

# Competing Nationalisms in *Ru* and *La Trilogie coréenne*

Francophone Asian Québécois  
Literatures

Over two decades ago, Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong published a provocative essay, “Denationalization Reconsidered,” in which she investigated three phenomena occurring in Asian American studies at the time: the “easing of cultural nationalist concerns” (126) as the fight for “indigenization” (128) was being replaced by explorations of feminist, queer, and other Asian American perspectives; the disciplinary flexibilities arising in scholars’ understandings of Asian American and Asian Studies (124); and “the sweep of the postmodern condition [that] made it more and more acceptable to situate Asian Americans in a diasporic context” (127). Debates ensued and, as Wong outlines in the introduction to the reprint of her article in Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt’s *Postcolonial Theory and the United States*, numerous Asian American cultural theorists have taken up these topics in order to imagine the ways that transnationalism and globalization might impact the field. The third phenomenon covered by Wong, the diasporic turn, arguably opened doors for Asian Canadian cultural theorists to enter into these conversations in meaningful ways as well; we could discuss the similarities of our experiences and histories while not being entirely subsumed under the sometimes inappropriate American umbrella. Curiously, what Wong saw as an expression of denationalization for Asian Americanists fostered a nationalist opportunity for Canadian scholars to outline a unique Asian Canadian identity separate from their American counterparts.

But what’s sometimes missing from these conversations is an elaborated critique of what constitutes the nation, as if a singular national identity is either available, reliable, possible, or desired. While much focus has been

given to diversifying and de-homogenizing the meaning of what constitutes Asian identity, less work has been done to nuance what is meant by *Canadian* within an Asian Canadian context. Thus when the editors of this special issue asked how we are to understand Asian Canadian literary studies beyond the nation, I wondered who was imagined as “Asian” and also what was considered “Canadian.” Assumptions about what constitutes the nation in Asian Canadian studies, for instance, rarely interact with the official bilingual and bicultural (English and French) nature of the country. In other words, when it comes to thinking through nationalism in Asian Canadian studies (as this special issue seeks to do), scholars need not always look beyond the state, to anti-nationalist and transnational discourses. We might also turn our attentions to certain francophone Asian Canadian writers who find themselves at a cultural impasse by living and working in the province of Québec—a quasi-nation-state animated by a competing sovereign impulse, and an entity that deliberately and continuously interrupts the assumed singularity of Canadian nationalism as a whole. Asian Canadians who live and write in French, and particularly in the province of Québec, expose the limitations in the ways that Asian Canadian cultural critics read and interpret nationalist gestures, and force scholars to more clearly articulate who is considered part of Asian Canada. In the most general sense, Québec nationalism is primarily articulated through language issues where separatist demands are predicated on a national specificity that is articulated via claims of historical and cultural differences mainly understood in connection to language. French language-as-culture has long been a source of contention in the Canadian nationalist project, prior to and since the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1963-1969); and Québec nationalism has historically haunted its Canadian counterpart, evidenced in the 1995 referendum and at nearly every federal election before and after, as Québec’s exceptionalism is understood even when the province’s autonomy is articulated as *part of* a unified, whole Canada. So what does it mean, then, to be a francophone Asian Québécois writer living and working in the language of a *competing* nationalism, and particularly a competing nationalism that defines itself overtly in terms of language but inferentially through an exclusionary Europeanness that harkens back to French settlements and the mythologies of white labourers, explorers, and settlers? In other words, what does it mean to write in French as an Asian Canadian, and what does it mean to be a francophone Asian Québécois in a land of *pure laine*?

In this essay I analyze two contemporary francophone Asian Canadian semi-autobiographical novels that invite us to think about language tensions

beyond our typical conversations about assimilation and deculturation. Kim Thúy's *Ru* (2009) and Ook Chung's *La Trilogie coréenne* (2012) explore the cultural significance of language, and particularly the French language, in relation to both English and other Asian languages—Vietnamese in Thúy's case, Japanese and Korean in Chung's. In both novels, protagonists discuss language through considerations of colonialism in Asia, making a provocative analogue given the status of Québec as both colonizer and colonized. Most importantly, these Asian Canadian novelists are writing in the language of a *competing nationalism* and one that, as I note above, complicates Canadian nationalist and constitutional debates. At the same time, although they write in French as Asian Québécois authors, Thúy and Chung do not share the ethnic and racial origins and genealogies (*la souche*) that would allow them entrance into that national body. Thúy, in particular, comments on this situation in her novel. These writers are doubly excluded: mostly omitted from the anglo-hegemonic conversations about Asian Canadian literary studies, and marginalized in the Québécois publishing scene in which they are considered authors of "migrant" but never Québécois literature. Hence, they find themselves in a neither/nor situation, an ambivalent position without resolution that is different from the liminal subjectivities we customarily associate with Asian Canadian communities.

