

Political Animals and the Body of History¹

Entranceways are the most difficult because you have to pass through them alone. I wanted to bring someone with me, someone who in this moment might function as a translator, not from some other language into English but from one English to another. Because I already know this entranceway is not where I come from, and yet I must say I do, in order for you to understand me.

Ashok Mathur, a writer, critic and activist, but mostly a trusted friend was here first, keeping watch over the literary/academic entranceway, asking the leading question. I did not want to come in the door like that. And yet it seemed to be the main entrance. He thought it was important that I enter the dialogue, and so asked the question— a door-opening kind of question, a come-right-this-way sort of question to lead the sniff-sniffing fox out of her lair onto the green. Not to assume she'd be hunted, but no sense denying the possibility.

The question was this: How could you or would you describe your writing as coming from a racialized space?²

A question from the middle of a conversation, begun in some other place, long ago and far away. Which is to say right here and now, but of another root, another wellspring. An awkward question because it demands a starting point apart from the self. A question that assumes one already knows how she is looked at from someplace that is by definition outside of her, and yet familiar at the same time.

It took me a long time to answer. I kept turning the question around in my head, asking myself what he meant when he asked it, and how he per-

ceived his own work in that regard. We'd talked about the question before, so I knew he understood my ambivalence. How can a person write from a place constructed for her, pejoratively, by someone else? Why would she want to? But then, does she have a choice? My racialization is a historical fact, begun in Europe centuries before I was born, and perpetuated in a sometimes friendly Canadian sort of way through the social, bureaucratic and corporate structures of this society. I still live with the hope that the body exists prior to race, that experience exists prior to race. Living in a country that could not and does not exist without the concept of race, and for that matter, why be polite, white superiority, it is often hard to maintain this hope. When I say pejorative, I mean, you know, I didn't *ask* for this. And when Ashok asks me how I see my work coming from a racialized space, he is implicitly acknowledging that we both know this. He is asking me, faced with this recognition, what I intend to do about the injustice of it. He is asking me whether I see this othering of my body and my work by the mainstream as my responsibility to undo. If it is not my responsibility, are there reasons why I would choose to do it? He is asking me whether or not I think I have a choice. He is asking me because he faces similar questions.

These questions rise from the context this country has handed me. They are not the centre of my world. What I mean to say is, I didn't want to come in the door like this, nor dressed in these clothes, these shackles. But would you, white or brown, content or discontent, have recognized me otherwise? Perhaps. But I am not yet a creature of great faith.

My work comes from many places at once. There is an aspect in recent years that has been about trying, Houdini-like to break from the box which allows only two possibilities—to understand and work from the racialized position this society allots to the likes of us, or to work from a “colour-blind” liberal position which actively denies the way we have been racialized even as it perpetuates the very racial interests it claims not to see.

Growing up in Canada in the seventies and eighties, I was very much crammed inside the racism-was-terrible-but-now-it's-over box—a quick-fix product of official Multiculturalism that did precious little materially except sweep the problem of white racism under the carpet. This liberal position, so seemingly loaded with good intentions, had a pale, clammy underside that merely masked existing power imbalances while doing little to rectify them. For those of us who grew up in that era, it meant knowing

something was wrong but never being able to put your finger on it.

In the late eighties/early nineties, I was drawn to the anti-oppression movements which, though they had been growing for years, were currently flowering on the West Coast and in other parts of the country. It was and continues to be incredibly empowering to embrace a confrontative politic that refuses to accept the historically rooted racism of this country and to call it into question wherever it rears its ugly head. I was and am very interested in questions of strategy—How can people of colour and First Nations people empower ourselves and one another given the colonial and neo-colonial contexts we live with? In a collective sense, this means taking particular stands on issues such as appropriation and affirmative action as a means of pushing white liberals to look at the hypocrisies of colour-blindness, multiculturalism and other stances that seemed so liberal in the seventies. It means forcing the hand of those who would like credit for a belief in equality without having to put that belief into practice by giving up the ill-gotten gains of racially endowed power.

