

Afterword

Does there exist an object to be studied called Asian Canadian writing? Is there, as Gertrude Stein famously remarked about Oakland, a *there* there? The essays in this issue do not assume, as some academic practitioners still do, that the objects they study exist in some simple way before their acts of producing knowledge frame and indeed create them as objects. They are, to use Guy Beauregard's term, concerned about the *terrain* of a field called Asian Canadian studies, and as they explore new ground they are filled with an awareness of it as a built environment rather than some natural landscape. In various ways, each of the authors has carried an acute sense of how they or the writers they study fit uncomfortably into some object called "Asian Canadian writing," or indeed the subjectivity of someone that might be labeled an "Asian Canadian writer." Ultimately, they leave us with the question of whether there is even a subject we might call an "Asian Canadian," or whether we might be better off with a less narrowly construed definition of the histories and experiences of migrants and settlers in Canada who can trace ancestry to Asia.

Is there a *there* to be found, a destination awaiting us? There is something to be said about the possibility that the place of origin is more stable than all the wandering might suggest. After all, in the study of Asian Canadian writing, many of the writers in question—Wayson Choy, Joy Kogawa, SKY Lee, Jim Wong-Chu—appear again and again as the usual suspects, and the concrete site of Vancouver anchors so much of their lives and their writings. They did not appear *sui generis*, but came formed out of a particular intersection of histories and their memories of these histories. Interpretations of these writers' work, and of the places and people they created, find solid grounding in a specific time and space, or so it seems to a historian like me. The 1970s in Vancouver and across Canada was a particular context for the eruption of creativity that Donald Goellnicht has called the "birthing" of Asian Canadian writing. Shaped by the conversations that newly formed networks of artists and writers and political activists carried on in places

like “Pender Guy” and Powell Street and at UBC, the fictions of a Canadian history that had excluded or erased their voices were confronted by voices straining to be heard. This is a powerful myth of origin, akin to the birthing stories of Asian American literature out of the Kearney Street Workshop in San Francisco and the activism of the fight over the International Hotel and at San Francisco State College and at the University of California at Berkeley. Donald Goellnicht, however, in discussing Roy Kiyooka’s and Fred Wah’s trajectories as writers who entered the “canon” of Asian Canadian writers later in their careers, traces a more complicated story that explores how recognition and marketing intersect and, at times, collide with the writer’s own conceptions of what and why they are producing, showing the shifts that have occurred in Canadian literature between the 1970s and the 1990s.

Perhaps it is the historian in me that narrates change using simple historicist explanations, but it seems clear: The 1990s was a different time, and therefore the writings had changed, giving us Evelyn Lau and Kevin Chong and Larissa Lai and new challenges and possibilities for using identity as an analytical category. Glenn Deer’s essay accordingly focuses on the aesthetics and politics of a different generation of artists, a period marked by an expanding market demand for the literature of “visible minorities,” and one that redefined the meaning of those earlier writers such as Kiyooka and Wah, whose work found new interpretations and meanings as well as new categorizations. There were writers, activists, publishers, critics, and readers who actively shaped this new terrain. In this respect, one important consequence of having gathered all these essays into a single issue is the rich grounding they provide, a mapping of the shifting terrain that created a new product to be harvested and packaged, the “Asian Canadian” as ethnic writer.

This collection of essays aims to go farther, however, and take us to another place, more unsettled in all senses of the word. It is “contested” terrain, created out of political practices and fought over, not in the way armies battle over turf, but the way architects and designers fight over the very shape of the built environment. It is also an intellectual site that has not presumed Canadian nationalism or settler colonial politics as the rationale for academic production. The aim of scholarship, in other words, must not rely on the politics of national incorporation and inclusion, an addition of streams of Asian migrants into a larger national narrative of Canadian immigrant settlement. If the landscape of Canadian academia shapes Asian Canadian studies, can we avoid all of the rivers flowing to the same shore, the creation of some desired object called Canadian society and culture? Contribution to the

development of Canadian literature, as admirable and enjoyable a goal for scholarship that this might be, is too limiting a terrain for us to navigate.

