

Must All Asianness Be American?

The Census, Racial Classification, and Asian Canadian Emergence

[N]othing classifies somebody more than the way he or she classifies.

—Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words* (131)

I begin this paper with the observation that “Asian Canadian” seems to be in the process of shedding its quotations, those real or imagined marks suggesting the tentativeness of its relatively recent installment in the academy. With this shedding, the Asian Canadian classification appears to have arrived at a certain sense of categorical self-possession and legitimacy, no longer carrying itself as a hesitant cultural modifier. Perhaps this development is vaguely reminiscent of the cultural nationalist period of Asian American cultural criticism that saw the dropping of the hyphen from “Asian-American” to assert the integrity of a fully constituted “American” identity, rejecting the hyphen’s function of consigning “Asian” to the status of a subordinate qualifier. But despite the way that the Asian Canadian category may be demonstrating a bit more poise, it strikes me that it can’t quite shake a certain furtiveness over the context of its emergence. In particular, while Asian Canadian studies continues to enjoy steady growth, its main context of representation has been in the realm of literary culture—its renaissance inaugurated chiefly by literary academics rather than activists¹—so much so that it remains unclear to what extent Asian Canadian panethnicity exists as a social and political identity outside the academy. The purpose of this essay is therefore to explore the emergence of “Asian Canadian” as a *social* category against the backdrop of a distinctive Canadian racial formation and in the shadow of Asian America.

It is not surprising that since the 1990s significant attention in the Asian Canadian field has been directed at exploring its affinities with its Asian American neighbour (see Beauregard). Corresponding histories of labour exploitation, exclusion laws, disenfranchisement, and internment have provided a material basis for a diasporic alliance between these panethnic configurations. The incorporation of key Asian Canadian texts in Asian American literary studies has also encouraged scholars to examine the significance and function of border-crossing texts such as those by the Eaton sisters and Joy Kogawa.² The results of these particular developments have included facilitating the growth of an attendant bridging term, “Asian North America,” under which comparative examinations of Asian Canadian and Asian American texts have been undertaken (see Ty; and Ty and Goellnicht). In addition, there have been eager pronouncements of a renewed commitment to foregrounding debates about “race” in mainstream Canadian academic discourse (see Coleman and Goellnicht). In following these directions in the field, however, I often get the sense that Asian Canadian emergence and development are often reliant, even parasitic, on the association with Asian American literary studies and on US conceptualizations of race. Without a social movement to anchor its development, the Asian Canadian field continues to subsist as an armchair academic variant of a socially rooted Asian American model.³ What I’d like to examine more closely here is whether it is possible to view Asian Canada as a social category that is part of a distinctly Canadian racial formation, one that cannot be seen through the US prism of race. Or, to pose a variation of one of George Elliott Clarke’s questioning titles, must all Asianness be American?⁴

To clearly link my exploration of Canadian racial formation with the particular contours of Asian Canadian emergence, I have organized my discussion to respond to questions raised by Donald Goellnicht in his extensive institutional history of Asian Canadian literary studies published in 2000. I respond to Goellnicht’s essay not only because it offers the most detailed account of Asian Canadian institutional emergence but also because it offers provocative grounds for the absence of race consciousness in Canada that could have facilitated, as in the US, the social emergence of Asian Canadian panethnicity. Moreover, as an Asian Canadian writing from a US ethnic studies department, I am indebted to his essay for pushing me to consider more seriously the differences between Canadian and US discursive productions of race without yielding to the clichés of Canadian “multicultural” tolerance. The outcome of this historical investigation is an appeal against

the transposition of a US conception of race into different national contexts. This is far from saying that race does not exist as a social fact outside US borders; rather, it's an insistence on loosening an American grip on the sign of race.

With these considerations in mind, this essay responds to three characteristics that Goellnicht ascribes to the Canadian situation. These are for him the principal characteristics that have inhibited the political mobilization of Asian Canadians: first, the lack of a substantial Black Power movement to inspire panethnic Asian Canadian political mobilization and race-based activism in general; second, the race-evasive practices of state institutions such as the academy; and third, the problematic segregation of South Asian and East Asian cultural and political concerns. To engage with the merit of these characterizations, I offer a comparative examination of the history of racial classification in Canada and the US by looking at decennial and quinquennial censuses since 1960.⁵ Turning to these classificatory systems in both countries, my goal is to reveal the historical circumstances that caused shifts in the approach of the census to racial classification that helped to shape race discourse by affecting popular understandings of race, levels of racial identification, and political mobilizing around race.

My main objection to Goellnicht's assessments of the field is that they rely inordinately on US racial formation to evaluate what he sees as the failed development of a panethnic Asian Canadian social movement. Rather than transpose a black-white colour line in Canada to hypothesize the so-called absence of race-based mobilizing, therefore, I suggest that we look toward a much more expedient Canadian colour line that is conspicuously absent in his essay: one that involves ongoing race- and gender-based movements undertaken by Aboriginal activists against Euro-Canadian tactics of cultural genocide.⁶ Furthermore, by considering the political circumstances surrounding South Asian inclusion in the Asian Pacific Islander (API) category in the US against the inclusion of West Asian and Arabs in the visible minority category in Canada, I call attention to the often arbitrary delimiting of "Asia" in either country.⁷ Finally, those who disavow race in favour of ethnicity in Canada may not be living in false consciousness, as Goellnicht implies. Instead, ethnic identification in this case is a symptom of both a classificatory system that does not rely on a structure of race-based rights as it does in the US, and a historically racialized definition of ethnicity in Canada. By probing the history of Canadian racial formation, we can identify the autonomous features of Asian Canadian emergence.

