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Article

Decolonising otherness and sense of belonging: Autoethnography of a Korean woman migrant in Aotearoa New Zealand during the pandemic (2020-2022)

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Abstract

This autoethnography examines my lived experiences as a Korean migrant in Aotearoa New Zealand during the 2020-2022 global pandemic, interwoven with narratives from Asian women migrants in my doctoral research. Through personal and collective storytelling, I explore the intricate interplay between belonging and otherness, a duality that resonates deeply across our shared experiences. Employing a qualitative methodological approach, this study critically engages with decolonising perspectives, neo-racism, and social identity theory to unpack the complexities of ethnic and racial exclusion, cultural hybridity, and the pervasive 'us and them' dichotomy amplified by colonial worldviews. The narrative reveals layers of otherness—manifested in feelings of displacement, experiences of victimisation, and unintentional harm—while highlighting the profound human need for belonging. The findings reveal nuanced lived realities often overlooked in broader societal discourses. This study contributes to understanding the dynamics of social identity, power relations, and belonging, offering critical insights into how Asian women migrants negotiate their place in a world shaped by ethical and racial divides. It calls for a re-examination of narratives that perpetuate exclusion, advocating for more inclusive frameworks that honour diverse experiences.

Keywords
autoethnography, decolonising, ethnic and racial identities, sense of belonging, otherness

Social identities of Asian women migrants in Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter Aotearoa NZ) encompass a visible Asian ethnic and racial identity (Lee, 2016). Within the Pākehā/Māori bicultural context, the *Asian look* is often perceived as *other* (Banks, 2015; RNZ, 2020). Despite living in Hamilton, a multicultural community where over 30% of the population identifies with ethnicities other than European or Māori (Figure.NZ, n.d.), there have been times when, as an Asian-looking woman, I have felt distinctly viewed as other. My experiences resonated with those of the Asian women who participated in my doctoral research. This paper serves as a testament to our experiences of existing as *others*. However, it does not seek to frame migrant experiences solely through narratives of victimhood or heroism—a tendency to reduce migrant lives to binary extremes, critiqued by Hunter (2015) Rather, it recognises identity negotiation is an ongoing process, a continuous navigation between the desire for belonging and the affirmation of self-worth (Lee, 2016).

Introduction: Korean woman migrant is in a decolonisation process

Upon arriving in Aotearoa NZ, my *Asian look* was immediately noticeable. In 2008, when I moved into a new neighbourhood, my neighbours' curiosity about my origins was common, and at first, I felt comfortable responding to their questions. However, over a decade later, the continued inquiries about where I am from have become unsettling. This persistent questioning has led me to reflect on whether, despite years of living in Aotearoa NZ, I am still perceived as *other* by New Zealanders. As Olivier (2019) argues, acknowledging the discomfort of such experiences marks an important first step towards cultivating a resistant, decolonising sense of self. Building on this, Vlase (2024) posits that decolonisation also involves actively challenging and unlearning dominant ways of knowing and being.

Unlearning, in itself, becomes a form of new knowing and being. Olivier (2019), drawn from Fanon's concept of decolonisation, argues that the decolonisation process should have the aspiration of the creation of "new humanity" through "resistance identity" (p.16). According to Fanon (1963, cited in Olivier, 2019), decolonisation is defined as:

> *Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the "thing" which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself. (p. 36)*

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The author contends that to truly decolonise, one must internalise the process according to their own cultural aims, "without being subordinate to any other power" (Olivier, 2019, p. 16). In the context of the studying ethnic and racial identity, Verkuyten (2016) emphasises the need to consider situational and social contexts, recognising the diverse ways individuals present themselves in a dynamic world. Therefore, exploring the experiences of Asian migrants in Aotearoa NZ during the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of a Korean woman migrant's voice contributes to the decolonisation process. As part of becoming a resistant self—decolonising self, I am engaging in the process of challenging the dominant ways of knowing and being (Olivier, 2019; Vlase, 2024). This active questioning involves a critical examination of ingrained assumptions and a conscious effort to dismantle colonial legacies that persist in thought and practice.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian ethnicity became hyper-visible in Aotearoa NZ, where the majority population often framed Asian migrants through racialised stereotypes and scapegoating narratives, intensifying feelings of otherness (e.g., Kim et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023). This marked a shift from the pre-pandemic period, when such racialisation was more subtle or situational, rather than overtly linked to global health fear and blame. Such experiences underscore Verkuyten's (2016) view that ethnic and racial identities are not fixed but are dynamically shaped by situational and social contexts, reflecting the diverse and ever-evolving ways individuals navigate their existence in a complex world. This autoethnography, centred on the voice of an Asian woman migrant, builds on Verkuyten's (2016) framework to explore how these contextual forces shaped my lived experience during this period of heightened scrutiny. By rejecting binary labels of successful settlement or failed integration, this study asserts a self-determined narrative that resists reductive categorisations, contributing to a decolonising process that reclaims agency and affirms the multiplicity of migrant identities in Aotearoa NZ's socio-cultural landscape.

