With Warm Regards and Open Ears

1. An invitation for reflection and conversation

The first time I remember having to identify myself as a racialized person is during middle school. We were having a break between classes, and I was sitting with a group of my friends sharing our ethnicities. In the 4th grade I moved schools and joined the extended French program meaning that half of my courses would be taught in French. I don’t know how the topic came up, but I remember the group I usually sat and interacted with was mainly Asian. This was a common thing to do, ask about each other’s ethnicities, though the question was mostly, “what kind of Asian are you?” I don’t remember this topic ever coming up talking to my white classmates.

I remember saying that I was “mixed”—Chinese and Vietnamese, but upon highlighting that I only spoke Cantonese, my friends had asserted that I wasn’t Vietnamese. If my friends had tested me on entertainment that Vietnamese people would know, I could’ve said Paris by Night. I could’ve told them that I’ve only ever visited Vietnam. But what a strange thing it is, I realize now, that in the 7th or 8th grade, I had already felt the need to define and validate my identity and I didn’t know how to. This experience really stuck with me and I still constantly find myself a little tripped up every time I explain what my background is. I’ve tried to “calculate” how Vietnamese I am compared to how Chinese I am based on my parents’ backgrounds. I think it is interesting that I’ve had to confront this idea of how much—either genetics-wise, experience-wise, looks-wise etc., I lean towards one ethnicity or another and how often the conversation itself comes up. The ethnicity conversation never really seems to go anywhere. There is a strange deliberation, where I feel the need to voice different reasoning about whether I am more Chinese or Vietnamese, and usually that’s it.

The fact that the language I speak was used as a marker of my ethnicity also makes me wonder about how language and communication affect the way someone’s identity is construed. Does an Asian-Canadian who is less fluent in their native language lose that part of themselves? Are they not allowed to claim their culture and history because they have been “whitewashed” in a sense? I’m interested in exploring the idea of being “Asian-enough” and related points about whiteness. These are related to Marilyn Frye’s points, in her writing, “On Being White: Thinking Toward a Feminist Understanding of Race and Race Supremacy” about dominant groups deciding who is white. I would like to dig further into
this dynamic as it pertains to Asian culture. The link between language and identity, especially the way it divides and categorizes people, is a topic I explore later in this paper. The way we govern writing and speech limits the ability of marginalized groups to speak out. In academic writing, we are taught that objectivity is credibility. Similarly, speaking in slang or a different dialect of English that is not “standard” American/Canadian English is deemed as inferior. Speaking and writing in academic, status, white English is not the solution to being racialized, but this is a myth that attempts to convince oppressed groups that if only they worked harder to become a part of the dominant group they would be granted access. In my discussion about language and identity, I examine the ways people of colour (POC) find their voices minimized and dismissed when they try to engage on topics of racial ignorance through dominant discourse. The way we write and speak is judged through dominant ideology which is inappropriate and harmful as we seek to dismantle exactly these systems which are centered on whiteness. Even when POC speak fluent English, we are still made to confront our racialized identities. We are heckled, interrupted, and spoken over in the same languages we have been told to stop speaking so that we may be heard. This myth that the othered group just needs to perform like the dominant group to overcome their oppression breeds and enables ignorance. The myth must be rejected, along with ideas about language and discourse that are centered on whiteness, as we learn to listen better to one another and work towards a space that invites open conversation in all shapes and forms.

I still struggle with my identity and now there are more layers to this dilemma because my identity carries privilege. I can ignore oppression while at the same time being a victim to systems of oppression. In middle school, it was just the way things are. Now, I feel as if I could give voice to what was going on and what implications were made when we were having these discussions. The “othering” and need to feel like we are part of a group starts young. The systems and socialization that enabled and encouraged my group of middle school friends to categorize and sort each other into groups based on race are still rampant and pervasive. The truth of the matter, which I must accept if I am to speak out against racism and how I will dissent and protest against the oppression of minority groups, including BIPOC (black, indigenous, people of colour), is that I will never feel ready or sufficiently educated enough to say something. In my four years of University in an English program—which is specifically called “English – Rhetoric, Media, and Professional Communication” despite constantly practicing how to argue, techniques for persuasion, and how to research well, in any instance where there is a major social or political issue up for discussion, I find that no amount of studying rhetoric makes me comfortable sharing my ideas.

There are a lot of reasons for this. When I saw my friends post the #BlackoutTuesday image on social media to protest police brutality, I wondered if I should’ve done so as well. A lot of thoughts ran through my mind; I was uncertain about whether a post like this would be effective. I was frustrated that it
seemed like anti-racism was communicated through a hashtag resembling a fad or trend. But I am also constantly disappointed that the fear of saying something wrong, and the risk of sounding ignorant prevents me from doing anything at all. I make the privileged choice of being silent. But I don’t think all hope is lost, there is a learning opportunity for me here. Social media is not what works for me. The environment that I feel I thrive in and where I feel like there is room for me to share ideas and start conversations is in longer written pieces. I don’t know if what I will write about is helpful or whether it’ll be any help to people looking to get involved in anti-racism work. This is a personal piece, in which I want to explore and work past my own complacency and find small ways where I can make change. But along the way, I hope it may encourage anyone who ever reads this to begin their own journey of recognizing their own subjective identity and embark on a journey to discover how they can themselves dissent against injustice and oppression.

