

# The Currency of Visibility and the Paratext of “Evelyn Lau”

I was relieved that I wasn't being slotted into yet another panel of women writers or multicultural writers struggling to say something about their multiculturalism when for some of them it made little impact on their work.  
—Evelyn Lau, “Getting Heard” (88)

The apparently deracinated nature of Evelyn Lau's work has rendered her an ambivalent figure in Asian Canadian and Asian American literary studies.<sup>1</sup> Lau's characters, often racially unmarked, are instead scarred by their longing for human connection, and they drift in and out of generic spaces or cloistered back rooms that are untethered to the specificity of the world outside. Her stories of prostitution, sadomasochism, obsession, and unrequited love do not lend themselves easily to the interpretive frameworks that have characterized Asian American and Asian Canadian literary studies.

Defined in opposition to dominant literary traditions, these studies have historically often foregrounded the “claiming” of a place in the social, political, and cultural landscapes of the United States and Canada.<sup>2</sup> This privileging of oppositionality, however, argues Viet Thanh Nguyen, produces a binary between the “bad subject” and the “model minority,” and naturalizes this binary as the measure by which authors and their works are granted value, canonized, and understood. The bad subject is idealized as resistant to dominant ideology and critical of the demands and terms of assimilation. The model minority, in contrast, is figured as co-opted by dominant ideology, eschewing political critique in favour of upward mobility. Both, for Nguyen, are functions of the political economy; despite the bad subject's disavowal

of the economic enticements of assimilation, the bad subject trades on the resistant value of his or her ethnicity, and it is the commodification of race and resistance that grants the bad subject such currency within minority discourse.

Although Nguyen's examination is based on Asian American literary studies, the premises of his argument are useful when examining the range of responses to Lau's work. The lack of engagement with Lau's writing in Asian American literary studies is instructive, particularly if we consider this silence alongside the critical efflorescence generated by Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*.<sup>3</sup> *Obasan*'s crossover appeal suggests that the lack of interest in Lau stems not from the attention to national specificity but from the absence of certain racial and ethnic signifiers that have become the condition of interpretive and disciplinary possibility for texts defined as "Asian." Ironically, it is outside Asian American literary studies that critics have examined Lau's work in a binary similar to that outlined by Nguyen. Some critics, such as Lien Chao and Fred Wah, argue that Lau's rehearsal of conventional literary devices and poetic voice is potentially accommodationist and is perhaps a reason for her popular reception in Canada. Others, such as Elaine Chang, Peter Georgelos, Sneja Gunew, and Charlotte Sturgess read Lau's work as transgressive to the extent that they view her work as blurring the borders that constitute identity and difference. As Misao Dean notes, one of the central frustrations regarding Lau's work is that it seems to "lack many of the signposts that readers use to determine the moral or political perspective of a piece of writing" (24). Given the dichotomy of responses to Lau and her work, what are the "signposts" that lead to such responses? Moreover, in the politics of representation, which epistemological assumptions render a signpost recognizable as a "signpost," and how do these signposts orient our critical analyses within the terrain of Asian American and Asian Canadian literary studies?

The neglect of Lau in Asian American literary studies is a missed opportunity to re-evaluate its interpretive paradigms as well to examine the cross-border convergence of Asian racialization in North America. Recent scholarship on Lau by Rita Wong and Lily Cho, for example, situates Lau's work within an expansive ethnic and racial politics and moves beyond gauging Lau's oppositionality. Wong's analysis suggests that an emphasis on Lau's autobiographical details and accommodation overlooks the "supplement the market forces on a text" (123). Through examining the commodification of Lau and her work, Wong suggests that Lau's writings open up a space to examine how the cultural, emotional, and sexual labour of

women trouble the distinctions between the personal and the commercial. Cho frames her analysis of Lau within a diaspora figured as a condition of subjectivity. Despite Lau's refusal to affiliate with diasporic groups, her work demonstrates an "overwhelming commitment to the genealogical in its melancholic return to the sadness of overlapping losses (family, community, love, belonging)" (176).