I have two goals here. First, I want to intervene into the anglocentricism of Asian Canadian literary studies and suggest that the competing Québécois nationalism influences francophone Asian Canadian literature. Second, I want to analyze the theme of language, and particularly characters' preoccupation with French, in both books. I draw on images of in-betweenness and themes of colonialism in both novels, arguing that these representations parallel the ambivalent and precarious statuses of francophone Asian Québécois writers, within both the linguistically marginalizing framework of Asian Canadian literature and the racially and ethnically marginalizing framework of Québécois' competing nationalism. I argue that, by writing in French, these authors disrupt one nationalist project while also exposing the limitations (and contradictions) of another.

## I.

In his important commentary on the history and then-current state of Asian Canadian literary studies, "A Long Labour: The Protracted Birth of Asian Canadian Literature" (published in 2000), Donald Goellnicht explains the field in contrast with its American counterpart. Arguing that

the particularities of a Canadian context that featured a comparatively subtle civil rights and Black Power drive to which Asian Canadians could ally themselves (4-6), as well as relying on a history of official multiculturalism that mainly manifested as English-French biculturalism (9-10), Goellnicht understands national, political, and social factors as central to our understanding of Asian Canadian literature's "protracted birth" (1-2). What is missing from this important conversation, however, is any significant reference to francophone Asian Canadian writers, and specifically those who live and work in Québec, a state that is paradoxically both colonizer and colonized, and whose ethnic majority is mainstream within provincial borders but federally marginalized. Goellnicht's essay begins with a settling on terms that bespeaks what is considered Asian Canadian literature. "[B]y the term 'Asian Canadian literature,'" he says, "I mean the clear identification of an ethnic minority literary tradition in *English* and the academic study of it as such" (2 emphasis added). "In English" stands out in this explanation, especially given the care Goellnicht takes to explain Canada's biculturalism and official bilingualism in the pages that follow. In other words, while much of the article is concerned with how we might understand Asian Canadian subjectivity in terms of races and cultures of origin—focusing on the *Asian* parts of this identity politic—little to no mention is made of how precarious the concept of *Canadian* might be as well, or of how it operates implicitly within an English framework.<sup>1</sup>

While the logical reason for this approach stems from the fact that the majority of Asian Canadian literature and literary criticism is produced in English and in English Canada—a fact that was even more true when Goellnicht's foundational essay was first published than it is now—if we are to undertake a project that challenges dominance and norms in an earnest way, we must attend to other, sometimes more complex, experiences as well.<sup>2</sup> Texts by francophone Asian Québécois writers, like Ying Chen, Bach Mai, and Aki Shimazaki, I suggest, offer an opportunity to upend many of our assumptions about Asian Canadian literature and the political work we uphold in our analyses of it. For instance, in her *Slanting I, Imagining We*, a brilliant intervention into the field of Asian Canadian literary studies, Larissa Lai notes that the "English-speaking Chinese Canadian" must choose between "speak[ing] the master's tongue in order to break the silence and so enter into liberated 'Canadian' subjectivity" and "betraying her ancestors" by writing in her "mother tongue" (11). Yet, Lai focuses here on an anglophone linguistic mainstreaming in Canada; the Charter of the French Language

(Bill 101) in Québec, which indeed complicates such discussions about dominance and compulsory language practices, falls beyond her purview. This is not to say that French is any less a colonizing language or is somehow redeemed of this truth because of its minority status in Canada as a whole; I simply want to draw on the experiences of other, non-anglophone Asian Canadian perspectives in order to understand the particular suppositions about nationalism that are at hand here. My thinking falls in line with what Jack Yeager points to when he argues that

the production of literary texts in French by immigrant writers in Québec problematizes contemporary issues of nationalism and sovereignty and of belonging and citizenship that are of concern in Canada's only province with a majority of French speakers. When writers of Asian origins address important questions such as these, we are forced to rethink what it means to be Québécois(e). (137)

Moreover, I contend that literature in French by Asian Québécois writers (whether immigrant writers or not) more broadly forces us to rethink what it means to be Asian Canadian as well. If, as Christopher Lee poignantly notes, "Asian Canadian cultural formations continue to demonstrate the instability of identity" (32), how might we consider these works when they are produced in a sovereigntist space like Québec that is also "always in the process of becoming" (Yeager 144)?

Many francophone literary critics of Asian Québécois literature tend to group writers alongside other "migrant" authors and contemplate the ways in which authors speak to notions of Québécois trans- and interculturalism, as Gilles Dupuis does in one of his many important essays, "La littérature migrante est-elle universelle?" Junga Shin and Yong Ho Choi, in their article "De l'espace transculturel," turn to francophone Asian Québécois literature in order to "dévoile . . . les implications culturologiques dans l'histoire de la littérature du Québec" (103).<sup>3</sup> This approach is part of a relatively broad critical perspective that focuses on "minority literatures" and migration in Québec, which includes Robert Berrouët-Oriol and Robert Fournier's foundational article, "L'émergence des écritures migrantes et métisses au Québec." This was also the approach at work in the development of the important special issue of *The International Journal of Francophone Studies* that focused on "Francophonie(s) Asiatique(s)"—a term which editor Gabrielle Parker explains "réfère à la fois à des points de départ (Asie) et des points d'arrivée (France, Québec) qui englobent une grande diversité" (241).<sup>4</sup> In that instance, critics imagined writers as global figures whose experiences of marginalization are used as points of comparison for Québec nationalism.