Census and Racial Identification

While judging the extent of one nation's racisms against another's is a slippery undertaking, state definitions of race often uncover more stable discursive constructions for comparison. Census classifications not only reflect racial ideologies but also are often responsible for shaping the very discourse of race in Canada and the US. Although the levels of stability are different in both countries, the force of state-defined racial categories has rested on their power to determine legal rights,⁸ citizenship, access to immigration and naturalization, marriage laws,⁹ and more recently rights to affirmative action or employment equity legislation. Not only do censuses present definitions of racial difference, but also, as Melissa Nobles explains in her comparative examination of US and Brazilian censuses, "censuses register and reinforce the racial identifications germane to citizenship through the process of categorization itself" (*Shades* 5). In addition to citizenship, state classifications have been instrumental in the formation of group identities. On this feature, Yen Le Espiritu and Michael Omi observe that US census classifications have become the "de facto standard for state and local agencies, the private and nonprofit sectors, and the research community" (50–51). Indeed, that there are groups and community formations organized under "Hispanic" and "Asian or Pacific Islander" labels underscores some of this state classificatory influence. In Canada, similarly, the historical need for data on the ancestry and phenotypical characteristics of Canadians has been determined by laws, politics, and broader societal perceptions of race and ethnicity (Boyd, Goldman, and White 33). Today multicultural and employment equity programs require public and private organizations to comply with state definitions of race as reflected in census classifications. The manner in which these classifications are presented on the census also plays a large role in determining individual identification or disavowal of race and ethnicity. Thus, by comparing decennial censuses in Canada and the US, we can examine the extent to which census classifications reflect differing racial ideologies and practices of racial identification.

Since the first national censuses in 1790 in the US and 1871 in Canada, five notable differences have distinguished each nation's practice of enumeration: the significant historical volatility of racial data collection in Canada versus the US; a largely top-down approach to classification in Canada versus a combined top-down/bottom-up approach in the US; the state recognition of panethnic racial groups in the US versus the recognition of an aggregate visible minority population in Canada that is distinct from the classification of Aboriginal

populations; less stable definitions of race and ethnicity in Canada than in the US; and, perhaps most importantly, a political structure of minority rights built into the logic of racial data collection in the US that is absent in Canada. These rights are based on civil rights legislation to promote racial equality by monitoring racial discrimination and creating a structure of minority access to federal contracts, grants, and other programs. I argue that this manner of civil rights distribution is the most significant structural factor that affects and differentiates conceptualizations of race in Canada and the US.¹⁰

Resistance and Classificatory Change

As Goellnicht explains in his comparative account of racial formation, social movements of the 1960s and 1970s had an enormous impact on systems of racial classification in Canada and the US. My analysis of these movements differs, however, in terms of defining which social movements are central in this period and interpreting what effect they had on race discourse in both countries. In the US, the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement led by individuals such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X would have a significant effect on solidifying the concept of race through the structure of minority rights that required racial self-identification. In Canada, race-based social movements initiated by Aboriginal populations would lead to the introduction of multiple ethnic origins on the census while reaffirming the special status of Native peoples in Canada. If it had not been for these social movements in Canada and the US, the US would have followed Canada's lead in dropping race from the census, a category that had become unpopular by 1960. As Yen Le Espiritu explains, "At the time of the 1960 census, the race question had become discredited and would have been excluded in 1970 had it not been for the passage of the civil rights and equal opportunities laws, which made it necessary for the census to continue to compile racial statistics" (120). In Canada, at a time when the population was predominantly white, the fight for special status undertaken by Aboriginal people led to a need for further disaggregation of Native populations to obtain more reliable statistics. Their efforts would also highlight the structural disadvantages faced by Aboriginal and visible minorities in Canada and ultimately result in the introduction of employment equity and human rights legislation requiring statistical data on racial minority populations. What I would like to suggest is that race-based activism spearheaded by African Americans in the US and Aboriginal groups in Canada shaped the discourse of race in significant but contrasting ways.

In the US, the civil rights movement initiated by African Americans, many who had risked their lives for the country in its wars abroad, fought successfully for domestic civil rights that led to the creation of significant new legislation. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and 1968, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the overturning of anti-miscegenation laws in 1967 dismantled the most extreme structures of racial inequality, such as black disenfranchisement, Jim Crow segregation in the South, residential red-lining, and bans on white/nonwhite interracial marriage. With this legislation came opportunities designed for racial minorities—legally identified as Native, Hispanic, Black, and Asian—that included access to federal contracts, government funds, and project grants. These programs required proof of disadvantaged status from bodies charged with monitoring civil rights compliance that relied on racial data from the census. Therefore, while the new legal discourse of civil rights addressed the monitoring of equality and affirmative action, it did not address the meaning of race directly. So, rather than taking racial classification off the census after 1960 and eliminating its prior function to differentiate the rights of nonwhites from whites, race was “born again” after the civil rights movement. As a result, it became difficult to discern what race was without making reference to its prior role in confirming immutable, biological difference in the distribution of rights. But one thing became certain: in contrast to the previous function of racial data collection, the US census became an *ally* of civil rights legislation. Since racial categories had been the basis of discrimination in the past, it was taken for granted that they would be the basis of the remedy.

Removing past associations of biological objectivism, race nevertheless became imbued with a new kind of political objectivism linked to equity issues. As a result, the census has become a site of intense battle in which groups lobby for recognition and rights, a battle that Melissa Nobles argues arises from “an ethnic group’s anxiety about its own fecundity vis-à-vis that of another group [and] combines with fear of political domination” (*Shades* 17). Following the 1970 census, which was heavily criticized by racial minority lobbying groups for undercounting people of colour, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), working with the Census Bureau, issued *Statistical Directive No. 15: Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting*, which defined the five racial/ethnic classifications. These classifications, which would be used in the census, were designed to enable better enforcement of civil rights legislation by requiring all federal agencies to report statistics of these five geographically oriented

categories, which were as follows: American Indian or Alaskan Native; Asian or Pacific Islander; Black; and white. In observing the various changes made after 1970, which included adding the “ethnic” Hispanic category and reclassifying Asian Indians from the white to the Asian or Pacific Islander category, we are immediately confronted with the political nature of racial classification.