My reading builds on their work by synthesizing how the ethnic, racial and sexual commodification of Lau is a function of cross-border racialization. Through the figure of Lau, I argue that though model minority discourse in the United States and visible minority discourse in Canada are nation-specific formations, their logic and effects are not reducible to them. This cross-border racialization, in spite of its apparent absence, plays a prominent role in how Lau's texts circulate and are commodified. The frustration that Dean highlights over the lack of identifiable signposts in Lau's work, I would suggest, in part stems from *where* we have been looking and what has counted as identifiable directives. Rather than read the content of Lau's work for indices of resistance or complicity, in this article I read *around* it, paying particular attention to what Gérard Genette calls the paratext—the text's nonliterary structural features that are mediated by market considerations. The paratext, Genette argues, is more notable for the "convergence of effects" of a "heterogeneous group of practices and discourses" than the diversity of their aspects (2). My reading around Lau's work is, of course, inseparable from my reading *in*, for reading around always imbricates reading in, and vice versa. Broadening our interpretive coordinates to examine the ideological work of the paratext reveals how model minority and visible minority discourses converge to orient our analyses of texts such as Lau's. As I will argue, this convergence—what I call "the currency of visibility"—is an index of the commodification of racialization within a visual economy that equates, if not privileges, "visibility" as a particular form of political agency or subjectivity.

### **Model Minority Discourse as Paratext**

Although the model minority thesis first appeared most explicitly in a 1966 article in *U.S. News and World Report*, it remains a powerful example of containment and stratification in the United States and beyond. Appearing at a time of social upheaval and unrest, the representation of Asian Americans as an exemplary minority, able to achieve financial success and assimilate without special economic or institutional support, held particular political

purchase. These Asian American “success stories” not only constituted a critique of “blacks who sought relief through federally supported social programs” but also “diffused the black militant’s claim that America was a fundamentally racist society, structured to keep minorities in a subordinated position” (Osajima 450). Despite its coinage at a particular historical moment, the logic of model minority discourse predates the 1960s, and its effects are not reducible to national borders.<sup>4</sup> As David Palumbo-Liu notes, as early as the 1930s “scientific” conclusions that Asian intelligence was comparable to (and in some cases higher than) that of whites foreshadowed later manifestations of the model minority thesis that touted Asian economic achievements and stellar academic abilities (151). Such an example of what Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan term “racist love” is reaffirmed in the 1982 work of University of Calgary Professor Emeritus Philip E. Vernon, *The Abilities and Achievements of Orientals in North America*.<sup>5</sup> In a move fundamental to model minority discourse, Vernon cites the achievements of Asians to undermine Black critiques of systemic racism: “poor living conditions, poverty, overcrowding, and discrimination and repression by the white majority are often cited as the major reason for the low intelligence scores of blacks. But oriental immigrants were subjected to at least as much deprivation and oppression” (275). Vernon concludes that it is not “adverse environments” that affect IQ and success but “superior motivation to achieve academically, and personality characteristics such as docility and industriousness. Whatever the difficulties, oriental parents have continued to rear their children in much the same traditional manner” (275). In attributing success to personality traits and cultural tradition, Vernon’s work underscores the irrelevance of national specificity between Canada and the United States even as it is precisely the Orientalist belief in these innate traits and the unassimilability of these tradition-bound Asians that justified exclusion and the patrolling of national borders against Asian “infiltration.”

Model minority discourse’s valorization of Asian economic achievement as both the condition of assimilation and the sign of assimilability dramatizes the extent to which Asians in North America have been figured as exemplars of “exceptional capitalist achievement,” to borrow Tomo Hattori’s phrase (231). Hattori suggests that Asian American studies needs to interrogate how the ethnic subject is produced by and within capital. Examining the Asian American subject as a “human form of racial capital,” he argues, enables a move away from the idealist investment in resisting mainstream cultural ideology to an examination of the pragmatist strategies of survival

underwritten by “cultural interpellation under capital” (239). The divergent attitudes toward the Eaton sisters within Asian American literary studies, for example, in which Edith is valorized as resistant and Winnifred is vilified for being a sellout, ignore the ways in which both writers calibrate and calculate the opportunities enabled and disabled by the commodification of ethnic identity. According to Hattori, the work of both sisters must be understood as effects of model minority discourse, a “system of signification that emerges from the institutions of multiculturalism that use racialized human subject tools for the advancement of a civil society under capitalism” (228).

Hattori’s notion of model minority discourse as a function of multiculturalism and state capitalism parallels Nguyen’s analysis of the oppositional politics that define Asian American Studies—in both their works, the viability and currency of minority discourse are inextricable from the commodification of ethnic identity even as Asian American Studies defines as its object the undoing of that commodification. This commodification, variously described as an effect of the “marketplace of multiculturalism,” “boutique multiculturalism,” or “corporate multiculturalism” (see, respectively, Nguyen 10-11; Fish; and Chicago Cultural Studies Group), underscores how capital *models* minorities—that is, how certain models or “forms” of minoritized identity are granted currency or cultural capital and intelligibility, while others are not.