I explore experiences of otherness for an ethnic and racial being as an Asian woman migrant in Aotearoa NZ throughout the pandemic years. To do this, I establish the conceptual frameworks of how ethnic and racial identity is linked to otherness for Asian migrants, and how the feeling of otherness is closely connected to the sense of belonging. Within this theoretical framework, I examine the methodological tool of narrative autoethnography to capture not only my narrative, but also fellow Asian women migrants' stories reflected through my personal dialogues; the method is to capture our stories not only as separate but also as one. I question further how the narratives impel us to move forward by situating ourselves in the negotiation field of otherness and sameness. Then I will conclude this manuscript with my resistant thoughts and questions to give voices to others to continue this ongoing dialogue. I also hope this manuscript is the beginning of me being in the process of decolonising myself.

Literature review

This literature review establishes a framework for understanding the lived experiences of a Korean woman in Aotearoa NZ by examining the interplay of social identity, the foregrounding of ethnic and racial identities upon migration, the realities of neo-racism and otherness, and the crucial link between the feeling of otherness and the development of belonging in constructing positive identities. First, it considers how social identity theory informs the formation and negotiation of identities in a new context. It explores how ethnic and racial identities become salient when migrants move to a society where they are not part of the dominant group. Second, it analyses how neo-racism, and the experience of otherness shape the daily realities of migrants. Finally, it investigates how navigating feelings of being *other* influences the construction of belonging and positive identities in their new home.

Rather than being applied in isolation, these theoretical frameworks are interwoven and mutually informative. For example, the salience of ethnic identity upon migration, as explained by social identity theory, often sets the stage for encounters with neo-racism, which in turn deepens the sense of otherness. The sense of otherness then becomes a pivotal factor in how migrants negotiate belonging and reconstruct positive identities. Through these interconnected lenses, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexities faced by Asian migrants in Aotearoa NZ.

Migration and identity

Migration is often associated with the venture of a new home leaving a familiar environment. The decision to migrate often coincides with people's hope for the future in the new home and the new country. For instance, an unsatisfying education system in their home country in some Asian countries is often the biggest motivation to resettle in Aotearoa NZ (e.g., Lee, 2016; Thomas & McKenzie, 2005). Conversely, migration stories retell the unsatisfied or unfulfilling expectations of the anticipated future in their homeland. For instance, one may seek to migrate to more politically and economically stable countries to seek a better future, such as the refugees. The study of Asian migrants in Aotearoa NZ is not much different from the other ethnic and racial migration in that broad sense (e.g., Aye & Guerin, 2001; Ho, 2015; Ho & Bedford, 2008).

Lived experiences as migrants bring the issues of identities to the fore. The study of Asian women migrants in Aotearoa NZ reveals that the participants face a new set of identities assigned to them, such as Asian and language learners (Lee, 2016).

Lee (2016) found that such identities are experienced as being excluded and marginalised. For example, their prior professional and life experiences were not recognised in a new home. As one participant lamented, they were asked to learn the baby language when they could well articulate it in adult language. The struggle is everywhere when there are new members. A study of North Americans who migrated to Ecuador for a more stress-free lifestyle (Hayes, 2014) shows that the participants try to diminish the importance of their racialised identities. They were being noticed all the time: white among Latinos.

Among the many identities each migrant holds, racial and ethnic identities are quite visible when migrated to a racially and ethnically distant nation (Bazo Vienrich, 2019; Özdemir, 2023). Here, the central point I wish to advance is that ethnic and racial identities significantly shape how individuals are perceived and positioned within mainstream society. These identity markers often become the basis for processes of othering, where individuals or groups are constructed as different or marginal relative to the dominant social group. Moreover, I contend that experiences of ethnic and racial differentiation are intricately connected to the broader issue of belonging—a complex and contested space that warrants critical examination. Understanding how ethnic and racial distinctions influence one's sense of inclusion or exclusion is essential for unpacking the shared social landscapes in which notions of identity, power, and community are negotiated.

