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Paul Wong and Refugee Citizenship

In the summer of 1999, four rusty ships carrying 599 Chinese "boat people" who were seeking refuge arrived on the West Coast of Canada, causing heated debate in the media, in government, and in the general public about refugee status and national belonging. Most of these undocumented migrants were detained, incarcerated, and ultimately denied refugee status. On September 8, 1999, in the midst of this debate over Chinese "boat people," Adrienne Clarkson, of Chinese ethnicity herself and arguably Canada's most famous refugee, was approved as Governor General of Canada on the recommendation of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien. Clarkson was sworn in on October 8 of that year, the first racialized minority person to hold the position of the Queen's representative, the highest political office in Canada.

If Clarkson's appointment ostensibly indicated a triumph of official state multiculturalism, the detaining and rejection of the "boat people" potentially signalled its "failure."[1] In the wake of these events, Vancouver-based video artist Paul Wong was commissioned by the Canadian Race Relations Foundation (CRRF), a state-funded agency that operates at arm's length from the government and is self-described as "Canada's leading agency dedicated to the elimination of racism and all forms of racial discrimination in Canadian society" (n. pag.), to make a series of brief public service announcements for television. These announcements, which Wong titled *Refugee Class of 2000*, form part of the CRRF's "See People for Who They Really Are: Unite Against Racism" campaign, "the largest anti-racism campaign of its kind in Canadian history," designed "to engage Canadians in a national dialogue about racism"

(n. pag.).[2] Wong points out that, unlike regular public service announcements, which appear in free television slots provided by the broadcaster, "the Canadian Race Relations Foundation purchased the advertising spaces, specifically for me, [and] the 30 second ads were placed within the context of the CTV 11 [o'clock pm] National News" ("Refugee Class of 2000" n. pag.), during a prime time slot for adult viewers. In a video interview that accompanies the ads on the CRRF website, Wong also states that *Refugee Class* is made up of different layers:

> [It] was motivated by the mainstream venomous and racist view of the boat people, and I was looking for even one perspective that revealed these people as brothers, mothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, immigrants, people who had hopes and dreams and aspirations for better lives. The layer of the graduating class of 2000, which is going to be high school students; I'm going to return to my old high school because demographics have changed a lot in the inner city. I mean, I think it's gone from probably predominantly white to now predominantly Asian. The second layer is working with graphics and texts, and throws in words that are used to identify people. And then I'm going to use, I'm going to call it, the inauguration of our new Governor General. (n. pag.)[3]

The announcements, designed as education for the new millennium, began airing on January 15, 2000. In them, Wong brought the viewer face to face with students from the graduating class at Sir Charles Tupper Secondary School in Vancouver, while also exhuming the history of racism and racist exclusion in Canada. This paper examines the subtle ways in which Wong in *Refugee Class of 2000*, working for a state-funded agency, negotiates the complex balancing act between satisfying the agency's objectives and critiquing the state itself in dealing with issues of national belonging, official multiculturalism, racism, identity politics, citizenship, and transnational or diasporic identity.[4] I argue that in Wong's form of Asian Canadian critique, the transnational identities of the refugee subjects—not all of whom are Asian, and not all of whom are refugees by conventional definitions[5]—bring pressure to bear on nationalist concepts of citizenship and belonging, insisting on the paradoxical notion of refugee citizenship as an alternative to conventional concepts of national belonging.

Paul Wong had, by 1999, established a reputation as a radical video artist whose work focused on issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. One of Canada's most critically acclaimed and celebrated video artists, Wong has had a forty-year career in which he has exhibited his work around the world. He has had many screenings at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where some of his videos are in the permanent collection. In 1992, he received the

Bell Canada Award in Video Art, the most significant national prize in this field; in 1994, he was a featured Canadian artist in the prestigious CBC series *Adrienne Clarkson Presents*, thus initiating a relationship with the future Governor General; and in 1996, the National Gallery of Canada mounted a solo exhibition, *On Becoming a Man.* Later, in 2002, the Vancouver Art Gallery held a major exhibition of his work and he won the Asian Canadian Heritage Award for Transforming Art. Further high points in his career came in 2003, when his *Hungry Ghosts* was presented at the Venice Biennale, and 2005, when he won the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts. In 2008, the Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival held a retrospective of his work and in 2010 Wong was selected as the lead artist and curator presenting public artistic spectacles for the Vancouver Winter Olympics. The period I wish to focus on in Wong's *oeuvre* is the late 1990s, by which time he had moved from his earlier status as young rebel to that of highly respected artist with national and international reputations.[6]