Consequently, scholars did not link works by francophone Asian Québécois writers with the larger oeuvre of Asian Canadian literary studies; instead, they perpetuated the linguistic divide that separates francophone and anglophone Canadian literature more generally. But what would happen if we thought about Asian Québécois writers as part of Asian Canada, and as subjects dislocating that category from within?

## II.

En français, *ru* signifie « petit ruisseau » et, au figuré, « écoulement (de larmes, de sang, d'argent) » (*Le Robert historique*). En vietnamien, *ru* signifie « berceuse », « bercer »<sup>5</sup>  
—Kim Thúy, *Ru*

Kim Thúy's critically acclaimed, semi-autobiographical novel *Ru* features the memories of a Vietnamese Canadian protagonist, Nguyễn An Tịch, as she reminisces about her early childhood in Vietnam, time spent in a refugee camp, her grammar-school years in Granby, Québec, experiences as an adult and with motherhood in Montréal, travels to France and Thailand with her small children, and a three-year sojourn in her country of origin. It is a challenge to locate Thúy's protagonist either temporally or spatially; the non-linear and postmodern movement of the novel mimics An Tịch's disorienting cosmopolitanism as people, places, and memories melt into one another. But every so often, the reader is re-anchored in Canada, usually in small-town Québec with its "paysage aussi blanc, aussi virginal" (18)<sup>6</sup> or bustling Montréal, and the narrator describes her experiences of being Asian Canadian and Asian Québécoise. But as Vinh Nguyen argues in "Refugee Gratitude," although Thúy's novel features a refugee success narrative that may be interpreted as having been "produced for and deployed by the state and its apparatuses," it can also be read "beyond the determining frame of liberal democratic nationalism" (19), as narratives that, on the surface, appear to express success stories may also have subtexts denoting "struggle, loss, and trauma" (18). The winner of a number of literary awards, including the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction and the Archambault Grand Prix Littéraire, *Ru* is at once celebratory of Québec as the land that welcomed An Tịch's family after their arduous journey and at times critical of the sovereigntist state's ethnic nationalism that blatantly refuses her.

In the epigraph to *Ru*, Thúy gestures to the key role that language shall play in the ensuing pages. She notes the inconsistency of meaning attached to her titular phoneme: in French *ru* is a symbolic stream, in Vietnamese a lullaby—but both, in turn, prove fitting imagery for what follows. That is,

the collection of prose-poetry snapshots flow together in a way that mimics both the ebb and flow of recollection and also the acts of remembering and telling that swell gently to and fro with a calming, lulling tone. One episode streams into its successor; one story triggers while the next soothes in response. In this way, the many traumatic events captured in *Ru* are ironically represented in a quiet, calming style. The images evoked by Thúy's examples of what, in the French language, might be symbolically streaming—tears, blood, money—foreshadow the grief to be portrayed throughout the book, but a grief that is expressed with a kind of lyrical tranquility. *Ru*, in French, suggests loss; in Vietnamese it signifies acts of pacifying. Early in the novel, themes of lullaby and loss come together in one of the text's most memorable images as the narrator recalls the scene on a boat when her family fled Vietnam:

Le paradis et l'enfer s'étaient enlacés dans le ventre de notre bateau. Le paradis promettait un tournant dans notre vie, un nouvel avenir, une nouvelle histoire. L'enfer, lui, étalait nos peurs : peur des pirates, peur de mourir de faim, peur de s'intoxiquer avec les biscottes imbibées d'huile à moteur, peur de manquer d'eau, peur de ne plus pouvoir se remettre debout, peur de devoir uriner dans ce pot rouge qui passait d'une main à l'autre, peur que cette tête d'enfant galeuse ne soit contagieuse, peur de ne plus jamais fouler la terre ferme, peur de ne plus revoir le visage de ses parents assis quelque part dans la pénombre au milieu de ces deux cents personnes. (13-14)<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to the visceral horrors depicted in this passage, the symbolism of a whale-like vessel and the anaphoric expressions of fear throughout—mimicking the repetitive motion of the heaving sea—ironically transform the boat into a cradle being rocked and the description into a horrible lullaby. Passengers become accustomed to that fear and their dreadful environment: “Ce goût d’huile dans la gorge,” the narrator recalls, “sur la langue, dans la tête nous endormait au rythme de la berceuse chantée par ma voisine” (15).<sup>8</sup> The image also gestures to the importance of language and communication, even if long after the unspeakable event; language is stopped on the boat both by looming dread but also by the biscuits that coat An Tình's throat and tongue (an important homonym for language in French) with poisonous motor oil.