The commodification of ethnic identity helps to contextualize the popularity of model minority narratives that deal with what Palumbo-Liu calls “the ethnic dilemma.” These narratives chronicle the “problem” of racial, ethnic, and gendered identities (395). According to Palumbo-Liu, the success of model minority narratives stems from the resolutions offered to this predicament. Such narratives

constitute a specific model of assimilation, held to be the natural working out of the “ethnic dilemma,” that reroutes social critique into introspective meditation. In much the same way that the model minority myth worked to place the responsibility for the minority subject’s success or failure squarely within his or her personal “capabilities,” so the logic of model minority discourse argues that an inward adjustment is necessary for the suture of the ethnic subject into an optimal position within the dominant culture. In both cases the sociopolitical apparatuses that perpetuate material differences remain unchallenged and even fortified. (397)

This inward epiphanic shift that leads to narrative resolution and personal healing (i.e., what was once a fragmented self produced by this ethnic dilemma becomes whole) not only diverts interrogation of the dominant culture

but also reduces its effects to a plot complication in the drama of the ethnic dilemma. Moreover, representing resolution in terms of personal healing reinforces the liberal individual as the locus of meaning and agency, rendering the sociopolitical apparatuses that define and police the boundaries of nation and subjectivity invisible if not irrelevant.

The features that Palumbo-Liu identifies as definitive of model minority narratives are inextricable from the paratext, which shapes how these texts are marketed and read. In his theory of the paratext, Gérard Genette argues that the paratext is made up of *peritextual* elements—such as the cover, title, epigraph, preface, chapter headings, and so on—and *epitextual* elements—such as interviews, book reviews, and private letters—that are outside the book proper. Since the definitional boundaries of what constitutes the epitextual elements are fuzzy, there is “the potential for indefinite diffusion” of the epitext (346). Together these elements constellate the paratext or the “threshold of interpretation” through which the reader passes, orienting reader-text relationships. The paratext is simultaneously on the fringes and central to how the text is read and understood. Genette continues:

Indeed this fringe, always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that—whether well or poorly understood and achieved—is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it. (2)

Essentially, Genette’s theory of the paratext is a theory of mediation that examines how “literary and printerly conventions . . . mediate between the world of publishing and the world of the text” (Macksey xvii). While determining the extent of Lau’s role in authorizing and legitimating the paratext is a highly speculative endeavour,<sup>6</sup> what is salient to the present discussion is Genette’s identification of the economic dimensions of the paratext that not only improve reception and increase sales but also direct a “more pertinent reading” of the text. It is this more “pertinent” reading, I would suggest, through which we can understand how model minority discourse is an integral part of the paratext. While model minority discourse, as Palumbo-Liu points out, is not necessarily coextensive with the texts themselves, it designates a “mode of apprehending, decoding, recoding, and producing Asian American narratives” (396). What, then, does it mean to refer to the paratextual or nonliterary features of model minority discourse that designate this mode highlighted by Palumbo-Liu?

### The Currency of Visibility

To answer that question involves an initial detour into how this “mode of apprehending, decoding, recoding, and producing” is also informed by visible minority discourse. The power of the discourse on visibility as a central lens by which racial difference is understood and apprehended has been extensively explored. In *The Politics of the Visible in Asian North American Narratives*, Eleanor Ty neatly sums up the ambivalence of situating racial difference in terms of visibility. “The politics of the visible,” Ty notes, deals with “the effects of being legally, socially, and culturally marked as ‘visible,’ and paradoxically, with the experience of being invisible in dominant culture and history” (11–12). *Visible minorities*, as defined in Canada by the Employment Equity Act (1995, c. 44, s. 3), refers to “persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour.” Intended to ensure equal employment opportunities for people of colour, the term “visible minority” ironically postulates “visibility” as both the sign of recognition conferred to those rendered invisible by racism and the mark that is the condition of their marginalization. Robyn Wiegman’s concept of the visual economy is particularly instructive in understanding this slippage. The visual economy, as Wiegman argues, defines “the visual as both an economic system and a representational economy” (4). Within this visual economy, the discursive formation of race as a primarily visible and corporeal phenomenon cannot be understood independently from a hierarchy of value accorded to differentially racialized bodies. Visibility, within the visual economy of race, is the currency of exchange; its value is secured by a liberal discourse invested in “recognition” as the means to agency and subjectivity such that visibility or being visible eventually becomes an end in itself. Within this visual economy, visible minority discourse does not simply circumscribe the terms of oppression as well as the terms of emancipation; the condition of oppression—that is, one’s visibility—returns and is proffered as the term of emancipation.