To say that Wong was a respected artist by the 1990s does not imply that he had lost his critical edge, however. Wong began the 1990s by curating a foundational exhibition for Asian Canadian art, *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered*, "a diverse selection of experimental and documentary photo, film and video work produced by Asian Canadians" (6) that toured the country in 1990. Following on the heels of the 1988 federal Multiculturalism Act, *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* sought, according to the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, "to contribute in a positive way to these discussions [of multiculturalism] before policies and programs [were] defined. . . . To be understood, we [Asian Canadians] must first be seen and be heard," he claimed (6-7). Christine Miguel asserts that "*Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* was the first exhibition in the country to feature Asian Canadian work so visibly and prominently" and that it "contribute[d] in a concrete way to the ongoing discussion of race and representation" (Wong and Miguel 130). It should come as no surprise, then, that Wong ushered in the new millennium with the scathing, witty works for television that are the focus of my discussion here. These brief ads demonstrate that he had not lost his radical, activist edge, but that he was now pairing it with a subtle wit and irony that enabled him to straddle the line between working for a state-funded agency and critiquing the state. He thus avoided incorporation into the bounded nation, challenging it with the concept of the transnation.

The collective title and the subtitles of the three brief videos in the *Refugee Class of 2000* series bear examination for the hints they give about

Wong's objectives. The first and briefest (30 seconds) is subtitled "The Class of 2000"; the second (1 minute), "I Am a Refugee"; and the third (2 minutes), "A Refugee Prisoner's Lament." The title and subtitles consist of juxtapositions of the general or communal—the *Refugee Class of 2000*—with the increasingly particular or personal: from "The Class of 2000" through "I Am a Refugee" to "A Refugee Prisoner's Lament." Wong's technique, to which I will return shortly, encourages the viewing audience to become increasingly concerned with individual subjects in the videos through an attempt to piece their stories together as the videos, which initially use very rapid intercutting, slow down and become longer, allowing us more and more engagement of an intellectual, but especially of an affective, kind. The fact that these are public announcements that were repeated on television over a period of a month, according to Wong's recollection, adds to the creation of a narrative dimension, despite the fast-paced montage technique that makes the videos so difficult to follow on first viewing. The montage technique, I suggest, allows for the initial "hiding" of subversive or confrontational messages that accumulate greater meaning with successive viewing. Wong observes that he "created the works based on knowing [the purchased time slot of 11:00 pm] in advance," and emphasizes that this influenced his technique: "it was interesting to see this [work] slammed up against the other tv ads and news stories[;] I purposely created the fast paced, multilayered work of visuals and text so that it could be seen again and again, in fragments, in whole[,] with or without sound" ("Refugee Class of 2000" n. pag.) He intended his announcements to participate intrusively in debates about national issues that were appearing on the nightly news, and to build in effect as they were seen repeatedly.

The "Class" the title refers to is made up of thirty-four students in the 2000 graduating class from Sir Charles Tupper Secondary School in central Vancouver, a working-class, ethnically diverse area of the city. Ironically, Sir Charles Tupper, the school's namesake, was a Conservative and a staunch imperialist, embodying the Anglo-Canadian nationalist and monarchist qualities of an "ideal citizen" in his time. He was a baronet who served as the premier of Nova Scotia from 1864 to 1867, when he led the province into Confederation, then as a member of federal parliament from 1867 to 1884, and as Canadian High Commissioner to Britain from 1883 to 1895. Tupper became the shortest-serving Prime Minister in Canadian history when he held the office for sixty-nine days (May-July) in 1896. The refugees in the 2000 graduating class were clearly outsiders to the political,

governmental class represented by Sir Charles Tupper; from Wong's ironic perspective, however, they were the new founders of the Canadian nation, those who might build a truly multicultural Canada—or world, since this was ultimately a global movement more than a national one—for the twenty-first century. They provided the opportunity for a new form of confederation made up of refugees from outside and inside of Canada, from around the globe, that challenged the traditional hegemony of Anglo-Canada represented by their school's namesake, as well as the contemporary hegemony of state multiculturalism, by offering instead a transnational foundation that is supranational.

