

Enacting the Asian Canadian

I

The history of Asian Canadian literature begins, strictly speaking, with the publication of *Inalienable Rice: A Chinese and Japanese Canadian Anthology* in 1979. This is not to say that literature by Canadians of Asian descent begins then: attempts to trace such an “origin” might look back to poems etched onto immigration detention centre walls in British Columbia or the well-known work of the Eaton sisters of Montreal (Edith Maud Eaton, who wrote under the name Sui Sin Far, and Winnifred Eaton, who used the pseudonym Onoto Watanna).¹ But insofar as the editors of *Inalienable Rice* offered a conscious exposition of the term “Asian Canadian,” the anthology was, to borrow a definition by Hannah Arendt that I will return to in the course of this essay, an *action* that “engages in founding and preserving political bodies, [creating] the condition for remembrance, that is, for history” (8–9).² Arendt’s compact definition evokes some key themes in Asian Canadian studies, including the possibility of new sociopolitical formations, the stakes of memory, and the status of history.

Critics working on Asian Canadian studies, including the contributors to this special issue, have written extensively about the historical circumstances that led to the emergence of Asian Canadian identity, often by drawing comparisons with the Asian American movement. Such accounts have also discussed the challenges of antiracist organizing within and among Asian Canadian communities, especially in light of state-sponsored multiculturalism. There is a general consensus among scholars and critics that Asian Canadian culture as such is a relatively recent phenomenon that has yet to gain the recognition that Asian American culture has south of the border.

Donald Goellnicht has described the development of Asian Canadian literature as a “protracted birth” and “a long labour,”³ while Guy Beauregard bluntly declares, in the introduction to this special issue, that, “in Canada, *ethnic studies itself appears to be faring very badly*.”

Keeping these diagnoses in mind, I want to focus on a moment when a sense of Asian Canadian culture did indeed take hold. The text that I want to turn to is *Inalienable Rice*, which combined social activism with literary production in an unprecedented manner. *Inalienable Rice* was produced as a result of the joint effort of two community groups: the (Japanese Canadian) Powell Street Revue and the Chinese Canadian Writers Workshop. Having decided that “a publication of Asian Canadian writings had been long overdue” (viii), the editors produced a compilation of articles, fiction, interviews, visual art, photographs, and poetry by Joy Kogawa, Paul Yee, Roy Kiyooka, Sharon (SKY) Lee, Jim Wong-Chu, Roy Miki, and others (readers of Asian Canadian literature will undoubtedly recognize these figures, as they continue to play major roles in shaping the emerging Asian Canadian cultural scene). The circulation of *Inalienable Rice* was limited—only six hundred copies were produced (Chao, *Beyond Silence* 49)—but this fact makes its subsequent influence on Asian Canadian culture all the more remarkable, for the anthology continues to serve as a (if not *the*) point of reference for critical accounts of Asian Canadian literary history.⁴

In their introduction, the editors begin with the following qualification: “we will use the term Asian Canadian to mean Chinese and Japanese Canadian. This is for convenience rather than an attempt to define the work or exclude other groups for any ideological reason” (viii). However, what seems to be a carefully used heuristic term soon acquires a life of its own. The next paragraph opens with this statement:

What has characterized our experiences growing up Asian Canadian has been a sense of separation from all things Asian Canadian. We learned little about our ancestors, the pioneers who had made this land grow, “caught silver from the sea”, laid the rails that had bound British Columbia to Canada. Our school books didn’t deal with the Vancouver racial riots of 1887 and 1907, or the World War Two expulsion, incarceration and later dispersal of the Japanese Canadians, or the disenfranchisement of both peoples until the late 1940s. (viii)

While it recognizes differences between Chinese Canadian and Japanese Canadian experiences, with the internment of the latter being the most obvious distinction, the introduction is more concerned with establishing a panethnic collective by defining Asian Canadian identity in terms of

a shared history of racism. In the passage above, “history” is far more than just a factual record of the past, which could just as easily reinforce the differences between Chinese and Japanese Canadians. Rather, it functions as a profoundly paradoxical concept: the editors interpret the absence of history from their own experience and consciousness as an indication of the pernicious inescapability of a racist past.