I will discuss language and identity, my own struggles with identity, issues with the generalization or grouping of people, especially based on the colour of our skin, the importance of listening, and continue to explore more ways that I can dissent and engage in anti-racism movements. I will also include works from an immigrant writer and a Korean-American internet personality to illustrate and showcase different, impactful ways to share experiences and dissent. Unlike a lot of the academic papers I’ve written, I want to be honest about my subjective experiences and invite conversation. We are taught to be nuanced and objective when we write academic papers; to consider the other person’s point of view but present counterpoints. This will not be that type of piece. I don’t know anything about anyone else’s subjective experience, and I want to listen and learn. Academic papers aren’t fit for true listening. In an academic paper, you want to be direct, objective, and distance yourself from the topic. If you don’t write in this style, your argument is null and weak. If there is too much Pathos and your paper only relies on emotions, it is unreliable. The human experience is messy, in real conversation you are often wrong. You don’t know the other person’s “argument” as you claim to know when you are writing about their point of view in your scholarly paper. That’s why this writing needs to be the opposite of what I know how to write.

While I’m afraid that this will come off as messy and incoherent, I think writing from experience, without making claims about what the other party might think and allowing yourself to listen to other stories without assumptions, facilitates an open conversation. It is an invitation for people to teach me more about areas that I am ignorant about. I started a trend in high school that my friends and I often joke about. I wrote a letter to a friend whom I still miss sometimes but was quite a bully. I wanted to tell them how I felt, give them time to process and respond without having to confront them in front of everyone else. I don’t talk to them anymore, but exchanging letters allowed us to have as mature of a conversation as can be with high schoolers, where we could acknowledge each other and isolate our own feelings. This
writing isn’t meant to accuse or attack, but to invite people to think on these topics more personally. In some sense, this writing will be a very long, personal letter offering you a story, another perspective, and in an ideal scenario, it’ll encourage someone to respond or write back even if not directly.

2. **Learning to dissent and what it means to me**

   What started in middle school, and what is evident to me now, is that BIPOC are always made to confront their racialized identity. I am constantly reminded about the colour of my skin and it often seems like white people, who never really have to think about themselves as white (no one ever asks white people “what kind of white are you?”) only remember race and racism “exists” when an act of violence is brought up in media. I have experienced myself the dismissal of racially charged experiences because they did not seem severe or violent. On one of my co-op terms I was making tea in the kitchen. An older white woman who also works in the office comes up to me and asks, “is that Chinese tea?” I responded saying I wasn’t sure. It was an unlabelled Earl Grey tea and to be honest I don’t know the origins of any tea that I drink. I felt uncomfortable thinking that she may have made that connection based purely on how I looked but tried to stay cheerful anyway. I didn’t want to cause any strife and ruin my chances at potentially working there full-time. She continues the conversation by telling me about a Chinese shop she goes to for herbal tea and I could tell she thought I would be able to relate or be excited about this somehow. I had never spoken to this woman before. During this brief interaction I hoped my discomfort didn’t show and I was worried about making a bad impression. As I reiterated this story during lunch to my co-workers, I remember two distinct reactions. The other female, Persian, co-op student said, “that is really weird, sorry that happened to you,” the full-time employee, a white male, on the other hand said, “well, was it Chinese tea?” I wonder if the “groups” that each co-worker belonged in, or the combination of groups had impacted the way they responded to my experience. I later retold this story to my cousin, and we laughed at how ridiculous it would’ve been if a white person had been asked, “is that British tea?” To my white co-worker, would there have been nothing wrong with the scenario had it truly been Chinese tea? There is this intuitive sense of being racialized and othered that is much easier to grasp as a person constantly confronted with their own racialized identity. I left this tea conversation alone, ranted about it to my friends who would understand and let it go.

   While we look at the big events that are covered by media such as the death of George Floyd in 2020, which certainly needs attention and serves as continual evidence that there is still a lot of work to do in terms of anti-racism, all instances of racism, prejudice, and ignorance should be treated with seriousness. This was evident to me during a work meeting that I attended in which we were discussing anti-racism and diversity after the killing of George Floyd. A Black member of the organization spoke up and shared that while they appreciate that people check on their peers during times where a hate crime or act of discrimination runs in the media, it is not only during these times that racism is prevalent and seen.
BIPOC are constantly aware of their non-whiteness and conversations like these make me realize that dismissing the everyday experiences of BIPOC and only paying attention when something makes the news, is enabling racism and discrimination to run when it’s under the radar; like a constant pain in your body that you refuse to get examined until it is too late. It is important that during everyday instances, where a POC is interrupted, where their credibility is questioned, and when they are held back from leadership roles, that we take the same care and consideration about how this perpetuates prejudice and discrimination. Even though the conversation about tea seemed small and insignificant, I think I was subconsciously testing the waters. If I express discomfort at an experience that seemed racially charged, would it be taken seriously? Racism and ignorance should be addressed on these everyday levels. This experience, and the words of co-worker stuck with me and it inspired me to be confident speaking about my experiences so that these conversations are ongoing. The need to dissent and talk about racism is necessary all the time and not only as a reaction to violent events.

There is an additional layer that is an obstacle for speaking out, and that is being part of multiple marginalized groups. The dynamics at play because I am both a woman and Asian makes it dangerous to speak out. There is a pressure to stay silent and overlook uncomfortable and negative experiences because of a sense of helplessness. A lot of the times a woman must prove why her feelings are valid; there’s a questioning of how you interpret your own experience versus what the person “meant”. A lot of the settings in which I felt the least power and the most helplessness are scenarios when I was made aware of my racialized identity or my womanhood. When I am afraid walking down a dark street and harassed by strangers in coffee shops, I am made aware of my womanhood. When someone calls out to me in Mandarin expecting me to understand and someone asking if I speak English is accompanied by a fear that they have something to say to me about the Coronavirus, I am made aware of my racialized identity. The awareness of both these aspects of my identity often intersect. The boundaries and pressures from social forces to stay silent are amplified as women are also socialized to be quiet and to be nice. Being an Asian woman then especially, carrying the stereotype of being submissive, it is exceedingly hard to stand your ground and to convince someone that your experiences are valid. Femininity, akin to the idea of the model minority, and generalizations about groups of people whether it be based on gender, race, or class, are ways in which we are taught to behave and act. The model minority does not complain. They are immigrants who work hard and earn their keep, in a similar way, women are expected to be polite and considerate. These standards and expectations, especially when combined, create insidious pressures that imply that if you play the roles given to you, you can be truly American or truly Canadian, but I am constantly reminded this is not the case. As long as I am a woman, as long as my skin is not white, and as long as racism and sexism are allowed to exist, I will be made aware that I do not belong. So, it is unacceptable for me to believe the myth that if I speak English, act as expected, and be as nice as I can, things will change for the better.
That’s why these conversations are even more necessary to me. The traumatic experiences of POC are multiplied by overlapping oppressive forces when they are part of more than one marginalized group. While I will focus on my racialized identity, there are also gendered issues, and other related complex, social problems that are linked. This is an important note because I feel as though the sentiment exists that we cannot care about multiple things at the same time or that attention paid to one problem means there is less effort and attention given to other issues. There are many examples of this, especially during the current COVID-19 pandemic, where one may feel unable to discuss their struggles with mental health because there are people going through worse experiences than they are. This ranking system of “who’s suffering more” and “what deserves more attention” is unnecessary and detrimental. Many social and inequality issues are connected and conversations and progress surrounding one issue will have inextricable effects on others.

