

# UNDER THE WHITE GAZE

A TYEE  
PROJECT

WRITTEN BY  
CHRISTOPHER  
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TROUBLESHOOTING CANADIAN JOURNALISM ON RACE AND REPRESENTATION

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## ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Under the White Gaze was originally published by The Tyee as a free email newsletter. It ran for 13 weeks between October and December 2021. Each issue was comprised of an essay by Tyee journalist Christopher Cheung along with comments shared by our many readers. By the end of the newsletter's run, we had over 5,000 subscribers. Each issue was sent exclusively to subscribers, not appearing on The Tyee's main website. Due to popular demand, we've collected all the issues in this package, along with some reader responses and Q&A from our two live virtual events.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher Cheung is a staff reporter at The Tyee. He writes about urban change and how Vancouver's many diasporas strive to make a home in a city with colonial legacies. He has previously written for the Vancouver Courier and Metro. He holds a master of journalism from the University of British Columbia.

## ABOUT THE TYEE

We're an independent, online news magazine from B.C. founded in 2003. We're devoted to fact-driven stories, reporting and analysis that informs and enlivens our democratic conversation. Our reporting has changed laws, started movements and garnered numerous awards and the respect of our peers and readers. While some journalism gives the last word to power, we try to give the last word to ordinary folks. We're a non-profit, reader-supported publication. Join us at [support.thetyee.ca](https://support.thetyee.ca).

# I HAVE A CONFESSION TO MAKE...

**M**y name might be Christopher, but I worry about being a Columbus!

I report on multicultural Vancouver, which is by no means a “dark continent” or “no man’s land.” But we journalists, in service to the “average Canadians” who read us, too often introduce people, places and cultures through the lens of an outsider.

It’s something I’ve noticed again and again in my career. Why are racialized people always missing or misrepresented in our journalism?

Open the local paper or tune into a local broadcaster and you’ll often find variations of these tropes: An exotic celebration with dancing and costumes! An immigrant who refuses to respect our most holy official languages! A model minority who achieved the Canadian dream because of how hard they toiled!

It took a few years before I came to this realization: the white gaze is at work.

We live in a country founded with Anglo-colonial roots, and our most spoken official language is English. Is it really a surprise that our news media takes a white perspective when reporting on “ethnic communities”?

Even the term “ethnic” is a product of the white gaze, assuming that being white is the baseline by which all other people and cultures are measured.

I decided to investigate the white gaze at work in our media, and its power to shape our perceptions. In 2021, we launched weekly reported essays as part of a Tye newsletter.

We’ve collected all the issues into this handy PDF so that you can use it in your classroom or print it out to stick on your fridge. Hey, you can even keep it in your pocket and whip it out for backup when your friends insist that we shouldn’t scrutinize that kind of race because we’re all part of the human race.

We received many reader emails during the run of the newsletter, and we’ve sprinkled some of their responses throughout this PDF.

Just so you know, I’m not white, but I have also often internalized the white gaze. We all can.

Are you tired of immigrant neighbourhoods being neglected until a craft brewery moves in? Tired of ethno-cultural groups being ignored outside of obligatory heritage months? Tired of diasporas treated as one-note, as if they’re elves and dwarves?

These essays will offer a peek at the agonies and decision-making that go into the work of journalists like me as we strive to report stories that accurately introduce readers to their neighbours of different backgrounds.

What to expect? We’ll investigate how “minorities” always make the news for the same reasons. How “foreign” cultures are introduced as if they’re novel discoveries. How journalists can check their biases and use them as strengths.

Metro Vancouver will be our classroom. We’ll be taking a few field trips, to a local museum and even Burnaby’s Metrotown mall — Dairy Queen not included. And of course

we’ll dive into what the “white gaze” even means.

To be clear: This project is not a mere rallying cry for English Canadian publications to throw an “ethnic” person up on their front page and call it a day.

We’ll be going deeper, examining how our media advances a Canadian brand of sugary multiculturalism that can be as exclusive as it is inclusive. It’s heavy stuff, and we’re all part of it in one way or another.

At the end of it, I hope you’ll be able to spot how the white gaze in journalism shapes how we all view our communities, and how journalists can strive for more representative reporting that encourages equality.



I FIRST WROTE ABOUT  
RACE, REPRESENTATION  
AND MEDIA IN AN ESSAY  
CALLED “BLIND SPOTS,”  
WHICH WON THE 2021  
DALTON CAMP AWARD.

[CLICK HERE TO READ](#)

**DON'T  
LOOK  
AT  
ME  
LIKE  
THAT!**

Let me state it once more, my big journalism fear: My name might be Christopher, but I don't want to be a Columbus.

It's easy to fall into that trap. Our profession demands that we find fresh stories that grab eyeballs. And sometimes, in service to “average Canadian” readers, we end up introducing them to people and places through the lens of an outsider — or worse, a colonizing power.

I found an old story of [mine](#) where I said that a neighbourhood — a landing place for immigrant residents for decades, from Poland to the Philippines — wasn't “established” until an artisanal ice cream shop moved in. Eek! Columbus alert: assuming a place is a jungle until someone from the outside world discovers it.

In another story on an Indian restaurant with vast offerings, I [led](#) with the boring, stereotypical description of a “smell of hot curry and spices.” Ah! Way to flatten a huge country's food, Chris.

Just yesterday, I wrote the phrase “mainstream Canadians” with white Canadians in mind. Does that imply that everyone else is a weird outsider?

I started to wonder: why was I looking at the world in this way?

When I entered journalism seven years ago, it seemed like an optimistic time for diversity and inclusion.

Newsrooms were keen to show that they served all people by hiring new writers and publishing more coverage of underrepresented groups.

My friends and I, Canadian-borns of immigrant parents, have craved more representative journalism all our lives. When I entered the profession, I proudly wrote about various Vancouver neighbourhoods that didn't get a lot of media attention, to show what they're really like.

But over time I noticed that some journalists, when writing about our city's diversity, would fall into a common way of looking at the world, just as I did. I had trouble describing the specifics of this gaze, but I knew its effects:

Stories that treated groups like “[Asians](#)” in a homogenous way.

Stories featuring immigrant seniors, quoting them saying things like, “I like to make the friendship.”

## Why was I looking at the world with a white gaze?

Stories on cultural holidays, homing in on the most exotic aspects and their most ancient history. Dragon dancing! People jumping over fire! Hm, but where's the coverage the other 364 days of the year?

Non-white characters in news stories are sometimes portrayed in this old-world, [Orientalist](#), National Geographic way, as if they're all harmonious people, part of homogenous tribes, dedicated to inscrutable traditions. A bit like the stereotype of the “[noble savage](#).”

We journalists are very much dedicated to objectivity as a pillar of our profession. So how do these examples of dehumanization creep in?

Media scholars have a term: the “view from nowhere.”

Many journalists strive to report from it, to present information that's fact-based, neutral and balanced.

As I started my career, I had trouble reconciling this view. Don't we make every choice in our reporting? What stories to tell, who to quote and even which quotes are included?

As it turns out, I wasn't the only one who thought it impossible for people to do journalism without a “view from somewhere.”

“No matter how far it pulls back, the camera is still occupying a position,” media scholar Jay Rosen [once said](#).

“We can't actually take the ‘view from nowhere,’ but this doesn't mean that objectivity is a lie or an illusion. Our ability to step back and the fact that there are limits to it — both are real. And realism demands that we acknowledge both.”

Crack open any news story, and you'll find three perspectives that shape how it's presented: the author, the audience, the actors.

### 1. THE AUTHOR

decides what to show and share.

### 2. THE AUDIENCE

is who the story is catered to, from the topic chosen to the context included for their benefit.

### 3. THE ACTORS

have their appearance shaped by the author, from what they do to what they say.

These three perspectives can work very well together. A smart author will deliver to the audience exactly what they need to know, and present what actors say with big-picture context.

But imagine if the author has internalized a white gaze and is writing for a white audience about people who aren't white.

If the author doesn't do their homework, it's easy for the coverage to be infused with ethnocentrism.

We get stories where people who aren't white are viewed as "ethnic."

We get stories where foods like sandwiches are described as normal, while others like hummus are pegged as exotic.

We get stories about Indigenous people with a relentless focus on "[disaster coverage](#)" and little else from within their communities.

We get stories aplenty about European heritage since contact, but very little about the millennia of Indigenous history before that.

We get stories that say neighbourhoods are "[emerging](#)" when new condos or chic restaurants show up, never mind the immigrant families who've called them home for decades.

We get stories about [racialized people](#) who aren't interviewed for the story at all, instead privileging the voices of white characters talking about them.

We get simplistic tropes recycled again and again: the [good Indian](#), the model minority, the bad immigrant, the damaged newcomer, the perpetual foreigner.

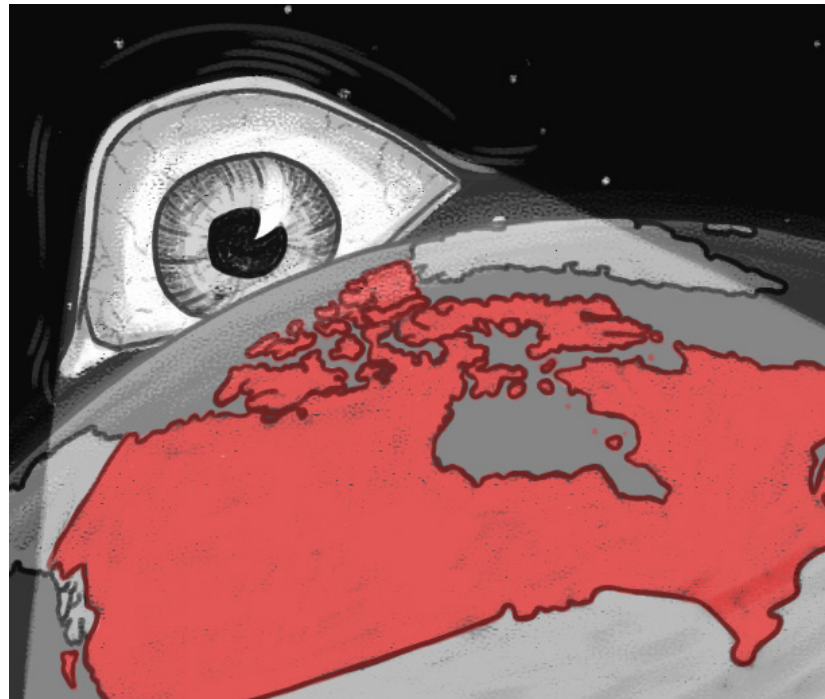
If that's all the coverage there is, isn't it obvious that the audience would begin to form stereotypical impressions about these people?

Many great minds have pondered the concept of gazes — from Jean-Paul Sartre to Toni Morrison, who [coined the term](#) "white gaze" — and used the idea to understand how powerful parties consider others in the world.

Think of the privileged gaze common in reporting on poverty, with journalists highlighting crime and decrepitude, accompanied by photos of [needles in puddles](#).

Think of the [male gaze](#) common in cinema, with filmmakers sexualizing women whose only role is to accompany heterosexual male characters and please the hetero male audience.

These gazes determine what we see and how we see it.



Exactly whose gaze is behind our journalism? Illustration by Stella Zheng.



We happen to live in a country with Anglo colonial roots, and our most spoken official language is English. Is it really a surprise that our news media takes a white perspective for white audiences when reporting on Indigenous people or “ethnic communities?”

Even the term “ethnic” is a product of the white gaze, assuming that being white is the baseline by which all other people and cultures are measured.

Real representation in news media is about more than just “visible minorities” seeing faces like us on a page or on the screen. It’s about everyone seeing people like us as part of society.

Disclaimer: I’m not trying to solve racism, [life, the universe and everything](#).

I’m trying to investigate the roadblocks to do with race and representation that I keep running into during my reporting.

I just used the term “visible minorities,” but what to do with loaded language like it? How to introduce cultures to English readers with sensitivity and accuracy? How to convince people not used to sharing their story that their voices matter? And of course, what to do when white readers belittle stories that mention race, and say that we should be focusing on the “real” crises like climate change and runaway capitalism instead?

Readers have told me proudly that they “don’t see race” and that I shouldn’t waste my time writing about it. Well, if they don’t see race, no wonder they don’t see that racism exists, and how it’s intertwined with other crises. Just look at our [unequal pandemic](#). Racism won’t go away just because some of us cover our eyes.

“The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist,” poet Charles Baudelaire [once said](#).