I took a particular interest in questions of history for a number of reasons. I think part of what is so aggravating about the reactionary racism that is so often the knee-jerk response to an anti-racist critique is the way in which it denies this country's ugly histories—the histories of the residential schools, the Japanese Internment, the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Komagata Maru incident as well as larger international histories of colonialism and exploitation which shaped and continue to shape the globe. It was particularly empowering to be introduced to works by marginalised people that addressed these histories from our own points of view. There was an urgency around their production and reading which I still feel. Gloria Anzaldua and Cherie Moraga's *This Bridge Called My Back* was seminal, as much as a presence as a text. I remember being thrilled by the publication of *Piece of My Heart: A Lesbian of Colour Anthology* put out by Sister Vision Press in 1990. Trinh's *Woman, Native, Other* was also important, as was bell hooks' *Ain't I a Woman*. There were also numerous cultural projects and special issues of periodicals that while problematic in their tokenized status were, nonetheless, affirming and thought-provoking. Although very few of these things became institutionalized or regularized, each served as a forum to move dialogue forward. In some ways the ad hoc nature of these projects was liberating in that they allowed various communities different ways of entering the discussions and validated a variety of voices in a variety of media.

I began to take note, however, of how certain texts became rapidly fetishized by critics, academics and the general public in ways comparable to the way anthropologists and missionaries address field notes. I attended many readings and I can't count the number of times audience members have asked writers of colour, referring to the main character of any particular writer's text: "Is that you?" Or of my own work, which at moments actively resists that question: "Did you get these stories from your grandmother?" The suggestion is, of course, that we are not creative agents capable of constructing nuanced fictions which address historical situations, but rather mere native informants reconstructing, as accurately as our second-rate minds allow, what actually happened. Not, I might add, that I am trying to create a hierarchy of genres that inadvertently favours narrative fiction—I think it is very important that those who remember "what actually happened" write about it, and I have faith that they have written and will continue to write it well. It is rather the reception of the work, and the assumptions around that reception, that I wish to critique.

I understand that these questions may well be addressed to novel writers across race, class, gender and sexuality lines; however, their anthropological resonance with regard to marginalized peoples can not be denied. (I betcha no one ever asked Dickens if he was really Tiny Tim.) I feel a certain ambivalence here. My authority as an author is of no great importance or interest to me. My one great wish for readers is that they understand writing as a practice rather than as the production of an inert, consumable text. In some ways, the question "Is that you?" affirms this wish.

There are other genres that have a tradition of foregrounding within the body of their texts questions about how we read, that have a history of resisting readings that would consume them. These are the same texts that within many circles, both progressive and conservative, get labelled as too intellectual, too academic, incomprehensible. They are circulated within certain small if thoughtful circles, but do not reach the audiences which novels reach. I do not wish to address the question of whether their "elitism" is inherent or constructed. I am conscious of my choice to write fiction as a strategy chosen because it reaches people. On the other hand, in this age of steroid-enhanced capitalism, the tension between engaging those technologies which enable one to reach large numbers of people, and opening oneself and one's work to quick fix consumption, is no easy thing to resolve. Indeed, the quick fix consumptive scrutiny itself is all too easily

transmuted into a kind of surveillance which generates new stereotypes, dangerous ones if their sources can be traced to a semblance of native reportage. This is the editorial power of capital.

And yet the fact remains that narrative compels me. What is history, after all, but narrative? And she who inhabits that narrative truly has ground to stand on. That grounding is necessary when her belonging to the land she lives on is so contested.

My second interest in the question of history is a more personal one, tied to my own historical situation. It is also very much caught up in questions of strategy: How do we diasporized types make a homespace for ourselves given all the disjunctures and discontinuities of our histories, and for that matter, the co-temporalities of some of them? It is also about the second box, if you were following my Houdini metaphor. The paradox of claiming a racialized space as a space from which to work is an uncomfortable one. To claim a racialized space is empowering in that it demands acknowledgement of a history of racism to which the mainstream does not want to admit. It demands acknowledgement of the continued perpetuation of that racism often, though not always, in new forms in the present. On the other hand, to claim that space also confirms and validates that eurocentric racist stance by placing ourselves in opposition to it, enforcing a binarism which itself is a Western social construct. So how to break from the second box without falling back into the first one, the one which denies a history of race and racialization as shaping our lives?

