

In this picture, I see what everyone else can see — a much younger Karen with eyes matching a smile in cuddling with a collection of stuffed toy friends. Behind this picture, I see my parents’ attentiveness to opportunity, answering to a call, “have your say” with a passion for arranging animated life to meet light, inviting anyone from the public eye to join in meeting us.

Gazing at my parents and probably at a camera too, it is easy to warm up to their energy and dedicated spirit for life. It’s interesting to notice how bigger beings capture your attention, call to (how they see) you, while strengthening narratives that may reflect differently felt on the inside.

In between kindergarten classes, Mom would refer to me as her little tail, because I would follow her everywhere she’d go. With our matching bowl haircuts, at the local grocery store, a cashier would greet me as I sat by the cart handle bars, “Hi Karen!”, easing a 90° head turn to my Canadian born name every time I heard it. At a beginning age, my body began to immediately train in alignment with formed realities and with (shared) identities.

15.2 Molding Values

As far back as I can remember, I recall a first day of kindergarten surrounded by snacks on brown paper napkins pulled out from above the sink. Unlike the stuffed toys, my classmates and I surrounded each other, usually sweaty, moving, and unpredictably lively. I remember how a brief passage of time felt like to me, between seeing stuffed mouths with crackers to hastily wiping off the remnants on the brown paper napkins before dipping their hands into the shoe box filled with buttons during arts and crafts time. This swift transition would allow any of us to create artwork with food particles that missed our mouth cavity. It’s a detail difficult to miss because it contrasted deeply with values of sharing resources at home, perhaps pre-dating me for at least over a couple of millenia.

So, at our dinner table at home, we used chopsticks specific for individual plates and ones with shared food dishes embedded in principles that were about sharing equally. These utensils looked almost as asymmetrical as 二 (èr) (‘2’ in Mandarin). My siblings and I had shorter chopsticks: theirs were green, blue, yellow, while mine was pink. Our parents had bamboo. An image of these chopsticks at work (before the pandemic) is gathering around a restaurant table eating dim sum with family friends from my grandparent’s generation. Mom greeted everybody with equally lowered head nods to each person, including the restaurant hosts, in Cantonese. After the restaurant hosts directed us to an empty circular table nearby, we received our guests in this seat-specific yet shared space. As I heard chopsticks clacking together, a family friend from Mom’s generation turned to me, exclaiming how in little time the dumplings Mom made for her parents disappeared from their bowls the day before.

An earliest memory was of us sitting in front of our family round table, a menu of geometric shapes in front: rectangular sheets of pulpy wood, water bowls branded

with a circular blue line, circular dough wrapping, and the biggest stainless-steel bowl I had ever seen anywhere outside of TV and YouTube to this day. These shapes were also placed on top of principles that extended to ensuring that each round wrap was consistently packed with filling. Looking beside and upwards at Mom as she placed a round wrap on her left hand while scooping onto it a mix of filling arriving aromatically in front of me: sesame oil, protein, coriander, chives, napa. I decided to try out folding the next dumpling. After noticing the proportion of the almond-shaped fillings alongside Mom’s hand size, I tried placing some filling that matched my hand size on the next wrap. “Put some more feelings (fillings) into it,” Mom advised as I sat there confused for a moment, then believed what I heard versus what she meant to say.

15.3 Learning English Together

Dumpling gatherings at our home, receiving family from outside Canada, would remind me of a cultural inversion of Toronto’s predominantly monolingual (English) culture when navigating formal institutions. In contrast to this, throughout many publicly-funded institutions in the city, I met unexpected faces from unexpected parts of the world. Hosting family visiting from abroad revealed to me how familiar faces reflected genetic overlaps, while there was little overlap in languages. These gatherings though, would be impossible if Mom was not a holder of languages in our family. Before she enrolled in classes to learn English as an additional fourth language, she would learn Mandarin with her family, and grow up learning Cantonese in Hong Kong, and Portuguese in Brazil. After becoming pregnant with my older siblings and then me, she would eventually learn English again with Sesame Street with my siblings and then with Barney and Friends and me. Switching on closed captions / subtitles was a multisensory way she found that helped her and her *caçula* (youngest child in Portuguese) both learn how to read and spell ‘proper’ words in English.