It’s the same with racism and privilege. Advantaged or disadvantaged, we all play a role. And it takes some tough introspection to see this.

Hey, I’m not white, and I barely noticed that I internalized the white gaze myself.

So has my mom.

When I was a kid, I took a bite out of a sesame ball and asked what the sweet paste inside was. It was red bean, but

my mom, hoping to relate to Canadianized young me, told me it was “Chinese chocolate.”

Ahh, the white gaze, and its ability to erase cultural knowledge of desserts!

More seriously though, this incident taught me that information is shaped by who’s doing the presenting and who’s being presented to. That’s an enormous power.

By the time you finish reading this, I hope you’ll learn to catch the distorting effect of the white gaze in Canadian news media, and how journalists can strive for representative reporting that encourages equality.

Q

How have you seen the white gaze at work in the journalism that you consume?

Has news media ever led you to form stereotypes about people, places or cultures?

Have you ever had journalism misrepresent the place or culture you’re from?

**DARLINGS!  
DEVIANTS!  
AND  
OTHER  
DIVERSITY  
TROPES**

An Elder once told journalist and CBC host Duncan McCue that the only way an Indigenous person would make the news is if they were one of the four Ds: drumming, dancing, drunk or dead.

McCue, who is Anishinaabe, was taken aback. Surely not? It sounded too simplistic.

But the Ds kept coming up in coverage, along with the stereotype of the “warrior.” (Remember the [masked protester](#) photographed during the Oka Crisis of 1990?)

I read McCue’s [analysis](#) of these stereotypes back in my first year as a journalist, and they’ve stuck with me ever since.

Coverage of Indigenous issues is slowly improving, but the warrior frame and the Ds still persist, McCue told me recently.

“I wish I could say they’ve gone away,” he said. “You only need to see something like *Walking Eagle*, and you can see that there are reporters making grievous errors on a regular basis and still following the same tropes.”

[Walking Eagle](#) is a satirical Indigenous news site in a similar style to the Onion. Its headlines lampoon real news. Two recent ones: “Cities allow alcohol consumption in parks now that white people want to do it,” and “‘This country may have mass graves at schools but we draw the line at pulling down statues,’ leaders say.”

Over the years, I couldn’t help but notice another pattern: a series of tropes used in news coverage of racialized groups in Canada, each related to the white gaze.

Have you spotted them at work?

## DARLINGS

Canada’s news media love stories of “model minorities” who work hard.

The immigrants who [never want to retire](#). The children who are the [first in their family](#) to go to university. The dutiful worker who [sends money overseas](#) to their family. The [quirky elders](#) with foreign wisdom to share with locals.

These stories zoom in on a diaspora’s love of Canada or Canada as a land of opportunity, with journalists pouring on the patriotic quotes. “There’s nothing that could stop

Canadians from doing whatever they put their mind to,” [says](#) one happy refugee in a CBC piece, who also encourages newcomers to “be an example to your community.”

The stories often include [Canadian flags](#), [Christmas celebrations](#) and a love of that unifying [national pastime](#), [hockey](#) — in other words, it’s coverage that seems like a [Tim Hortons’ ad](#).

But these stories often imply that hard work and love of country are all it takes to succeed in Canada.

Were there other supports along the way? And are publications also covering the racialized people who don’t make it, the barriers they face and why?

## DEVIANTS

I’m not talking about the villains of that Marvel movie, *Eternals*.

I’m talking about bad minorities. If we have model minorities, then we must have bad ones, right? The freeloaders, the uncivilized, those who don’t integrate, commit crimes or are just plain lazy. (Ontario Premier Doug Ford recently said any immigrant who isn’t willing to [“work your tail off”](#) should stay away.)

The old frame of an [“unassimilable race”](#) causing trouble still pops up, along with the [“invasion narrative”](#) of immigrants flooding in and defiling the way things used to be.

Reporting on deviance can be very subtle about placing blame.

Take this headline from the BBC about [“The Wet’suwet’en conflict disrupting Canada’s rail system.”](#) Nothing about the [land rights](#) at the heart of the issue? Or a nod to the conflict’s [complexity](#)? Instead, the BBC headline falls into the old frame of Indigenous troublemakers impeding Canadian [“progress.”](#)

A lot of stories about Metro Vancouver’s Chinese immigrants in recent decades — likely because the large influx has unnerved some longtime locals — have also highlighted deviance.

There are stories about Chinese builders with [poor architectural taste](#); Chinese businesses excluding English-speaking residents with [“way out of hand”](#) Chinese signs;

Chinese nationals “[abusing](#)” society by coming here to give birth so their child can have a Canadian passport.

And then there’s the story of the viral photo of a caretaker helping a toddler [urinate](#) in a mall garbage can, which was turned into a journalistic investigation into whether public peeing is a part of Chinese culture. Thanks CBC!

There will undoubtedly be important stories about deviants of colour; after all, deviants come in all colours. Still, journalists should be careful how these stories are written.

Is mentioning a character’s race, ethnicity or culture crucial to the story? The Canadian Press has stressed this point.

Do racialized people have a voice in the story? Or does it only contain other people talking about them?

Is race or culture being confused or conflated with other factors, such as class? Could it be that racialized people are being blamed for something that’s a policy or [geopolitical issue](#)?

And even if race, culture or nationality is central to a story, are these people overrepresented in a publication when it comes to deviance?

Imagine if the only news stories to ever come out of Victoria were about people [peeing in public](#). We’d start to form stereotypes about those dirty Victorians!

## D AMAGED

Precarious workers exploited. Refugees with tragic journeys. Seniors harassed and abused during the pandemic.

These are often newsy stories, with journalists descending upon racialized victims to share their sad experiences, often tied to some big current event. An interpreter might speak for the subjects, if we hear from them at all.

If it bleeds, it leads, right?

But humanity is often missing from these stories. Characters are not actors, but passive people who are acted upon.

Yes, bad things happen to people. But what choices did they make along the way? What big force did they come up against? Learning about the odds stacked against them

defies impressions that these are just sad, weak people who could have done something differently.

It’s important to show agency, not just trauma.

These stories also allow comfortable Canadians — whether they’re local-born or foreign-born — to feel good about the country when it helps the damaged. The sadder the story, the more Canada seems a welcoming and benevolent promised land.

## D ELICIOUS

Yummers, here comes a cultural holiday! The more dances, costumes and colourful traditions, the better. Wow, is that someone pouring wine on a grave? What does it [symbolize](#)?

And don’t forget the ethnic heritage months. They’ve become the hot time for a publication to talk about inclusivity, with generous helpings of people doing and talking about cultural stuff. (Finally, an excuse to call up that Black-owned salon.)

McCue calls this date-specific coverage “calendar journalism.”

It can be burdensome for underrepresented and marginalized groups to field all the media requests at once, especially if traumas are involved.

The term “parachute journalism” describes journalists who are dropped into a foreign locale they know little about to do temporary coverage on the headline makers. This happens in Canada too, with various ethnocultural groups.

Sounds like hit-and-run journalism to me. Where’s the coverage the rest of the year?

I mentioned previously that Canadian cities like Vancouver are by no means “no man’s lands.” But because they are home to people from many different parts of the world, there is no shortage of culture that is “new” for people to “discover.”

Just as the male gaze is aroused by women’s bodies, the white gaze is aroused by these displays of the exotic, served up deliciously by journalists. [Orientalism](#), after so many years, is still around.

There's nothing wrong with cultural exchanges — we're in multicultural Canada after all. But there tends to be an imbalance in these stories: they're centred on the audience's perspective as outsiders on tour, rather than the actors in it.

One more problem to consider is that not all cultures are considered delicious. The white gaze deems some worthy and neglects the rest, dependent on [foodie fads](#) or [news cycles](#).

## CAN YOU TASTE THE MAPLE SYRUP IN THESE FOUR DS?

Darlings are Canadian poster children. Deviants are un-Canadian and threats to Canadianness. Characters portrayed as damaged are adopted into benevolent Canada. Delicious culture is Canadian multiculturalism on display.

On the surface, stories like this can seem wholesome. But the white gaze has also been called a colonial one by scholars like Edward Said because it shows how rulers want racialized people to behave in their pluralized society.

In Canada, the white gaze is both inclusive and exclusive. Hard-working newcomers and their cultures are celebrated, but multiculturalism has limits. We have stories that celebrate delicious Ramadan [post-fast recipes](#) alongside others that privilege voices that say clothing like hijabs are "[not a good image](#)." We have stories that spotlight discrimination in Canadian history, alongside others that privilege voices that say showing off one's native language too much today is "[not very inclusive](#)."

This isn't to say that journalists should avoid the diversity Ds.

Just be careful to contextualize where tropes might lead to incorrect, infantilizing or harmful assumptions.

The power of journalism is that it can take us from the outside in to see what someone else's life is like.

Coming from the outside in, a journalist is likely to bring baggage if they're eating a dish for the first time, stepping onto a reserve for the first time or celebrating another religion's holiday for the first time.

This doesn't mean that only white writers should write about white things, or only Chinese writers like me should write about Chinese things (hey, maybe I have no interest or knowledge in this, and that's OK). In diverse Canada, journalists at some point will all have to write about a culture they're unfamiliar with.

Just remember not to leave out the perspective from the inside out — how the world is viewed through the inside party's eyes. They may have a lot more stories to share that have nothing to do with tropes like the Ds.

DUNCAN MCCUE'S LAUDED  
GUIDE TO REPORTING IN  
INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES.

[CLICK HERE TO READ](#)

## THE DS CAN OVERLAP

I've written a few stories about "damaged delicious darlings" (three out of four!), people who've left their war-torn country and found fortune here after working hard to serve exotic cuisine to Canadians who've never had it before.

An overly sentimental effort by a younger me wrote a popular story about Vancouver's [Duffin's Donuts](#) like a kind of Canadian romance: Cambodian refugees bring yummy food by way of Los Angeles to the good people of Vancouver.

I tried to do better later when writing about the "[baklava man](#)," a former Syrian parliamentarian selling sweets on Vancouver streets. Sounds like a Canadian fantasy right? Rather than just presenting a cute story of the world looking at the baklava man, I wanted to show how the baklava man fit into the world. I dove into questions of refugee welfare, why street vendors do what they do and why cities are so antagonistic about marginalized people publicly selling stuff.

It's easy to fall into tropes like the Ds, because Canadian journalists like me have become so familiar with them. We go out to grab what we're used to getting.

That's why challenging the Ds is so important. Repeat a trope enough times and it'll become how we view the world.

FROM

Camila Castaneda

SUBJECT

Confronting tropes in journalism school

MESSAGE

Once I was working on the story of a Salvadoran artist. My professor (an award-winning journalist) said to me, "Canadians won't find this relevant. You should change the headline to 'Immigrant does xyz.'" I knew at the time this wasn't the approach I wanted to take. But it was a risk to avoid a teacher's advice versus my own intuition.

Q

How have you spotted the four diversity Ds at work?

Are there stereotypes about an ethnocultural group that the Ds have led you to believe?

Have you spotted other tropes when it comes to reporting on racialized people?

# ELVES, DWARVES AND THE MAGIC OF INTERSECT- IONALITY

**S**tep into a time machine with me.

Not so far as to see the Big Bang, just the 2000s. Flip phone in your pocket, Black Eyed Peas on the radio, 99-cent TacoTime in your tummy.

Destination? Eric Hamber, my Vancouver high school.

The student population at the time was “majority visible minority.” The census data said as much, but so did our yearbooks, with names that read from Au to Zhang.

Facebook had just shown up, and someone made a group called “You Know You Go to Hamber When....” One of the first entries was about being lost in “the sea of black hair.”

That was how we talked about race, ethnicity and culture as teenagers, zeroed in on appearances and behaviours.

The majority of our “minorities” were Asian, specifically with roots from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Philippines, India and Korea — a mix of Canadian-borns and those born overseas.

Because of this, there was a phrase we commonly used: “So Asian.”

Taking AP Chemistry? So Asian. Playing on the ping-pong team? So Asian. Listening to K-pop? So Asian. Eating cup noodles for lunch? So Asian. Writing notes with gel pens? So Asian. Parents bought you a too-large jacket? So Asian.

As we grew older, we thought we had matured in our discourse. Instead of saying something was so Asian, we described it as being part of “Asian culture.”

Parents strict about curfews and dating? Parents saving extra napkins and condiments from the food court? It’s Asian culture!

We didn’t question how ridiculous it was to assume that stashing soy sauce packets was some sort of time-honoured practice shared by 4.6 billion people — or that other factors like class might play a role.

Let’s zip back into the present.

