

# Asian North America in Transit

*Glenn Deer*

me and the Yano brothers  
three asians  
in a '57 ford-niagara-  
not-so-flashy-model-blue

but we struck out  
like the morning sun

JIM WONG-CHU, from "Merritt B.C. Revisited 1965" (Lee 19)

In Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's *Reading Asian American Literature* the concept of mobility in Asian American writing is used to highlight the ways in which Americans of Asian descent have not been permitted to travel the literal and symbolic landscapes with the same freedom as the caucasian mainstream. For the latter "horizontal movement across the North American continent regularly connotes independence, freedom, an opportunity for individual actualization and/or societal renewal—in short Extravagance." For Asian Americans, mobility is "usually associated with subjugation, coercion, impossibility of fulfillment for self or community—in short, Necessity" (121). During the late summer and fall of 1999, the mobility of overseas "Asians" has certainly been a preoccupation of the mass media: four boatloads of illegal Fujian migrants have arrived along the BC coast at various times during August and September. This Fujian mobility—certainly lacking the amenities of extravagance and bearing the determination of a grim necessity—is intertwined in a global movement of people that bears a complex and often contradictory relationship to the immigration policies of Canada and the United States where Asian investments and expertise

have been both courted and feared. Asians in North America, whether fresh off the rusty boat of a snakehead (a smuggler of people) or a fourth-generation descendant of Asian Canadian pioneers, continue to be interpellated as stereotypical and simplified *Others* by an historical narrative that includes acts of exclusion, internment, disenfranchisement, and discriminatory taxation.

An important scholarly contribution to the exploration of inter-ethnic relations and policy options is a work published by the Institute of Asian Research at the University of British Columbia, *The Silent Debate: Asian Immigration and Racism in Canada*, edited by Eleanor Laquian, Aprodicio Laquian, and Terry McGee. Comprised of twenty papers originally presented at a 1997 Vancouver Conference on Racism and Immigration, this work gathers together research by geographers, sociologists, political scientists, economists, and immigration specialists. Such a work tries to open up what is perceived as a Canadian “reticence”<sup>(21)</sup> in discussing matters of race at the policy level. Certainly, however, the recent 1999 discourse has been anything but reticent on the issue of the Fujian boat migrants.

As Lisa Lowe argues in *Immigrant Acts* in a statement that is meant to apply to the United States but serves especially well for the present Canadian situation, “The presence of Asia and Asian peoples that currently impinges on the national consciousness sustains the figuration of the Asian immigrant as a transgressive and corrupting ‘foreignness’ and continues to make ‘Asians’ an object of the law, the political sphere, as well as national culture”<sup>(19)</sup>.

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My personal understanding of the politics of immigrant mobility is informed by the stories of my own parents’ maritime and racial crossings in our mixed-race family: one side of the family epic has been my mother’s journey from Berlin in 1951, via a ship boarded at Bremen, and a train that took her on a classic Westering journey from Halifax, across the Shield, and to Saskatchewan. My father’s half of the family journey began on a ship named the SS Tyndareus, a Pacific voyage which took him as a young boy from the Hoi Ping region of China to Victoria. When he arrived on the 29th of October in 1921, he paid a \$500 Head Tax fee. Over twenty years later, after working to pay back his debt and criss-crossing the continent from British Columbia to Quebec, and journeying back to China several times, he would meet my mother in a divided town—not Berlin, though we did revisit my mother’s family in that complicated city twice—but Lloydminster, a city straddling the border of Alberta and Saskatchewan.

My mother would recount these stories of mobility as if her meeting with my father was fated, a romantic necessity but also a subversive extravagance—the danger and the thrill of crossing territories and race lines, blonde Europe coupled with dark Asia somewhere in the wheatfields in a no-man’s land between Saskatchewan and Alberta.