No writing or speech can completely encapsulate a person (and especially not a group’s) experience and I hope to open a door and share ideas on how I personally try to truly listen and work on finding ways to speak against racism and discrimination without implying, which is not my aim, that I know the right way. I invite you to listen, especially during a time in a digital era where we have so many outlets to speak from, we need to relearn how to listen to hear. I’ll start with the relationship between language and identity, since it is a necessary obstacle to conquer if POC are to feel safe and validated in speaking out.

3. Language and identity

Learning to listen well to the experiences and stories of other marginalized groups start with understanding and rejecting the tendency to define someone else’s identity and experience in a way that aligns with our own world views and experiences. This also goes along with allowing and listening to people on their platform. As explored in “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” by Gloria Anzaldúa and Vershawn Young’s book, Your Average Nigga, there is a link between language and identity that is important to examine because of the way it can create internal dissonance about what “group” you belong in. It can undermine and prevent marginalized groups from speaking out.

I can relate to Anzaldúa’s feelings of being othered when she says, “Chicanas who grew up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish. It is illegitimate, a bastard language. And because we internalize how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differences against each other” (Anzaldúa 38). There are even specific terms used to describe Chinese Canadians: CBCs (Chinese-Born Canadians), or even a “banana,” which is a “slang term created to describe an Asian person who is white on the inside or acts white” (Khoo). If you are not white or white-passing, you’re often made to confront your ethnic identity (i.e. where are you really from?) even though you don’t speak your native language fluently. It is embarrassing to know how
broken my Chinese is when I try to speak to my older relatives and family members. I’ve found that I am distancing myself from my culture the more I opt to speak English to my parents instead of Chinese. However, I think it’s important to recognize that one doesn’t cancel out the other; an idea that Anzaldúa brings up. I can still participate in my culture even if I don’t speak the language perfectly. I want to make it clear that you are still able to look through multiple windows, a metaphor from Tomson Highway, even if you do not feel like you are entirely immersed in a culture. I think there is another realm of connection and a widening of perspectival horizon in the fact that we can “bridge”, in a way, both Canadian and Chinese culture. I can and am still interested in learning about my culture and we don’t have to draw the line for which cultural identity we relate more to—though this is difficult as we are constantly confronted with a questioning of our identity. It’s important to examine ourselves and why we may sometimes reject our culture or use our language differences against each other and give ourselves permission to practice our native language and connect with our culture even if we don’t feel “Asian enough”. There is no authority that can or should be able to tell us this, and it’s a question that stems from an attempt to alienate people.

I am still sometimes afraid that going into an English post-secondary program is unusual and almost unacceptable because I am Asian. There is an inherent belief or assumption that people of colour cannot speak English well which sometimes manifests as a microaggression. The lowest grade I’ve ever received was in a 5th grade English class. I still see telling my family I’m studying English as a whole debacle and sometimes I lie and say, “yes, I am going into teaching,” because I don’t know how to explain the fields of technical writing or data research in Chinese. I am guilty of assuming that they just wouldn’t understand. I have internalized the idea that English is a language that lets me describe all these things that Chinese cannot, but this is wrong. It’s an important feeling to reflect on. English is seen as the academic, status language, and it has been ingrained into my mind so deeply, that I have felt ashamed trying to speak Cantonese. The link between speaking English and having something worthwhile to listen to has been so normalized that I have internalized the belief that there is no point trying to explain something if “they”, my parents and older family members, don’t understand it in English. In believing this, I am also condemning my Chinese identity as inferior and unnecessary. Slowly, I have tried to speak more Cantonese again. The othering of the parts within my own identity and self is detrimental and the journey of dissent and learning to speak out must involve resolving these inner conflicts and recognizing the value of being a part of another culture which opens up the potential for seeing multiple perspectives. Language is used against marginalized groups as a way of othering and speaking English makes you seem more intelligent and credible.

I believe it was mid-afternoon, at least a year ago, when my Mom and I walked into a McDonald’s after I got a blood test done. As we headed to the self-serve kiosk to order, an older, white
man sitting in the corner with a larger group of other white men called out to us and shouted something like “Ni Hao”. I remember feeling upset but like always, I held my tongue thinking, it’s just my Mom and I and I don’t want any trouble for us. I convinced myself that it was relatively harmless even though I couldn’t shake off my annoyance—we weren’t even Mandarin speakers, though I had taken Mandarin classes when I was younger, and my Mom could converse in basic Mandarin. We could understand what the man was going for but listening to his Mandarin was like hearing your friends shout newly learned swear words in school. My Mom was slightly amused, like watching a “foreign”, most likely white, person speak fluent Chinese on some of her television shows, I imagine she also thought this scenario was interesting and the white man was just joking around.