I’ve noticed a lot of journalism still presents race, ethnicity and culture in an “essentialist” way, where people who share a social category like race are thought to share fixed characteristics due to some singular essence.

A 2010 Maclean’s story, originally titled “Too Asian?”, is a particularly egregious example. It was about white prospective students avoiding universities that were “too Asian”

and “a bit of a killjoy,” and about the supposed differences between white and Asian students on campus.

The author described the “Asian students,” without specifying from where exactly, as “strivers, high achievers and single-minded,” and mostly not “fun-loving.”

Not too different from my high school chatter!

So what’s missing? Intersectionality.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black feminist American scholar, coined the term back in 1989.

It describes the ways in which social categories and systems of power overlap, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, age, religion, appearance, immigration status, where one lives and more.

Together, the categories shape how a person experiences life, from privilege to discrimination. (Many conservatives hate the term because they don’t understand this.)

The term came about because Crenshaw, also a legal scholar, was concerned that the law seemed to neglect how Black women were subject to discrimination due to race, gender and sometimes a combination of both.

In a 1976 case of workplace discrimination against General Motors, Black women argued the company segregated its workforce: the Black jobs were men’s jobs, and the women’s jobs were for whites only. Neither was believed suitable for Black women, but the courts didn’t believe the plaintiffs were allowed to combine their race and gender claims into one.

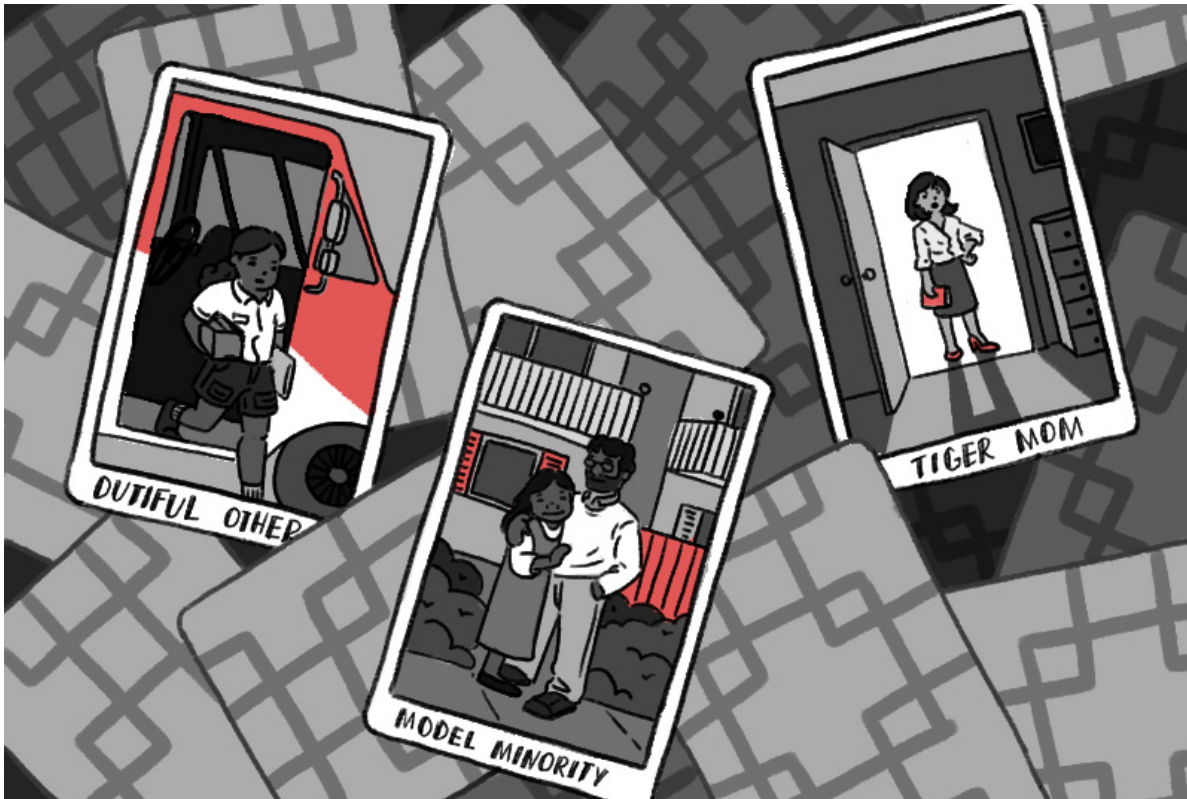
Crenshaw used intersectionality to reveal the “prism” of social categories.

In Vancouver, there are many issues to do with race that require other intersections to understand fully. Is something an Indigenous issue, or is it specific to urban Indigenous women? Is it a Chinese issue, or is it specific to single seniors who live alone? Is it a Filipino issue, or is it specific to women on caregiver work permits?

Without intersectionality, we often get an essentialist, *Lord of the Rings* approach to race.

**There was a phrase we commonly used in high school: “So Asian!”**





*We have a lot of shortcut frames that focus on race, but intersectionality helps us expand our understanding of people and power – think of what gender, class, labour and other social factors have to add.*

*Illustration by Stella Zheng.*

You know, how all elves are poets, how all dwarves love gems and how all Asians are geniuses.

There's nothing inherently wrong with the word "community," but journalists often use it in a way that implies the people in them share the same beliefs, speak the same languages and [vote the same way](#).

It makes groups like the "[South Asian community](#)" sound like one happy homogenous family. Journalists often interview these communities' "members" and "leaders," as if they share a single brain with no debate or disagreement within.

For example, the Vancouver Sun once talked about how "[Chinese leaders](#)" in Vancouver have "long opposed schools instituting anti-homophobia policies," spotlighting a shared ethnicity rather than religion as the reason for individuals' beliefs.

The implication that we're all part of harmonious "communities" almost has me disappointed that I don't

have a membership card to my local Asian community for weekly hot pots at the clubhouse, where we decide which Asian politicians to vote for. We're not allowed to think independently, right?

Essentialism has also [plagued the pandemic](#), as people often try to use race and culture to explain health outcomes.

Take this story from the [Edmonton Journal](#) about a COVID-19 outbreak at a Cargill meatpacking plant. In it, Alberta's top doctor talks about COVID-19 within the "Filipino community" (there's the word again!), saying the virus spread because of the workers' "strong ethic" that doesn't let "sniffles get in the way of a hard day's work."

Just because an article has expert quotes or data doesn't mean it's immune from essentialism. Journalists should take care to add context. In this case, all the author adds is an explanation that many Filipino Albertans are frontline workers who live and carpool together.

But let's consider immigration status. Many meatpackers caught in the outbreak were temporary foreign workers, a precarious standing that makes it hard to speak up against unsafe conditions.

#### LET'S CONSIDER SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS.

Many of these workers can't afford to lose income because relatives overseas depend on their remittances.

**LET'S CONSIDER HOUSING.** To save money, migrant workers share homes. They may not have as many housing options, facing discrimination by landlords who prefer Canadians.

**LET'S CONSIDER GEOPOLITICS.** Ironically, the stereotype of the hardworking and compliant Filipino was marketed by the Philippines government itself, says scholar Robyn Rodriguez. This was to encourage the export of Filipino labour to places like Canada, with initiatives like the caregiver program that are often gendered.

Without these important intersections, it makes it sound like Filipino people don't know when to stop working and are "existential threats to themselves," UBC professor John Paul Catungal once told me.

Considering intersections like this makes for more human stories and exposes the workings of systems that people live under.

I don't envy headline writers, because their work paring stories down to essentials can lead to essentialism.

A recent Toronto Star headline: "Alberta's South Asian community has some unhealthy eating habits, study finds." ("Community" again!)

Is the story seriously telling us that Alberta residents who come from a group of countries totalling two billion people are all inherently unhealthy eaters?

Or is it — as the rest of the story explains — about newcomers to Canada (intersection: immigration status) and food literacy (intersection: education), about remote communities having limited access to food choices (intersection: location)?

Here's a health story that does intersections well.

Are rates of diabetes high among Chinese Canadians because it's a Chinese thing? The South China Morning Post reported on a study that challenged the notion of a

"homogenous" community with similar health issues.

The study says it's likely a phenomenon of Canadian immigration pathways that seek out wealthy and high-skilled immigrants. It's also a phenomenon of growing nations, because the relatively well-off from a place like China with a recent economic boom are more likely to suffer diabetes, particularly young men.

A doctor in the story reminds us this is why we can't talk about race, ethnicity and culture in "broad strokes."

An intersectional lens can also help with choosing stories.

It's great that we have a lot more Canadian-borns of colour who are native English speakers, well-educated and work in the city sharing their thoughts in the news these days.

But journalists also need to work hard to find sources that might be harder to come by and interview.

How about those in the 'burbs? Those who've arrived recently? Those who work blue-collar jobs? Those who speak another language more fluently than English?

This doesn't mean journalists should slice and dice every source they interview by every intersection.

A helpful tip from the Canadian Press in a recent workshop: beware of "othering."

Being specific helps to avoid this.

Covering Canada's relationship with China's communist party? Are elites from China trying to launder money in Canada? Great! Very newsy! But journalists should be careful when describing who's involved, otherwise audiences might ascribe behaviour to an entire race.

## WHY FILIPINO WORKERS IN CANADA ARE OVERREPRESENTED ON THE PANDEMIC'S FRONTLINES.

[CLICK HERE TO READ](#)

There's also the harm of vague phrases like the Filipino "ethnic," and South Asians' "unhealthy eating habits" I mentioned earlier.

Journalists can also avoid othering by avoiding differentiations that aren't related to the story at hand.

If I did have a time machine, I could add nuance to my high-school chatter with this understanding of intersectionality in mind.

Hey, maybe it's not "so Asian" that you have tiger parents who care so much about your education. Maybe it's that they're blue-collar immigrants who want a different future for you and your siblings, and because Vancouver has a lot of immigrants from East Asia like your parents, you're associating this with "Asians," and adopting an essentialist belief that all Asians care about educational achievements?

I'm sure I would've been very popular.

Kidding aside, intersectionality offers a crucial lens for journalists. It'll help them see racialized people beyond members of monolithic groups of elves and dwarves, and the resulting coverage will give audiences a deeper and more empathetic understanding of society.

Think of all the questions intersectionality opens up:

Who's being targeted by discrimination, and why? Who are we importing for labour, and what's life like for them? How are newcomers changing the landscape of religion? What does it mean to be gay and a refugee? Which ethnocultural groups are more accepted by white Canadians, and what are the structural factors behind this?

Much more complex than phrases like "so Asian," right?

Q

Why do you think people see race as an explanation for behaviour without considering other factors too?

What are some racial generalizations you've come across that sorely need intersectionality? In my case, it was the "so Asian" descriptions.

What are some ethnocultural issues in your community that could do with more intersectional journalism?

FROM

Deborah

SUBJECT

From across the pond

MESSAGE

Oftentimes we all get lumped together, as Christopher says. That it is not a question of colour as it is more a question of culture, and those with similar physical characteristics get lumped together with an assumption of shared agendas and a hive mind. I find many people don't fully understand that there is a difference between someone's skin tone and how they were raised and what culture they associate themselves with.

FROM

Amanda

SUBJECT

The intersections of being Jewish

MESSAGE

As someone who was raised with Reform Judaism, rejected it, and now sees myself as a secular Jew, I feel there isn't a very nuanced understanding by people in general or coverage in the media of intersectional factors/aspects related to Jewish people:

- that we aren't all white
- that we aren't all rich
- that we aren't all religious (lots of us are secular, non-practicing, etc.)...
- that we don't all support Israel or the government of Israel, that many of us support Palestinians
- that being Jewish is both a religion and an ethnicity (I see it as my ethnicity but not my religion)
- that we immigrated to Canada at different times, from different places, for different reasons
- that immigrant values and experiences still shape some of our lives
- we're diverse politically and not all conservative
- that there's still prejudice against us, which I hear in people's comments from time to time, usually when they assume I'm not Jewish.

CHAPTER FOUR

# OF MONSTERS AND MAPS

**T**ime for our field trip! South Burnaby, here we come. If you've been here, you'll likely think of Metrotown mall, packed with chain stores. It's not the New Yorky, Portlandian and San Franciscan parts of [bohemian Vancouver](#) that journalists and content creators like to focus on.

But South Burnaby is more than a mall.

Yes, it has big box offerings like Superstore and Walmart, but it also has supermarkets like Assi, King's and Persia Foods, where residents restock their kitchens with Korean, Chinese and Iranian staples.