Identity, neo-racism and otherness

The identities I focus on is ethnic and racial identities. Ethnic and racial identity "is concerned with thoughts and feelings that are linked to the ethnic-racial categories and groups to which people belong or to which they are assigned" (Verkuyten, 2016, p. 1797). Unlike other social identities such as a teacher or a shopkeeper, ethnic and racial identities are rather fixed—visual group membership. According to Verkuyten (2016), the issue of ethnic and racial identities is an ever-increasing topic of concern due to the increased flow of migration. For example, the Republic of Korea was known to be the most homogenous country in the world prior to the late 1990s (Ahn, 2012; Han, 2007). However, the flux of migration for various reasons changes the country's demographic scenery where people with different ethnic and racial backgrounds share the same space and time. Thus, the question of ethnic and racial differences surfaces in people's daily lives.

Schwartz et al (2014) define ethnic identity and racial identity as "both subjective and self-ascribed sense of oneself as a member of an ethnic or racial group—rather than in terms of the label that one assigns to the group itself" (p. 59). My identity I unfold here, in this autoethnography paper, is that of "I am an Asian migrant in the Pākehā and Māori bicultural nation". My claimed identity highlights that I am neither Pākehā nor Māori in Aotearoa NZ—positioning me as an *other* within the bicultural nation.

My biological differences that are associated with nationality, language and cultural practice have become the subject of neo-racism that is everywhere but different (Balibar, 2007; Nelson & Dunn, 2017). Grosfoguel (2016) defines racism as "a hierarchy of superiority/inferiority along the line of the human" in that certain groups of people "enjoy access to rights, ··· material resources, and social recognition to their subjectivities, identities, epistemologies and spiritualities" (p. 10). The author goes on to state that neo-racism recognises "this hierarchy can be constructed and marked in diverse ways" (Grosfoguel, 2016, p. 10). The experiences of English teachers with darker skin tones among local Asian communities differ significantly from those of fair-skinned teachers.

However, even though it can be said that racism is localised (such as an Asian migrant in a non-Asian country or a Black English language teacher in an Asian country), there are "non-local 'everywhere' issues that underpin racisms" (Nelson & Dunn, 2017, p. 40). As one example, a study of international students in East Asia revealed that they experienced unjust treatment and challenges compared to those from outside the Asian region, the West particularly, students from Europe and North America (Lee et al., 2017). It goes beyond the othering of different coloured skin: within the same-coloured nation, certain nationalism is more subject to othering. This is evident even for Chinese students in South Korea, who—despite sharing similar skin tones with the host population—have faced unequal treatment, anti-Chinese sentiments, and discriminatory behaviour in areas such as housing, employment, and social interactions (Lee et al., 2017).

Otherness is closely linked to the work of identity. People identify themselves in contrast to others. Here I use the term, otherness, as the characteristics of others defined by Staszak (2004): Other is defined as a "member of a dominated outgroup, whose identity is considered lacking and who may be subject to discrimination by the in-group" (p.1). Asian migrant identity only surfaces in discourses when non-Asians differentiate themselves from Asians, also conversely, Asian migrants differentiate themselves from non-Asians.

Otherness is distinct from mere difference. As Stazak (2004) states difference is the fact while otherness is how we use the difference in contexts, such as identifying Asians when talking about imminent social issues of a housing crisis can affect Asians within Aotearoa NZ. The other exists when there is a claim of self. So, otherness is when one claims one's identity in a conversation with others. The conversation is not just literal verbal dialogue exchanged. Othering conversations can be any form of exchange of information or responses to social narratives via news articles or regulations (e.g., Adida et al., 2022).

Sense of belonging

The feeling of otherness results in/from a lack of sense of belonging. Anthias (2006) states that a sensitivity to belonging emerges to the surface when one experiences exclusion. Anthias (2006) elaborates that belonging extends beyond mere membership, encompassing a sense of connection forged through emotional and social bonds within a specific social environment, shaped by practices and experiences. To that point, it can be argued that many migrants may lack a sense of belonging. Such an argument is found in an Australian English teacher's narrative of otherness (Illesca, 2003): The author states that her mother who could not speak English has no status in Australia, like many women of colour. The study highlights the complex reality of living as 'the other', noting that acceptance by locals often depends on whether individuals are perceived to think, act, and speak like them.