In Canada, the concept of social mobilization has been overdetermined as French due to continual bouts of moral panic generated by the ever-present threat of Quebec separation. These claims for Quebec sovereignty articulate a politics of white settler nationalism, which Goellnicht also gives weight to in his essay, regardless of the FLQ’s self-characterization as the “White Niggers of America” (see Vallières). Similar to the effect that the civil rights movement in the US had on shifting the discourse of race toward strengthening self-identification through minority rights legislation, the nationalist and feminist-nationalist Indigenous movements that began in the late 1960s shaped race discourse in Canada in particular by legitimizing mixed-race identity and loosening ethnic or racial self-identification with only one group. By increasing attention to issues of equal rights, gender discrimination, and cultural difference at a time when Canada was ninety-five percent white (Driedger and Reid 152), and while Statistics Canada continued to draw lineage arbitrarily from the paternal side, Indigenous peoples in the 1960s and 1970s made visible Canada’s racial formation. It is therefore due in large part to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis social mobilization—which has increased since the 1970s—that the government has recognized the structure of racial and gender inequality and attempted, as had the US, to craft legislation to redress social inequality through employment equity, human rights, and multicultural laws. However, because of the acceptance of mixed-race identity in Canada in the early 1980s, facilitated by Native protest, entitlement claims do not rely solely on singular racial identification as in the US. Thus a different form of racial identification prevails in Canada, one informed by Aboriginal rather than Black organized resistance.

If *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 was the catalyst for the 1960s-70s civil rights movement in the US, Pierre Trudeau’s 1969 White Paper served a similar function in Canada. Shortly after Trudeau was elected Liberal prime minister—after he had campaigned for a “just society”—he actively pursued policy modifications that would replace collective rights with individual rights. Under this mandate of individualism, the White Paper was presented by then Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development Jean Chrétien

to terminate the special legal position of Status Indians and the reserve system. Manipulating the discourse of equal rights culled from the US civil rights movement to advance a politics of colour blindness and forced assimilation, the *Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy* made clear that Native people would once again be the unwilling recipients of social change: "The Government believes that its policies must lead to the full, free and non-discriminatory participation of the Indian people in Canadian society. Such a goal requires a break with the past. It requires that the Indian people's roles of dependence be replaced by a role of equal status, opportunity and responsibility, a role they can share with all other Canadians." Native people responded to the White Paper immediately and collectively, signalling the birth of a nation-wide activist movement. Among the famous counterattacks to the White Paper was Harold Cardinal's *The Unjust Society: The Tragedy of Canada's Indians*, which manipulated Trudeau's campaign slogan to argue that the White Paper policy "betrayed [Indians] by a programme which offers nothing better than cultural genocide. . . . [It is] a thinly disguised programme of extermination through assimilation" (1). In 1970, with the support of the National Indian Brotherhood, the Indian Chiefs of Alberta authored *Citizens Plus*, a document that came to be known as the Red Paper. Presented to the federal cabinet, the Red Paper lambasted the fraudulence of the government's claim that the White Paper was the product of negotiations with Native peoples. It also argued that Aboriginals should be recognized as citizens who enjoy equal rights and who possess supplementary rights as "charter" members of Canadian society (see Cairns 65–71). The result of Native protest was the defeat of the White Paper for approximately ten years, until it resurfaced under several different guises: the Constitution Act of 1982 and the failed Meech Lake Accord of 1987, both of which would again galvanize Native peoples across Canada to assert their rights.

The defeat of the White Paper marks an important historical turn in race-based activism in Canada. In the 1970s, a period of global decolonization, the National Indian Brotherhood (now the Assembly of First Nations) became internationalized by participating in the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. The Inuit Circumpolar Conference, another international organization, brought Native people from various Arctic regions to discuss transnational concerns (*Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, hereafter *RCAP*). In addition, the breakthrough Supreme Court decision in the 1973 *Calder* case concerning Nisga'a title to territory led the federal government to establish its first land claims policy, beginning a process that continues today. As a result

of coalition building of Native groups across Canada, awareness of Aboriginal issues in Canada grew, giving rise to non-Native coalitions such as the Canadian Association for the Support of Native People and Project North that was organized to demand that the government recognize Aboriginal right to land and self-determination (*RCAP*). In 1979, the Inuit and Dené presented a proposal for the creation of Nunavut, marking the beginning of a twenty-year struggle for an Inuit province. The 1970s would also see significant Aboriginal obstruction of the flow of capital, particularly in confrontations involving state expropriation of natural resources such as the James Bay hydro project, the Mackenzie valley pipeline, and the northern Manitoba hydro project (*RCAP*). Throughout these turbulent years, increased public attention on Aboriginal issues forced the government to respond not only by allocating funding to Aboriginal groups but also by substantially changing the system of classification to improve the enumeration of Aboriginal peoples. As John Kralt notes of his experiences as the officer charged with the development of the 1981 census, “Although the 1981 Census question was meant to enumerate status Indians, the major reason for collecting the ethnic data in 1981 was to obtain an official estimate of the number of Métis and non-status Indians” (19). In addition, he notes that the use of the paternal ancestry criterion since 1951 had become problematic as it was “considered sexist by many staff and persons consulted during the development of the 1981 Census” (21). Changes to the 1981 census included creating a separate question designed specifically to enumerate Aboriginal populations, replacing confusing terms such as “Band” or “Non-Band Indian” with “Status” or “Registered Indian,” and substituting “Inuit” for “Eskimo.” Perhaps the most notable conceptual change was inclusion of “Métis” as an Aboriginal category. Prior to 1951, the Métis had been subject to varying modes of classifications and after 1951 according to paternal lineage, resulting in either a European or an Aboriginal assignment.¹¹ These changes reflect both an awareness of the diversity of Native peoples of Canada and the sexism inherent in the classification system, changes that were influenced by the vexed intersection of gender politics and Native nationalism.

The undercounting of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, a significant impetus for classificatory change, is the result of both the colonial logic of the Indian Act that stripped legal status from Native women who marry non-Native men and a classificatory system that forced single ethnic origins from the paternal line. In the former, a provision in the Indian Act meant that Status women who married non-Status men lost their Status and their housing on

the reserve while granting Status and housing to non-Native women who married Status Native men. As Nancy Janovicek notes, migration patterns of women and men differed and created “a disparity that grew over time” (548). The intersection of race and gender is therefore central to the analysis of Native classification. In the midst of the growing nation-wide Native activist movement in the 1970s, we find in this conflict over the classification of Aboriginal women in Canada one of the most important examples of women-of-colour feminism and social change in North America.