The "refugee class" of Wong's title also ironically evokes the notion that refugees constitute a group, "type," or "kind" who share common experiences—"the refugee experience." According to Liisa Malkki, nothing could be further from the truth. She states categorically that:

> "refugees" do not constitute a naturally self-delimiting domain of anthropological knowledge. Forced population movements have extraordinarily diverse historical and political causes and involve people who, while all displaced, find themselves in qualitatively different situations and predicaments. Thus, it would seem that the term refugee has analytical usefulness not as a label for a special, generalizable "kind" or "type" of person or situation, but only as a broad legal or descriptive rubric that includes within it a world of different socioeconomic statuses, personal histories, and psychological or spiritual situations. (496)

Malkki's description of the diversity of refugee experience and subjectivity speaks directly to Wong's pedagogical objectives in these public announcements: moving beyond the narrower concerns of what it might mean to be "Chinese Canadian" that he had tackled in some of his earlier videos, Wong now widens his focus to the larger issue of racism more generally and refugee subjectivity in particular. He makes the viewer ponder: "*Who* is a refugee?"[7] Two potential answers to this question had emerged into Canadian public perception in 1999: the stereotype of the Chinese "boat people" who appeared off the BC coast in the summer of 1999, and the ascendancy of Adrienne Clarkson to the position of Her Excellency, the Right Honourable Governor General of Canada.

In the summer of 1999, the stereotypical refugee was in the news almost daily: 599 Chinese "boat people" had arrived off the BC coast in four rusting boats, seeking asylum as refugees after being smuggled across the Pacific in deplorable conditions. Their arrival threw into "crisis" Canada's immigration and refugee policies: denied refugee status, the Chinese subjects were kept in detention at Canadian Forces Base Esquimalt, outside Victoria, and most

were then deported to China, an unusual treatment in a contemporary Canadian context.[8] As Joshua Greenberg observes in "Opinion Discourse and Canadian Newspapers: The Case of the Chinese 'Boat People'":

> Despite evidence that upwards of 30,000 refugees attempt entry to Canada each year (Beiser, 1999), the general feeling conveyed by news coverage of these events was that the immigration and refugee systems were being flooded by an influx of Asian "gatecrashers" (Francis, 1999a), whose presence posed numerous harms to the public. (518)

In a later article that analyzes newspaper coverage of the arrival of the Chinese migrants further, Greenberg and Sean Heir point out that:

> Although [Canada's immigration and refugee] system has been heralded as "one of the best in the world" (Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, 2000, p. 3), news coverage suggested, somewhat paradoxically, that its humanitarian imperative necessarily invites transgressions of the law because it is "too open." These themes were thus normally spoken of together, as a sequential, cause-and-effect chain of events: weak immigration/refugee system => "invitation" and "opportunity" to abuse => "influx" of illegal Chinese migrants => increase in crime.
>
> The overall ideological effect was to problematize not only the identity of the immigration and refugee systems, but also the very identities of Canadian citizens, whose sense of self, community, and nation have always been strongly aligned to an understanding of the country as a humanitarian nation state (Henry and Tator, 1994; Henry et al., 2000). (573)

It needs to be stressed that while the migrants were described as Chinese "hordes," thus implying that there were huge numbers of them, they were in fact a small minority of refuge seekers to Canada and not typical in that arrival by sea rarely occurs. Ashley Bradimore and Harald Bauder, in summarizing the academic studies of the 1999 Chinese "boat people," point out that "the consensus among these studies is that the Canadian media was heavily biased in its reporting, racializing and criminalizing the migrants. The studies revealed that the discourses of security and risk were the dominant modes of representation in the media" (640). It is precisely these racializing and criminalizing discourses that Wong seeks to make visible and to dismantle in his three brief videos, stressing instead the humanity of refuge seekers.