Like model minority discourse, visible minority discourse is a discourse of containment. The supposed transparency of racial markers that belies visible minority discourse presumes racial markers to be apprehensible independent of the process of racialization. The unmediated “visibility” of racial difference simultaneously naturalizes the body as the sole site of racial meaning and, in turn, shifts attention from how discursive formations racialize the body and reduces racial oppression to an effect or by-product of difference. Just as model minority narratives ascribe the minority subject as “responsible” for his or her personal healing, framing racial difference as a corporeal

sign “blames” the body—and not racism’s inscription of the body—for racism. Furthermore, the term “visible minority” raises the question, visible to whom? For many people of colour, we have always been conscious of the “fact” of our visibility.<sup>7</sup> Within the logic of Canadian multiculturalism, visibility becomes the privileged signifier of recognition, spatializing the relations of recognition such that those doing the “seeing” are always on the inside. “The disciplinary naming of the not-so-white body as ‘visible minority,’” Roy Miki argues, “maintains the normative value of whiteness” (*Broken Entries* 208).

The complicated configurations of model minority discourse, in which Asians are racialized by and within capital, and visible minority discourse, which presumes the transparency of race, reveal the currency of visibility exemplified by the controversies that surround Lau and the rich paratext that surrounds her work. In an opinion piece for the *Globe and Mail*, Lau explains why she decided not to participate in the 1994 Writing thru Race conference, which was organized to provide a space for Canadian writers of colour to discuss both their writing and the politics of race and publishing:

I decided fairly early to stop accepting invitations to “multicultural” readings, although I needed the \$100 or so that these readings provided. I didn’t want to have any more opportunities based on my colour that would separate me from the equally struggling white male writer next door.

Despite all this, I am aware of having an advantage. When I walk into a convention room or a reception hall full of writers and publishers, I realize with a tiny thrill that I am one of the very few non-white faces. In a sea of writers and would-be-writers, all of them hard-working and ambitious, a visible minority is at least visible. (“Why I Didn’t Attend”)

Lau’s characterization of multiculturalism, where meritocracy and fairness have been overshadowed by an uncritical promotion of women writers and writers of colour, reveals the currency of visibility, which functions here on multiple registers. Lau’s rejection of the opportunities afforded to visible minorities is based on her equivalence of an extra “\$100 or so” to the value of one’s “colour.” Furthermore, the contrasting scenes laid out here—the unfair and opportunistic racialized space of “multicultural readings” and a democratic publishing convention or reception made up of “hard-working and ambitious” writers—naturalize whiteness as the inevitable configuration of a meritocratic system, where “hard work” and not the commodification of ethnic identity determines success. In Lau’s version of multiculturalism, it is the labour of the “struggling white male writer” that is devalued and ethnic identity that is overvalued. Political recognition and popular reception



are conflated such that her status as a visible minority desecrates the “level playing field” and becomes the sole ground on which popular reception and recognition are conferred. Simultaneously, though, the thrill of difference, of being “one of the very few non-white faces,” can only be sustained by her singularity from other “visible minorities” who do not inhabit the writing world. What her formulation does not address is this: if the playing field has been levelled, then what provides this thrill? Where are the other visible minorities? In effect, being a visible minority has made her a minor celebrity. Her apparent reluctance to capitalize on the supposed cultural cachet of “visibility” is simultaneously undermined by the thrill of difference, reflecting her acknowledgement that, in spite of how she would like to be identified, she is still always visible as a minority.

In contrast to the deracinated subject matter of Lau’s writing and her refusal to identify as a writer of colour, the media interest that sustains her public incarnation ironically seems to revel in her status as such. In fact, the marketing and popular reception of her work have been inseparable from the titillating details of her life, titillating because they simultaneously mark her as “Asian Canadian” while distinguishing her as anything but representative. In spite of Lau’s later success as a writer and poet (Lau became the youngest writer ever to be nominated for the Governor General’s Literary Award for poetry), she is still best known for her first major work, *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid*, a memoir that documents her time on the streets from the ages of fourteen to sixteen. Since its initial publication in 1989, *Runaway* has been translated into six languages and has spawned a made-for-television “Movie of the Week.”<sup>8</sup> Given the success of *Runaway*, the following autobiographical details are not only common knowledge but also consistently invoked: born in 1971 to Chinese immigrants, this sensitive, straight-A student was left with no option but to run away because her abusive and traditional parents forbade her from pursuing her dreams of becoming a writer; they wanted her to be a lawyer or a doctor. To survive on the streets, Lau turned to prostitution and drugs, all the while struggling to be a writer. The transformation from “street kid” to “writer” is the narrative propulsion of *Runaway*, and the work’s success seemed to forever wed Lau to this narrative teleology.

