

Epilogue

A Conversation on Unfinished Projects

Christopher Lee: *Canadian Literature* has kindly given us a few pages to reflect on our engagements with and investments in Asian Canadian Studies in light of our essays in this special issue. I am always struck by how intellectual work around Asian Canadian Studies coalesces at certain moments around specific concerns. Recently some of us have been reflecting on how quickly Asian Canadian Studies has been taken up by academic institutions; one sees advertisements for academic positions, for example, that directly refer to Asian Canadian literature, and some of us teach in departments that regularly admit graduate students who declare it as their primary area of research. Does this mean that we can speak of an Asian Canadian intellectual tradition? If so, what kinds of responsibilities do we have—intellectually, politically, pedagogically—if we consciously call ourselves Asian Canadianists?

Guy Beauregard: I agree with Chris that the question of responsibility remains crucial to our future work. If Asian Canadian studies is to be understood as a critical project—and not simply viewed as a bounded object of inquiry—then we need to ask ourselves what this critical project can do. The value of this special issue, as I see it, is how it opens up this question in remarkable ways. Yet I am reminded here of a point Roy Miki made a decade ago in *Broken Entries* (1998): that cultural texts do not arrive in our hands with their meanings ready made. This is certainly the case with this special issue too. For while the individual contributions to this special issue robustly investigate the stakes involved in doing Asian Canadian critical work, the potential significance of these contributions, understood as a whole, will depend on what comes after.

Iyko Day: I think Chris's question of whether we can identify an Asian Canadian intellectual tradition provides an interesting moment to reflect on the "impurity" of that tradition. Like some of the other contributors to this

issue who were trained and have worked in both Canada and the US, the spectre of Asian American studies unavoidably mediates the way I engage with Asian Canadian cultural politics. For me this has meant—as my essay in this collection suggests—distinguishing Canadian racial and ethnic politics from the US context. Today, I still see the need to distinguish Asian Canadian studies, particularly in terms of the distinct legacy of artists and cultural activists that gave rise to its current institutional configuration, while acknowledging the vexed porosity of national borders and the recurrence of anti-Asian settler nationalisms. So in conceptualizing an intellectual tradition, perhaps Larissa Lai's notion of a "corrupted lineage" (2001) best captures the complex and ongoing interplay of nation and transnation in the field.

Don Goellnicht: As someone who started teaching Asian American literature from the peculiar position of central Canada over fifteen years ago, Iyko's comment on the relationship between Asian American studies and Asian Canadian cultural politics resonates profoundly, as does Chris's original question. In my own pedagogy, the shift has been from Asian American through Asian North American and Asian Canadian to Asian Diaspora studies, and not as a simple linear progression: the fraught negotiations and perilous navigations continue. At this significant moment of institutional formation, with a new generation charting its configuration, it's clearly valuable to continue these productive debates, but it's also important to ensure that they don't become debilitating. As we encourage increasing numbers of graduate students into the field, however defined, it's incumbent on us to create secure institutional spaces in which they can work and build careers, just as it's important to ensure that Asian Canadian communities find their cultures fully represented in higher education.

Marie Lo: Like Iyko and some of the other contributors to this volume, I was also trained in the US and Canada. These days, it seems to almost go without saying that Asian American analytic paradigms have been important points of reference in the formation of Asian Canadian studies. While my work on Asian Canadian cultural politics has certainly been routed through Asian American Studies, my work on Asian American cultural politics has simultaneously been shaped by the critical engagements of Asian Canadian scholars. I am an Asian Americanist as much as I am an Asian Canadianist. For me, excavating an Asian Canadian intellectual tradition—however fraught such a project might be—is of necessity twinned with complicating an Asian American one.

Glenn Deer: While many of the essays in this issue capture moments in Asian North American culture that have already become part of history, the problems that appeared urgent in the recent past now persist in different forms. The recovery of previously suppressed voices, anti-racist activism, critiques of multiculturalism, the negotiation of institutional inclusion, identity politics, and the development of productive pedagogies are still significant issues. These are supplemented by the need to cross borders, to move comparatively across national spaces, and to build and maintain communities of Asian North American inquiry, and to extend coalitions between teachers, theorists, writers, and artists in all modes of cultural production. This conversation has already been joined by many writers who are not part of this collection because of the limitations of space, but whose critical work must be accounted for as helping to shape future directions in our research and teaching.

Roy Miki: I would say that the institutional visibility of Asian Canadian literary studies calls for critical negotiations and practices specific to its contingent formations. The temptation to stabilize its institutional presence may occlude the always provisional conditions of its various manifestations. For me, despite the critical work done in its name, “Asian Canadian” remains a limit term that generates, simultaneously and sometimes with cross purposes, a shifting body of social and cultural references and an equally shifting body of textual forms and practices. Coming to appearance in the fraught belly of the Canadian nation-state, it now circulates in multiple arenas of interpretation, subject to both progressive critical research and to the perils of institutional containment and careerism. At this time, the uneven effects of transnational flows are producing the need to develop a research ethics to approach Asian Canadian work as an open-ended critical frame that always (or do I mean all ways?) has the potential to expose and transform dominant relations of power. (Am I being too hopeful? I hope not.)

Rita Wong: One might look to the etymology of the word “Canada,” the Huron-Iroquoian word *kanata*, for a reminder of how the very term “Asian Canadian” relies on First Nations land, language, and history. Moving from colonial pillage to ethical village feels like an intellectual journey that still has a long way to go. As Sunera Thobani writes in her book *Exalted Subjects*, “The transformation of the racialized nature of the national-formation requires a fundamental redefinition of the relationships of all non-indigenous populations to Aboriginal peoples” (250). To phrase it from another

angle, Dorothy Christian, a video artist from the Splatsin, asks, “Can you love the land like I do?” and (in the context of having worked hard to support the Mohawk resistance at Kanehsatake/Oka in 1990), “Who is going to be standing next to me when an army tank is coming at me?” I hope that “Asian Canadian” has both use-value and ethical thinking to offer toward decolonization and what it means to respect the indigenous cultures of this land. The journey starts with the human but doesn’t end there. May there still be enough time for us to deeply learn and understand ecological interdependence.

Lily Cho: When I think about Asian Canadian Studies and its place in academic institutions, I am struck by the varied and various paths it has traveled through communities and disciplines. In terms of Asian Canadian literature specifically, I am also struck by the many fields of expertise (postcolonial, Canadian literature, diaspora, transnationalism, eighteenth-century literature, Asian American studies, ethnic studies and so on) from which its practitioners have emerged. Thinking about all this—and looking at the conversation unfolding in this collective epilogue—I am excited about the possibilities for how Asian Canadian can remain a site of openness where the boundaries are not quite worked out. It draws on a diverse set of intellectual traditions and practices. It has been, as Iyko notes via Larissa Lai, capaciously corruptible in terms of its sense of lineage. Its trajectory has been circuitous and open-ended. Not knowing where it will end up has been enormously generative. It’s hard to not know and exciting too. I can’t wait to see what comes next.

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