In their study on racial discrimination and stigmatisation experienced by Asian communities in Aotearoa NZ during the COVID-19 pandemic, Liu et al. (2023) conclude that "living in a world with COVID-19 has brought racism to the surface against Asians" (p. 2714). Similarly, Kim et al. (2024) report lived experiences that highlight incidents of anti-Asian racism during the global pandemic. These experiences of racism are closely linked to a diminished sense of belonging among Asian individuals in Aotearoa NZ (Park et al., 2023). These experiences also led participants to downplay or conceal their ethnic identities in an effort to avoid being stereotyped or targeted as carriers of the virus. This resulted in a form of self-distancing from their ethnic identity and diminished sense of belonging, used as a protective strategy (Park et al., 2023). This, on the other hand, reflects a strong desire to gain sense of belonging in the dominant society.

Radford (2016) investigates the multicultural encounters between new visible migrants and long-term residents noting everyday otherness, and yet the author argues for the recognition of the sameness of another by saying "if there is such a thing as 'everyday otherness'··· then there is also such a thing as 'everyday sameness'" (Radford, 2016, pp. 2140-2141). The author argues for the focus on sameness rather than otherness.

The attempt to gain sameness for migrants to gain a sense of belonging is theorised by Hayes' (2015) self-policing practices: Hayes (2015) claims that lifestyle migrants engage in self-policing practices in the effort to diminish their negative racialised identity, from a desire for a sense of belonging. Similarly, Pio and Essers (2014) argue that professional migrant women decentre otherness they feel by utilising the agency and articulation of their voices.

Narrative autoethnography

Said (1987) and, consequently in Aotearoa NZ, Smith (2021) raised a seminal inquiry about what is research and how colonised views are perpetuated in the academic world that shapes and reshapes the knowledge by the perspectives of the main society. Reflecting on the seminal work of Said's (1987) orientalism and Smith's (2021) decolonising methodologies, this paper starts with the thought of how mainstream society defines *the others* within the power it is inherently holding. For minority groups within a society, being understood and represented solely through the voices of the mainstream cannot be free from its limitations—an understanding that is often imagined, rather than based on the lived realities of these communities. Acknowledging this power imbalance and the limitations it imposes; this paper aims to present the voices within these minority groups. By providing a platform for *our* (the others') narratives and perspectives, this research seeks to challenge and disrupt the colonial idea of the division, of us vs. them.

In response to this inquiry, the study I present here is both my stories and our stories—narratives that may differ from those of the dominant majority—told through the lens of narrative autoethnography. Berger (2001), drawing on Angrosino (1998), defines narrative autoethnography as the researcher's account of their experiences with a particular group during fieldwork. Adopting Berger's (2001) perspective, this paper presents my experiences as an Asian woman migrant, as reflected in and through the shared narratives of the Asian women who participated in my doctoral research.

This method embraces the researcher's subjectivity, moving beyond a simple retelling of others' stories (Chang, 2016). My own experiences are brought to life through the narratives of my participants. Prior to gathering stories from the participants, ethical approval was obtained from the research ethics committee (EDU103/12). Participants provided informed consent, acknowledging that transcripts from their interviews and personal accounts may be included in the thesis and any resulting publications, with the understanding that all quotations and their identities would remain anonymous.

In this context, narrative autoethnography recognises that the experiences of both researcher and participants form a "shared subjectivity" (Angrosino, 1998, p. 265, as cited in Berger, 2001). Thus, the methodology foregrounds the shifting nature of the self and offers a way to articulate lived experiences within a broader social context (Coia & Taylor, 2005; Hamilton et al., 2008). On the other side of coins, my stories also are part of our stories. Similarly, in the examination of three different types of narrative, self-study and autoethnography, Hamilton, Smith, and Worthington (2008) argue that autoethnography focuses on one's experiences and stories in the cultural context research design. I am utilising the recounts of others, my participants' stories—relations between my experiences and the recalled stories of my participants (Windhorst, 2016). Their stories recounted during my experienced feeling provided me some sorts of legitimacy and confirmation through populating my personal experience.

