

# Making Experience Meaningful: Interpreting Chinese Canadian Women's Personal Encounters with Racism

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## Abstract

Using Philomena Essed's theory on everyday racism, this paper explores how Chinese Canadian women interpret racism. It argues that differences in interpretation can be explained by examining personal biographies that attend to subjective experience and social context, and from which implications for anti-racist feminist epistemology can be drawn.

## Résumé

En se servant de la théorie sur le racisme quotidien, cet article explore les Canado-chinoises interprètent le racisme. Il soutient que les différences dans l'interprétation peuvent être expliquées par les biographies personnelles qui sont liées à l'expérience subjective personnelle et le contexte social, et desquelles on peut tirer la portée d'une épistémologie anti-raciste féministe.

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When I had been in Canada for just about a year, I was asked whether I suffered from cultural shock upon arrival. I blithely answered that I had no difficulties because I was already knowledgeable about the western world. Compared with other immigrants who were unable to speak English, I considered myself to be fortunate. Much have I learned since then. For one thing, I have adopted an identity as an immigrant/racial minority woman, referencing the histories and the struggles of women of colour before me, and the space in which I am now able to write and speak. Thus, if someone was to ask me the same question today, I would be much more measured in my response. Such a change and revision in representations of our experiences are the consequences of the process of adaptation, modification and acquisition of new information over one's life history.

Racism is an ideological encounter. It takes years to unlearn what we take for granted. It takes many more to give meanings to one's experiential reality that seem to counter existing legitimate knowledge. To understand this process, it is useful to begin with Philomena Essed's (1990; 1991) notion that knowledge of everyday racism is heavily influenced by one's group, personal history, and experiences as a minority person in a context where one's experience of racism is delegitimated as a valid source of knowledge about the society. I draw on Essed's work in arguing for the importance of examining personal biographies in order to better understand Chinese Canadian women's development of knowledge of racism. Working with transcribed interviews with six young women of Chinese

descent living in Toronto around 1993, I examine their interpretation of experiences to show racism as an ongoing ideological conflict that exists at the individual level.

In understanding how personal biography and individual experiences shape Chinese women's knowledge of racism knowledge I want to highlight the importance of validating individual experience as a legitimate source of knowledge about racialized realities. Individual experience cannot be understood, however, outside of the social and ideological context. This experience of course has to be contextualized in the knowledge production and legitimation structures. Experience is itself already an interpretation (Scott 1992). Thus, looking at how an individual interprets her experience is useful. I do not mean to suggest that every instance of difficulty experienced by a racialized minority person is an instance of racism but I want to show how difficult it is to name racism when established knowledge denies its existence in everyday encounters. Moreover, the lack of an anti-racist community knowledge among these women suggests the gaps that exist between established anti-racist communities and activists, and many racialized minorities in the periphery. Clearly, more needs to be done to integrate newcomers into the antiracist community by discussions around how racism manifests itself everyday. My aim is to show the ongoing need for knowledge production strategies that activist communities need to undertake in order to establish an anti-racist perspective in our society. The integration of, and the emphasis on, racialized minorities' and newcomers' experience in established knowledge of racism and anti-racism are necessary to bring them into a more productive dialogue about the future of a common community of resistance (Hall 1996) against racism and other forms of marginalization.

There are two aspects to knowledge of racism that inform this discussion. The first aspect is its

rootedness in experience. Essed (1991) points out that experience is the channel through which knowledge is acquired, indirectly through personal experience or directly through communication and vicarious experiences of racism (88). What this implies is that individuals' knowledge is the product of their experience and that the social context of experience would function either to limit or enable knowledge of racism. Second, general knowledge about racism should be differentiated from "comprehension" of racism. General knowledge about racism involves established representation and meanings of racism available to the society or the group regardless of how the individual knowing subject interprets it (73-76). In other words, general knowledge involves generalized and acceptable understandings of racism which often exclude racialized minorities' own interpretations of the society. General knowledge is the legitimate knowledge and is the context for comprehension of racism in ways particular to the subject. It would be difficult to identify racism if the general knowledge presupposes a racism-free society. However, ideological conflicts can shift general knowledge about racism. For example, Essed argues that compared to Dutch black women, American black women have a more established group history of anti-racist movements that could claim such icons as Sojourner Truth and Angela Davis. The generalization of this knowledge to American society allows for an acknowledgment of the existence of racism in the United States (US). American black women's long historical struggle with racial politics has become more generalized in the US. Thus, black American women are more likely than Dutch black women in Holland to recognize or label their experiences as racism as they have access to and are socialized into a broader general knowledge of racism. In addition, Dutch black women living in Holland are generally newer to that society. The subtle and polite racism in Dutch society and the recency of Dutch black women's presence only facilitate

