As we write this editorial, we have before us four special issues of *Canadian Literature* that have been dedicated to Asian Canadian literature. In the 1990s, special issues were published on “South Asian Connections” (#132 [1992]) and “East Asian-Canadian Connections” (#140 [1994]). In editorials published in both issues, then-editor W. H. New grappled with the object posited by their very topics. On the one hand, writing by or about South and East Asian Canadians had yielded a significant but (at least at that time) neglected body of work. On the other hand, New is acutely aware that these very categories may be misleading, incomplete, or even complicit in histories of racism. Writing about Asian characters in Canadian fiction, he says, “human sympathy can sometimes still function as a barrier, expressing solidarity at one remove; sometimes it is an act that conceptualizes itself as generosity rather than as a tacit declaration of identity—because fundamentally it assumes that the norms of the cultural ‘inside’ will never change” (“Inside Gold Mountain” 6). In outlining these concerns, New highlights the limits of liberal acceptance and national belonging, partial solutions that respond to racism while leaving structural exclusions intact. In this way, he reflects the dissatisfaction that many writers and critics have felt with respect to promises of multiculturalism.

Issue 163 (1999), on “Asian Canadian Writing” and guest-edited by Glenn Deer, emerged in a moment of crisis: the arrival of Fujianese migrants on the shores of British Columbia in 1999, which led to racialized backlash in public discourse. Deer juxtaposes the arrival of these migrants with the story of his father, who came to Canada in 1921, and that of Adrienne Clarkson,
whose family came to Canada as refugees and who eventually rose to the office of Governor General. Questioning the discourses that make “Chinese” migrants legible in Canadian society, Deer draws parallels with the United States in order “to move beyond the constraints of racial categories and into the ongoing assertions of identity in borrowed or invented voices that we might call our own” (15). Asian American and Asian Canadian experiences and scholarship are positioned alongside each other, acting alternately as models and points of comparison in a continental conversation about migration, inclusion, and cultural representation. Finally, issue 199 (2008), on “Asian Canadian Studies” and guest-edited by Guy Beauregard, assesses the range and complexity of Asian Canadian intellectual projects that have emerged despite a lack of institutional space and support. Beauregard not only explicates the unequal terrain on which knowledge is produced, but also urges readers to seize the “present moment as an opportunity to critically address and transform social and institutional conditions that are not of our choosing” (13). In doing so, he underscores the need to transform institutional frameworks in Canada to accommodate the social and political goals of Asian Canadian studies.

Even though we have purposely confined this brief genealogy to the pages of Canadian Literature, insofar as the (Canadian) nation functioned as the conceptual horizon in all four special issues—even as they explicate the limits of liberal multiculturalism, anxieties around borders and migration, or the difficulties of navigating institutional structures—they reflect how the field of Asian Canadian studies has largely unfolded within nation-based (and often nationalist) frameworks even though it has sought to critically expose the racist foundations of the Canadian nation-state.\(^1\) Historical events such as the Head Tax imposed on all Chinese arrivals (1885-1923), Chinese exclusion (1923-1947), the Komagata Maru incident (1914), and Japanese Canadian internment (1942-1949) have come to stand in for a long history of racial injustices by demonstrating a persistent unwillingness to include Asians in Canadian society and extend to them the social and political rights enjoyed by European settlers. However, even this claim risks erasing histories of settler colonialism, under which Asian migrants were slotted into a racial hierarchy that placed them in between privileged European settlers and violently dispossessed Indigenous peoples. Given this background, Asian Canadian studies is in a unique position to dismantle, rather than reinforce, national epistemologies. Nevertheless, the histories cited here have been conventionally framed in relation to the Canadian nation-state. In part,
this characterization reflects ongoing attempts to appropriate them for, and resolve them into, liberal nation-building projects such as multiculturalism. However, critical approaches that solely emphasize Canadian specificity or exceptionalism, focus on anglophone and francophone texts to the exclusion of other languages, or privilege narratives of citizenship and national belonging reveal a more subtle and unacknowledged tendency to privilege Canada as the object of inquiry.