Asian women migrants and me as participants

Six Asian women migrants were invited to participate in my doctoral research, which focused on understanding their identity negotiation processes as language learners. The participants included two women from South Korea, two from China, one from India, and one from Japan. At the time of data collection, their durations of residence in Aotearoa NZ ranged from a few years to several decades. All participants were also mothers. As the researcher, I also shared many of the identities the participants held within the context of Aotearoa NZ. The study employed a narrative inquiry approach, and over a twelve-month period—from February 2013 to March 2014—we, the participants and I, shared and explored our experiences of living as Asian migrant women.

Background

The outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in an Asian country captured global attention, with media narratives fixating on its lethality and rapid spread. In Aotearoa NZ, despite its geographic isolation in the far south, this distant crisis intensified local anxieties, swiftly linking the virus to Asian ethnicity and amplifying racialised stereotypes. As an Asian woman migrant, the association of the virus's origin with Asia became an additional marker of otherness, further intensifying the sense of alienation I had already experienced within Aotearoa NZ's socio-cultural landscape. Through this autoethnography, I reflect on my personal encounters with these dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic, interwoven with the stories of other Asian women migrants I researched for my doctoral thesis. These narratives, both individual and collective, reveal the enduring impact of racialised othering and the questions that linger post-pandemic.

The stories of my feelings of otherness during the global pandemic in Aotearoa NZ capture not only my voice but also the collective voices of Asian women migrants navigating a time of uncertainty. Writing from and within this personal experience of otherness becomes, as Tsalach (2013) puts it, "a demonstration of power and a site for critical investigation" (p. 77).

Russell (1999) argues that "autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations" (p. 7), highlighting how such narratives challenge dominant frameworks. Tsalach (2013) further asserts that speaking about these moments of otherness as a form of epistemic erasure reveals how knowledge is always an assertion of ideology—reminding us of what is unknowable, what has been erased, and how that erasure occurs.

Framed within the theme of otherness in Aotearoa NZ, I revisit both my own experiences and those of my participants—stories that were often silenced or voluntarily left unspoken in response to the dominant narratives of mainstream society during the time of the global pandemic. Using Braun and Clarke (2006)'s thematic analysis approach, the following themes were identified and are presented below.

Findings

I once worked in an office where the few women (fewer than five) across six teams were obliged to serve coffee every morning—not only to senior staff, but also to colleagues and even junior male employees. My very timid objection (as a young female employee without full legitimacy, having been hired through special recruitment) was not well received. This experience marked a moment of realisation for me: despite the country's democratic systems, a deeply saturated patriarchal social structure still prevailed. In that environment, women—regardless of age or status—silently accepted this practice as normative, often framing it in terms of noble virtue, as though it were an inherent trait of being female.

I remember this ritual lasting far longer than I would have imagined. Over time, female managers slowly opted out of the expectation, some male juniors began to take on the coffee-serving role, and eventually the practice became adapted to fit each team's needs and preferences.

The lingering feeling of *not-rightness* quietly pushed me to seek emotional refuge. I found some sense of belonging among a group of friends—foreign English language teachers in South Korea—who also saw themselves as outsiders. Within this group, there seemed to be fewer expectations surrounding appropriate female conducts. They embraced diverse ways of living; for example, I had friends in same-sex relationships at a time when such sexual orientations were largely unrecognised, even condemned, in South Korea. We were all outsiders, lacking a sense of belonging to mainstream society. Yet, this refuge was also temporary, as the group constantly changed due to the short-term nature of their contracts.

Now, as an Asian migrant living in Aotearoa NZ, I find that my sense of belonging—or lack thereof—is not so different from what I experienced in South Korea. The feeling of otherness has been further heightened in recent years, particularly during the global pandemic and the periods of lockdown and border closures. During this time, I felt an intensified absence of emotional refuge—places or people through whom I could regain a sense of belonging or affirmation that my experiences were shared.

In these moments, I turned inward, reflecting not only on my past but also on the stories of others. There were ongoing conversations between my present emotions during the lockdown and the memories of my past, intertwined with the stories

of my research participants—Asian women migrants whose experiences mirrored my own. In other word, the internal dialogues I had—arguments and counterarguments seeking emotional confirmation—often echoed the stories of my participants. Both they and I were Asian women living as outsiders in a Pākehā-Māori world, navigating the complexities of identities and belonging in the bicultural nation, Aotearoa NZ.