Who were we, my sister and I, and the Eurasian cousins from North Edmonton, too Asian-eyed and dark to “pass” and yet comfortable with hearing the patter of Chinese or German—though we spoke only English in our family—as the visiting paper Uncles or German travellers dropped by for noodles or strudel? Were we Chinese? German? “Simply Canadian” would not answer the curiosity of those who asked, and the sophisticated balance of the term “Eurasian” was not yet on the horizon of our speech, nor was the hyphenated ethnic tag of “Asian-Canadian,” a product of early eighties multiculturalism. Balance was certainly not offered by the occasional jerks in our working-class neighborhoods who called us “Chinks” or “Chinamen”—there were few Asians in the Northwest Edmonton neighborhood where I grew up—and I remember angrily covering a Junior High student council poster with outlines of “Black-Power” fists to counter the racist “Chink!” that had been anonymously scrawled on some of my campaign posters. “Fuck ’em,” I thought. “I will get through this.” Political mobility won out in this case, and I became the student council vice-president, but it was another lesson in the undercurrent of anti-Asian sentiment that often lies beneath the civil exterior of Canadian life.

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During the more innocent years of the early sixties, my father would take us to the Edmonton restaurant where he worked as a cook, *The Seven Seas*. I remember how the Jasper Avenue cement would be wet with spring rain, and the water reflected the lights of taxis and buses. The spray that arched from the tires of the passing traffic embodied the romance of a movement through space, a cutting through waves, a movement through urban space: step into the cab or bus and you could go anywhere, uptown to the Seven Seas or down further to Chinatown. No thoughts here of necessity, just pure mobility.

Above the Seven Seas entrance, the neon outlines of masted sailing ships graced the marble-tiled façade, mercantile ships of colonial power—pirate ships, I used to think, the ships of raiders, buccaneers.

Inside the “Seas” were an animated chorus of voices and the aroma of good food, and for over twenty-years it was a popular spot for formal banquets



and receptions. I remember a conversation that my mother had with someone after leaving the restaurant: a Chinese businessman had wanted to buy a house in West Edmonton but the locals were opposed to the presence of an Asian in their genteel neighbourhood. The businessman bought anyway, tore down the older house and built one bigger and finer than the others. My mother, a European, always told this story with great relish and pride, taking the side of the ambitious Asians. This was in 1964.

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The relatively upscale *Seven Seas* was not in Edmonton's Chinatown but west on Jasper Avenue. The old Chinatown of the fifties and sixties was further east, on 97th Street, a two block strip of restaurants and shops across from the farmer's market, with popular eateries like *The New World* and *The Lychee Gardens*. Two blocks away stood the old Dreamland Theater where, in the 60s, they would show reruns of Chaplin films or provide a stage for Chinese dancers. A stone's throw away further north was the misery of skid row, punctuated by the absurdly named brick flophouse, *The Ritz Hotel*. A sad place for familyless bachelor Chinamen.

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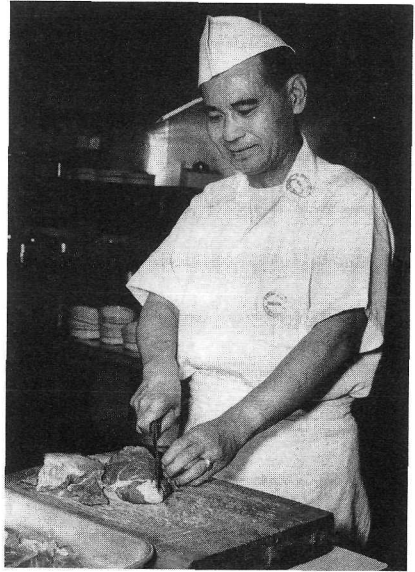
"The Head Tax wasn't fair" he always said. "They only made the Chinese pay it."

■

Many years later I am doing research in the Provincial Archives in Edmonton. I find a photograph of the 1950s clientele at the *Seven Seas*



Restaurant. Men and women—all caucasian—dressed in the early fifties film-noir style: pointed lapels on their pin-striped suit jackets, women, some with pill-box hats and cigarettes, imitating Lauren Bacall. The only Asian in the photograph is a waiter in a white jacket who is carrying a tray of food, his back to the camera. Yet another photograph is a surprise and a joy: one of my “uncles,” dressed in his cook’s linens, his muscular fingers wielding a knife at a thick wooden chopping block, trimming rectangular pieces of steak. The Asian face has been restored in the dignified work of the kitchen, and I feel almost relieved by the anonymity of the waiter in the previous shot: Asian necessities, caucasian extravagance.