All of this branches out from Kingsway, a thoroughfare that [predates colonization](#). In addition to these treasured cultural supermarkets are the food producers. From commercial kitchens and warehouses come locally-made tofu, noodles, phyllo and kimchi — the lifeblood of retailers elsewhere.

Burnaby gets a bad rep for being the boring old 'burb next to Vancouver, but there are more than just monster houses here. Karaoke bars blast K-pop hits past midnight. Car dealers and auto shops brandish neon palm trees and inflatable tube men. Among the likes of A&Ws and Wendy's are giant signs that ask you to pull over for hot pot and bubble tea again and again.

It's no wonder that 70 per cent of the people who call this part of the city home are “visible minorities,” according to the census. It's also the place in Metro Vancouver where you're most likely to run into someone [born in a different place](#) than you.

There are many immigrant families, and many have live-in grandparents, whether in a shared house or a one-bedroom apartment in the old wood-frame walk-ups. Plenty of refugees make their Canadian starts in the area's relatively cheap rentals. Sprinkled throughout the subdivisions: the Nikkei museum and cultural centre, the Michael J. Fox Theatre, a gurdwara, a Hindu temple, a Buddhist temple and dozens of churches.

Needless to say, it's a textured neighbourhood.

So imagine my surprise when I opened up [Vancouver Magazine](#) to read about the “deepest throes of South Burnaby,” where “a lot of people in the area” have “no

amenities whatsoever.”

And what's the “sole reason” the writer says you should visit the area? A new craft brewery.

Ouch. The trope of neighbourhood as “no man's land” strikes again. As I read those words, I saw a big fat eraser scrub out the people and places that make this community home.

What's going on here?

I know my mental map of the city is not going to be your mental map of the city.

We'll each have fog over the different places we're unfamiliar with. If I don't like to shop, why would I know where the shops are? If I don't live in or near Burnaby, why would I know that much about it?

The narratives we hear play a big role in how we form our mental maps. Communicators and institutions wield enormous power over which places are privileged and which places are left in the fog — “here be monsters” and all.

Everyone from journalists to historians to governments craft narratives of place. And in Metro Vancouver, there's an inequality to those narratives.

Guess who lives in parts of the city that are uncelebrated and under-serviced, dismissed and disdained, misrepresented and misunderstood?

“Ethnic” people!

Let's look at another neighbourhood called a “no man's land.”

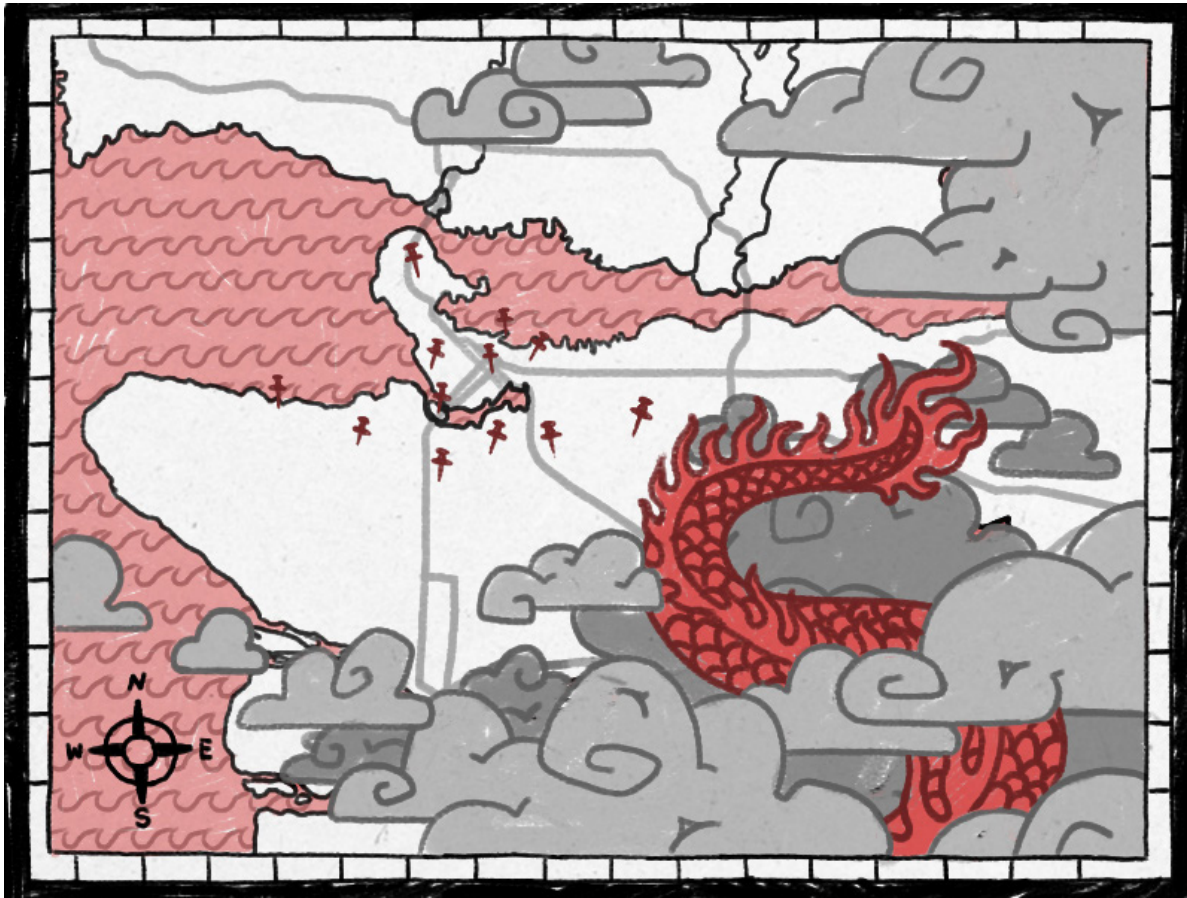
That's what [Vancouver Magazine](#) called the east side's Mountainview, until hip eateries moved in and the area was rebranded as Fraserhood. The magazine had another word to describe the place's past — “boggy.”

But it [neglected a history](#): the Polish, Filipino and Vietnamese newcomers who built a community in the area. Today, there are a dwindling number of mom-and-pop stores, though cornerstones like a Polish community centre and the Vietnamese newspaper *Thời Báo* still call the neighbourhood home.

I confess I participated in the erasure of this history when I was a student, writing a fluffy piece about Fraserhood. I chased the excitement that journalists do when spotlighting supposed “up-and-coming” places, interviewing a

*Do you know your city well?  
Or do you have a lot of fog and monsters on your mental map?*

*Illustration by Stella Zheng.*



French bistro and an artisanal ice cream shop while ignoring diaspora settlement.

Real estate marketers and entrepreneurs who scout these territories all say the same things to journalists. The craft brewer in the Burnaby piece talks about how risky it was to move into “the middle of nowhere,” how their success was based off recognizing its “potential,” and how he wanted to be the “first in” and “really put our stake in the ground.”

Why is it when migrants move into and develop an area it’s called “boggy”? But when whiter business interests do so in the same places, they’re celebrated as pioneers bringing civilization through savvy conquest?

Race, ethnicity and culture have a spatial dimension.

A journalist with blind spots regarding race will also have blind spots regarding place. This is where the white gaze comes in, elevating some places while excluding or exoticizing others.

A place might be celebrated for recent Eurocentric foundations, while sidelining vaster Indigenous history or immigrant ones.

A place like Mountainview might be called a “no man’s land” by tourists because shops and services are specific to people of certain cultures. (There’s a class dimension, too. We are, after all, in a desirable city where capital sloshes around and can wipe out the working-class places that diasporas call home.)

A place like Surrey might be deemed “scary” because it’s the subject of an overwhelming number of stories related to [crime and people of colour](#).

A place might not even be mentioned, because journalists and audiences know nothing about it.

The white gaze also expects racialized places to be accessible to them, and stories are often written in this frame.

Think of places scrutinized for being too ethnic for

Canada. Residents of places like Richmond and Surrey, with their large Chinese and South Asian makeup respectively, have been questioned in the press for having “[less loyalty to Canada](#)” due to “choosing segregation” (as a [CBC forum](#) once put it), never mind the structural reasons that make it difficult for them to live elsewhere.

But hey, when Richmond and Surrey roll out a [Dumpling Trail](#) or Spice Trail curated for tourists with a velvet rope that guides them exactly where to go, the reception is great. (If you want to dig deeper into this, Google “[ontological expansiveness](#).”)

This is about more than representation — it’s about power.

Racialized people obviously don’t have fog over the places they’ve built up, and these places will have representation in their own media channels. But because the white gaze misses or misunderstands these racialized places, they get left out of public histories and decision-making.

For an article last year, I flipped through the neighbourhood plan for Vancouver’s [Renfrew-Collingwood](#), where there is a rare hub of business, religion and community for the region’s many Filipino locals on Joyce Street.

The plan did not mention the word “Filipino” at all, and even called Joyce Street “weak.” This frustrated the advocates [fighting gentrification](#) in the area, and their efforts to make a case for the harms of displacement.

If we frame this story as about a “weak” area getting stronger, it paves over the reality of a community’s displacement — the home of a diaspora at that.

Ironically, oft-ignored racialized places like this tend to fulfil Vancouver civic goals.

Joyce Street as a mom-and-pop business hub? **CHECK ✓**

Affordable food? **CHECK ✓**

Cultural connections? **CHECK ✓**

Newcomer support networks? **CHECK ✓**

Because I’m always curious about coverage of place, I delved into what was written about Renfrew-Collingwood.

I regularly tally how often racialized neighbourhoods get reported on compared to the hipper, whiter ones. I use a tool called [Canadian Newsstream](#), which contains articles from the country’s major print outlets.

Let’s compare Renfrew-Collingwood with Mount Pleasant,

the seat of hipsterdom in Vancouver, with breweries and boutiques galore.

Since the pandemic began, Mount Pleasant, population 33,000, was mentioned 638 times. But Renfrew-Collingwood, with a larger population of 51,530, was mentioned a measly 19 times. (I even counted other common area names like Collingwood Village and Joyce-Collingwood.)

The bulk of those stories? Crime stories about church vandalism, which stemmed from police media releases.

What’s missing?

Stories about life in these places from the inside out, and how they relate to the region at large.

A long list of contacts is great for journalists, but so is a detailed map. And if we sense that readers have fog or so-called monsters in a place, it’s our job to investigate, as it is with any kind of reporting gap.

Interrogating the white gaze when it comes to racialized places helps reveal the many people who share this city, how they’re doing, whether public supports for them are adequate, how they’ve adapted to their city and how they’re adapting the city itself.

Really, representation of place is about coverage

that’s a reflection of reality. Isn’t that just called news?

If we have inequality of coverage, that’s going to further inequality, period.

I often think about a plaque in Vancouver’s New Brighton Park, with its postcard views of the inlet and the mountains.

It declares, “HERE VANCOUVER BEGAN, ALL WAS FOREST TOWERING TO THE SKIES.” Then goes on to brag about the location being home to the first road around, the first dock around and so on.

Talk about erasure and ethnocentrism. What about the fact that this was and still is unceded x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵw̓x̓wú7mesh (Squamish) and Selil̓wiltulh (Tsleil-Waututh) homeland?

A narrative of place cast in bronze, to legitimize one power over another.

**This is about more than representation — it’s about power.**



Q

Where is the fog on your mental map of where you live? Why do you think it is there?

What places near you do you feel are missing or misrepresented in media?

Think of labels used to describe place like “dive,” “exotic,” “hidden gem,” “sketchy,” “slum,” “quirky.” What are the places near you described this way, and why?

FROM

Chris Yakimov

SUBJECT

Dragons

MESSAGE

I have grown up in Vancouver, and ‘dragons’ still exist in most non-white spaces for me. But I’ve never (until today, and your article) felt the way I’ve internalized a racist narrative of those spaces without question, and how I’ve foreclosed on the imaginary necessary to see them now, to explore, to respect.”

FROM

Adrian

SUBJECT

On privilege and double standards

MESSAGE

Parents and other white folks were afraid of downtowns or Chinatowns or words I won’t repeat for other ‘majority-minority’ neighbourhoods as I grew up here in Ottawa. But that dimension of privilege, or white supremacy, had never come through to me. How dare a community persist here in Canada, after all?!? If white people can’t walk in and understand and be understood by every store clerk, and have English on every sign or package (labelling laws quite aside!) it seems like an offense. When the reverse, having white spaces that are so exclusionary, is either treated as normal or simply never even consciously realized.

