

Global Drift

Thinking the Beyond of Identity Politics

We live in a globalized world where imperialist and national structures, differences between the tangible and the intangible, the monumental and the everyday, and even the very notion of humanity are no longer the same as our characterizations of them twenty years ago.

—Néstor García Canclini, “The State of War and the State of Hybridization” (38)

History is not the dead and gone; it lives on in us in the way it shapes our thought and especially our thought about what is possible.

—Daphne Marlatt, “Self-Representation and Fictionality” (125)

Lee Maracle’s “Yin Chin,” one of the stories in *Sojourner’s Truth and Other Stories* (1990), is dedicated to SKY Lee, author of the well-known novel *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1990). The story is framed through a childhood memory of a Chinese grocer whose store was across the street from Vancouver’s Oppenheimer Park in what is now, and was back then, a run-down neighbourhood. The narrator, identified as a writer, does not present her memory directly but explores its effects through a network of memories. The story is formed in her movement between specific events that are separate in historical time but held in her unfolding consciousness as simultaneous.

The narrator begins with her early student years at the University of British Columbia, typified in a moment in the cafeteria when she “instinctively”—and I place this adverb in scare quotes for now—turned away from a table of “Chinese” students who are imagined as “other” to her “Native” identity. The scene then shifts to another moment, again supposedly in the same cafeteria but years later. She is now seated, as a self-identified writer (and presumably not a “Native” student), around the table with many “Asian” writers, and she acknowledges a strong, shared consciousness of a collective struggle against racism and their disempowerment as writers.

Set against these two scenes are two other scenes. In her immediate present, the narrator-writer jumps out of her car on Vancouver's Powell Street. With some risk to her own physical safety, she defends an elderly Chinese woman being harassed by a Native male. While she stands on the sidewalk comforting this woman, her memory segues to the traumatic epicentre of this story: the moment when the "I" of her childhood, in the presence of her mother and the Chinese grocer, her mother's friend, had screamed out the English translation of the title, "Chinaman." The racialized discourse coming out of her mouth had been prompted by a playful gesture of a man outside the grocery store. The story probes the contours of this discourse. Where had it come from? How had it inhabited her childhood consciousness so habitually that she "instinctively" screamed "Chinaman" when she felt threatened? How, indeed, did the formation of her subjectivity, and thus her assumed identity as Native, depend on its relation to "Chinaman" as the other? When we think of going "beyond identity," we would do well to keep in mind the sometimes traumatic circumstances out of which identities arise. As points of coherence, identities are not only positions of power and stability, though they are often seen only in these terms. Instead, as Maracle's story suggests, they function as a provisional nexus in and through which social subjects address the boundaries of cultural and political inequities and their wounding consequences.

In the aftermath of 9/11, I have been haunted by the limits of language to ameliorate the alterations in the core of social and biological existence that only moments before had seemed so much more taken for granted, at least in Canadian terms. An event of cataclysmic proportions had split apart all the apparently organized structures of the social, economic, and cultural determinants that constituted our imagined lives. But to expose what? Nothing could be unequivocally identified. Instead, what appeared were the more amorphous contours of global powers and machinations—economic, political, ideological, and military—suddenly mobilized around a new social script in the United States and, by association, in Canada: a script called "terrorism." The word, as a heavily burdened and moving signifier without a locatable signified, announced in the everyday lives of Canadians the arrival of an elsewhere, a there that became a here.

It was this crisis that set in motion a global drift that initially manifested itself in an emergent inability to tell the time. Not, of course, the regulated time of calendars, bank machines, punch clocks, and so on, but the

substance of the unfolding time we simultaneously inhabit and produce as social and biological beings. I want to emphasize the “social” to remind ourselves that as social beings we seek to locate ourselves through the diverse media of the equally diverse discourses that shape the boundaries of what is representable and, of equal importance, what is not. When our taken-for-granted representations are destabilized or otherwise disordered, as they are at present, attempts to tell the time expose the real possibility that the “foreign” or “alien” elements they can no longer contain may harbour unpredictable and even threatening global signifiers and that these signifiers do not move in accordance with recognized local and national times. This condition of a post-9/11 discourse has brought into circulation the immediacy of “terrorist cells,” “biological warfare,” and “anthrax,” terms that are not “elsewhere” but are “inside” the public spaces that on September 10 seemed known and manageable. In Canadian cultural spheres, the coming of this new time has brought in its wake the signs of trauma, for some or for many, as the local and national formations once mediating the global lose their bearings and are seemingly set adrift.