A front page headline in *The National Post*, September 11, 1999:

3500 migrants slipped into B.C. unnoticed: US. (Hume)

And in another column in the same issue:

Canada has captured yet another ship trying to sneak Chinese migrants ashore in British Columbia in what immigration officials now describe as the largest smuggling operation the country has ever seen. (Hasselback)

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On the front page of *The Vancouver Sun* on September 9, 1999 a profile was presented of Adrienne Clarkson, Canada's newly appointed Governor General. Clarkson has been a popular television journalist and was a former agent-general for the province of Ontario in Paris from 1982-87, but much attention in the September media coverage was given to her Asian background—her parents came to Canada in 1942 as refugees from Hong Kong. In *The Vancouver Sun*, her picture is juxtaposed against the headline, *Navy tracks fifth suspect ship*.

What is the connection between Clarkson and the media coverage of the ship and the illegal migrants? As a well-known broadcast personality and small “I” liberal, Clarkson's profile in the *Sun* article might be construed as a multicultural sign of Canada's diversity and of the social mobility that is fostered by our society. This was certainly the spin put on the appointment by our Prime Minister:

The first member of a visible minority and the first immigrant to be picked for the job, she is also only the second woman to hold the vice-regal post as well as the first person in 20 years to come from outside the ranks of politicians. Announcing the appointment Wednesday of Canada's 26th governor-general, Chretien said his choice of Clarkson is 'a reflection of the diversity and inclusiveness of our society and an indication of how our country has matured over the years.' (Greenaway)

The article, which quotes terms of praise from the historian Michael Bliss as well as the Prime Minister, then shifts to a description of how “Clarkson was born in Hong Kong in 1939 but her family fled to Canada as refugees during the Second World War three years later.”

The setting of the Clarkson story beside the illegal migrant story could be interpreted in various ways, but both speak to the quality of the migrant story: one is a story of meritorious claims and achievements, while the other is one of criminal smuggling, military alert, and a fourth undetected “ghost ship.” Yet if Clarkson is implicitly held up as the model refugee migrant, the fully assimilated Canadian, the language also subtly embeds her in the category of the Other, the “new” Canadian. And why? Did Adrienne have a choice when she came at the age of three? Would her immigrant status have

been worthy of comment if she had arrived from London or Dublin at the age of two? An explicit connection between Clarkson and the migrant boat people is created in another column in *The National Post* by Rosemary Sexton. She praises Clarkson as a politician's dream, "ethnic, intelligent, bilingual," but then concludes by emphasizing that there are "several ironies" in this appointment: "One is that this extraordinarily accomplished former Hong Kong refugee is taking on one of the highest offices of the land, albeit a ceremonial one, at the same time as hordes of Chinese refugees try to enter this country illegally." While the final tone of Sexton generally praises Clarkson, the constant identification of the governor general with a strained refugee status shows how people of visible Asian descent cannot escape a label that makes them less Canadian than their caucasian counterparts. The Asian label is not one that Clarkson went seeking—it was applied to her in order to promote the image of Canadian social inclusiveness: however, the label both professes the mobility of the individual while limiting it by implying she is somehow less Canadian because of her refugee past.

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The illegal Fujian migrants have now come to be known as the "Boat People" (haven't we seen this one before?) and they are said to be New-York bound. New York City has one of the largest urban concentrations of people with Asian ancestry in North America. Long before the Fujian ships were tracked off the west coast of Vancouver Island in the summer and fall of 1999, as Jan Lin reminds us in his recent *Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclave, Global Change*, "a rusting, unregistered freighter carrying some three hundred smuggled passengers, called the *Golden Venture*" ran aground on the beach in Queens on Rockaway Beach on June 6, 1993. But while New York is often the destination of choice for Asian migrants, other ethnic groups—in even greater numbers—still try to make it there (to echo Sinatra) rather than anywhere else: "An analysis conducted in September 1993 by the New York Department of City Planning, however, revealed that Chinese were thirteenth on a list of the largest illegal alien groups in New York City, with Ecuadoreans, Italians, and Polish [sic] topping the list" (29).

