies angle, Tittley (2019) defines this debatability as the “constant contest as to what constitutes racism . . . whose ‘definition’ and voice counts, and . . . the consequences that should stem from these fractious forms of public recognition and denial” (p. 3) in ostensibly post-racial societies like Australia.
 17. This extends on the term “white noise,” which has been used analogously with racism in the field of North American higher education (see Stich, 2021), with autonarrative work by Syed (2012) focusing specifically on the link between Canadian multiculturalist discourses and racism in higher education. In the Australian education context, drawing on (a) white noise’s ability to meaninglessly distract, but also drown out anything Other, and (b) the often-unobtrusive nature of its constant power, which is based on an equal intensity (of soundwaves) at different frequencies, Mackinlay (2018) uses the term to refer to the “dominance of coloniality in relation to the ways . . . Indigenous Australian peoples are . . . framed within music education discourse” (p. 536). Given the social-cultural-historical-political situatedness of racism (Lentin, 2020) and the fact that “racism circulates in Australia . . . in different forms with different intensities” (Hage, 2014, p. 232), my concept of “gold noise” is specific to Australian racism through its focus on the ways in which “Asian” Australians internalize and negotiate racism and/or the discourse of Australian multiculturalism in and among the white noise that masks and sustains the possessive logics of patriarchal white [Australian] sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson, 2006, as cited in Mackinlay, 2018). I have chosen the color gold here for several symbolic reasons. First, it is an homage to the indentured Chinese laborers of the gold rush and the “Asian” international student cash cows, both of whom have been governed in similar ways through white Australia’s economic logics. It is also a way of acknowledging Australia’s fraught history of racialized “Asian” exclusion, originating during the gold rush, continued through the White Australia Policy, and sustained even to today. Second, I focus on the color gold to unpack the perils of being yellow in Australia, but to also exert a type of strategic anti-essentialism (Ang, 2014; Ifitkar & Museus, 2018) in reclaiming and resignifying a color discursively associated with the Yellow Peril.

Drawing on von Goethe's (1967) theory of color, I conceptualize gold here as a derivative of yellow, which "in its perfectly unmixed state . . . gives us a new and high idea of [yellow], bringing with it [a] . . . magnificent and noble effect" (p. 307). I also accept the inescapable entanglement of white and yellow, insofar as yellow "appears . . . by . . . faint reflection of white" (p. 307). Simultaneously, I foreground the agentic potentialities of yellow/gold, where, depending on context and medium, can be simultaneously agreeable and disagreeable; noble and unpleasant (von Goethe, 1967), and use it agentially vis-à-vis the green and gold that are Australia's national colors to argue for new understandings and inclusion beyond just "sporting victories . . . mineral wealth, beaches" and the like (Australian Government, n.d., para 1). As such, "gold noise" for me is a mutually con-stitut/test-ed space.

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