

A Long Labour: The Protracted Birth of Asian Canadian Literature

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In 1969, there was no such thing as Asian Canadian writing, at least not as a genre. In fact, there was no such thing as an Asian Canadian. Japanese Canadians were the Japanese; Chinese Canadians were the Chinese. The generic term was “Oriental.”

— Terry Watada, “To Go for Broke” (80)

THE STUDY OF LITERATURE by Canadians of Asian origin or ancestry under the rubric of “Asian Canadian literature” is, as Roy Miki pointed out in his pathbreaking paper “Asiancy: Making Space for Asian Canadian Writing,” delivered at the annual conference of the Association for Asian American Studies in 1993, a relatively recent phenomenon. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, in her *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*, published in 1993, quoted Shelley Wong as saying that “the state of Asian Canadian literature is best described as nascent” (217). So unfamiliar, in fact, was this designation in academic circles — and I stress that academic institutions are my focus here rather than artistic communities — that, when I organized a special session entitled Asian Canadian Literature: Classification, Identity, Nation at the 1993 MLA convention in Toronto, there was an audience of about ten. The papers in that session were of high quality — I know that three of the four were subsequently published in reputable venues, including Lien Chao’s “Anthologizing the Collective: The Epic Struggles to Establish Chinese Canadian Literature in English,” one of the most important historical examinations of Asian Canadian literature to date — so I can only conclude that as recently as seven years ago the North American academic literary establishment was not interested in a literary tradition called “Asian Canadian.” It was spring 1994 before the oldest and most established critical journal in the field, *Canadian Literature*, published a special issue

on Asian Canadian writing, and even then three of the five articles and the introductory editorial were by white male scholars.¹ It was even later, at the 1997 Congress of Learned Societies in Canada, that the first conference session on Asian Canadian literature was held by ACCUTE, the largest professional association of literary scholars in Canada, organized by John Chen of Malaspina College.² In the area of the performing arts, the journal *Canadian Theatre Review* devoted a special issue to South Asian Canadian theatre in the spring of 1998. Taken together, these fitful initiatives were not, I think, an auspicious “beginning” to Asian Canadian literary studies.

Despite the fact that several anthologies and special journal issues of Asian Canadian creative writing in English have been published since the 1970s,³ that three journals devoted to Asian Canadian writing, culture, and politics — *RIKKA*, *Asianadian*, and the *Toronto South Asian Review* — began publication in 1974, 1978, and 1982 respectively (now all defunct or transformed), and that this literature was called to wider critical attention a decade and a half ago by Anthony Chan, Jim Wong-Chu, Suwanda Sugunasiri, and M.G. Vassanji⁴ — despite all that, we in the academy seem to operate in an almost perpetual state of *announcing* Asian Canadian literature, a literature that has taken, from our snowblind perspective, twenty to twenty-five years to be “born.” (Let me emphasize again before proceeding further that by the term “Asian Canadian literature” I don’t mean the literary texts themselves, which have been produced at least since the Eaton sisters⁵ began to publish at the end of the nineteenth century; rather, I mean the clear identification of an ethnic minority literary tradition in English and the academic study of it as such.⁶) The “final push” in this “birth” may have been signalled by the appearance in 1999 of an article entitled “The Emergence of ‘Asian Canadian Literature’: Can Lit’s Obscene Supplement?” by Guy Beauregard in *Essays on Canadian Writing*, an article quickly followed by *Canadian Literature*’s second full-scale issue on Asian Canadian writing, this time expertly edited by Glenn Deer. Neither of these most recent examinations of an area of cultural study labelled “Asian Canadian” attempts to trace the historical contours of this literary academic field in any detail, however;⁷ it is this gap that I am attempting to fill here in the belief that we will be able to understand the full implications of this term only after we have begun to understand its institutional history. Ultimately, I am concerned with the crucial question of who is served by a field of study called “Asian Canadian literature.”

I want to start my investigation by tackling the question of why, compared with the rapid rise of Asian American literary studies in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Asian Canadian literary studies have languished in the wilderness, taking so long to find an academic home (if we can yet say they have done so). My argument is grounded on the working assumption that for a racial minority literature — and in this case a panethnic minority literature united under a sign of “race”: Asian — to emerge with a clear identity there needs to be a strong accompanying and reciprocal national political-social movement focused on identity politics or the politics of difference.⁸ Why compare the development of Asian Canadian literary studies to its Asian American counterpart? Doesn't this approach run the risk of simply presenting Asian Canadian literary studies as a supplement to the larger Asian American Movement, a position that has already been implicitly adopted by a number of critics who incorporate writers such as Joy Kogawa and SKY Lee into their studies of Asian American literature? My justification for approaching this as a valid comparison lies in an attempt to examine how this designation has been used and abused in the U.S. context in order to see whether we in Canada can learn any valuable lessons from that use/abuse. The comparison also works, I think, to help explain the development of this particular form of literary study. To put it another way, this is an exploration of the ways in which institutional formations and practices in North America have attempted to discipline and contain various Asian ethnic groups and their cultural production as well as of the possibilities for resistance to such containment within those institutional formations.

The Asian American Movement that emerged in the late 1960s and grew to maturity in the 1970s has been well documented, first by early chroniclers such as Paul Wong and Mike Murase, and later by William Wei, Yen Le Espiritu, and the contributors to the special issue of *Amerasia Journal* on this topic in 1989, among others, all of whom draw heavily on interviews and other primary sources, including numerous pamphlets from the 1960s and early 1970s, to construct their accounts. I will not undertake a full-scale summary of that work here; rather, I will concentrate on the points of comparison between the development of a national panethnic Asian American Movement and the “failure” of a parallel Asian Canadian movement to develop in the late 1960s, despite considerable similarities between the two countries' historical treatments of minorities of Asian origin.

The most obvious difference between the U.S. and Canadian situations is the size of the Asian-origin population in each country. The significant post-World War II immigration of Asian women to the United States and Canada resulted by the mid-1960s in a sizeable population of college-age, North American-born, native-English-speaking children, many of whom entered universities and colleges just when radical protests were rampant on campuses. These numbers were swelled by a new wave of immigrants after passage of the Immigration Acts of 1965 and 1967 in the United States and Canada respectively, acts that liberalized immigration from Asia and other "Third World" countries. Despite doubling in population during the 1960s, however, Asian Canadians remained a small group in absolute terms: the 1961 census recorded 121,753 people of Asian origin in Canada (0.7% of the total population), a number that had increased by the time of the 1971 census to 285,540 (or 1.3% of the total population). In comparison, there were already more than a million people of Asian origin in America before the 1965 Immigration Act ushered in the huge "second wave" of Asian immigration (Takaki 420).

Perhaps equally significant was that Canada had an even smaller black population,⁹ which, coupled with the country's *reputation* as a haven for racial minorities (a reputation of dubious merit that stretched back to the Underground Railroad), meant that there was relatively little black radicalism in Canada in the late 1960s. This is significant because virtually all commentators on the Asian American Movement agree that it would not have come into being without the examples of, and even alliances with, first the Civil Rights Movement and then Black Power (Espiritu 25; Wei 15).¹⁰ While there was an acknowledged push by already active community groups in Chinatown and Manilatown in San Francisco and Los Angeles, and in Chinatown in New York, to have living standards improved and cultural centres established, it took the galvanizing events of the 1968 student strikes at San Francisco State College and the University of California at Berkeley to create a strong pan-Asian ethnic movement, represented by groups such as the Asian American Political Alliance. These strikes were essentially attempts to change racist educational institutions so that they would respond to the needs of America's racialized minorities and reflect the pluralistic nature of American culture in the curriculum. This marked the first time that "the term 'Asian American' was used nationally to mobilize people of Asian descent" (Espiritu 34). The largest con-

tingent of the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) at San Francisco State College, to which the Asian American student groups (AAPA, ICSA [Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action], PACE [Philippine-American College Endeavor]) belonged, however, was the Black Student Union (BSU). Furthermore, the Black Panthers had begun in nearby Oakland in 1966, with leaders such as Huey Newton and Bobby Seale active in the events leading up to the college strikes.¹¹ The aims of the Black Panthers, to change the deplorable conditions in black urban centres and to build revolutionary nationalism among the black masses, were adopted directly by two Asian American activist groups in San Francisco: The Red Guard and I Wor Kuen (Liu and Cheng 147).¹² In New York, the radical group East Wind wanted Chinatown to form the basis of an “Asian nation” inside America, an idea adopted from the black Nation of Islam (153). While earlier Asian American community leaders had looked to Martin Luther King, Jr. as a model for civil rights protest, university students involved in the strikes looked to figures such as Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, and Stokely Carmichael.¹³ The example of African Americans raised the consciousness of Asian American students to the pervasive nature of racism in America and in their own lives, moving them “toward the goals of racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment” (Wei 41). According to Glenn Omatsu, “The radical vision . . . can best be summarized by the demands raised by students and their community allies: ethnic studies, community control of education, open admissions in higher education, and redirection of university resources to promote social justice. Education, in short, became a tool for social change” (“Asian American Studies” 120).