Thus, my personal experiences during the global pandemic were continuously shaped and reshaped by the resonances of their stories. In what follows, I attempt to summarise the complex telling and retelling of these lived experiences.

I have no home

> *A jogger is coming towards my way. I kind of know the person and I can sense that he dislikes me. I can feel the tension, negative energy against my being. Again, I ignore the gaze and distance myself." "I am here. And sorry, I can't leave." [Jinah during the pandemic]*

> *I came to New Zealand in June 1996... One day, when I walk from [the institute] back to home. Two young girls saying something, not too good to me···. Now I have been here for 17 years. I finished my English, got a diploma in international management. I could not find any job··· couldn't find even a cleaning job. [First Interview with Holly]*

Both excerpts express a deep sense of otherness and displacement experienced by Asian women migrants. During the global pandemic—particularly in the early stages when news of a new and deadly virus emerged—I felt unwelcome, simply because I looked Asian. Soon after, the borders were closed, and no one was allowed to freely leave or return *home*. Yet for me, home—Aotearoa NZ—did not offer the safety or security I needed to feel accepted for who I am. The sense of being stuck, and of not truly belonging anywhere, echoed strongly in Holly's story. The interview was held in 2013. As seen in the excerpt, Holly who migrated from China did not elaborate the details of the trivial incident of being alienated by the passers-by. However, I remember the image of her being a little Asian woman walking in the dark, which was my imagination when I was listening to her story—being scared and being helpless and being regarded as a foreigner by the young New Zealanders. This word, foreigner, signals that we, foreigners do not belong here and then there.

The image I was portraying from her story may have been me: the image of me being in the dark in the middle of a foreign land who is shrinking to a non-existence, who is saturated with fear and sadness. Obviously, the passers-by were described as young girls whom, in normal situations, we, as mature women, would not be guarded against. This was not a significant story to be included in my thesis back then. However, I revisited the image many times in the time of feeling othered: during a conversation with colleagues, while listening to a national news about the virus sweeping through many countries and the fatality of the virus.

Holly continued saying that she lacked a sense of belonging to the main society in Aotearoa NZ. She mentioned that she was living in Aotearoa NZ for nearly 17 years (back in 2013), and she worked towards what she understood was desirable to the mainstream society: she took English language courses and acquired a local qualification. However, she did not feel like she belonged as a kiwi—she was still a foreigner. And I find myself feeling the same, time and again.

Am I a troublemaker?

> *The unexpected stop by of the managers puzzled me even after a few days. I could sense that there was an agenda for them to nicely tell me off. Some colleagues may have felt uncomfortable about what I had said.··· silenced, silenced and be silent" [Jinah during the pandemic]*

> *One day, one son (one of two) came home with excitement telling me 'Mum, mum, boys tell me I am a silly boy.' My boys were 6 and 8. ··· "Don't you know what silly means?" "No" he was just happy. ··· When we were watching boys coming out of the school, we saw that one Kiwi boy was pushing one of my sons. [First Interview with Mia]*

The global news about the fatal virus brought fear—not only to society at large, but also to me. Like many others, I tried to make sense of the unfolding situation in the best way I could. However, articulating my understanding often seemed to heighten the discomfort of others. A dominant narrative quickly took hold, leaving little to no room for diverse perspectives or ways of being. Any narrative that slightly diverged from the mainstream was quickly labelled a *conspiracy theory*. Compliance became mandatory—spoken or unspoken—and those who didn't confirm were effectively told they didn't belong. As I mentioned earlier, I had no home to return to, so I suppressed my own understanding. I learned to stay silent, clinging to the thinnest thread of belonging. The fear of having done something terrible to others—and the fear of nowhere to go because I had disrupted the calm yet forceful dominant discourse—reminded me of Mia's recounts.

Mia's recount, as seen in the excerpt, goes beyond that. Her story became more complex, involving both parents and the school. However, Mia chose not to share the rest of it as data. This is no longer just about the story itself—it is about the act

of censorship, a process in which we, as Asian migrants, are often complicit. We both recognised it as a story that *shouldn't have happened,* and one that perhaps *should be forgotten.*

A similar story surfaced when I felt like a troublemaker, as reflected in my earlier recount. Mia, who volunteered at an early childhood centre, once washed a child who was covered in mud—an act she did instinctively, without a second thought. However, what she considered a caring and professional response, grounded in her experience as a qualified early childhood educator in her home country, was interpreted very differently in Aotearoa NZ. As a volunteer in a new context, her action was deemed a serious misconduct and even a potential case of child abuse.

