

## Global/Local

**A**s the return of Hong Kong from Britain to China approached this summer, local and international media chronicled the countdown and its effects on the Pacific Rim with something resembling obsession. In Europe over Christmas, I shook my head at an article in *Frankfurter Allgemeine* (a leading German daily) which appeared to lament “the conquest” of Vancouver by “the Chinese” seeking “refuge” in this “satellite of Hong Kong” (Brigitte Scherer, “Der grosse Sprung über den Pazifik,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 7 Dec. 1996; my translation). Although she rehearses the stereotypical observations about rising property prices and the desecration of an Edenic natural environment by “monster houses,” however, the author also writes approvingly of the conversion of what she considers a former hicktown into a global city whose population, hitherto unsophisticated and devoted to sports, has learnt from the newcomers to shop in expensive designer stores and relax in outdoor cafes while “so far, the consumption of food outdoors has been prohibited [sic].”

The errors in this piece range from the amusing to the infuriating (visa students at UBC and SFU are rumoured to pay an annual \$14,000 in tuition fees each, and homeowners on the North Shore are said to suspend their garbage cans from chains to protect them from “racoons,” “evidence of the ever-present drama” provided by a “grandiose and cruel natural environment”), but these errors are to a measure typical of the discursive confusions attending “rimspeak” (Bruce Cumings, “Rimspeak; or The Discourse of the ‘Pacific Rim,’” *What Is In a Rim?*) generally and the rhetoric surrounding the Hong Kong turnover in the Western media in particular. Returned to North America, I was instantly confronted with a series of articles on the subject in the *New York Times* which, while not as scurrilous as the item in *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, still trotted out a predictable mix of economic hype

and cultural cliché. Both the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Globe and Mail* have pursued the topic assiduously. Here, the misconceptions are perhaps not as glaring, but there is still ethnic innuendo galore. On a recent weekend, for instance, the *Sun* featured a four-page report on “Hong Kong and Us,” while the *Globe* translated art appreciation into stockbroker’s jargon by declaring “the Asian cultural community on Canada’s West Coast [to be] hot, hot, hot” (Chris Dafoe, “East Heats West,” *Globe and Mail*, May 3, 1997).

Analysts of “rimspeak” have pointed out how its practitioners tend to posit the Pacific Rim as the quintessential postmodern space, all mobility and global access, but in describing the region’s characteristics still adhere to entrenched binary constructs derived from orientalism or frontierism. Nevertheless, three remarkable recent collections of critical essays—*What Is In a Rim? Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea*, ed. Arif Dirlik (1993), *Asia/Pacific as Space of Cultural Production*, eds. Rob Wilson and Arif Dirlik (1995), and *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, eds. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (1996), the first published by Westview Press, the remainder by Duke University Press—go some considerable way toward disentangling not only the corporate rhetoric of “rimspeak” but also the cultural studies lingo posturing as its analytic superior: “Too much of cultural studies, in this era of uneven globalization and the two-tier information highway, can sound like a way of making the world safe and user-friendly for global capital and the culture of the commodity form” (Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, “Introduction,” *Global/Local*). Working from a variety of perspectives ranging from anthropology and geography to politics and history, and drawing on literature, film, journalism, polemic and other forms of discourse, the essays collected in these three volumes remain alert to social injustice and uneven modernization, to orientalisms revived or re-invented, and to energetic localisms which insist on formulating their own imaginary, “transnationalization, that master-narrative of globalized production” (Wilson, Dissanayake 4) notwithstanding.

Thus, Karen Kelsky discusses alternatives to the *Madama Butterfly* myth which, with its vision of the East as feminine, mysterious, and passively ready to give up its riches, continues to influence Western economic thinking, as headlines such as “Wooing the Orient: With Cash Reserves and Growth Rates on the Rise” (*Ottawa Business Life*, April 1988) or “Westerners [Are] Told Far East [Is] Glittering with Opportunity” (*Calgary Herald*, 13 Feb 1988) will readily attest. Kelsky, an anthropologist, describes the phenomenon of

the “yellow cabs,” that is, Japanese women who aggressively pursue *gajin* men in Hawaiian and other resorts, in deliberate provocation of Japanese patriarchy and the deference expected of women within it. Kelsky, however, does not idealize this phenomenon into an act of feminist defiance, but refers to “the forces of commodification [that] can dominate even as they liberate desire” (Karen Kelsky, “Flirting with the Foreign: Interracial Sex in Japan’s ‘International’ Age,” in *Global/Local*). Donald Nonini, in “On the Outs on the Rim: An Ethnographic Grounding of the ‘Asia-Pacific’” (*What Is In a Rim*, 161-82), agrees with bell hooks and, more recently, Inderpal Grewal’s contention that the study of travel has privileged Western concepts of leisure and culture traffic and has failed to investigate involuntary mobilities such as those enforced by labour inequalities or political unrest. Travel and tourism are also one of the bones of contention in the fiery and very important ongoing debate between anthropologist Joyce Linnekin and the Hawaiian sovereigntist Haunani-Kay Trask over questions of cultural appropriation, as chronicled in Jeffrey Tobin’s “Cultural Construction and Native Nationalism: Report from the Hawaiian Front” (*Asia/Pacific*).

Perhaps the most illuminating observations in the context of the Hong Kong turnover and its impact on the Pacific Rim occur in the geographer Katharyne Mitchell’s essays in *Asia/Pacific* and *Global/Local* on changes in the city of Vancouver. She speaks about the results of a massive influx of immigration and of the emergence of a new global citizen (although her observations here seem to generalize the experience of a proportionately small number of extremely privileged individuals). She also investigates the systematic challenge to unexamined racial prejudice initiated by research initiatives like the Laurier Institute. Drawing on a wide variety of phenomena, Mitchell’s work eschews the facile conclusions about the turnover that the press all too often reiterates and instead develops the case of Vancouver into a paradigm of multiculturalism as a policy “not naturally emancipatory, but [one which] must be constantly monitored and interrogated” (“In Whose Interest? Transnational Capital and the Production of Multiculturalism in Canada,” *Global/Local*).

I read these books with relief, finding in essay after essay a patient attentiveness to the complexities of cultural identity and exchange, and an equally impressive determination to expose racism and exploitation, however well disguised they might be. E.-M.K.