I don't want to give the false impression that, in contrast to the radical politics of black and other Third World peoples in the United States, African Canadians were simply passive or compliant victims of racism. There were significant instances of active resistance to racism — such as the protests and legal battles over the clearance of Africville, a long-established black community on the outskirts of Halifax, between 1965 and 1967, which led to the formation of the Black United Front, and the black West Indian student revolt at Sir George Williams University in Montreal in 1969 — but such instances were localized and contained. As George Elliott Clarke, writing about his youth in Halifax in the 1960s, points out with a degree of self-mockery, “We had no real civil rights agitation, for school segregation was velvety abolished

by the provincial government between 1954 and 1960. There was no serious Black Power activism, for our provincial community of fewer than thirty thousand souls was too small and too conservative to tolerate more than casually militant rhetoric" (1); "The insistent pressure to assimilate, emigrate, or accept a marginalized position is acute in Canada, where people of African descent account for roughly two percent of the population (in contrast, African Americans account for thirteen percent of the American whole)" (11).¹⁴ Without an established national Black Power movement in Canada, there was no significantly large protest movement focused on issues of racism and racialized identity in the 1960s, unless we consider the Quebec question to involve racism, a topic to which I will return shortly. Nor do I want to give the impression that Canada's reputation for racial tolerance was well deserved: especially in the treatment of Asian immigrants, Canada's pattern of behaviour was very similar to that of the United States, with the exploitation of Chinese labour in the nineteenth century, when cheap labour was in demand (for gold mining, railway building, etc.), and the exclusion of immigrants during most of the first half of the twentieth century; with the internment and "repatriation" of Japanese Canadians during World War II; with the exclusion of immigrants from India from 1908 to 1951; and with the disenfranchisement of all these groups. In other words, the impetus for protest by Asian Canadians historically has been just as strong as it has been for Asian Americans. But the Canadian state has been more adept at containing or diffusing protest from racialized minorities, aided to a considerable extent by the fact that the Canadian polity as a whole has been more fractured and less coherent than its American counterpart. Canadian internal incoherence has made it difficult, if not impossible, for racialized minorities to gain sustained national attention.¹⁵

The other social-political movement that had a profound effect on the formation of the Asian American Movement and that was largely absent in Canada was the anti-Vietnam War movement, in which Asian Americans played a prominent part. Unlike the white antiwar movement, which focused on bringing American soldiers home safely, the Asian American Movement viewed the Vietnam War as a striking example of U.S. imperialism and racism, of white America's long-held desire to dominate and colonize Asians. Asian Americans as a group were in a unique position to bring together the antiracist protest of the Black Power movement and the antiwar

protest of white New Left groups. Not only did the activists in the Asian American Movement see the war in Vietnam in colonial terms, but they also viewed America's treatment of its minorities as a form of "internal" colonialism (see Liu), basing their analysis on the theories of Third World-liberation thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, Che Guevara, and, most significant for Asian American students, Mao Zedong (Umemoto 10). Among Asian American student groups, Mao was admired as a great liberator of Asian people, a leader in revolutionary thought, and a respected figure in international politics. Opposition to the Vietnam War as unjust and racist was also the driving force behind the Asian American alliances and groups that formed on the East Coast (especially in New York) and in the Midwest (in Chicago, Madison, Minneapolis, and Ann Arbor). According to William Wei, "The Vietnam War and the opposition to it unified Asian Americans psychologically and politically. The war catalyzed the development of an Asian American identity" (38), to the point where Asian American antiwar groups separated themselves from mainstream antiwar groups that would not take a stand against racism. Wei concludes that, "In bringing Asian American activists together to participate in a common cause that transcended college campuses and Asian ethnic communities, the antiwar movement helped transform previously isolated instances of political activism into a social movement that was national in scope — the Asian American Movement" (41).

This movement came into existence, then, at a moment when the United States was experiencing significant social and political struggles involving a great deal of radical protest from New Left organizations. The general mood of violent protest and reaction was exemplified by civil unrest and the assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert Kennedy, by the tactics of groups such as the Black Panthers, and by incidents such as the disruption of the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago. Meanwhile, on the international stage, the United States had become the new imperial power, especially in Southeast Asia. The election of Richard Nixon in 1968 led not only to an escalation of the Vietnam War but also to a swing to the political right. Canada, in contrast, was considered a liberal democracy, not an imperial power, a country that had adopted progressive social welfare policies such as universal medical insurance and a universal pension plan; on the international stage, it was the country that had pioneered the concept of U.N.

peacekeeping forces, with Lester Pearson, then secretary of state for external affairs and later prime minister, receiving the 1957 Nobel Peace Prize for Canada's peacekeeping efforts. In its "quiet diplomacy" with the United States, Canada in the late 1960s opposed any escalation of the Vietnam War. Pierre Trudeau's election in 1968 on the wave of Trudeaumania consolidated a centre-left Liberal government that quickly adopted "official multiculturalism" and bilingualism,¹⁶ increased immigration from and aid to the Third World, and recognized the People's Republic of China as the legitimate government of China in 1970, before the United States did. Prime Minister Trudeau visited China in 1971 — he was always sympathetic to leftist governments, including Cuba's — and a Chinese consulate was established in Vancouver in 1973, thus recognizing China's achievements since 1949 (Wickberg 248).

We should not be misled by this brief sketch into believing that Canada was in any way free of racism or that it was entirely devoid of radical protest — far from it. But radicalism in Canada was centred primarily on the push for independence for Quebec. In the mid-1960s, separatist political parties in Quebec became more radically politicized, a development that resulted in the FLQ crisis of October 1970, when — for the first time since the internment of Japanese Canadians — martial law (the War Measures Act) was declared by the federal government as it attempted to deal with a terrorist threat of insurrection in Quebec. Political and cultural issues in Canada were seen, then, as dividing along largely bicultural lines — English versus French — with little sense of concern for the issues of other minorities, despite "official multiculturalism." As Paul Wong commented as recently as 1990, "The ongoing and unresolved bilingualism problem in Canada [which is also a coded way of saying 'the threat of Quebec separatism'] leaves little or no monies, political energy, commitment or media attention for other cultural issues. This inability to recognize 'others' directly, and perhaps intentionally, suppresses our voices" ("Yellow Peril" 7). What the vast majority of the public understood to be a "hyphenated Canadian" in the 1960s and 1970s was not an African Canadian or an Asian Canadian or a Native Canadian but a French Canadian. In a national context, French Canadians were seen as the persecuted or privileged minority — depending on one's perspective — and the great bulk of political debate over minority issues has focused on their rights.¹⁷

Asian Canadians never attained the status of a mass, panethnic social movement but remained localized groups, primarily in Vancouver and Toronto, or focused on the issues of a single ethnic group. Certainly, there were social and political causes that these local or single-ethnic communities fought for and often won in the 1970s and 1980s (see Lai and Lum). For example, the struggle in the early 1970s to preserve Vancouver's central Chinatown by resisting attempts to construct a new firehall and a freeway through the area, although protracted (see *Gum San Po* 2), was eventually successful; similarly, Chinese Canadians won their fight against the CTV program *W5* (see Kwan; and Mavalwala). Of greater national importance was the attainment by Japanese Canadians in 1988 of redress from the federal government for their internment during World War II. But despite such significant successes, the federal government's policy of multiculturalism, together with its myth of Canada as a "cultural mosaic" that is less assimilationist than U.S. society, has been remarkably successful in containing ethnic minority groups, keeping each isolated and focused on its own cultural "heritage." As Richard Fung states in an important essay on Asian Canadian culture,

Multiculturalism has produced a whole caste of "community leaders" who have facilitated in the management of race politics. . . . Multiculturalism shifts the focus away from the political and social questions of race such as housing, employment, education, access to power, into a political marketing of personal identity. It champions a notion of cultural difference in which people are encouraged to preserve cultural forms of song and dance they didn't practice before they came to Canada. ("Multiculturalism" 18)¹⁸