To speak to—or in resistance to—this moment of transformation is to tempt a back draft of contradictory, uncertain, and even volatile discourses. For me—and I speak in the awareness that this “I” and presumably other “I’s” have now been thoroughly diminished—the post-9/11 era has sped up a crisis of time in Canada that has been apparent but not openly recognized during the past decade and more. There is some urgency here, then, to approach global drift not so much from the perspective of its fields of interaction beyond or external to the Canadian nation but through a remembering of the recent past of our cultural history. Such a venture requires a rethinking of the historical trajectory that has shaped the Cold War era of the postwar years, up to the late 1980s, a time that frames the changing social conditions of my own subject formation and memories.

What emerged in the 1950s, as the Canadian nation-state sought to manage and shape the imagined horizons of its citizenry around more centralist forms of management, was the appropriation of culture to produce new forms of a national identity—in the creation of the Canada Council in 1957, for instance. The discourse of being “Canadian,” then, began to distinguish the boundary demarking “us” from the US to the south and from the former centre of the British Empire an ocean away, though the cultural and ideological ties to British values would remain strong in English Canada,

creating what many of us kids experienced as the era of heavy anglocentrism. Yet by the 1970s—and this is, significantly, in contrast to the escalating coherence of cultural forms that were forging a Québécois identity—policy makers of English Canada had to manage an increasingly unruly mix of new immigrants and non-Anglo citizens who were making visible a whole slew of cultures out of sync with each other.

A detailed account of this history is beyond the scope of this essay.¹ Such an account would have to involve an examination of various intersecting social movements, inaugurated, for instance, on the basis of gender, ethnicity, aboriginality, sexuality, and race, and they would have to be studied in relation to governmental policies and reactions, institutional and cultural representations, critical and cultural theories incorporated in feminism, minority discourses, critical race studies, and historiography, and especially new cultural production from previously unrepresented groups. What I would like to do is provide a much more modest sketch of recent social and cultural history that I hope will bring us back to the present.

By the late 1960s, in the surge of nationalism during Canada's 1967 centennial year—even at this heightened moment—there were already cracks in the nation's centralist identity. On the one side lay the threat of the cultural sovereignty movement in Quebec, and on the other were the large and vocal non-English Canadian groups being designated as the "others"—the "ethnics"—the European-origin groups such as Ukrainian, German, and Italian Canadians. And, of course, to the south lay the omnipresent shadows of US cultural imperialism, always itching to move its wares across the border. Seen in this social framework, the multiculturalism policy of 1971, itself a discursive act, can be read in political terms—that it was the federal government's response to the heterogeneous cultural identities threatening the coherence of the nation-state and the internal fabric of its historical tactics of control. These tactics had included the racialization of nonwhites, the administrative control of land and First Nations collectives, and the deployment of British imperialist cultural values. The Official Languages Act (1969), which established Canada as a bilingual country and mediated the cultural dissension of French Canadians, had to be balanced with something—though not with the status of an act—for those who were actually designated "the others," whose voices could no longer be ignored.

Always unpredictable, however, are the modes in which policies and the effects they produce will be received and even rescripted by social subjects who, in contrast to the abstract nature of the policies, inhabit the local sites

of the nation that are marked by differences, conflicts, and contradictions. The 1970s and early 1980s, especially in large urban centres, saw the emergence of alternative groups, variously self-identified, whose “voices” resisted and often refused the dominant cultural forms of the Canadian nation by making visible the covered-over or elided histories in the nation’s past. Soon we were no longer in search of “a” or “the” Canadian identity, the predominant social quest of the 1960s. Now we had identities in the plural that were seen as differentiated, in relations of inequality, and hierarchically positioned according to the three critical categories that gained prominence in cultural work: gender, race, and class. The arrival of this version of identity politics opened up new discourses and cultural productions that explored the implications of hyphenated identities.

But the social praxis it generated—exciting to many—prompted the reactionary voices of those who lamented the loss of a former “Canada” that, in their eyes, was more stable, more homogeneous, more connected to representations of colonial legacies. The “Canada” invoked in their discontent vis-à-vis voices of previously accommodating “minorities” could be traced to an earlier nation formation—one that had its deeper historical roots in an identity that one political theorist, Jan Penrose, has captured in the following succinct description: “The hegemonic ideal prescribed that, in customs, Canadians would be British; they would speak the English language (though some French had to be tolerated, temporarily at least); they would hold to the Christian faith (preferably Protestant); and, incontrovertibly, they would be white” (27). By the 1980s, the cultural values aligned with this origin—which included, to a large extent, the adjustments necessary to assimilate its European-derived citizens—could no longer account for the increasingly heterogeneous and incoherent cultural and demographic conditions of the nation following the switch in 1967 to a “point system” in Canada’s immigration policy. What appeared to be radical disruptions for some, then, for others was the inevitable outcome of the structures of unequal “differences” built into the historical boundaries of the Canadian nation-state.