My strategy in recent years has been to make a project of constructing a consciously artificial history for myself and others like me—a history with women identified women of Chinese descent living in the West at its centre. (I eschew the term “lesbian” because of its eurocentric roots, and because it does not necessarily connote community or social interdependence.) It must be artificial because our history is so disparate, and also because it has been so historically rare for women to have control over the means of recording and dissemination. The writing and rewriting of history has always been the prerogative of men and of the upper classes. I have the added disadvantage—the result of an unfortunate combination of my own childhood foolishness and the pressures of assimilation—of not being able to read Chinese. So my readings of history are bleached not only by the ideological interests of gender and class but also of race and culture.

As a quick example, my research into the life of Yu Hsuan-chi, the courtesan and poet on whom the “Poetess” character in *When Fox Is a Thousand* is based, turned up two records of her. One described her as a woman with many lovers, hence lascivious, hence immoral, hence capable of murder. The second suggested she might have been framed for the murder of a young maidservant by an official who did not like her strong ideas about the role of women in Chinese society. Although she is supposed to have left a sizable body of poetry, very little of it appears in anthologies of Chinese poetry in translation, which tend to favour sanctioned male heavyweights.

The history I’m going to write, I told myself, may be ideologically interested, but no more so than what’s already out there.

Several queer Asian theorists caution against projecting the needs and contexts of the present onto the past (see Shah, Lee). How can we understand, for instance, temple images in South Asia in the same terms that the makers of those images understood them, regardless of what we think we see? At the same time, without claiming those histories what are we? Shah suggests that the fact that we are here now in the present should be enough. But it isn’t. In the everyday discussions of politically active people of colour, lesbian, gay or straight, I hear this nostalgic referring back to a homeland that no longer exists, indeed, one that never did. I don’t think this practice originates so much with naiveté as with a burning desire for that past; that it should have form, that it should have a body. Sometimes I feel our very survival in this country depends on the articulation of this form, the construction and affirmation of this body.

Animals at last. The myth and the tall tale. The secret and the subterranean. The dark, the feminine, the yin. All allies in this task. For, if diasporic cultures in the West are to be living breathing things they must change. We must have the power of construction, as long, of course, as we behave as responsibly as we know how in the act of construction. (By “responsibly” I mean that the ideas I have discussed above do matter. I do not hold the ideal of freedom of speech, or freedom of the imagination above other freedoms and other ideals, especially at a historical moment when these freedoms are regularly invoked in order to justify the reproduction of tired stereotypes and the perpetuation of historically unjust power imbalances. I do not believe in censorship, because I think it solves nothing. I do believe in integrity, and expect it of myself and of other writers.) This project obviously can not be one of creating a totalizing history; it is rather one of uninhibited, zany invention for the sheer joy of it.

My interest in the archetype of the fox began with my stumbling across Pu Songling's *Strange Tales of Liaozhai*, a well-known text of the sixteenth century. Pu is supposed to have collected these various tales of the supernatural from ordinary people and compiled them into this anthology. The preface to one translation (which comes out of the PRC) talks about these tales as proto-socialist in their critiques of class structure, corruption and abuse of power. A reason to love them—or is this merely a pretext to circulate an old text that has been such a pleasurable read for so many years? There are stories in the compilation which are obviously allegorical in their intentions. And then there are the fox stories, which certainly have their allegorical aspects, but I like to think that there is more to them than that. Some are not so politically palatable at all, such as the one about a wily supernatural fox woman who leads an innocent man from his pious life into debauchery, sickness and death. There is another about an unsavory young man who leers at a beautiful woman; the woman turns out to be a fox, and the fox trounces him. There is yet another about how a fox and a young man fall in love—star-crossed love, of course, because the human and the divine are not supposed to have carnal dealings with one another. I suppose this one could be read as a comment on class or a critique of the repression of romantic love.

But what is more compelling in many ways is the figure of the fox herself, as a creature of darkness, death, germination and sexuality. The fox has the power to travel both above the earth and below it. In order to work her mischief she needs human form, which she achieves by entering the graveyard late at night and finding the corpse of some poor young girl who has died before her time. She breathes life into it. In this form, her power over men (and perhaps women too?) is the power of seduction. I find these stories very rich and very visceral. They are also politically compelling for a number of reasons. The first is contemporary feminism's struggle with questions of sexual representation. What does it mean for a feminist to embrace the power of seduction? And am I a feminist, or is that also a colonized space? The second is the question of how to deal with sexual representations of Asians in the West where we have been so much exoticized and/or de-sexualized in a society which insists on pathologizing the sexuality of the other. I was compelled to find out what kind of warrior the fox could be in that battle. The third is the possibility of employing the fox as a new trope of lesbian representation, or, if that term and its history reeks too much of its western origins, then as a trope of Asian women's community and power.