In direct contrast to the figure of the stereotypical refugee was the exceptional figure of Adrienne Clarkson, who came to Canada in 1942 as a two-year-old "refugee" from Hong Kong. In fact, Clarkson's father worked for the Canadian government and the family was evacuated from Hong Kong with Canadian officials after the Japanese invasion of the colony in December 1941. Clarkson grew up in Ottawa and had a very successful career as a journalist in Canadian television broadcasting before becoming a diplomat

for the Ontario government and then being selected as Governor General, the first "visible minority" person and the second woman to hold the office. Her life was represented in the national media as exceptional at the same time as her ascendancy to the position of Governor General was used to "prove" a number of national myths: Canada as a multicultural country; Canada as the place where refugees can aspire to and succeed in gaining, even "transforming," the highest non-elected office in the land.[9] With her Anglo surname, assumed through marriage and maintained after divorce, and her Asian looks, Clarkson comes to embody Canada as a "post-race" society.

Wong's videos bring together both the Chinese boat people and Clarkson, particularly in the third of the series. Made using a collage technique whereby a succession of rapidly changing students make declarations about themselves, the videos employ five repeated statements that dominate the ads: "I am a refugee" is proudly proclaimed like a chorus, interspersed with:

> "I am . . . a student, an MC, a pianist, a photographer, a mother, tall, a superstar, a basketball player, Chinese, Cambodian, the only child, part of the graduating class of 2000."
> "My name is . . . Jennifer, Sarah, Angela Koh, Lisa, Rita, Venita, Tracey Nguyen, Paul, John Ly, Jason, Jackie, Erin Ritchie."
> "I was born in . . . Vancouver BC, Ontario, BC, Lautoka Fiji, Vietnam, Korea, Taiwan, Mexico, Canada, Macao, Toronto Ontario, Penticton BC."
> "I want to be . . . a chef, a police officer, a kindergarten teacher, a marine biologist, a lawyer, a computer programmer, a famous singer, a nurse, an athlete, an accountant, travel the world, happy."

The effect of this rapidly changing collage of different speaking subjects with its voice-overs and visual intercuts is astutely analyzed by Ming Tiampo:

> Framed as a public service announcement and not art, the viewer's immediate response is surprise at the prevalence of refugees in the general population. Taken in the context of Wong's artistic practice, however, the viewer begins to wonder where fact leaves off and fiction begins. With each speaker leaving open the possibility that they too, are a refugee, self and other are broken down as discrete categories in this act of solidarity. (195)

Via the uncertainty of the status of each speaker, Wong creates a deconstructive set of reversals between "refugee" and "citizen," the two terms that are usually held in binary opposition in traditional refugee studies, until there is a vertiginous collapse between the two signifiers. Peter Nyers states that "[t]he visibility, agency, and rational speech of the citizen is lacking in the prevailing representations of the refugee. Instead, qualities of invisibility, voicelessness, and victimage are allocated with the effect of effacing the

political subjectivity of the refugee" (*Rethinking* xv). By identifying so many subjects as "refugee," including persons born inside Canada, Wong suggests that to be Canadian is to be a refugee; or that to be a refugee is to be Canadian. He articulates a bold vision of "refugee citizenship," a form of citizenship constituted not from within a predominantly Anglo-Canadian nation with a state modeled after Britain, but by refugees who arrive from all over the globe with different cultural, social, and political heritages. He offers this proposal not blithely or naively, but rather with a powerful sense of the history of Canadian state racism that he is working to change. He dares to imagine a bold new vision of the future at the cusp of the new millennium.

Both visually and through text, Wong evokes Canada's history of racist exclusion on which the traditional nation is based. As a backdrop for the speaking subjects in the third video, he shows current refugees, the "boat people," being taken to detention centres, shackled and in chains, herded by armed police. Layered over these images are several different kinds of textual statements, including a list of evocative alphabetized words ranging from "Aboriginal, AIDS, Albanian, Alberta, Alien, Apartheid, Arabic, Arrest, Aryan, Asylum, Auschwitz . . ." to "Xenophobia, You, Youth, Yugoslavia, Zaire, Zealot, Zero tolerance," each of which recalls a complex history of racism and other forms of discrimination that stretch well beyond immediate Asian Canadian concerns. The three videos are further intercut with textual messages in blue script that begin in the first ad with innocuous statements that would offend no one—"Equality for all"; "Make this a better place through your actions"—and that become, in the second, more complex, but still positive, seemingly supporting the dominant ideology: "My parents, like so many immigrants, dreamed their children into being Canadians"; "Imagine a new world country, a free and tolerant society." By the third, the statements are highly critical of Canada for its history of racism: "The lost, the rejected come dreaming of another life"; "Profiting from racism, Canada was notorious for the head tax"; "Chinese had to pay extra to be denied basic citizen rights"; "The Exclusion Act: Legislation to stop Chinese immigration"; "Classified as enemy aliens, Japanese Canadians were deported." This last statement not only evokes a particularly violent event in Canadian racial history, but plays ironically against our knowledge that Clarkson came to Canada as a "refugee" at exactly the same period as the internment. A whole segment of the Asian Canadian community, Japanese Canadians, the majority of whom were citizens by birth, were labelled "enemy aliens" and targeted for incarceration, while a few select