Since the early 1970s, multiculturalism policy has produced the illusion of equality of opportunity; it has assisted in whitewashing the asymmetrical distribution of power in society by entrenching the right of personal cultural choice for private individuals while making little concerted effort to change the values, practices, and policies of public institutions to reflect the racial and ethnic pluralism of Canada. The effect of official multiculturalism has been a focus on celebratory "folk" song and dance and on "ethnic" food — commodities that are easily transformed into touristic fetishes for

the mainstream culture to consume. Although multiculturalism has also been concerned with the preservation of “heritage” languages by funding classes, this aspect of official policy affects a much smaller percentage of the population and is therefore often more vulnerable to budget cuts. The result is that literature produced in languages other than English or French — and there has been a good deal of it in Canada, published in community newspapers and by small presses often supported by federal grants — has gone largely unnoticed by both the dominant culture and the academy. What we speak of as “Asian Canadian” literature today is written primarily in English, an example of “multiculturalism within a bilingual framework” that was the aim of Trudeau’s multiculturalism policy from the outset.¹⁹ Official multiculturalism has as its foundational imperative the “preservation” of “homeland” cultures by ethnic groups who have immigrated to Canada; its gaze is thus backward and away from Canada, its concerns focused on individual ethnic groups, each with its own “heritage” language and culture forming part of a larger “mosaic.” But there is little interaction between groups, so that each remains caught in repetitions of a specific “originary” ethnicity circumscribed by state apparatuses. It is not concerned with the development and (r)evolution of ethnic cultures *in* Canada, with artistic transcultural pollination, with intellectual hybridization, with interethnic social and political coalitions that might threaten mainstream hegemony and dominant discourses.

To claim that Asian Canadians have never attained the status of a mass, panethnic social movement is not to claim, however, that they lack agency or are apathetic victims acted on by others; on the contrary, they have been politically and culturally active. As Jim Wong-Chu points out, in the late 1960s

a group of UBC [University of British Columbia] students, inspired by a radicalized visiting Asian American professor [Ron Tanaka,] began the process of re-examining their history and identity. They formed the Asian Canadian Coalition, hosted a conference and created historical exhibitions on campus [the Asian Canadian Experience exhibit was held at UBC in 1972]. The ACC’s Chinese component was called Gah Hing [“Brotherhood”], the Japanese component was the Wakayama group. (“Brief History” 1)²⁰

Although the work of these groups became increasingly focused on cultural and artistic production, it is important to recognize that they maintained strong community connections. Wong-Chu continues:

The Chinese Canadian Writer's Workshop formed to publish *Gum San Po* (1974) [a periodical that survived for two issues] as a way to educate the community and provide a creative outlet for its writers. . . . Some members went on to establish Pender Guy, an English language Chinese Canadian radio program on Co-op Radio (1976-1981). . . . In 1976, the Chinese Canadian writers workshop and Powell Street Revue [a *sansei* Japanese Canadian group founded by Alan Hotta in Toronto] join[ed] forces to develop *Inalienable Rice*, an anthology project which was finally published in 1979. The Asian Canadian Writers Workshop [ACWW] was established towards the end of 1979. Its earliest membership included Paul Yee, Sean Gunn, SKY Lee, Rick Shiomi and Jim Wong-Chu. During this period, the group functioned more as a means for internal communication and helped nurture ideas and legitimate each other's projects. (1)²¹

Activity in the ACWW has tended to focus increasingly on getting younger, unknown writers published, a process that Wong-Chu acknowledges often involves circumventing rather than appealing to the Asian Canadian community.²²

There are two aspects of this account of the ACWW to which I wish to draw attention. First, the ACWW has always seen its mandate as supporting the cultural work of, in the words of its own membership application pamphlet, "writers and artists from a common Pacific Rim Asian Canadian heritage" ("About ACWW" n. pag.);²³ in other words, it has not been concerned with South Asian Canadian writers and artists, who form a major part of the Asian Canadian population in British Columbia, Ontario, and Alberta and who have been immensely successful as writers. Second, "ACWW is a B.C. based organization" ("About ACWW" n. pag.), although it now has chapters in Calgary, Edmonton, and Toronto. The ACWW has been a major influence on and an invaluable support to Pacific Rim Asian Canadian writers and artists; its membership now numbers over 150. But it has not attempted to be a fully panethnic or national organization.

Along with Vancouver, the other important centre of Asian Canadian cultural activity has been Toronto, which became home to the largest concentration of Asian Canadians during the 1970s and the location where the two most important cultural-political journals focused on Asian Canadians were published: the *Asianadian*, a product of the Asianadian Resource Workshop, which began publishing in 1978 as an outgrowth of the *Crossroads Monthly*, a Chinese Canadian publication that began in 1977; and the *Toronto South Asian Review*, which began publication in 1982.²⁴ From its inception, the *Asianadian* had admirable and ambitious aims:

to speak out against those factors (whether conditions or persons) perpetuating racism in Canada, stereotypes, economic exploitation, and the general tendency towards injustice and inequality practiced on "visible minorities." But more importantly, we will present an outlet for the talented Asian Canadian artists, writers, and musicians. We will strive to promote unity in the Asian Canadian communities and to bridge the gap between Asians with 19th century roots in Canada and recent Asian immigrants. ("Editorial")

In the inaugural issue, Anthony Chan carefully defined Asian Canadians "as peoples whose cultural heritage originated in East Asia (China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Macao), Southeast Asia (Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam), and South Asia (India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka) and now make their homes in Canada" ("Chinese Community" 13). Although at first dominated by East Asian Canadians, the *Asianadian* quickly became a genuinely panethnic journal, including important work by South and Southeast Asian Canadians. After the journal folded in 1985, Richard Fung lamented that, "since the demise of the *Asianadian* magazine in the mid-1980's, there has not been a national forum for discussing cultural or political issues for a pan-Asian audience" ("Multiculturalism" 17). A vital panethnic Asian Canadian institution run on a shoestring budget from the outset had failed to survive the financial squeeze experienced during the swing to the political right in the mid-1980s; a valuable voice of protest against the political and cultural hegemony of the dominant culture had also been lost.

The other important journal in the field, the *Toronto South Asian Review*, with its narrower ethnic focus and greater academic, and

so less threatening, agenda, survived considerably longer and helped to establish the careers of several important South Asian Canadian writers. In 1993, it was transformed into the *Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad*, which still gives a good deal of attention to South Asian Canadian writing but which no longer sustains a singular ethnic focus, dealing instead with new Canadian, American, and international writing of diverse racial and ethnic origins. There is at present, then, no periodical devoted entirely to criticism of Asian Canadian literature and culture — no equivalent to the long-running *Amerasia Journal* in the United States — which some might interpret as a positive sign that Asian Canadian literary and cultural production is being dealt with effectively in “mainstream” journals but which I would not view in so positive a light. The loss means, I would conjecture, that it is now more difficult for unknown or fledgling Asian Canadian writers to gain the kind of critical attention they need to establish themselves.

To me — and here my argument is somewhat speculative — it appears that since the mid-1970s, despite the large East/Southeast Asian and South Asian communities in both Vancouver and Toronto,²⁵ the East Asian (especially the Chinese and Japanese) Canadian literary community has come to dominate the Vancouver Asian Canadian cultural scene and the South Asian Canadian literary community has come to dominate the Toronto scene. This is especially true in terms of finding sympathetic publishers for literary works in English²⁶ — and perhaps because Toronto dominates Canadian publishing, the South Asian Canadian literary community has had a more established history of publication in Canada, both with mainstream commercial publishers such as McClelland and Stewart (which publishes well-known authors such as Ondaatje, Mistry, Vassanji, and Selvadurai) and with specialized presses such as TSAR, the book-publishing venture of the *Toronto South Asian Review*.²⁷ The first anthology of Asian Canadian literature is not, as is often assumed, *Inalienable Rice* (with its focus on Japanese and Chinese Canadian writers, mainly from the West Coast) but Stephen Gill’s anthology *Green Snow*, in which all the writers are of South Asian origin except Joy Kogawa, a resident of Toronto at the time. While Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981) and sky Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1990) are often championed as the first English-language novels by a Japanese Canadian and a Chinese Canadian respectively (this was before the revival of the Eaton sisters), several novels by South Asian Canadians were published in the 1970s.²⁸

Similarly, the first concerted effort at collecting criticism on Asian Canadian writing is *A Meeting of Streams: South Asian Canadian Literature*, edited by M.G. Vassanji and published in 1985. It was followed by Suwanda Sugunasiri's two books, *The Literature of Canadians of South Asian Origins: An Overview and Preliminary Bibliography* and *The Search for Meaning: The Literature of Canadians of South Asian Origin*, published in 1987 and 1988 respectively, both in Toronto. Lien Chao's *Beyond Silence: Chinese Canadian Literature in English*, published in 1997, is the first book of criticism on East Asian Canadian literature (published, interestingly, by TSAR); Roy Miki's *Broken Entries: Race Subjectivity Writing*, which collects essays published earlier in the 1990s along with some new ones, appeared in late 1998; and Fred Wah's *Faking It: Poetics and Hybridity*, which collects pieces written throughout the 1990s, was published in 2000. In other words, South Asian Canadian literature had a significantly stronger cultural infrastructure by the 1980s than did the literature of other Asian ethnic groups. Why, we may ask, was this so?

