

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Fighting the Asian Docility Myth: Finding My Own Voice in the Academy**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The myth of Asian docility is both insidious and enduring. It casts Asian bodies as quiet, compliant, and apolitical, an image that erases the diverse realities of Asian diasporic lives and serves as a tool of racialized control. In this deeply personal narrative, the author reflects on moments when this myth was violently imposed, including during the heightened xenophobia of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how these experiences echoed through academic spaces. Beginning with a racist encounter in a Toronto grocery store, the chapter examines how racialization collapses nuance, belonging, and lived experience into reductive tropes. The academy, often imagined as a space of critical inquiry and inclusion, becomes another site where Asian scholars must fight to be heard, recognized, and taken seriously. Through vivid storytelling and honest reflection, the chapter challenges readers to confront the silences that universities perpetuate, and the courage required to disrupt them. It is a narrative about refusing smallness, reclaiming voice, and reimagining academic spaces where racialized

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In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, I stood in line at a grocery store in Toronto when a man looked me in the eyes and said, “You’re Chinese, right? Go back to China.” I was small, masked, quiet. He was large, unmasked, and loud. Though the incident was brief, the discomfort lingered, not because I feared for my safety, but because it reminded me how little my Canadian upbringing mattered in moments like these. Encounters like this mirror the racialized assumptions I’ve experienced throughout my life. In academic spaces, I have also been made to feel small, foreign, and out of place.

Anti-Asian sentiments have been on a steady rise since the start of the COVID-19 global health pandemic (Do et al., 2021; Li, 2021; Yang et al., 2021). During the early stages of the pandemic, reports suggested that wet markets were responsible for the spread of the coronavirus, labeling an important part of East and Southeast Asian culture as “foreign” and “backwards” (Perng & Dhaliwa, 2022, p. 380). The media outrage instigated racialized attacks, both verbal and physical, against people of Asian descent (Li, 2021; Perng & Dhaliwa, 2022). For Asian women in particular, there has been a new sense of “hypervigilance” and “changes in cognitions around safety” while out in public (Yang et al., 2021, p. 7). These recent experiences echo and amplify the ways Asian women are racialized both within and beyond educational institutions.

This chapter explores how anti-Asian racism is embedded in Canadian academic institutions through stereotypes, curricular silences, and structural barriers. Drawing on my own educational journey in Edmonton’s Mandarin bilingual school system and later in postsecondary education, I use critical autoethnography to examine how gendered and racialized expectations, such as the Model Minority Myth and the docility myth, shape the experiences of Asian women in academia.

For those who might not know, the Model Minority Myth stereotypes Asian Canadians as “naturally hardworking” and “successful” and in doing so, denies the existence of present-day discrimination against Asian Canadians and the effects of past discrimination (Chang, 1999). And while the Model Minority Myth paints all Asians as apolitical, docile, and obedient, this has been especially harmful for Asian women who are often seen as inherently submissive. This docility myth is rooted in racist and sexist stereotypes used to objectify and marginalize women of Asian heritage (Kim, 2011). In the classroom, this has translated to young Asian girls being socialized to keep their concerns to themselves and not asking their teachers for help (Bablak et al., 2016; Chen & Rao, 2011). Meanwhile, in the workforce, Asian women are “expected to perform Westernized notions of docility and deference in order to be marketable on the global stage” (Ameeriar, 2015, p. 469). This creates a double-edged sword: Asian women who conform to the stereotype may be deemed “marketable,” for the workforce, but they are simultaneously not “enough” to become leaders in their fields (Huang, 2018, p. 173). Meanwhile, those who assert themselves are often dismissed as bossy and disruptive, further contributing to the “invisibility of Asian women” (Huang, 2018, p. 173). In reality, Asian women are not naturally docile. In fact, female leaders have historically resisted this stereotype through means like labour activism (Kim, 2011).

### **Purpose and Research Question**

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified how the Model Minority Myth and the docility myth continue to shape the lives of Asian women in Canada. As both an educator and researcher, I have come to recognize how my voice has been repeatedly silenced, not only as a student, but also as an academic navigating Western educational norm. These experiences led me to

write this critical autoethnographic piece which reflects on how intersecting systems of racism, sexism, and homophobia have impacted my educational trajectory.

