

*The Silent Debate:
Asian Immigration and Racism in Canada*

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and Terry McGee, editors

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I AGREED to review this book out of a sense of duty rather than of excitement. Given my research interests, I felt I could not say no to reviewing a volume on Asians and racism in Canada. However, by the time I got to the end, I was reading with genuine excitement. I even found myself having to reconsider some of the assumptions of my research.

The Silent Debate is an important contribution to an international literature on migrations and racism. It grows out of a 1997 conference organized by UBC's Institute of Asian Research. That conference brought together scholars and policy makers from around the Pacific Rim to explore patterns in migration, local racisms, and their implications for public policy in Canada. Judging by the quality of papers published here, that conference must have been exciting. The concerns of this volume are indeed topical.

Specific contributions establish that recent migrations from Asia to Canada are only a small part of a much larger movement of people within Asia itself. Following this, many chapters move beyond the usual "push/pull" studies of international migrations. Chapters by Zeng and Zhang, Pinnawala, and Brillantes explore the policies and economic conditions shaping migrations

from China, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, respectively. Meanwhile Kassim, Hugo, and Abella look at migrations within Asia, comparing the situations of multiple countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia. These accounts establish a wider context within which to conduct debates over immigration to Canada. Kassim points out, for example, that Malaysia documented 1.6 million illegal immigrants between 1992 and 1995 (130), only part of what is believed to be a much larger movement of people. Canada's situation pales by comparison. The volume also contributes to the theory of human migrations. Skeldon's chapter on "diaspora," a must-read for scholars using the term, points out the gains and losses involved with thinking of diasporas rather than of migrations. Some of the more policy-oriented chapters, often written by key policy makers themselves, have a rather hortatory tone. For example, Tang's chapter on the immigration/settlement policies of the City of New York seems to give an all too rosy picture of that jurisdiction's treatment of illegal immigrants. However, even such chapters provide alternate policy models that can and should texture debates in Canada.

The chapters on racism are also of high quality. I was particularly interested

in Jones's chapter on Australia and Trlin, Henderson, and Pernice's chapter on New Zealand. The discourse on Asian "astronauts," the Pauline Hansen case, and so on, are all too familiar for readers in Canada. Indeed, continuities between such discourses in places like Australia and Canada cry out for further exploration. Are these artefacts of the behaviour of some Asian migrants themselves or are they the results of White supremacist nationalist imaginings common to both countries? Chapters on Canadian racism also raise important questions. Ley's chapter on the "monster homes" issue in Vancouver, the best account that I have read on the subject, successfully problematizes the political usages of allegations of racism. Other chapters examine anti-Asian immigration backlash (Simmons), multiculturalism policies (Tepper), and the experiences of Chinese migrants to Canada (Woo). Adam-Moodley develops an argument for linking efforts at anti-racist education to a broader political and social literacy. Indeed, so strong are many of these contributions that I found myself copying their references and looking up the authors' publications, adding further to that list of "things I should read." (I knew I should have said no!)

However, for all of *The Silent Debate's* textured exploration of Asian migrations and racisms, it does not really succeed in linking the two. There are several reasons for this failure. First, it is not entirely clear that anti-Asian racism in Canada is caused by the arrival of newcomers from Asia. Such racism may well have more to do with how that migration has been publicly represented than with its scale. Indeed, this racism may be enacted through such representation. Recent moral panics over "illegal

refugees," an oxymoron if there ever was one, seem to stem more from columnists for the *National Post* than from people living in close contact with newcomers. A significant literature on anti-racism suggests that racisms have more to do with creating exclusions than with the existence of difference per se. Thus, the prevailing wisdom that migrations need to be controlled so as to mitigate backlash in receiving populations remains to be demonstrated. Indeed, several contributors to this volume point out that public opinion polling has consistently indicated that 15 per cent to 20 per cent of the Canadian population are deeply prejudiced – a figure that has remained remarkably stable as levels of immigration have changed over the years.

Second, with the exception of Woo's chapter on business-class Chinese immigrants in Vancouver, the voices and experiences of Asian migrants themselves tend to be missing from this volume. In part, this reflects the disciplinary background of the contributors to the volume – demographers, human geographers, and urban planners. Pages are filled with presentations of so-called "hard data," charts, census figures, and quotes from policies. But when it comes to the study of racism, engaging the experiences of those subject to exclusion is key.

Third, with the exception of citing some opinion poll data, most of *The Silent Debate's* claims about popular racism in Canada are unsupported. Part of the problem here is that many scholars, and here I include myself, see their formal research as divorced from their lives. While we may have witnessed, or even been targeted by, expressions of popular racisms, we have often not documented such things. The result is that the most germane of issues can exist as little more than

urban legends in even the most critical scholarship. What the dimensions of popular anti-Asian racisms in Canada really are is a question that this volume does not answer.

Fourth, longer-term historical perspectives are missing from this volume. None of the things discussed here, Asian migrations or Canadian racisms, is particularly new. Issues of multicultural diversity, especially on the West Coast, were confronted long before UBC even existed. More than one student of history has been struck by the parallels between contemporary send-them-back-no-matter-what discourses about Chinese boat people and newspaper reactions to the 1914 *Komagata Maru* incident, for example. Such perspectives might have drawn attention to the longer-term structures at work

and might also have shifted policy discussions. However, I suspect that this omission may have more to do with the unwillingness of historians to engage in contemporary policy-oriented discussions than it does with any failures on the part of the organizers of the volume.

In the end, these weaknesses show this volume's strength. They point to gaps within current research rather than to failings on the part of the contributors to, and organizers of, this book. Like all good scholarship, *The Silent Debate* points to the limits of existing knowledge and highlights areas for further exploration. This, in the end, may be its most important contribution. I hope that scholars in multiple fields will approach it with a sense of excitement rather than duty.