

Painting the Maple:
Essays on Race, Gender, and the Construction of Canada

Veronica Strong-Boag, Sherrill Grace,
Avigail Eisenberg, and Joan Anderson, editors

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AT FIRST GLANCE, the editors' disciplines (listed on the back cover of *Painting the Maple*) – Women's Studies, English, Political Science, and Nursing – don't seem to have much in common. However, shared preoccupations and assumptions link the diverse essays collected here in a genuinely interdisciplinary enterprise. The focus is the primary role of language, or symbolic systems, in constructing social relations and perceptions of reality. Canada, the contributors insist, is a linguistic entity, a text to be read for what it reveals about the historical asymmetries of power that have shaped its present outlines; it is also a text in process, never closed or finished, susceptible to rewriting.

Such is certainly the emphasis, for example, of Christl Verduyn's essay about the emergence of major writers of Colour Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, and Marlene Nourbese-Philip ("Reconstructing Canadian Literature"); their presence on the Canadian literary scene has reshaped not only the literary field, but also the critical and conceptual paradigms through which scholars and teachers map that field. Ideas about confronting nature, the rugged North, and the experience of isolation – once thought to identify the distinctive national flavour of Canadian writing – must now be reconsidered and enlarged to reflect

the mainly urban and extra-national focus of these writers, for whom identity is often (painfully or productively) hyphenated, the meaning of home fractured, and the geography non-Canadian. In turn, reading these writers enables us to recognize the racial and cultural specificity of "unhyphenated" Canadian identities.

Verduyn's emphasis on the need to examine our working definitions in order to construct more accurate models of the nation is characteristic of the essays in the collection. While Verduyn's scope is national, if Toronto-centred, many of the articles in the collection have a BC focus. Isabel Dyck's essay on health-care delivery ("Methodology on the Line") presents two Vancouver case studies of the particular needs of Indo-Canadian and Chinese-Canadian women. Gabi Helms and Sherrill Grace ("Documenting Racism") examine the hybrid dramatic form of Sharon Pollock's *The Komagata Maru Incident*, a documentary play about a ship, carrying immigrants from India, that was denied entry to Vancouver in the summer of 1914. Yasmeen Abu-Laban demonstrates how Canada's post-1967 immigration policy, though turning decisively from the overt racism of earlier legislation, remains structured by hierarchies of race, gender, and class in its emphasis on education and

skills. Her argument is of particular relevance for British Columbia, where the recent arrival of boatloads of refugee claimants from Fujian Province, China, has revealed the ferocity of racial tensions in the province. Lisa Chalykoff's "Encountering Anomalies" focuses on the experiences of Chinese immigrants to British Columbia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, emphasizing how those Chinese workers who planned to return to China have been written out of the Canadian historical record. All of the essayists in the collection seek to make connections between their particular subjects – a television program, news coverage, the dichotomy between collectivism and individualism – and the broad cultural questions that inform discussions of Canada's past and its future.

The ability to write accessibly for scholars outside of one's discipline would seem a necessary prerequisite for interdisciplinarity; in general, these articles are remarkably successful in making their object of inquiry "thinkable" (Helms, James, and Rodney, 264) across disciplinary boundaries. There are, however, a few exceptions. To get at Dyck's interesting analysis of cultural difference in health-care research, one must first slog through an overly ambitious and ponderous survey of theoretical perspectives on difference. Jo-Anne Lee and Linda Cardinal's able article on national feminist organizations also over-emphasizes the theoretical discussion of such concepts as hegemony, while scanting the particular case studies that should have anchored the discussion. Most impressive and engaging are those essays that employ the

insights of postcolonial, feminist, and anti-racist theory without the use of obfuscating jargon. For example, Strong-Boag's analytical biography of Pauline Johnson ("A Red Girl's Reasoning") combines cultural criticism and a richly contextualized historical narrative to present a balanced, insightful, and eminently readable essay. Linda Warley's examination of the television series *North of 60*, which she reads as a forum for national "consciousness raising" and productive "self-scrutiny" (173), is a wonderful contribution to the collection in its scope, clarity, and elegance. Becki Ross and Yasmin Jiواني have also done fine work in presenting complex material clearly and cogently.

Although I have no hesitation in recommending this anthology as a valuable resource, I register one disappointment. While the introduction claims that the collection aims not only to examine Canada's past and present, but also "to repaint the maple, to tell new stories, and to reimagine Canada" (4), it largely fails to deliver on this bold and intriguing promise. In a few cases, I suspect that the exclusive concentration on ways Canada has failed to realize its multicultural and democratic ideals may have prevented authors from seeing "what Canadians do differently and do well" (Warley, 176) and, therefore, from creating positive blueprints for the future. In response to this objection, the editors might well argue that it is necessary to strip the maple of its false glitter before new colours can be applied. Perhaps this volume should be followed by a second, future-focused collection.