Section 12(1)(b) of the Indian Act discriminated against Status women by taking away their and their children’s status if they married a non-Status man. Adding to this gendered and assimilationist legal structure, as Bonita Lawrence outlines, “Section 12(1)(a)(iv), known as the ‘double mother’ clause, removed status from children when they reached the age of 21 if their mother and paternal grandmother did not have status before marriage” (13). For decades, Aboriginal women fought these discriminatory statutes in the face of major opposition, both from the Euro-Canadian legal system and from Native groups such as the National Indian Brotherhood, which argued that this fight put Native nationalism in jeopardy by privileging “individual” over collective rights. In 1971, Jeannette Corbière Lavell from the Wikwemikong Reserve and Yvonne Bedard from the Six Nations Reserve both lost their status for marrying non-Status men and took their cases to court. In 1973, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled against them, citing that by losing their Indian status they *gained* the legal rights of white women, construing the Indian Act as inherently nondiscriminatory. In 1977, Sandra Lovelace, a Maliseet woman from the Tobique Reserve in New Brunswick who had also lost her Status through marriage, bypassed the Supreme Court and took her case to the United Nations Human Rights Committee. In 1981, the United Nations ruled that the Canadian government was in breach of a number of rights contained in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which included the right to protection from discrimination, equality of men and women, protection of the family, equality of rights and responsibilities in terms of marriage, and the right to enjoy her own culture (Kallen 252). But out of fear of massive Native opposition to amend the Indian Act, the government would not present Bill C-31 until 1985, finally eliminating the gender discrimination from the act and reinstating approximately 100,000 people to the status Native population, one-seventh of the total (Cairns 69). Problems remain with Bill C-31, but this change was a significant victory. As Lawrence states,

“Gender has thus been crucial to determining not only who has been able to stay in Native communities, but who has been called ‘mixed-blood’ and externalized as such” (15). Therefore, whereas segregation gave rise to resistance movements in the US, forced assimilation gave rise to a nationalist and feminist nationalist Aboriginal movement in Canada. This difference is most pronounced, perhaps, in the assertion of “separate but equal” status of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, a structure that for African Americans was at the root of inequality.

It is out of this crucible of race and gender struggle that the classificatory system changed in Canada, shifting the discourse of race toward a recognition of racial mixing and away from single ethnic origins on the paternal side in order to more adequately account for Native populations of Canada. If the census presented some kind of mirror to the composition of Canada’s society, it was no longer possible to view it as one made up of discrete racial and ethnic groups, as it had been in the past. Census enumerators could no longer rely on arbitrary strategies of dealing with mixed-race or ethnic individuals who marked more than one group, as many did in the 1971 census, by assigning individuals on the basis of the darkest pencil mark on the form (Kralt 17). As Kralt notes, “the problems census-takers have encountered over the past 115 years with the collection of ethnic data suggest that this rather static and simplistic view of Canadian society was and is simply not valid” (27). Renewed attention to race mixture and race difference reflected in the 1981 census—influenced by Native mobilizing since the late 1960s—aroused attention to other visible minorities and the racial barriers that they faced. By 1983, although there was still considerable interest in Aboriginal data, there was also a further demand for data on visible minorities that would effect further changes in classification on the 1986 census.

Because the 1981 census was self-enumerated, census officials had to determine how best to ask the question of multiple ethnic origins. In the US, the civil rights movement had shifted race discourse from an emphasis on the biological sense of race to a social politics of racial self-identification. But in Canada, after much debate, census officials concluded that a question on “ethnic roots” rather than “ethnic identification” would result in greater accuracy in the enumeration of multiple ethnic origins. Again, these considerations were primarily influenced by the desire of Statistics Canada to gather more accurate data on Aboriginal populations. As Kralt notes, “it was considered important to know not only the numbers of persons who identify with a given ethnic group but also the numbers who could *potentially*

identify with this origin” (21; emphasis added). Ultimately the idea of “roots” prevailed as a more tangible determination of ethnic origin than self-identification. Therefore, despite the significant shift in race discourse that would from that point enumerate and socially recognize mixed-race individuals such as the Métis, this shift did not precipitate an increase in racial self-identification, as it did in the US, because of the recognition of multiple rather than singular racial origins, the “roots” criterion, and the absence in Canada of a minority rights structure dependent on racial self-identification.

The shifts in racial classification that followed the civil rights movement in the US and the Native nationalist and feminist movements in Canada in the 1960s and 1970s demonstrate the growing cleavage in race discourse in both countries, represented most palpably on the 1980 and 1981 censuses in the US and Canada respectively. In the US, self-enumeration forms would require individuals to self-identify with one of four racial categories—Black, White, Asian, American Indian—and one of two ethnic categories: Hispanic and Non-Hispanic. With the exception of the Hispanic ethnic category, the US census recycled the same racial categories whose prior function was to distribute rights and privileges along colour lines, whose purpose now was incorporated into a structure of minority rights aimed at redistributing access and wealth to people of colour. Although self-classification was possible before 1980,¹² the structure of rights guiding OMB’s *Statistical Directive No. 15* was instrumental in further solidifying the concept of race as an identity and encouraging political mobilization around those racial categories. Because the structure of minority rights was contingent upon racial identification with only one of the categories outlined by the OMB, mixed-race individuals were required to choose only one race category “which most closely reflects the individual’s recognition in his community” (OMB). This system of racial classification presents significant difficulties to many Latinos, who, analogous to the Métis, are derived of multiple origins. Remarking on the way that this structure of racial classification forces Hispanics to identify as white or black, Clara Rodriguez argues that US decennial classifications perpetuate a “bipolar” structure (65). The result of this classification system is that, until the 2000 census, forty percent of the Hispanic respondents chose “Other Race” as their racial classification in 1980 and 1990 (Omi 14), and of those respondents ninety-eight percent wrote “Latino,” which is currently not considered a racial but an ethnic designation.¹³ In Canada, Native mobilizing against the White Paper and the Indian Act led to greater awareness of racial difference,

racial inequality, and gender discrimination on a collective scale, facilitating the introduction of multiple ethnic origins and the elimination of paternal single ethnic origins on the census. This shift in racial classification affirmed the social validity of mixed-race individuals such as the Métis, while US Latinos continued to be caught between a choice of black or white. Moreover, the absence in Canada of a legal structure of minority rights similar to that in the US did not require strong self-identification of individuals with “ethnic origins,” a classification whose changeable racial and ethnic configuration over the century undermined the potential for self-identification, particularly for visible minorities.