Aside from the fascination with youth overcoming adversity, the sensationalism that attends Lau’s debut on the public stage also derives from her apparent challenge to the model minority stereotype. In an interview with Lau, award-winning journalist and memoirist Jan Wong writes, “Now I

left my comfortable Montreal home at 19 to voluntarily haul pig manure in China during the Cultural Revolution. But I have trouble understanding why someone so smart would drop out of school and run away from home at 14 and end up as a junkie-whore" (C1). Wong's description of Lau reveals the pervasiveness of the dichotomy outlined by Nguyen and others. While Wong describes her own youth as animated by political commitment and idealism, she figures Lau's actions as incomprehensible because she is "so smart." "Overnight," Wong continues, "she went from a straight A student to every parent's nightmare." Wong's professed inability to understand, however, is undermined by her details of Lau's physicality. Her interview opens with the following description: "Evelyn Lau is wearing a baggy oatmeal sweater. So it's not immediately apparent she is one of the few surgically unassisted Chinese women in the world to require a DD-cup bra." In an interview that tries to make sense of Lau's personal history and artistic drive, this detail about Lau's unnaturally large Chinese bust potentially naturalizes her body as a part of the explanatory framework for why, unlike "millions of Canadians who have overcome such traumas," Lau was unable to overcome hers, therefore ending up a "junkie-whore." What Wong poses as incomprehensible because Lau is "so smart" therefore has nothing to do with Lau's brains but with her body. Coincidentally, when Lau appeared on TV's *Geraldo* in the fall of 1989, a banner flashed across her chest with the blurb "Hooker at age 14." As one reviewer explains, the tabloid sensationalism that surrounded Lau reflected the extent to which "Interviewers were anxious to meet someone [like Lau] who had so thoroughly upended the stereotypical image of the clean, young Chinese-Canadian" (Hluchy 73). Lau's putative divergence from the model minority stereotype is expressed through sexualizing her singularity. Ironically, despite Lau's disavowal of her ethnic identity and her reluctance to cash in on it, it is her apparent difference from popular assumptions about her ethnic identity that fuels media interest.

Lau's perceived difference from the conventional "clean, young Chinese-Canadian" also relies on readers racializing her texts as the point of reference by which her singularity is gauged. The covers of the U.S. and Canadian versions of *Runaway* and of two poetry collections, *You Are Not Who You Claim* (1990) and *Oedipal Dreams* (1992), feature her photo, a disembodied face emerging out of a dark, shadowy background.<sup>9</sup> The cover of *Oedipal Dreams*, according to Misao Dean, "evokes the classical face of Chinese Opera. Sold under the sign of 'oriental girl,' who is stereotypically both the mincing and modest virgin and the mysterious and sexually skilled courtesan, Lau's

books are marketed in a way that evokes both racist and sexist stereotypes” (24–25). On the cover of *You Are Not Who You Claim*, Lau’s intense eyes stare up from under her dark permed hair, and her body disappears into the simple blankness of the cover. Her expressions are the same—defiant and yet searching. Like the cover of *Oedipal Dreams* and an early edition of *Runaway*, her face is the central if not the only focus, collapsing the distance between author and text by insistently racializing the text through invoking the proximity of the racialized authorial body. Just as Wong’s piece on Lau literally and metaphorical frames Lau’s body as a point of entry into understanding her work, at the end of each poem in *You Are Not Who You Claim*, the initials E.L. appear in script to approximate handwriting—rhetorically punctuating each poem with the immediacy of Lau’s presence and the authenticity of her authorship.<sup>10</sup>

What are minor references to Lau’s ethnic and racial background in her work often become touchstones for analyses and evidence of her rejection of her ethnic heritage; her running away from her parents is figured as synonymous with running away from the markers of race and ethnicity. According to Lien Chao, “By denouncing her parents as the sole cause of her running away from home, the sovereignty of the autobiographical narrator is obtained, though at the expense of her parents’ subjectivity being depicted as Other” (163). Indeed, the prologue of *Runaway* seems to suggest such a reading:

I was born in Vancouver to Chinese immigrants. I was a shy and introspective child, exceedingly sensitive to the tensions and emotions around me. My parents were strict, overprotective and suspicious of the unknown society around them. By kindergarten, I was already expected to excel in class, as the first step, in my pre-planned career as a doctor or lawyer. (1)