Extending *Canadian Literature*’s commitment to Asian Canadian studies, this special issue interrogates how national epistemes have become sedimented in the field itself, often in barely discernible ways. It is this self-reflexivity that we hope distinguishes Asian Canadian critique from the many cultural, activist, political, and institutional projects that have coalesced around this term. How would Asian Canadian critique look if we focused instead on transnational flows of labour, capital, and cultures, as well as on the logics of empire and processes of settler colonialisms? Historically, Asian Canadian communities were produced through migrations that took place in the shadow of British, American, and other empires. More recently, Asian Canadians have appeared as labourers, merchants, refugees, undocumented migrants, international students, and so on. These “racial forms” have repeatedly placed the Asian Canadian subject at the intersections of capital, empire, and nation.²

To imagine Asian Canadian critique beyond the nation may suggest that the national horizon has been abandoned or overcome, thereby echoing emphatic claims about the decline or eclipse of the nation-state under various forms of globalization. Such statements inevitably elicit counterclaims about its inescapability, arguments that range from resigned acceptance to passionate investments in the nation-state as a vehicle for social progress. However insightful, these debates can seem predictable and unresolvable; our goal, by contrast, is to return to the discursive logic embedded in the very notion of “beyond.” In her essay “The Politics of the Beyond: 43 Theses on Autoethnography and Complicity,” Smaro Kamboureli explores how “the critical act is nearly always complicit with its object of criticism” (31). To put it another way, any critical project involves an inherent folding in on its own terms, which makes moving beyond any object or paradigm misguided at best, misleading at worst. Kamboureli writes:

*Beyond* is a double signifier, a trope that at once signals an impasse that we must overcome, a stalemate we have to resolve, and a desire, a willingness, to move away from such deadlocks. Beyond, then, signifies process, but its directionality, though indeterminate, activates a progressivist logic. There may be no specific
telos inscribed in the *beyond*, but, as soon as we become engaged in its troping, we run the risk of adopting the fallacy of emancipation, a progress away from what lies before it. (47)

Two points follow from this: the first is that “*Beyond* is haunted by the spectre of complicity”—and this haunting interrupts any sense of “forward looking” progress (48). The second is that if we suspend this teleological impulse, then thinking beyond an object invites reflection on “the means we can employ to explore knowledge and ways of knowing” (32). Beyond, in other words, starts to give way to “beside.” Thus while the very act of naming the nation in the way that we have is already an act of complicity, the invitation to think beyond it might allow multiple lines of thought to proliferate, slowly and subtly decentering the nation as our primary critical paradigm and context.

It is in this spirit that we return to the histories mentioned earlier in order to consider parallel approaches that do not centre the Canadian nation. When former Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized for the Chinese Head Tax in the House of Commons in 2006, he noted that the “failure to truly acknowledge these historical injustices has prevented many in the community from seeing themselves as fully Canadian,” while then-NDP leader Jack Layton declared that it was an opportunity to “show the world that Canada is indeed a fair, generous and just nation” (“Chinese Canadians” n. pag.). This kind of rhetoric from elected leaders is hardly unexpected, but these examples reflect a nationalist approach that obscures how exclusion was part of a transpacific system of Chinese labour regulation. The full(er) story of exclusion is not just about the contradiction between racist attitudes and the need for cheap labour in Canada, but also, in the words of historian Kornel Chang, about “multiple and overlapping histories of frontier expansion, the globalization of capital and empire, and the territorializing process of state formation in Canada and the United States” (19).³ Because Canadian restrictions on Chinese immigration took the form of a head tax (a policy that was affected by Canada’s deference to Britain in foreign affairs), middlemen brought migrants to the US by first landing them in Victoria, paying the head tax, and then smuggling them across the border. Angered by these “illegal” circumventions, white labour activists staged expulsion campaigns on both sides of the border starting in the mid-1880s. Even as the number of Chinese labourers declined, the shortage was partially filled by Japanese migrants. Beyond North America, the story of exclusion encompasses the imposition of unequal treaties on China by Western powers.
and Japan, and the emergence of a transnational labour system that powered capitalist economies around the world.

