

Asian Canadian Futures

Diasporic Passages and the Routes of Indenture

This paper traces possible future directions for Asian Canadian literature within the rubric of Asian diasporic studies and is written in the spirit of the tremendous sense of possibility that I see for Asian Canadian literature. Asian Canadian literature is, of course, not a new phenomenon. As Donald Goellnicht observes in his overview of the emergence of Asian Canadian literature as a field, despite the long history of Asian Canadian writing, “we in the academy seem to operate in an almost perpetual state of *announcing* Asian Canadian literature, a literature that has taken, from our snowblind perspective, twenty to twenty-five years to be ‘born’” (2). Goellnicht makes clear that he is referring to the institutional space of Asian Canadian literature rather than the literary works themselves, and that his article is “an exploration of the ways in which institutional formations and practices in North America have attempted to discipline and contain various Asian ethnic groups and their cultural production as well as . . . the possibilities for resistance to such containment within those institutional formations” (3). Following Goellnicht’s meditations on institutional formations, this paper explores the institutional futures of a field whose arrival needs less and less to be announced.

While personal histories are not necessarily reflective of institutional ones, they can sometimes be instructive for considerations of institutional shifts. Writing this paper has been an opportunity to reflect upon my own embarrassingly thin training. Having undertaken over a decade of postsecondary work in Canadian universities, primarily in Departments of English,

I could not take any courses in Asian Canadian literature. Moreover, the idea of being an “Asian Canadianist” was, until recently, virtually unthinkable. When I wrote my doctoral candidacy exams, Asian Canadian literature was not something in which I could declare a specialization (I was guided toward established fields such as Canadian and postcolonial literatures). And it would never have occurred to me that, at the close of my graduate work, major Canadian universities would be hiring—or have stated intentions of hiring—in fields such as Asian Canadian literature, Asian diasporic literature, and Asian North American literature. Partly because of these institutional shifts, and largely because of the hard work of many activists and scholars, Canadian scholars are now in the curious position of considering the pasts and the futures of a field that, until recently, did not have a defined institutional existence.

I do not recount this personal institutional history in order to celebrate the seeming rise of Asian Canadian literature in Canadian academic institutions. Rather, I wonder what the exercise of cautious optimism might look like. Unlike the institutional location of Asian American literature, our fledgling institutional location means that internal critique must always be balanced with the necessity of nurturing Asian Canadian and Asian North American literature as it establishes a toehold in the academy. Goellnicht’s metaphor of Asian Canadian literature as having emerged from a “protracted birth” suggests precisely what I suspect is a collective sense of the fragile newness of the field. While the metaphoric references to the relative youthfulness of Asian Canadian literature as a field are useful and, in many ways, unavoidable for thinking through our current institutional moment, I cannot help feeling a little wary of depending too much on the developmental narrative that they imply. Asian Canadian scholarship needs a sense of its institutional histories in order to get a sense of where it might go next. And yet, even as I too rely on considerations of the field in terms of developmental narratives, I sense that it is also a field which is looking for ways of thinking through these histories that are attentive to the lessons of postcolonialism and the perils of Western historiography.

Perhaps one approach might involve imagining directions for the field that benefit from the work that has been done in fields such as Asian American studies, Asian Australian studies, postcolonial studies, and diasporic studies. Asian Canadianists can draw from related fields, partly because most of the critics who have pioneered so much of the work in this field come to it, by necessity, through side doors and back doors, bringing with them a

commitment not only to this literature but also to a wide range of critical projects. We can draw from these multiple fields of inquiry to make serious interventions not only within the Canadian academy but also internationally. As Goellnicht points out, Asian Canadian literature as a field emerges from a different history than Asian American literature (3). This difference registers as an enabling one when we take up the possibilities of our own distinct intellectual and institutional histories. People who work in Asian Canadian literary criticism come not only from fields that might be considered to be related, such as postcolonial and Canadian literature, but also from Romanticism, eighteenth-century, and comparative literature. Rather than seeing these interests as distinct from the study of Asian Canadian literature, we can exploit these eccentricities of location by building a field that is broadly affiliative. We can use these intellectual interests to put pressure on Asian Canadian literature by pushing this literature toward more comparative contexts.

One of the possibilities that I want to explore in this paper is that of approaching Asian Canadian literature through the rubric of diaspora. I suggest that Asian Canadian literature must retain its affiliation with diasporic concerns and remain open to its ties to postcolonial studies because a rigorous exploration of the politics and culture of indenture and its aftermath needs to be at the centre of Asian Canadian literary studies specifically and of Asian diasporic studies in general. In this paper, I will be referring most specifically to Chinese Canadian communities, but I hope that some of my comments will have relevance for other Asian communities in Canada.