The answer lies, I think, in the fact that virtually all the prominent Canadian writers of South Asian origin — and some of the names, such as Michael Ondaatje, Rohinton Mistry, M.G. Vassanji, Bharati Mukherjee, and Cyril Dabydeen, are not only easily recognizable now but also central to CanLit — came to Canada as highly educated adult immigrants from former British colonies: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka; the British Caribbean, especially Trinidad and Guyana; and eastern and southern Africa, especially Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, and South Africa. Sugunasiri also emphasizes that “These writers, generally speaking, come from the middle or upper class families. . . . As they entered the work world, some of these writers came to be part of the linguistic if not literary elite, as teachers, university professors, newspaper editors, broadcasters, translators and critics” (“Literature” 8–9). They were, in this sense, advantaged over Chinese and Japanese Canadians who had been in Canada longer but had come initially from working-class backgrounds and who, when they started to attend universities in significant numbers in the 1960s, after the repeal of discriminatory laws that had isolated them from mainstream life, did not put “Literary pursuits . . . high on the list of waiting achievements” (Bennett Lee 2). Or, as the more radical Wakayama Group, writing in 1972 in *Bridge* magazine, a U.S. periodical not subject to pressures from mainstream Canadian publishers, described the situation,

Since the struggle for self-identity and spiritual growth through the development of Asian-Canadian historians, moral philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, economists, poets, musicians, etc., would be detrimental to sustaining [their] subservient role in society, neither Asians, who desire to survive, nor whites, who desire to rule, have any inclination to encourage Asian-Canadians to move into these fields. (17)²⁹

Furthermore, Canadian literary institutions — publishers and universities in particular — already had a designation by the late 1960s for the kind of literature being produced by immigrant South Asian Canadians and its field of study. In a manoeuvre that kept this literature simultaneously inside and outside the field of “Canadian literature,” it was classified as “Commonwealth literature,” a term that gave way in the late 1980s to “postcolonial literature.” This is a designation that writers and critics of South Asian origin embraced and promoted, at least initially, as Vassanji’s introduction to *A Meeting of Streams* makes clear.³⁰ Sugunasiri claimed in 1985 that “the Canadian writers of South Asian origin could be called ‘Third World’ chroniclers” (“Reality” 36). The fact that these writers have traditionally focused in their fiction on the past in a distant place that still haunts them, another place, not here,³¹ rather than writing novels about racism and discrimination *in Canada* may also help to explain why it has been easier for their works to get published by mainstream publishing houses such as McClelland and Stewart, which dubs itself “The Canadian Publisher.” This approach was perhaps more prominent in the early stages of South Asian Canadian writing in English, up to and including the spectacular success of Rohinton Mistry, but it continues in younger writers now gaining popular and critical attention, such as Shyam Selvadurai, Shani Mootoo, and Anita Rau Badami. South Asian writers, such as Himani Bannerji, who are intent on exposing racism in Canadian society through their creative writing have not met with the same popular, or even critical, success. I hasten to stress that this observation is intended not as a criticism of the “successful” writers and their works — one expects that first-generation immigrants acutely aware of their diasporic subjectivities will seek to understand and explore their immediate pasts, and many of these writers have done so brilliantly³² — but as a comment on the kind of “acceptable” and “exotic” writing that the white literary

establishment has tended to elicit and reward from ethnic minority writers, an example of the institutional practices that discipline Asian Canadian cultural production.³³

A measure of that “reward” can be found in the most recent edition of the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (1997), which devotes a fairly long entry to “South Asian-Canadian literature” by Chelva Kanaganayakam, thus confirming its “arrival” on the national literary scene as far as the academic establishment is concerned, but which contains no entry on “Asian Canadian literature,” a term that is now used primarily to refer to writing by East and Southeast Asian Canadians or immigrants. There is even a now commonly accepted acronym for South Asian Canadian literature: Saclit. The Canadian situation, it is worth noting, is virtually the reverse of that in the United States, where “Commonwealth literature” was not an established field of academic study and where South Asian American writers have been one of the last Asian ethnic groups to gain critical attention and to be included in the “Asian American” designation, a position gained only after some wrangling and controversy.³⁴

Inclusion of Saclit in the larger category of “Commonwealth literature” and then “postcolonial literature” has had the advantage of creating interracial coalitions between black and South Asian writers from former British colonies, especially around issues of the intersection of race and gender discrimination,³⁵ but it has also meant that East and Southeast Asian Canadian literature has been left relatively isolated, thus rendering the already small field of Asian Canadian literature smaller, more divided. The division is not limited to the early period of the 1970s but continues, as exemplified in anthologies and special journal issues published even recently. Of the more than one dozen anthologies of Asian Canadian writing published since 1990, I can find only one — *Another Way to Dance: Asian Canadian Poetry*, edited by Cyril Dabydeen — that is truly pan-Asian Canadian in its approach;³⁶ similarly, of the special issues of journals devoted to Asian Canadian writing or criticism, I am aware of only two — the 1990 issue of *Fireweed* and the 1998 special issue of *absinthe* on the *Prairie Asians Reading Tour* — that meet the criteria of Asian panethnicity.³⁷ Even a stronger focus on gender rather than ethnic origin in the selection process for anthologies does not guarantee a fully pan-Asian approach: the introduction to a more recent issue of *Fireweed* (1994) compiled by the Asian Women Writers Collective states that,

Partly motivated by the success South Asian women writers have had in organizing and publishing, we approached *Fireweed* regarding a special issue. . . . Due to the venues available for the South Asian arts community . . . the AWWC decided to limit this special issue . . . to East and Southeast Asian women writers. (4)

Nor is this division limited to literary production: *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered*, the brilliantly provocative exhibition of “experimental and documentary photo, film and video work produced by Asian Canadians” that toured Canada in 1990–91, includes, according to the introductory essay by Paul Wong that accompanied the exhibition, “artists and producers of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese and Filipino origins” (“Yellow Peril” 6). He “define[s] ‘Asian’ by the color of our skin,” and he does not include “Indo-Canadians” under this designation (6). Finally, the recent issue of *Canadian Literature* on Asian Canadian writing, which I mentioned earlier, deals exclusively with material by Japanese and Chinese Canadians.³⁸ It appears, then, that the term “Asian Canadian” has, as the Watada epigraph that I have borrowed from this issue of *Canadian Literature* implies, been chosen by East Asian Canadian activists and intellectuals as a countersignifier to the derogatory term “Oriental,” a term that has not been used much in Canada to describe South Asians. In (re)defining themselves, East Asian Canadians have concentrated on combating the negative stereotyping of dominant-culture orientalism but have tended to adopt the same ethnic-origin boundaries that the term “Oriental” implied, thus indicating the trace power of such terms.³⁹ I should also observe that the work of some writers and artists of Asian ethnic origin sometimes appears under neither of these classifications — “Saclit” and “Asian Canadian literature” — but under designations such as “Caribbean literature” or “African literature,” an indication that the complexities of diasporic identity defy neat taxonomic categories, often exceeding the category of “race.”

By emphasizing the largely self-imposed classificatory division between South Asian Canadian writing (Saclit) and East/Southeast Asian Canadian writing (known as “Asian Canadian literature”), I am certainly not suggesting that there is rivalry between the two groups, nor am I attempting to cast “blame” on any group; rather, I am suggesting that a stronger pan-Asian approach might give Asian Canadian literature as a whole a higher profile. I offer that

suggestion tentatively, however, because there remains the fundamental question of whether there is enough common ground between East/Southeast Asian Canadian and South Asian Canadian artists to make such coalition building anything more than a politically expedient exercise.⁴⁰ I would speculate that as the work of second-generation South Asian Canadian writers emerges it will contain a good deal in common with the writing of East Asian Canadians, although, in an increasingly globalized — some would say “post-national” — culture easily traversed by jets, telephone lines, and the Internet, it remains to be seen whether a pattern will develop in which second-and-subsequent-generation writers concentrate on issues in the “adopted” country. One encouraging example is the work of the Calgary-based *absinthe* literary collective, mentioned above, which is constituted mainly of younger artists and has aimed to be pan-Asian and inclusive. It is interesting — and perhaps causal — that this development has occurred in a nontraditional Asian Canadian setting — not Vancouver or Toronto or Montreal — where such coalition building may be easier and more necessary in the face of “the historical invisibility of Asian-Canadians on the Prairies, particularly in the arts” (*absinthe* website). In the case of the *absinthe* collective, this pan-Asian approach is more than simply strategic in that the creative work of writers such as Hiromi Goto, Ashok Mathur, and Larissa Lai evinces certain stylistic and thematic similarities, those particularly suited to the exploration of diasporic subjectivities. More critical attention needs to be paid to the work of such collectives.

