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Racism Against Japanese Canadians in British Columbia: My Reflections on Racism Inspired by John Holt

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Abstract

Racism against Japanese Canadians in British Columbia (B.C.) has been an ongoing issue with its roots ingrained in the past. The province of B.C. has a history of putting Japanese Canadians into internment camps during World War II due to their ethnic background and are still refusing to include this tragedy into the current B.C. curriculum. This reflective autoethnography guided by John Holt's *Learning All the Time*, explores the history and current issues that Japanese Canadians face in B.C. Through the lens of the researcher's own experiences with racism, the issues of being a "model minority", the difficulties of cultural identity, and the current state of racism towards Asian Canadians are discussed. The study concludes that, the lack of historical recognition from the government and with the rise in hate crimes towards Asian Canadians due to COVID-19, racism towards "model minorities" is very much alive in today's society.

Keywords: racism, model minority, autoethnography, Japanese Canadian

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> Collective identities are produced and social inequalities are structured when people include and exclude people through the signification of skin color. (Darder & Torres, 2004, as cited in Lam, 2015, p.244)

As John Holt (1980) quotes in his book, *Learning All the Time*, "living is learning" (p. 113). The path that an individual takes in their life is learning itself, as there is development and changes throughout the entire lifetime. Personally, I relate to this quote as I look back on my own journey in life, realizing that I have been learning as I grow in multiple types of environments. With all the experiences and opportunities I have had so far, the greatest learning curve for me has been how to live in Canada, especially in British Columbia (B.C.), as a Japanese Canadian. Asian Americans (and Canadians) were widely known as "model minorities," "good subjects who represented hope, possibility, and academic excellence for other historically marginalized groups in capitalist America" (Lam, 2015, p. 241). This myth exists even today, as Asian Canadians are seeing an increase in racial discrimination, yet, not being heard by the rest of the public as they are seen as having "honorary white" status (p. 245). Personally, there have been many ways in which I believe the environment I was put into and the different people I have interacted with have shaped the person I have become. As I learn about other individual's experiences and hearing about current news surrounding racism towards Asian Canadians, I have been able to draw some parallels, self-reflect, and ultimately, realize that my life has been a series of learning experiences that I had never truly delved into.

Personal Experience

My personal experience starts with coming to Canada at the age of 4. At the time, my father was the only person that was able to speak English, while the rest of my family—myself, my mother, and younger brother—were left completely oblivious. Since it was before the age of the Internet or cell phones, I recall my mother always having a small green translating dictionary with her, since she was unable to understand what anybody was saying. Like her, I did not understand anything that was said to me, but I was a friendly child and that never stopped me from saying hello to strangers. At a young age, I realized that Holt's (1980) statement, "children learn from anything and everything they see" (p. 117) had been true, as I started to witness the attitude and behaviour of those around me. My first encounter with racism was during this time at a grocery store. While the cashier greeted every other customer with a smile, when it came to our turn, she completely ignored us and pursed her lips even after I greeted her. I asked my mother why the cashier was grumpy, and my mother said she was probably just having a rough day. Although it was a small encounter, this was the first step of racism that I would experience throughout my lifetime.

I started going to school in North Vancouver, a small suburban city, dominated by a Caucasian population. Not surprising during those times, there were barely any visible minorities on the streets, let alone any Asian families. When I enrolled in elementary school, the majority of my classmates were Caucasian. It was here that I experienced my first encounter with blatant racism. After a week or so of being in Grade 1, a boy in my class started whispering about me to his friends. They then came up to me and snickered, "we don't want to sit with you because you smell like seaweed," and ran off. Confused with what I was told, I went home and asked my mother if I smelled like seaweed. My mother was horrified with this, as she was very careful not to pack any Japanese food for lunch, knowing I would be ostracized if I had brought food that

was different from others. Looking back, even the idea of my mother consciously deciding not to allow me to bring Japanese food so I wouldn't get bullied is something that has stuck around with me for years. Nowadays, many B.C. residents, including Caucasian people, claim that their favourite food is "sushi." I find this ironic since in the 90s, seaweed was considered disgusting, nobody would consider eating rice with raw fish inside, and I was bullied for this exact dish.