**ETHNICALLY  
DIVERSE  
MAN  
GETS  
TONGUE  
TIED**

One of the most agonizing parts of my job is choosing the right words.

I know. A journalist, struggling to find the right words? Isn't that the job?

But when reporting on racialized people, the wrong words can do serious harm, leading readers to fall into inaccurate, even negative, stereotypes.

Talk about culture without context, and people might seem primitive. Talk about migration without context, and people might seem like a faceless tsunami.

Finding the right words can be an exhausting game of mental chess — especially when the reputation of a character is in a journalist's hands, not to mention representation of underrepresented people at large.

Let's start with a basic but common challenge. I don't even know how to collectively describe the people I write about who aren't white.

**"NON-WHITE"** doesn't work. It's disempowering, based on being not something.

**"DIVERSE"** doesn't work. Why do white people get to be normal, and everyone else diverse? White people are diverse too.

**"ETHNIC"** poses the same problem. The Vancouver Police Department [likes using it](#) to boast of its "ethnically diverse officers." What does that make everyone else?

**"VISIBLE MINORITIES"** has persisted, because it's used as a [legal definition](#) and by federal agencies like Statistics Canada.

But it feels like a perpetual label of foreignness and marginalization. Not to mention it becomes totally incorrect in places where so-called minorities are the majority.

**"RACIALIZED," "MARGINALIZED" and "UNDER-REPRESENTED"** might work in stories about discrimination. But as a label, who wants to be identified as a victim?

**"PEOPLE OF COLOUR"** and **"BIPOC"** have become popular, but they flatten groups into one category, and carry the baggage of the offensive phrase "[coloured](#)."

See how hard it is to find the right words?

Take "ethnic enclave." The term comes from sociology, used to describe an area where people of a shared

ethnocultural background live and work in large numbers for support and to avoid discrimination. Commenters tend to flock to the stories I write about enclaves to complain about the people living in them being un-Canadian about their self-segregation.

The word "community" often doesn't work either. "Ethnic community," "Muslim community" — what could be vaguer? "Community" can ignore difference and make the people in them sound like part of a hive mind. It also makes it seem segregated from larger society.

Pointing out that a character speaks "no English" is a weird little shortcut used by journalists, highlighting their lack of ability. It's worse if there's no mention of the languages they do speak.

When a story says a character speaks "not a word of English" or has "[zero knowledge of the English language](#)," you might think they can barely speak at all.

Even for words that seem neutral, I have to be careful.

The word "household" gave me a lot of pause during the pandemic.

To many cultures in Canada, it's normal for a household to include live-in grandparents, even aunts and uncles. There's no need to say that this is a "large household" or a "multigenerational household" — it is simply a household.

But the reference point for the wider Canadian readership is most often the nuclear household. So journalists describing households that include "extended relatives" tend to include descriptors like "large" or "multigenerational."

Which frames immigrant families who live in these arrangements as somehow odd compared to "normal" families.

When I wrote about how to protect [large, multigenerational households during a pandemic](#), I found it tricky not to make it sound as though these families are crowding together when they shouldn't — so I introduced lots of context about how widespread this is, and why.

But introductions can be cumbersome. Don't get me started on the challenge of introducing terms from other languages into English.

If I mention a backyard barbecue in a story, I don't need

to stop the narrative and explain to the reader what it is: an informal gathering of family and friends coming together to cook food over some sort of open fire.

But if I mention something like [mukbang](#) that English readers might not be familiar with, I do have to stop and explain. Write too little, and the reader might not get it. Write too much, and the description eats away at the word count, interrupts the story and over-exoticizes an everyday phenomenon.

Imagine being a racialized journalist in a white-majority newsroom publishing a story about something from your culture. You might not actually know much about it, but your colleagues are looking to you for a definitive explanation. But even if they are hands off, it's a lot of internal pressure — the representation of an entire civilization, resting on your shoulders!!

You may have noticed that italics are sometimes used for words unfamiliar to English readers.

Words lose their italics as they become “assimilated” into English, according to the federal [Canadian Style](#). For example, “kimono” and “dim sum” now go unitalicized.

But the unfamiliar ones are still italicized, and if I use too many of them — Khalsa and kirpan, bossam and budae jjigae, turon and turo turo — the style convention makes my story start to look like Tolkien's Elvish or a Latin taxonomy.

The need to find the right words affects policy-makers, too. After all, how can governments tackle problems they don't even have names or definitions for?

A personal example: My great-grandmother, who lived in an East Vancouver care home until age 101, was served a western diet that was totally foreign to her, and she often skipped meals. She was also unable to communicate with the English-speaking staff in her native Cantonese. Her condition spiralled downward because of this, and it was painful to watch.

Nowadays, the concept of “cultural competency” is gaining more recognition in health care. The term acknowledges experiences like my great-grandmother's.

“Once you design a definition, you can assign policy resources to it,” said Kevin Huang, the executive director of Vancouver's [Hua Foundation](#). The non-profit consults

with governments on social issues such as sustainability and urban planning so that they're more reflective of the cultures in the city.

A few years ago, Huang ran into a challenge when sounding the alarm over immigrant businesses like groceries being displaced by gentrification.

Should special places like this be defined reductively as “businesses”?

That leaves out the fact that they provide culinary comforts for immigrants, who also share their native food with Canadian-born children. They're affordable for seniors and blue-collar workers. They're rare safe spaces where immigrants can be together and speak their language, without the scrutiny and racism experienced elsewhere.

There wasn't a term to describe these places that play a crucial role in the lives of diasporas, despite them being all over the region.

But Huang's team noticed that they fit the criteria of what the City of Vancouver had called “[food assets](#),” offering affordability, bolstering mental well-being and serving local products.

Still, the cultural component was lacking from the definition. So the non-profit began calling them “cultural food assets,” with the term increasingly recognized.

But such definitions can also backfire.

When I write phrases like “culturally competent health care” and “cultural food assets,” I can already hear the white gaze complaining about immigrants wanting special treatment and life catered to them.

You know, comments like, “If you love your own culture so much, why don't you just go back to where you came from?”

Our systems left racialized people out in the first place. But ask to be included, and the language looks like they're being given something extra.

Do you see my agony now?

Write the wrong word, give the wrong idea. Leave out the right words, lose a chance to inform.

NPR's “Code Switch” podcast [calls](#) the language of diversity a treadmill to keep up with and says the descriptions we use will be in flux “as long as our orientations to each other keep changing.”

Rather than come up with hard and fast rules, here are some questions I think about to keep up with the treadmill.

**DOES THE LANGUAGE OTHER?  
DOES IT LEAD TO FALSE IMPRESSIONS?  
DOES IT OMIT IMPORTANT INFORMATION?**

Notice I didn't call this series Ignoring the White Gaze.

Journalists writing about race, ethnicity and culture in Canada today need an awareness of how the white gaze works.

Not because it deserves to be catered to, but because inaccurate, negative stereotypes of racialized people need to be challenged and corrected.

If I'm writing about racialized people, places and cultures in Canada, I often have to justify how they live their lives to the white gaze.

If I don't, there will be readers who jump to stereotypes.

It's not just white people who do this. Racialized people may stereotype other racialized people; racialized Canadian-borns may stereotype people from their own background who are new arrivals.

If I talk about multigenerational households, I have to justify why they're normal and why they exist. If I talk about [astronaut families](#), I have to justify why they aren't parasitic people, but a direct result of Canadian immigration policies.

You never know what words or topics might trigger racist stereotypes. It might be religious clothing. It might be foreign homebuyers. It might be the mere mention of Islam or Indigenous issues — commenting on stories to do with Indigenous issues got so toxic that the CBC made the decision in 2015 to [close](#) online discussions.

I often wonder if media should take some responsibility for that toxicity. If there is an outsized percentage of stories on racialized people as deviants (remember chapter two?)

Journalists can add context to help counter stereotypes. But even then, you never know what readers might pick at.

I once wrote a story about B.C.'s lack of language support during the pandemic for people who speak languages other than English. It featured a Vietnamese-speaking refugee dad who doesn't know much English. I knew there'd be

readers who'd call him lazy or un-Canadian, so I explained the barriers for migrants like him.

This man tried to learn English multiple times over the years, but it was difficult because he grew up in a fishing family, without much childhood education, and as an adult had to work to support his family. To this day he still tries, popping into his daughter's room to ask about vocabulary.

In response, readers wrote in with comments like "Language classes are free. Everyone has time."

It's frustrating that a story about the need for pandemic translation for our diasporas led readers to scrutinize their lives. But racialized people who share their experiences with Canadian media are often held to such unfairly high standards.

What are journalists to do about ugly comments on their stories?

I know of colleagues who ignore comments entirely to spare themselves from the toxicity.

I also know that the majority of readers are probably not like this.

But I do think that some of that ugliness needs to be considered. The fact that people see a headline about something like "birth tourism" and scream "immigration cheats" gives us an important sense of the world we are writing in.

Rather than cater to every vocal reader, it's a reminder that journalists have a diplomatic role to play as ambassadors and interpreters.

Yes, it can be frustrating to explain everything from culture to injustices that are everyday realities for racialized people. Yes, it's especially burdensome for racialized journalists in these roles to see aspects of their lives missing or misunderstood.

But the white gaze is still with us, and there's a lot of work to be done so that people in Canada can see each other for who they really are.

Q

Has journalism ever given you an inaccurate or negative impression of a race, ethnicity or culture?

*Thank you to a reader who introduced us to the “explanatory comma,” which racialized journalists like me use all the time and struggle with. Here’s a good explanation from a blog called [White as Snow, Privileged as Queens](#):*

An explanatory comma is the aside or comma after a word, idea or person is introduced in an effort to define it for an audience that needs the explanation.... [A podcast] paid tribute to Tupac Shakur without providing an explanation of who he was. They then received a number of comments from listeners complaining that they felt left out. In particular, a self-identified 54-year-old white woman stated that she could tell Tupac meant a lot to the hosts, but she never felt invited in to the discussion, because she had no idea who Tupac was.

**CONDESCENDING  
TROPES THAT  
CANADIAN  
FOODIES  
MUST  
TRY!**

All my life I've been spoiled by Vancouver's Asian restaurants, eating everything from congee to chana masala. But just as exciting to me growing up was reading the newspaper clippings that hung on their walls — carefully cut out and proudly displayed in huge frames by the owners, like something sacred.

These were precious documents, yellowed with age, that said that these places mattered. Someone came down from on high and wrote a review that gave the wontons, laksa and pakoras their blessing, and brought the foodies on pilgrimages in droves.

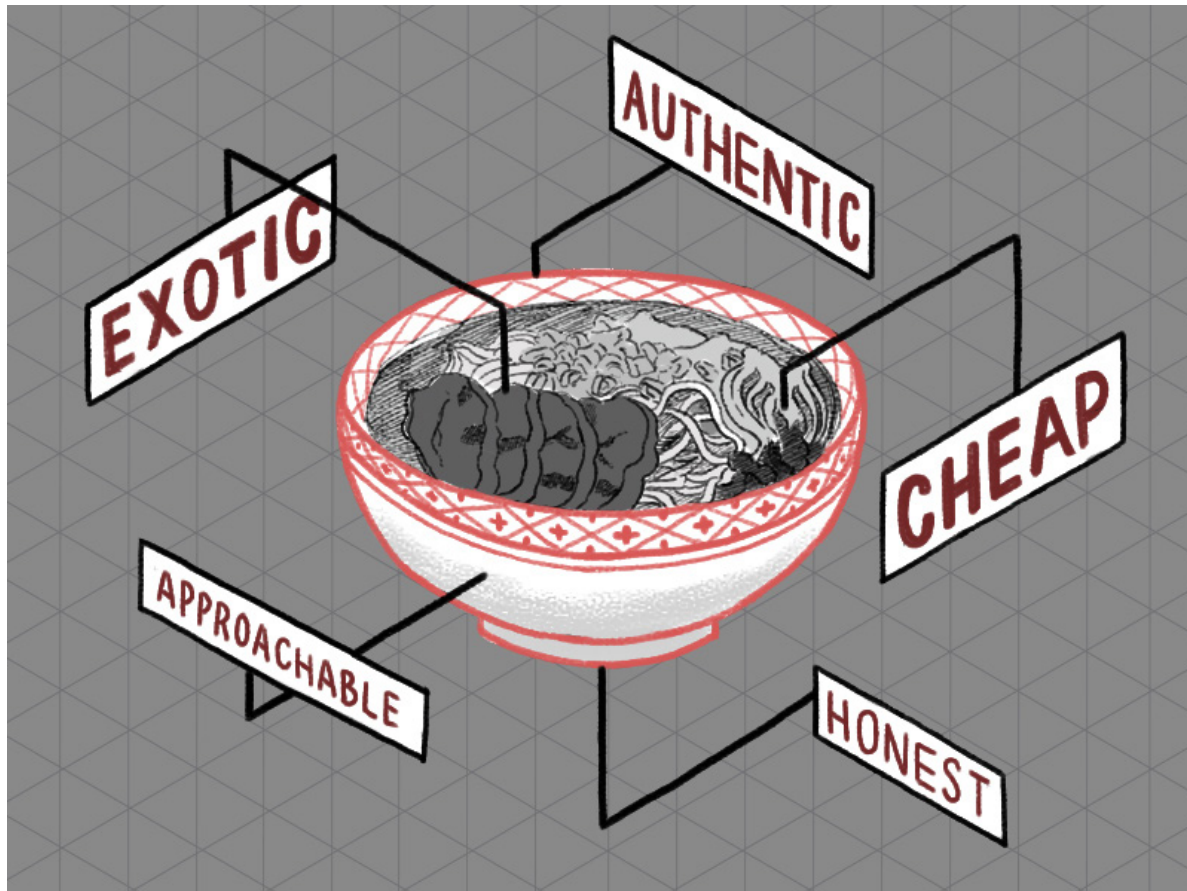
It was rare seeing Asian faces in the news back then, even in Vancouver, so it was all the more thrilling to read the coverage.