We also need to consider a question that I have held in abeyance thus far, but one that is crucial. What and whose purposes are served by classifying literature according to racial and ethnic origins? Such a classification is by no means the only or “natural” one. A Chinese Canadian or South Asian Canadian writer who immigrated from the West Indies, for example, might have closer cultural affinities and might self-identify more with African Canadians of black West Indian descent than with Asian Canadians who have immigrated directly from Asia. Or an Asian Canadian artist might belong to other groups on the basis of gender or queer identity. Coalition building can operate in many different directions, then, for different purposes, and it might be to the political advantage of ethnic minority Canadian artists to build as broad coalitions as possible while not losing sight of differences within such groups. After all, the very foundations of Asian American literary, cultural,

and social studies are based on the broad coalitions of the “Third World” student strikes at San Francisco State and Berkeley that resulted in the founding of ethnic studies programs focused on African, Asian, Chicano, and Native American cultures.

Perhaps an even more fundamental question needs to be posed here, one that I gestured toward earlier. It is a question raised by George Elliott Clarke in his discussion of African Canadian identity (or lack of a group identity) compared to African American national identity. Lacking a unifying national metaphor equivalent to the U.S. concept of “manifest destiny,” is Canada itself so devoid of a national identity, the collective psyche so divided and splintered, the nation so geographically regionalized, that it is virtually impossible for a national ethnic minority identity to assemble itself in a Canadian context? Clarke’s mapping of the problems of building an African Canadian identity could be used to describe the situation of Asian Canadians as well:

We are divided severally; we are not just black and Canadian but also adherents to a region, speakers of an official language (either English or French), disciples of heterogeneous faiths, and related to a particular ethnicity (or national group), all of which shape our identities. African Canadians possess, then, not merely a double consciousness but also a poly consciousness. (17)

Moreover,

no truly national black organization exists in Canada . . . , nor is any fully bilingual. Furthermore, there has been — and there is — no “national figure to whom Negroes can turn,” no “effective national leadership,” and “no genuinely national [black] newspaper” (Winks 474, 475). Also, as Joyette acknowledges, “there is a conspicuous absence of a Black Canadian school of thought, or a critical perspective of the art of Black Canadians” (5). (26)

These different factors help to account for the general failure, up to this point, of the cultural production of the various Asian Canadian ethnic/national groups to unite under a single sign such as “Asian Canadian literature.” Another question must also be asked. Would a truly *panethnic* Asian Canadian literature, if such an identity could

be forged, gain enough leverage to be taken as a viable category on its own? Finally, is this classification, which assumes at some level the significance of identity politics, valid in a world now dominated, according to many, by postidentity politics?

The result of such classificatory divisions in Canada is that, despite the stress on official multiculturalism and perhaps because of the privileging of the “cultural mosaic” metaphor over the American “melting pot” metaphor as a national cultural ideal, we have tended to cluster ethnic minority authors at the periphery of CanLit, a mosaic/field whose traditional axis runs between English Canadian and Québécois literature in what amounts to a bicultural model of nationhood, at least as far as government institutions (e.g., the Canada Council for the Arts, SSHRCC) are concerned. In the institution of Canadian literary criticism, as Frank Davey points out, the model has more usually been a unicultural (English) one; sometimes a dominant-subordinate one, with English as the primary and French the secondary term in this binary; and only occasionally a truly comparative one in which English Canadian and French Canadian literatures are treated as equals. Increasingly, Québécois literature and criticism present themselves as part of a separate nation, so that the bicultural model becomes one of parallel traditions that have similarities but are separate. In none of these models is racialized minority literature given any prominence except as an example of English Canadian “tolerance” — itself a crucial part of our (anti)national myth. The importance of English Canadian literature to the project of “national unity” — and the complicity of English Canadian literary criticism in this endeavour — should not be underestimated. Such a cultural “imperative,” a term used by respected white critics, has, until the past decade, allowed little room for alterity or has permitted difference only as long as it gets folded back into an all-inclusive English Canadian literary nationalism.

Even a text such as the much-heralded *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions*, which signalled in 1990 that the bicultural model of Canadian literature was long outmoded and which sought to establish the claim that multiculturalism itself is the defining aspect of Canadian culture, could not help but wrap racialized “visible minority” authors in with “mainstream” white authors, as if such an admirably intentioned levelling of the playing field in the anthology could instantiate its own desire. To be sure, Linda Hutcheon’s introductory essay does alert us to the issue of racism in Canadian culture (Hutcheon and Richmond 7–9), but in the end

the “positive possibilities” of the Multiculturalism Act are seen potentially to outweigh the power of racism. But the claim that legislation will overcome cultural racism is premature, as the subsequent decade has shown, which is why most visible minority writers still insist on their visibility rather than run the risk of disappearing under the well-intentioned sign of “Canadian multicultural fictions.”

The equally recent disruption of the traditional cultural cartography with the introduction of postcolonial theory (which, as I observed above, has grown in Canada largely out of Commonwealth literary studies), while clearing a space for South Asian Canadian literature, has not served to build a “home” for East and Southeast Asian Canadian literature; in fact, it has left East and Southeast Asian Canadian literature vulnerable to “colonization” by Asian American literary studies. The question of whether this literature should be treated as part of a continental literary movement called Asian North American literature (a term now in frequent use) is fraught with its own implications of U.S. cultural imperialism, although to raise the spectre of U.S. “imperialism” is to play directly into the hands of those Canadian cultural nationalists who use the United States as the bogeyman whom we in Canada are called on to unite against by eliding internal “difference.”⁴¹ There can be no doubt that “colonization” of East Asian Canadian literature by Asian American literary studies has benefited a select few Canadian writers who have gained a larger reading audience and greater critical attention. Asian Canadian artists and critics have not been very adept, however, at transforming such “colonization” or “absorption” into more of a strategic alliance that would benefit both minority literatures. This might not prove to be an easy task given that the Asian American nationalist project of “claiming America” initially seemed to be blind to any Asian Canadian nationalist tendencies or even to broader Canadian nationalism. At the same time, though, Asian American literary studies has needed Asian Canadian literature for some time — has needed the Eaton sisters as the *first* Asian American writers, has needed Kogawa’s *Obasan* as the great internment novel. Asian Canadian artists and cultural critics should aim to take advantage of the leverage provided by that need — and by a greater emphasis in Asian American studies on Asian diasporas rather than on “claiming America” — both to build coalitions and to remind Asian American cultural critics to pay closer attention to national differences between the two traditions. At the same time, Asian Canadian artists should

employ the international attention garnered through such a strategic alliance to gain greater recognition from governments, cultural institutions, and reading audiences at home.

The other question that I raised, whether Asian Canadian literature should be treated as part of a more “global” phenomenon now referred to as postcolonial literature, despite the criticism that has been levelled against the totalizing tendencies of this term, is equally fraught with difficulties. Where does this minority ethnic literature “fit” in such a model? Clearly, neither in the camp of the white settler majority nor in the camp of the indigenous culture. Saclit, as I observed earlier, has affinities with, and at times even includes, the postcolonial literature of immigrant groups who have moved from (former) colonies (South Asia, Africa, the Caribbean) to Canada, but we must also recognize that China and Japan were not politically colonized by European powers, so immigrants from those countries (with the powerful exception of those from Hong Kong) do not arrive with the colonial legacy of the English language and of British educational, legal, and political systems. Immigrants from the Philippines have experienced yet a different set of colonial impositions, ones that take on greater significance in a U.S. context. The permutations of difference under the sign of “postcolonialism” are immense; at the same time, the threat of balkanization among racialized minority groups who have experienced similar discrimination and racism in Canada should be guarded against since it can play into the hands of the dominant culture. Perhaps the emerging field of “diaspora studies,” as I have suggested above, will provide a more auspicious sign under which Canadian artists and critics of East, Southeast, and South Asian origin or ancestry can discover commonalities, but only if this field can avoid the already identified dangers of “deterritorialization” or “denationalization.”⁴²

I cannot pretend to answer the host of questions that I have raised here, but I raise them in an attempt to push the discussion of “Asian Canadian literary studies,” with its attendant issues of cultural racism, the efficacy of multiculturalism, and the possibilities and limitations of classifications such as “postcolonial literature,” “diasporic literature,” and “Asian North American literature” into the limelight in the hope that others will take it further. I want to bring my own wide-ranging discussion to a close by returning to my initial comparison of Asian Canadian and Asian American literary and cultural studies in a further attempt to explore what we might learn from the American experience.