After showing up for Chinese school on Saturdays, our parents would sometimes treat us with hamburgers. I would stand in line and chuckle at Mom with a black purse over her shoulder every time she would order a hamburger, “Could I order a hambooger, please?” As I grew taller, I began to see experiences closer to her standpoint. When visiting São Paulo for the first time in 2007, Mom and I stood in line ordering hamburgers at the airport. As we were waiting, we heard a customer who ordered in Portuguese, “Quero um hambooger, por favor.” (“I’d like a hamburger, please.”) As they ordered, I found myself to be the only one giggling, as everyone around us wasn’t doing the same. Mom whispered in my ear, “See I’m not the only one.”

Three years later, when I took accounting class, our teacher asked me to read out accounts in a trial balance exercise. As I read out ‘merchandise’ as “merkandise”, the way I heard Mom pronouncing it and without presence of the ‘proper’ ‘ch’ sound, I heard and felt my classmates laugh, many of whom were also of East Asian

descent, chuckle at the “foreign” error of how I pronounced. I felt just as bewildered, confused, and as upset as Mom must have felt when she would order hamburgers for us, then to feel humiliated by her own kid. How is it possible that I could fully respect Mom while laughing at the way she pronounced things that actively decentered this North American way of pronouncing? Whose way of saying things was really ‘correct’?

With pressure from anywhere but home to learn what is the most spoken language in the world, Mandarin, I opted to take Portuguese classes instead. When a pen would drop on the floor, my teacher who taught us European Portuguese would exclaim, “Aiyaiyai”. It sank in then that this expression wasn’t an extension of ‘aiya’ that Mom would say the same way in a similar scenario. However, if an umbrella broke in the middle of the rain, it would be “aiya”. In hearing both expressed in undesired situations of varying severities and hearing this from family (friends) who spoke English, Portuguese, and Chinese, I conflated the two expressions to be Chinese. I sat in silence with the discomfiting idea of how much more I had to learn. What good could actually come of this leaving what-I-didn’t-know-what-I-didn’t-know unquestioned?

15.4 A Foreigner, Perpetually

In a community program I participated in that required using computers, a classmate of mine asked, “Karen, do you know why I’m getting all these porn ads of [East / South East] Asian women?” We were both speculating how ads target viewers based on the probability of conventionally desirable-looking people for clicks. We laughed because we knew they misdirected their (not-so) nuanced efforts towards someone uninterested in the demographic that targeted them. A less hilarious aspect is why these ads had to reflect women who looked like ‘me’. With the thought of being likened to that of a tourist attraction, I can sense my eyes tightening, locating a constellation of bodily sensations signifying immediately at being taken for face and body value.

In July of 2007, a long-time friend of Mom’s took Mom, my sisters, cousin, and me to see Iguazú Falls, the largest waterfall system in the world. The falls themselves lie within two United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site parks in both Brazil and Argentina yet predominantly within the latter’s borders. This is very similar to Niagara Falls where accessing it from the Canadian border offers a more intimate glimpse than from the American side. However, anyone inviting themselves to enter the park from the Argentine side would have to access the falls with a train, jeep, boat, bridges, and foot power along centralised routes and pathways.

On the train, we boarded onto a section with the seats that were most empty. These were wooden bench-like seats that would face into each other, almost knee to knee with anyone sitting across from us. I noticed that the earliest seats may have also been the most coveted seats facing towards the front of the train, moving along

with inertia throughout most of the ride. We took our seats facing away from where we were to be headed as the forward-facing seats across from us were already taken.

Sitting across from us were a group of all-boys, the not-yet-20 types, with matching khaki shorts and tops with distinctly British accents (likely non-Australasian, as I heard a close friend in school would speak). Sometime after the train took off, the one who definitely seemed to be the 'leader' with blue eyes, sang aloud what seemed like a chorus of an improvised folk song, "I'm married to the girl sitting in front of me. I bet she can't understand me." As briskly as this entourage around him erupted in laughter, I tried to locate their social status back. I took note of their glistening white teeth (likely classed), school uniforms (likely in boarding school). Throughout the rest of the ride, a riled part inside of me wanted to prove them wrong.

As I internalised this imposed identity as a 'foreigner', I sat with the unbelonging that I had less experience on how to navigate this part of the world (Brazil-Argentina) even less than Mom did. Mom sat there without a word. It definitely wasn't that she wasn't incapable too of speaking English. When we took a boat ride near the falls in a steadier river channel, our guide told stories of the Guaraní legend behind Iguazú Falls. With the overlapping similarities between Spanish and Portuguese, Mom translated from Spanish to English, through the Portuguese that she knew. In this way, I presumed that silence was a way Mom's generation at least dealt with encounters of xenophobia, racism, and sexism, maybe even until now in at least two different continents.