It should be no surprise that New York is the idealized goal of migrant peoples. On the cover of an anthology of personal memoir and literary essays edited by Garrett Hongo, *Under Western Eyes*, there is an amazing black-and-white photograph of a woman dressed in a traditional silk Chinese dress while standing at a busy street corner. Apparently in Manhattan's

Chinatown, she holds a copy of *The New York Times* under one arm while smiling and holding up a sheathed martial arts sword in the other, as if to hail a cab. As ironic counterpoints to this woman warrior, a painted cutout model of the Statue of Liberty stands across from her, the torch of liberation held high and the dates of the Declaration of Independence etched on the scroll in her other hand. Two figures of liberation and mobility thus defiantly stand in a zone marked by a traffic sign that declares “No Standing at Any Time.” Yet, as one of my students pointed out to me, all of these figures are, in the implied pun in the title, “underwesternized.”

New York, the Statue of Liberty, and the promise of the new order? (And of Tiananmen Square?) The eight chapters of Jan Lin’s *Reconstructing Chinatown* trace the history of New York’s Chinatown by reviewing traditional and contemporary theories of assimilation, human ecology, and the urban sociology of class transformation. At the leading edge of these theories is Lin’s analysis of Chinatown as both a community that can sustain the new immigrant by offering employment and support, and an economic enclave that exploits the labouring classes for the benefit of the managerial classes. New York and other “command centers” of global capitalism (13) create polarized economic streams because “postindustrial global cities require not only a corps of highly skilled and educated managers and administrators but also a phalanx of low-skilled and low-paid clerical staff who are often recent immigrants” (14). As a graphic illustration of the “two-circuit” economy of Chinatown, Lin provides a photograph of a Chinatown street scene where, in the foreground, a produce vendor displays his wares in front of the polished steel columns and glass and stone front doors of the Bank of East Asia. In well-researched forays into the urban economy and politics of New York’s Chinatown, Lin uses ethnographic sketches of Chinatown housing and of employment conditions in the sweatshop zones of the garment industry. He analyzes the impact of overseas Chinese investment capital, and the consequences of the development of satellite communities in transferring capital from the centralized enclave.

A critique of the armchair voyeurism that constructs Chinatown as a place of mysterious vice, “tourist spectacle, or enigmatic area” is also presented in the penultimate chapter where Lin critically examines the history of exploitive and voyeuristic tours of Chinatown and how such Orientalist discourses have been recirculated in both lowbrow movies (*The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu*, *Charlie Chan*) and more pretentiously crafted films such as



Polanski's *Chinatown* and Cimino's more controversial *Year of the Dragon*. Throughout this book, Jan Lin pulls together urban sociology, studies of global capital, and intelligent analyses of the cultural perpetuation of stereotypes. However, at the end we only get a brief glimpse of the kinds of counter-discourses and art works that have been produced by the Asian Americans of New York City. Lin, because of his deliberate focus on social and economic patterns pays, only brief attention to the symbolic economy that has been affected by Asian writers from New York City.