I have been much influenced by the work of the Vancouver collective Kiss and Tell, and by much of the sex-positive work that has come out of Canada and the United States in recent years. The work is valuable in that it makes sex a site of resistance as well as a site of pleasure. I can't help thinking, however, that much as using one's racialization as a point of entry into political and philosophical discussions shapes what one can say and learn, so using sex as a point of departure shapes the way one thinks about women's community, and how one goes about looking for echoes of it in the past. My concern here, I hope, is not one of prudery or reaction, but one of wanting a little more give in the technologies we use to tap history. Elsewhere I have spoken about my interest in a tradition of spinsterhood, which became radicalized in Shundak (my father's long-ago county of origin, in Guangdong Province) at the turn of the last century. Although my sources on this tradition are entirely and problematically anthropological, I was struck by the argument (see Sankar) that the act that clinched this practice for women was not sex but the acceptance of the idea that younger generations of spinsters could feed, through ancestral worship, the souls of the older generation. This practice is normally reserved for the members of patriarchal families only.

That said, I must also add that it is extremely difficult to find historical materials on Chinese lesbians. I suspect this not because they did not exist, but because for a long time sexual practice was not considered as a focal point for identity. It could be argued, in fact, that the notion of identity arose from Western philosophical traditions, and from the needs of Western colonial practices. Later, the absence of such texts could be ascribed to the fact that women's lives were not deemed important enough to write about, or if worthy of writing, not deemed worthy of translation. The only scholarship on lesbian history in China that I could find in English was an appendix to a book called *Passions of the Cut Sleeve*, which dealt in its main body with the history of gay men. That appendix, perhaps ten pages long, focussed exclusively on the question of sexual practice, which felt empty and unsatisfying in its narrowness.

Insofar as *When Fox is a Thousand* concerns anti-racism—and it does, although I think it also goes much further than that—I think issues of the body are primary. There are the obvious metaphors—the Fox breathing life into the bodies of the dead is like an Asian woman trying to breathe life into the assimilated almost-white self required by the social pressures of liberal-

ism. She can never do it perfectly. There are always moments where the synapses don't connect, where there are understandings missing. But for the Fox, these moments of breathing life into the dead are also moments of passion. This is something she is compelled to do. It is her nature. The work of Calgary writer Yasmin Ladha is compelling in that it talks about colonialism and its effects in terms of romance. A very messy and dangerous romance, rife with the abuse of power, but also tinged with hope. I think in doing so she takes a great risk, particularly as the spectres of Pocahontas, Suzy Wong, Madame Butterfly and their ilk loom above us. But to engage in this way also opens up possibilities for living here that might not otherwise exist.

It did not occur to me until well after completing the book that the notion of transformation through breath is both a Taoist and a Buddhist notion. Or perhaps, indeed, it is a remnant of some earlier indigenous religion that has since disappeared or become subsumed by these more organized forms. Breath, like writing, is stilling and insistent. It moves and it sustains life. To engage the breath is to disrupt the binary opposition of Houdini's two boxes, to break from what Judith Butler refers to as "the discursive site of injury." What happens for me in the process of writing, at certain electric moments, is a contacting of the past that resonates with something akin to truth and belonging. A bit metaphysical perhaps but in a country built on denial, I am used to ghosts and not frightened of things that are only half apparent. These are not moments that sing of hurt but rather compel my interest in Taoist and pre-Taoist cosmologies. Here again, there are dangers. My compunction towards home-making belongs to the realm of the feminine in a way of which some branches of feminism might not approve. I think it is important to remember, to get back to the question of racialization, that there are entire knowledge systems and ways of living in our historical pasts that pre-date white racist modes of identification and their reclamations. How to touch those systems and practices may not be obvious, and the dangers of naive idealization are far from negligible. For me, the consciously artificial narrative construction of history that acknowledges the desires of the present but also resonates with the past, seems a very useful possibility.

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NOTES

- 1 This piece was originally produced for the conference Making History, Constructing Race at the University of Victoria, October 23-25, 1998.
- 2 E-mail interview with Ashok Mathur, July 1998. Available at <http://www.acs.ualgary.ca/~amathur/>

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