

# REFRACTING PACIFIC CANADA: *Seeing Our Uncommon Past*

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The year 2008 is the 150th anniversary of the founding of British Columbia as a Crown colony. It is also the 150th anniversary of the arrival of three Chinese merchants from San Francisco, marking the first permanent settlement of Chinese in what is now British Columbia. That these two anniversaries are coincident, and indeed connected, should not come as a surprise. From the earliest moments of colonial British Columbia, Chinese migrants arrived alongside Scots and English and Quebecois and other trans-Atlantic migrants, as well as Native Hawaiians and other migrants from the Pacific region, and all engaged with First Nations peoples.<sup>1</sup> In 1788, Chinese carpenters and labourers encountered Nuu-chah-nulth peoples as they helped build a trading post led by Captain John Meares in Nootka Sound. For most Canadians today, the fact that people of Chinese descent have been in British Columbia as long as have people of British descent is probably a curiosity at best. However, there are historical consequences to this coincidence, which we have yet to fully work out.

The first consequence to note is that Canada is as much a Pacific-oriented as it is an Atlantic-oriented nation. And this refers not just to British Columbia and “Western Canada” but also to Canada as a nation built out of a colonial past. I have used the phrase “Pacific Canada” to name this oceanic orientation and history. “Pacific Canada” is not a geographic designation, replacing “Western Canada.” Pacific Canada is a perspective on our past, a way to refract our history not

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<sup>1</sup> The hybrid nature of British Columbia’s colonial past has been well documented by scholars such as Jean Barman, Sylvia Van Kirk, and Robin Fisher. For more on Native Hawaiians in British Columbia and on the Pacific Coast, see Jean Barman and Bruce Watson, *Leaving Paradise: Indigenous Hawaiians in the Pacific Northwest, 1787–1898* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006).

solely through the prism of trans-Atlantic migration and settlement. The year 1867 brought together many colonies and transformed them into a new nation. And yet an Atlantic-centred national history tends to give primacy to a colonial past that centres on Atlantic Canada, in particular the colonies that turned into Ontario and Quebec. This particular approach to the past favours some genealogies more than others, displacing First Nations peoples at the same time that it erases our Pacific past.

My UBC colleague Christopher Lee suggested the metaphor of refraction when we were attempting to capture what it might be like to rethink the history of British Columbia and Canada through a series of anniversaries significant to Asian migrants. We thought of refraction as a way of seeing the distinctive elements of our “uncommon past.” There are many ways to understand our shared “common past” and also to understand our *uncommon* past – that which we do not share. I would also use the phrase “uncommon past” to describe those elements of the past that are less common, in the sense of rarely remembered, ignored, or erased, but also uncommon in terms of being unique, different, or not assimilated into a common narrative. The metaphor of the past as a “commons,” a public space to be shared by all, is an ideal; however, if we are to aspire to it in this nation, we have some distance to go before we achieve it. Often, metaphors of a common past in the United States and Canada end up centring upon white settlement, following trans-Atlantic migrants as they move westwards and build colonies on First Nations land, only bringing into the story other historical actors as they are encountered by Europeans. Our uncommon past, in contrast, might be made up of those elements of our history left out or excluded, sometimes lost amidst the blinding light of narratives focused upon the British and the French, but sometimes also just ignored for not being considered interesting unless they involve interactions with European settlement.

For instance, what would it be like to take events such as the anti-Asian riots that rocked Vancouver and Bellingham in September 1907 and see them refracted through the perspectives of the Chinese, Japanese, and South Asians who were their targets rather than simply trying to understand the motivations of the rioters? Last year, amidst a number of events marking the one hundredth anniversary of the 1907 riots, one of my students, Woan-Jen Wang, did precisely that, finding Chinese-language newspapers that discussed what was happening in the streets and in Vancouver in the months before the riots. Not sur-



*To the Far East.* A brochure published in 1936; Artist: Maurice Logan. Canadian Pacific Railway Archives, A15381.

prisingly, they offered a very different view than did English-language newspapers.

As an example, writings in English tended to naturalize the indigeneity of white labourers and settlers, as if the phrase “White Canada Forever” used by anti-Asian agitators referred not only to the future but also to the interminable past. The fact that both trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific migrants had only recently displaced First Nations peoples from their lands was erased. The Chinese noted that many of the white rioters were in fact very recent migrants to the city and that they were engaged in a violent process of driving out and replacing Chinese workers in various industries. This ran contrary to the rhetorical claims of anti-Asian agitators, who held that Asian workers threatened to take jobs away from whites.

One of the consequences of seeing the coincidence of trans-Pacific and trans-Atlantic migration 150 years ago is to understand all peoples in Canada who are not First Nations as late arrivers. One of the political effects of the white supremacist narratives that marked anti-Asian agitation was the presumption that even the most recently arrived European migrant was Canadian and belonged here and that Asians were always migrants, and always perpetually late in arriving.