I want to expand on the more immediate impact of this clash at the crossroads, if the tensions can be so conceived, through the event of the Japanese Canadian redress movement, in which I participated directly during a ten-year period of my life. Even though the origins of redress as a concept can be traced back to the identity politics of the 1970s—Japanese Canadians even celebrated their centennial in 1977—it wasn’t until the 1980s,

the period singled out above, that Redress (which then took on a capital R) became a full-fledged collective movement. Of course, for Japanese Canadians this mobilization of consciousness was instrumental in leading them to redefine the uprooting of the 1940s as “democracy betrayed”—the title of their brief to the federal government in 1984—and as a consequence to seek “redress” for the injustices.²

I have written on the redress movement in *Justice in Our Time* (coauthored with Cassandra Kobayashi) and in *Redress*, but here I want to propose that its eventual resolution in the Redress Agreement reached with the federal government on 22 September 1988 was woven into the cultural and “race” politics—the so-called politics of representation—that marked the cultural and social tensions of the 1980s.³ The softer forms of the multicultural sentiments in the 1970s, what critics of the policy see as the staging of its folkloric or “song and dance” phase, had transformed into an energized field of contested discourses, particularly as issues of social and cultural exclusions came to be asked more forcefully. These issues, fortunately but not accidentally for Japanese Canadians, were to intersect with a strategic moment in the public sphere when English Canadian liberalism, through the leadership of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, saw the repatriation of the constitution and the scripting of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The latter document would supposedly prevent an atrocity such as the uprooting and dispossession of Japanese Canadians during the 1940s from ever happening again. Japanese Canadian redress, then, found itself as a heightened sign at the crossroads of a nation that was simultaneously establishing its sovereignty and struggling to maintain a unity from being eroded from within by centrifugal forces. As a national issue, redress was drawn into—and produced in—the very contradictions that underwrote its narrative voice.

The fuller social, political, and historical dimensions of redress are difficult to unravel in the confines of this essay, but here let me offer a scenario that is relevant to this discussion of global drift. Understood as a human rights issue involving Canadian citizens whose rights were violated on the basis of racialization, the redress movement allowed Japanese Canadians to be seen as citizens who sought redress as a democratic act and a responsibility of citizenship. As “Japanese Canadians,” however, as the instance of a state-identified “visible minority” (the official federal government term for nonwhites), the same citizens were validated in the discourse of a multicultural policy that depended on difference, not sameness. In this framework, the same “citizens” whose rights were violated became part of those “others”

that multicultural ideology sought to incorporate. Oscillating between these two contradictory yet complementary poles of Canadian liberalism, Japanese Canadians were conceived as “citizens” who were wronged and whose redress would redeem the racist past of the nation; at the same time, they were represented as a racialized and cultural minority whose identity had been denied and who, in the current enlightened state of multicultural Canada, were able to reclaim their ancestral connections to become bona fide members of the nation.

We are dealing here with what might be read as a sleight-of-hand situation—now we are normal “Canadians,” now we are not—that makes the redress settlement both an occasion to celebrate for Japanese Canadians and a major symptom, or a kind of “fault line,” of the large-scale changes to Canadian social and cultural spheres that would occur in its aftermath. As the temporal zone widens, Japanese Canadian redress as an event takes on ambivalent social and historical overtones. On the one hand, redress can be interpreted as a “gift” to the nation by Japanese Canadians; thus, in negotiating the settlement with the federal government, they presented the nation with their traumatic history and in that gesture helped to redeem a blemished Canadian history. On the other hand, in agreeing to the settlement, the nation could incorporate “Japanese Canadian redress” into its continuing efforts to manage the borders of a wavering national identity—with Quebec itself then threatening to separate from English Canada. The Free Trade Agreement, being debated at the time of the redress settlement in 1988, and the dismantling of the Berlin Wall a year later (an act that signalled one “end” of the Cold War era), were the larger symptoms of the rapidly ascending forces of globalization, most visible in the takeover of public discourses by the powerful corporate “voices” of information technologies, finance capitalism, cultural commodification, and so on. All of this has translated into a pattern of declines and substitutions within the nation-state, for instance, in the shift from the “citizen” as a member of a collective to an “individualism” aligned with capital accumulation; from a social contract that valorized health care and welfare to the discourse of “user fees”; from the belief in the social good to the neoliberal scramble to amass wealth and commodities through the global economy.