Fortunately, to fill this gap, we have *The NuyorAsian Anthology: Asian American Writings About New York City*. This hefty 472 page volume of poetry, fiction, and artwork is edited by Bino A. Realuyo, Rahna Reiko Rizzuto, and Kendal Henry and features lively work by 59 writers and 11 visual artists who write out of or about New York City from an Asian American perspective. The vast coverage of the anthology, published by Temple University Press for the Asian American Writers' Workshop, makes this work a celebratory gathering of a pan-Asian coalition of writers. Represented here are writers with connections to the Philippines, China, Korea, India, Japan, and Malaysia, writers who are queer and hetero, classic and contemporary, high modernists and street jammin' slammin' poets. The energetic range of New York is represented from the dark nostalgia of Pico Iyer's bladerunning cyberpunk images of the stygian smoke in "A City in Black and White" to the warm romance of Eileen Tabios's "Staten Island Ferry Poem." A frank conversation between Jessica Hagedorn and Kimiko Hahn cuts through aesthetic abstractions and reveals the pragmatics of the writing process in bluntly humourous fashion (see 349). The erotics and racialized politics of sex in the excerpt from Mei Ng's *Eating Chinese Food Naked* is juxtaposed to the hybrid blending of Hispanic and Indian culture in the Manhattan story of "Liquid Seasons" by Sunaina Maira, co-editor of the South Asian anthology, *Contours of the Heart* (1997).

Works like *The NuyorAsian Anthology* undertake important political work in building coalitions between diverse groups and in providing exposure for a wide range of authors and artists. The Asian American Writers' Workshop has been especially ambitious in this regard, having published important anthologies of drama and poetry, and group-specific works such as *Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map North America* (edited by Sunaina Maira and Rajini Srikanth) and *Flippin': Filipinos on America* (edited by Luis Francia and Eric Gamalinda). In Canada the Asian Canadian Writers'

Workshop has played a similar role, under the leadership of Jim Wong-Chu and the 1998-1999 editorial vision of Madeleine Thien's guidance of *Rice Paper*. Wong-Chu has organized hundreds of readings sponsored by the ACWW during the annual May Asian Heritage Month in Vancouver and has provided grassroots support for both emerging and established writers.

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"Is there a distinctive Asian American creative sensibility?" This is a central question posed in Amy Ling's biocritical reference work and anthology, *Yellow Light: The Flowering of Asian American Arts*. While uses of categories like Asian American—or citizenship status, such as refugee or landed immigrant—can limit the freedom to define oneself in multiple ways, sometimes posing the question above, as directly as Ling does, can turn up intriguing results.

The diversity of Asian North-American writers must always be re-asserted against the stereotypes of the public imagination. Though we must be wary of the appropriating forces of multiculturalism, forces that can compel ethnicized Canadians to play out narrowly prescribed roles for the occasional heritage festival, cross-cultural alliances are important to build. The Asian Canadian race theorist Roy Miki, in his collection *Broken Entries: Essays on Race, Subjectivity, and Writing*, certainly shows us the dangers of multicultural appropriations that elide the contradictions in texts like *Obasan*. We must be wary of how critical energy spent on the celebration of multiculturalist diversity can often serve to distract us from ongoing systemic forms of racism. But Amy Ling's editing of *Yellow Light* is an example of how a reference text that is a coalition of voices can intervene in the negative stereotyping of Asian North American culture. Both mainstream and subversive, *Yellow Light* features a useful blend of capsule biographies, writerly reflections, and excerpts of creative work from forty Asian American writers, artists, musicians, and composers. Ling's Introduction reveals her own experiences of meeting professional resistance to the serious study of Asian American literature in the academy in the early eighties, a time when the American canon was slow to accept the study of non-canonical texts by writers of Asian descent. Amongst the writers and artists who contributed, we are presented with fascinatingly honest responses to questions of identity and influence from Diana Chang, Maxine Hong Kingston, Peter Bacho, Garrett Hongo, Karen Tei Yamashita, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kirin Narayan, Ping Chong, David Henry Hwang, the performance group Slant, Hip-Hop artist Tou Ger Xiong, and twenty-nine others. In addressing the

problem of defining a specific Asian-American sensibility, David Henry Hwang defends the right of the individual to transcend the necessity of genetic heritage. Asserts Hwang, "More important than race, national origin, or genetic heritage are those groups and individuals that define *themselves* in response to shared experiences, frustrations, and needs. The factor of self-definition becomes the key . . . immigrants become Americans when and if they choose to define themselves as such" (223).

Certainly this is the kind of mobility we would all wish for ourselves, to move beyond the constraints of racial categories and into the ongoing assertions of identity in borrowed or invented voices that we might call our own.

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