One of the best ways to belie this mythology of Asians as “late arrivers” is to think of the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). School children in British Columbia are taught that the Chinese helped build the railroad, with over 15,000 arriving in the province in the 1880s to tackle the treacherous terrain of the Fraser Canyon and the Rocky Mountains. But to refract this undertaking through the prism of Pacific Canada is to realize that there were reasons why the Chinese built the railroads all up and down the west coast of North America, from California through Oregon and into British Columbia. Before the building of the railroad, it was much easier and cheaper to transport people in ships across the Pacific to the west coast of North America than it was to have them travel overland across the continent. Indeed, because of prevailing winds and currents, and before the building of the Panama Canal, it was prohibitively difficult to ship European migrants around the southern tip of South America (the most common route from Europe to the west coast of North America was that of the clipper ships, which sailed around the world the other way, coming to Vancouver and San Francisco by way of Hawaii, Hong Kong, and Yokohama).

Before trans-continental railroads were built, the overland route by wagon train across the United States was expensive, dangerous, and long

– taking months rather than the weeks taken by trans-Pacific shipping, and only possible during good weather months. The Chinese, in other words, were on the Pacific Coast in large numbers before the arrival of significant numbers of trans-Atlantic migrants. The irony of the Chinese building the railroads is that they created the very mechanism by which white labourers could arrive and take away their jobs. That we still live with the mythology of Chinese labourers as late arrivers displacing white workers, rather than the other way around, is a continuing triumph of the white supremacist history that the anti-Chinese movement created over a century ago.

So what does refracting our history through the prism of Pacific Canada look like? I hope that this special issue of *BC Studies* offers some suggestive possibilities. Historical research in Asian languages is obviously crucial, and several of the articles show how attention to sources in the languages used by trans-Pacific migrants reveals new perspectives.<sup>2</sup> Some of the articles place British Columbia in an international context, revealing how events such as the 1907 anti-Asian riots put the province into the middle of global diplomacy and how trans-Pacific migrants have long tied the province to nations and societies in Asia. We might also take inspiration from some recently published works. The transnational turn in historical scholarship has encouraged the following of migrants across national borders and back and forth in the circular networks that they often inhabited. Studies focused on the worldview of migrants, rather than on the interests of nation-states in integrating and assimilating “immigrants,” help us to understand history at different levels – local as well as global, families as well as nations.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For an example of how Asian-language sources have been used to reveal the history of the Chinese in BC, see the foundational study Harold Con, Ronald Con, Graham Johnson, Edgar Wickberg, William Willmott, editors, *From China to Canada: A History of Chinese Communities in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1982); also Wing Chung Ng, *The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945-1980: The Pursuit of Identity and Power* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000). Sociologist Peter Li and geographer David Lai have also used Chinese language sources extensively in their scholarship. There has also been a rich tradition of scholars writing in Japanese (most notably Masako Iino of Tsuda College) who have used Japanese-language sources to document the history of the Japanese in British Columbia.

<sup>3</sup> For a cogent article explaining the need to move away from nation-centred studies of migration, see Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, “Methodological Nationalism, the Social Sciences, and the Study of Migration,” *International Migration Review* 37, 3 (2003): 576-610. Research on an Atlantic world of migrations is much better developed than that on the Pacific, but we might imagine, for instance, a Pacific version of Donna Gabaccia and Franco Iacovetta, eds., *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002). For an argument that we have understudied the mass migrations of Southeast Asia and North Asia, which were as numerically large as the trans-Atlantic migrations in the nineteenth century, see Adam Mckeown, “Global Migration, 1846-1940,” *Journal of World History* June 2004 <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jwh/15.2/mckeown.html>>.

For instance, Eiichiro Azuma's *Between Two Empires* makes extensive use of Japanese-language sources to understand the complex world of Japanese migrants to the United States, allowing us to understand their fraught manoeuvring between the expanding Japanese and American empires.<sup>4</sup>

Many possibilities remain unexplored – possibilities that we hope this issue will encourage. For instance, Chinese migrants to British Columbia brought with them centuries of experience in Southeast Asia, where young migrant men often mingled with local communities, using marriage alliances with First Nations women to establish themselves as part of local societies. This was a pattern expressed when Chinese migrants went to Hawaii, and there is evidence that it was a practice that occurred when Chinese went into the interior of British Columbia as well. Research still remains to be conducted on engagements between Chinese and First Nations peoples prior to the arrival of European settlers to many parts of the province.

In placing British Columbia in the context of a trans-Pacific world, the authors of this issue have illustrated in various ways how privileging European migration and colonialism and the legacies of anti-Asian politics leaves out so much of the history of British Columbia. Trans-Pacific migrants were more than just victims of racism. As much as white supremacy might have constrained their activities, they lived rich lives that cannot be understood if all we know about them is what was *done* to them. We know that Japanese Canadians were interned in 1942; and that Chinese Canadians paid the Head Tax between 1885 and 1923; and that Punjabi Sikhs and other South Asian migrants on the *Komagata Maru* were not allowed to land in British Columbia in 1914. But, we might ask, what did the trans-Pacific migrants who followed those initial three Chinese merchants in 1858 do with the rest of their time in British Columbia?

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<sup>4</sup> Azuma, *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).