the construction of Holland as a tolerant society. This ideological framework makes it very difficult to name racism when it occurs.

Comprehension of racism is the subject's ability to recognize and understand the underlying structural meanings of everyday racism. It requires insights that are meaningful to the group and the individual subject. These insights include:

- a) the ability to explain individual experiences in terms of group experiences;
- b) acknowledgment of the historical experience of the group;
- c) explanation of (historical and contemporary) group experiences in terms of racial and ethnic domination;
- d) acknowledgment of continuity in the relation between the personal experience and the group experience; and
- e) personal responsibility in the process of change.

(Essed 76)

In other words, comprehension of racism has to do with being able to recognize racist encounters not simply as individual, isolated phenomena but also as social, historical, and political. The full impact of racism on the individual and the group is recognized. Most importantly, knowledge is often derived from experience; thus comprehension has to be contextualized in both individual and group experience with racial oppression and resistance.

This formulation of racism knowledge points to the relevance of feminist theorizing (Collins 1990; Lee 1996; Smith 1987; Sudbury 1998) about experiential knowledge in thinking about the acknowledgment of experiences of minority groups, including women whose knowledge is rarely recognized as legitimate and is relegated to the space of "experience"- the space of

unknowing or subjugated knowledge. Feminist scholars however, have shown very convincingly that knowledge and experience cannot be thought of as separate and discrete. Joan Scott (1992) for example, argues that experience is only available to us through interpretation, making it impossible for us to imagine an authentic experience. For minorities, it is necessary to understand not just how this mediated experience enters the realm of knowledge, but how the structural and social dimensions limit the interpretation of experience. We can acknowledge the role of experience in informing and limiting knowledge, and vice versa. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) calls experientially-grounded knowledge "wisdom." This is similar to Essed's distinction between knowledge and comprehension. Collins and Essed respectively emphasize personal "accountability" or "responsibility" in the way that experiential knowledge is produced. Personal significance of experience is highly relevant in how one's experience is interpreted and known. In short, anti-racist feminist theorizing on experience and knowledge production is useful in understanding how experiences of racism can be known by people experiencing them.

Although it is very difficult to comprehend the underlying racist meanings in seemingly normal acts, the understanding of racism, whether fully comprehending or not, influences the way in which women act in racialized encounters. The competition between dominant knowledge of racism and women's own experience is revealed in women's ambivalence towards what racism is and in the steps they take to protect themselves. A few of my interviewees adopt defensive strategies in public situations precisely because they expect to encounter racism even though they seem to see Canadian society as tolerant. The disjuncture between the interpretation of their experience and their general knowledge about the society as shown through these interviews reveals knowledge production as contestable.

This research was conducted as part of my master's degree requirement. Six Chinese women living in Canada were interviewed about their experiences of racism for approximately two hours each. The purpose was to explore how they understand their experiences of racism. These women were recruited from my network of friends and acquaintances. I was looking for self-identifying women students of Chinese descent to talk about their experiences of racism. I asked them to speak about their racist encounters if they had any. Those I spoke to had very different origins and backgrounds. Four were in their twenties, and two were in their thirties. All were students in various universities in Ontario cities. Jenn came as a visa student from Mainland China four years prior to the interview. She was extremely isolated and entered Toronto in late 1980s when Cantonese from Hong Kong were the predominant Chinese group. She was also struggling financially working as a dim sum cart pusher. She was twenty-four years old and she had been in Canada on her own for four years. Fee had been in Canada for four and a half years at the time she was interviewed. She was twenty-four years old and immigrated from India with her relatively affluent family. Still, she worked part-time throughout her school and university years to help pay for her tuition. She was studying to become a nurse. Comfortable in her own small extended family, she had very few friends outside of her small Chinese community. Like other Hakka-speaking Indian Chinese who were linguistically marginalized in the dominant Cantonese speaking Chinese group in Toronto, Fee kept to her own Chinese network. Alicia came to Canada from Jamaica ten years before the interview. She was twenty-five years old and was attempting to complete a degree in journalism. Her friends were a mix of Jamaican blacks and Chinese. Lena was also twenty-five years old and was born and raised in Canada by immigrant parents. Lena spoke English with no "foreign" accent. She was doing an MBA degree at the