The boat scenes, to which An Tình returns throughout the novel, are crucial not only because of the allusion to lullaby and loss, but also because the linguistic coming together that illuminates the book's title is set in the ambiguous and unanchored liminal space of the sea. The tiny but crowded vessel in *Ru* becomes “entouré, encerclé d'un seul et uniforme horizon

bleu” (15)<sup>9</sup> when its passengers are out at sea, and this causes its passengers to feel paralyzed with fear because they are between recognizable states, between nations, and without land. Vinh Nguyen describes the liminality and insecurity of the boat in the ominous sea in terms of insecurity: on the boat, the passengers “sit waiting, drifting” (25) for something, anything, to happen. On the one hand, there is notable danger, not just of discovery by communists or pirates, but also in the journey itself; An Tịnh recalls that the many “qui avaient coulé pendant la traverse . . . n’avaient pas de noms” (24),<sup>10</sup> and the aggressive way that her Vietnamese identity was “jeté . . . à l’eau quand elle nous a fait traverser le golfe du Siam” (12).<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, it is only by boat that the refugees can find asylum because borders to neighbouring countries are made permeable to the surviving “boat people” (24). The boat and its motions interrupt the static boundaries of nationhood not just as it physically traverses the liminal space of ocean and sea, but also as the ominous imagery interrupts the pleasant and teleological trajectory of the so-called successful immigrant story, which Nguyen argues is a crucial element in the Canadian nationalist narrative.

The liminality of the boat, I contend, is also symbolic of the precariousness of language, and in my opinion of the difficult way that An Tịnh and other Vietnamese refugees living in Québec relate to Québécois nationalism. An Tịnh is confronted with a similar sensation of anxiety and un-anchoredness when she first arrives in Québec: “[J]e ne pouvais pas parler ni écouter, même si je n’étais ni sourde ni muette. Je n’avais plus de points de repère” (18).<sup>12</sup> Just as the boat was most vulnerable when it traversed the open water between landmarks, so too does An Tịnh feel exposed, “dénudée, sinon nue” (18)<sup>13</sup> when she cannot speak French in Québec. It is therefore critical that, shortly after her arrival in Granby, An Tịnh immediately begins to learn how to speak in French and English as their “langue maternelle était devenue non pas dérisoire, mais inutile” (29),<sup>14</sup> though she notes that her parents already spoke enough French (having been children when Vietnam gained independence from France) to be considered overqualified for the free language integration courses offered in Québec. Quickly learning to communicate in French benefits An Tịnh, whose childhood in Québec is comfortable and happy. Considered “good immigrants” who do not contribute to the potential decline of the French language, the Nguyễn family is welcomed in Granby, which An Tịnh recalls was “le ventre chaud qui nous a couvés durant notre première année au Canada” (21)<sup>15</sup>—quite the contrast to the horrible belly of the boat that transported them from Vietnam to



Malaysia. But when she returns to Vietnam as an adult, An Tịch finds herself in the predicament faced by many 1.5 generation subjects who return to their countries of origin: she is alienated from the languages (as well as cultural practices) of the place. She notes:

J'ai dû réapprendre ma langue maternelle, que j'avais abandonnée trop tôt. De toute manière, je ne l'avais pas vraiment maîtrisée de façon complète parce que le pays était divisé en deux quand je suis née. Je viens du Sud, alors je n'avais jamais entendu les gens du Nord avant mon retour au pays. De même, les gens du Nord n'avaient jamais entendu les gens du Sud avant la réunification. Comme au Canada, le Vietnam avait aussi ses deux solitudes. (88-89)<sup>16</sup>

This passage is meaningful because An Tịch compares the language duality of pre-unified Vietnam with the “two solitudes” notion of the English-French divide in Canada. While not analogous situations, An Tịch’s point is that in both cases, language segregation is a tangible manifestation of political and cultural differences. Thus, when An Tịch speaks and thinks in French, and when Thúy writes in French, we are witnessing deliberate political acts. But, as I will argue later on, these acts do not necessarily fit neatly into the nationalist ideology of assimilation as might be originally assumed by Asian Canadian cultural critics.

### III.

Si j'écris en français, ce n'est pas tant parce que je trouve la langue française belle que parce que j'ai « quelque chose à dire. » Et, paradoxalement, ce que j'ai à dire est ma condition d'exilé.<sup>17</sup>

—Ook Chung, *La Trilogie coréenne*

Ook Chung’s *La Trilogie coréenne* also draws on themes of partition and colonialism in Asia to discuss issues of language and culture. It is strikingly different from Thúy’s novel; the style is direct and at times almost perfunctory, and it is less introspective and more narrative-driven than *Ru*. But despite these differences, I contend that it is a provocative complement to the ways that language is both theme and political gesture in *Ru*. The first part of *La Trilogie coréenne* focuses on the lives of protagonist O Jeung’s ancestors and parents as *zainich’I* in Japan during the period when “L’armée impériale japonaise a débarqué en Corée et, sous le menace de la baïonnette, a forcé toute une génération de Coréens—de 1910 à 1945—à parler japonais dans leur propre pays” (14).<sup>18</sup> Reflecting the ways that culture and language were fractured for Koreans in that period, these early chapters are non-linear and structurally fragmented; it is only once the narrative shifts to O Jeung’s