Because diasporic studies is, like Asian Canadian studies, a relatively new field, let me briefly outline how I understand its significance. The recent resurgence of the term “diaspora” in the Western academy has arisen out of a profound perplexity regarding the cultural spaces and products of peoples who have been displaced by oppression and violence. I suggest that, if the term is to retain its potential for powerful critique, it cannot float away from the constitutive sadnesses of dislocation. Furthermore, I propose that the term in contemporary discussion would be productively used as a way of thinking through subjectivities that emerge from the displacements of colonial and imperial oppression. In this sense, I understand diasporic studies as constitutively related to postcolonialism. As Rebecca Walsh notes, “the study of diaspora is frequently inseparable from the study of postcolonialism and imperialism in its various forms” (2). In “Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment,” Khachig Tölölyan admits

some fears about the ways in which diaspora as a concept has become unhinged, in both enabling and disabling ways, from its classical usage. Warning of the dangers of allowing the term to become too expansive and inclusive, he suggests that, “Without some minimum stringency of definition, most of America—or Argentina, or New Zealand, or any modern immigrant-nation—would just as easily be a diaspora” (30). The need for stringency of definition lies in the perils of a collapsing of transnational and diasporic subjects where the use of the diasporic concept beyond its classical sense may result in “the inadvertent complicity between some diasporicists and transnationalists in the attack on the nation-state” (29).

In differentiating between transnationalism and diaspora, I want to highlight the ways in which the state of diasporic migrancy is framed by social and political precariousness. It is not that all migrants exist in a precarious state but that migrancy carries within it the potential for precariousness. This is a precariousness amplified by race, sexuality, gender, and class. What stands out for me in this marking, though, is the way in which the words *go home* carry specific valences for some communities more than others. For some, the injunction to go home carries with it a profoundly different capacity for pain, humiliation, and political disempowerment. Vijay Mishra notes in “The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora” that, “As long as there is a fascist fringe always willing to find racial scapegoats for the nation’s own shortcomings and to chant ‘Go home,’ the autochthonous pressures towards diasporic racial exclusivism will remain” (426). Mishra describes the sense of “familiar temporariness” that marks what he has called the old Indian diaspora, the diasporic community that is the legacy of indentured labour in the West Indies (426). In this idea of a “familiar temporariness,” we can begin to read for the kind of precariousness that lies within racially marked diasporic communities. For example, a fourth- or fifth-generation Chinese Canadian might still be asked to “go home” in a way that a fourth- or fifth-generation white Canadian will never be. In the context of the Chinese diaspora, I therefore focus on a diaspora marked most explicitly by race but inescapably defined by issues of class, sexuality, and gender. I focus on a racialized diaspora because the Chinese diaspora has been defined throughout the social and historical archive by race first. As the history of race riots and race-based legislation such as the head tax and the exclusion act illustrates, the Chinese Canadian community has been attacked primarily on the basis of its Chineseness, even though issues of class, sexuality, and gender—especially evident in the promulgation of the

idea of a degenerate bachelor society that has taken jobs away from upstanding and hard-working white men—are crucially imbricated in the targeting of Chinese immigrants.¹

In distinguishing the diasporic from the transnational, I am also arguing for a racialized differentiation that turns on class and is profoundly connected to colonial displacement. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur call for distinctions to be made by identifying “the political risks entailed in different forms of movement and migration as well as between transnationalism (which can describe NGOs, multinational corporations, and dissident political organizations, as well as individuals) and diaspora (which is a human phenomenon)” (15). While the distinction between the human and the non-human (are NGOs, multinational corporations, and dissident political organizations not human?) is slippery and thus potentially misleading, Braziel and Mannur do point to the importance of thinking through the nexus of the diasporic and the transnational. In their introduction to *The Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture*, Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin warn against “an exclusive focus on the diasporic as *transnational*” because they suggest that we also consider the possibilities of diasporas existing within states (23). They refer specifically to the experiences of Natives in North America. Boyarin and Boyarin suggest that we need to keep the concept open to displacements that are compelled by colonialism but that are not necessarily transnational. As Aihwa Ong’s *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* makes clear, the issues that attend on thinking through the experiences of privileged, multiple-passport-carrying subjects can be most productively engaged through the rubric of transnationalism. As she notes in “Cyberpublics and Diaspora Politics among Transnational Chinese,” “The term ‘transnationality’ better describes the variety of cultural interconnections and trans-border movements and networks which have intensified under conditions of late capitalism” (85).

Ong’s *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America* attempts to address the “other Asians”—those who are not among the “new affluent Asian immigrants” of her previous study of flexible citizenship.² However, as the delineation “other Asians” suggests, Ong’s discussion in *Buddha Is Hiding* understands the migratory underclass as the other side, or the underside if you will, of transnationalism. For Ong, the underclass Asian migrant constitutes a problem for citizenship and thus illuminates the ways in which “citizenship rights have become partially disembedded from the nation” (286). While her discussion usefully highlights the need for a “transnational

moral economy” that takes into account the failure of the discourse of citizenship to protect those most vulnerable to the abuses of power, what remains less clear are the conditions of dislocation and racialization that connect one generation of Asian immigrants and another as well as those connections across Asian communities differentiated by ethnicity and class. It is not just that pan-Asian politics might still provide a place for thinking about the construction of communities in dislocation but also that we need to think through the historical connections between Asian diasporic communities and the histories of European colonialism and imperialism. Rather than thinking of this underclass as the underside of transnationalism, we might understand these subjects within a rubric that sees them as more than the dark side of a transnational dream.