I remember waiting in line at Chinatown's Phnom Penh restaurant and reading the visceral story of the owners hanging from the wall, told in the [Vancouver Sun](#).

The family behind the restaurant shared how they hid in the Cambodian jungle for a month before crossing over to Vietnam, where they sold noodles on the street. The story included details about gold and smugglers, a jailed son and benevolent Canada welcoming the family with open arms. Oh, and garlic squid.

The Sun featured the restaurant numerous times, with one writer calling its dishes “real food... the smell of holiness.”

True, the writing could be sentimental, and often featured a jarring blend of suffering with deliciousness. But as someone from an immigrant family, I got sucked into the storytelling —



Let's take a closer look at the "hidden gem."

Illustration by Stella Zheng.



tales of sacrifice, tastes from the homeland and multicultural Canada coming together at the dinner table.

You might think that coverage of restaurants in Vancouver and other multicultural Canadian cities is devoid of the white gaze because there's so much food diversity.

Yes, that diversity is celebrated, but these eats are still held at a distance.

Just think of how “ethnic” food is described locally.

Fish balls as “exotic.” Ancient eats like congee as “new.” Writers decide which dishes are “serious” and “authentic.” They may praise a restaurant for making a cuisine like Vietnamese more “approachable.”

But exotic to who? New to who? Authentic to who? Approachable to who?

“Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice.”

That's a quote from bell hooks, the American scholar and activist, in her classic essay “Eating the Other.”

“The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight,” hooks says, “more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling.”

As a result, Phnom Penh's cuisine, originating in the jungle

and enduring the fire of a refugee journey, is described as “real food.”

Ah, the hunger for status and distinction in culinary adventuring! The more exotically you eat, the more experienced you are.

Not all foodies are white, but all foodies can be capable of othering racialized people and their food. And in Canada, Eurocentric foods tend to be the baseline by which all other cuisines are measured. It is from this baseline that foodies hunt for “new” food experiences, and emphasize the crossing of boundaries into the world of the other.

There are plenty of local examples of “othering” to jab at.

This guide to dim sum apologizes for the “problem” textures of dishes like chicken feet. This review of a soba shop has a 175-word opening on the author's experience with Japanese (“its unique phrasing and compound alphabet results in a mesmerizingly lyrical system of communication”).

Crueler analysts than me would have a field day tearing up write-ups like these.

But I'm more interested in how the white gaze on food considers people and place, class and consumption. So let's move on.

### Food media loves its expeditions into the “hole-in-the-wall.”

I get it, there's the street cred of surfacing a “hidden gem” to audiences.

An off-the-beaten-path greasy spoon is more exciting than a French restaurant, giving well-to-do audiences the experience of traversing into a gritty, blue-collar world that serves “honest” food that is “surprisingly” delicious.

But an off-the-beaten-path dumpling stall, perhaps in the belly of some suburban Taiwanese mall where aunties make them by hand, is even better.

Disclaimers like “intimidating” and for “adventurous eaters” are often used.

But bear with it and enjoy the reward of cheap ethnic food, with prices “far lower than what you would pay in the grocery stores or your local Blenz,” says the Georgia Straight.

As hooks writes, “Encounters with Otherness are clearly

## CHECK OUT SCOUT MAGAZINE'S 'NEVER HEARD OF IT' RESTAURANT COLUMNS, SOME OF VANCOUVER'S BEST.

Yes, the title hints at foodies looking from the outside in, but writer Fernando Medrano does a great job with introductions.

[CLICK HERE TO READ](#)

marked as more exciting, more intense, and more threatening. The lure is the combination of pleasure and danger.”

Sure, hole-in-the-wall can refer to the physical location. Indeed, a lot of them are small joints, perhaps located in the inner city, with sparse or seemingly random décor.

But they may also be holes-in-the-wall in the imagination of the outsider. Who cares if it’s on a major thoroughfare? It’s a hole-in-the-wall because it serves “foreign” cuisine.

It doesn’t matter if every Canadian with Cantonese roots knows of this barbecue shop — foodies with ethnocentric palates emphasize the everyday as exotic and sell cornerstones as hidden gems.

There are writers who put down these places while praising them at the same time, stoking their status as explorers with a penchant for risk.

The Northern Café, which is above a hardware store in industrial South Vancouver, has been described so many times as a hole-in-the-wall that I’m not even sure it qualifies as one anymore.

It’s a diner run by a Chinese Canadian family, and it’s been written about by everyone from the National Post to the Daily Hive to countless food Instagrammers, as if they’ve found the El Dorado of bacon and eggs.

Here’s the [language](#) used by the National Post. “Prepare to be staggered: by the uneven floor.” “Visual confusion.” “Random drawings.” “Funhouse at a summer fair.” “Canada’s... most rundown restaurant.” “The best of the oldest, most decrepit eateries in the land.”

Restaurants are stripped down to objects of discovery and consumption in these reviews.

What’s missing? The fact that so-called holes-in-the-wall are often run by migrants in Canada who don’t exist to chase Michelin stars — rather, to make ends meet and serve their clientele cuisine they need.

## Food writers have also weighed in on critiques of racialized places as they gentrify.

University of Toronto sociologist Zachary Hyde noted this phenomenon in a [paper](#) analyzing 296 Vancouver restaurant reviews.

Hyde points to a New York Times [review](#) of the lauded Japanese-Italian restaurant Kissa Tanto. The writer says that the [fancy restaurant](#) in Vancouver’s gentrifying Chinatown “inhabits the neighbourhood respectfully.”

Commentary like this can be found in other reviews of hip new eateries in Chinatown.

The Vancouver Sun [reviewed](#) a café-grocery called Dalina in a new condo building. The writer wrote that she’s “happy to see millennials in this habitat,” “with laptops and beards,” “as it speaks to their resilience in this unaffordable city.”

The Globe and Mail reviewed the Union, which the writer calls a “photo-box” in a “desolate wasteland.” The clientele, she says, are a “panoramic snapshot of urban diversity,” which includes “surfer dudes” and “architect types.”

These reviews nod to Chinatown’s troubles — an immigrant community trying to reinvent itself amidst urban decline and gentrification — yet praise espresso-sipping millennials on laptops and brave surfers for their willingness to visit this “wasteland.”

Next time food media invites you to eat in some racialized neighbourhood, see whether the narrative of cool eats making an area better is actually erasing local life and struggle — taste determining who and what fits in a place.



des hume  
@deshumemusic

White vancouverites take the #20 past Kingsway and think they’re Anthony Bourdain

Can’t help but share this joke tweet by @deshumemusic that our readers shared with us

**W**hen it comes to “eating the other,” there is constant tension between two impulses.

Is it for status? Or does it come from a genuine desire to experience another culture?

University of Toronto sociologists Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann talk about this in their eye-opening book *Foodies*.

In many of the reviews I’ve seen on restaurant walls over the years, there’s a mix of both these impulses.

The otherness of the cuisine is stoked, sometimes in Orientalist ways, just as it is celebrated — I admit I’ve written pieces in this vein myself, and at least two of them are still on the walls of Vancouver restaurants.

The white gaze in food journalism is no different than its presence in any kind of journalism, subjecting people, places and cultures to the same judgments and stereotypes.

But to the mom-and-pops making a living, reviews can mean a lot, regardless of what the representation looks like.

Sure, Canada has a lot of multicultural menus, and we’ll always be eating dishes that are new to us.

But just because food media feature racialized people and their cuisines doesn’t mean representation is guaranteed.

Is the menu “cheap,” or is it that it caters to the budgets of working-class customers?

Is a food court stall reluctant to give extra chopsticks because the owner is “rude,” or because she’s careful about their budget?

Is a restaurant serving “approachable and aesthetically pleasing” foreign food because it used to be scary and ugly? Or because Canadians with Eurocentric palates aren’t used to flavours and ingredients common to another culture?

Is a hole-in-the-wall in an odd, faraway location for white urbanites because migrants are intentionally trying to be mysterious? Or because commercial real estate in a central location with foot traffic is expensive and outside of what new Canadians can afford?

Shallow coverage feeds us imagery of how rundown a restaurant is to emphasize adventure, and imagery of ethnic crowds packing into a place to emphasize authenticity. Class and culture are just visible enough to be delicious, yet invisible in the way of more nutritious understanding.

The richest coverage doesn’t just lead audiences to food. It shows how that food got to us — and what it means to the chefs and the community in which it’s served.

**Q**

How do you decide which new cuisines to try?

How do you feel when “eating the other”?

Have you ever been judged for what you eat? If yes, why?

CHAPTER SEVEN

# WHITE AT THE MUSEUM

**W**e're going on another field trip today — New Westminster, B.C.!

If you strolled into the city's museum a decade ago, it would've been all about the British colonial narrative.

The city was the original capital of the colony of British Columbia, and the museum showcased exhibits on everything from Victorian fashions to the Queen's visit in 1971.

In 2011, a member of the city's multicultural advisory committee told the museum's curator that people of colour did not see themselves reflected in the institution.

Another person who visited the city's Irving House — built in 1865, the oldest colonial house still intact in B.C. — told the curator that nothing about the heritage site would make her visit again.

The house wasn't entirely devoid of racial representation: inside was the print of a Black man kneeling before Queen Victoria.

What's a museum to do? The ones steeped in colonialism don't have good track records when it comes to inclusion.

"Historically, museums were presented almost as a political statement to assert someone's dominance in an area and demonstrate longevity," explains Robert McCullough, who manages the museum and heritage services at New Westminster.

What happens when marginalized voices aren't reflected in community records?

We're six chapters in, so you'll already know some of the outcomes when ethnocultural groups are stereotyped or left out of journalism.

We've talked about how coverage frames migrants as good or bad (chapter two); how coverage ignores or belittles racialized neighbourhoods (chapter four); and how coverage pins behaviour on race, while neglecting inequalities of gender, class (chapter three), etc.

But we're not just lacking stories that show the diverse reality of our present. We're also lacking stories that show the diverse reality of our past.

That's why we're visiting a museum today — to have a longitudinal look at how the white gaze has silenced racialized people in some of our community records.

The gaps in museum archives have a lot of lessons for

journalists on how we chronicle the times.

Who are the people we are leaving voiceless? How does their absence shape how we understand our communities? How do we decide which stories are considered "important"? How do we make space for people who've been previously neglected to share their stories and views?

In 2017, New Westminster's council approved a new mandate, long in the making, to decolonize the museum.

One of the goals was to "enhance knowledge and deepen understanding of the city and its diverse peoples — from the First Nations cultures to the multicultural community of today."

But when New Westminster Museum curator Oana Capota and her team started digging through newspapers to collect stories, she found that "people of colour were always criminalized."

There were stories of them getting drunk, stealing hats, forging cheques and committing "ridiculous offenses."

"I'd find something like a Japanese man I've been researching arrested for riding his bike in the wrong direction," Capota says.

I've noticed the same dehumanization and vilification when reading stories about people of colour in B.C.'s history.