childhood in Montréal in the years just following the Quiet Revolution that chronology takes over, though even here the first-person narrator often interrupts himself with memories of immigrant hardships in Québec, including ponderings about childhood experiences of xenophobia and racism. The second section of the novel features a now-adult O Jeong, who returns to his birth nation of Japan and faces the paradox of a space shaped by his mother's anecdotes and a contemporary nation that maintains some residual anti-Korean sentiments. In the final section, O Jeong accepts a teaching position as a French language professor at a national university in Jeongju, approximately three hours south of Seoul. Here, Chung provides the perspectives of multiple Korean diasporic characters who encounter O Jeong (some are professional colleagues and students, while others are friends), many of whom are themselves cosmopolitan travellers who have just returned from lives abroad in Paris or elsewhere. O Jeong's life is like a palindrome: he ends up in the land of his ancestors; Korea bookends his birth and return to Japan after being raised in Montréal. As the final section of the novel suggests, language—particularly the French language—is a crucial aspect of O Jeong's subjectivity, and is a pressing theme for other characters as well. When he accepts the teaching position we are reminded of his Korean father's belief that French is a superior language, which led to both the elder Jeong's French studies at Yonsei University in his youth and his decision to move to Québec instead of Alberta, recommended to the family as “une province en pleine expansion économique, riche de possibilités pour un nouvel arrivant” (68).<sup>19</sup> Language, as always, is connected to power; in the context of a Korean Canadian man returning to the Japan of his birth in order to teach French—a language that is protected as marginalized and disappearing in his home province of Québec—we see that the connection between language and power can be highly complex and ambiguous.

Throughout the novel, O Jeong ponders the significance of language for diasporic people: political exiles like his father, people who migrate as children, and young people studying abroad. He considers his own cultural confusion and the identity crisis he seeks to address in the telling of his life history as direct outcomes of speaking so many languages. His story begins:

Je viens d'une famille dont les origines sont coréennes. Cependant, je ne parle pas le coréen. Je suis né au Japon, et le japonais est ma langue maternelle; là-bas on m'appelait Noboru. Mais cette langue a cessé d'être ma langue première après mon immigration au Canada à l'âge de deux ans. Aujourd'hui, à quarante-huit ans, j'écris donc en français plus par la force des circonstances que par choix. (13)<sup>20</sup>

From the outset, we understand O Jeong's complex subjectivity in relation to the ways that language has been given to and taken from him throughout his life. As a result, O Jeong recognizes that language is a tool of oppression and control, not just in terms of what is spoken but also by way of which languages are denied or prohibited. The one situation to which he repeatedly returns is that of his mother Mitsouyo, who, having been born and raised in Kyushu, is profoundly regretful that she could not speak Korean fluently. He explains: "Mitsouyo, elle est née au Japon et elle a parlé le japonais toute sa vie, même si ses parents lui parlaient en coréen . . . Ma mère n'a pas choisi . . . le japonais comme langue première. Toute sa vie, elle a nourri le regret de ne pouvoir parler couramment le coréen, même si c'est une langue qu'elle comprend" (15).<sup>21</sup> Mitsouyo, we gather, is particularly disturbed by the fact that one language was forced upon her and another refused, and that the result of this oppression is alienation from her family, their culture, and her ancestral past. Estranged from other Koreans, Mitsouyo finds herself "entre l'arbre et l'écorce . . . nulle part où aller" (20)<sup>22</sup>—in other words, liminal between cultures and places. O Jeong suggests that Mitsouyo's experiences are not unique and that the Korean language is marked by its long history of being splintered, prohibited, and disparaged. Oppressed by "l'histoire de la Corée et à ses soubresauts," the Korean language, according to O Jeong, can be characterized as "une acclimatation au malheur" sustained first "sous l'occupation japonaise" and "[la] séparation des deux Corées après la partition" (51).<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, O Jeong mourns the loss of the Korean language for people like his mother; on the other hand, he celebrates its survival despite the colonial violences of the last one hundred years.

Although he does not explicitly make the connection, O Jeong's thoughts on language and colonialism in Korea, and particularly his evocations of occupied Koreans as "bilingues" (287),<sup>24</sup> invite us to think about language rights in Canada and Chung's decision to live and identify as a francophone Asian Québécois. Such connections between language and identity are inferred in O Jeong's declaration that he chooses to communicate in French not because the language is beautiful, but because it is political. In the epigraph to this section, we see O Jeong insist that he speaks French when he "has something to say," and I think his statement gestures less to the content of his speech than to the political implications of how he expresses himself. Moreover, when he motions to his condition of exile, that which he feels compelled to discuss in French, it signals a critical relationship between language and subjectivity, particularly in connection to fraught circumstances of residual

colonial oppression. Kyeongmi Kim-Bernard makes the connection between O Jeong's loss of his mother tongue and Mitsouyo's loss of Korean, observing

Comme sa mère Mitsouyo qui ne s'exprime bien qu'en japonais, sa langue maternelle imposée par la domination coloniale, le narrateur, lui, se trouve sous la domination culturelle francophone à cause de son immigration au Québec. Comme Mitsouyo qui a regrettée toute sa vie de ne pas pouvoir parler couramment le coréen, tout en appréciant la lecture et l'écriture en japonais, le fils adopte le français comme outil d'expression tout en gardant un regret de ne pas pouvoir maîtriser aussi couramment le japonais et le coréen. (360-61)<sup>25</sup>

This comparison, I think, troubles not just our anglocentric understanding of Asian Canada; it also points to the paradox of a Québécois nationalism that imagines itself as the object of cultural oppression, ignoring other forms of marginalization, occupation, and oppression enacted in the name of that nationalism. That is not to say that recent immigrants to Québec are colonized subjects, are not themselves settlers occupying Indigenous land, but novels like *La Trilogie coréenne* point to some of the contradictions that often exist within various ethnic nationalist movements.