In Canada, we have no “originary” event to look back to with nostalgia as the “founding” moment of Asian Canadian studies, no 1968 university strike, no history of national panethnic activism like the Asian American Movement to claim a space for ethnicity designated as “Asian Canadian.” Of equal importance, we lack the legacy of those historical events in the United States — ethnic studies programs, which include Asian American studies programs.⁴³ In the wake of the California university strikes in 1968–69, “Asian American Studies programs were established on major university campuses located on the West Coast, in Hawaii, and in New York City” (Liu and Cheng 146; see also Espiritu 35). The delayed development of Asian Canadian literature as a coherent field of study is due in part, I believe, to the absence of ethnic studies programs in Canadian universities. With the exception of Native/indigenous studies programs, a tradition of ethnic studies programs has not been developed at Canadian universities — that is, programs devoted to the study of racialized minorities *within* Canada, as distinct from Caribbean studies or Asian studies, which treat societies at a geographical distance from Canada.

To say that there has not been a tradition of ethnic studies programs at Canadian universities is not, of course, to deny that there is a tradition of Canadian ethnic studies. In 1968, a Research Centre for Canadian Ethnic Studies was established at the University of Calgary, and the following year the centre began publishing *Canadian Ethnic Studies/Études ethniques du Canada*, a semiannual journal “envisaged to become an outlet for studies pertaining to Canadian Ethnic groups” (Malycky i). From the outset, the research centre was interested in literary and cultural subjects because the Departments of Modern Languages and of Germanic and Slavic Studies had been the driving force behind its establishment. As the European names of these founding departments indicate, however, the Canadian interpretation of “ethnic” was quite different from the American one. Whereas ethnic studies in the United States developed out of radical, confrontational protests against Eurocentric curricula in universities, with “ethnicity” being equated with “race” and nonwhite culture, in Canada ethnic studies was closely allied, as the first editors of *Canadian Ethnic Studies* observe, to the stated government aim of “the development of the multi-cultural nature of Canadian identity” (Malycky i) or the promotion of the “aspirations of all ethnic groups comprising the Canadian cultural mosaic” (Laychuk i). In the Canadian context, “ethnicity” was

equated with “multiculturalism” and with linguistic “pluralism” rather than with “race.” White European communities in Canada, with the exception of the founding British and French cultures, have been a major focus of Canadian ethnic studies. Furthermore, the close links of this academic endeavour to government policy were indicated with the publication of Senator Paul Yuzyk’s letter of praise, with the Senate of Canada letterhead, in the first issue of *Canadian Ethnic Studies*. Funding from the secretary of state soon followed. Whether this alignment with official Liberal policy blunted the journal’s ability to deal effectively with issues of “race” is a matter beyond the scope of this study, but it is worth noting that more attention has been devoted to European “ethnic” cultures in the pages of this journal than has been given to the cultures of racialized minorities.

A Canadian Ethnic Studies Association (CESA) was founded in 1973, and in 1975 *Canadian Ethnic Studies* became its “official organ” (Palmer iii); soon after, the studies in the journal came to be predominantly from social science rather than humanities disciplines, with a focus on public policy. CESA has hosted many successful biennial conferences. To be certain, there has continued to be an interest in the literary and cultural activities of ethnic minority groups, with *Canadian Ethnic Studies* producing a special issue in 1982 on *Ethnicity and Canadian Literature*, followed by one on *Ethnic Art and Architecture* in 1984, but such scholarship still tended to be dominated by scholars of eastern and southern European ethnic origin. The *Ethnicity and Canadian Literature* issue was edited by Robert Kroetsch, Tamara Palmer, and Beverly Rasporich, and the focus in the articles was on Jewish, Ukrainian, and Doukhobor literature in Canada, with racialized minorities being considered only as they are represented in the texts of white writers. The ideological thrust of such an approach to “ethnic” literature may have been admirable — to predict the “genuinely pluralistic shape for Canadian society” and to reinvent “the Canadian past to multicultural ends” (Kroetsch, Palmer, and Rasporich iii) — but it seems to have been perversely blind to the asymmetrical distribution of power based on racialized difference in Canadian society and to the silencing of the voices of racialized minority artists.

This approach has changed in the past decade, and especially in the past five years, as *Canadian Ethnic Studies* has published a number of special issues. *Racial and Ethnic Inequality* (1994) was

guest edited by Peter S. Li, who, aligning himself with “social constructionists [who] emphasize power differentials as essential in demarcating social groups as ‘racial’ or ‘ethnic’” (Introduction 1), set out “to consider racial and ethnic inequality in a broader theoretical context to include its many concrete forms and diverse manifestations in social lives and institutions of Canadian society” (2). *Ethnic Themes in Canadian Literature* (1996) was guest edited by Natalia Aponiuk, who stated clearly that “The articles . . . address the reasons for the continuing marginalization of ‘ethnic minority’ writers and their exclusion from the mainstream of Canadian literature” (4) and who took *Canadian Ethnic Studies* to task for not paying enough attention to ethnic literature. *Literary Theory and Ethnic Minority Writing*, guest edited by Joseph Pivato, also appeared in 1996. In neither of the two provocative issues dealing with ethnic minority literature, however, is “race” treated as a different category from white/European “ethnicity”; rather, texts by white ethnic minority writers and racialized minority writers are treated together in many of the essays.

This is also the approach taken by Winfried Siemerling in *Writing Ethnicity: Cross-Cultural Consciousness in Canadian and Québécois Literature*, a collection of essays published in 1996. In the introduction, Siemerling traces the archaeological interest in recuperating and uncovering the voices of Canadian ethnic writers through various projects — from “Watson Kirkconnell’s annual review, from 1937 to 1965, of Canadian literature in languages other than French or English in the *University of Toronto Quarterly*” to “John Miska’s massive *Ethnic and Native Canadian Literature: A Bibliography* [1990], which reports on the literatures of sixty-five different language groups in Canada” but, with the exception of texts by Native authors, not on writing in English or French by nonwhite writers born in Canada (5–7) — all of them linking “ethnicity” closely to “language.” Even into the 1990s, then, many scholars in the field of Canadian literary ethnic studies still consciously defended a position of disavowal or deferral in dealing with “race” as a cultural category: in a recent essay that demonstrates strong awareness of discrimination based on race, Enoch Padolsky nevertheless laments “the increasing racialization of the Canadian discourse” (22) and advises against following the “American” model of “race” studies in favour of a more traditional Canadian approach that emphasizes the “‘pluralist’ alternative [that] is still a possibility” in Canadian ethnic studies (35). That this remains the dominant approach in

Canadian ethnic studies goes a long way toward explaining why academic programs in ethnic studies similar to those in the United States did not materialize at Canadian universities.⁴⁴ State multiculturalism remains attractive to those in the academy and has helped to contain racial protest there.

U.S. ethnic studies programs, in contrast, served not only the racialized minority students registered in them but also their larger communities by hosting conferences and producing anthologies of material on and by racialized minorities, including Asian Americans (e.g., *Roots* and *Counterpoint* at UCLA), as well as journals that were accessible not simply to academics but also to community activists (e.g., *Gidra*, *East Wind*, *Getting Together*). These anthologies and journals were wide-ranging, dealing with social-scientific, community, health, cultural, and political issues. They provided an early outlet for young Asian American writers and scholars. In addition, Asian American studies programs, because they were set up in opposition to traditional academic programs, which were Eurocentric and bourgeois, consciously set out to forge and/or maintain strong links with local Asian American communities. Grassroots activists in local communities and college students and faculty with their more “national” perspective fed each other in a reciprocal relationship that worked well to promote counter-hegemonic theory and praxis, at least initially (Liu and Cheng 147–54): many of the students chose to work in local activist programs despite their own middle-class backgrounds. The existence of these programs led to the establishment of ethnic studies archives at universities such as Berkeley and UCLA, an invaluable resource for later research. It also paved the way for the founding of important national bodies such as the Association for Asian American Studies, whose annual conference provides a forum for regular exchanges of ideas that contribute in a major way to the development of the field of study. The conference gives a national profile to the field and thus helps to encourage students, mostly Asian American but from other ethnic groups as well, to learn about Asian America and to preserve its past as well as help chart its future. Further benefits from campus activism are also evident; as Yen Le Espiritu points out, “although the pan-Asian concept was first coined by young Asian American activists on college campuses, it was subsequently institutionalized by the larger society” in the form of census classification, social service funding, and affirmative action programs (18).⁴⁵

Ethnic studies programs of this type in Canada could have served a useful function in drawing together the fairly considerable body of research dealing with Asian Canadians in the post-1960s period. For example, Asian Canadian symposia were held several times in the late 1970s and in the 1980s.⁴⁶ To be sure, this research focused not on Asian Canadian cultural production⁴⁷ but on the fields of history and sociology; however, the pattern of development in the United States has shown that, while ethnic studies programs began with a strong emphasis on social science and history, they created a supportive interdisciplinary environment, as well as the academic infrastructure, in which the study of cultural production developed and moved ahead rapidly. Canadian ethnic studies programs could also have provided a forum for the significant work of Asian Canadian writer/artist activists — work that, with a few notable exceptions, has been carried on almost entirely outside the academy — to be heard within universities. Despite the recent criticism of ethnic studies programs in the United States for being too tied to essentializing identity politics, I would contend that the absence of ethnic studies programs in Canada — along with the claim that we don't need such programs because an official multiculturalism has served to produce a more tolerant and equitable society that has largely escaped the black-white racial divide of the United States — has been one of the major stumbling blocks delaying the study of Asian Canadian and other ethnic minority literatures.