Mia's comment about her fear of deportation underscores both her profound sense of alienation and the consequent pressure to self-censor. Like many migrants, she found herself needing to prove that she could be a *good New Zealander*—not one of those perceived by mainstream society as uneducated or uncivilised, a troublemaker. Ultimately, Mia left that story behind and instead focused on becoming a good citizen through community services and by working as an unregistered ECE worker—within the boundaries that the dominant system allowed her to exist. Like Mia, I too learned to stay silent.

I am different!

> *Oh, I am not from China. I am from South Korea···. Yes, I know. ··· But the Korean government are very proactive. They don't do anything like full lockdown. [Jinah during the pandemic].*

> *I don't know because I'm a bit tired of making new friends. I feel like I probably get old, just comfortable with friends I have already made. ... Yes, my mother-in-law helped me but it's not the same. Because she doesn't know how to do it in the Korean way. [Fifth interview with Jessica]*

The sense of being outsiders—the feeling of unwelcome—intensifies when we, as Asian migrants, become subject to negative narratives tied to a particular nation or race. This was especially amplified by the U.S. president's use of the term *China virus*. I recall a phone conversation with a property owner in my neighbourhood that made this internal division painfully clear. In that moment, I found myself distancing from the broader *we*. I reassured her that I was from South Korea—not China, the country she had expressed strong dislike for. My words carried a subtle but clear hope: that by stating my origin, I might be viewed differently—perhaps more favourably—than migrant groups who are marked as unwelcome. It was a moment when I distanced myself from *us* to find safety in being a different kind of other.

I actively participated in the act of othering—distancing myself from others—in order to claim a sense of legitimacy and a voice for my existence. At the beginning of the pandemic, the overwhelming sense of isolation as a mother of two consumed me. There was no one I felt I could turn to for help. That loneliness became even more acute after a minor surgery, when I was advised to have someone with me at home. Instead, I returned to an empty house—my children were staying with their father, and I was alone.

Like Jessica's story, I grieved the absence of people to lean on. Yet, just as she described, I also didn't actively seek support. I was simply too tired to build new friendships. Beneath that exhaustion was a deeper feeling—an ongoing sense of not being accepted for who I am. It left me drained, with little energy to reach out or connect.

I have a voice!

> *... despite years of living in NZ, I am still perceived as "other" by New Zealanders. ... with my resistant thoughts and questions to give voices to others to continue this ongoing dialogue. [Jinah at the beginning of this manuscript]*

> *Because we want to give them the best education. If our children are not studying well then it is not nice. What is the point in coming here? That is what I feel. That is why, and then I think, kids need some help. ... Yes, I mean for them that are alright, not everybody wants to go into universities, here. For us it is important, coming from the countries you know you should be educated well, academically. [Seventh interview with Simi]*

Through this manuscript, I give voice to my experiences—to make sense of my surroundings and to invite others to understand *me and us*—Asian women migrants living in Aotearoa NZ. It is a loud cry to be heard, even while being silent. The doctoral research I conducted in 2012 created a space for the Asian women migrants to voice their experiences—allowing others to understand their decision-making, which often differs from mainstream discourses. One recount that particularly resonates is Simi's decision to move to Aotearoa NZ. Her migration journey was primarily driven by her and her husband's desire to provide a better future for their children—a motivation echoed in the stories of all other participants. Lucy, for example, was married to a Kiwi and moved to Aotearoa NZ when they had a child. Even after her husband left for overseas, she chose to stay and raise her son, prioritising his well-being and education.

The experiences shared by participants highlight a common theme: decisions rooted in care and long-term aspirations for their children which are not always understood or valued by the wider society. As Simi noted, particularly in Western contexts,

the sacrifices parents make—such as relinquishing comfortable lifestyles and professional advancement for the sake of their children's futures—are often overlooked and undervalued.

This theme—of being a parent willing to forgo stability for the perceived benefit of their children—has echoed throughout my own existence in Aotearoa NZ. It has become, at the very least, a comfortable explanation I offer when questioned about my decision to remain here. Just as the doctoral research project gave fellow Asian women migrants, including myself, a space to voice our experiences, this manuscript too serves as a way for me to speak up—to give shape and meaning to my experiences during the global pandemic.