time of the interview. Sue came from Singapore as a visa student three years before the interview. She was in her thirties and was struggling with her English. Mary was also in her thirties and had been here for four years. She came from Hong Kong. Like Sue, she was also struggling with her English and trying to understand her English-speaking professor was a key struggle for her. Mary was a single mother with a ten year old daughter. All the other women had never been married. The dialects spoken among them included Cantonese (Lena and Mary), Hakka (Alicia and Fee), Hokkien (Sue), and Mandarin (Jenn). All the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms are used to disguise their identity.

The sheer diversity of this small group of women attests to the multiplicity of what is often called "Chinese diaspora." It is too easy to generalize and universalize women's experiences. John (1989) explains the problem this way: "The problems with the 'I' and 'we' slots are obvious. Each of them asserts too much: the 'I' too much authenticity, the political becoming purely personal, and the 'we' is precisely what needs to be demonstrated, not assumed," (56).

Keeping this in mind, I am arguing for the need to contextualize Chinese women's knowledge of racism in their personal biographies to conceptualize their differences even as I examine the force of dominant ideologies and knowledges in producing common experiences among these women. The examination of personal biography addresses shifting cultural identities in the ever-increasing inter-culturalization of identities. It helps us avoid the gross generalizations of the universal category of "Chinese Canadian woman" devoid of the complexities of world travel, migration and cultural differences among "Chinese Canadian" women. The focus on biography locates knowledge of racism in the larger historical framework of colonialism, migration and cultural specificities; thus preserving the continuities of

group experience over multiple displacements. At the same time, personal biographies allow individual differences and uniqueness to be conceptualized. A biography is but one's interpretation of one's life experiences, limited and informed by one's social context. Social actors stand at the cusp between individual and social and we could never view their knowledge about our society as isolated and individual. By definition, personal biography encompasses all the socio-historical and political forces, as well as personal events that structure the experience of an individual. Personal biographies are not discrete histories but located alongside of and intersect with other biographies to illustrate how our knowledge is produced, and how individuals are connected to each other and the larger context. In short, personal biographies allow me to employ "ethnographies of the particular" (Abu-Lughod 1991, 149). Abu-Lughod argues that focusing on the particulars highlights the constitution of experience by the specificities and ways individuals contest interpretations of their experience (153-54).

All the women interviewed felt ambivalence either in naming racism in their own life or recognizing it in others' lives. Lena, the Canadian born, and Alicia, the immigrant woman from Jamaica, were more certain than others that there was racism in Canadian society. To begin, Lena was more confident about her hyphenated status than others: she was a "Chinese Canadian." After all, she was born in Canada. The entrenchment of multiculturalism allows for such an identity. Other women simply narrated themselves as "Chinese." Alicia did at times try to label herself as "Jamaican Chinese Canadian." Both Lena and Alicia readily recounted personal incidents of racism. Lena began with her recollection of childhood experiences with name-calling. She explained that in later years when she was in high school, she did not experience similar incidents and reasoned that it was possibly because her peers became "smarter" as they got older.

We also have to remember that tolerance and multiculturalism were becoming important ideologies; overt racism was increasingly being relegated to private expressions and extremely racist groups. As Bannerji (1995) suggests, nowadays, racism is about "omission" rather than "commission." The problem then becomes one where, as Essed argues, the ideology of tolerance makes it difficult for racism to be named, particularly when it is expressed in covert forms. Even for Lena, there were moments when she could not be sure whether an incident was racist or not as in this example:

I don't really know if you'd call it discrimination or not. I find that because I was born in Canada, a lot of people, when they make fun of Asian people, they will just turn to me and say, well, doesn't matter for you because you are Canadian. [...] I have a lot of people say to me, you Asians are alike, you know, you are all good at Math and Science and that's about it. Just little incidents like that.