According to the editors, racism is most clearly manifested in the pressure to “assimilat[e] into the liberal white middle class” (viii). Rejecting this fate, they embark on a wide-ranging search for identity: “Only through encounters with others already questioning this process [of assimilation], through exposure to Asian American literature, on personal searches for a satisfactory sense of identity, or by sheer inadvertence, were we able to break out of this syndrome of trying to become white. By the development of our own Asian Canadian literature, both creative and analytical, we are setting out to bridge that separation from ourselves and other Asian Canadians” (viii). Coming at the end of a paragraph that identifies a “sense of separation from all things Asian Canadian” at the heart of the editors’ experiences as racialized subjects, this passage reinforces the notion of an Asian Canadian subjectivity who is deeply alienated from his or her history and, consequently, from a holistic sense of self.

As a literary anthology, *Inalienable Rice* implies that the very act of writing and, by extension, the institutions of literature offer the means through which to bridge the “gap” between self and history, subject and community. For example, historiographical essays by Bennett Lee, Paul Yee, Art Shimizu, and others provide knowledge largely unavailable to the general public at that time. In another essay, Donald Yee describes the pioneering Chinese Canadian radio program *Pender Guy* as an attempt to bring “immigrants and native borns” (65) together to address a pervasive ignorance among Chinese Canadians about their own history. In a more reflective tone, Jim Wong-Chu’s poem “old chinese cemetery (kamloops 1977/july)” includes the following lines:

searching for scraps
of haunting memories.
like a child unloved
pressing his face hard
against the wet window
peering in
straining with anguish
for a desperate moment
I touch my past. (8)

The emotional intensity of this poem, with its mixture of pain, indignation, and determination, evokes the “desperation” of the alienated Asian Canadian subject who “strains” to heal the psychic wounds inflicted by racism through a reconnection with personal and collective histories. In retrospect, Wong-Chu’s poetry evokes themes that continue to preoccupy Asian Canadian literature to this day. Indeed, the influence of the anthology as a whole is confirmed by the fact that several of its pieces have been republished in other collections and made available to larger audiences.

If the goals of the anthology seem to be clear enough, what isn’t always clear is the meaning of “Asian Canadian” itself. The introduction declares that *Inalienable Rice* is a collection of “material by, for and about Asian Canadians,” and the editors describe their efforts as an attempt to articulate an “Asian Canadian perspective” (viii). As we have already seen, the status of “Asian Canadian” shifts within the course of a single page from a heuristic device to a term that encompasses a set of objective and definable experiences. In other words, it starts to function as a marker of ethnic difference in its own right and the ground for a distinct epistemological position. As an Asian Canadian identity emerges in this manner, the provisionality of the term dissipates, and it becomes harder to maintain the historical differences between its constituent groups.

What I am describing here is not so much a case of rhetorical slippage as a process that is representative of attempts to produce and inaugurate an Asian Canadian identity. Some thirty years after *Inalienable Rice*’s publication, critics are likely to be more cautious when invoking Asian Canadian identity as such. In the wake of critiques of essentialism, a straightforward and unproblematic definition of such a formation hardly seems to be possible since there are usually experiences that are marginalized or excluded by identitarian categories, such as those of mixed-race or queer subjects as well as more recent immigrants. Indeed, as Goellnicht’s essay “A Long Labour: The Protracted Birth of Asian Canadian Literature” demonstrates, one of the tasks of Asian Canadian studies has been to trace and describe these inclusions and exclusions. But while it is critical to trace the meanings and implications of Asian Canadian identity, I want to focus in this essay on the conditions of its emergence, a task that underscores my interest in *Inalienable Rice*. In reading this anthology, I want to consider how questions about the instability of Asian Canadian identity circulate within the powerful intervention articulated by the text, with its claim that the use of identitarian categories is politically justified. There is, to my mind, something compelling and convincing about its call for

empowerment. Asian Canadian studies continues to be invested in this legacy even as it redefines identitarian categories or even places them under erasure. Asian Canadian cultural formations continue to demonstrate the instability of identity, but this instability is extraordinarily generative insofar as it is the catalyst for a flourishing body of work by critics, activists, and artists.