Other well-known events in Asian Canadian history can be reframed along similar lines. As Renisa Mawani notes, the man responsible for chartering the Komagata Maru, Gurdit Singh, was an anti-colonial activist who believed that, as British subjects, he and the other passengers had every right to travel freely throughout the Empire (“Law and Migration” 263). His challenge to barriers faced by South Asian migrants, including the notorious “continuous journey” provision, resulted in a two-month standoff, with the ship stranded off the Port of Vancouver and its passengers unable to land. As scholars such as Radhika Mongia and Ali Kazimi have shown, these rules were the result of complicated negotiations between Canadian and British authorities, for whom impediments to migration were antithetical to the ideology of empire. Recent work by Mawani has traced what happened after the Komagata Maru was forced to leave Canadian waters and return to India, where it sparked riots and inflamed local anti-colonial movements. The story of the Komagata Maru, then, was also about the transpacific circulation of movements against imperialism: as Mawani notes, one argument made by supporters of the Komagata Maru was that British Indians had sufficiently benefitted from British rule that they could be considered more mature and civilized than Indigenous peoples in the colonies (“Specters” 398).

In a related manner, re-situating Japanese Canadian internment as a global phenomenon of incarceration and repatriation brings the relationship between settler colonialism and migration into sharper focus. For example, Japanese Australians and their families were interned during World War II followed by the repatriation of nearly all former internees. By March 1946, of the 3,268 Japanese that had been interned during the war, over 3,000 individuals had been deported to Japan and only 162 were permitted to remain in Australia (Nicholls 78). By comparison, Canada incarcerated approximately 23,000 Japanese Canadians and deported over 4,000 to Japan (Miki, Redress 2, 105). But because many Japanese men in Australia had married Indigenous women, the devastating consequences of these events extended far beyond the Japanese community. Asian Australian critic Jacqueline Lo has shown how wartime incarceration and deportation intersected with policies of assimilation directed against mixed-race Aboriginal children (now known as the Stolen Generations). From a different perspective, Iyko Day links Japanese internment to deep-seated
investments in whiteness in places such as Canada, the US, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, investments that take place “against the backdrop of Indigenous dispossession and the ‘problem’ of Asian migration that settler colonial expansion could be justified through ideologies of liberal democracy” (7). For Day, a transnational framework highlights how internment worked to dispossess people of their land and transform them into coerced labour through forced resettlement. These strategies reveal how settler colonialism is “a formation that is transnational but distinctively national, similar but definitely not the same, repetitive but without a predictable rhythm, structural but highly susceptible to change, everywhere but hard to isolate” (17). Writing about the postwar “afterlife” of incarceration, Karen Inouye’s recent study of the transnational after effects of Japanese internment in North America emphasizes the transformative capacity of these memories and the forms of political agency it generated on both sides of the border. By tracing how activists and intellectuals exchanged ideas and strategies across national divides, Inouye demonstrates how their respective engagements with politics can be understood through a transnational lens.

We hope that this brief overview demonstrates how reframing some of the most foundational events in Asian Canadian history can open up questions and lines of thought that do not take the Canadian nation as their primary context. Informed by similar concerns, the essays in this special issue take up literary and cultural texts in order to centre Asian Canadian critique’s relationship to the nation. By engaging with, for example, Asian Canadian poetry as a node in transnational literary flows that link China, Japan, and the US (Yu) or Vancouver as a location for “Asian” films such as The Interview, Finding Mr. Right, or Everything Will Be (Leung), Canada is reframed through its relation to transnational movements rather than understood in isolation. We should add, however, that these examples cannot and do not displace the centrality of the nation in and of themselves: the term “Asian Canadian” has long invoked a nation-centered framework in which Canada gets supplemented and enriched by references to other locations. Ironically, an Asian Canadian critique that strives to go beyond the nation can make us more aware of how the nation-state dominates the field at different levels.