In both novels, we witness a deliberate linking of colonialism in Asia with the complex coloniality of Québec: a space that is both colonizer and colonized, a land that maintains strict law protecting the dominant (colonial) language. Thinking about migrant literature in Québec, Simone Grossman reminds us that “la littérature du Québec diffère de celle des pays du Nouveau Monde anciennement colonisé en ceci que les colons venus de France ont eux-mêmes été colonisés par les Anglais” (177).<sup>26</sup> Beyond the false notion here that Québec (or Canada) is “formerly colonized”—that it is not an ongoing settler colonial space—I wonder what it means, then, to explore the relationship between colonialism and language in Asia within the same literary works that are dealing with similar, though not identical, conflicts in the West? In the case of *Ru*, the link between language and colonization is particularly fraught: the Nguyễn family migrates from a place traumatized by French colonialism, where even after independence “les campagnes vietnamiennes étaient terrorisées par différentes factions de voyous implantées par les autorités françaises pour diviser le pays” (73),<sup>27</sup> to a land where claims to sovereignty and independence are predicated on a nostalgia for the colonial days of *pure laine*.<sup>28</sup>

#### IV.

As I have suggested in the preceding pages, both *Ru* and *La Trilogie coréenne* intervene in the anglocentricity of Asian Canadian literary studies just in the very fact that these books are written and published in French, the

language of a competing nationalism that unsettles Canadianness from within. And indeed, language is a crucial issue for Asian Canadian writers not just in terms of working in what Lien Chao and others call authors' "mother tongues" and the tensions between them and the official language(s) of the nation, but also along the francophone-anglophone divide that makes up the latter category. Robert Berrouët-Oriol and Robert Fournier consider this issue in relation to the waves of non-European immigrants arriving in Canada in the late twentieth century. "Cette migration arc-en-ciel," they explain, "a lentement, mais de manière irréversible, modifiée l'habitus canadien dans différents domaines (social, culturel, etc.), et très tôt se trouvera au cœur du vieux et toujours actuel dilemme linguistique anglophone-francophone" (7).<sup>29</sup> That is, the issue of language and questions of which language(s) Asian Canadian writers elect to work in have numerous effects, including those that extend out to nationalist concerns over how subjects might "claim Canada." And indeed, in *La Trilogie coréenne*, O Jeong seems fixated on the idea that for "néo-Québécois" like him, those who have a "visage asiatique [et qui] parlent français avec l'accent Québécois" (108),<sup>30</sup> language is the most important marker of belonging.

But let me be clear: by writing in French, these authors are not necessarily substituting one nationalism for another. Despite the fact that Québec nationalism is predicated on a cultural exceptionalism that centres on the French language as paradigmatic object, implied in this nationalism too is the cultivation of a white French settler historical "*souche*"<sup>31</sup> from which non-white francophone immigrants are always already excluded, even within the assimilationist language of "intégration" championed by Québec's inter- (rather than multi-)culturalism. This was made infamously apparent in 1995 when Jacques Parizeau conceded defeat in the referendum on independence, stating "It's true that we were beaten, but by whom? Money and ethnic votes" (qtd. in Picard A1); and more recently in the subtext of the 2007 Bouchard-Taylor Commission, which Québécois scholar Bruno Cornellier summarizes as a reassertion of interculturalism as an ideal policy to "foster a civic pluralism predicated on the harmonious and reciprocal integration of 'ethnocultural minorities' into a normative, socio-institutional framework that is contingent upon the precarious futurity of a foundational, francophone majority culture" ("Interculturalism" 79). For decades, cultural critics have pointed out what Cornellier and others before him have recently articulated as the Québécois finding themselves in a "peculiar location as white colonial/colonized subjects in the margins of the Anglo-American

sphere of dominance” (“Pierre Vallières” n. pag.). Theirs is a precarious subjectivity which features a white ethnic nationalism lingering not far beneath the surface of a nationalism concerned with language rather than race—or so it claims.<sup>32</sup>

Francophone Asian Québécois writers, then, unearth the contradictions of this sovereigntist nationalism that articulates itself through language but rejects French speakers of non-European origins, or sees them only as an analogy for their own subjectivity. Thúy’s narrator recalls a moment when this becomes apparent to her: “[M]on patron a découpé dans un journal montréalais un article qui réitérait que la ‘nation Québécoise’ était caucasienne, que mes yeux bridés me classaient automatiquement dans une catégorie à part même si le Québec m’avait donné mon rêve américain, même s’il m’avait bercée pendent trente ans” (88).<sup>33</sup> Again we see the emergence of lullaby imagery, as the narrator imagines herself cradled by the Québec nation and its promise of belonging. But she is lulled no longer. Even though she grew up as a French Canadian subject, even though as a schoolgirl she “réciter par cœur le texte sur Jacques Cartier” (82),<sup>34</sup> the narrator is denied Québécois subjectivity. Thus, the dedication of the novel, “aux gens du pays,”<sup>35</sup> is at once charitable and ironic; Gilles Vigneault’s 1975 song of the same name speaks of love and hope but infers who is considered a proper member of the nation, not just in its lyrics but also by its repeated use by members of the sovereigntist movement. Thúy can dedicate her novel to the Québécois people of the country, and Chung’s characters can declare themselves to be “plus québécois que les Québécois” (95),<sup>36</sup> but they will continue to be imagined as migrant subjects peripheral to the competing nationalism of Québec.