Once again, I reflect back on Holt's (1980) quote "we take [messages from our environment] in, in one form or another and make use of them" (p. 113). My experiences of being a minority in Vancouver continued, as I experienced less blatant, yet obvious racism from my peers. During my intermediate elementary school years, I was able to make some friends and excelled in many of the subjects at school. However, one Caucasian girl in my friend's group decided she did not like me, and would exclude me from after school activities. I later found out that her hate stemmed from her parents, as they refused to talk to my parents, let alone make eye contact with them. This girl would make my life miserable, whispering behind my back to my friends, saying she didn't want to invite me just because, that it was silly that I was getting good grades in Language Arts, and saying that it was normal for me to be good at Math. Looking back, I realize that there was no conversation that was had about racism or discrimination, since many adults turned a blind eye since I was Japanese Canadian, a model minority that have not suffered as much to be conceived as a person of colour (Lam, 2015, p. 246). I never confronted her or her behaviour towards me, and instead, remember talking to my mother about this. This was when she told me to study hard and keep my head up high, as this was the only way to prove that we belonged. Luckily, these words have shaped the way I see education and self-development all these years, making it a strength of mine to pursue things without giving up. I believe without these negative experiences with a classmate and having my mother speak on her

beliefs, I would not have the same mindset when it comes to any of my career and educational choices. Holt's quote of "making use" of the experience is reflected in this incident, since 20 years later, I am still in the same mindset as I was when my mother first told me to continue forward.

Admittedly, I have lost count of how many times I've experienced racial hate. Other than the blatant racist hate that is taken up by the media, there are many times where I personally have experienced subtle racial discriminations. I have had to change my name from my full name to a shortened version, since it was easier for people to remember, and I have always been asked, "no, where are you really from?" when I tell strangers that I am originally from B.C. In regards to my shortened name, although I strongly believe that it was the correct decision to make, there were internal struggles of abandoning my name, and thus, heritage. However, by going by my shortened English name, more people started to recognize me as more than just the "Asian girl," and I also found that it connected to employment as well. Since my last name was also Japanese, my full name would not get me any callbacks, no matter how qualified I was for the job. Once I started applying to the same position with my English first name, I successfully received interviews. The idea that just a name would sway how people saw me (without really knowing me) was frustrating to say the least. Holt (1980) quotes, "in the same way we learn — something from the work we do, however interesting or dull, good or bad, it might be" (p. 114). As Holt explained in his quote, not every learning experience is good with positive takeaways. Even as an adult, I learned through these numerous negative experiences, that people are willing to judge others with just how they look or what their name sounds like, without truly knowing who that person is deep down. This is what creates subtle racial discrimination, and I have always understood this as an underlying factor in our country.

A Brief History of Japanese Canadians in British Columbia

In the late 1800s, Japanese people started voyaging across to the United States and Canada to pursue a life of their own. Many ended up in British Columbia, since they were hired to be fishermen and lumberjacks, as physical labour jobs were popular in the province. Although they were paid less than their Caucasian counterparts, many were successful in obtaining more than one job, with some even opening up their own businesses (since they were considered model minorities). In the early 1900s, protests against Japanese immigration became increasingly high, with riots and hate crimes also increasing in the city due to the fear of "the yellow peril" and "Asian invasion" (Hickman & Fukawa, 2011). Laws and commissions were set into place to strip licenses away from honest workers of visible minorities, making it difficult to ignore the racism that was happening in the province. However, none of these incidents were comparable to the internment camps that were created during World War II. As soon as Pearl Harbour was bombed by the Japanese, all people of Japanese racial origin were thought to be threats to the country, leading to drastic measures taken by the government, especially in B.C. Many people were uprooted to internment camps with curfews and their possessions were taken away and sold to the rest of the population without consent, as they were deemed "enemy aliens" by the province of B.C. These internment camps were paid by the Japanese Canadian prisoners themselves, as they were not protected by the Geneva Convention that were implemented for prisoners of war of enemy nations (Japanese Canadian History, 2019). Many families were separated as they were relocated across Canada, with women and children being separated from the men, as their living situations worsened with the lack of care from the government. The selling of property, the largest occurring in Powell Street ("Japantown") was to "to ensure the permanent exclusion of Japanese Canadians from the province" (Stanger-Ross, 2016, p. 273).

Even post-war, the Japanese Canadians in B.C. were not allowed to move back to their homes and their possessions were never returned. In fact, many of them moved back to Japan to live in exile or moved to Quebec where the discrimination was less harsh as it was forced by the ostracization by the government. Along with the removal of property also came the removal of rights, not allowing Japanese Canadians to vote until 1949.