In proposing that Asian Canadian critique be revamped into a methodology for critically engaging transnational flows, we hope that our approach will align it closer to global movements for decolonization and
justice. In *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*, Taiwan-based scholar Kuan-Hsing Chen outlines a method of what he calls inter- or multiple-referencing. Seeking to dismantle a colonial hierarchy of knowledge that treats the West as the privileged ground of comparison, often through invocations of “theory,” Chen suggests “using Asia as an imaginary anchoring point” in order to allow societies in Asia to become one another’s reference points, so that the understanding of the self can be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt. Pushing the project one step further, it becomes possible to imagine that historical experiences and practices in Asia can be developed as an alternative horizon, perspective, or method for posing a different set of questions of world history. (xv)

Multiple referencing is central to an “internationalist localism” that for Chen acknowledges the existence of the nation-state as a product of history but analytically keeps a critical distance from it. The operating site is local, but at the same time internationalist localism actively transgresses nation-states’ boundaries. It looks for new political possibilities emerging out of the practices and experiences accumulated during encounters between local history and colonial history—that is, the new forms and energies produced by the mixing brought about by modernization. (223)

Chen’s methodology emerges from his location in Asia and constitutes a response to the dominance of Euro-America in global knowledge production. Asian Canadian critique cannot, of course, claim a clear sense of separation from the West: its entanglements with the Canadian nation-state, as we have shown, are too deep to dismiss or ignore. What we take from Chen’s project is the provocative suggestion that it is only through a dynamic, multi-pronged program of shifting comparisons that intellectual work can begin to move out of the shadow of the nation-state and its Eurocentric histories. Unlike the earlier special issues of *Canadian Literature* discussed above, our interest lies not only in recognizing racial injustices committed in Canada, but also in viewing them in relation to global inequities. By putting Asian Canadian critique in dialogue with Asian cultural studies, for example, we seek to recognize how the Asian Canadian is connected to and enmeshed in multiple transnational networks that do not exist solely through, and in conversation with, Euro-Canada. Such an approach shares with Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih’s notion of “minor transnationalism” an investment in examining “micropractices of transnationality” that are typically overlooked in favour of major networks (7).

The essays collected in this special issue explore multiple sites of reference inside, outside, within, and beyond the nation. They begin to do the work
of positing Asian Canadian critique as what Chen calls an “imaginary anchoring point” or “alternative horizon” through which to engage the world histories that are sedimented in our daily lives and take seriously the materiality of Asia rather than reducing it to an adjective. Our contributors take as their points of departure literary form and avant-garde poetics (Yu), structures of nationalism and settler colonialism (Wills, Phung), spatial referencing (Leung), and competing modes of defining and imagining transnational figures that include refugees and victims of ecological disaster (Goellnicht, Beauregard). Together, they generate and constellate a set of new directions for the future of Asian Canadian critique.

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NOTES

1 For a more extended discussion of the problematics of nation-based thinking in Asian Canadian studies, see Lai; Kamboureli; and Miki’s In Flux.
2 We borrow the notion of “racial forms” from Lye.
3 See Chang for more details. Also see Adam McKeown, Melancholy Order.
4 See John Price’s Orienting Canada.

WORKS CITED


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**Erratum:**

In “From Qallunaat to James Bay: An Interview with Mini Aodla Freeman, Keavy Martin, Julie Rak, and Norma Dunning,” published in issue 226, the word “Minijuq” on page 120 should be spelled “Minijuq” and “qallunaat” should be “qallunaaq,” also on page 120. On page 116 of the same article, editorial clarification was erroneously inserted in brackets, “[about *Oklahoma!*],” in Julie Rak’s comments. We apologize for the errors.