The history of Chinese diasporic trajectories is intimately linked to the history of colonialism. As Jenny Sharpe notes, “The designation of postcolonial as an umbrella term for diaspora and minority communities is derived in part from an understanding of decolonization as the beginning of an unprecedented migration from the former colonies to advanced industrial centers” (105). However, as the trajectory of Chinese indentured labour shows, diaspora begins not only with the end of colonialism but also with its instigation. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries marked the mass exodus of dispossessed communities who were bound by indenture and slavery. I believe that we need to foreground this history of dispossession and dislocation not because it is “history” in the Western historiographic sense but because these are pasts that are constitutive of our present. It would be a mistake to think of the indentured Asian labourer as an unfortunate feature of a forgettable past. The march of history does not proceed so smoothly. We cannot risk losing sight of the ways in which the racisms of the past continue to shape the racisms of our present.

Approaching Asian Canadian literature within the rubric of diasporic studies, as I have briefly outlined it, encourages interventions such as comparative work between multiple sites of Asian migration, comparative work between minority communities, and explorations of the relationship between slavery and indenture as formative features of certain diasporic subjectivities. I should say that these are not interventions that diasporic studies necessarily enables but ones that I see as potentially enabled by a diasporic perspective.

First, attention to the routes of indenture of Asian Canadian immigration facilitates comparative work between the multiple sites of Asian migration. I think not only of communities in Australia or the US but also, for

example, of those that emerged from the sugar plantations in Cuba and the Caribbean, the railway workers in South America, and the miners in South Africa. That is, we could understand early Asian Canadian migration within a complicated and overlapping set of trajectories. In emphasizing the routes of migration, I am not advocating a rejection of the need to engage with the nation-state. I am, however, suggesting that we need to think of Asian Canadian migration as deeply connected to a whole series of movements and migrations. The colonial archive abounds with instances of these connections. For example, part of the decision to import Chinese indentured labour to South Africa in the early-twentieth century was based on consultation with the *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration in Canada* submitted to the Canadian Parliament in 1885 as well as the experience of Chinese labour in Australia and the US. Persia Crawford Campbell notes that

on Feb. 14, 1903, the Witwatersand Labour Association, under the aegis of the Chamber of Mines, asked Mr. Ross Skinner to proceed to California and the Far East to investigate

1. the conditions under which indentured Chinese labourers might be employed on the Rand;
2. the possibility of obtaining such labour;
3. its suitability to supplement the present inadequate Kaffir supply. (171)

The representations of Chineseness that circulate in one country are not limited to those national contexts. Canada consults Australia and the US; South Africa consults all of the former. The representation of the experience of Chinese workers in nineteenth-century Canada in British colonial administrative documents such as the *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration in Canada* directly shaped the experiences of Chinese workers who would end up in South Africa working in the gold mines. Moreover, one of the aims of the Royal Commission report was that of situating Chinese immigration in Canada in the context of Chinese immigration in Australia and the US:

It will also be part of the duties of the Commission to examine the evidence submitted in Australia, California and Washington and to condense and collate it and submit it with its report to Parliament so that the Parliament of Canada may have, in a convenient shape, together with the researches of the Commissioners, all the information which the legislative bodies of the United States and Australia had when they undertook the work of legislating on this question. (Canada viii)

It makes perfect sense that one arm of colonialism would consult with another and that they would work in tandem to produce politically coherent

forms of legislating not only Chinese immigration but also Chineseness itself, as one would have to be able to differentiate those who are Chinese from other forms of Asianness in order to legislate around it.³ But this is also precisely the reason why we need to think through the connections between Chineseness in Canada and elsewhere.

The shaping of Chineseness in Canada is not distinct from the mechanisms of colonialism and its dislocating forces. Throughout the history of the recent mass migrations of Chinese people, one form of exploitation has been used to justify another. The experience of one migrant population has implications for those of another. We need to think about Chineseness not as an identity formed solely in relation to the Canadian state; we also need to think about the formation of the Canadian state through imperialism and colonialism and the relationships between other colonized spaces. British imperialists did not see Chinese populations in Canada as distinct from those in Australia, South Africa, or Hong Kong; in order to understand this history of racialization, we need to think of it in terms of the construction of Chineseness in Canada and to think of this construction as deeply connected to Chineseness elsewhere. We might also consider the possibilities of resistance across these spaces. Might the routes of indenture have also been trajectories for the circulation of information, tactics for survival, strategies of resistance? As Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker demonstrate with detailed clarity in *The Many-Headed Hydra*, the transatlantic routes of slavery were also a means for the passage of information among subaltern populations. These are possibilities we have yet to fully consider in terms of the trans-Pacific passages of indenture.