Was there a connection between the fact of Iguazú Falls being a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and me receiving uninvited assumptions reminiscent of being a docile and subservient 'girl' who can't communicate back? Perhaps inviting a flurry of tourists from all over the world may have helped muddy a sense of who came from where that made it easier to jump to crude, automatic, prejudiced responses? Could sitting in close proximity, with physical space as a limited' resource, across from our counterparts make them feel uneasy? In locating a plausible relationship between the structure of the context and what unfolded, I can feel a familiar sense of vigilance in my eyes as I type this and how much more I give attention now to expressive changes in one's eyes (mis)matched with deeper (un)met needs.

After visiting tourist attractions on rare family vacations, it is a stark sight to see people of varying heights, shapes, skin colours, speech tones, gaits. I felt like this seemed comparable to the diversity of dogs in steeply appreciating areas within Toronto. When strolling in these areas, I see people walking these dogs that seem to pale in comparison.

15.5 A Furry Collaborator

When I took driving lessons, the experience informed me on how to be a safer pedestrian whenever trying to cross the road. I learned that making eye contact with the driver can be the first and single most effective way to allow the collaborative possibility of us moving past each other without lawsuits or law enforcement

back-up. That way, we can have a mutual yet foundational understanding of our positioning in relation to each other before making our next move.

Someone who models this is one of our family cats, a snowshoe tabby my sister named Bella. Snowshoe tabbies are a descendent of Siamese cats (indigenous to now-called Thailand) and American shorthair tabbies (indigenous to Europe). Whenever Bella would find me horizontal, in between after waking up and before getting up, they would arrive at the bedroom door announcing their presence with a soft 'meow', tail topped with a gentle curl, leaping onto the mattress and walking onto my belly insistent on face-to-face contact before purring and kneading on my chest. Overtime, Bella would arrive unannounced, collapsing a desire to make cuddling happen on demand with a single look—softened yet steady eye contact signaling you, me, now, cuddles, in no order. I can count a few moments where I wasn't in the mood to cuddle together. In those moments, I would shift my body by facing in the other direction. The next moment where I'd sneak a peek to see if Bella was still there, they'd already gone on their own way. By sensing both of us, Bella didn't waste time.

Why was meeting Bella's gaze so gratifying on the human end? We do have two other cats who are darker coloured. As I reflect on how they are one of the first out of the three cats usually to meet the eyes of family (friend) visitors from outside Canada, I draw the congruent connection of how much their eyes look like ones in YouTube ads, almond-shaped blue eyes with undeniable white features. Each time Bella sits by the computer monitor to watch their favourite show on YouTube, I wonder if these ads' insidious messaging also sinks in with them the way it does with me. Behind obsessions with how being beautiful is to look a particular way, I sometimes meet self-identifying women who look like 'me', of East / South East Asian descent. I believe there is an indignation in their eyes for a differently felt reality. An anger that finds its way directed outward eventually, sometimes directed towards themselves from the outside in, skin deep, under the knife. I wonder if that helps them feel happier now and later. With Bella born this way and their markings easy to identify and locate their breed as a snowshoe tabby, I wonder at this commonality we share, being born with undeniable close(r) proximities to whiteness that also mark us as being outside from the West.

After visiting the family (cats) after a while during the pandemic, I woke up rolling around in bed, kicking something soft. I feel a soft paw on my right foot. Half an hour later, I woke up to Bella and we gazed at each other, unabatedly. I saw it in their eyes that they wanted to stay. Although, I can't speak to why they'd wanted to stay, I know the intention I carry towards Bella. I try to keep an open heart-mind to what Bella enjoys doing unprompted from anyone else: sunbathing, watching outside birds and squirrels, playing fetch, covering up skat already there in the litterbox (perhaps without blaming others) before then covering their own droppings. There's a certain order that plays out in Bella's world, familiar values there. And chances are, it has nothing to do with seeing me as an inferior gendered slave unable to articulate back.

While cleaning up Bella's eye poop, I see how I've also been socialised to see Bella as perpetually endearing to observe. With this came my noticing of their

tactful eye contact patterns, strategic enlisting of support based on each human's strengths, sophisticated vocalisations with varying rhythms, tones, tempos specific to the context. With an observable kind of industrialised-prized intelligence, I can only presume that Bella knows themselves more than I could ever claim to know their inner realities. And yet, the quality of rational intelligence that is easily observable somehow overshadows underlying emotions undeniably part of the process too. Overtime, I feel a respect towards Bella in attuning honestly to their own needs, locating personal needs in a situation before enlisting surrounding support to make needs happen. There is an integration of embodied noticing and taking action that reminds me that an accord among this can be possible. It's interesting to see how beings capture your attention, call to how you see a mirrored reality, while strengthening narratives that may reflect differently on the 'other' side, in black and white.