This paper aims to explore the institutional dimensions of anti-Asian racism in Canadian educational contexts by using my lived experience to interrogate dominant ideologies and practices. While my narrative is personal, it is not the focal point; rather, my experiences are used to illuminate how systemic structures and cultural myths affect Asian women in educational spaces. The research questions guiding my critical autoethnography are as follows:

1. How has the intersectionality of my race, gender, and sexual orientation impacted my experience as a Queer, Asian Canadian student, academic, and educator?
2. How have the Model Minority Myth, the docility myth, and anti-Asian racism disrupted my educational journey?
3. How has my commitment to anti-racist pedagogy influenced my practice as an educator?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research is grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), with a specific focus on the tenets of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2017) and counter storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In tandem with CRT, I draw on Asian Critical Theory (AsianCrit) (Chang, 1999; Iftikar & Museus, 2018), Asian Feminism (Chow, 1987), and Gender Socialization (Orr, 2011) to interrogate how overlapping structures of race, gender, and sexuality shape educational spaces.

CRT recognizes that racism is endemic and entrenched in all aspects of society, including education (Lei & Guo, 2022). This framework provides a critical lens through which I examine how racial hierarchies and whiteness shape institutional norms, often rendering Asian students invisible or hypervisible through stereotypes like the Model Minority Myth. The principle of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2017) is key to my analysis, as it allows me to explore how my racial, gendered, and Queer identities interact to inform my experience within academia.

Counter storytelling, central to both CRT and critical autoethnography, enables the sharing of narratives that challenge dominant understandings of success, meritocracy, and neutrality in education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). My story, while personal, is mobilized as a counter narrative to confront institutionalized racism and sexism and to reveal how dominant ideologies affect Asian women in educational contexts.

Drawing from AsianCrit, I also examine how racialized constructions of “Asianness” are negotiated within Canadian academic institutions. AsianCrit challenges the erasure and homogenization of Asian identities and foregrounds the unique experiences of Asian communities within racial discourse (Chang, 1999; Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Asian Feminism further informs my framework by offering tools to examine how racialized and gendered expectations, such as docility and silence, are culturally and historically imposed upon Asian women both within and beyond educational spaces (Chow, 1987),

Lastly, Gender Socialization (Orr, 2011) helps contextualize how educational institutions reinforce normative gender roles through formal and informal practices. Schools are key sites where children are “encouraged to participate in gender-typed activities” (Orr, 2011, p. 272), shaping long-term behavioural expectations. Understanding how this gendered conditioning

intersects with racial and Queer identities is critical to unpacking the silencing I and others have experienced as Asian Canadian women in academia.

Together, these intersecting frameworks shape the critical lens through which I reflect on my educational journey, analyze the structural conditions of Canadian academia, and contribute to the broader discourse on race, gender, and equity in education.

### Methods

This study employs critical autoethnography as both a methodology and a mode of resistance. Situated within qualitative inquiry, critical autoethnography allows researchers to center their personal experience as data, while simultaneously interrogating the sociopolitical and institutional structures where these experiences unfold (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020; Elhinnawy, 2022). Following the methodological traditions of AsianCrit-informed autoethnographers (Chan et al., 2021; Kim, 2020; Kim-Bossard, 2022; Teo, 2022; Yeh et al., 2022), I construct counter stories that challenge dominant narratives of Asian identity in academia (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These stories resist pathologizing discourses and offer alternative frames for understanding how Asian women navigate racism, sexism, and institutional silence. While I center this chapter on my own narrative, is not meant to stand in for the experiences of all Asian or Asian Canadian women. Instead, my story is situated within broader structural contexts, using the tenets of CRT and AsianCrit to connect individual experience with collective patterns of racialization and marginalization in education.

My data collection began with over 50 pages of handwritten journal entries, reflecting on key moments across my educational journey. I later expanded these into more than 100 pages of typed reflections, written in response to self-designed prompts that align with my research questions. These narratives were then uploaded into NVivo for coding and analysis. The first stage involved descriptive coding, which summarized segments of data into short phrases (Creswell, 2021). I then applied emotion coding to identify affective responses linked to each experience (Saldaña, 2016). The final stage involved thematic and narrative analysis, drawing on CRT and AsianCrit to surface patterns, silences, and ruptures within my educational journey (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017).