Euphemizing Race in Canada, Neutralizing Race in the US

Since the mid-1980s, the US and Canada have experienced a period of greater convergence in their census classificatory systems. This convergence became especially apparent in 1996 when the Canadian census introduced for the first time a more direct question about race, one that was distinct from and additional to the ethnic origins question. Like the 1981 ethnic origins question, the “race” question allowed respondents to choose as many applicable categories necessary to answer the question. In the US, the 2000 census allowed respondents for the first time to check more than one racial category. Although the censuses in the US and Canada appear to have converged on a similar multiracial course, they remain underlined by significant policy differences that have further conditioned race discourse in both countries.

There are four significant differences between the Canadian “visible minority” classification introduced in the 1980s and the US “race” classification. First, although usage of “visible minority” in the 1970s implied Aboriginal peoples and people of colour, since the 1980s “Aboriginals” have been excluded from the visible minority classification. Pendakur explains that “Aboriginal peoples were included as a separate category because they argued that their situation was sufficiently different to warrant separate treatment” (232). Second, the term “visible minority” is an aggregate classification of all racial minorities in Canada. Therefore, in contrast to the OMB’s 1977 *Statistical Directive No. 15*—which disaggregated the population into five racial groups (White, Black, American Indian, Alaskan Native, and Asian Pacific Islander) and one ethnic category (Hispanic or Non-Hispanic)—all nonwhite and non-Aboriginal Canadians, whether Chinese or Haitian, are reaggregated to the visible minority classification. Third, the designation

of “visible minority” status is determined not by the combined top-down/bottom-up efforts of the OMB and lobbying groups as in the US but by the strictly top-down charge of Employment and Immigration Canada.¹⁴ And fourth, the US self-enumerated short and long forms ask a direct question on race, such as in the 2000 census, which states simply and clearly “What is your race?” Canada, in contrast, does not have a specific, direct question that includes the words *race* or *visible minority*. Unlike most Americans, who have a general understanding of “race” given its endurance on the census and in spite of its functional modifications from 1970 onward, Canadians do not have a common reference point for either “race”—which, until the 1970s, was still used to characterize the British and French in addition to racialized minorities—or the newer “visible minority” race euphemism. Perhaps the only similarity in the use of “visible minority” in Canada and “race” in the US is that their respective “race” classifications employ a combination of criteria that include skin colour, geography, nationality, and ethnicity.

A new question on visible minorities was necessary because of the poor visible minority data culled from the 1981 and 1986 censuses. Because of the high number of “Canadian” responses to the ethnic origins question—one of the variables used to calculate the visible minority population—and the tendency for certain racial minorities to identify themselves according to their colonial ethnic origins—Haitians writing “French” and Jamaicans writing “British” as their ethnic origins (Kralt 24)—a more direct race question was required to address increased data requirements for visible minorities. Although Statistics Canada made plans to include the visible minority question on the 1991 census, no question was added because of the poor quality of responses to the census surveys issued after 1986, which included seniors and Québécois classifying themselves as visible minorities and Arabs and Latin Americans classifying themselves as white. As a result, no question on visible minorities was included on the 1991 census, requiring statisticians to once again assign visible minority status to individuals by referring to questions on place of birth, ethnic origin, and language. Unlike in the US, therefore, racial self-identification had never played a role in the census in Canada and was reflected in the weak identification with terms such as “visible minority” and “race or colour.” Accommodating the weak racial identification of Canadians—after good test responses from the 1993 National Census Test—Statistics Canada added to the 1996 census for the first time a race question that did not use either the words *race* or *visible minority*:

19 Is this person:

- Mark "⊗" more than one or specify, if applicable.

This information is collected to support programs that promote equal opportunity for everyone to share in the social, cultural and economic life of Canada.

- 05 White
- 06 Chinese
- 07 South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc.)
- 08 Black
- 09 Filipino
- 10 Latin American
- 11 Southeast Asian (e.g., Cambodian, Indonesian, Laotian, Vietnamese, etc.)
- 12 Arab
- 13 West Asian (e.g., Afghan, Iranian, etc.)
- 14 Japanese
- 15 Korean
- Other — Specify
- 16

Statistics Canada 11¹⁵

In the US, the major controversy during the 1990s was not over having a race question, which was nothing new, but over the option to check multiple race boxes, an option available to Canadians since 1981, and the reconstitution of existing racial reclassifications. Racial reclassification, like racial classification, is embedded in the structure of minority rights and increasingly in a politics of self-identification. Throughout the twentieth century, various groups were reclassified or threatened with it, particularly Asian American groups. Filipinos, for instance, who consider themselves “brown” and economically disadvantaged vis-à-vis upwardly mobile East Asians, have been successful at the state level in being reclassified as “Filipinos” rather than “Asian Pacific Islanders” in California. Equally remarkable is what Michael Omi characterizes as the “strange and twisted history of the classification of Asian Indians,” who were classified as “Hindu” during and after peak years of immigration in the early decades of the twentieth century even though the majority were Sikh (23); classified as Caucasian but not white and thus ineligible for naturalization after the 1923 *US v. B.S. Thind* Supreme Court ruling; classified as white in 1970 after the implementation of civil rights initiatives; and, finally, classified as “APIs” in the 1980 census after Asian Indian leaders successfully sought minority group status. A further complication in the reclassification of South Asians was Chinese American opposition to the inclusion of South Asians in the API category. As Espiritu and Omi remark, “Obviously, at stake were economic benefits accruing to

designated ‘minority’ businesses” (58). Moreover, many South Asians oppose the API classification by arguing that they are “racially different” from other Asians and that they risk invisibility by being lumped in under this pan-Asian label. Espiritu and Omi found that many South Asians were in fact racially confused, some individuals they interviewed remarking that “A lot [of South Asians] were filling out that we were black [on the census]. Some were saying we were Hispanic. We just did not know” (56). As the case of both Filipinos and South Asians demonstrates, racial classification and reclassification underscore the often unintuitive, arbitrary, and inherently political process of racial categorization.