15.6 Having a Collective Say

Names can be brands, meanings that carry feelings that are felt in front of one's eyes and not behind their eyes, disembodied in this way. With plenty out there on the backlash behind the name 'Karen', I'd like to focus this section on having a family name centered in Crazy, Rich Asians. 'Young' is a phonetic translation from 杨 (yáng), literally meaning 'poplar tree'. It can, too, sound like it's "from the West". With a name that can blend across cultural contexts also means never questioning the denial of classed opportunity that comes with the absence of familiarity, particularly for written-based applications. With the ongoing stigma that comes with the ageing process, the ambiguity of guessing an 'Asian' person's age is romanticised. However, with speaking English like a Canadian born, queries of whether I'm adopted do arise. Curiosities stem from a confusion of being hard to locate. This mismatch can bother people as it bothered me as I grew up.

Remember when I felt confused when Mom pronounced fillings as feelings? There was nothing incorrect about this belief in itself. I genuinely believed for the longest time that she meant to say 'feelings' as the key missing step needed to make dumplings. And when seeing family (friends) from Brazil, Mom got us to practice giving two to three air kisses to anyone we visited. It was also a way that I opened myself with affection to people we just met. Practising being emotionally open with others allowed me to process why confusion was also tied to feeling comfortable and entitled to this feeling. Immediately evading this comfort meant locating the anxiety outwards, towards 'other' bodies, before locating the discomfort of why hearing Mom pronouncing 'feelings' didn't make sense in my body. When I perceive confusion from my fellow white-passing Canadians, those born in Canada, towards 'me', I can imagine a subtle assertion of hierarchy staring back. I wonder whether we really do see each other as equals.

When I cleaned my room before moving out for graduate school, I found the newspaper clipping with my baby photo that starts off this narrative. I decided to locate the article to understand more about the broader context the image was placed

in. Below the baby photo lay two headlines that seemed oddly siloed next to one another. Both are juxtaposing first-person accounts in this newspaper article published in the mid-1990s. One account is by a ‘wife’ from Toronto outlining personal, emotional, financial, and public sacrifices following the denial of her husband’s refugee claim. Another is by a visitor from Wilmington, North Carolina who referred to Toronto as a “beautiful, exciting, and safe destination for visitors.” If voices are linked to “where they come from” as a fixed place, then how accurate is this in aligning identity with fluid movements of people between places? How is it possible for all these lives mentioned here to co-exist in real life and in black and white?

Growing up without living grandparents added to the anxiety of navigating life, of navigating between differing cultural worlds. Wading into this uncertainty has allowed me to see values in welcoming and befriending the strengths of opportunities this reality offers. The only way for 筷子 (kuaizi) (chopsticks) to work at once is when one is static, and the other is moving. If both were moving or if both were still, they would be as asynchronous as evidence-based public health values and ‘public’ policy approaches during a pandemic. In graduating to bamboo chopsticks and growing taller, I’m seeing a great cost to “being right”, losing opportunities for conversations to learn something new. I see how much society loses out on collaborating with unquestionable talent while taking you for body value. If I saw Bella as a stuffed animal, I wonder if I would have experienced seeing their multiple abilities, modelling many ways of self-caring, collaborating, and enjoying the present moment. I see my parents’ influence on how we treat beings around us, welcoming them with respect and care, without expecting anyone to come back for more.

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I write to make sense of past, current, and future experiences that move beyond words, processing experiences through the mind, emotions, and even more so with the body. I write to also trust in my own truth, no matter how others arrive at theirs. For me, among other things, writing is about nurturing skills that help to navigate health care systems too, including honest, comprehensive, accurate self-reporting. My writing is usually interdisciplinary, intersectional, and evermore, it is intergenerational.

In *Eyes and ‘I’*, I thread together a series of reflections about conforming to cultural forms and realities growing up in Toronto, with an openness to investing in passion. Carrying within in values like respecting shared spaces, realities, and truths, I explore what it can look like to navigate cornered spaces in grocery store line-ups, shoeboxes, trains, newspapers. In this process, I explore how embodied realities from the inside out can add value in understanding identities in formation across the life course, structures, and imaginations. Voices mentioned other than my own gave explicit permission to allow their thoughts, emotions, and words to be included here.

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