## V.

In the final pages of *Unfastened: Globality and Asian North American Narratives*, Eleanor Ty uses the term “global writing” to encapsulate the works by Asian North American writers who are overtly discussing globalization and transnational movement, subjects who “have little or nothing to do with the adopted country of the authors,” or works that do not “deal with anything Asian” at all (131). In these senses, we could easily understand *Ru* and *La Trilogie coréenne* as examples of global writing, as texts that push beyond the nationalist goals of “claiming America”—or Canada, as is the case here. Thúy’s novel, which ebbs and flows between various places in Southeast Asia and Québec, and Chung’s, which showcases

the plights of ethnic Koreans who are first *zainich'I* in Japan and later migrants to Québec, reveal state borders to be flexible and abstract in a number of ways. Chung's protagonist reflects upon his cosmopolitan subjectivity when he notes:

Parfois, je me réveille la nuit dans mon hotel en me demandant: "Où suis-je?" À Montréal, Paris, Londres, Mexico, ou Tokyo? Car depuis ces dix dernières années, je n'ai pas cessé de voyager. Moi qui ai été si longtemps en proie à l'immobilité, me voici maintenant devenu un nomade, un citoyen du monde. J'ai une boulimie du voyage que rien ne rassasie. (253)<sup>37</sup>

Embodying what Aihwa Ong would call a "flexible subject" (1), figures like O Jeong incite us to "pay attention . . . to the *transnational practices and imaginings* of the nomadic subject and the social conditions that enable his flexibility," granting us "a different picture of how nation-states articulate within capitalism in late modernity" (Ong 3). O Jeong is constantly in motion, travelling between Canada and Asia as well as parts of Europe. The novel considers the ways in which people are dispossessed, exiled, and relocated because of war and colonialism and the intricacies of diasporic communities that result. Thúy's protagonist too is a transnational subject, always moving between different spaces. She recounts her frequent movements, her unanchoredness: "Je dors aussi bien dans le lit d'un hôtel" she explains, ". . . d'une chambre d'amis ou d'un inconnu que dans mon propre lit. En fait, je suis toujours heureuse de déménager" (108).<sup>38</sup> Her youngest brother, she comments, is also a transnational subject, living in "New York, à New Delhi, à Moscow ou à Saigon" (116).<sup>39</sup>

In this essay, I have tried to reframe the ways we think about nationalism in the contexts of Asian Canadian studies not by looking elsewhere or reading texts that deliberately disavow the state. Instead, I have analyzed writers and works that by their very natures reveal some of the limitations to the ways we have been thinking about Asian Canadian cultural communities, particularly in relation to the English language. It is not just that francophone Asian Québécois writers are writing in a language connected to a competing nationalism, but that it is a competing nationalism from within the borders of the state. I close by aligning with Ty and others who seek to challenge nationalism but also acknowledge its political benefits because I want to add to this conversation by suggesting that not all Asian Canadian nationalisms are alike, and that we need to recognize the political aims of marginalized subjects living within different kinds of nationalist spaces if we are to fully imagine Asian Canadian studies beyond the nation.