II

Inalienable Rice's standing as the founding text of Asian Canadian literature has been confirmed in a number of subsequently published anthologies and critical texts. These discussions generally emphasize its status as an anthology, a collective effort that is in some way connected to a broader struggle against racist exclusion. In her extensive study of ethnic Canadian anthologies compiled in the 1970s and 1980s (a discussion that does not include *Inalienable Rice* although its observations are applicable to it), Smaro Kamboureli writes, "As efforts to make a collective statement, or to convey what is current, anthologies, perhaps more than individual titles, reflect the values shaping a given tradition or, conversely, a perceived need to revise that tradition. . . . [B]y making available new as well as traditionally ignored and marginalized authors, these texts also make visible, in direct or indirect ways, the cultural and political histories that inform the production of this writing" (133). According to Kamboureli, anthologies are important because they exceed the limitations of "individual titles" by engaging a "tradition" and revealing "cultural and political histories" that have been marginalized.

This emphasis on collective authorship is echoed in the most extensive critical examination of *Inalienable Rice* to date, Lien Chao's "Anthologizing the Collective: The Epic Struggles to Establish Chinese Canadian Literature in English," first published in *Essays on Canadian Writing* in 1995 and subsequently included in her groundbreaking study *Beyond Silence: Chinese Canadian Literature in English* (1997). Using terms drawn from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's well-known account of minor literatures, Chao situates *Inalienable Rice* within a collective Chinese Canadian history:

The "epic struggles" [Chao is referring to the editors' description of their project] also specify the historical conditions for the birth of a community-based minority literature in English. Chinese Canadians have been prepared for a reterritorialization because the community had been historically suppressed as a racial minority for almost a century, and the accumulated resistance against the imposed deterritorialization is too strong to die out. The combination of these two conditions provokes the community, especially its native-born generations, with a psychological need to cry out in the dominant discourse. (*Beyond* 38)

For Chao, *Inalienable Rice* marks the culmination of a century of resistance. Her discussion seems to treat resistance as something tangible and material, something that possesses a measure of agency insofar as it “accumulates” and “provokes.” The idea of a community-based literature is central to her larger project, “which adopts a power paradigm of silence vs voice to identify the historical transition experienced by Chinese Canadians from a collective silence to a voice in the official discourse” (*Beyond* 17). Chao elaborates her understanding of “official discourse” by exploring the risks of writing in English and proceeds to construct a genealogy that links *Inalienable Rice* to a more recent anthology of Chinese Canadian writing, *Many-Mouthed Birds: Contemporary Writing by Chinese Canadians* (edited by Bennett Lee and Jim Wong-Chu, 1991). She concludes that “The publications of *Inalienable Rice* and *Many-Mouthed Birds* were long-awaited historical events for the community. They signified the collective social advancement and cultural development of contemporary Chinese Canadians. As landmark publications, they have helped to reclaim the community history [sic], to define and redefine the Chinese Canadian identity in a dynamic community” (*Beyond* 50).

While Chao is careful to point out that “‘Chinese-Canadian’ does not totalize individual experience” (45), her awareness of intracommunity pluralism is constrained by her investment in a unified collective identity.⁵ Her essay is particularly valuable because it argues for an alternative critical and aesthetic tradition within Canadian literature and culture, and in this sense, her focus on unity despite diversity places her critical trajectory squarely in line with that of *Inalienable Rice*. In adhering to the spirit of *Inalienable Rice*, however, her perceptive reading also reproduces some of the shortcomings of the anthology’s approach to identity, a point that is demonstrated in her treatment of silence. While her study gestures toward a broad definition of silence that takes its resistive potential into account, it largely figures empowerment in terms of voice.⁶ Chao writes,

since silence is not as noticeable as speech, in order to reach the otherwise inaccessible silence, speech has to be born in its space. Only then can the disadvantage of silence be transformed into a resource of words. . . . The “unpredictable impact” resulting from transforming silence into voice can disturb the stability of the existing social structure. Therefore it is important for the marginalized to see that its silence *can* be transformed to a voice in the dominant discourse, and so lead to social changes. (*Beyond* 22)

Chao’s insistence on speech as a tool of empowerment aligns her cultural politics with those of *Inalienable Rice*. This commitment to speech and

writing considers the emergence of a literary corpus by Asian Canadian writers on Asian Canadian topics to be a sign of “social advancement and cultural development.” Indeed, *Beyond Silence* claims to respond directly to this development: discussing the increased publication of texts by Chinese Canadian authors during the 1980s and 1990s, Chao declares, “There had never been a time in which so many Chinese Canadian writers were publishing for the first time and being reviewed and recognized! As well, there had never been a time when there was such a need for critical interpretations of Chinese Canadian literature” (*Beyond* xi).