The question of what purposes the knowledge about “Asian Canadians” should serve underlies all of the essays, based upon the premise that the objective shapes the object as surely as a cup shapes the water. Guy Beauregard and Christopher Lee in particular point to the very battles over definition that determine the political possibilities of categories, and the essays by Roy Miki, Rita Wong, and Lily Cho all, in their own particular ways, question both the pasts and futures of narrowly construed definitions of identity politics. What is to be gained by the practice of creating, studying, and discussing the category of “Asian Canadian” writing? And with much trepidation, what is to be lost or ignored, or worse yet excluded, like the Chinese and Punjabi Sikhs and Japanese each in their own ways so many decades ago? The legacy of exclusion, it might be argued, is central to the problematic of Asian Canadian literature, and with this legacy comes a heightened awareness of other exclusions and the political necessity of alliances and coalitions, so that we do not perpetuate in our actions the very exclusions we repudiate. Rita Wong places the writings of nominal Asian Canadians in dialogue with First Nations history, and Lily Cho uses parallels between the migration of indentured Chinese labour to the Americas and the African slave trade in the Atlantic as heuristic devices to question too singular a focus on “Asians” as unique subjects in history.

Although this is a collection of essays primarily concerned with literature, Lily Cho’s and Iyko Day’s essays reminds us that it is not only in the field of literature that we see the connections and inextricable ties between projects of racialization that produced—and continue to produce—categories such as “Oriental,” “Native,” “white,” and “black.” Day’s work on the shifting history of categories in the Canadian and US census reveals that the role of state institutions in defining categories of belonging reflect complex political processes that at times ran parallel in Canada and the US but, at other times, diverged in significant ways. Among many fascinating insights, Day points out that the erasure of race that has marked much of Canadian policy and categorization is not the transcendent accomplishment that many smug Canadians embrace as a point of national pride. Analyzed in conjunction with the successful capture of census enumeration by civil rights groups in the US (groups that recognized the value of counting bodies as a way of demanding resources and changes in public policy), the evasion in Canada of a correlation between the categories created by the census

and categories of discrimination, exclusion, and injustice created by racial practices has resulted in a profound disconnect. One of my bi-national Canadian/American friends used to remark that racism in Canada struck him as perverse in comparison to racism in the United States because “they just lynch you from a lower branch.” What she meant by this was never clear, but her assertion captures the distinctions in kind and degree between racial projects here and there, as well as the mythic untruth that a victim of racism in Canada is somehow better off because of some kinder, gentler, and more obscured form of racialization. But when you are hanging from the branch, does it really matter how high it is in the tree? The gulf itself between rhetoric and practice that Day’s essay suggests as a characteristic of racial categories in Canada is significant: it is the oft-frustrating disjuncture between what is imagined as a happy race-free society where we are all Canadians to an equal degree, and a society where inequities and injustices are difficult to quantify and remedy because we do not know how to count.

How are we to imagine and classify ethnic and racial groups, let alone count them and critique the literature produced by them? Who defines the “them” and for what purpose? The inadequacies of an “identity politics” that charts individual “ethnic groups” or “visible minorities” are a target of several essays in the issue, with explicit links drawn to the multicultural policy of the federal government of Canada. The “management” of multiculturalism, the not-so-hidden hand at work in the politics of cultural production, is a political and aesthetic strategy that has succeeded in the classic “divide and rule” practices of Canada’s imperial past, but also in a more contemporary “divide and consume” manner that is particularly pertinent for understanding the production and consumption of literature. At the heart of the commodification of “ethnic” literature is a darkness born of the marketplace, a shade cast upon the art of “visible minorities” that brings to light the centering of consumption practices on an idealized “white” consumer.

The product can produce the consumer. The exotic, after all, is exotic to someone in particular, and the smorgasbord stylings of the new Canadian literature can produce as its generic consumer a sophisticated cosmopolitan who has risen above racism and is able to appreciate those who are different. White supremacy in relationship to Asian migrants used to mean exclusion and social hierarchies of status and profession. Such political practices served as a glue to weld together a wide range of fractious settlers as European, “white Canadians” (a rather redundant term in practice, since the modification of Canadian by terms such as “Asian” Canadian presumed that

the norm was a white Canadian). The state-sponsored multicultural ideology disseminated in contemporary Canada has seemingly left that world behind, but we continue to encounter strange legacies of a racially stratified past. Exoticism and objectification, a fetish for the quaint writings of the authentically strange—is this the cup from which Asian Canadian writings pour forth? Is there no *there* there in terms of an authentic Asian Canadian writer whose subjectivity produces Asian Canadian writing? Is the authentic subject itself a product of the marketing of multicultural consumption?