My parents did not approve of my writing or of my involvement in the peace movement. They forbade me to write unless I brought home straight A’s from school, and right up until I left home at fourteen I was not allowed out of my house except to attend school and take piano lessons—not on weekends, not after school. (4)

Here Lau’s parents and their middle-class “model minority” aspirations are juxtaposed against her political beliefs and artistic dreams. Aside from these early references, there is little mention in her memoir, poetry, and fiction about issues of ethnicity and race. However, it is the constant repetition and referencing of these “ethnic traces” that demonstrate how her visibility as a minority holds currency and sustains public fascination.

In many instances, Lau’s running away is attributed to the restrictive upbringing defined as Chinese culture. One writer notes that Lau’s account

of her life on the streets is “less remarkable than Lau’s reason for leaving home: her conservative parents wouldn’t allow her to pursue her interest in writing” (Dafoe C1). Another writes, “She ran away from home at 14, when her parents, Chinese immigrants, refused to let her write” (Walker E7). The descriptive modification of her parents, “Chinese immigrants,” implies and attributes their Chineseness as an explanation for their refusal to let Lau pursue artistic expression. If this is the popular narrative of Lau’s emergence as a writer, then the logic behind her explanation for not attending the Writing thru Race conference becomes an even more powerful means of constituting and affirming whiteness as the invisible and transcendent signifier of neutrality and meritocracy. The absence of other visible minorities at the publishing conventions and receptions that she attends is rewritten not as an example of institutional or systemic racism but as a function of crass Chinese materialism and lack of aesthetic appreciation. One only needs to note the uproar over Vancouver’s “monster houses” to see how Asian capital is racialized as antagonistic to the aesthetic harmony of pastoral Vancouver neighbourhoods.<sup>11</sup> Lau’s singularity and currency, then, arise not because she has “successfully” run away from the markers of ethnicity so much as she persuasively embodies the liberal myth of inclusion through meritocracy upon which a racialized political economy depends.<sup>12</sup>

To further naturalize Lau’s visibility, thereby obscuring the insistent marketing of her image as initial point of mediation to her work, her books’ back cover descriptions and reviews continually laud Lau for the unmediated authenticity of her poetic voice. In Irving Layton’s review, which appears on both the back covers of *Oedipal Dreams* and *You Are Not Who You Claim*, Lau’s “lines and images” are described as “compellingly fresh. Her observations are free of literary jargon. If early success doesn’t weaken her rage, doesn’t soften her indictments, her future success is inevitable.” Another blurb, this time a *Globe and Mail* review on the back cover of *Fresh Girls*, applauds Lau for the courage in maintaining her vision: “Lau has urgently offered herself as raw material in her prose—stripped, unselfconscious, her words ringing with a rare verisimilitude. . . . she blends startling prose talent with a fierce determination to be true.” Rawness, truth, authenticity, realism, and independence seem to be the refrain of the reviews that sing Lau’s praises. This insistence on the unmediated nature of her work and her independent voice—Lau has yet to be tainted by cultural and economic capital or by the identity politics and theory often assumed to have “hijacked” literary studies—reflects the value accorded to visibility. Transparency

or resistance to mediation is here the index of value for ethnic literature because it leaves the logic of capital and racialization intact. Just as the proximity of the authorial body is invoked to authorize the work as “ethnic,” the representation of her work as unmediated and powered by a defiant authenticity simultaneously authenticates the “raw materiality” of the authorial body, thereby naturalizing the visibility of racial signifiers. In other words, this authority of the authorial body is constituted through the denial of its discursivity—its visibility is constituted as transparent and prediscursive.

Furthermore, if the ethnic dilemma is denoted paratextually, then the textual subject of Lau’s poetry and fiction can be read as the possibility of transcending this dilemma. Whereas Palumbo-Liu argues that the popularity of model minority texts hinges on the resolution of the cultural conflict between the generations while leaving the sociopolitical context in which the conflict takes place unexamined, the absence of cultural conflict in Lau’s works marks the possibility of resolving this conflict. Yet it is only through reference to these images of Lau as a visible minority whose “visibility” comes to function as a notation for the ethnic dilemma that the textual absence of cultural conflict is able to be registered as an example of transcendence, a transcendence that ironically foregrounds the particularity and individualism that sustains the discourse of Lau’s presumed authenticity. In the context of Canadian racial politics, then, the “ethnic dilemma” that Palumbo-Liu locates as a narrative feature of model minority texts need not be found exclusively at the level of plot. As analysis of the paratext around Lau reveals, it is enough to invoke the ethnic dilemma through recourse to Lau’s image on her book covers, marking it as the threshold of interpretation. The repetitive references to Lau’s relationship with her parents as a drama of cultural conflict and the insistent marketing of her books under the sign of her face reveal how the currency of Lau’s visibility is powered by the confluence of U.S. model minority discourse and Canadian visible minority discourse. Her face and ethnic background seem to be invoked as substitutes for the other. Thus, although writers such as Lau may not necessarily deal with the “ethnic dilemma” in the content of their works, the currency of her visibility as a minority functions as a shorthand notation for this dilemma.<sup>13</sup>