After we got our order, we sat at a nearby table. I had wanted to sit somewhere else, since this was close to that table of men, but the table was near the exit and we weren’t going to take long. I just hoped that none of the men had anything else to say, which I was wrong about. At this point my Mom was still amused when, I think the same white man, tried to have a conversation with her in broken Mandarin. My Mom tried responding a few times, which I wouldn’t have done myself. As the man reached his limit of Mandarin words to use that were understandable, my Mom turned her focus back to eating and stopped responding to what the man was saying. I don’t remember exactly what he said next, but I’m certain it was something along the lines of “Chinese people are so rude, I’m just trying to talk to you”.

I’m always disappointed in myself for not saying anything, and I think I had just ranted to my friends about it later and let it go. I remember thinking that I speak fluent English and it’d probably be easier for my Mom to respond to the man in English rather than his broken Mandarin. I was upset because my Mom had tried to talk to him anyway until what he said was incomprehensible. Were we not friendly enough because we didn’t want to engage further, or at all, with strangers in a McDonald’s? My Mom and I left the McDonald’s and talking in Cantonese to each other, we agreed that those were weird men. My Mom told me she didn’t even know what he was trying to say. His speech was like gibberish, but she tried her best to respond. I can’t tell what the other men at the table thought and I can’t remember whether it was the same person who tried to talk to us who complained when we stopped responding. I wish there were other people around because I felt like it would’ve been easier to ignore them if we weren’t the only ones there; it’d be easier to pretend like you aren’t sure something is being addressed to you. Instead the restaurant was empty except for us, or at least it felt that way, and it was clear that the table of men were calling out to us because they used an Asian language. I was aware that they expected a response even if we didn’t speak the language. I wonder what else my Mom thought about it. These experiences have never happened when my Dad is around. I question my own interpretations of the interactions and whether I would be more content looking at them as amusing instead of mocking. I wonder how I could
have performed in a way that didn’t make the man think Chinese people are rude. This generalization creates a fear that one’s personal, subjective identity can represent your “group” in a negative way and can be a reason why a POC may choose to stay silent instead of confronting a problem.

I remain curious about what was going on in the mind of this white man we encountered at the McDonald’s. The calling out to us and the response he gave to our interaction was centered on his perspective. My Mom and I were made aware of our racialized identities and my Mom chose to engage with the man. I felt that I was only able to observe; being powerless if the situation were to become violent. Our interaction was used surely with other anecdotal instances where the man tried to converse with a POC to generalize all Chinese people as rude. There is a helplessness I feel caught between wanting to say something and being afraid of the consequences. I think there is an underlying assumption I often make that an ignorant person will become physically violent if I try to speak up, so I’m not sure how to find power speaking up in these day-to-day occurrences where I don’t feel safe doing so.

It is important therefore for members of dominant groups to recognize their ignorance and be open to engage in conversations about race and other social issues even if they are not through dominant discourses (like academic papers, and only in perfect English). In the meantime, I can learn to better listen to and respond when someone shares their experience. I will stay curious and invite others to examine the way their actions and behaviours may reflect biases. I am also a perpetrator of the idea that English is the only credible language and I have dismissed opinions that were not given to me the way I understood it. However, as Young discusses in his book, it’s not about the language you speak and even if you do engage in the language of academic merit, the real issue is racism. This doesn’t change even if you can speak English.

Young writes that “I am required to perform my academic (read white) and ghetto (read black) languages in order to quell and fulfil the racial, class, and gender fantasies that others have of me and that I have of myself” (Young 3). I can speak English perfectly. I can write for pages and pages and I still do not feel empowered to speak out and I am still constantly aware of my racialized identity. Random people whom I’ve never met will try to engage me in the language they think I speak based on the colour of my skin, and it isn’t just strangers on the street or at McDonald’s. It is people with authority, who I’d hope would have more racial awareness, trying to show off that they could speak my language, thinking that they could impress me with performing a racial identity I must be ecstatic to see white people imitate.

When this happened, I was also with my mom. After putting off my chest pains for months and being turned away from a walk-in clinic as soon as I told them what the problem was, I decided to go the Emergency Room to get it checked out. After waiting a few hours, as one does in Toronto Hospitals, I was finally directed to one of the medical rooms. Another half-hour after that, an assistant doctor came to do some preliminary checks. She explained that it could be caused by stress, or perhaps there was some
lung inflammation. She said she would have another doctor see me to decide what tests I should have. I waited a little longer and finally, the doctor came in. The next interaction probably lasted around 10 minutes. I think I was explaining what the assistant doctor said to my Mom in Cantonese. Naturally, the doctor decided to greet us in Vietnamese. With unfounded confidence, he adds, “you were speaking Vietnamese, right?” I responded with, “no, that was Cantonese”. The assistant doctor let a laugh slip and despite this not being a very sophisticated instance of dissent by me, I was laughing on the inside too. I felt like he deserved this bit of humiliation that would hopefully stop him from making racial assumptions in the future. At least that’s what would happen in my ideal scenario. As he switched languages and began asking about my symptoms in Cantonese, my dream cloud was scattered away. My mom and I were visibly confused, and I wish he would’ve just spoken in English because it took us a lot longer to process through his accent what he was trying to say. He told me in the end, “it’s hard to recommend a blood test to a healthy, young woman, but if you want you can do an X-ray. But you’ll probably have to wait around 4 hours for an X-ray, do you want to wait?” Well my mom and I didn’t wait all those hours to have no concrete assessment about what could possibly be wrong, so we waited—again, a total of about 10 minutes. To this day, I wonder if he had only given us that false wait time because he didn’t like the way I responded to his performance.