Second, a diasporic perspective displaces the primacy of the relationship between white and nonwhite groups, shifting the emphasis to the relationships among minority groups. "Asia" and "Canada" are not the only cultural, historical, or geographical entities that constitute Asian Canadian subjectivities. One of the tasks of Asian Canadian and diasporic criticism lies in a serious engagement with the kinds of relationships between minority communities that texts such as SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill* explore. In addition to the complicated whorls of a personal history that involves Chinese, Swedish, Scottish, and Irish crossings and mixings, *Diamond Grill* depicts interactions between Japanese, First Nations, Doukhobor, Jewish, and Chinese communities. Similarly, Lee's novel opens with a love story between a Chinese man and a First Nations woman. These are not necessarily relationships that we need to recuperate as

celebratory examples of minority interactions. As Tseen-ling Khoo argues, “the particular colonial oppressions and legacies of Canada’s indigenous groups are situations for which Asian-Canadians can express sympathy and some forms of solidarity but cannot claim to share” (177). Khoo goes on to note that she is “not advocating a hierarchy of victimage; rather [she] want[s] to iterate the strategic quality of coalitions and their potential for contingent but powerful effects” (177). Indeed, both Wah’s use of the term “half-bred poetics” to describe “the activity and dynamics of the site of the hyphen” (“Half-Bred” 95) and Lee’s depiction of First Nations communities suggest that these are deeply complicated and vexed relationships and interactions—a point that Rita Wong explores in detail in her contribution to this special issue. But it is precisely this messy, discomfiting space that we need to explore in our criticism. At this point in cultural criticism, the issue is not about whether a particular representation is good or bad, or accurate or inaccurate. However, I hope that a diasporic perspective on Asian Canadian literature might bring forward more discussion of the kinds of dynamics that unfold in texts that invite precisely these complex discussions on the uneven relationships between minoritized groups.

Recognizing and examining the uneven relationships between minority groups might curtail some of the inevitable binarism that seems to be already implied in the notion of “Asian Canadian” studies. The past two decades of diasporic and minority discourse criticism have already suggested the need to consider the multiplicity of the interactions from which concepts such as Asian Canadian emerge. This work points to thinking about racialization as a set of differential relations that cut across each other. In *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, Avtar Brah asks, “How . . . are African, Caribbean, South Asian and white Muslims differentially constructed within anti-Muslim racism in present-day Britain? Similarly, how are blacks, Chicanos, Chinese, Japanese or South Koreans in the USA differentiated within its racialised formations? What are the economic, political, cultural and psychic effects of these differential racialisations on the lives of these groups?” (185). In response to these questions, Brah argues, “Of central concern in addressing such questions are the power dynamics which usher in racialised social relations and inscribe racialised modes of subjectivity and identity. [Her] argument . . . is that these racisms are not simply parallel racisms but intersecting modalities of *differential racialisations marking positionality across articulating fields of power*” (185–86). This attention to the positionality of differentially racialized communities recalls

Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd's discussion of minority discourse as a theoretical project that "involves drawing out solidarities in the form of modes of repression and struggle that all minorities experience separately but experience precisely as minorities. . . . 'Becoming minor' is . . . a question of position: a subject-position that in the final analysis can be defined only in 'political' terms—that is, in terms of the effects of economic exploitation, political disenfranchisement, social manipulation, and ideological domination on cultural formation of minority subjects and discourses" (9). JanMohamed and Lloyd call attention to the structural situation of minority communities and the urgency of understanding these positionings as a dialogue between minorities. Brah has noted that minority discourse, unlike the Black Power movement and its reorienting of the connotations of blackness, has not been successful in shifting the meaning of minority; she "remain[s] skeptical that . . . any moves that perpetuate the circulation of the minority/majority dichotomy will not serve to reinforce the hegemonic relations that inscribe this dichotomy" (189). While we must remain attentive to the possibilities of re-entrenching the very binaries that we seek to disrupt, the overall project of understanding minorities in relation to one another rather than simply in opposition to whiteness remains one that we must continue to work toward.

In highlighting the relationships among minority communities, we can problematize the presumption of a trajectory where the Asian is always already foreign. Instead of understanding the "home" of diasporic trajectories as primeval localities that expel people into new places that are becoming increasingly culturally mixed as a result, a diasporic perspective demands an understanding of the *construction* of home and arrival in diasporic trajectories. Not doing so naturalizes the idea that diasporic peoples come from a space of racial homogeneity and arrive at spaces that are becoming increasingly multicultural because of other people "like them" without ever questioning the autochthonous claims of those "who were there first." In the case of the Chinese diaspora, taking for granted the trajectory of "home" and "arrival" naturalizes the idea that China is a uniformly "Chinese" country, that Chinese diasporic communities ultimately come from China (even if there are multigenerational detours through Indonesia, Vietnam, South Africa, and so on), and that white people originate in Canada. In challenging the autochthonous claims of whiteness, this perspective also refuses to naturalize the relationship between the nation-state and ethnicity, between the People's Republic of China and Chineseness.