Despite having been born and raised here, and despite experiencing some of the counter discourses in the cosmopolitan greater Toronto area, racism remained difficult to name. When racism is not expressed in blatantly negative ways but in those "positive" stereotypes that Lena experienced, it was difficult to name it as racism. The idea that Chinese youth are all six-packers (those who excel in each of the three high school subjects in Mathematics and Science) seems to be the one that Lena is offended by and yet it has allowed her to be seen as intelligent and smart.

Lena was able to recall overt expressions of racism since she grew up in Canada and often encountered blatant forms of racism. As she said:

I do remember these racist slurs. Oh yeah! You brought noodles like worms. And just because I was different in what I would bring for lunch, people would call me a Chink and you know, why your eyes are slanted and things like that.

It is difficult to say with absolute certainty that Lena is much more aware of racism because of her long experiences of racism, particularly the overt forms, but what is clear is that she experienced discourses of racism and anti-racism more than the other women interviewed, aside from Alicia. Even for her, an encounter that I would label as racist creates much confusion in her mind. For example, Lena and her friend Lynn were the only two Asian students among 30 or so students in a graduate course. Lena described the incident:

Our professor will be talking a lot about Asians and then he'd say it as a joke: "oh you know those slanted-eyed people," and we [Lynn and I] kind of look at each other. And you look back, what are you saying?...And every once in a while he would say things like "Japanese who spoke English with a South American accent are not really Japanese."

While her friend Lynn was "just going crazy," Lena was hesitant to label this as racist:

I was talking to some people about it. They were telling me, maybe he doesn't...he would kind of go into a kind of character, so maybe he was trying to be one of those people, and he really didn't mean it. It was difficult to say whether it was his view or what he encountered when he was there, what other people thought, I don't know. The rest of the

class didn't feel anything was wrong with it...When we had our mid-term evaluation, Lynn said you know, some of the things he said are racist...The next class he [the professor] goes, "Well, you know, some people think the things I say are racist," and everybody turns around and looks at us.

This example gives us further indication of the difficulty of naming racism when everybody else discounts it. Particularly when the racialized minorities are numerically small, this creates greater difficulties in legitimizing one's experience as valid.

Alicia recounted that she learned early on, not long after immigration, that racism was part and parcel of our society because of racist encounters with the school system:

You realize that there will be people who will want to put you back and who will want to negate what you're striving for. [...] So to have someone negate you like that when you are so young doesn't give you much confidence in yourself. It negates your confidence. It is saying, we are better than you are so we have to put you back or something, and it's not fair to new immigrants...

Alicia's experience of racism was influenced by her Jamaican background. Stereotypes about Chinese and Jamaican communities created a contradictory experience where she was differently positioned as Chinese or Jamaican depending on the context. For example, she recounted many incidents where she was underestimated by her teachers whose body language or expression of surprise when she excelled in her school work communicated an assumption of her intellectual inferiority. She felt that the stereotype of "lazy" and

"stupid" Jamaicans elicited some of those responses. Yet, she felt that white peers approached her when they wanted something from her such as help in school work.

Sue's experiences with racism reveals a highly conflictual understanding of racism. The dissonance between what she personally experienced and knew about racism on the one hand, and a denial of racism through racist ideologies on the other hand, is highly pronounced. She had known from some of her friends while in Singapore that she had to be ready to face racism in this country. Upon arrival, she had a frustrating encounter with a Bell Canada employee which she believed stemmed from racism. Here, she did not think that it was a problem of adjustment. In fact, she explained, the employee knew she was not from Canada through her heavy Singaporean accent. During the interview, Sue indicated that she experienced racism in her personal encounters and in the media. As the interview progressed, it became unclear whether she understood her experiences as problems of adjustment or racism. However, she seemed frustrated at the lack of vocal resistance from Chinese peers in her classes and in other spheres. Towards the end of the interview, she explained matter-of-factly that the Bible justified racism through the story of Ham whose mark (interpreted as a darker skin colour) of suffering would remain with his descendants. In other words, racism is the natural order of our society. However, her acceptance of this explanation is not inconsistent with what was happening to her at the time. Sue's isolation and a personal crisis led her to convert to Christianity which provided her solace and a community of Bible reading friends with whom she had regular meetings, social gatherings and bible discussions. The following excerpt reveals the competition and conflict between experiential knowledge and validated knowledge. Sue has been told that racism occurs in the workplace more so than other places:

I personally haven't really experienced [discrimination] because I haven't worked so I haven't really experienced it. From my friends you know, they have told me this sort of stuff. [...] I can sense the kind of feeling is still around. It's still kind of obvious. But it's like, it depends. But I think generally, it's still discrimination. [...] It's obvious. [...] I think normally Asians don't like to voice up. They normally keep quiet, you know, like Asians are the most you know, can tolerate whatever [problems that come their way].

Sue was frustrated with other Asians and Chinese for not standing up for themselves and she relocated the problems to Chinese people's lack of desire to defend themselves and their quiet acceptance of discrimination. She also suggested in this excerpt that she had never experienced racial discrimination personally because she had never "worked," so she could not really say that there was racism or not in our society. (Work for her meant paid full-time employment, not part-time work in the university library). This contrasts with all the racist encounters she narrated but in the final analysis, racism is not quite there.

Similarly, Fee believed that she did not personally encounter racism but she had heard of other people talking about it. Moreover, she bought into the myth that racism was only a transgression by whites occupying lower socio-economic status. She believed that they felt much more threatened by new immigrants, while higher class white people were more friendly and seemed to be interested in her background. Fee was living in a working-class neighbourhood and worked in a nearby grocery store around the time she was interviewed. Thus, she was more likely to have contact with working-class whites outside of the university. This was, perhaps, the way in which she tried to make sense

of what she experienced outside and within the academia. She explained that since educated and wealthy white people were able to travel extensively and had more knowledge about third world countries, they were more open-minded. On the other hand, those who were racist were really people who had problems of their own. She believed that the best way to deal with racism was to prove to white people that you could succeed. She consciously adopted a reserved and aloof attitude to avoid difficult situations despite her denial that she had personally experienced racism. As she explained:

I guess I've never really encountered any [racism] but I've heard a lot of stories. Everybody knows about that. [...] You can see it in the workplace all the time. I don't seem to encounter this because I don't talk to customers. I don't give them the chance to do it. I don't know - [maybe it's] because I'm more aloof to customers. I just serve them like I should be serving, like [in a] professional way. If you start talking to them, then you never know, they might like you, [or] they might not like you.

This defensive stance reveals a strategy to avoid racist encounters even though she did not fully comprehend racism. This is her personal interpretation of the general knowledge and her own experience.

Even with her defensive stance, Fee was not immuned to "racism." Upon an encounter with a customer shouting at her at a deli where she worked, Fee considered whether there was a racist motive on the part of the customer:

I don't really know, maybe the lady thought that I was Chinese. I wouldn't know. She may have thought that I didn't know English....I

don't know if there's such a thing connected to that or not, I just see it as the stupidity of the other girl [the customer]. And that time was recession time. She's probably just been fired by her boss. You always find excuses; I don't know. It's very hard for me; I don't see it as discrimination. I just see that they have something else in mind.

This uncertainty is common among the women. The willingness or perhaps the desire to deny that racism exists is important in a society where meritocracy is supposed to take you up the social and economic ladder.

Jenn from China denied that there was racism; she saw her difficulties as simply problems in adjusting to life in Canada. She identified social isolation, language barrier, cultural differences and financial problems as key issues she had to confront. Like Sue, she converted to Christianity not long after arriving in Canada, finding a new network of friends through her church. She explained her difficulties as God's tests for her. She had difficulty naming any specific racist incident when she was asked. Here is Jenn explaining the difficulties of recognizing racism because everybody tries to mask what they really feel:

All the courses talk about racism, classism and sexism, and everybody is so aware of these things. So people just try to be nice to the other race or the other sex or gender, even though they are [prejudiced] inside, they don't really show it. So if you don't have a lot of contact with them, you don't really notice that. [...] So when you just say hi or you just sit down beside them in the lecture, they won't show that because they don't realize what they have deep inside. Even though they think of you in this way, but with the

knowledge they have, they know it is not nice to express it...