Before Census 2000, racial reclassification in the US was once again hotly debated, especially in terms of the addition of a multiracial classification. Recommendations were proposed by lobby groups representing white, Hawaiian, Arab, and multiracial identities. Among the white groups were the Celtic Coalition, the National European American Society, and the Society for German-American Studies, each of which argued for the disaggregation of the white category. In particular, the Celtic Coalition recommended that “white” be subdivided into three categories: “(1) as the ‘original peoples of Europe’, (2) ‘the original peoples of North Africa’, or (3) ‘the original peoples of Southwest Asia (Middle East)’” (Nobles, *Shades* 141). The National European American Society wanted to add a “European-American” classification because they thought that their current classification as “white non-Hispanic” was not an identity with a real-life referent (King 196). Hawaiians, Samoans, and Chamorros argued to be reclassified as “Native Americans” and removed from the API classification. These groups called attention to their status as Indigenous peoples and noted that their lower socioeconomic status and educational attainment distinguished them from both the majority white and the Asian American population. The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee argued for the reclassification of Arab peoples from “white” to an “Arab American” minority classification (King 196), while the Arab American Institute lobbied for the addition of a “Middle-Eastern” minority classification (Nobles, “Racial” 59). These groups wanted the government to monitor racially motivated hate crimes against them such as those that occurred during the Persian Gulf War. Lastly, the groups creating the biggest classificatory controversy were multiracial groups, including the Association for Multiethnic Americans (AMEA), Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally), and Hapa Issues Forum (HIF). AMEA’s primary arguments were based on promoting recognition of

multiracial individuals and tracking hate crimes against multiracial people; Project RACE argued that multiracial children suffered from negative-self-esteem issues because they were forced to classify themselves according to the race of one and not both parents; and HIF, a student-based organization of mixed-raced Asian Americans, “aimed at gaining acceptance for mixed-race Asian descent people in the traditional Asian ethnic communities” and “sought recognition based on the ability to check more than one [category] and still be counted with their Asian American brethren and sisters” (King 202). As the various mandates of these lobbying groups indicate, it has become increasingly unclear whether the census is a vehicle for civil rights compliance or self-identification.

In 1997, after an extensive review process, the OMB released *Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity*. Instead of reclassifying Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders as Native Americans, the API classification was divided into two categories: “Asian” and “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.” As noted by the OMB, “The ‘Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander’ category will be defined as ‘A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.’” This definition excluded Filipino Americans, who are still aggregated under the “Asian” classification despite having origins in the Pacific Islands. The most significant change to the census was adoption of multiple race reporting. Although the OMB rejected the addition of a stand-alone multiracial category, Census 2000 would allow respondents to check more than one of the racial classifications listed. The outcome of these deliberations was the following race question, preceded by the Latino ethnic question:

8. What is Person 1's race? Mark one or more races to indicate what this person considers himself/herself to be.

White

Black, African Am., or Negro

American Indian or Alaska Native — *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.* ↴

Asian Indian Japanese Native Hawaiian

Chinese Korean Guamanian or Chamorro

Filipino Vietnamese Samoan

Other Asian — *Print race.* ↴ Other Pacific Islander — *Print race.* ↴

Some other race — *Print race.* ↴

Bureau of the Census,
US Census 2000 1

To properly enumerate individuals who checked more than one race box, the OMB has identified sixty-three mutually exclusive and comprehensive race categories, six single-race categories, and fifty-seven race combinations to classify respondents who chose more than one race.

Although the introduction of multiple race checking on Census 2000 marked a step toward adopting a system like the one Canada employed on the 1981 census, and although Canada's introduction of a specific race question on the 1996 census adopted a long-standing practice in the US, race discourse in both countries appears to be again moving in different directions, a move hinging on different structures of minority rights. For many groups in the US, the option of multiple checking registers a major defeat in the fight against institutionalized racism. For race-based political lobbying groups, multiple race checking reduces numbers and puts in jeopardy civil rights monitoring and enforcement. For example, the National Coalition for an Accurate Count of Asians and Pacific Islanders stated that "it becomes difficult to ascertain the salience of biraciality or multiraciality in relationship to the specific provisions and intended benefits of these Federal [civil rights] laws and programs" (qtd. in Espiritu and Omi 82). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium (NAPALC) similarly opposed multiple race checking because of the complications that it would present for existing civil rights legislation in addition to research, policy development, and resource allocation. Many organizations led media campaigns urging census respondents to "check only one" to preserve membership counts and civil rights gains. Some see the OMB's identification of sixty-three categories as a sign of racial dissolution, a multiplication of categories to the point that race difference itself becomes a form of sameness. This dissolution has been interpreted by conservatives as a step toward the formation of a desirable "colour-blind" society, which former University of California regent Ward Connerly advocated for in his failed Proposition 54 campaign in 2003, otherwise known as the "Racial Privacy Initiative."

In Canada, because minority rights hinge on membership in an aggregate visible minority population, the political mobilization of panethnic groups to maintain or increase numbers for rights and recognition—often in competition with other groups—has not become controversial. Although there are clearly problems with an aggregate visible minority classification, most obviously in its misleading approach to racial minorities as a culturally and economically undifferentiated bloc who experience race relations in identical

ways, it has nevertheless prevented the formation of competitive racial and ethnic blocs that have formed in the US. Pendakur explains the numerical advantages as follows: “it should be recognized that there are political advantages to being viewed as an homogenous entity. These advantages stem from the fact that there is political strength in numbers, and thus the entire non-white population constitutes a more powerful political block than a single segment of that population” (147). In sum, the addition of a race question in Canada, one that recognizes multiple visible minorities, reflects the increased recognition of the social salience of race while strengthening the ability of state and research agencies to collect data on Canada’s visible minority population. In addition, the visible minority population in Canada, although identified primarily by state agencies, is more inclusive than in the US, particularly in its recognition of Arabs, West Asians, and Latin Americans as nonwhite groups that are subject to racial discrimination. In the US, in contrast, the introduction of multiple race checking reveals a weakening in racial recognition that actually threatens to erode civil rights monitoring and enforcement. Although Canadian and US censuses demonstrate greater convergence in terms of racial and multiracial classification, they are surrounded by vastly different policy implications.