Many accounts of the internment are filled with sadness and disappointment, "because their unfair treatment was based on phenotypical racial qualities, they felt that much was beyond their control" (Sugiman, 2004a, p. 61). Slurs were very popular as well, with many of them being called "Japs," not only in person but in newspapers and even by the MP Ian Mackenzie, with his famous nomination speech in 1944, "let our slogan be for British Columbia: 'No Japs from the Rockies to the seas'" (as cited in Canadian Race Relations Foundation, 2003). However, many Caucasian Canadians did not realize at the time the identity crisis that many Japanese Canadians felt, as they struggled to identify with being Japanese and felt themselves more as Canadians. Letters written by second-generation Japanese women would highlight this, as they write, "they call us 'Japs' and think of us in the same light that they think of the native Japanese" (Sugiman, 2004a, p. 62). Many second generation (Nisei) and third generation (Sansei) Japanese Canadians who saw themselves as Canadian and not Japanese, were equally mistreated, as they looked like their ancestors from the East. The internment camps of World War II and thus, the identity struggle of Japanese Canadians have had long-lasting effects in Canada, with the increasing push of assimilation even post-war. This assimilation came in forms of "shedding the cultural markers of their Japaneseness: the Japanese language, contact with Japanese Canadian peers, and an appreciation of traditional Japanese art forms" (Sugiman, 2004b), creating more and more young Japanese Canadians to forget about their long lost heritage of being Japanese. This cultural

genocide that was instilled upon Japanese Canadians is the damaging reality of the terror that their ancestors experienced, seen even now in the Japanese Canadian communities in B.C. with many unable to speak the language. Perhaps one of the biggest takeaways that has continued for many Japanese Canadians is the bitterness towards the Canadian government and the silent culture of their Japanese ancestors.

The dispossession of Powell Street led to the small community never returning to what it was pre-war. Although in 1988 through the Japanese Canadian Redress Agreement, the federal government apologized to the Japanese Canadian community for their mistreatment and pledged to never let loyal Japanese Canadians have similar experiences occur again, it was only in 2012 that the B.C. government made an official apology (Baines, 2019). By then, however, Powell Street was engulfed with homelessness and drug users on the street, as East side Vancouver became a popular spot for the less fortunate. Since Powell Street was at the heart of this district, many of Japantown's historical shops and homes were no longer occupied by Japanese Canadians. Even now, downtown East side has an overflowing population of drug users and prostitutes, creating difficulties for Japanese Canadians to rebuild their community. However, among these hardships, there are some positive aspects where the Japanese culture has shone through. Powell Street Festivals have been held since 1977 to commemorate Japanese traditions and culture, and the Vancouver Japanese Language School was deemed as a heritage building in 2019. These small steps in victory to regain Japanese Canadian culture have been the highlight to those who identify as Japanese Canadians, such as myself.

Present Day Issues as a Japanese Canadian

In many schools across B.C., World War II internment camps are not taught at any level of education. In 2001 when the Ministry of Education announced the changes that were to be

made to include social justice themes in Social Studies 11 curriculum, the idea of including Japanese Canadian internment and dispossession was rejected by the government, citing that it did not meet the criteria. Representatives of the B.C. Teachers' Federation and the Japanese Canadian National Museum were cited claiming this "signaled the Ministry's 'reluctance to partner with or represent ethnocultural minorities,'" (Woods, 2012). With the federal and provincial governments' attitudes of wanting to move on from the past, the curriculum to teach about the mistreatment of Japanese Canadians had not been implemented, creating tension and ongoing distrust in the Japanese Canadian communities. This may be due to the government not wanting to trigger ethnic-tensions, but this tactic certainly has not allowed for many Japanese Canadians to heal and trust the Canadian government. As Woods (2012) wrote on this matter:

> Public education represents an important step towards escaping such a conundrum [of achieving reconciliation and collective confrontation with the past], but this intervention will not work if calls for historical recognition are left unanswered by public institutions and government leaders (p. 81).