As a result, based on this experience, and the constant reminder of my racialized identity as I navigate through everyday life, the problem doesn’t seem to be “as long as you speak in English, I will understand you”. Even if a POC were to speak in perfect English, if someone does not want to listen, they will always find ways to dismiss your experience. Even though my mom and I could speak English, the white, male doctor, and the group of white men at McDonald’s chose to engage us in a language they could barely understand or use. If one truly wanted to understand and listen, the onus is equally on the privileged individual to learn, listen, and communicate to oppressed groups. It is a barrier for people who do not speak the dominant language to engage on topics of anti-racism and dissent and even when oppressed groups learn the dominant language this problem is not solved. The obstacle to listening isn’t language, but the intent to hear only to respond, and listen only so you could prove someone wrong. If one can learn the language of POC and use it as a gimmick, put on the disguise of being a part of the othered, then surely it is not impossible to open your ears to the experience of the other. Perhaps it is just ignorance, and I’ve never stopped being friendly with someone because they were ignorant to my discomfort and dismissive of an uncomfortable racialized experience. I think that’s why it’s so important to share perspectives from people who are constantly faced with racialized interactions, and how these are threatening to a person’s mental well-being. These experiences can heavily affect how safe someone feels in a workplace, even if it seems negligible through the lens of a person who rarely has to confront their racial identity.
Since language can be used to identify and other a group of people as well as define what is credible, the issue of being “Asian enough” and having an uncertain sense of self has been a barrier to how comfortable I feel speaking out about instances of racial ignorance. In Isabella Wang’s poem, “On Forgetting a Language,” she describes the impact of language on her identity:

Every once in a while I try to force my new
blubber into old leotards,
gel my greasy hair back into a tight bun,
enunciate my name in Chinese
just to get a feel of what it was once like.

If I return to my birthplace Jining now
I will return as a foreigner,
like the time I stepped on to this land ten years earlier
as a Chinese immigrant
and realized there was no place
for my language in this new country. (Wang)

When I came across this poem by Wang, I was excited to know that someone had put this experience down into a poem. I can’t relate exactly, because I was born in Canada. But I have also experienced trying to write my name in Chinese, “to get a feel of what it was once like,” and the “realiz[ation] there was no place / for my language in this new country,” (Wang) gives voice to that internalized embarrassment from speaking Cantonese when I’m not good at it and which reminds me of my racialized identity. Another thought I had when reading about Wang is that it seems like she has more credibility to write about dissonance with her language and identity than I do. I think this is a point of tension that prevents me and other POC who are born in a first-world country, who can speak the dominant language, from feeling like they can have a voice in anti-racism and discourse. I had always wanted to write about my experience of feeling out-of-touch with my heritage, but I had never done so. My identity has been shaped by grappling between being Chinese, Vietnamese, and Canadian but not really relating to either “group”. This includes being ashamed of speaking my language because I don’t want to be racialized and a feeling of embarrassment at how poorly I speak my “native” language. I was worried that “complaining” about losing my Cantonese is a “first-world problem” since I had the privilege of being born in Canada. However, it should be clear that racism and discrimination affects everyone. There is something to learn from all different types of lived experiences and perspectives.

Discussing the different, everyday experiences of marginalized groups doesn’t come at the expense of larger, more violent issues. Addressing this multi-layered problem, not only focusing on the
“worst” instances of racism and dismissing ones that are deemed less significant, both by the lack of attention by popular media and a fear of negative consequences in the workplace or other social contexts, is necessary for the goal of dismantling behaviours and attitudes that perpetuate and allow racism to pervade. Wang and other Asian figures who have shared their experiences through creative and different ways encourage me to be confident in my own lived experience. There are many ways to speak out and take part in dissent and these instances of ignorance in an everyday context must be called out. Racism is not only an issue when it makes the news. It is a plague that we let spread when we ignore and dismiss the symptoms, urging victims to suffer in silence until it is life-threatening. You shouldn’t have to be “sick enough” to get help. In the same vein, you shouldn’t have to be “Asian enough”, in other words “oppressed enough”, to speak out. Once we can reject notions that one must suffer either violently or silently, it is still necessary for dominant groups to learn to listen well if marginalized groups are to be heard. This collaboration is key to overcoming racial injustices and we must seek to listen and write collaboratively.

4. Listening and writing

People of colour and indigenous peoples are expected to speak using dominant rhetorical discourses and practices. To achieve higher education, we hold “objectivity” to mean intelligence and we learn that our own perspectives and experiences are unimportant. If minority groups do not engage with dominant groups in a way that the dominant group can understand, they are not taken seriously, and dominant groups may be given reasons to dismiss the stories and resistance of those who are oppressed. To learn to listen well, we must be aware of our own biases and the privilege that we bring to the table when we engage in anti-racism discourse and the rhetoric of resistance. We should seek to understand not from our own perceptions and experiences, but to hear from people, who aren’t just bystanders, that constantly suffer from prejudice and oppression. Instead of speaking for others and doing what we think is right, we need to listen to, learn from, and amplify the voices of people who live day-to-day needing to resist and needing change. We may lift our voices by educating ourselves and write powerfully by speaking from our own experiences. Your experience of the world is subjective and acknowledging your context and your own situation may help you with avoiding the tendency to generalize. When we write, it’s important that we don’t write in a way that aims to speak for or over other voices.

I am not alone in trying to learn and speak out against oppression and I think a lot of the pressure of saying something wrong or being afraid of coming off as ignorant can be absolved from writing to listen and dedicating my writing to finding better ways to listen. I love writing, but I never really liked to argue against someone else’s point of view. This is something dominant discourse makes you believe you have to do so we continue this pattern of writing even when it isn’t appropriate or suitable for talking about complex, deep-rooted social problems like systemic racism and oppression. Impactful writing, in
my perspective, shares your personal ideas in a coherent way and the best part of it is isn’t writing in a vacuum and writing for yourself, but inviting others to respond, building on other people’s ideas, and expanding your own perspective.