### Data Sources

Two primary sources of data were used in this study. The first form of data included self-reflections and journal entries responding to prompts related to my research questions. Some of the questions I reflected on include:

1. What's an experience I had with systemic oppression in higher ed?
2. What are the resources and support that women of colour need to not only survive but thrive in academia?
3. What are my thoughts on the notion of permission and the seeking of permission to tell my own stories and amplify the voices of those who look like me?
4. How has maintaining my heritage language empowered me?
5. What does it mean to be both Asian and Canadian?
6. How do my past experiences with racism, sexism and homophobia influence my work as a researcher?
7. How has my journey to anti-racist pedagogy influenced my practice as an educator?

Additional questions I reflected on addressed how I learned to “take up space” as an Asian woman in academia and were inspired by prompts in Ashlee, Zamora and Karikari’s (2017) paper.

To contextualize my experiences within institutional frameworks, I also conducted a document analysis of publicly available materials related to Alberta’s Mandarin bilingual program, Canada’s policy of multiculturalism, and the University of Toronto’s anti-racism strategies. These included mission statements, policy reports, school improvement plans, and faculty handbooks. By reading these documents alongside my personal narratives, I explored how systemic and institutional forces shape the experiences of Asian Canadian educators and students.

For this chapter, I focus on the first data set, the reflective narratives, as a means to foreground counter storytelling and lived experience as legitimate and rigorous forms of educational research.

### **Reading, Writing and Finding Myself**

My critical autoethnography starts with my early experiences in Alberta’s Mandarin bilingual program. I then go into a detailed narrative of both my secondary and post-secondary journey. To begin, I am a Queer, Asian Canadian woman who was born and raised in Edmonton, Alberta. My mother immigrated with her older brother and parents from Hong Kong as a child, while my father fled Ho Chi Minh following the Vietnam war on a boat with his grandmother in his adolescent years. Together, my parents raised five wonderful kids in the snowy city that is Edmonton. Today, you get to learn about the oldest one, you get to learn a little bit about me.

### **Bilingual Education in Alberta and the Construction of the Model Minority**

Alberta is home to one of the few publicly funded Mandarin bilingual programs in North America, with options available from kindergarten through high school in cities like Edmonton and Calgary. These programs were designed to foster bilingual literacy and cultural exchange, but they also play an underexamined role in reinforcing the Model Minority Myth and the docility myth. I was a product of this program.

Growing up, I attended a public school that offered 50/50 instruction in English and Mandarin from kindergarten through grade six. After that, I continued in a junior high school that offered Chinese language and culture classes. These programs were celebrated for their academic rigour and approach to multiculturalism, but they also came with heavy expectations to perform, conform, and represent.

When I entered the program at age five, I was fluent in neither English nor Mandarin. My first language was Cantonese. I’ll never forget the confusion on my kindergarten teacher’s face when I didn’t respond to my English or Mandarin name. But like many kids, I adapted quickly. And while I resented what 12 year old Jasmine saw as extra work for a useless language, 29 year old Jasmine now understands how powerful it is to speak multiple languages on the streets of Toronto. I am extremely grateful to my parents for putting me in Mandarin bilingual school. I can read and write in both traditional and simplified Chinese, I still listen to Mandarin and Cantonese pop music, and I can actually read street signs when I visit my family in Hong Kong. My family members in Vietnam also get excited when I help them navigate the streets of Chinatown during my visits. And while I still resent some of the struggles that came with being a part of the program, I will forever be grateful for growing up with friends, classmates, teachers, and leaders who looked like me.

Despite my eventual appreciation for bilingual education, it wasn't always easy. The program that gave me linguistic fluency also imposed certain expectations and stereotypes. It reinforced ideas about what it meant to be a "good" Asian student: quiet, hardworking, and academically successful. Looking back, I can see how those early experiences shaped not just how I learned, but how I understood myself. Students like me were expected to thrive, to excel in school, behave quietly, and never cause trouble. The pressure to live up to the model minority image meant that struggles, especially around identity, mental health, or language barriers, were overlooked and minimized. My teachers and peers saw me as competent and self-sufficient, not someone who needed help.