Conclusion

We can return to where we began with the three issues that Goellnicht argues have thwarted the development of Asian Canadian panethnicity: the lack of a Black Power or significant race-based movement in Canada, the segregation of East Asian and South Asian issues, and “race evasiveness” in Canada. Taking into consideration the comparative history of racial classification and the historical conditions that contributed to shaping race discourse in Canada and the US, we can respond to each of these characterizations in turn.

Beginning with the claim that Asian Canadian panethnicity was stunted by the lack of a Malcolm X-led Black Power movement—a movement that was responsible for the rise of the Asian American movement in the US—we must refer to the ongoing activism of Aboriginals in Canada. Similar to the centrality of African Americans in the US civil rights movement, Aboriginal activism in Canada has highlighted the intersection of race and gender in the recognition of multiracial cultural difference. Today Aboriginal activists pose the biggest organized obstruction to the capitalist expropriation of natural resources in their protest against the economic and cultural dislocation

of Native peoples. Long before the blockade, occupation, and armed standoff of Mohawks in Oka raised awareness of Native issues in 1990, an organized Native blockade movement in Canada had been one of the few examples in North America of nation-wide race-based mobilizing.¹⁶ In the period between 1980 and 1993, for instance, Nicholas Blomley notes, there were eighty-two blockades across Canada—forty-nine of them in British Columbia—that posed a significant threat to transnational corporations that lost millions a day to blockade resistance.¹⁷ He goes on to explain that these blockades are strategic and mobile “spatial tactics” of resistance that draw attention to questions of the racialization of “mobility, rights, and space” (11, 24). Blockades also register a profound statement of protest against what Blomley describes as the “massive, unsustainable, out-movement of capital and commodities from traditional territories” (18). Therefore, to relate the absence of an Asian Canadian racial project to the lack of a Black Power movement or other race-based movement in Canada is both to transpose a decontextualized colour line into Canada and to erase the instrumentality of Aboriginal activism in Canadian racial formation. As Leo Driedger and Angus Reid noted in a survey in 1995, Aboriginal peoples are thought to pose the most significant threat to mainstream Canada, more than any other group since 1975, with thirty-three percent of the population perceiving that Native groups “have too much power” (170). With these examples in mind, we can conclude that the lack of an Asian Canadian movement has nothing to do with the absence of race-based mobilizing in Canada because such mobilizing has a long history and is ongoing. Perhaps we should ask instead what impact Aboriginal movements have had on more recent race-based social movements such as the Japanese Canadian and Chinese Canadian redress movements or on Asian immigrant advocacy organizations. To what extent is there coalition building among Asian and Aboriginal peoples, connecting the politics of immigrant and Indigenous peoples in a formation that might only be possible in Canada?¹⁸

Shifting now to the concerns that Goellnicht raises about the various factors that contribute to the segregation of South Asian and East Asian identities—which he claims hampers a truly pan-Asian Canadian formation—we can recognize that his effort to bridge the two is again rationalized by a US racial model. But, even in the US, South Asians occupy a liminal racial position that does not always support their classification as Asian American. As noted above, the 1980 inclusion of South Asians under the Asian American classification was opposed by many East Asian Americans,

who feared the diminishment of rights that would result if another group was added to the minority pool, and by South Asians, who felt racially different from East Asians. What I would like to emphasize here is that, unlike “Asian American” in the US, “Asian Canadian” remains an open social category that is not built into a legal structure of minority rights. This ambivalence introduces several possibilities. On the one hand, given that Arabs and West Asians also originate from Asia—and given that the Canadian government recognizes them as members of visible minorities—why can’t an Asian Canadian social formation include these groups? Why should Asian Canadians be delimited according to the highly political and arbitrary boundaries of Asian America, whose configuration in the US is markedly different from that of Asians in Canada? As of Census 2001, Asian Canadian ethnic groups represent 9.65% of the population, including West Asian and Arab populations. This is almost triple the percentage of Asian American ethnic groups, which was 3.6% as of Census 2000 and which does not include West Asians and Arabs who are classified as “White Non-Hispanic.” The percentage of Asian Canadians is only marginally lower than the US Latino population and approximately two percent lower than the African American population.¹⁹ Given their size, Asian Canadians have the potential to effect major social change in Canada.

On the other hand, rather than continue to draw lines around which groups should or should not belong to an Asian Canadian classification, we can point to the fact that the main issue that hampers the development of Asian Canadian panethnicity *in the social sense* is—as Goellnicht also underlines—the absence of a political movement, one that may come to light if we consider the recent mobilizing of Arab groups and West, South, and Southeast Asians, particularly Indonesians and Malaysians. Because these groups have become increasingly subject to racial profiling, infiltration, and hate crimes in Canada and the US since September 11th, the coalitions that these groups have formed with one another have created the kind of political loyalty possible only in the context of a social movement. The National Association of Japanese Canadians has stood in solidarity with these ethnic groups by speaking out against racial profiling and the government’s Anti-Terrorism Act, whose racist logic can be connected to the mass internment of Japanese “enemy aliens” during the Second World War (NAJC). It is this kind of social mobilization that may help give shape to a pan-Asian social identity. Social formations are not the result of any “natural” affiliation of groups but the outcome of interethnic mobilizing around shared political

issues. Therefore, rather than bridging the gap between South Asians and Asian Canadians in the abstract, or defining the inclusiveness of the Asian Canadian classification for its own sake or for the sake of corresponding with Asian America, it may be wise to commit to a larger category of “people of colour” in Canada by observing the sentiments of Vijay Prashad: to “craft solidarity. . . to negotiate across historically produced divides to combat congealed centers of power that benefit from political disunity” (121–22). In Canada, to craft solidarity includes recognizing potential alliances between and across Asian ethnic groups, Indigenous and immigrant groups, and interracial groups from the Caribbean—all of whom must negotiate the social reality of race in Canada.