The obsession with objectivity results in emotionless, distant writing, which aims to be so rigid that no other whispers are allowed to pass through. Objectivity cannot be accomplished because we each carry personal biases. We view the world subjectively: in a way that is formed by the environment and context we grow up in. Writing in a way that demonstrates you are listening to hear is a lot different than writing and listening to argue against. The latter is the style of writing typically taught and expected of me to do in all four years of my English degree at the University of Waterloo. Writing without listening is like screaming into a void. Each experience is a personal and individualized one and they must be heard as such. This is what helps us tackle day-to-day racial ignorance. A part of listening well involves avoiding overgeneralizations and forming assumptions based on the experience of one person and believing there are simple ways to take on the complex problem of racism.

5. Generalizations and being the token minority

Another obstacle that stands in the way of speaking out, and one of the fears I had covered earlier that came up at McDonalds, is being afraid that your subjective identity will be generalized and reflect negatively on your “group”. Many public figures who are part of marginalized groups have expressed that they feel this pressure of acting as a representative of a community in the public realm. Someone who I have followed for years, Eugene Lee Yang from The Try Guys on YouTube, had expressed his experiences with this. In a video explaining why he decided to come out as gay, he says, “I didn’t want to be the Asian man on screen who failed” (“Why I’m Coming Out As Gay”). Lee Yang, in the video “Why I’m Coming Out As Gay,” explains the burden of feeling that he represents the entire Asian community. He is the only person of colour in his group, The Try Guys. One of his group members, Keith, says, “his career has not just been about representing the LGBT community, it’s also about the Asian community” (“Why I’m Coming Out As Gay”).

Lee Yang talks about the comments he has received from viewers that have discouraged him from speaking out. These comments include, “how dare you, you can’t talk about hating yourself, you shouldn’t talk about having this toxic, emotional, complex relationship with your race or identity” (“Why I’m Coming Out As Gay”). Anything that Lee Yang says or does seems to reflect both on himself, but also as if it represents the entire community of the groups he belongs to. He adds that “to be gay-Asian American… triples in the stress…I just have to be hyperaware of doing anything that would deepen someone else’s prejudice towards either party” (“Why I’m Coming Out As Gay”). The extension of a subjective experience to represent the whole of a group is indicative of the effects of othering that occurs against marginalized groups. To the dominant group, they are the center, and there exists an in-group bias
suggesting everyone within that group is an individual with subjective experiences. On the other hand, the “other” is seen as all the same. This is what perpetuates the idea that one can speak for the experiences of another or make judgements on the basis of a “token minority”. It’s important to have representation in media, and to have figures like Lee Yang talk about his subjective self. Representation in media is in part about showing individuality, rewriting, and challenging harmful stereotypes that allow racism and prejudice to thrive.

The expectation that all members of a racialized group have the same attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours is both a consequence and perpetrator of racist beliefs and enables complacency. The tendency of ethnocentrism and for people to generalize the experiences they have with one person to the entire group i.e. “I have a Black friend that isn’t offended by the N-word, so you shouldn’t be either,” erases individual voices and allows someone to see what they want to see. It is a psychological fallacy that silences and harms BIPOC. There is a pressure for marginalized groups to speak carefully since how you present yourself is often taken to reflect the opinions and beliefs of an entire group. This makes it unsafe for someone to speak out and talk about their subjective experiences; particularly when setting boundaries and expressing discomfort with a situation. After examining our subjective selves, working to listen better, and emphasizing the importance of hearing individual experiences, I ask myself how to use this broader perspective to start actively dissenting.

6. How to dissent against and engage in anti-racism discourse

The conflict surrounding what makes up my subjective self and how I ought to be, according to the roles prescribed to me based on my visible identity, has made me wonder how I can best (and most safely) speak out and dissent. There are privileges to being caught-in-the-middle of Asian and Canadian, where I can communicate my experiences and speak out through writing. I want people to notice how they may be refusing to “hear” experiences of POC and encourage other people to speak of their subjectivity through whatever means they are comfortable with, such as writing or art. Writing helps me see through other perspectives and voice my experiences and opinions. Like Frye, who recounts and examines her own subjective experience and invites you to do the same, I want to give people an opportunity to reflect and I have attempted to demonstrate how to do this through writing. This section seeks to encourage action in whatever way seems meaningful to the individual. Like Wang, one may choose to write a poem, or create videos like Lee Yang, or even write a lengthy, personal paper.

Across the readings from prominent figures and activists who have spoken up against racism and helped move the conversation forward, I have found very insightful and practical techniques and ways in which you can write in dissent. In a few particular pieces, like James Baldwin’s essay, “Letter from a
Region of my Mind,” Reni Eddo-Lodge’s article, “Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race,” and the writing from Frye, I have found inspiration for how to write my own piece and I hope it may be helpful for anyone trying to write in dissent. All three styles of writing involve emotion, the writing is personal, and the writers don’t try to generalize their experiences. Each writer uses different rhetorical techniques that encourage and force the readers to confront their own thinking instead of trying to convince them there are singular, all-encompassing solutions to these sticky problems. It encourages the reader to be an active participant instead of passive receivers of information.

Frye takes us through her thought processes, and her writing techniques both involve a sort of story-telling aspect but also serve as a guide. She makes clear ideas that underlie the way a dominant group speaks and blends them into her writing. For example, she brings to the surface the implications from a dominant group when they get to decide who is a member of the group: “anyone who is even possibly marginal cannot be allowed to draw the line” (Frye). Frye is thinking about her thinking and what things like deciding which group a person belongs to says both directly and indirectly. She challenges you to think about your thinking as well. Frye doesn’t say whether these implications are intentional, but it nonetheless creates a substantial consequence when, as Frye explains, one group “wields” the power to “[define] who is white and who is not” (Frye). It makes you question the way you communicate in general: both directly and indirectly, what are you saying through your actions and your words? Not only does she make you think about how power is interlaced in the way you speak in this context, this line, “her claim that she is not white must be challenged,” (Frye) delivered by Frye in this imperative way is rhetorical and performative. The line is showing you, through its tone, how these implications are heard by and how they oppress marginalized groups.