What interests me here is how *Beyond Silence* relies on what I would call a logic of critical mass when it draws our attention to the “accumulation” of resistance or a body of published literary texts as the impetus for recognizing Asian Canadian culture as such. I am not suggesting that there is anything wrong with this approach per se, as it would be pointless to posit Asian Canadian culture in the absence of any empirical referents. But what can get overlooked in such a move are the meanings and implications of the category itself, which becomes justified on the ground that there is an already existing critical mass of Asian Canadian culture. Left unexamined are the conditions that produce the Asian Canadian and the subjectivities that such a term might describe. Instead, what gets privileged is the completed act of emergence, which marks the culmination of a historical narrative of oppression and resistance, a narrative that finally functions to call into existence and justify the Asian Canadian.

III

Although texts such as *Inalienable Rice* and *Beyond Silence* privilege speech and writing as acts of political contestation, their use of identitarian categories raises other issues that we should consider in the broader context of Canadian multiculturalism. Critics have shown how multiculturalism preserves and even celebrates cultural differences without transforming the social and institutional structures that maintain and reinforce racism. As Kamboureli argues, “The Multiculturalism Act (also known as Bill C-93) recognizes the cultural diversity that constitutes Canada, but it does so by practicing a sedative politics, a politics that attempts to recognize ethnic differences, but only in a contained fashion, in order to manage them” (82). She goes on to point out how discussions of multiculturalism in Canada often reveal an obsession with establishing the presence of racially marked (“visible minority”) bodies. Addressing the rhetoric of race in mass media,

she describes a recurring “effort to force the national imaginary to confront multiculturalism through body images, images already racialized and ethnicized. When, for example, the media approach the representation of difference through stories that focus on numbers (how many dollars are granted to multicultural projects, or how many people of colour serve on Canada Council juries), they offer a crude way of exposing the power dynamics inherent in such issues” (89).

This focus on bodies produces a “representational econom[y]” employed by “public discourse, and sometimes also by members of ethnic communities” (89) in which ethnic and racial differences are reified. The presence of a critical mass of racially marked bodies, understood as material evidence of an existing multicultural society, has been effectively mobilized in order to construct versions of Asian Canadian identity defined by consumption. Commercial multiculturalism is, after all, dependent on a critical mass of bodies that can be turned into a potential consumer demographic. Across Canada, corporate sponsorship of Asian-themed events such as Asian Heritage Month, Asian-themed film festivals, and Dragon Boat Festivals has become hot business. Moreover, forms of consumption—food, fashion, recreation, culture, and so on—have been presented as (pan-) Asian activities in order to cater to an emerging market of young, cosmopolitan, and affluent consumers.⁷ My purpose is not to disparage these developments but to point out their limitations, especially in comparison to the more expansive political visions articulated in *Inalienable Rice* and *Beyond Silence*. The ease with which Asian Canadian identity has been integrated into a globalized economy brings to mind critiques of multiculturalism that identify it as, in Slavoj Žižek’s words, “the cultural logic of multinational capitalism.”⁸

The problem of commodification alerts us to how the presence of Asian Canadians is always conditional. Since the arrival of Asians in what would later become Canada, the state, as well as culture at large, through numerous attempts at management and control, has determined the terms through which these subjects appear and exist. Through a shifting series of exclusions and inclusions, these apparatuses (re)produce and manage Asian subjects, who have been defined variously (and often simultaneously) as sources of labour, threats to the white mainstream, sexualized bodies, bearers of capital, and so on. To my mind, analytic frameworks based on a rigid division between presence and absence are reductive because they ignore the nuances of Asian Canadian subjectivity. This is not to deny the absence of Asian Canadian history from public discourses or the lack of Asian representation

in mainstream culture. What is problematic, however, is the elevation of such exclusions into the defining characteristic of Asian Canadian identity without paying attention to the conditions under which Asian Canadian subjects have always been made present. If the production of the Asian Canadian as consumer depends on the conflation of identity and economics, then the problem lies not so much in whether such subjects are indeed present as in whether their presence can be mobilized into critical interventions against exploitation and injustice.