Third, a diasporic perspective on Asian Canadian literature illuminates the relationship between indenture and slavery, between Asian Canadian communities and black Canadian communities. I suggest that we need to think through the historical and cultural relationships between slavery and indenture. While slavery has commonly been understood as a foundational event of black diasporic culture, the relationship between Asian indentured labour to the Americas and Asian diasporic culture has yet to be fully explored. When slavery was “abolished” in European colonies in the mid-nineteenth century, there was a concerted effort to recruit indentured labour from India and China to take the place of slave labour. As documents as diverse as the Canadian *Report of the Royal Commission* and *The Cuba Commission Report: A Hidden History of the Chinese in Cuba* show, Asian labourers were specifically targeted for indenture because of their perceived docility or pacific nature. What was known as *la trata amarilla* (“the yellow trade”) in Spanish colonies and the “coolie” trade in anglophone colonies supplanted the slave trade.⁴

Furthermore, an analysis of the journey of indentured labourers from Asia to the New World opens up the possibilities for thinking about the connections between black and Asian diasporas, Atlantic and Pacific subjectivities. I have been struck by the realization that many of the ships used to carry slaves across the Atlantic were used to transport indentured labourers across the Pacific. Moreover, all of the ships used to transport indentured labourers copied precisely the architecture of slave ships: “iron gratings over hatchways, walls between crew and coolie quarters, armed guards, [and] cannons trained on hatchways” (Applied History Research Group). The legacy of these architectural forms raises all kinds of questions about the relationship between the Middle Passage and the Pacific passages of indenture. It is not just that Asian indentured labourers were subjected to similar incarceration forms as slaves from Africa but also that the very differences between these forms are also profoundly suggestive for our considerations of the construction of black and Asian diasporic subjectivities.

Not only were the same ships often used, but, looking at logbooks and shipping routes, we can see that Asian indentured labourers also passed through the now infamous Middle Passage across the Atlantic (see fig. 1).

When I first began this research, I assumed, wrongly, that an examination of nineteenth-century Asian migration would largely be one of looking at trans-Pacific routes. However, this assumption is based on the bias of twentieth-century air travel and the supposition of migration to North America alone. As Cutler’s map of common nineteenth-century shipping routes

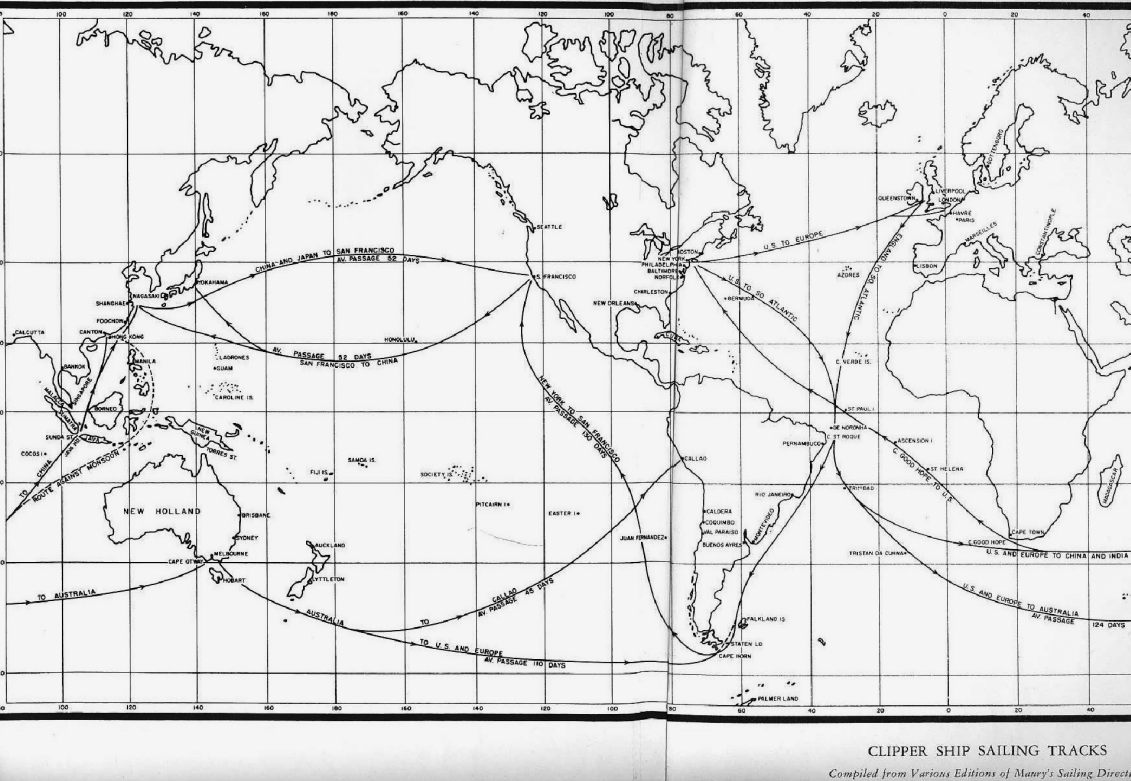


Figure 1: "Clipper Ship Sailing Tracks," in Carl Cutler, *Greyhounds of the Sea* (New York: Halcyon, 1937), flyleaf.

shows, some ships—particularly those headed to ports such as Vancouver, San Francisco, or Callao from Asia—did indeed traverse the Pacific. Yet many other ships left Asia and sailed *west* across the Indian Ocean, round the Cape of Good Hope, and across the *Atlantic*.