Asians, like Clarkson's family, were welcomed for their service to Canada's government abroad, their service to empire.

In the third video there is an additional scrolling text along the bottom of the screen that is meant to come from the mouth of one of the 599 Chinese refugees who landed on the BC coast the previous summer. This is the titular "Prisoner's Lament":

> To come to this far away land, we suffered and risked our lives. In this civilized country, I could not have imagined we would end up being treated this way. You saved us to be locked up in your prisons. Is this your justice? I do not understand. How could I not be sad? We are shuffled here to there, days and nights turn into months. We know no peace. My tears never stop. What is the crime? I do not understand. We wait and wait, hoping for release. Is this to be my fate? Judge, oh judge, please give me my freedom.

The lament evokes the writings scratched on the walls of immigration detention centres in the late-nineteenth century by Chinese immigrants who were made to pay the head tax. At the same time as he evokes the racist history on which Canada is founded, Wong implicitly asks his viewers to consider: What has changed in a century?

The final textual message of the video, "Try to forgive what is past," is taken from Adrienne Clarkson's installation speech as Governor General and appears over her portrait. This particular part of her speech resonates with Wong's message in provocative ways:

> There seem to be two kinds of societies in the world today. Perhaps there have always been only two kinds—punishing societies and forgiving societies. A society like Canada's, with its four centuries of give-and-take, compromise and acceptance, wrong-doing and redress, is basically a forgiving society. We try—we must try—to forgive what is past. The punishing society never forgets the wrongs of the past. The forgiving society works towards the actions of the future. The forgiving society enables people to behave well toward one another, to begin again, to build a society in hope and with love.

Wong's art also seeks "to build a society in hope," but it adamantly refuses "to forget the wrongs of the past," to forgive if forgiving means forgetting, as Christian doctrine urges. Instead, it seeks to build on a belief in justice for all.

After all we have witnessed in this final video, are we to take this statement—"Try to forgive what is past"—at face value, as a plea to Canada's racialized minorities to forget the racist past, to forgive the crimes committed against them, and to enter into a modern multiculturalism represented by Clarkson and all she is made to stand for? Or are we to take this statement ironically, as a critique of the presentist nature of official

multicultural policy, which advocates closure on the past, a forgetting of history as we enter into a future where all will putatively be equal? Wong's art has it both ways. It allows those who want to view the announcements as acknowledging a racist history that is recalled only to be disavowed in pursuit of new beginnings to do so, while at the same time allowing for a slant viewing in which the multiculturalism represented by Clarkson is critiqued and a call for justice is evoked, if not openly enunciated. By showing us the past repeating itself in the current racist treatment of the Chinese refuge seekers, Wong suggests that the past cannot be forgotten, cannot be laid to rest: it haunts us in the present, demanding that we refuse to "get over" it without a just reckoning. As Judith Butler reminds us in "Afterword: After Loss, What Then?": "the past is irrecoverable and [yet] the past is not past; the past is the resource for the future and the future is the redemption of the past" (467).