Those early experiences also contributed to my complicated relationship with school. I may be pursuing my doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy now, but school wasn't always for me. During those early years, I internalized rigid gender norms, learned to quiet myself in order to "fit in," and began to associate academic success with personal worth. Growing up in classrooms where many students and teachers looked like me was a gift, but it didn't shield me from the deeper structural issues that shaped how Asian students were seen and not seen within the system.

### **Gendered Expectation in Bilingual School and at Home**

As a child in the bilingual program, I absolutely detested the Mandarin curriculum. Mandarin is one of the most difficult languages to learn, and spending my weekdays writing lines and reciting texts was not my idea of having a fun time. To make matters worse, the poems I memorized in class had subtexts that detailed the habits a girl must develop to become the perfect wife. The fairy tales we read also depicted men as warriors and women as damsels in distress. This caused me to loathe these parts of Asian culture. I didn't enjoy reading most Chinese fairy tales and refused to recite poems that painted girls as inferior to boys. Only when I learned about Mulan, a female warrior who took her father's spot in war, did I start gaining interest in Chinese history and literature. So, I guess even as a child, I had moments of struggle and resistance.

Unfortunately, the gender expectations imposed by these stories were also reinforced at home. During my K-6 days, I loved running around screaming. And while my parents found it cute, my 婆婆 (PoPo - maternal grandmother), bless her loving heart, would always tell me to be "more like a girl". I absolutely hated it. I wanted to be a kid and kids ran around screaming, so I did. Yet, in defying this cultural norm, I was seen as this rebellious "loud Asian girl". My grandparents and family friends alike would say I was too "巴渣" (BaaZaa - talkative) and a "男仔頭" (NamZaiTau - Tomboy). Then, to try and persuade me into being more feminine, they would say things like "nobody wants to be with a tomboy" or "loud Asian girls are too much". My family members were also socialized with rigid gender and cultural norms, and simply repeated what they thought was right for me. But, when does this cycle end?

I'd like to think my family thought they were saving me from potential bullying, but I don't think they realized they were dampening my spark. The rambunctious Jasmine, who would run around the playground with her friends, started to turn inwards and grew a little more introverted. To my family's delight, I was no longer screaming, I talked back less, and I started combing my hair.

### **Transitioning into Racial Minority Status in Secondary Education**

My transition from elementary to junior high school was jarring. Despite my struggles and gripes with Mandarin bilingual school, I have come to realize that sixth grade was the last year in a long time before I would feel even semi-comfortable in my own skin again. In junior high school, I no longer felt like I belonged anywhere. As I went from a Mandarin bilingual program where most of my classmates and teachers looked and sounded like me, to a junior high school where people thought my food smelled funny and Mandarin sounded weird, I started to feel like an outsider. I felt like I was not completely Canadian. I remember the first time a classmate said they were jealous of my “Asian brain” and went home wondering why someone would say that. I would go on to have many more racist encounters. Some subtle, others not so much.

To make matters worse, around the same time my classmates started having crushes, I realized I was bisexual. I never officially came out to my friends nor my family. The Asian community in Edmonton can be, quite bluntly put, homophobic. Not only did I not feel safe coming out, but I also didn’t think it was necessary. If my peers didn’t have to “come out” as straight, why should I “come out” as bisexual? So, I kept my head down and bit my tongue whenever people made homophobic jokes around me. I tried to reason with myself that my friends were just kidding, they didn’t know any better. But it still hurt. It hurt to hear people throw around the word “gay” like a slur. It hurt hearing people talk about “dykes” and “nasty lesbians”. And it hurt hearing the people I grew up with make fun of Queer people as if we’re sub-human. But I was already contending with the fact that I was now a visible minority in a school where being different wasn’t exactly a good thing. So, I decided to lean into my “Asianness” instead and stuck with my friends from grade school, a safety bubble which, in hindsight, was not so safe if I couldn’t even be openly Queer.