Disasters were often turned into spectacle. In 1909, the Columbian newspaper covered a [Burnaby train wreck](#), describing in detail the gore of peeled scalps and severed heads of the 23 Japanese men who died, but including none of their names — only that of a white survivor named George.

Even something like health was [blamed](#) on race. In 1917, the Vancouver Daily World blamed the spread of the Spanish flu among "Red Men" for "declin[ing] to take proper precautions," and among the "Oriental population" for their "wages of sin."

To update its collection, the New Westminster Museum worked with such newspaper records, but also turned to the public to surface "new" stories that haven't been told in a formal way.

"I think white Anglo-Saxon people are used to being in museums, and so will often approach me and say, here's something I know the value of, and it should be in a museum," Capota told me.

“Other groups, they haven’t seen themselves in a museum, so they wouldn’t think of approaching us.”

The concept of value stuck with me.

Other journalists and I have had similar experiences. Almost everyone who contacts me out of the blue with a story idea that they “know the value of” is white. But for stories centred around the experiences of people of colour, particularly migrants, I have to go find them.

But when I talk to them, some have refused to do interviews, saying things like: “I’m not an expert.” “I’m not interesting.” “I’m not very good at speaking.”

It’s not that they lack personal self-worth; they’re not used to seeing themselves in a formal record of their community. And if journalists or other chroniclers don’t proactively seek out these stories, they may never be recorded.

There’s another common pitfall of representation in Canadian history: “Communities of colour are only allowed to share one story.”

That’s something Naveen Girn, one of the museum’s guest curators, told me.

For South Asian Canadians, it’s the Komagata Maru. For Chinese Canadians, it’s the head tax story. For Japanese Canadians, it’s the internment.

Girn remembers his high school class in Vancouver zipping through these stories in a week, as if paying diversity dues.

These stories are, of course, hugely important events with lasting historical effects, key flashpoints of people of colour fighting discriminatory governments.

But if they’re told in the same way, their overemphasis in media and historical accounts can lead to blind spots.

They may be used as shorthand for an entire race’s experience. They may sideline other stories of Canadians of colour. They may silo “diverse” history as different from Canadian history. They may give the appearance that systemic discrimination is relegated to the past.

I did a quick search in the [Canadian Newsstream database](#) of stories from major newspapers to examine the scale of this. In the past decade, 62 per cent of the 3,600 stories that mentioned “Japanese Canadians” also mentioned “internment.”

The challenge today, says Girn, is to open up the “scope of stories.”

Communities of colour have more than one storyline.

In the end, a collaborative approach with the public enriched the New Westminster Museum’s record of the city’s history.

The museum looked everywhere from city committees to knitting groups to powwow workshops and beyond.

They wrote family profiles for incoming donations of artifacts and conducted oral history interviews. Thanks to these, new light was shone on the city’s Sikh, Chinese and Black heritage.

The efforts revealed New Westminster, despite its British roots, to be a very diverse place.

The first Japanese person in Canada lived in New Westminster. The earliest property purchase in the archives was by Black residents in 1860.

There were two Chinatowns. Queensborough, on the other side of the Fraser River, was home to a Sikh community, many of whom worked in the lumber industry.

And of course, the city is on the unceded land of Halkomelem-speaking peoples. One notable site was the displaced village of [qiqéyt](#).

One museum exhibit, “[Hair Apparent](#),” included a story from 1859 of one of the city’s first barbers, who was Black, and used a barrel for a chair.

**“TOWARDS A MORE  
WELCOMING, INCLUSIVE  
NEW WESTMINSTER MUSEUM”  
BY OANA CAPOTA, PUBLISHED  
IN THE BC MUSEUMS  
ASSOCIATION MAGAZINE.**

[CLICK HERE TO READ](#)

Another was “[An Ocean of Peace](#),” which traced a century of Sikh history in New Westminster, told through intimate objects like photo albums and weaponry on loan from families.

Stories included the founding of a gurdwara in Queensborough and the life of the anti-imperialist revolutionary Mewa Singh, who was executed by hanging in the city in 1915.

Seeing is often believing when it comes to representation.

How would anyone understand a community if the diversity of its history and residents is not visibly reflected?

And how would racialized people feel they have a voice in the community if they’ve been neglected from the official record for so long?

Personally, I’ve often second-guessed whether stories outside of the white gaze were worth writing about, because I haven’t read about them before — whether it’s some [cultural food](#) or practice or [special place](#).

When I write about these things, some readers ask why I’m wasting my time and not covering the “bigger issues” of the day.

I suppose when a lack of diversity is normalized, a glimpse of diversity almost seems abnormal.

Capota at the museum has a response to this.

Spotlighting diversity doesn’t over-privilege it, she says. Rather, it brings to light experiences that “have been hidden.”

Q

What’s a history you learned that changed how you view a place?

How can museums steeped in colonialism evolve to be more inclusive?

How can journalists and other community chroniclers do a better job of making sure the diversity in their communities is recorded?

# ATTACK OF THE SHUTDOWN COMMANDS



Look, I didn't set out to write about whiteness.

It was always an uncomfortable topic for me growing up. Whenever I happened to use the word “white,” my family would stop me for being what they thought was politically incorrect. “You mean Caucasian,” they'd say, not knowing the term was actually part of the [racist taxonomy](#) used to justify slavery.

My big interest starting out as a journalist was to reflect the ethnocultural diversity of my home, Vancouver.

But one can only pursue representation for so long before wondering why people of colour are misrepresented by media in the first place.

The more I wrote about ethnocultural diversity, the more I noticed whiteness as the other side of the coin — defining itself as “[mainstream](#),” defining what counts as Canadian and defining how racialized people are portrayed.

I've caught myself writing stories under this white gaze, which is why I decided to create this project to investigate why and how it's become so normalized in journalism.

Guess how some of our newsletter's readers responded?

They told me whiteness shouldn't be talked about.

Readers accused me of being “driven by hate” and that I should “go to prison” for it. Of course, I got the classic “good for you to go back to where your ancestors came from and live in the culture you love more.” Another said the divisiveness I encouraged through my “unscientific, in-your-face sociology” could result in more white nationalism. And apparently, “The beneficiaries of increasing race consciousness among whites will, of course, be the Conservatives.”

Some were less angry but still upset, accusing me of “reverse racism.”

Only a minority of readers reacted this way. But their comments deserve highlighting because they represent a pattern of how people talk about — and try to avoid talking about — race.

The comments read like shutdown commands for a computer, the control-alt-delete of conversations on race, and whiteness and privilege in particular.

Let's have a closer look at some of these shutdown commands, and why they deserve to be challenged.

## You are racist for talking about race!

One of the first emails I received when we announced this newsletter read: “interesting how you chris will start to promote more Racism in our country rather than be part of a solution [sic].”

I also got a bunch pointing out that we're all part of the human race, so I should “get past this identity politics bullshit and accept that we are all essentially the same.”

These readers seem to define talking about racism as a highlighting of difference, which divides people and is bad. This assumes that if we don't talk about race, we can all live together in unity.

But we know that racial inequality exists, and that it intersects with all kinds of inequality: gender, labour, wealth, housing, education, etc.

Accepting that “we are all essentially the same” erases and denies racism and all racial experiences.

In the words of the American scholar of multiculturalism Robin DiAngelo, “Unequal power relations cannot be challenged if they are not acknowledged.”

## You should focus on the “bigger issues,” not race!

I get this reply a lot.

Climate change is the biggest of the “bigger issues” cited. As one reader said, “it will matter little if the victims are white or Asian, LGBTQ or otherwise, whether we experienced intergenerational trauma, or were raised in loving, tolerant, liberal, racialized families. The ultimate outcome will be extinction for all of us, without distinction.”

But this argument ignores that crises have systemic and social dimensions, with the vulnerable and marginalized hardest hit. The UN itself has noted this, through lenses such as [race](#) and [gender](#).

Take the pandemic in B.C. Sure, all humans have a body that can catch COVID-19. But as other journalists and I have reported, the neighbourhoods with the [most cases](#) are home to people of colour who work frontline, blue-collar jobs.

Our immigration policies brought many of these people over to fill our labour gaps. And some employers' labour conditions, such as a lack of sick days, put many at risk.

B.C. had its first taste of a heat dome this summer, linked by scientists to [climate change](#). Sure, all humans have bodies that can have a heat stroke.

But Canadian studies have noted that Indigenous Peoples, racialized folks and those with low-incomes are the most susceptible to extreme weather events like these — the result of systemic inequality when it comes to access to health care, overrepresentation in outdoor jobs and exposure to air pollution.

A meteorologist quoted in the Washington Post [put it succinctly](#): race is “inexorably” linked to climate change because it dictates who benefits from the activities that produce planet-warming gases and who suffers most from the consequences.

Whatever the crisis, let’s not pretend we’ll all be hit equally.

### **You can’t have a white gaze in a place that’s multicultural!**

White readers have told me that white privilege, along with the white gaze, don’t exist in Canada anymore due to the “demographic decline” of white people. They frequently cite census data on the ways white people are now — or about to become — the “new minority.”

“White ain’t what it used to be and stoking this ‘white privilege, white gaze’ is boring and utter nonsense,” wrote Allan. “My lawyer is Asian, my dentist is Asian, my banker is Asian, a Vietnamese owns the barber shop where I get my hair cut. I buy my fruit and vegetables at a Chinese-owned market.... You obviously don’t like stats.”

Some readers have said that racial equality must exist because they see more and more people of colour around. Allan has a seemingly higher bar, describing racial equality as the ability to hold jobs and own property.

Sure, these are important rights, especially considering Canada’s racist past.

But a white man having an Asian dentist doesn’t mean that structural injustice is gone. Instead, let’s consider American political philosopher Iris Marion Young’s “five faces of oppression.”

Oppression, according to Young, is when a group experiences exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural domination and violence. Even in a liberal democracy, you can find oppression by this definition.

No matter how multicultural the Canadian population, presence doesn’t necessarily indicate power. Imagine a city where people of colour are the majority. Compared to their white neighbours, do they have equal institutional, social, symbolic, cultural and economic power? Do they have the same freedoms of self-determination? Are their differences affirmed or admonished?

Remember the story I shared with you about Richmond, B.C. (chapter two)? The city’s population is mostly of Chinese descent. But the moment a Chinese sign or ad goes up, out come the cries of it being un-Canadian and exclusive.

Of Young’s five faces of oppression, marginalization and cultural domination are all too common in Canadian journalism. The white gaze in media persists because it is the perspective by which diversity is considered.

You are biased because you are a racialized journalist writing about race!

This is a common attack on racialized journalists. During the run of this series, I’ve been accused twice of biased journalism due to being in the pocket of China’s communists. (Hmm, I wonder why!)

There are many more shutdown commands than we have time for in this chapter! I’ve focused on the ones related to Canadian media, but if you’re interested in reading more — from “I have friends of all colours” to “There is much less discrimination today” — check out [White Fragility](#) by Robin DiAngelo.

Look, journalists are professionals. We are governed by industry standards and ethics. It's degrading to accuse a journalist of colour of throwing professionalism out the window because they can't help but lose all cool when reporting on a story they have some familiarity with.

It's not unusual for journalists to report on — or develop a beat on — areas that we have expertise and experience with. An Abbotsford journalist familiar with hydrology and the geography of the Fraser Valley would be invaluable at a time of flooding like in 2021.

Any journalist reporting on a diaspora they grew up in would have an insider's perspective on which questions to ask and which inequalities to interrogate.

Journalist Angela Sterritt at the CBC, who is from the Gitanmaax band of the Gitksan Nation, told [The Tyee](#) that she's been accused of being an "advocate" for Indigenous Peoples and causes.

But as she continued to fight for important stories involving Indigenous Peoples to be told and told accurately, her positionality and understanding was eventually considered an asset.

Expertise and experience are strengths. And if there is a story that journalists feel they cannot cover fairly, we do indeed step away.



*Ahh, why don't  
the people want  
to talk about  
race?*

**D**o you remember what John Horgan said in 2020?

During a debate, the B.C. premier recalled his youth playing sports with Indigenous and South Asian kids, saying, “I don’t see colour.”

People were quick to challenge Horgan. “If you don’t see colour, you don’t see us,” tweeted Sunny Dhillon, the former Globe and Mail journalist who’s been [outspoken](#) about being the lonely person of colour in majority white newsrooms.

(Horgan would later apologize).

Tyee writer Crawford Kilian [wrote](#) about Horgan’s comment as a learning moment: “That’s what I used to tell myself, too. Then I came to learn what Horgan is being made aware of now. That to claim to not see colour is to imply you are blind to systemic racism and therefore can’t be counted on to work to remove its structural barriers.”