At the same time, the current group of refugees, the class of 2000, offers hope for "the redemption of the past," hope for the creation of "a new world country, a free and tolerant society." Such a society is based not on a singular notion of a monolithic Canadian culture, language, and race (the Sir Charles Tupper model of Anglo-Canada), or even on an English/French binary model of Canadian culture, languages, and races—Pierre Elliott Trudeau's "multiculturalism within a bilingual frame" that was always designed to privilege the "two founding races."[10] Rather, Wong's vision grounds twenty-first century Canadian citizenship on the foundation of the transnational and diasporic subjectivity of the refugee that he re-presents in both senses of the word. Refugee citizenship, an apparent oxymoron, is articulated by Wong as a goal, a future to be attained in this new millennium. We might even say that Wong has ironically recast Clarkson, a Chinese Canadian refugee who speaks fluent Cantonese, English, and French, as the head of state of this new polity of refugee citizens, thus simultaneously invoking and subverting her profoundly nationalist installation address, which is full of refugee gratitude towards Canada.[11]

The contemporary concept of the "refugee" is predicated on the prior concept of the modern bounded nation-state as a natural or organic entity, so that forced migration or "displacement" in terms of the "refugee experience" becomes an anomalous movement that threatens or destabilizes the secure, sedentary life that is considered normative in the modern nation-state. "Refugees," in this context, become populations that need to be managed, contained, resettled, and assimilated, or ideally repatriated, as if

"home" is an essential point of origin where the refugee naturally belongs—"there, not here" as dictated by xenophobic nativism. "Common notions of culture," James Clifford comments, are biased "toward rooting rather than travel" (338). Sarah Kyambi observes that,

> Standing at the threshold of nation[,] the refugee comes both to fulfil and to undermine the identity of nation. He or she is both what the nation relates itself to and what it separates itself from. In the recognition of refugees through the grant of asylum the nation fulfils its universalist claim in what is beyond it in a display of civility and humanity. Yet the refugee's presence is also seen as foreign and other, a threat to the order and unity of national identity, undermining the nation's self-presence. (25)

Wong attempts to destabilize traditional, fixed notions of the refugee further, not only by making refugees visible on camera, giving them individual and collective voices, and asserting their agency, but also by focusing not on what refugees "lose" in their routings to new places, but what they bring with them—what Canada "gains" in terms of its identity and culture, or how "they" can change "us." Wong's art thus deconstructs the binary distinctions between refugee and citizen, alien and native, foreign and domestic, "them" and "us." What it means to be "Canadian," Wong suggests, is challenged by what it might mean to be a "world citizen" in a genuinely multicultural society.[12]

In envisioning the refugee as the symbol of the world citizen, Wong is working within a significant theoretical tradition that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century. Michel Foucault, in his adumbration of the concept of "international citizenship," states: "One of the duties of international citizenship is to reveal human misery to the eyes and ears of government, as it is not true that they are not responsible for it. Human misery must never be the silent residue of politics" (qtd. in Malkki 517). Foucault's focus on the figure of human misery as the representative of international citizenship harks back to Hannah Arendt's claim in *The Origins of Totalitariansim* "that stateless persons comprise 'the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics'" (qtd. in Hayden 57), and aligns with Giorgio Agamben's assertion that the refugee, the one who experiences bare life, "is perhaps the only imaginable figure of the people in our day" ("We Refugees" n. pag.).

In "We Refugees," Agamben goes on to make the claim that "the refugee is the sole category in which it is possible today to perceive the forms and limits of a political community to come" (n. pag.), the base figure or ground

zero on which to found political rights, the one who represents "nothing less than a border concept that radically calls into question the principles of the nation-state" (n. pag.). In "Beyond Human Rights," he states further:

> If we want to be equal to the absolutely new tasks ahead, we will have to abandon decidedly, without reserve, the fundamental conceptions through which we have so far represented the subjects of the political (Man, the Citizen and its rights, but also the sovereign people, the worker, and so forth) and build our political philosophy anew starting from the one and only figure of the refugee. (159)

Wong takes up Foucault's and Agamben's challenge of revealing the human misery—but also human potential—of the refugee as the figure of the political future to the eyes and ears of government and the broader public, even if he does so subversively. As he says in the Preface to *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered*, "we must first be seen and be heard" (6), which is why he turns to video art to get his message across of the refugee as the base or ground zero of a new type of citizenship. His viscerally affective "aesthetics of heterogeneity" (Tiampo 195) makes clearly *visible* the written theories of philosophers like Foucault and Agamben.