Critics concerned with the relatively restricted realm of literary arts and culture remain susceptible to reproducing the logic of presentencing. Kamboureli illustrates this point through a critique of Linda Hutcheon's influential account of Canadian postmodernism. Kamboureli writes that for Hutcheon, "ethnic difference is endowed with political value precisely because it is named, because naming allows identities previously ignored and subjugated to become *present*. But this *presentencing* . . . makes ethnicity a sign of cultural excess: ethnic identity is one of the many 'ex-centric' identities that Hutcheon's postmodernism embraces and, in some ways, commodifies" (167; emphasis added). For scholars and critics of Asian Canadian literature, the consolidation of an alternative canon remains a pressing task even as we might express reservations about the process of canonization as such. But as Kamboureli suggests, discourses around texts by minority authors often treat texts as stand-ins for marked bodies and represent material manifestations of the "voices" we seek to recover and recentre. The act of discovering and explicating texts thus makes present what has hitherto been erased or suppressed. In the context of the canon and culture wars, texts themselves come to stand in for previously marginalized subjects. In other words, the presence of these texts (in libraries, bookstores, reading lists, syllabi, and so on) signifies a negation of silence.

I am certainly not alone in advocating theoretical interrogation of the terms under which Asian Canadian literature emerges. The focus of the field has gradually shifted from making texts available in order to establish the existence of Asian Canadian literature as such to sustaining a critical interrogation of the conditions of that presence. This shift offers a way to periodize Asian Canadian studies in terms of distinct theoretical concerns even though this division does not translate into neat chronological periods. Chao's reading of *Many-Mouthed Birds* is an example of the first approach in that it seeks to place the text in a genealogical relationship to *Inalienable Rice* as "a new landmark" that signifies the "continuous growth" of Chinese

Canadian literature (*Beyond* 33). In contrast, Roy Miki's widely-read essay "Asiancy: Making Space for Asian-Canadian Writing"—which appeared in print the same year as Chao's "Anthologizing the Collective"—argues that the commercial production and circulation of *Many-Mouthed Birds* reifies ethnic differences and compromises the extent and integrity of its political intervention.

Let me pause here to compare these two essays in greater detail. Both Chao and Miki are committed to an oppositional Asian Canadian literature. Both explicitly refer to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "minor literature" in their arguments, but their applications of this model differ significantly. Chao argues in *Beyond Silence* that "one hundred and thirty-seven years after its settlement, the Chinese Canadian community has finally achieved a *reterritorialization* when its first-generation writers started to publish in English," an occasion that allows them to "share their community history and personal experiences through literary forms with a wider audience" (24; emphasis added). Her interest in reterritorialization is consistent with her understanding of contemporary Chinese Canadian literature as a site of community empowerment. The presence of such texts implies access to a broad readership across ethnic and racial groups and signifies the entry of Chinese (and Asian) Canadians into mainstream culture.

In contrast, Miki privileges *detrterritorialization*. In his discussion of Japanese Canadian writing in "Asiancy" (and elsewhere in the collection *Broken Entries: Race Writing Subjectivity*),⁹ he notes how the trauma of internment resulted in lingering psychic and communal wounds: "The touchstone of community had slipped out from under, so no framework existed for reproducing, even identifying in meaningful self-critical patterns, a shared history. Instead, the weakening of community-based values often led to self-denial, self-effacement, passivity, and a fear of politics, qualities that aided in the stereotype of Japanese Canadians as the 'model minority'" (112). In light of these conditions, Miki argues that "the act of '*detrterritorialization*' through writing" is "a viable method for resisting assimilation, for exploring variations in form that undermine aesthetic norms, for challenging homogenizing political systems, for articulating subjectivities that emerge from beleaguered community—even at the risk of incomprehensibility, unreadability, indifference, or outright rejection" (118; emphasis added). Resistance, in other words, is located first and foremost in the discursive realm and, more specifically, in the use of language itself. "Asiancy" ends with a call for "a renewed belief in the viability of agency"

(123) expressed through the act of writing as a creative and politically scrupulous engagement with language.