Eddo-Lodge illustrates the experiences of POC when trying to engage with white people on the topic of race. The writing is performative in the way that, she can indirectly share experiences of POC without engaging in conversation with the dominant group through dominant channels of discourse which don’t give room for conversation or speaking from personal experience. Eddo-Lodge publishes this piece on her own blog, her space, and it’s one that opens room for responses in the comments. The platform allows for other people to add on and speak about their own stories as well. One of the comments on the blogpost says, “ironically, in writing this blog post and subsequent book, Reni has opened up probably the biggest conversation with British and other white people about race” (Eddo-Lodge). I don’t think it is ironic. I think writing about her experiences in a blogpost like this lets her share on her own terms. It invites engagement but one that the responder must take initiative in starting. It lays out exactly what she feels and sees. The comments, should you choose to engage, are public. You can’t interrupt, you can’t talk over the speaker, and you must take responsibility for anything you post.
Similarly, as noted by the title of the writing, “Letter from a Region in my Mind,” Baldwin speaks of a personal journey and lets us in on his thinking. Baldwin understands how POC can come to hate their oppressors and why it would be tempting to take vengeance. At the end of the letter, Baldwin says “I wondered, when that vengeance was achieved, What will happen to all that beauty then?” (Baldwin). Baldwin does not tell the reader to think one way or another; he gives us tools to think for ourselves. What I want to achieve with this writing is something similar. I want to speak from my experience and give the reader tools to take an active role in deciding where they stand and what actions they will take. The writing is pointed, actionable, and personal but it doesn’t draw conclusions for you. Baldwin, Frye, and Eddo-Lodge tell you what they have experienced, what they have decided, and give you the opportunity to do the same for yourself. It may be strange that I am writing about writing in my paper, but I think it provides an active tool that has helped me amplify my voice and taught me how different ways of thinking can be communicated through rhetorical techniques and writing style, not just what a writer is saying directly.

I think that is what has always drawn me to writing. I’m not outspoken and there is a major difference on how comfortable I feel speaking versus writing (and, I imagine, how my parents feel, along with other POC, when they are not fluent in dominant methods of discourse, whether it be in regard to language or writing style). I have adopted either silence, for fear of not having any credibility or having my ideas come across “wrong”, and I think this fear may be telling and important to write on when we think about how marginalized groups are expected to speak up through channels that put them at a disadvantage. I hope incorporating metawriting in my paper helps people think about language and identity and why it’s important to engage oppressed groups through their choice of medium or channel of communication if you truly want to listen and understand. Like Frye says, there is an issue of not being able to claim you are marginalized if you are “white-passing”. I reject the fact that not being or appearing “oppressed enough” (related to not being Asian enough) takes away your right to speak on any issues pertaining to oppression and invalidates your experiences.

These writers move away from traditional academic prose in a way that empowers their writing and it takes the reader on a journey. Personal storytelling makes it evident that these systemic issues are real, and we are engulfed in them. These writing styles present ideas in a way that doesn’t allow you to look away from the problem. It challenges you to question your own beliefs. This writing doesn’t claim to give perfect answers but offers pieces to think about that the writers have been thinking through themselves. It invites you to challenge the way you think in a way that means something to you on an individual level. The significance of Frye’s points about white privilege is that individuals can acknowledge and refuse the privileges and power that come from being part of a dominant group to be able to truly listen to oppressed groups. She states, ”Membership in it is not in the same sense ‘fated’ or
'natural.' It can be resisted" (Frye). White people may face obstacles in understanding and addressing their implications and responsibilities for racism because their idea of equality might still center on whiteness resulting in, "our own firsthand participation in racial dominance rather than the secondhand ersatz dominance we get as the dominant group’s women" (Frye). The first rule to overcome this entrapment is to "educate oneself"; on both what one is ignorant about but also about your own ignorance. Frye emphasizes that "ignore" is an active verb. Like the refusal of the privileges that come with being a part of a dominant group, one must choose to overcome ignorance. Overcoming ignorance is dependent on the willingness to listen.

In Eddo-Lodge’s blogpost, she describes her experience with talking to white people: "Even if they can hear you, they’re not really listening. It’s like something happens to the words as they leave my mouth and reach their ears. The words hit a barrier of denial and they don’t get any further" (Eddo-Lodge). The writer is no longer speaking to white people about race because they are not listening. White people should hear the discrepancy in privilege, how they can choose what they hear and what they do not. If one truly wants to listen, they must recognize their position of power and listen without the intent to refute or defend. Frye, Baldwin, and Eddo-Lodge all speak from a subjective position and refuse dominant methods of discourse. They encourage us to explore our own subject positions and how we are implicated. Across different places, times, and vantage points, they make clear that complicity is afforded by privilege. You must play an active part if you wish to dismantle your ignorance.