So, in one sense at least, as we witnessed the undoing of the “identity politics” formed in Canada during the crucial period from the early 1970s to the late 1980s, we would think that those who decried, often with a bitterness that overstated its case, the public anxieties invoked by this politics

should now be able to celebrate its demise. Strangely, there is no audible sigh of relief. On the contrary, in this post-9/11 time, the Canadian version of the politics of identity appears much more generative than the strident identity formations that became visible in the aftermath of 9/11, the extreme of which are the fundamentalisms incapable of going beyond their closed imaginary of “good” versus “evil.” Indeed, in light of the global violence produced in the name of these fundamentalisms, the recent history of Canadian cultural formations may perhaps serve a pedagogical function in pointing toward self-critical discourses that can mediate the current time of war, terrorism, and political confrontations.

Today we seem to be witnessing the emergence of social upheavals that have yet to be named or whose names are themselves subject to constant change. It is as if a bundle of counterfeit bills has been inserted into our language so that we can no longer count on the stability of references and meanings. Here I am drawing on a metaphor invoked by Leslie Hall Pinder to critique the legal system’s inability to comprehend the oral cultural traditions of First Nations. What words mean, how they mean, how they are heard, how they are articulated, what values they take on in specific circumstances—all these conditions become churning mills for misrepresentations, misunderstandings, and misidentifications.

The apprehension of social language as counterfeit helps to account for a pervasive anxiety that marks Canadian life. The anxiety moves like a network of barely visible seams that contain uncertainties and insecurities. The same news media that, prior to 9/11, heralded the wizardry of biotechnology and its associated industries, and projected its discoveries as a future soon to arrive, are now fixated on bioterrorism and the threat of viruses and microorganisms that can invisibly enter our bodies—the last stronghold of our existence—and possibly terminate large numbers of innocent lives. In this last instance, despite all the powers of governments and their military machinery, despite all the constitutions and agreements negotiated to forestall outright warfare, it may be our existence as living organisms that makes us vulnerable to what still remains unarticulated. In this last instance, the question of identity returns with new urgency.

The critical frameworks out of which I have attempted to think through, however provisionally, the crisis of time have been constituted on the assumption—here I’m following cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall—that identity as such should not be seen as something fixed that determines our

relations with others.⁴ This would be evident in an assertion, for instance, that as a “Japanese Canadian” I necessarily relate to others in such and such a prescribed set of social and cultural codes. Rather, identity formations are always being interrupted by shifting spaces and times, forcing further negotiations that transform former states. This is why, more than ever, we need to think through the notion of identity as an always provisional formation—the effect of an ensemble of practices that shape all the variables making up our subjectivities (variables such as racialization, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, geographical location, family histories, language, memory, ability, and so on). Systems of power and the relations that those systems produce are not external to our subjectivities but constitute the flows and processes through which we both act and are acted upon.

This point was brought home to me through Linda Ohama’s film *Obaachan’s Garden* (2001). One point of urgency in the film is the search in Japan by filmmaker Ohama, her daughter, and her mother for the lost daughters of Ohama’s grandmother, Asayo Murakami—lost to her before Asayo arrived in Canada in the mid-1920s. This fact is kept secret as Ohama begins filming what she thought would be a more-or-less conventional documentary biography. But midway through, Asayo, then over one hundred years old, reveals that she had been married before, had lost her two young daughters to a domineering mother-in-law who had also broken up her marriage, and had come to Canada to escape Japan. The film follows the search through records in Japan and the magical meeting with one of the daughters (the other had died a few years earlier), nearly eighty, who thought her mother had died long ago. The film represents the mother and daughter meeting after some seventy-five years of separation, as if in a dream landscape but actually in the reconstructed garden of Asayo’s restored home in Steveston, British Columbia, where she and her family lived before they were uprooted during World War II.

By uncovering this secret or concealed history of a woman who came to Canada as a “picture bride”—women married on agreement to Japanese men in Canada, usually after the exchange of photos—the film both widens the lens of history and brings its diasporic conditions to bear on the minutest aspects of daily existence. All through her life and marriage, giving birth to many children, undergoing the ordeal of incarceration, and rebuilding her family after the war, Asayo had carried a photo of her two girls. She had held in her imagination a dream that one day she would be reunited with them, and her dream had come full circle with the remaining daughter.

What I found so compelling was that Ohama's film itself had become, through the unexpected disclosure of Asayo's secret, an effect of a global drift. As Asayo releases her secret, in that very gesture, the identity formation of Japanese Canadians, which had been formed linearly through its negotiations with the Canadian nation-state, was altered by the more malleable and spatially more encompassing signs of "Japan" in their history. We might say that the film performs an opening that releases Japanese Canadians from the need to be constantly vigilant in declaring themselves "Canadian" and not "Japanese." This had been one of the elements of their social survival during the Cold War when, as a racialized minority, they had to maintain an expected "model minority" role as loyal subjects of the Canadian nation-state.