Sometimes, I’ll look at pictures from when I was in junior high school and wish I could tell myself that things get better. It took a lot of work, but it really did get better. Because, as I got older and became an educator myself, I came to realize that multiculturalism and inclusivity is more than just having a group of diverse people living in the same country together. It means being active participants in countering racial prejudice, sexism and homophobia. It means that we recognize our own preconceptions and dismantle them. It also means ensuring the youth who come after us are equipped with the vocabulary and knowledge necessary to not only address and understand their own experiences with racism, sexism and other forms of oppression, but to resist and challenge them as well. And while I am ashamed of keeping quiet all those years ago, I also recognize that I was a child. A child who was afraid of being ostracized and losing her friends.

Through these experiences, I transitioned from a young girl who was confused by gender and cultural expectations to a young woman who now wants to dismantle our patriarchal system and disrupt systemic racism. And as I continue to reflect on my journey and the impact of being silenced had on me, I hope that, somewhere out there, a young Queer Asian girl reads these words and sees herself reflected. I want her to know, it’s okay to be afraid. It’s okay to choose silence when it feels like the only safe option. You will speak, if, when, and how you are ready.

### **Life as the Quiet Asian Girl**

In high school, thanks to familial pressure and racial stereotypes, I leaned further into the “quiet” Asian girl stereotype. I became the opposite of who I was as a child. I was quiet, kept my nose in my books, and only had a handful of friends who knew the more colourful sides of me. My teachers saw me as obedient, studious, and non-disruptive. While some may view these

attributes positively, they often led to situations that hindered my learning and growth. Classrooms with seating plans often meant I was sat next to the rowdy or struggling students. I was expected to be a good role model to keep them quiet or help them with class content. And while I didn't mind helping students who struggled with trigonometry in Math class, stoichiometry in Chemistry, or terminology in Social Studies, being forced to sit next to disruptive students meant my learning experience was severely compromised in those classes. I was scared to speak up and ask the teachers to move me, so I'd look up and hope they could see the silent plea in my eyes instead.

Sometimes, the teacher would notice and adjust the seating plan; other times, the teacher would be oblivious to the impact of their decision. In those cases, I always ended up bringing my iPod to class. That way, I could just get my homework done during quiet study times without being disturbed by my elbow partner. Yet, this only made me turn inward even more. I couldn't socialize as much with other classmates and only spoke to my friends from elementary and junior high school. The stereotype of the quiet Asian girl, who could endure and excel regardless of circumstances, overshadowed my struggles. I felt invisible, my needs secondary to managing the behavior of the students placed next to me.

My experience reflects a broader pattern in education systems where Asian students, particularly Asian girls, are assumed to be self-disciplined, emotionally resilient, and academically successful regardless of their environment (Poon et al., 2016; Museus & Kiang, 2009). Because of these assumptions, their struggles are often overlooked. And so, my high school years taught me a harsh lesson about the consequences of racial and behavioral stereotyping: I was not only expected to tolerate disruption but to absorb it without complaint. It reflected what Pyke and Dang (2003) identify as a form of racialized and gendered disciplining, where Asian girls are expected to be docile buffers in chaotic school environments. And it wasn't just about enduring a few months of disruption; it was about the long-term impact on my confidence and academic performance. The belief that my quietness could somehow neutralize disruptive behavior was an unfair expectation placed upon me; this was a structural message about whose needs mattered, and whose didn't.

### **The Impact of Feeling “Seen”**

Despite hating most of high school, there were moments that stood out, moments that reminded me I had something valuable to offer. One of those came from my eleventh-grade math teacher, Mr. T. His classroom was next to the locker where my friends and I hung out at lunch. It was there, in that liminal space between periods, that my sarcastic humor and deadpan jokes would surface. One afternoon, I was helping a friend study for a circle geometry quiz, joking about his inability to grasp arc lengths while using highlighters to draw diagrams on the floor. Mr. T overheard and casually said, “Hey Jasmine, you're pretty good at that. Ever thought about becoming a teacher?”