If, following the pioneering work of Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*, we take seriously the importance of routes for thinking about diasporic cultures, then understanding the routes of Asian indenture means understanding the black Atlantic as *formative* of Asian diasporic cultures, not only in the sense that black slavery precedes the mass migration of Asian indentured labourers but also, more importantly, in the sense that black Atlantic formations can be understood as *constitutive* of Asian diasporic formations. That is, the

black Atlantic was not solely black, and Asian diasporic movements were not solely transpacific.

Asian American critics such as Gary Okihiro and Lisa Yun have long argued for the importance of thinking about Asian diasporas in relation to black diasporas. In *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture*, Okihiro argues that “the migration of Asians to America cannot be divorced from the African slave trade, or from the coolie trade that followed in its wake” (47). In his recognition of the connections between coolie and slave histories, Okihiro warns against emphasizing the differences rather than the similarities between these coercive forms of labour migration. Lisa Yun and Ricardo Laremont argue that “The terms ‘coolie’ or ‘indentured labourer’ . . . obfuscate the very political and experiential nature of coolies” (101). Comparing the cost of slave and coolie labour in nineteenth-century Cuba, Yun and Laremont demonstrate that coolie labour was significantly cheaper than slave labour and note that the conditions of work for coolies were no different and sometimes even worse than for those of slaves from Africa (107–09). “Because of malnourishment and abusive conditions, over fifty percent of coolies died *before* their eight-year contract ended. The average life span of an African slave on a sugar plantation was twenty years” (Yun and Laremont 113). These statistics are horrifying enough to suggest that it would not be mistaken to understand the indenture of Chinese labourers within the terms of slavery.

My point here is not that slavery and indenture shared similar features or that the horrors of slavery did not end with abolition. There has been a tendency to think of the black and Asian diasporas as distinct partly because of legal differences between these two forms of forced labour⁵ but also because these legal differences are also reinforced by the supposition of distinctly separate geographical passages. Understanding Pacific passages as linked to Atlantic passages enables an understanding of the relationship between Asian and black diasporic subjectivities. If the Middle Passage has been a crucible for the emergence of contemporary black identity, Asian Canadian scholars would be amiss in not also looking at the ways in which these routes lie within the histories of some Asian migrant populations. Asian Canadian scholarship needs to untangle the spatial overlap that marks both the displacement of slavery by indenture and the congruence of these experiences.

Investigating the routes of indenture offers an opportunity to think about the passage itself as deeply transformative and to meditate on what these transformations might be for diasporic cultures. The average journey from

Macao to Havana took more than half a year. What happened in that time? What kinds of bonds were formed, and which communities emerged from these experiences? How do they resonate in contemporary culture? In "(B) ordering Naipaul: Indenture History and Diaspora Poetics," Vijay Mishra argues "that any account of the production and reproduction of diaspora culture must begin with the ships of the passage: 'indenture lives in dates and distances,' writes Arnold Itwaru in his poem 'We have Survived' (293)" (196). Taking up Henri Lefebvre's provocative declaration that "No space ever vanishes utterly, leaving no trace" (164), Mishra suggests that "the ship was a space that outlived its original design" (198). It carries a resonance, the memory of confinement, passage, and transformation, beyond that of the journey itself. Displacements and migrations are not simply about people moving from one place to another. Rather, the processes of displacement carry within them a memory tied to the materiality of ships, of passages, of the months and days spent at sea in abysmal conditions and under constant threat. Diasporas are formed not only by the act of moving from place to another but also by what happens along the way. After all, no one is born a coolie. One *becomes* one through experiencing the spaces of imperial confinement—the ship's hold, the barracks of embarkation, and those of arrival. This becoming is a process of subjection from which slave and indentured subjectivities emerge in the "living memory" of incarceration (Gilroy 198).⁶ Within this process of becoming, of subject formation and the attendant resistances to these incarceratory forms of subjectivization, we can decipher the transformations from which diasporic subjectivities might emerge.

Contemplating the relation between what we might think of as "indenture passages" for Asian diasporas and contemporary experiences of displacement, we come to the problem of old and new diasporas. In 1996 issues of *Textual Practice*, Vijay Mishra and Gayatri Spivak, in separate essays, mark out the distinction between old and new diasporas. In "The Diasporic Imaginary," Mishra suggests that "the old Indian diasporas of the sugar plantations" who "make up a single group of dispersed and territorially disaggregated bodies" can be distinguished from the "new" Indian diasporas, which "are part of a global odyssey as they renegotiate new topographies through the travails of travel" (427, 435). Similarly, Spivak asks in "Diasporas Old and New: Women in the Transnational World," "What were the old diasporas, before the world was thoroughly consolidated as transnational? They were the results of religious oppression and war, of slavery and indenturing, trade and conquest, and intra-European economic migration which,

since the nineteenth century, took the form of migration and immigration to the United States” (245). While this distinction between old and new diasporas has not been significantly taken up in subsequent discussions of diaspora and postcoloniality, I want to return to it because these categories open up a way of understanding the heterogeneity of diasporic communities while still attending to the continuities of specific historical experiences of displacement. Mishra notes that drawing out a distinction between old and new Indian diasporas in his essay is more than “a purely heuristic desire for a neat taxonomy” (“Diasporic Imaginary” 442). He draws “attention to the complex procedures by which diasporas negotiate their perceived moment of trauma and how, in the artistic domain, the trauma works itself out” (442). Mishra’s identification of the old Indian diaspora with the traumas of indenture passage points to ways in which the experience of the passage shapes diasporic communities. Implicit within the distinction between old and new diasporas lies the problem of involuntary and voluntary displacement. Extending Spivak’s and Mishra’s project, I suggest that the “old” diasporas of indenture and slavery are not fully distinct from the “new” ones of jet-fuelled transnational mobility. Rather, these diasporas are contemporaneous and can draw attention to the ways in which the past is constitutive of the present.