Far from allowing us in Canada to escape the pitfalls of identity politics, the absence of Asian Canadian studies programs has denied Asian Canadian literary studies a necessary stage of its development: the stage of structured interdisciplinarity that challenges conventional disciplinary boundaries and forces the academy to rethink the ways in which it organizes knowledge and uses its knowledge base to tackle social problems and injustices. Programs such as women's studies, black studies, and ethnic studies have been instrumental in bringing about such changes to methods of epistemology by insisting that these forms of knowledge be made to acknowledge, incorporate, and serve poor, working-class, underprivileged sectors of society through maintaining connections to their respective communities. This approach provides a base of historical experience on which later to build theoretical structures and offer practical solutions. Whether Asian American literary studies still adheres to that original mandate or not is debatable (see Banks and Kelly), but I would stress that Asian American literary studies still has that history

of antihegemonic activity to reflect back on and draw from every time it reconsiders its mission.⁴⁸ In Canadian universities, issues of gender were taken up in this way through links between interdisciplinary women's studies programs and the wider community of feminist activists, but, with the exception of Native studies, issues of race in the area of culture have not received the same kind of interdisciplinary attention until recently.⁴⁹ Now the study of Asian Canadian literature has begun in Canadian English departments, which have been notoriously conservative and resistant to change. There is a legitimate fear that, without the strong activist base of Asian American literary studies within universities, Asian Canadian literary studies will move rapidly to abstruse theorizing that does not necessarily serve the communities that this literature and criticism should be serving and may even alienate those communities. One of the significant questions that we as academics studying Asian Canadian literature should be asking is whether, and what kinds of, literary/cultural theories serve Asian Canadian communities.

Does the lack of a founding moment cripple the effectiveness of the term "Asian Canadian," or does it liberate Canadian artists into wide-open self-fashioning? Does this term have a strong enough base in social, political, and cultural activism to make it worth using at all? Given that several Asian American critics have claimed that their term is "already collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions" (Lim 162), is there any point in trying to make the term work for the heterogeneous groups of Canadians of various Asian origins and ancestries? Some critics in the United States are trying, as Kent Ono puts it, to *re-sign* the term (give it new signification) rather than resign it (give it up). Is it possible for the term "Asian Canadian" to be re-signed so that it becomes truly pan-Asian and panethnic? Other U.S. critics, such as Shirley Hune and Lisa Lowe, seek to revive "Asian American" by insisting that those operating under this sign not lose sight of its activist origins in the resistance to racism during the 1960s. As Hune notes, "New paradigms are not necessarily transformative. Furthermore, current practices that disconnect Asian American Studies from the community and place the academy at its center shift the paradigm of Asian American Studies from social transformation to the production of a new academic elite" (37). Lowe calls for a reclaiming of the term through a refocusing on interventionist projects that deal with "the crises of our contemporary moment of global restructuring, with new post-1965 immigrant groups who come from Asian sites where

the US has been a colonial or neocolonial power, and interracial conflicts exacerbated by new forms of capitalist exploitation” (50). Canada’s pattern of new post-1967 immigration from Asia is similar, but our political interventions in Asian conflicts are much less pronounced. Our questions and issues around Canadian and Asian global capital and labour will no doubt be somewhat different, perhaps even significantly different, but we need to ask and examine them.

The crucial question remains “Whom does the term Asian Canadian literature serve?” If the answer is that it serves publishers seeking a new “exotic property” to sell to a particular niche of the market in the voyeuristic display of ethnographic “knowledge,” fetishizing “difference” into yet another commodity for capitalist consumption, then it is dangerous in its perpetuation of traditional power relations. If the answer is that it serves academics — including me — seeking to advance their careers, then its use is at best irrelevant and at worst mercenary. The term has validity only if it can be made to work for the benefit of Asian Canadians by performing as a sign under which forces fighting racism, classism, sexism, and colonialism can find some form of solidarity for the purposes of resistance to the dominant hegemony.⁵⁰ At the same time, it must not function as a sign that obliterates differences among Asian Canadians and between them and other ethnic groups. There is always the danger that solidarity will turn into a totalizing attempt at unity or sameness, which really paves the way for the emergence of certain groups into positions of power. Strategic alliances forged for resistance must not become their own hegemony. Now that the term, and the resultant “field,” “Asian Canadian literature” has clearly been born, what value accrues to it remains to be seen in the context of how we use or abuse it, both in and out of the academy. As we learn to use it critically, I would urge us to recall some of the issues that Roy Miki brought to our attention in “Asiancy,” issues still vital today: that “The act of ‘deterritorialization’ through writing is perhaps a viable method for resisting assimilation, for exploring variations in form that undermine aesthetic norms, for challenging homogenizing political systems, and for articulating subjectivities that emerge from beleaguered communities — even at the risk of incomprehensibility, unreadability, indifference, or outright rejection” (145); that the act of reading must be transformed “from passive consumption to critical interchange” (146); that the cultural theories we develop “to understand the workings of

'racialization' in the production of texts must be an on-going negotiation process, in which the terminology and frames applied are open-ended and flexible" (148); and that "What is important for a culture to thrive is a renewed belief in the viability of agency" (148). It is such aims that the term must help to realize if it is to be truly useful.

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NOTES

¹ One of the pieces was a memoir by George Woodcock about his year spent in Cambodia. To be fair, *Canadian Literature* recently published another issue devoted to Asian Canadian writing (winter 1999), from which the epigraph for this article, by Terry Watada, is taken and to which I refer below.

² As a point of comparison, the MLA Discussion Group on Asian American Literature was formed more than a decade earlier, in 1985, as the September issue of *PMLA* indicates. The Discussion Group recently became the Division on Asian American Literature.

³ The anthologies include *Green Snow: Anthology of Canadian Poets of Asian Origin*, edited by Stephen Gill; *Inalienable Rice: A Chinese and Japanese Canadian Anthology*, by the Powell Street Review and the Chinese Canadian Writers Workshop; *Bayang Magiliw: An Anthology of Asian Canadians and Asians in Canada*, edited by Lakshmi Gill; *Paper Doors: An Anthology of Japanese-Canadian Poetry*, edited by Gerry Shikatani and David Aylward; and over a dozen others published more recently, most since 1990.

⁴ Anthony Chan, "Born Again Asians: The Making of a New Literature" (1984); Jim Wong-Chu, "Ten Years of Asian Canadian Literary Arts in Vancouver" (1984); Suwanda Sugunasiri, "The Literature of Canadians of South Asian Origins: An Overview" (1985); M.G. Vassanji, introduction to *A Meeting of Streams: South Asian Canadian Literature* (1985).

⁵ Winifred and Edith Eaton are now usually claimed as pioneers of Asian American literature by American critics; see Doyle.

⁶ I should note here that special issues of Canadian journals of creative writing have also focused on Asian Canadian writing, some quite early: for example, in 1981 *West Coast Review* published a special issue entitled *The Asian-Canadian and the Arts*; in 1990, the feminist periodical *Fireweed* published *Asian Canadian Women*, which its editorial collective described as “the ‘first’ Asian Canadian women’s anthology” (6) and which it followed with another special issue in 1994, this one entitled *Rice Papers: Writings and Artwork by East and Southeast Asian Women in Canada*. This second issue was the work of the Asian Women Writers Collective, formed in Toronto in the fall of 1993. Creative-writing journals such as *Fiddlehead* and the *Antigonish Review* have also published work by Asian Canadian writers since the late 1960s.