Locating political contestation in the realm of language has important consequences for Miki's treatment of the silence-to-voice paradigm. In his analysis of Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981), perhaps the most famous literary text dealing with the internment of Japanese Canadians, he traces how many scholars and critics have read the novel as a text in which the silence of the protagonist, Naomi Nakane, is resolved through the emergence of her own voice as well as the recovery of writings by her mother. Discussing the ambiguous implications of the government memorandum against the deportation of Japanese Canadians that Kogawa appends to the end of *Obasan*, Miki argues that its inclusion performs another erasure of Japanese Canadian agency in a manner that evokes the pressure to assimilate into mainstream Canadian society after the Second World War. Miki writes, "instead of resolving the dichotomy between silence and speech, between repression and exposure," *Obasan* "ends within a gap where private and public are dichotomized as a status. Japanese Canadians are still *spoken for*" (117).

For Miki, the ambiguity of *Obasan*'s ending exemplifies the difficulty of establishing an Asian Canadian voice. As a minority literature situated within an often hostile cultural landscape, "coming to voice" requires an engagement with the mainstream in order to overcome cultural and racial barriers. While Chao is certainly aware of this problem, Miki is far more cautious and even pessimistic about the political benefits of such engagements. In addition to his reading of *Obasan*, "Asiancy" includes, as I have already mentioned, an extended critique of the commodification of *Many-Mouthed Birds* (although Miki also points out that many of the pieces in that anthology exhibit "strategies of deterritorialization in the reappropriation of 'English' as the language of dominance and complicity" [122]). Miki finally insists that difference, as the product and legacy of traumatic histories, cannot be superseded in a facile manner. Instead, he strategically mobilizes difference itself in order to unsettle homogenizing discourses and enable the exposure and critical negation of reified identities.¹⁰

Miki's model of Asian Canadian critique is rooted in a conception of identity as "a network of articulations and theoretical concerns that not only undermine assimilationist pressures but also allow for provisional spaces where writers of colour can navigate diversity within the specificity of histories, languages, and subjectivities" (107). This model of political subjectivity suggests that any move to establish its actuality must also be an act

of discursive space clearing, for which there are never guarantees that resistance and critique will emerge in its wake. As Guy Beauregard has suggested, “Asian Canadian literature as a critical category is not, in and of itself, either subversive or thoroughly regulated; instead, we might productively consider discussions of the term in relation to their institutional locations and histories of resistance they address” (“Emergence” 12).

IV

While it is clear that history is one of the terrains on which Asian Canadian studies endeavours to intervene, I want to suggest that Asian Canadian literature should not only be read as having a responsive relationship to history. The danger of invoking historical master narratives to understand literature is that such moves do not recognize the key role of the literary in constructing the very conditions under which consciousness of the past emerges. Although the writings of Chao and Miki are conditioned by personal experiences of racism, their work as critics and scholars situates them in relation to objective histories that exceed their own experiences. As a result, both are engaged in theorizing an Asian Canadian subject who can remain cognizant of, and responsible to, legacies of anti-Asian racism that permeate Canadian culture and society to this day. This subject always occupies a paradoxical space and negotiates the predicament of being both inside and outside mainstream society. In this context, Chao raises the dilemma of the Chinese Canadian writer whose use of English is both a sign of cultural loss and a potential tool for collective empowerment. Similarly, Miki’s discussion of co-optation alerts us to the risks of asserting Asian Canadian identity even while his project necessarily, albeit cautiously, requires such moves.

Instead of reiterating the many arguments that have already been made about the promises and dangers of Asian Canadian identity politics or, indeed, identity politics as such, I want to suggest that a focus on the act or event of cultural intervention might offer useful critical tools for Asian Canadian studies. Let me return, then, to *Inalienable Rice* and Hannah Arendt’s notion of action. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt is concerned with how social formations can be changed through the actions of individual members. In her definition, action, which she describes as “political activity par excellence” (9), is instigated by subjects within a social context—that is, in relation to other subjects. Action is generative insofar as it elicits and even inspires responses from others. It enables societies to embark in new directions and to account for the often unpredictable character of collectivities.

For Arendt, the existing social order can be radically interrupted by the emergence of temporary new formations.¹¹ She writes, “This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins. . . . [T]he new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle” (178). The miraculous character of action underscores its contingency, but Arendt also argues that actions are often reabsorbed and neutralized. Indeed, “every body politic” functions to “offer some protection against the inherent boundlessness of action [although] they are altogether helpless to offset its . . . inherent unpredictability” (191).