Finally, with respect to Goellnicht’s critique of Canadian evasion of race and fixation on ethnicity, we have seen how the historical fluctuations of race concepts in Canada have contributed to race discourses and processes of identification that remain distinct from those in the US. Because race and ethnic concepts have been collapsed into each other in both countries at various times, in either a social or classificatory sense, it may be more useful, as Rey Chow argues, “not to insist on an absolute distinction between the two terms at all times, for the simple reason that they are, more often than not, mutually implicated” (23). For now, then, we may keep “Asian Canadian” in quotation marks, as a social category whose potential is still largely unknown, but one whose development will arise out of a distinct Canadian racial formation described in this paper.

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NOTES

- 1 In making this distinction, I am not asserting the mutual exclusion of academic work and activism. Rather, the distinction refers primarily to the lack of an accompanying race-based social movement that helped to initiate the institutionalization of Asian American and ethnic studies programs in the US.
- 2 For example, Marie Lo responds to the incorporation of Asian Canadian texts in Asian American studies by figuring “Asian Canadian literature as its necessary Other” in the Asian American project of “claiming the nation” (“Fields” 6).

- 3 The emphasis here is on the sociohistorical foundation of Asian American studies, which grew out of student mobilizing in the 1960s and 1970s, rather than on its later institutional manifestation, which some have criticized as overprofessionalized, depoliticized, and disconnected from community concerns. See Omi and Takagi.
- 4 The title of Clarke's essay is "Must All Blackness Be American? Locating Canada in Borden's 'Tightrope Time,' or Nationalizing Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*."
- 5 National quinquennial censuses in Canada were standardized in 1956, alternating between collecting data in agricultural and metropolitan areas every five years. Since 1986, quinquennial censuses have been uniform.
- 6 My use of "Aboriginal" reflects its usage in the *Constitution Act*, 1982, and includes Indian, Inuit and Metis people. Status Indian is defined by the Indian Act. Terms like "Native," widely used in a general sense before 1982 and "First Nations," which became popular when the then Native Indian Brotherhood changed its name to the Assembly of First Nations in 1982, are often equated with Status Indian because these two associations are composed of chiefs of official reserves. However, both terms are also used in more inclusive senses. Many Aboriginal people prefer to be identified by their nation, such as Mohawk, Cree, Anishnabe, etc.
- 7 By "West Asian" I am referring to nationalities that include, for example, Armenian, Egyptian, Iranian, Lebanese, and Moroccan.
- 8 Among the rights denied to people of colour was the right to census confidentiality. In the 1940s, the government solicited confidential residential information from the Census Bureau to facilitate the internment of Japanese Americans; see Bureau of the Census, "Census Confidentiality." The Census Bureau has also been tied to the deportation of up to one million Mexicans during the 1930s after the 1930 census classified Mexicans as a race, the only year that they were classified as such. See Balderrama and Rodriguez.
- 9 Racial mixing was restricted through *de jure* and *de facto* discriminatory measures in the US and Canada respectively. In the US, anti-miscegenation laws were in place since the 1600s and were not overturned until 1967. In Canada, racial intermarriage was not directly prohibited by law, but legislation such as *The Women's and Girl's Protection Act* passed in several provinces in the early twentieth century was a *de facto* measure to prevent white women from working with Chinese men.
- 10 Space limitations prevent me from detailing, beyond a cursory overview, the features of racial classification in Canada and the US prior to 1960. Before and after the turn of the century, census bureaus in both countries collaborated with scientists who employed racial classifications to advance race science and theories of social and biological Darwinism. Although much is made of Canada's elimination of "race" from the census in 1946 to disassociate, at least discursively, from Nazi racial ideologies, much of the visual content of "race" was simply added to the more neutral components of language that attended its replacement term: "ethnicity." Arguably a more significant difference in census classification in Canada and the US prior to 1960 is methodological. In Canada, enumerators were required to ask a series of questions to determine race or ethnicity, while US enumerators determined race solely by observation. Although the US Bureau of the Census claimed that enumerators were able to identify races with reasonable accuracy they had a history of resorting to ad hoc methods of determining nonwhiteness, such as the "brown bag test" in which anyone with skin darker than a brown bag was marked as black or mulatto.
- 11 See Kralt "Appendix," 442.
- 12 Respondents were able to self-classify their race in the US in the 1960 census. It was at the discretion of the enumerator to reclassify the respondent if the enumerator observed a discrepancy in the self-classification.

- 13 In a recent *Los Angeles Times* editorial, legal scholar Ian Haney Lopez suggests that, because approximately forty percent of Latinos check “some other race,” many Latinos consider themselves a race rather than a linguistic/ethnic group.
- 14 The mark-in “visible minority” categories listed on the 2001 census were identified by the *Employment Equity Technical Reference Papers* published by Employment and Immigration Canada in 1987 and included eleven groups: Chinese, Black, South Asians, West Asians, Arabs, Filipinos, South East Asians, Latin Americans (excluding Argentinians and Chileans), Japanese, Koreans, and Pacific Islanders.
- 15 The only changes made to the 2001 census included removing the parenthetical examples beside the “Black” category and making “Arab” and “West Asian” separate categories, adding “Afghan, Iranian, etc.” in parentheses beside the latter.
- 16 I am indebted to Shauna McCranor for framing Native blockades as a social movement.
- 17 Blomley points out the financial losses of CN Rail as follows: “the closures of the Duffey Lake Road in the summer of 1990 (which cut off the towns of Pemberton from the east and Lillooet from the west) and the Sto:lo blockade on the main CN Rail line into Vancouver in 1993 (which cost CN around \$3 million a day)” (18).
- 18 Rita Wong notes that the Direct Action against Refugee Exploitation (DAARE) Asian immigrant advocacy organization emphasizes its solidarity with Indigenous peoples; also see her essay on “decolonizasian” in this special issue. In a historical analysis of Chinese head tax legislation during the exclusion era, Lily Cho considers this legislation against the Indian Act and urges scholars to read them as overlapping and interconnected oppressions. In the context of literary studies, Marie Lo has argued that Asian Canadian literature reveals a striking romanticization of and identification with First Nations peoples (see “Native-Born”).
- 19 The breakdown of Asian Canadian groups as of Census 2001 is as follows: 3.5% Chinese, 3% South Asian, 1% Filipino, 1% Arab/West Asian, 0.6% Southeast Asian, 0.3% Korean, and 0.25% Japanese. The largest source of immigrants in Canada is currently from Asia.

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