Wong's highly radical method and message also intersect with or anticipate the work of national and local activists like Sunera Thobani, who was President of the [Canadian] National Action Committee on the Status of Women in the mid-1990s, and Harsha Walia, co-founder of the Vancouver Coast Salish Territories chapter of No One Is Illegal. With her concept of "border imperialism," Walia "disrupts the myth of Western benevolence toward migrants," focusing instead on "the processes by which the violences and precarities of displacement and migration are *structurally* created as well as maintained" by colonialism and capitalist empire (4). She observes that "Border imperialism encapsulates four overlapping and concurrent structurings," the first three of which Wong clearly evokes in his videos, albeit in a more subtle and affective manner:

> first, the mass displacement of colonized and impoverished communities resulting from asymmetrical relations of global power, and the simultaneous securitization of the border against those migrants whom capitalism and empire have displaced; second, the criminalization of migration with severe punishment and discipline for those deemed "alien" or "illegal"; third, the entrenchment of a racialized hierarchy of citizenship by arbitrating who legitimately constitutes the nation-state. (4)

In excavating Canada's violent racist past, Wong, like Walia, subverts the common assumption of Canada as a generous, peaceful nation of refuge,

while suggesting that borders create arbitrary divisions between those human subjects deemed alien/refugee/migrant and those granted the privilege of citizenship. In the third video in particular, through his use of flashing words like "apartheid," "camp," "colonialism," "displacement," "ethnic cleansing," and "nationalism"—only a few examples from a long list—he evokes Canada's past and present role in empire building that structurally produces and perpetuates inequality and refuge seekers. Further, he interrogates the need for a securitized national border to hold aliens out, propagating in the process the concept of transnational or global citizenship based on the figure of the refugee. Wong was using a state-funded agency to circulate this message just prior to the events of September 11, 2001, in the aftermath of which the tightening of borders would become even more pronounced and groups like No One Is Illegal would arise.[13]

Thobani also observes that official state multiculturalism casts "white [nationals] . . . as tolerant and respectful of difference and diversity, while non-white [immigrants and refugees are] instead constructed as perpetually and irremediably monocultural, in need of being taught the virtues of tolerance and cosmopolitanism" (148). Further, "Multiculturalism constructs [immigrant and refugee] communities as neatly bounded, separate cultural identities, unchanged by the process of migration and dislocation" (149). Wong reverses these positions to establish a genuinely critical multiculturalism in which the different subjects in the refugee class break out of this state-imposed and discrete racial, ethnic, and national segmentation; different racialized and ethnicized subjects appreciate and explore each other's differences to such an extent that they become confused and so enter into a coalition from below, a solidarity that poses a challenge to the hegemony of dominant whiteness and thus performs a critical multiculturalism. Whiteness becomes just one among many racial positions in the national and transnational conversation he portrays. In his representations, the physical positioning of the refugee subjects becomes important: in the third video they increasingly face sideways, towards each other, or even with their backs to the camera, indicating that they no longer need to account for themselves to a mainstream, white audience, the ubiquitous "dominant viewer."

The viewing audience here is somewhat different from that of Wong's earlier art videos in that Wong is not speaking to the converted, as he might be in a museum setting. Rather, he speaks in these public announcements made for television to a wide viewing audience. The videos give a doubled

message that can be seen as supporting Canadian governmental efforts against racism—official multiculturalism, forgiveness, tolerance, apology—but they also offer an opportunity to read them ironically, for radical critique. In the end, they offer the possibility of an optimistic reading for the future of a transformed Canadian citizenship, which Wong imagines at the dawn of the millennium as a critical multiculturalism, or as a type of world citizenship or transnational refugee citizenship that radically challenges and exceeds modern concepts of the bounded nation. Sixteen years into the twenty-first century, as Canadians debate the fate of a new wave of refugees, this time from Syria in West Asia, Wong's form of Asian Canadian critique remains as vitally relevant as it was in 2000.

NOTES

1 This critique of multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-religious societies based on immigration would gain momentum after 9/11, with Prime Minister Tony Blair declaring "Britain's multicultural experiment over," according to Philip Johnston in *The Telegraph* on December 9, 2006, and on October 17, 2010, Matthew Weaver reported in *The Guardian* that Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, had asserted that attempts to create a multicultural German nation had "utterly failed." I should make it absolutely clear that, while I—along with many others—mount a critique of official Canadian multiculturalism, I do so from a position that it has failed to deliver its promise of genuine equality/equity, not from a position that it threatens a cohesive (white) national culture to which we should return, the position taken by Blair and Merkel.

2 For a description of the "Unite Against Racism" campaign and access to its videos, visit the Canadian Race Relations Foundation's website.