In, A Tale of Monstrous Extravagance: Imagining Multilingualism, Tomson Highway’s comparison of speaking one language to living in a house with only one window really resonated with me. Highway says, “all you see is that one perspective when, in point of fact, dozens, hundreds, of other perspectives exist and one must, at the very least, heed them, see them, hear them” (Highway). Language is not just a tool, but I feel as if we jump into a different persona and part of ourselves when we switch between languages. It seems to come with it a different understanding of the world and there are ideas I can express in Chinese that I cannot express in English. There’s a connection that I have with my childhood friend with whom I can communicate with in Chinese that I don’t have with everyone. There is a history that is “reopened” when I speak in Chinese that I sometimes feel like I’ve forgotten—the experiences of going to Saturday school to learn Mandarin, watching television shows on Chinese channels, and not being able to relate to kids that watched Disney. It felt embarrassing as a kid not being able to relate to the childhood of all the other kids. There was certainly a sense of alienation that I still recall when I come across people who shout random phrases in Chinese at me on the streets. There is potential for a sense of community and empowerment but as I grew older, I’ve developed almost an aversion to speaking my native language because it seems so foreign to me. I’m trying to speak more Chinese, at least to my parents, to try to reconnect with the culture.
The decentering of your own subjectivity and biases is necessary for truly listening to the experiences of others. As Dr. Frankie Condon mentions in her writing, *I Hope I Join the Band*, the plan she comes up with to save him from poverty and oppression, as she drove to her brother’s house, was centered around the perspective of whiteness (57-60). While I am writing, like how Dr. Condon and Frye write, I hope I was able to present my memories and histories alongside the experiences of others. I wanted to examine my own subjective identity and unravel the layers of how I have had privilege in specific contexts where other POC wouldn’t. At the same time, like Dr. Condon and Frye, I don’t want my writing to imply I have found a clean, simple, solution to solve sticky problems like systemic racism and oppression. Rather, I want people to examine their respective memories and find ways that they can engage with and support anti-racism in a way that makes sense to them.

The ways I have learned to think whitely is having the privilege of being born in Canada. At times, related to Dr. Condon's discussion of the idea of “guilt”, it is easy to stay complicit because I do not have to face violent racism up-close. My lived experiences and memories might disguise the experiences of marginalized groups that are facing racially charged aggression living in or out of first-world countries as something I can do nothing about or something that is not my business. I feel far removed because I have learnt from sharing my stories that micro-aggressions are not “bad enough”. However, the thought that these everyday prejudices aren’t as bad, represents a learned helplessness and acceptance of the world as is because it seems impossible to imagine things getting better, especially if I am under the impression that things-as-they-are aren’t so bad. However, just as Dr. Condon examines her desire to give up writing *I Hope I Join the Band*, because of the guilt and hopelessness she feels thinking she is unable to join the conversation as a white woman, I must examine my own fear of not being able to change anything and recognize that it is an insufficient reason to not try.

It is certainly difficult to write or speak out, but everyone suffers in a society where racism and discrimination still exists. Being unable to decenter yourself and listen to other lived experiences will always keep people divided. Accepting a “good enough” society, allowing implicit racism to be unchecked, encourages a constant othering of people and dismissal of other lived experiences. This is a society that remains unsafe for POC, and being from a first-world country, I have adapted a false sense of security that has allowed me to remain complicit as someone who feels they are removed from explicit racism and discrimination. In every area, whether it be job-seeking, academia, day-to-day, or many other contexts, you can be affected and disadvantaged by gender and race. The comfort of being in a first-world country masks this at times but these implications will always be present if we opt for comfort and acceptance of things-as-they-are.

7. **Looking forward**
It is my hope that this piece of writing, like pieces from Frye, Baldwin, Highway, Condon, and other moving, powerful writers, though I would not consider my piece nearly as artful or impactful, inspires you to consider your own subjective position and how you can take personal steps to engage in anti-racism discourse. As I learn more about these writers and the ways in which people have dissented, in classes about race, resistance, and rhetoric, it seems necessary to speak up and be part of the solution. Learning to dissent, understanding how these systems of oppressions pervade my own life and sometimes being able to do so due to the privilege I have being born in Canada, has made it evident, as it should’ve been all along, that social issues and injustices are everybody’s problem. But though it may be everyone’s problem, there is no one-size fits all solution.

If there is one thing that I would like a partaker in my consciousness to take away, after getting through this piece, it is that listening is the key to dissent. Listening was and will remain a necessity as I traverse the journey into my own subjective self and figure out the implications of my identity and how I am best able to dissent. The discourse involved in dissenting and trying to bring change is not about being right or being the most objective. It is better to be wrong and be open to learning and being corrected than to never say anything at all. I need to be able to truly listen in order to carry on and build on anti-racism conversations to help address biases and injustices that marginalized groups are confronted with daily.

I will continue to examine my own identity: the way that I define myself, the way that society defines me, and how this implicates my day-to-day life as I create a personal road-map and dissent in ways that I can make the most impact—for me currently, it is through writing and creative means. At the same time, I want one of the key takeaways for someone reading this to be the importance of true listening. It necessary to engage in conversation and share your experiences, but it is of equal importance, sometimes even of greater importance, for you to make space and pay attention to experiences that have been erased and oppressed. I cannot have felt comfortable writing and sharing if I did not listen first. If I do not read and listen to ideas of other writers, then I am not trying to understand and be a part of the solution. This problem implicates all of us and it demands collaboration for us to overcome. Systemic racism is a deep-rooted problem and it requires that we work together, build off each other’s ideas, and write our narratives alongside each other instead of against one another.

I was paralyzed a few months ago when I saw all my friends posting on social media in protest of police brutality. I didn’t know what I could say, and it felt disingenuous for me to reach out to Black POC to make sure they were okay even when it is a known fact that BIPOC are suffering daily from oppression and discrimination. You’ll find in this writing that I “wonder” a lot. I hope this gives any readers an idea about the constant awareness BIPOC have about their racialized identity and encourages you to examine your subjective self and consider the way your actions and behaviours affect others. Reflecting on the class in which this piece arisen out of, I am appreciative of the opportunity and push I was given to speak
on my subjective self and dissent in a way that I was never confident enough on my own to do. It has allowed me to explore ways in which I can add value to the conversation. I will continue to grab hold of opportunities in my life to listen and I am hopeful there exists a future where we may all listen to one another without judgement.

Works Cited


   http://renieddolodge.co.uk/why-im-no-longer-talking-to-white-people-about-race/