Given the paratext’s centrality in the apprehending, decoding, and recoding of Lau’s work, her work cannot be understood independently of the paratext’s economic dimension. As the paratext around Lau reveals, model minority discourse and its ambivalent relationship to racialized capital must be understood in relation to Canada’s visible minority discourse and

the liberal ideology that underpins them both. Model minority discourse, in other words, needs visible minority discourse—it needs a concept of visibility that is the currency of exchange in visible minority discourse. The putative successful assimilation and the increased profile of recent Asian American and Asian Canadian writers affirm liberal democracy's recognition of its minorities. As Robyn Wiegman notes, this new visibility of minorities in popular culture “reveals the profound transformations that underlie both the form and structure of contemporary white supremacy” (5). And, simultaneously, visible minority discourse needs the teleology of model minority discourse, such that the trajectory of invisibility to visibility posits upward mobility and economic opportunities as the teleological endpoint or “reward” of recognition. It is telling, in the wake of her success and popularity, that Lau goes on to write about the obsession with home ownership in “I Sing the Song of My Condo.” According to Lau, the home buyers brochures depicted “women [who] were blond, with sunny smiles, and their husbands looked both chiselled and paternal.” They “were not like anyone I knew.” It was then, she notes, that “I wanted to sing the love song of the middle class. I wanted this to be the song of myself—a litany of mortgage payments and car payments, the weeping and gnashing at tax time, maximum RRSP payments and mutual funds, credit cards and credit's twin, debt.” In her obsession with home buying and the frustrations that ensued, Lau notes, “when I walked the streets of Vancouver, I glared up at the high windows of the condominiums and felt the owners were not as special as me, nor as deserving. When I gave poetry readings, I looked out at the audience and wondered how many of them owned their own homes.” Despite her success and ability to attract a large readership, it is the white middle class signifier of home ownership that Lau registers as the mark and “reward” of recognition. She may be visible as a public figure, but she is still on the margins, looking up or looking out. In this instance, it is model minority's promise of upward mobility and assimilation that powers visibility's value in visible minority discourse.

Indeed, even within minority literary studies, we can detect the convergence of model minority and visible minority discourses and the currency of visibility. For to argue that Lau's work is assimilationist requires one to reference and reinforce the “ethnic dilemma” as constitutive and definitive of texts written by ethnic writers. Yet to suggest that Lau challenges the model minority stereotype is to imply a kind of transcendence that not only characterizes model minority texts themselves but also fosters the conditions for their circulation and currency. The contradictions here also point to the

limits of Asian American and Asian Canadian literary studies to the extent that these contradictions draw attention to how the signposts we have relied on to produce readings of resistance and oppositionality are themselves similarly the products of such interpretive acts informed by paratexts and market forces. In the same way that popular reception of Lau can rely and has relied on the paratextual racialized body of Lau to instantiate their readings of her transcendence, Asian Canadian and Asian American scholars have also invoked the paratextual racialized body of Lau to substantiate our own desires for “resistance,” even when those readings conclude with a disavowal of Lau as a resistant figure.

In his essay “Can Asian Adian? Reading the Scenes of ‘Asian Canadian,’” Roy Miki calls for an ethics of reading “Asian Canadian,” a set of critical practices “that can negotiate the tensions between the material conditions of textual productions that give a text its singularity and its power to see and the normative conditions of reception that shape the subject positions of readers and thereby influence what gets to be seen” (74). The tensions between the “power to see” and “to be seen” are what the premium placed on “visibility” in visible minority discourse erases. Building on Miki’s call for a set of critical practices, what I hope to have demonstrated here at this critical juncture is not whether or not works such as Lau’s are complicit, but instead, the necessity of tracking the assumptions underlying our own reading practices and the signposts that have come to define for us what counts as resistance.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Throughout this article, I try to be nation specific rather than use the term “North America” because I want to momentarily fix and highlight the different racial formations and discourses particular to each country to show how these discourses, in fact, travel across the border and inform each other. Although I am ambivalent about preserving the nationalist rubric and the discreteness of difference that my specificity implies, I am wary of the homogenizing potential of the term “North America,” where U.S. racial paradigms are the default lens through which we understand racial formations in North America.
- 2 According to Elaine Kim, the “most recurrent theme in our writing” is “the claiming of America for Asian Americans” (147). Such a formulation can be found in Chan.
- 3 One exception is Sau-ling Wong and Jeffrey Santa Ana’s review essay on Asian American sexuality, which takes into consideration Asian Canadian texts. They read Lau’s works