Arendt is interested not in idealizing action and actors but in describing the nature of political contestation as such. She suggests that actions are important ultimately because they reveal the identities of actors, which in turn become materials for stories compiled in “the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants” (192). As Arendt writes, “*Who* somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero—his biography, in other words; everything else we know of him, including the work he may have produced and left behind, tells us only *what* he is or was” (186). In the aftermath of action, history is (re)written and disseminated, but it is important to note that actions fundamentally alter the very ways in which we imagine history itself.

To be sure, Arendt does not directly address the racial identity politics that have been the focus of attention in Asian Canadian studies.¹² Nevertheless, her concept of action offers a productive way to think about the disruptive potential of Asian Canadian culture in a way that moves beyond binary frameworks of majority and minority, mainstream and marginalized, white and visible minority. This is not to deny the importance, indeed the centrality, of race in the work of Asian Canadian studies, but it is to consider the possibility that an event such as the publication of *Inalienable Rice* cannot be historicized only within narratives of anti-Asian racism. Instead, the very act of publication establishes the conditions for an alternative history; in doing so, it enacts an identity that is both a site for remembrance and an instrument of political contestation. One of the main tasks of Asian Canadian studies, then, is to identify moments when specific interventions inaugurate social movements and determine the path of future actions, even if such moments are ephemeral in and of themselves.

Paying attention to the act of acting, as it were, brings us back to the banal material (in the sense of the practical) circumstances under which *Inalienable Rice* was produced. According to Terry Watada, one of the contributors, the editors were “tired of the inactivity” and encouraged by community leaders to

do something—get a grant and put together an anthology, an Asian Canadian anthology. And so they did. . . . *Inalienable Rice: A Chinese & Japanese Canadian Anthology* appeared in 1980 [sic]. . . . [T]he first collection of Asian Canadian writing featured many writers who were later to have a significant impact on Canadian letters and politics. . . . The anthology, a perfect-bound magazine of eighty-three pages with a simple black and white drawing of a bowl of rice, fork and knife and chopsticks on the front cover, was a humble first step for these writers but its importance is obvious when considering future publications [of Asian Canadian literature]. (90)¹³

As a contingent event, the publication of *Inalienable Rice* depended on the efforts and competencies of those involved rather than on historical necessity as such. The “humble first step” has, in the twenty-five years since its publication, turned out to be a foundational event for an emergent canon and cultural movement. While Watada doubts that community leaders and activists from that period “could have foreseen what was to become of their desire for an Asian Canadian culture and community,” the results marked a new direction for Asian Canadian literature. Watada concludes, “a spirit was born that created the possibility of an Asian Canadian writing. I am still affected by it—my own writing of poetry, music, plays, and fiction thrives on it” (90).

What I find most revealing about Watada’s comments is his sense of surprise, a sign of his dual role (in Arendt’s terms) as actor and historian. About a decade after the publication of *Inalienable Rice*, Paul Wong expressed similar sentiments about the art exhibition *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered*.¹⁴ Wong writes, “We can start to see what links us as Asians and as Canadians. We can see similar sensibilities at play and at work, we can start to see and to understand the differences. There is an Asian Canadian sensibility, there is an Asian Canadian contemporary art, there is an Asian Canadian photo, film and video community. Produced against all odds, *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* is a testimony that we do indeed exist” (12).

One can well imagine the range of odds – practical, financial, conceptual, and so on – that this type of cultural activism might encounter. Overcoming such challenges does not, of course, imply the overcoming of racism. Indeed, Wong is careful to tell us that he is not idealizing the Asian Canadian subject and implying that conditions of equality and emancipation exist where

they do not. Nevertheless, his comments articulate the sense of surprise that reveals something of the nature of action: the enactment of the Asian Canadian is an actualization of the improbable if not the impossible—in the final reading, nothing short of a miracle.