Jenn's ambivalence towards naming racism explains why when a person called her a "Nipp," she was still reluctant to name that as racism.

Jenn shows in another instance her confusion around whether her co-workers exclude her intentionally or not (racism for her seems to be only defined as an intentional individual act). It is easy to chalk up her experience as a difficulty with language when they feel alien in our society and where they are unfamiliar with the slangs and common usage of English language:

Sometimes they joke around with each other but they're not excluding me. They talk to me too; they're nice to me. But the thing is I just feel like the way they talk between them; it's like I can't really get whatever they say, you know. Sometimes in the school, you talk just the normal language, you use proper words which you can find out in the dictionary, but the word they say is like, I have never heard of it.

When Mary was asked to participate in the study, she said that she was more knowledgeable about sexism because she experienced it as a big problem in Hong Kong. She felt that Canadian society treated women better. Racism was not an issue. Like Jenn, Mary experienced most of her difficulties as problems in adjusting to a new society. She tried to compensate for what she perceived to be poor English by perfecting her familiarity with her course content. However, there were materials that she just could not comprehend, such as her professor's baseball example which was supposed to have illustrated a lesson. Thus, she explained her problems as cultural and language difficulties. She did not believe that there was much racism in Canada

because the white people she knew, including some of her professors, were very kind to her. She wanted to adopt what she considered as western cultural traits such as "creativity" and individual freedom while giving up certain "Chinese" cultural traits such as "humility" and "inexpressiveness." This is fully consistent with a society where Third World cultures are seen as undeveloped and inferior (Razack 2001). This cannot be denied even though there may have been individual acts of kindness. Thus for Mary westernization was the route to success; the less the cultural difference between her and the society, and the more she understood the codes of western behaviour, the more adjusted she could be. Managing her own behaviour was very important in overcoming racism. Relatedly, Mary explained that "racism" was actually the result of individual behaviour:

I don't feel it [racial discrimination] very strongly...I think that they [professors] may have different views on your writing and stuff. That may affect my score a little bit. It depends on different individuals too.

Mary's strategy is to work hard in her studies and improve her English so that she would be able to minimize these problems. She could not change how others behaved, but she could certainly change what she could do.

What accounts for the fact that Lena and Alicia were most assertive in articulating their experiences as racism, or the confidence they have that racism existed not only for other people but also for themselves? Since they've been in Canada the longest, the number of years they have had to learn about racism in Canada is certainly one of the explanations. Each woman's interpretation of racism is influenced by her personal biography inclusive of one's subject position organized through systems of oppression, knowledge production, length of stay in Canada,

education, conditions for knowledge of racism prior to and after immigration, communication with others about racism, social support and group power. Just as Essed argues that black women in the US and in the Netherlands have different comprehension of racism because of the very different socio-historical and political context in which different women are located, these women's comprehension must also be specified to their personal and local context, namely, their personal biography.

Lena and Alicia were both cognizant of the structural nature of racism. Both had more experiences with discourses countering racism and had a good support network. Alicia for example, discussed racism with her friends. She was moved by debates around racism involved in the performance of "Miss Saigon." Lena's ability to claim "Canadian" status afforded her an ability to assert her sense of belonging to Canada in a more confident manner than others could. Lena was upset that Jan Wong, the reporter from *The Globe and Mail*, had become the media expert on anything Chinese. Both women were amply connected and were very interested in racist events discussed in the media. Both women also subscribed to group strategies such as mass protests and boycotts to counter racism. In other words, they were more established in the society, giving them more confidence in countering the denial of racism. What made the two women different from each other was that while Lena experienced racism mostly in the form of "positive" stereotypes about Chinese people, Alicia felt a contradiction as a result of her Jamaicanness. For example, Alicia explained that whenever she told people that she was from Jamaica, she felt the weight of the stereotype that Jamaicans were "stupid" and "lazy." Thus, she felt she had to prove her intelligence from the time she entered public school in Canada. Moreover, most of her friends were also Jamaicans, allowing her easy access to Jamaican Canadian group conceptions of racism.