It’s a very Canadian example of how we’re not used to talking about race, and that many people still think it’s possible to arrive at a post-racial world where race doesn’t matter.

Another reason is that we tend to take these discussions personally. Some readers, who are white, thought I was saying they were bad people, and took the time to tell me that they were “raised to accept all.”

The point of doing journalism that touches on race isn’t to separate good people from bad racist ones. The point is to examine how our society is made up of racial inequality and racial experiences, and explore where we all fit in.

It can be difficult to see. It’s uncomfortable, and it’s disarming. As [Peggy McIntosh](#), the American scholar known for her research on white privilege, said: “I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group.”

Journalists who write about race are holding society accountable, just like with any other issues.

Anyone using a shutdown command to silence this kind of reporting... well, they’re upholding the current status quo of racial inequality and invisibility.

**Q**

How do you initiate conversations with others on racial inequality?

Have you noticed other “shutdown commands” than the ones we discussed in this chapter?

How have you responded to shutdown commands?

Do you think there’s anything about Canada that makes it especially difficult to talk about race?

CHAPTER NINE

# SEEN AND HEARD

**R**ace and culture inevitably come up in every conversation I have with a journalist of colour.

We talk about the burden of feeling like the representation of an entire community is on our shoulders if we choose to cover it. Better not get it wrong and let down all those people! Especially if a culture or issue is appearing in Canadian English media for the first time.

We talk about the inevitability that readers will say racist things no matter how carefully we cover ethnocultural groups or racial inequality. We might even be called a racist for bringing up race.

We talk about being a minority in white majority newsrooms. Are journalists of colour supported to tell stories that aren't skewed by the white gaze? Do white colleagues try to do so as well?

The makeup of our newsrooms makes it hard. Just check out this [2021 survey](#) by the Canadian Association of Journalists, the first of its kind in 15 years, which shows that half of our nation's newsrooms are exclusively white. As for Canadian journalists, 75 per cent of them are white; the percentage is higher for managerial positions.

These challenges make it much easier to just forget about mentioning race. And that's a problem if it's key to the journalism at hand.

People of colour like me who grew up in Canada had this relationship with English media: open up a newspaper, turn on the TV or radio, and we might not catch people who look like us or come from our communities for days.

When representation does come, media often celebrates assimilation, chides un-Canadian behaviour, hones in on crime (chapter two), and mentions our exotic food (chapter six), holidays and culture, but without the same care for our socioeconomic advancement (chapter three).

This is what it means to live under the white gaze: to be told what your community looks like and how you should live.

And you can't run from it or ignore it.

While writing this chapter, I opened up the websites of our two daily newspapers and the websites of three broadcasters, and the only [person of colour in local coverage](#) was a man from China described as "a rich 'playboy' chopped into



*Canadian media still has a long way to go when it comes to reflective representation. Thanks for investigating it with me! Illustration by Stella Zheng.*

108 pieces after he was killed at a West Vancouver mansion." How's that for representation?

### **DEAR READER, THIS IS IT!**

If this project has built up your appetite for ethnocultural representation and investigations of racial inequality, you can be sure we're still pursuing it in our regular journalism as we always have.

I know because of my own positionality, there are many perspectives I will not have considered.

For one, being in Vancouver, it means that the racialized experiences I drew from are mostly East Asian, South Asian and Southeast Asian ones. I'm also conscious of the fact that I'm a man quoting famous feminists.

And how can we possibly talk about the white gaze in Canadian media without delving much deeper than I have on how it considers Indigenous issues?

It hasn't even been a decade since I wrote my first ever story in journalism. But this series has been an excuse to fill myself in on a crucial education I've missed when it comes to portrayals and points of view.

I'm glad to hear from readers that this is an education they also needed. After all, how many people who consume news do so with a built-in gaze detector?

Growing up, whenever I saw a newscast of Surrey, B.C. with police tape, broken glass and South Asian faces, my first thoughts were, "Surrey, danger, Indian gangs!" Not, "Hmm, why is Surrey only on the news when it comes to crimes related to its South Asian residents, and how is this shaping my perception of a place and a people?"

Whenever I read a heart-warming story about a Canadian immigrant working difficult jobs with a smile for decades, my first thought was, "Wow, this country is so welcoming and diverse!" Not, "Hmm, what is it about this country that welcomes migrants but keeps them in precarious jobs that locals don't always want to do?"

And whenever I heard a clip about a new craft brewery bettering a seldom-reported-on part of town, my first thought was, "Wow, this area is up and coming!" Not, "Hmm, are there racialized residents in this neighbourhood who've been neglected in this coverage in favour of a new space of consumption that caters to a media audience's white tastes?"

It's hard to build up media literacy! Especially when visceral violence, sweet sentiment or some yummy thing is in your face.

And it doesn't help that social media has rationed our primary engagement with news to photos and headlines briefly flashed on curated feeds.

So thanks for taking the time to challenge the journalism you consume each day, along with your world views.

We've covered a lot together:

Whose gaze is shaping a story (chapter one)? Are "diversity Ds" overly relied on to frame coverage (chapter two)? Is race used to explain behaviour, or is intersectionality used (chapter three)? In coverage of place and history, whose narratives are privileged (chapters four and seven)? Does the language other (chapter five)? Does our hunger for food lead us to ignore the people prepping it (chapter six)? Does

talking about race mean coverage is racist (chapter eight)?

Sure, representation is an increasingly hot topic in newsrooms, but it's still easy to fall into some of the traps outlined above.

We'll end with one last story from classic literature to make use of [my bachelor's degree...](#)

*The Odyssey* is the tale of the Greek hero Odysseus, whose epic journey home by sea after the Trojan War is interrupted again and again by monsters and the wrath of the gods.

Ten years pass, and Odysseus ends up on the island of the Phaeacians and attends a festival. There, a blind bard sings of the Trojan War, and Odysseus's part in the story.

Upon hearing it, Odysseus breaks down and cries.

Philosophers like Hannah Arendt and Adriana Cavarero have been drawn to this story because of what it says about stories. It's not that Odysseus doesn't know who he is or what he did. They interpret his emotion to mean there's power in being seen by others, to hear one's experiences woven into a greater narrative.

Identity isn't just something we innately possess. Identity is also relational, Cavarero tells us, and we understand who we are in the world through narratives provided to us by others.

That's why marginalization, brought on by the media's white gaze, is something we internalize and can get used to. That's why representative journalism is so important, so that people who've been missing and misrepresented for so long are affirmed in the narrative.

Don't forget us, OK?

Q

Have you ever felt like Odysseus, moved by a rare example of representation of a group or culture you belong to?

# THANKS FOR READING!

**How did you feel about  
race, representation and  
Canadian media before you  
read Under the White Gaze?  
How do you feel now?**

**Send your thoughts to us  
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# Q & A

## INSTAGRAM LIVE

During the launch of *Under the White Gaze*, **CHRISTOPHER** joined The Tyee's social media manager **SARAH KRICHEL** for a discussion on Instagram Live about the whiteness of the news and how people can combat it. A condensed excerpt of that talk is below. You can watch the full hour-long discussion [on Instagram](#).

**SK** It's called the white gaze, and I think people know what we mean when we say that, but is it fair to say it's also a socio-economic and colonial gaze?

**CC** Some people do call it a post-colonial gaze. What that means is that if this is Canada then there's a certain way that newcomers should act. So if we're doing a story about a model minority, then the piece will likely talk about, "Oh, good for this person, they're doing what they should be doing. They're very hard-working," and kind of leave it at that.

**SK** Can you tell me how the white gaze looks in action, and how that impacts how we consume the news and what we walk away from reading your average daily article with?

**CC** I would come across a lot of people who are racialized and then when I ask them, would you be interviewed about this, they say, "Oh, I'm not an expert, why would anybody want to hear what I have to say?" For us, it's frustrating as a journalist who has to meet a deadline. But for somebody else, they don't really see themselves included in media. They don't really feel like they have anything that other people might care to learn about. I feel like this is something that working journalists have blame to take on as well. If these are people we're not used to reaching out to and we're not used to featuring in our pieces, they might feel they really aren't important at the end of the day. It's why I think it's so important to reach out of whatever bubble we live in to make sure their voices are included.

... As journalists, we're always going to be writing about some kind of group that we don't belong in, but I think we have to be very careful about who we are coming into this and who are we presenting this to.... When we're coming from the outside-in, what are we bringing in? It's totally fine to be an outsider walking into some kind of culture you don't know much about. We're always going to have to do that as journalists. But we shouldn't forget about the perspective from the inside-out as well.... It's fine not to know something. It's fine to make mistakes, that happens. But it's about the attitude coming into it.... I see that a lot in restaurant reviews but I feel it can also apply to journalism. If you're going to a more blue-collar diner you're not going to say, "How come I just seat myself in this place?". You're not expecting five-star service when you go to a place like that. You're going to be entering a lot of spaces that aren't created for you and there're going to be norms you're not used to.

# Q & A

## YOUTUBE LIVE

Near the end of *Under the White Gaze*, **CHRISTOPHER** livestreamed over YouTube with his former schoolmate **SIMRAN SINGH**, managing editor of the *Burnaby Beacon*, to talk about how to report on race and what happens when we do as journalists of colour. A condensed excerpt of that conversation is below. You can watch full hour-long broadcast on YouTube.

**CC** When we're talking about what it means to have a white gaze, we're talking about some kind of power dynamic when it comes to representation. Anybody can take on the white gaze. I've taken on the white gaze in my reporting before. Have you?

**SS** Yes I have and it's very possible for racialized journalists to do this and take on the white gaze. I think early on in my reporting, when I began to really feel comfortable reporting on different issues and things going on in the South Asian communities in the Lower Mainland, I really realized that a lot of it was, "How do I make this sound really acceptable to people or likable to people?" And I think that just happened in my head without knowing.

What are the feel-good stories I can take on? What are the things that make people realize, for Sikhism, for the Punjabi Sikh community that *seva*, selfless community service, is part of the tenets of our faith? So I really focused on those feel-good stories, which are great and are important but I think is surface-level in some way because it doesn't really get down to kind of the nitty-gritty of what makes communities work or what's behind them or why a certain thing is happening within that community.

**CC** I also wondered, how we do have to consider the white gaze sometimes, sadly. Maybe not overly catering to it, but the fact that if we're writing to a mass audience, there some kind of bridging that we have to do so that people understand what we're talking about — but not to do too much hand-holding at the same time.

**SS** Yeah, it's a really interesting and delicate balance because you have to consider your audience and how much they might know.... Navigating that can be tricky. You don't want to feel like you're dumbing things down but you also want to do your job of being thorough and precise.

**CC** I've read a lot of your pieces on [COVID and South Asian communities](#) here in Metro Van and the Lower Mainland. I was wondering how do you cover something like race in a big crisis with sensitivity and with nuance?

**SS** We kept hearing this kind of narrative that COVID is happening to South Asian people. But I just thought: "Where is the explanation as to why?" We know it's happening, but there's got to be a reason or something we're not talking about. So that was a really big, tough topic to cover. I don't even think I got to the tip of the iceberg. But what I thought about when I was writing that series was all of the intersectionality of why it was happening.

Is it a community gone rogue just having huge parties because we don't care? No, that is absolutely not why there were high COVID numbers within South Asian communities here.

There was much more going on. It had to do with labour, with family structure, with translation services, with transit access. There was a list of reasons why this was happening and it was getting missed in daily briefings from our provincial health officials. Of course, they have so much to talk about that they go on to the next topic as quickly as possible to inform the public, but then who's going to inform the public about why people who looked like my grandfather were getting sick?

My whole family had COVID when I was writing those articles and it was just so surreal. I do live in a multigenerational household.... This is a very normal cultural thing within Punjabi families. We're tight-knit and live together.... I knew some dynamics in South Asian culture that helped me with this reporting. But it really, really made me realize how health and intersectionality, these two things need to come together in future health reporting.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If you've ever thought starting a newsletter and turning it into a PDF would be quick and easy, think again. My name is on the cover, but it takes a team.

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Finally, thanks to all of our newsletter readers for following along. Our weekly subscribers at the time numbered over 5,000 strong! Up to 55 of you emailed us each week to share your experiences.

Sorry I don't have something like a printable ally certificate or an equality tote bag for all of you, but I hope you've enjoyed the experience.

I dedicate this project to anyone who's ever felt left out by journalism. I hope that we journalists will strive to do a better job seeing and hearing from you as you are.



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