Including curriculum about Japanese Canadian internment would allow for acknowledgement of unfair treatment, as well as ensure that these types of events do not happen to visible minorities. However, this does not seem to be the case, as the Ministry of Education in B.C. were hesitant to fund a unit on Japanese Canadian internment even after agreeing to it once in 2002. This slow progress and clear hesitation made by the government has led to the slow implementation of the topic in schools across B.C., with many being dependent on the teachers and schools across the province. Many Japanese Canadians have also been afraid to speak on the further implementation of teachings, since those who experienced the internment are afraid of animosity from Canadians, while the rest of the generations (second, third) are silenced to respect the

wishes of their elders. With this delicate balance of fear and being forgotten and "the politics of memory [being] increasingly influenced by the politics of recognition" (p. 68), Japanese Canadians are left to hide in the shadows of other ethnicities that have stood up against their oppressors.

Recently, Japanese Canadians are speaking up with their Asian counterparts on the increased discrimination against them. As stated by Lam (2015) on the Model Minority Myth, there is a continuous sense of seeing Asian Americans (and Canadians) as "'obedient,', 'docile', and 'apolitical' bodies to perpetuate and reproduce certain colonial relationships in the domestic sphere" (p. 246). Although there have been laws and agreements made by the government to prevent racial discrimination from happening, the hate towards Asian Canadians in general have grown stronger since the COVID-19 outbreak. A movement of Anti-Asian Hate was started in response to the random attacks that were happening mainly in North America, with B.C. residents also being one of the frontline provinces to speak out against the hate. In a study conducted by University of British Columbia (U.B.C.) and the Angus Reid Institute, concluded that a majority (58%) of Asian Canadians experienced racial hate of some sort during 2020-2021, with 25% saying that they experience it frequently. These numbers are representative of how Asian Canadian youth experience hate due to their heritage, with Canadian youth of Asian descent being the highest to be hit with racism and hate compared to other heritage backgrounds. In a national study conducted in Canada to identify discrimination against Asians, it was clear that B.C. had the highest number compared to other provinces, with 87% of the hateful incidents occurring in the West Coast province, with 1 in 5 people experiencing verbal harassment from strangers on the street (Project 1907, 2020). Personal stories have also been in the media, with many stories in the news about random attacks, physically and verbally, on Asian people.

Recently, a non-Asian couple hurled racist slurs towards a Chinese coffee shop manager in Richmond, even though the manager was non-confrontational when dealing with them (Little, 2021). This is not a single incident, and there have been an increasing number of news articles that highlighted the hate that Asian people are facing in B.C. In an interview with.C.B.C., Dr. Leung, a clinical counsellor stated that there has been a tenfold increase in her caseload with Asian patients, with many talking about past experiences and racial trauma that they had lived through during their childhood that are triggered by the Asian hate they see during Covid (Jung, 2021). Dr. Ono from U.B.C. stated in an interview that, "escalating anti-Asian racism is something that's very real in Canada, very real in British Columbia and Vancouver, especially" (Bealne-Stuebing, 2021), as he experienced racial slurs while he was out with his family during the pandemic. These numerous stories of Asian Canadians experiencing hate and seeking emotional support is a sign of the times, representing the increase in Asian hate that has risen due to Covid. In B.C., Japanese Canadians are a quiet minority who are a part of those experiencing the racial discrimination.

Conclusion

With my personal experiences, a background in Japanese Canadian history, and the issues that are upon us currently, it is clear that hate and discrimination against Asian Canadians have been an ongoing issue that persists in our society. My own experiences had shaped the definition of "racism" at a young age, but the history of Japanese Canadian internment and the current status of Covid blaming has added on to the true meaning of being an Asian Canadian. As someone who understands the stories that have been shared by other Asian Canadians, and have been a part of the preservation of Japanese Canadian heritage, I see my own identity being reflected in the racial issues. As Lam (2015) stated, "the creation of the 'Other' was based on

signification of human biological characteristics and socially constructed mental capacities" (p. 243). If this is the case, why does it still happen in our society today? With Canada trying to make strides in amendment and correcting their ways of hate, I believe Asian Canadians, including Japanese Canadians, must also be recognized in the education field, society, and our local communities for equality to truly prevail.

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Biography:

May is a first generation Japanese Canadian raised in British Columbia, Canada. She is fluent in both Japanese and English, and is a member of the Japanese Canadian community in B.C. May has a background in Psychology and Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) and has been involved in the education field for her entire career. She specializes in Special Education and is currently pursuing graduate studies in Education.