as part of an emergent body of literature that deploys sexuality as a means of defying the model minority narrative. For a comparative analysis of *Obasan's* cross-border success, see my "Passing Recognition: *Obasan* and the Borders of Asian American and Canadian Literary Studies."

- 4 In "Rereading Chinese Head Tax Racism: Redress, Stereotype, and Antiracist Critical Practice," Lily Cho persuasively argues that model minority discourse in Canada emerged as early as 1885 in the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration.
- 5 It is also particularly noteworthy that *The Abilities and Achievements of Orientals in North America* was, in part, aided by a grant from the Pioneer Fund, a controversial U.S.-based organization that has historically funded eugenics research. Although Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, authors of the controversial book *The Bell Curve*, which argued that blacks were less intelligent than whites, have no connection to the Pioneer Fund, one of their key sources is Arthur Jensen, whose work was funded by the Pioneer Fund and whom Vernon also cites extensively.
- 6 In response to a query about how the shadowy image of her face became the cover for *Oedipal Dreams*, Lau "disclaims responsibility for this image. 'I'm not a studied person. I don't like to put out one image of myself and stick to that image.' The picture itself was a fluke, a *jeu d'esprit* of a *Georgia Strait* photographer who stood over her as she lay on the floor. 'I used to wear a lot of make-up like that, and I had actually made myself up like that when the photographer arrived. That was just me at the time'" (Dean 25). Of course, it can be argued, the disavowal of responsibility and authority for her public images can be precisely the image being cultivated.
- 7 In Frantz Fanon's formulation, the "fact" of blackness is in fact a "racial epidermal schema" in which "consciousness of the body is a solely negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness" (110).
- 8 The movie, *Diary of Evelyn Lau*, produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, aired on prime time on Sunday, 13 March 1994, to great media hoopla.
- 9 Recent editions of *Runaway* no longer feature Lau's picture.
- 10 According to Lien Chao, Lau's signature illustrates "her desire for authorship and individual success" (160). Although it is not clear to me that Lau has such a direct hand in the layout of her texts, the effect of these signatures does bear the imprint of individual authorship.
- 11 In his article "The Race of Space," Richard Cavell examines how architectural style is a contested site of racialization. These "monster houses" became synonymous with rich Hong Kong immigrants and referred to their "pastiche" or gaudy kitsch style that ruined the Tudor aesthetic of wealthy neighbourhoods, which had been predominantly Anglo because of the historical legal prohibitions against Chinese and other immigrants from purchasing property in these neighbourhoods. The language of aestheticism and aesthetic value, in this case, effectively masks the economic and racist motivations that underpin the protests against "monster houses."
- 12 Here I am invoking the work of Lisa Lowe, who persuasively demonstrates how racialization "has been the site of the contradiction between political emancipation and the conditions of economic exploitation" (23). Drawing on and extending Michael Omi and Howard Winant's notion of racial formation and the processes of racialization, Lowe argues that constitutive contradiction of liberal democracy is that its promise of universal equality and inclusion through citizenship relies on racializing the labour forces that it excludes from those rights (24). Similarly, B. Singh Bolaria and Peter S. Li have argued for examining how the production of racial difference is bound up with the reproduction of cheap labour. Thanks to Iyko Day for bringing their work to my attention.



- 13 The movie *Diary of Evelyn Lau*, in contrast to *Runaway*, foregrounds the conflict between Lau and her parents. According to both Lien Chao and Sneja Gunew, the medium of film shifts the emphasis of Lau's narrative from her life on the streets to her relationship to her parents. Writes Gunew, "The demands of the visual medium mean that the ethnic identity of the protagonist and her family inevitably register and have a certain kind of coded presence" (257). The visual medium, in other words, renders the "coded presence" inescapable and suggests that even the book covers come to authorize this "coded presence" in spite of the content of Lau's works.

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