While both Mishra and Spivak make the distinction between old and new diasporic subjects, my sense is that we cannot so easily separate them. That is, one is constitutive of and defined against the other. Contemporary Asian Canadian literature grapples with these connections and ruptures of old and new diasporic experiences. Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* juxtaposes the narratives of characters such as Kae Ying Woo and Hermia Chow against old diasporic characters such as Wong Gwei Chang and Lee Mui Lan. Wah’s *Diamond Grill* meditates on the connections between his father’s experience of becoming Chinese and his own. Lydia Kwa’s *This Place Called Absence* explores the connections between Wu Lan, a psychologist living in Vancouver, and Lee Ah Choi and Chow Chat Mui, two prostitutes in nineteenth-century Singapore. In *Salt Fish Girl*, Larissa Lai pushes the edges of the old and the new, staging the connection between Nu Wa in ancient China and Miranda, who lives in a future that is yet to come. These texts attempt to think through the relation between the old and new experiences of migration and displacement as a function of what it means to be in diaspora. They take up what it means to feel connected to one place and be in another while also attending to what it means to be in one moment in history and still feel the presence of another.

It is this question of history that marks for me the urgent relation between Asian Canadian literary criticism and postcolonial historiography. As Stephen Slemon notes in "Post-Colonial Critical Theories," postcolonial theory consistently questions the category of history. Taking up Eduardo Galeano's retelling of the Spanish conquest of South and Central America through the figure of the poet and the "remembering of colonial history, at its most brutal and abject, in a language of smell, touch and taste" (109), Slemon argues that

The intellectual challenge for post-colonial critical theory is to attempt to come to know the story of colonial and neo-colonial engagements in all their complexity, and to find ways to represent those engagements in a language that can build cross-disciplinary, cross-community, cross-cultural alliances for the historical production of genuine social change. That is how [Slemon reads] Eduardo Galeano's message about the poet of conquest, who seeks out history in the stones of the river, who teaches history in the smell of the wind. (114)

Whether this postcolonial engagement takes place through the subaltern historiography or colonial discourse analysis, it never lets go of the question of the subject of history and the subjective experiences of the past, of history as it resides in the memory of the senses. While there is still much work to be done in examining the relationship between postcoloniality and Asian Canadian literature, we might begin with postcolonialism's commitment to this question of the subject of history. Asian Canadian literary studies cannot take for granted the subject of its engagement and must continue to wrestle with constructions of race and ethnicity as well as the historical contingencies of those constructions. Asian Canadian literature is not simply a multicultural subsection of something bigger called Canadian literature. It is more than just a piece of the Canadian literary puzzle. Rather, it situates Canadian literature within a complex and delicate global network of routes and passages that are at once cultural and historical. Asian Canadian literature reaches outward across the Pacific and beyond as much as it reaches inward toward the heart of the Prairies; it reaches backward through the histories of displacement and forward to futures that we have yet to imagine.

I am aware of the problem of flattening out the multiple histories of Asian indenture. Not only are there significant differences in the histories of Indian and Chinese labouring communities, but there are also important differences between the experiences of Chinese indentured labourers. That is, the experience of working on the Canadian Pacific Railway is not the same as that of hauling guano in Peru, which is not the same as that of working on the sugar plantations in Cuba, and so on. Some labourers travelled on the

credit-ticket system, some as indentured labourers, some as contract labourers. However, my sense is that we need to explore the similarities, the ways in which these histories of displacement create common cultural formations. One of the challenges of diaspora theory is to think through what David Scott, in reference to Kamau Braithwaite, calls “an obscure miracle of connection” (*Refashioning Futures* 106)—how it is that one of the effects of the isolating experience of displacement is that of a powerful sense of connection to communities that are not even necessarily bound by nation, race, or class.

We might also keep in mind that the differentiations between the forms of the exploitation of Chinese labour (credit-ticket, contract, outright indenture, and so on) are distinctions that have been engendered by colonial and imperial bureaucracies. I suggest that, at least in the case of labourers imported from Asia for reasons of economy and ease of exploitation, the divisions between voluntary and involuntary, contract and indenture, are false ones. As postcolonial historians such as Madhavi Kale and Gyan Prakash have noted, the categories of free and unfree labour emerged out of colonialism and imperialism. Prakash’s *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labour Servitude in Colonial India* argues that the discourse of freedom is tied to notions of the individual subject, while Kale notes that the very category of labour and its place in British history “were forged in the crucible of empire” (3–4). Reading the archive of Indian indenture through the lens of race and gender, Kale proposes that