## NOTES

- 1 Not surprisingly, anglophone Asian Québécois writers, like Shauna Singh Baldwin, are often included within the general field of Asian Canadian literature.
- 2 This does not just end at including a few francophone Asian Québécois perspectives on our syllabi and in our criticism; this is an invitation to reimagine who qualifies as a French Canadian writer and, moreover, our assumptions that they are necessarily from Québec and not other provinces or territories.
- 3 reveal . . . cultural implications in Québécois literary history. (All translations from French to English are mine, unless otherwise noted.)
- 4 refers simultaneously to points of departure (Asia) and points of arrival (France, Québec) that circumscribe an important diversity.
- 5 In French, *ru* means a small stream and, figuratively, a flow, a discharge—of tears, of blood, of money. In Vietnamese, *ru* means a lullaby, to lull, (trans. Sheila Fischman).
- 6 landscape so white, so virginal (trans. Sheila Fischman).
- 7 Heaven and hell embraced in the belly of our boat. Heaven promised a turning point in our lives, a new future, a new history. Hell, though, displayed our fears: fear of pirates, fear of starvation, fear of poisoning by biscuits soaked in motor oil, fear of running out of water, fear of being unable to stand up, fear of having to urinate in the red pot that was passed from hand to hand, fear that the scabies on the baby's head was contagious, fear of never again setting foot on solid ground, fear of never again seeing the faces of our parents, who were sitting in the darkness surrounded by two hundred people (trans. Sheila Fischman).
- 8 The taste of oil in our throats, on our tongues, in our heads sent us to sleep to the rhythm of the lullaby sung by the woman beside me (trans. Sheila Fischman).
- 9 surrounded, encircled by the uniform blue horizon (trans. Sheila Fischman).
- 10 who'd gone down during the crossing . . . had no names (trans. Sheila Fischman).
- 11 flung . . . into the water when it took us across the Gulf of Siam (trans. Sheila Fischman).
- 12 I was unable . . . to talk or to listen," she recalls, "even though I was neither deaf nor mute. I now had no points of reference" (trans. Sheila Fischman).
- 13 naked, if not stripped bare (trans. Sheila Fischman).
- 14 mother tongue had become not exactly insufficient, but useless (trans. Sheila Fischman).
- 15 the warm belly that sheltered us during our first year in Canada (trans. Sheila Fischman).
- 16 I had to relearn my mother tongue, which I'd given up too soon. In any case, I hadn't really mastered it completely because the country was divided in two when I was born. I come from the South, so I had never heard people from the North until I went back to Vietnam. Similarly, people in the North had never heard people from the South before reunification. Like Canada, Vietnam had its own two solitudes. (trans. Sheila Fischman).
- 17 If I write in French, it is not because I find the French language beautiful but because I have "something to say." And, paradoxically, that which I have to say is my status as exiled.
- 18 The Japanese imperial army landed in Korea and, by threat of bayonets, forced an entire generation of Koreans—from 1910 to 1945—to speak Japanese in their own country.
- 19 a province full of economic expansion and rich with possibilities for a newcomer.
- 20 I come from a family whose origins are Korean. However, I don't speak Korean. I was born in Japan, and Japanese is my mother tongue; there they called me Noboru. But this language stopped being my first language after my immigration to Canada at the age of two years. Today, at forty-eight years, I therefore write in French more by force of circumstances than by choice.



- 21 Mitsouyo, she was born in Japan and spoke Japanese all her life, even if her parents spoke to her in Korean. My mother didn't choose . . . Japanese as her first language. All her life, she maintained regret that she could not speak Korean fluently, even if it was a language she could understand.
- 22 Between a rock and a hard place . . . with nowhere to go.
- 23 The history of Korea and its upheavals; an acclimatization to misfortune; under Japanese occupation and the separation of the two Koreas after partition.
- 24 bilingual
- 25 Like his mother Mitsouyo, who can only express herself well in Japanese, her mother tongue imposed by colonial domination, the narrator finds himself under francophone cultural domination because of his immigration to Québec. Like Mitsouyo who regretted her whole life that she could not speak Korean fluently, all the while appreciating reading and writing in Japanese, the son adopts French as a useful tool of expression all the while maintaining regret that he was not also able to master Japanese and Korean.
- 26 Québécois literature differs from that of any other formerly-colonized country in the New World on the grounds that the colonizers who came from France were themselves colonized by the English.
- 27 the Vietnamese countryside was terrorized by different factions of thugs introduced there by the French authorities to divide the country.
- 28 Literally meaning "pure wool," *pure laine* signifies French Canadian ethnic purity where ancestry can be (or is imagined to be) linked back to original French settlers.
- 29 This rainbow migration slowly, but in an irreversible manner, modified Canadian practices in different domains (social, cultural, etc.), and very early on we once again found at the heart of these developments, the age-old and always present anglophone-francophone linguistic dilemma.
- 30 an Asian face [and who] speak French with a Québécois accent.
- 31 *De souche*, literally "of the root/stump," symbolizes people who are descendants of original settlers.
- 32 But this is not to say that writers like Thúy and Chung are ignored by the majority. Again, Berrouët-Oriol and Fournier: "des *francophones canadiens* (de souche française ou anglaise) se réappropriant l'Ailleurs-proche, des mémoires historiques venues d'Ailleurs habitant ou traversant la trame fictionnelle, dans un dynamique transculturelle" (13). Translated, "*Francophone Canadians* (of French or English stock) reappropriating the Far-near, historical memories from Elsewhere that inhabit and crossing over the narrative plane, in a transcultural dynamic."
- 33 [M]y employer, who was based in Québec, clipped an article from a Montréal paper reiterating that the "Québécois nation" was Caucasian, that my slanting eyes automatically placed me in a separate category, even though Québec had given me my American dream, even though it had cradled me for thirty years (trans. Sheila Fischman).
- 34 could recite by heart a passage about Jacques Cartier (trans. Sheila Fischman).
- 35 In English, "to the people of the land," this dedication appears in neither language in the English translation of the book.
- 36 More québécois than the Québécois.
- 37 From time to time, I wake up in the middle of the night in my hotel room and ask myself: "Where am I?" In Montreal, Paris, London, Mexico, or Tokyo? Because for the past ten years I haven't stopped travelling. I, who for a long time was plagued by immobility, have now become a nomad, a citizen of the world. I have a hunger for travel that nothing satisfies.

- 38 I sleep just as well in a hotel room, a guest room or a stranger's bed as my own. In fact, I'm always glad to move (trans. Sheila Fischman).
- 39 New York, New Delhi, Moscow or Saigon (trans. Sheila Fischman).

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