3 See the Canadian Race Relations Foundation's video, "Unite Against Racism 15."

4 For Asian Canadian and other racialized cultural producers in Canada, state-sponsored multiculturalism provides opportunities as well as constraints in dealing with critical issues such as Canadian citizenship and national belonging, injustice and discrimination (especially racism), and identity-formation within ethnic communities. Often, Asian Canadian artists critique the shortcomings of official multiculturalism in direct ways, but at other times they must construct and advance their work within the confines of state-funded agencies or ethnic minority community groups that reflect an ethnic-community establishment beholden to the state, a situation that makes negotiating between critique and complicity a complex balancing act. Viet Thanh Nguyen and Tomo Hattori, among others, have argued that critics of Asian American literature need to move beyond a binary division between radical critique (Nguyen's "bad" Asians) and complicit accommodation (the model minority), observing that ethnic nationalist radicalism becomes its own commodity fetish within a system of cultural capital (Viet Thanh Nguyen 9-10, 150).

5 The 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees describes a refugee in relation to his/her nation as a person who, "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social

group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it" (UNHCR 14). That Wong has several of his "refugee" subjects list their place of origin or birth as inside Canada suggests that he has broadened the definition of refugee to include persons who are internally displaced for some reason—and that he considers Canada a country that both produces and receives refugees. That all his refugee subjects aren't Asian also suggests his strong commitment to coalition politics across racialized groups in order to combat white supremacy in Canada and the West.

6 In 1984, when he was 29, for example, his nine-hour-long video, *Confused: Sexual Views*, which had been commissioned by the Vancouver Art Gallery to open their new video exhibition space, was cancelled by the Gallery before it was shown on the grounds that it was not art and that it might offend viewers, leading to a huge outcry in the artistic community. Of his early work from the 1970s and 1980s, Wong says: "There is a lot of work there that was extremely personal and very revealing because it was so rebel to do that. It was claiming technology and video and image-making. Taking it from the mass media, which were owned by corporations, or by government and cable companies" (Wong and Miguel 132).

7 As P. Nobel points out, in the late twentieth century, "The overwhelming majority of refugees originate in the Third World. The direct causes of their flight are conflicts kept alive mostly by super-power politics and by weapons forged and manufactured at bargain prices in the rich countries, who export death and destruction, and import the natural and partly processed products of the poor countries" (qtd. in Malkki 504). Wong, through the text that flashes on his screen, suggests that wealthy Western democracies have also created refugee populations.

8 On Canada's immigration and refugee policy and changes in recent years, see George Usha, "Immigration and Refugee Policy in Canada: Past, Present, and Future." Since Canada's refugee policy is also connected to its policies on human rights, it is helpful also to consult Andrew Lui, who traces the national and international perception that Canada is a nation committed to universal human rights against the country's often bleak history of disregard for human rights in the exercise of its foreign policy.

9 Clarkson's official website states: "Welcome to the official website of The Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson, Canada's 26th Governor General from 1999-2005. Madame Clarkson is universally acknowledged to have transformed the office during her six years at Rideau Hall and to have left an indelible mark on Canada's history" ("Welcome" n. pag.).

10 This is the term used to describe the English and French in the 1969 Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. For a discussion of the use of this discourse to rewrite Canada's "cultural heritage" in the Commission documents, see Barrett, *Blackening Canada*.

11 On refugee gratitude and indebtedness, see Mimi Thi Nguyen; for a discussion of this topic in a Canadian context, see Vinh Nguyen.

12 For a detailed history and analysis of the concept of "world citizenship" as a form of cosmopolitanism, particularly as it is fleshed out in the work of Kant and in Agamben's counter to Kant in Agamben's theorization of the refugee, see Bishupal Limbu. He writes that "[t]he concept of cosmopolitanism as world citizenship, however, is more metaphorical than literal or practical. It is the expression of a desire or the espousal of an attitude or even the (utopian) claiming of an unrealized right more than the account of an actual state of affairs" (259). Limbu's stress on the potential of the refugee as world citizen

aligns with Wong's use of the refugee in his brief videos.

13 For an account of the rise of the No One Is Illegal movement after 9/11, see Fortier, as well as Nyers, "No One Is Illegal Between City and Nation."

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