Until that moment, I hadn't. But I kept thinking about it during class and even more so after both my friend and I aced the test. The following week, Mr. T asked if I'd be willing to run a lunchtime tutorial. Apparently, half the class was struggling, and he'd seen something in the way I explained concepts, with humour, with colour, and with clarity. I was nervous at first but decided to give it a try. Turns out I absolutely love teaching. My deadpan humor and sarcastic jokes also came out naturally around classmates who had never seen that part of me before. Better yet, Mr. T didn't treat me like a quiet Asian girl; he also didn't demand or expect me to help him with the students who struggled. He noticed a gift and encouraged me to use it.

I applied for the secondary education program at the end of twelfth grade in 2012 and became an English teacher after I graduated in 2016. I saw Mr. T when I visited my old high school after convocation, and he joked about how he thought I'd be changing the world with my big brain instead of becoming a teacher like him. But the truth is, he *did* change my world. By helping me see myself in a new light, he made an impact on my career goals and was one of the first people who would encourage me to go and do just that. Change the world.

And as I reflect on this experience, I realize how crucial it is to challenge and dismantle stereotypes in education. I didn't really understand it at the time, but as an educator and doctoral student reflecting on my academic journey, I now recognize the importance of advocating for environments that respect individual students' needs. And really, my commitment to fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments stems from experiences like these, where I felt overlooked and undervalued by some teachers, then seen, heard, and valued by others. I aim to amplify the voices of students who, like me, were expected to endure in silence.

At the institutional level, Asian students are rarely seen in student leadership or school-wide events unless they conformed to existing expectations of academic excellence or cultural entertainment (e.g., performing during Lunar New Year assemblies). There were often few spaces both within and outside of the classroom where students like us could explore our identities. This exclusion is not unique to my experience. Studies on Asian Canadian students in secondary schools indicate that many feel marginalized despite academic success (Lee, 2008; Reid & Eizadirad, 2023). Our voices are often absent in discussions on equity because our struggles are often overlooked by the assumption that we're all doing well by succeeding academically. Yet not all Asian students succeed academically, and academic success doesn't mean we don't need help. Through sharing my story, I hope to highlight the importance of recognizing and addressing the diverse needs of all students. We must ensure that everyone has the opportunity to thrive in their educational journey, and that every student can nurture that voice society wants to keep stifled.

### **Finding My Voice Again**

When I finished my undergraduate degree in 2016, I needed a reset. So, I packed up my life and moved across the world to Seoul, South Korea to work as an English and Special Needs teacher. I didn't know exactly what I was looking for, only that I needed space to be myself. And in that space, something unexpected happened: I got loud again.

Despite being the youngest teacher on staff, I started speaking up at work. When administrators pushed outdated pedagogy, I pushed back. When younger female teachers were assigned extra tasks like note-taking during staff meetings because they were "more detail-oriented," I told the men who said it to take notes themselves. I advocated for myself, and I stood up for others. It was exhilarating. For the first time, I wasn't playing the part of the accommodating Asian girl. I was just me: blunt, opinionated, and unafraid. Those two years in Seoul awakened a part of me I hadn't realized had gone quiet.

That awakening extended to my Queerness, too. I attended my first Pride parade during my first summer there, proudly carrying a rainbow flag among thousands of strangers who just wanted to exist freely. I still remember seeing an older Korean woman holding a sign in English: "Free hugs for all my gay children." I sobbed in her arms. I hadn't realized how much weight I'd been carrying, how deeply fear, cultural expectations, and silence had shaped my sense of self.

The next day at work, when coworkers asked what I'd done over the weekend, I told them. I expected awkward silence or disapproval. Instead, I got curiosity, support, and questions. "What

was it like?” “What does Pride mean to you?” I felt... normal. Seen. Whole. That’s when it clicked. I didn’t have to wait for permission to be loud, Queer, or proud. I could have been all of that from the start. But it took leaving Canada and stepping away from the academic systems that shaped me to find the courage to reclaim my voice.

### **Making Sure I’m Both Seen and Heard**

I moved to Toronto in 2019 to begin my Master’s in Educational Leadership and Policy, determined to bring the confidence and voice I had found abroad with me. The transition, from being a teacher back to being a student, was both thrilling and disorienting. Just as I began to find my footing, the COVID-19 pandemic hit during my second semester, placing the world, and my academic plans, under lockdown.