The articulation of gender, race and nation or colonial status is what made indentured labor so crucial to the crystallization of “free labour” ideology. Indentured labour was peculiarly suited to imperial post-emancipation conditions because it recognized and implicitly capitalized on racial differentiation—indeed racial hierarchy—within the empire by contributing to naturalizing, universalizing a bourgeois-imperial sexual division of labor that was not only predicated on but also reproduced women’s banishment to the domestic: to domestic labor, space, identity. (174)

The differentiation of race and its hierarchization, as well as the gendering of labour, made possible a postemancipation system of labour exploitation that can ostensibly hold to the principles of abolition without relinquishing a reliance on unfree labour. It is not that indenture was necessarily slavery under a different name (although those who advocated the end of indenture, such as the commissioners of the *Cuba Commission Report*, certainly declared it to be such) but that indenture, as Kale notes above, “crystallized” notions of freedom that made possible the dichotomization of free and unfree labour.

I began with a sense of the multiple possible futures of Asian Canadian literature, and it seems as though I have ended up in the past. However, in Fred Wah's apt words, "this rusty nail has been here forever in fact the real last spike is yet to be driven" (*Diamond Grill* 165). The "rusty" traumas of displacement and discrimination remain unredressed. The question of the future is also that of the past. As David Scott observes in *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, our imaginings of the future shape our relations to the past. He notes that postcolonial studies has anchored much of its imaginings of a postcolonial future in a Romantic vision of anticolonial struggle (in which "Romantic" refers precisely to the heritage of European literary Romanticism). This unacknowledged reliance upon a Romantic narrative of anticolonial struggle and anticolonial revolutionary figures such as Toussaint L'Ouverture leaves postcolonial studies with an unresolved longing for a future already belied by the tragedies of postcolonial governance. Writing about the problem of the future, Scott suggests "that alleged histories of the present (postcolonial or otherwise) tend to elide the problem of 'futures' in historical temporality": "I do not mean by this that they are non- (or anti-) utopian in formulation (though they typically are this too). I mean, rather, that these histories tend *not* to inquire systematically into the ways in which the expectation of—or longing for—particular futures helps to shape the kind of problem the past is constructed as for the present" (31). Scott points to the crucial role of desire in the relation of the past to the future and how our longings for particular futures shape our understandings of the past.

While postcolonial studies, as Scott suggests, longs for anticolonial revolution and revolutionaries rooted in a disavowed Romanticism, Asian Canadian literary studies seems to be uncertain about its own desires. It exists not in longings unfulfilled and unrequitable but in the peculiar ache of longings that have yet to be articulated. As Goellnicht notes, almost wistfully, we do not have an explicit history of revolution or struggle upon which to base the emergence of the field: "Asian Canadians never attained the status of a mass, panethnic social movement but remained localized groups, primarily in Vancouver or Toronto, or focused on the issues of a single ethnic group" (9). Unlike Asian American studies, Asian Canadian literary criticism does not emerge directly from U.S. countercultural political movements such as the civil rights struggle, the anti-Vietnam War protests, or the Third World strikes. However, not knowing the shape of our longings does not necessarily result in an elision of the question of the future. Rather, existing within this

ache of longing for a future that has yet to be articulated enables a different kind of temporal relation. It can be, as I have been suggesting in this essay, a relation that imagines a future out of the precariousness of displacement. If what we long for shapes our understanding of what we think we know, then we must attend to the longings shot through Asian Canadian literature for community, for redress, for the right to embrace the sadnesses of history as much as the pleasures of memory. The work of the present continues to be that of understanding the proleptic power of forgotten and suppressed pasts.

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NOTES

- 1 There has been a series of race riots targeted against Chinese immigrants in Canadian history, including the 1907 Vancouver riot, which caused enough concern at both local and national levels that Wilfrid Laurier, the prime minister at the time, stepped in to police the situation. For detailed discussions of anti-Chinese riots and anti-Chinese legislation (the two often went hand in hand), see Li; Roy; Ward; and Wickberg et al.
- 2 Ong observes in the prologue to *Buddha Is Hiding* that, “In *Flexible Citizenship*, I suggest that new affluent Asian immigrants—relocating their families and wealth to North America, while pursuing business interests in Asia—represent a new kind of disembodied citizenship. This is a parallel study of the ‘other Asians’—Southeast Asian war refugees—who flowed in at roughly the same time, and it will focus on the practices that embed these newcomers in specific contexts of subject-making” (xiv).
- 3 For a more extensive discussion of Chineseness and the significance of the head tax legislation in Canada, see Cho.
- 4 See Hu-DeHart for a discussion of Asian diaspora populations and the history of indenture in Latin America. Also see Helly for *The Cuba Commission Report*.
- 5 As Hu-DeHart argues, we cannot ignore the legal differences between slavery and indenture no matter what similarities there were in terms of material conditions: “it is important to separate actual physical treatment from legal status. A well-treated slave was still chattel for life by law” (83).
- 6 In the final chapter of *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy writes of “the living memory of the changing same” (198). His notion of this “living memory”—which changes and yet remains tied to the continuities between the past and the present—offers an important way of understanding the presence of the history of slavery in memory of contemporary black diasporic subjects.

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