Anti-Asian Racism: “It Doesn’t Feel ‘Random’ to Me”

By Daisy Han

I feel my grandmother’s fingers combing through my hair, just as they did when I was a child and she was getting me ready for school. I didn’t think it would be possible to feel this again, given the ongoing global pandemic, which included the birth of my baby in September 2020. And yet, after a 15-hour flight to Korea with a rambunctious 17-month-old, followed by 10 days of quarantine and 4 PCR tests, my grandmother and I are reunited.

Surprisingly, it feels like no time has passed. We sing Korean children’s folk songs together (though this time to my baby, Alden), she insists I eat more food, and she does my hair.

When I was a child, my 할머니 (halmeoni, “grandma”) would transform my bedhead into an art piece almost daily, sometimes even using scissors to cut bits and pieces to meet her meticulous standards. I was in awe of her commitment and would happily sit at her feet for an hour or longer as her fingers rhythmically massaged my scalp. I was proud of the care and time she invested in me; I felt deeply loved.

Now, at 94, she’s not able to braid with the same intricate detail she once did so effortlessly. She attempts a double French braid but pivots midway to a single braid. “Do you want me to do a French braid?” she asks me for the fourth time in a row, a sign of her dementia. “Yes, please!” I say as enthusiastically as I can, as if it’s the first time, though likely it will not be the last.

As our limited time together passes, chunks of my hair fall out of the loose braid. I pin it up. More falls out. I add another hair tie. I tuck it behind my ears. By the time we need to say goodbye, more hair is out of the braid than in. But even as I lie in bed that night to go to sleep, I can’t bear to take out the elastic that she originally put in place. I let the braid hang, draped over my pillow, my grandmother’s love.

Alden will likely never have memories of her great-grandmother caressing her hair, but she will know her love and she will know her stories. She will have videos and pictures of her silly, brilliant, and strong 할머니 (jeungjo halmeoni, “great-grandmother”), who grew up during the Japanese occupation in Korea. Who speaks three languages fluently and a fourth conversationally. Who sold rice cakes on the streets of Seoul in the aftermath of colonialist war. Who painfully witnessed friends and neighbors kidnapped into sex slavery to be “comfort women” for Japanese soldiers. Who raised three children, often as a single mother, when her husband was away at war or work. Who immigrated to the United States so that her children could get an education. Who never drove but knew the directions to anywhere in the Bay Area. Who loved the McDonald’s Filet-O-Fish sandwich. Who braided my hair each day with so much love. Who no longer remembers many of her own stories but whose stories deserve to be remembered.
In January 2022, when my partner and I weighed the pros and cons of traveling to Korea, we hoped that this opportunity for Alden to be immersed in her Korean culture, learning her native language on her ancestral lands, would be a positive one. We had no idea it would be a transformative experience for all of us.

Almost as soon as we landed at Incheon International Airport, I felt my breath change. I deepened my inhale and exhale from my diaphragm. The sight of 100 percent masked faces that looked like mine gave me a sense of safety I hadn’t even realized I had been craving. In the United States, I had felt ready for a fight, on guard, prepared for my Asianness to be blamed for causing COVID-19. In our hometown, in Austin, TX, the day before we left, a white man had stopped his car alongside me and my dog to scream out of his window: “You’re a fucking idiot for wearing a mask.”

And I know it could have been worse.

• An unnamed 67-year-old woman of Asian descent was punched 125 times in New York City on March 11, 2022.
• Julia Li was murdered while driving in St. Paul, MN, on February 16, 2022.
• Christina Yuna Lee was murdered after being followed into her New York City apartment on February 13, 2022.
• Michelle Alyssa Go was pushed to her death off a train platform on January 15, 2022.
• Six Asian women were murdered at work in Atlanta, GA, on March 16, 2021.

I believe none of these tragedies, or the many other violent attacks against Asian people, are random. Author Min Jin Lee describes anti-Asian violence succinctly: “It doesn’t feel ‘random’ to me. I never take off my race, gender, and the stereotypes others put on me.” Putting the extraordinary burden of proof on the attacked/deceased for racist intent & accepting the statements of the attacker or police compounds our devastation and fear” (Lee, 2022).

Sadly, this is part of a broader American tradition: hate crimes, and fear of hate crimes, are a fact of life for far too many Black, Indigenous, LGBTQ+, Muslim, and Jewish people, and people living without housing, among others. Because my American identity is as strong as my Korean identity, I find this particularly painful and even embarrassing. It is something we cannot abide. And at this moment, I am scared for myself and my daughter.
While my daughter is not yet 2 years old, as a Montessori teacher, I have been carefully planning her entry into school for the past 14 years—ever since I started my teaching career. And yet, the fear of her experiencing this heightened anti-Asian racism, coupled with the fear of her contracting COVID, made it impossible for me to send her to school in good conscience. In fact, even a doubling of my anti-anxiety medication, I was still struggling with my mental health. I needed to be with my family. I needed to go to my mother and grandmother, to be in my motherland. I needed to breathe deeply in a society where everyone was masked in solidarity.

We spent a month in Korea. During that time, I had the incredible honor of witnessing Alden fully armed in her Korean identity. I had precious time with my grandparents that I will always cherish. I learned more stories about my family and the damaging legacy of colonization. On March 1st, I celebrated Yu Gwan-sun, a Korean independence activist who was imprisoned, tortured, and eventually killed in 1920, at age 17.

“Even if my fingernails are torn out, my nose and ears are ripped apart, and my legs and arms are crushed, this physical pain does not compare to the pain of losing my nation.” Yu Gwan-sun wrote these words in prison while being repeatedly beaten and tortured for speaking out against Japanese colonial rule (Kang, 2018).

Now having returned to the United States, I hold on to the joy and safety of being immersed in my Korean culture. I hope to live every day with the spirit of my ancestor Yu Gwan-sun in me. I carry the victims of anti-Asian hate in my heart. I hold on to my grandmother’s stories as I prepare to one day recount them to Alden while tenderly caring for her hair.

And I wonder what the future holds for my daughter. Will she too carry the heaviness of fearing for her life while standing on subway platforms, walking home, working, or wearing a mask in her own neighborhood? Will she seek refuge in her motherland just to breathe? Will she be made a target simply for reflecting the immense beauty of her great-grandmother, who sacrificed so much for her to be here? Or will we stand in solidarity against anti-Asian racism? Will Yu Gwan-sun’s fight for freedom finally be won in Alden’s lifetime because we chose courage and love over fear and hatred?

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References