Still, I didn’t let the disruption derail my goals. I understood how crucial it was for Asian educators, especially Asian women, to be present and visible in leadership roles. Representation isn’t just symbolic, it brings lived experience, cultural nuance, and necessary perspective into educational spaces that have too long privileged predominantly white and male narratives. So even in isolation, I found ways to be present. I joined student groups like the Comparative International Development Education Student Association, took on leadership roles in the East Asia Group within my department, and aligned myself with research focused on equity and inclusion.

These spaces allowed me to speak up and work toward the kind of academic community I had long imagined, one where the voices of Asian women were not only included but valued. Then, when I began my doctoral studies in 2021, I made a conscious decision to define success on my own terms. Academia can feel like a maze with narrow pathways: publish or perish, teach, volunteer, write, write, write, repeat. I chose a different route, one that prioritized purpose over prestige. I pursued research that mattered to me, even if it wasn’t always seen as “marketable” or conventionally publishable.

Critical autoethnography, for instance, has been one of my most meaningful approaches. It’s often dismissed as “less rigorous,” yet it requires deep self-reflection and critical analysis. As Camangian, Philoxene, and Stovall (2023) remind us, this methodology connects the personal to the political and challenges researchers to interrogate how their lived experiences are shaped by structural forces. Through this lens, I better understood how damaging academia’s hidden curriculum can be, especially for first-generation students like myself. Why were we expected to volunteer on research projects without pay? Why did no one explain that publishing often comes with financial and emotional costs? Why were conference reimbursements an afterthought?

These realizations didn’t discourage me; they lit a fire. I sought out peers who shared these frustrations and built connections rooted in mutual support. I became a mentor for incoming students, eager to demystify academia and share what I’d learned myself the hard way. If institutions aren’t designed for us, then we’ll create new spaces that are.

Now, at the end of my third year as a doctoral student, I look back with pride at the leadership opportunities I’ve carved out for myself. As Director of Public Relations for the University of Toronto’s Chinese Graduate Association (UTCGA), I helped bridge relationships between student groups and enhanced access to extracurricular activities, especially for international students. This role deepened my understanding of the distinct challenges that Chinese international and domestic students face while navigating higher education in Canada.

I also served on my department’s Student Experience Committee, using my voice to advocate for better student support and share perspectives that might otherwise go unheard. Now, as Co-

President of the East Asia Interest Group at OISE, I help bring graduate students together to celebrate culture, share research, and talk frankly about our experiences in Canadian academia. I remind students, especially those early in their journeys, that their voices matter. That *they* matter. Leadership, for me, isn't just about roles or titles. It's about cultivating space where others can thrive. It's about being both seen and heard, and making sure others are, too.

### **Experience with Systemic Oppression as a Queer Asian Woman in Higher Education**

While I do believe I have carved out space for myself in academia, I continue to encounter systemic oppression as a Queer Asian woman navigating higher education. A striking example occurred at the Canadian Society for the Study of Education's annual conference in 2024, where I presented findings that inspired this very chapter. For much of the session, the dialogue was engaging, attendees asked thoughtful questions and expressed interest in applying critical autoethnography to their own work.

Midway through, however, an older male professor approached me with questions that were less about engagement and more about skepticism. His tone was condescending, and his critiques revealed an underlying resistance to the legitimacy of my research. He dismissed my use of "me-search," questioning the validity of telling my own story and challenging the necessity of centering personal narrative in academic work. He took issue with my use of AsianCrit, arguing that by focusing on Asian experiences, I was excluding others. But it is precisely because Asian voices have long been sidelined in academic discourse (Chang, 1993; Wu & Lai, 2022) that this work is so urgent.

He suggested I adopt a more "objective" approach, one that, unsurprisingly, aligned with a Western, positivist, and heteronormative framework. But research that ignores the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality is not neutral; it upholds the very systems of exclusion we aim to challenge. This moment reminded me how easily systemic bias operates within the norms of academia, undermining the contributions of Queer women of colour and casting doubts on our expertise.

Throughout my academic journey, I've wrestled with the unspoken need to seek permission to tell my own stories. This gatekeeping is both frustrating and unjust. As a Queer Asian woman, my experiences are not only valid, but they are also essential. They offer insight into structures that often go unexamined, and they deserve space in academic and public discourse without needing validation from those outside my communities.