From this perspective, the "Japanese Canadians" who were named in the redress settlement can be taken to prefigure the dramatic global shifts in cultural configurations that are transforming our everyday lives. In their successful struggle to redress the wartime injustices, they were bound up in a nation formation—that is, "identity politics" writ large—that had been historically constituted on the basis of a patriarchal, ethnocentric, raced, and classed system of assumptions. But in the unravelling of this version of the nation, the boundaries of its connective tissues can be seen, thereby allowing for a remembering that potentially opens new critical perspectives.

Many years ago the poet Earle Birney said that the Canadian nation's "lack of ghosts" had shaped the haunted history of its literature. In that phrase, Birney acknowledged the lack of a primary attachment to the lands appropriated to construct a settler society. The lack becomes the condition that forecloses the continuity of ancestral "ghosts" or "spirits" that inhere in those lands. His prognosis remains uncanny but perhaps not in the way he intended. Once we purposefully read against the grain of his provocative phrase, the "lack of ghosts," it becomes possible to invoke the "ghosts" inside the nation who are the others born out of the nation's lack and who come to constitute its exclusionary boundaries. These ghosts become the racialized "Asians," "Blacks," and "Indians" who have been produced in the discursive machinery that scripted the nation. As such, they have appeared in the national imaginary as figures in a haunting of its own making.⁵ For this reason, it is crucial to recognize that the voices of those who brought to visibility the suppressed histories of the colonized in Canada were not anomalous; rather, they and the cultural works that announced

their presence signalled a push from within—toward democratic practices that might transform the differential relations of power that limited their subjectivities.

We circle back to the suspended moment in Lee Maracle's story. Returning to the childhood scene, the narrator locates her childhood self, a subject in the process of being formed, inside the grocery store. Her nose is pressed to the window as she intently looks outside. In her mind she stands on guard to protect herself and other Native children from the "Chinamen" who are waiting to abduct them. Somewhere in her consciousness, as she peers through the "large circle" cleared by her hand, she looks upon a space she has produced in relation to the racialized discourses she has already internalized in her "Indian" formation—"Don't wander off or the ol' Chinamen will get you and eat you" (70). This medium frames the limits of what she sees. The sudden appearance of the playful face on the other side thus provokes a reading that has been normalized for her but is a shameful misreading in her mother's eyes. The pall of silence descends on the inside of the grocery store when the word *Chinaman* comes out of her mouth as if she were—and she is at that moment—the vehicle of the fundamentalist mode of thought (i.e., "we" versus "they") that has produced the Canadian nation. In retrieving the scene of the trauma—that past—the story enacts a critical practice built on the recognition that identity formations are malleable and always open to negotiations—but dangerous when used as positions of power. Maracle implies as much in the title of the story, "Yin Chin," a term that SKY Lee in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* suggests is the Chinese/English version of the derogatory term "injun"(3). The reinscription and hence reappropriation of the racialized equivalent of "Chinaman" refuses the internalizing power of dominant discourses to construct borders between those who are themselves marked as others.

We might then argue, on the basis of Maracle's story—which is, indeed, a parable for our times—that the crisis of time can open a fuller consciousness of the creative unfolding of time in our lives. The challenge to remember the recent past need not be an empty academic exercise but can instead initiate a critical process that encourages us—indeed pressures us—to think back and forth simultaneously, thereby breaking the spell of knowledge constructs that situate the knower outside the conditions of the known. More urgent is the need to develop research methods, pedagogies, and ways of locating ourselves that recognize our subjectivities as a vast field of intersecting variables.

We also need to develop modes of understanding identity formations that can recognize these formations to be always complicit with the variables that act on us and through which we ourselves unfold in time to become social agents. It is in this unfolding that history as a mode of remembering returns as the time of becoming—a becoming in which the critical imagination, a powerful source of change and renewal, is able to conceive of alternative, more encompassing cultural formations that can only be dreamed in a time of crisis.

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NOTES

- 1 For excellent studies that include aspects of this history, see Day; and Mackey.
- 2 See *Democracy Betrayed: The Case for Redress*, a brief issued by the National Association of Japanese Canadians in 1984.
- 3 A fuller exploration of this point appears in my recent study of the history of the redress movement; see Miki, *Redress*.
- 4 See, for instance, the essays by and about Stuart Hall in Morley and Chen.
- 5 For an excellent critical and theoretical discussion of this “haunting,” see McFarlane.

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