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NOTES

- 1 For information about poetry written in immigration detention centres, see Lai. Much has been written about the Eaton sisters and their writing; useful background information can be found in Ferens, and White Parks.
- 2 As Donald Goellnicht has pointed out, the first anthology of poetry by Canadian writers of Asian descent was Stephen Gill's *Green Snow: Anthology of Canadian Poets of Asian Origin* (1976), but Gill's volume is defined primarily in ethnic (most of the writers featured are of South Asian origin), not *panethnic*, terms. While Gill offers interesting insights into Asian writing in Canada, the text, in my opinion, does not make a marked social intervention in the manner of *Inalienable Rice*.
- 3 Goellnicht's essay offers a thorough account of Asian Canadian literary history. His wide-ranging investigation describes many of the figures and institutions (e.g., journals, community associations, and academic ethnic studies) that would play large roles in an emerging Asian Canadian literature and addresses the unique racial politics of Canada and the significance of multiculturalism. Goellnicht situates his account in a comparative framework *vis-à-vis* the development of Asian American literature in order to investigate the reasons for the relatively slow development of Asian Canadian literature. One of his important observations concerns the continuing use of "Asian Canadian" primarily to refer to Canadians of *East* Asian descent, thereby leaving out the well-published South Asian community. Like Goellnicht, I am interested in theorizing the emergence of a distinctly *Asian Canadian* literature, but I am concerned in this essay with specific acts that have, in retrospect at least, been foundational in its establishment.
- 4 See, for example, Chao, Introduction; Lai and Lum; and Quan.
- 5 Since *Beyond Silence* is a study of Chinese Canadian literatures in English, Chao does not address the interethnic aspects of the text.
- 6 Guy Beauregard makes a similar observation in his essay "The Emergence of 'Asian Canadian Literature': Can Lit's Obscene Supplement?" in which he briefly discusses Chao's essay. Like Beauregard, I am suspicious of claims to voice, but our theoretical approaches are somewhat different.
- 7 For example, *Banana* magazine enjoyed great acclaim when it debuted in 1999 (it was run by a group of progressive editors and writers). Part of its success lay in its ability to present an Asian (Canadian) lifestyle that extended to food, fashion, and recreation (the

subtitle of the publication was *asian-canadian lifestyle and culture magazine*). Although the magazine is no longer published, it demonstrated the existence of a market for Asian Canadian themes.

- 8 Žižek argues that renewed investment in ethnic identities, of which contemporary multiculturalism is a prime example, merely reinforces the domination of a universalizing capitalism. From that perspective, the production of “other” cultures serves to underscore the normativity of a global order. As Žižek writes, “multiculturalism is a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism. . . . [I]t ‘respects’ the Other’s identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed ‘authentic’ community” (44). For a related argument that engages more specifically with the conditions of North American race relations, see San Juan, Jr.
- 9 “Asiancy” was first presented as a paper at an annual conference of the Association for Asian American Studies in 1993 and first appeared in print in the 1995 essay collection *Privileging Positions: The Sites of Asian American Studies*; see Okihiro et al.
- 10 Also see Miki’s recent book *Redress: Inside the Japanese Canadian Call for Justice*, which chronicles his personal participation in the Japanese Canadian redress movement. This text builds on the reflections about race and writing in *Broken Entries* by focusing on a specific political movement that mobilized identity politics.
- 11 For a discussion of the immediate contexts addressed by Arendt, see Isaac. A more extensive account of Arendt’s background can be found in Canovan.
- 12 That being said, Arendt frequently returned to topics such as anti-Semitism and civil rights throughout her career, which was deeply affected by her own experiences as a Jewish émigré fleeing fascist Germany. For a discussion of the relationship between Arendt’s political thought and contemporary identity politics, see McGowan, who includes an extensive discussion of the relationship between action and identity.
- 13 Watada’s essay appears in a special issue of *Canadian Literature* on *Asian Canadian Writing*, edited by Glenn Deer, as a personal account of Asian Canadian cultural activism in the 1970s and 1980s. For a more extensive history of Asian Canadian activism, see Li. Capturing the momentum of Asian Canadian literature, Deer traces the trope of forced mobility (the example he cites is the arrival of Fujianese migrants in British Columbia in 1999) but ends by turning it into a source of hope as he calls for “the kind of mobility” that would enable Asian Canadians 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).
- 14 Wong’s comments were made in his essay “Yellow Peril: Reconsidered,” also the title of an exhibit he curated that has since been recognized as an important event in Asian Canadian cultural activism. For a discussion of the theoretical implications of the event, see Koh.

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