One should hope not, even if the suspicions lie close to the surface, as they clearly do in Marie Lo's examination of the reception of Evelyn Lau's writings. The "currency" of visibility, the commodification of authenticity that fetishizes the exotic and packages and re-packages the product for our consumption—if we go down this path as the terrain for understanding Asian Canadian writing we will be lost in the wilderness of endless empty commodities. Christopher Lee suggests that the best we can do, in following Hannah Arendt's notion of action, is perhaps to enact this thing called Asian Canadian and, in our enacting of it, we can build it with political intent and worthy cause. It is, he believes, how the category of "Asian Canadian" has been built, and through seemingly endless births, it has been what has kept it from becoming just a label on a shelf at Chapters that makes it easier for consumers to find and buy the right product.

It is difficult to isolate the product from the market, the book from its readers, the commodity from the consumer. This issue has taken this challenge head on, and what has resulted is of importance for understanding more than just the rise of an interesting category called "Asian Canadian" in literature; the issue also speaks to and engages with the long history of racialization as a process of power and a legitimization of hierarchy in Canadian and North American settler societies. Literature as a form of power, as a way of imagining the world and of distributing that imaginary, is at the center of this issue's problematic.

What should be obvious—that everybody except First Nations peoples came late to this place, and in myriad ways some migrants "got it over" on indigenous peoples and other migrants—should not be a surprise to anyone anymore. But to argue that this conception of a "Canadian" history and society is in itself liberating also comes into serious question. Roy Miki in his essay grounds us not in a hermetically bounded place called Canada but instead opens questions about the fictions that produce Canada in a global context. Spatial metaphors abound, and the framings of local and global dissolve the familiar geographic terrain of the nation.

If we enact and practice and produce in our activity something we agree to call Asian Canadian studies, it must be open to the global connections that have made being Canadian a convenient fiction (even if the privileges of that citizenship and that passport go beyond mere convenience). The local sites that Canadians make their homes are enmeshed with other places around the world, whether in people's imaginations or in the movements of bodies and goods. To ask our questions and center our studies on some narrowly construed place called Canada would beggar what has always been the generative consequence of adding the term "Asian" to the term "Canadian." It is more than saying that some migrants to Canada came from some place called Asia—it is to raise the specter that the categories themselves are fictions we need to understand for the hierarchies and exclusions that can be mobilized through their use, to embrace a history which made "Orientals" a problem and a solution for creating Canadian unity. The discomfort of adding the excluded term of "Asian" to "Canadian" invokes a long history of how, in Canada, excluding some girds some others. But we need also to examine what has been lost in that process and what other possibilities for life were obscured or ignored in those categories. What makes the problematic of "Asian Canadian" important to consider, and I hope also important to practice and to act, is that it is a troubled, contested place with questionable boundaries. We must constantly ask ourselves how the things we say or do serve a purpose, and how we can reach out to make the wider world a more just and equitable place.

We sit at a propitious moment, when intellectual and economic and demographic and political transformations have made the expansion of institutional programs devoted to studying "Asian Canadians" possible. As someone who is involved in trying to build some of these structures, I can say that it is a constant challenge. Not all interests are equal, and not all interests will be equally served. If there is a lesson to be drawn from the essays in this collection, it is a warning and a clarion call: to not forget the contested terrain upon which we live, and to recognize that our work is a continuing struggle that has had a long history. Whom we welcome as neighbors, whom we work with together, and whom we ignore at our peril—all will be affected by or determined by the daily practices we enact. Whether there is such a thing as Asian Canadian writing, whether there is a *there* there to be found, *there* is still a place I recognize, even if it is contested ground, a place where I can see myself thinking and working, where I can see a home, even if it is not the only place I feel at home. I hope this issue is another foundational step, like many foundational steps before, towards building this place.