Discussions and conclusion

Reflecting on my experiences during the global pandemic—through internal dialogues with fellow Asian women migrants who participated in my doctoral research—reveals recurring feelings of unbelonging, of being seen as troublemakers, and, at the same time, of asserting our difference in order to grasp any available sense of belonging. It is a quiet yet persistent act of voicing our lived realities—to be heard and to be understood.

As highlighted in the last two themes, there is evidence of active agency in developing a resistant sense of self—what Olivier (2019) describes as decolonising the self. This resistance operates within a constant negotiation between binaries—such as us and them—guided only by the shifting light of a symbolic *lighthouse*: the temporary and situational cues that offer a glimpse of belonging. This aligns with Hayes' (2015) concept of self-policing, wherein individuals strive to become *desirable citizens* by internalising dominant ideals—accepting what is socially rewarded but distancing themselves from what is deemed undesirable.

This negotiation inevitably involves acts of othering. As Balibar (2007) and Nelson & Dunn (2017) argue, othering is both deeply local and simultaneously ubiquitous. The findings indicate that we, as migrants, are constantly navigating this terrain—choosing to be in or out—engaging in daily acts of othering as a means of asserting agency and seeking belonging. Yet, this also implies that there is no single and complete space where we can fully exist as our whole selves: Korean, Asian, and Aotearoa New Zealander. Our ethnic and racial identities, often assumed to be stable, are in fact fragile and situational—socially constructed and continuously shifting.

Furthermore, the findings suggests that our everyday lives are characterised by an ongoing tension between otherness and sameness. These negotiations—though deeply personal and localised—are often shaped and intensified by global forces that amplify dichotomies of inclusion and exclusion. Recognising these dynamics has important implications for policy and practice. Understanding how individuals navigate these tensions can inform more culturally responsive community initiatives and guide policies aimed at promoting social cohesion, equity, and belonging in increasingly diverse communities.

As highlighted, during the pandemic, this tension became even more pronounced. One dominant narrative was elevated, while others were dismissed or condemned. The distinction between us and them intensified, fuelling division and diminishing tolerance for difference. Othering, in this context, became not just a social process but a tool for legitimising exclusionary narratives and actions. And yet, as this paper illustrates, we are all others in different contexts. Perhaps now more than ever, it is time to recognise this shared condition—and to begin seeking sameness within otherness.

For instance, cultural celebrations that are intended to uplift and give voice to underrepresented groups can inadvertently reinforce division—further separating us from them. Yet, when approached inclusively, such events can also foster a sense of shared humanity and connection among diverse groups. This raises a critical question for all of us—migrants, host communities, and policymakers alike: How can we celebrate diversity while also fostering a sense of shared belonging across differences? This may include dialogue and even policies that also help identify and emphasise similarities across different groups, while fostering understanding of their differences.

This study offers a significant contribution to the understanding of how social identity, power relations, and the politics of belonging operate within the lived experiences of Asian women migrants in Aotearoa NZ. By centring the voices and reflections of these women—including my own—the study highlights the often-unseen challenges of balancing different cultural expectations and finding a place within a society where differences in background and identity can shape how one is received and understood. Through personal narratives situated in a global crisis, this research reveals how these women respond to dominant discourses, not only through acts of resistance and self-censorship but also through complex forms of adaptation and agency.

It calls for a re-examination of dominant national and cultural narratives that sustain structures of exclusion, questioning whose voices are heard, whose experiences are validated, and whose are erased. As a qualitative research tool, the autoethnographic method can yield meaningful insights into the lives of those whose experiences are often erased, as well as capture the complex ways in which individuals position themselves in the world. In doing so, it supports a deeper understanding of society's complexities and advocates for the development of more inclusive social and policy frameworks—ones that move beyond tokenistic celebrations of diversity to genuinely honour the nuanced, plural, and evolving experiences of migrant communities. Ultimately, this study invites a broader societal reflection on how we might embrace difference not as a threat, but as a foundation for deeper connection, shared understanding, and equitable belonging.

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Statement on AI Usage

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were utilised in the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, OpenAI's ChatGPT and Perplexity were employed to assist with grammar correction, paraphrasing for clarity, and suggesting improvements to the overall flow of the text. All AI-assisted content was carefully reviewed and verified by the authors to ensure accuracy and originality. No AI tools were used for the generation or analysis of research data.

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