The other four women, Sue, Fee, Jenn, and Mary less frequently labeled their experiences as racism. They lived very much at the margins of our society, not participating in mainstream issues. They had also come to Canada more recently. Sue heard from her friends in Singapore that workplace racism was the main form of racism; hence she explained that she had never experienced racism here because she was not employed in Canada. Although she worked in the library, it was not considered the same way as other workplaces since her colleagues were also students who worked there part-time to put themselves through school. Since she believed that the Bible held the truth about our society, she could not see that the story of Ham was itself a racist interpretation rather than objective truth. Fee could choose to avoid white people because she had good extended family support, all of whom had moved to Canada as well. A member of a minority Chinese community in India, Fee's natural isolation from mainstream society was a daily experience even though the Chinese community in India had been economically very successful (Oxfeld 1993); Fee nevertheless found restricting herself to her community quite natural. Jenn's immediate and urgent struggles were about economic survival, making a living by pushing a dimsum cart in a Chinese restaurant. Hence Jenn noted this when discussing her understanding of racism before coming to Canada: "I never heard of that name [classism] but I think we [Chinese in China] experienced it more than those two [racism and sexism]." This retrospective explanation of her experiences in China was perhaps influenced by her current economic struggles. As a member of the dominant group in China, everyday racism was not an issue for Jenn. Even when she encountered westerners in China, the main difference she felt was that they were more affluent than she was. Mary simply did not see the presence of racism in her life, partly, as she herself claimed, because she had never been interested in politics and she was rarely

interested in current news. She said that she was never interested in politics even while she was in Hong Kong.

My brief overview of these women's understanding of racism shows first of all that experiential knowledge is easily delegitimized. When the dominant understanding of racism only conceptualizes it in blatant forms, more covert experiences cannot be acknowledged. In the end, dominant knowledge is internalized so that one's experience and knowledge are "bifurcated," in the words of Dorothy Smith (1987), with two modes of consciousness existing within the same person: one is a consciousness organized within the "relations of ruling," and the other one is located in subjects' everyday experience. It means that minority experience has been excluded in the making of our society because their everyday experience is not considered relevant in the general knowledge of our society. Also, there are differences in how these women relate to and interpret racism. We can begin explaining these differences by looking at their personal biographies in specific contexts. Moreover, psychic investments in not naming racism are also possible explanations for what social agents do with the knowledge that they possess. Even in the case of these women, we can see Jenn and Sue as highly motivated in not naming racism as such. Instead, they saw racist encounters as a test of their religious faith. Having found a network through their newly found religion, their need to deny racism and consolidate their faith can be understood in this light.

#### Conclusion

This paper documents concretely racial conflict at the subjective level. I wanted to show the limitations of comprehension of racism given our social and historical contexts. My aim has been to describe how our knowledge production or meaning making is a difficult process, particularly for marginalized groups. It is only by communicating with others in similar social

locations that experiences are named not simply as individual, but also as socially produced. As Essed might write, knowing is an ongoing process of unknowing, interpreting, validating, and accumulating experiences, and ultimately, checking with each other to evaluate the falsity or truth of our interpretation of experiential reality (73-74). While ideologies exert powerful control over how these women articulate their experiences, Essed's theory of racism offers possibilities for acquiring new knowledge of racism that could counter dominant knowledges about the nature of racism which are in effect, racist ideologies. Racism as a contested reality requires an ongoing production of anti-racist and other counter knowledges to subvert ideological control. However, all this depends on the investments of the individuals in interpreting racism, and in what is meaningful to them. There is a continual need for anti-racist feminists to think about how to validate experience as a legitimate source of knowledge, particularly for groups whose experiences are not included in the narratives of the nation-state, collective national identity or the policy making process. This paper reminds us of the importance of establishing alternative communities to carve out a general knowledge of racism to acknowledge our different experiential realities, and make our experiences meaningful, if not to others, at least to ourselves. The women's movement, anti-racist and other counter movements have all relied on naming our experiences and showing the contradictions between social realities and ideological forms of knowledge. This paper is also a cautionary reminder of how scholars and researchers interpret the interpreted experiences of our participants. Questions also arise of whether Chineseness, or being part of a Chinese Canadian community, has any influence on how racism is interpreted, and how this interpretation could be understood in the context of other discrimination based on class or gender.

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