As such, claiming the right for those who don't fit into Western, heteronormative spaces to tell our counter narratives is an act of resistance. This is one of many ways for us to assert narrative sovereignty in institutions that frequently silence us. Our stories push back against erasure. They create space. They signal to others like us that they are not alone. In fact, we need more than just tolerance in academia, we need a network of mentors, peers, and allies who understand the specific challenges faced by women of colour. Through sharing my experiences, mentoring incoming scholars, and advocating for methodologies that center marginalized voices, I hope to contribute to that network. If academic institutions do not provide safe spaces and platforms for us to share our research and experiences, then it's up to us to ensure our voices are heard and valued by telling them, with or without permission.

## **Amplifying Asian Voices in Educational Research**

My past experiences with racism, sexism, and homophobia deeply influenced my work as a researcher and educator. They have heightened my awareness of the structural barriers that marginalized communities face, driving my commitment to educational equity and social justice. These experiences inform my research questions, methodologies, and the populations I choose to study. Asian communities are incredibly diverse, encompassing a wide range of cultures, languages, and experiences. Including such voices in educational research ensures that this diversity is reflected and considered in academic discourse. It moves the field beyond a narrow, and often Western-centric perspective, fostering a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of educational issues.

Asian students and educators face unique challenges, such as the Model Minority Myth, racial discrimination, and cultural barriers (Do et al., 2021; Li, 2021; Yang et al., 2021). Amplifying their voices helps identify and address these specific issues, leading to more effective policies and practices that support the well-being and success of Asian individuals in educational settings. In fact, my own doctoral research focuses on the experiences and challenges faced by Asian Canadian students in Alberta. Through qualitative interviews, I have learned how Asian Canadian students navigate their dual identities and the ways they have built community and created their own culture. I have also learned of the challenges they face and how these challenges are similar to and different from my own. And really, if I had not gone ahead and reflected on my own trauma and the disruptions that have occurred in my own academic journey due to my gender, race and sexual orientation, I don't think I would have been so open and vulnerable in these interviews with my own participants. And in doing so, I found them being open and vulnerable with me.

## **Conclusion**

Critical autoethnography can be a powerful method for researchers to explore their own experiences and make connections to broader social structures and systems. It allows for a deep understanding of how personal narratives are entwined with social and political contexts and contributes to discussions on social justice, identity, and power (Camangian, Philoxene & Stovall, 2023). As an AsianCrit scholar and educator, this critical autoethnographic piece builds on the work of both AsianCrit scholars and critical autoethnographic researchers by exploring my own counter stories and narratives to the Model Minority Myth and docility myth. Through the lens of my own educational journey, I have illustrated how anti-Asian racism operates at multiple levels, from K-12 school curriculums to social norms and institutional culture.

While my personal narrative forms the foundation of this paper, the broader focus remains on how Asian identity is shaped and contested within Canadian schools and academia. Reflections stemming from this critical autoethnography highlight the pressing need for increased attention in educational research to address the racialization of Asian Canadian students and educators. Asian Canadians are tasked with the difficult challenge of navigating complex conceptions, such as the Model Minority Myth, while simultaneously being positioned as socially foreign. I urge us all to consider our own positions and reflect on ways that diverse students' and educators' voices and perspectives can be further included, amplified, and respected. Doing so can help advance equity, counter damaging stereotypes, and improve education for everyone (Kim & Hsieh, 2022, p. 157).

While this piece focused heavily on my educational experiences as a Queer Asian Woman, my anti-racist pedagogy and focus on equity in education doesn't stop there. For there to be

tangible impacts and change, advocacy must happen consistently. Thus, the labs I choose to work in all focus on amplifying the voices of students, educators, administrators and parents from traditionally marginalized backgrounds. The supervisors and professors I work with all highlight the exploitive and extractive nature of research and address the ways we can minimize this harm and truly enact transformative change. Likewise, the mentors in my life have continued to encourage me to always conduct research that speaks to me. And through this work, I have learned that being true to myself necessitates rejecting the academy's cycle of publish or perish, finding people who engage in meaningful work and working with them, and speaking out of turn, especially in spaces that really don't want me to.

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