⁷ Beauregard provides a two-paragraph summary of the development of the field (53–54) before launching into useful theoretical speculations and questions about the meaning of this designation; the *Canadian Literature* issue contains an anecdotal history of the early stages of Asian Canadian literature in the 1970s by Watada.

⁸ Yen Le Espiritu points out that panethnicity is inherently political in nature “not only because it serves as a basis for interest group mobilization but also because it is linked with the expansion of the role of the polity” (14–15).

⁹ There were 32,127 “Negroes” in Canada, according to the 1961 census, and 34,445 in 1971; as Winks points out, “white Canadians had little reason to think of Negroes in terms of ‘black power,’ for they were neither numerous nor strong” (484).

¹⁰ The following statement by Rockwell (Rocky) Chin is typical of many: “If Vietnam made me aware of America’s dark side as a world power, the civil rights and Black Power movements (and the Asian American movement that I was to become active in) laid bare the contradictions in American society — between rich and poor, black and white, men and women — the haves and the have-nots. For me, the struggle of black Americans for justice, equality and power was inspiring and exemplary. Our Asian American movement owes much to the leadership and contributions of the Black Power movement” (117). Numerous other statements outlining this indebtedness are given in the 1989 issue of *Amerasia Journal*.

¹¹ Two Black Panthers — John Huggins and Alprentice Carter — were shot to death at UCLA in January 1969 while involved in the struggle for the formation of ethnic studies (Murase 209).

¹² See also Alex Hing: “The SF Red Guard was a revolutionary organization inspired by the Black Panther Party. . . . The main focus of our activities was to change the substandard conditions in Chinatown, which we knew

were linked to the overall economic and political system in the United States" (138).

¹³ Glenn Omatsu observes that "Those who took part in the mass struggles of the 1960s and early 1970s will know that the birth of the Asian American movement coincided not with the initial campaign for civil rights but with the later demand for black liberation; that the leading influence was not Martin Luther King, Jr., but Malcolm X" ("Four Prisons" xvi).

¹⁴ The figure of two percent here is for the 1990s. Clarke's essay deals extensively with the complex relationship between African Americans (and African American studies) and African Canadian identity.

¹⁵ Robert Kroetsch argues that "Canadians cannot agree on what their meta-narrative is. I am also suggesting that, in some perverse way, this falling-apart of our story is what holds our story together. . . . Canada is supremely a country of margins" ("Disunity" 21-22). This position has been argued further by critics such as Linda Hutcheon (see *Canadian Postmodern*).

¹⁶ "Multiculturalism" policies were put in place in 1971 and legislated on 21 July 1988; see Hutcheon and Richmond 369-74 for a copy of the English version of the act. Clarke speculates that "it is possible that the Sir George Williams incident served, along with the FLQ crisis of October 1970, to spark the federal government to promulgate in October 1971 an affirmative policy of official multiculturalism" (46n14). The Official Languages Act of 1969 "established the legal right of citizens to federal services in either English or French" (Granatstein 382).

¹⁷ Québécois nationalists, in turn, distrust official multiculturalism as a federal strategy to direct attention and funding to a host of minority cultures and thus away from the "distinct status" of Quebec.

¹⁸ For two critical but very different views of multiculturalism by Asian Canadians, see Bissoondath; and Itwaru and Ksonzek; the latter ironically thank the secretary of state (multiculturalism) for assistance.

¹⁹ Roy Miki takes a more positive view of ethnic minority activism in the past twenty years, claiming that the limitations of "multiculturalism" have been recognized: "By the time of the Japanese Canadian redress settlement on September 22, 1988, the cultural spaces of Canada had radically transformed. In recent years, the new works and theories emerging from formerly excluded sites, from natives, from writers of colour, including Asian Canadians, have opened a network of articulations and theoretical concerns that not only undermine assimilationist pressures but also allow for provisional spaces where writers of colour can navigate diversity within the specificity of histories, languages, and subjectivities" (*Broken Entries* 107). For me, this position, while recognizing changes that have been implemented by cultural funding agencies such as the Canada Council

for the Arts, does not take adequate account of the right-wing agendas and discourses that now dominate many provincial governments and that have led to a backlash against racialized minorities (e.g., the dismantling of employment equity legislation in Ontario). For a cogent academic assessment of “multiculturalism” in Canada, see Peter S. Li, who observes that “The symbolic recognition of cultural diversity explains why the federal policy only provided moderate financial assistance to ethnic groups for their pursuit of cultural expression, and why no political demand was placed on key cultural, educational, and political institutions to make fundamental changes to incorporate multiculturalism” (152).

²⁰ In the early days, Vancouver activists seem to have had fairly strong connections to West Coast Asian American activists. In 1972, for example, *Bridge*, a leading Asian American journal, published an article based on a study by Michael Chao, a graduate student at the University of Oregon, of the conditions in Vancouver’s Chinatown in 1970–71. Chao’s Marxist analysis lays waste the notion of Chinese Canadians as a successful model minority, showing instead the high rates of poverty and unemployment (“75 percent of the single persons and 55 percent of the couples fall below the poverty line” [27]) and framing such exploitation and racism within the context of capitalist oppression. The other important centre of Asian Canadian political and cultural activity was Toronto. Some Asian American activists refer to attending an Indochinese Women’s Conference held in Toronto from 9 to 12 April 1971 that included “representatives from Women’s Strike for Peace, Voice of Women, two hundred Third World [i.e., North American women of colour] delegates, and five delegates from Indochina” (Chen 13). The war in Indochina was discussed in an attempt to build an antiwar coalition, and white feminists were criticized for their racist and bourgeois attitudes. The accounts of the conference that I can find, however, are by American delegates (Wilma Chen of Boston; the anonymous author of “Sisters Meet across 10,000 Miles”; Miya Iwataki; and Susie Ling, who identifies the location of the conference as Vancouver), who treat the Canadian city simply as a conference location, although the conference was probably held in Toronto because it was easier for the Indochinese delegates to attend and for criticism of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia to be expressed.

²¹ For a more anecdotal and detailed account of Asian Canadian artistic and political activism in 1970s Vancouver and Toronto, see Watada. He speculates that “Perhaps the culmination of all this activity was the 1972 Asian Canadian Experience Conference. It was the first gathering of second-, third- and even some fourth-generation Japanese and Chinese Canadians from Toronto . . . and Vancouver.” Held in downtown Toronto, it included a “photo exhibit developed by the Vancouver Wakayama Group[,] . . . symposia conducted by delegates on topics relevant to the two

communities, . . . [and] two 'Arts Nights' dedicated to readings by poets and performances by songwriters" (86).

²² Wong-Chu is quoted by Charlie Cho as saying that "There are a lot of books that are published that, if they had to go through the community to get approval, would not have" (22).

²³ Defined as "Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese and Filipino Canadians" by Cho (22).

²⁴ The *Powell Street Review*, "the first Canadian-*sansei* publication," was published in Toronto earlier in the 1970s, "but only one issue was ever produced" (Watada 84, 85).

²⁵ According to the 1991 census, the population of South Asian and East/Southeast Asian origins in Vancouver was just under 300,000 and in Toronto just over 500,000, although the percentage of the total population was larger in Vancouver.

²⁶ Sugunasiri, writing about South Asian Canadian literature up to 1983, states that "The British Columbia scene proved a hive of literary activity in Punjabi, reflecting the well-established and 'nativized' community, and a unity of purpose if not a unity of ideology. Ontario provided a second base of Punjabi activity, but to a relatively lesser degree. Literary activity in English was spread across the country, although with a preponderance of writers in Ontario. Though nowhere close to the degree in Punjabi and English, a surprising discovery was an emerging literary consciousness and activity in Gujarati, primarily in Montreal, and to a lesser extent in Toronto" ("Literature" 3-4). I make no attempt in this study to deal with works written in languages other than English by Asian Canadians, a position that clearly does a disservice to the thriving literature — much of it poetry — written in Asian languages. My inability to deal with this material reflects the dominant approach in academia to Asian Canadian literature.

²⁷ In Vancouver, presses such as Douglas and McIntyre and Press Gang have published East Asian Canadian writing.

²⁸ Harold Sonny Ladoo, *No Pain Like This Body* (1972) and *Yesterdays* (1974); Saros Cowasjee, *Goodbye to Elsa* (1974); Bharati Mukherjee, *Tiger's Daughter* (1971) and *Wife* (1975); Stephen Gill, *Why* (1976), *Immigrant* (1978), and *The Loyalist City* (1979); Michael Ondaatje, *Coming through Slaughter* (1976); Reshard Gool, *Price* (1976) and *The Nemesis Casket* (1979).

²⁹ For a revealing discussion of this issue early in the development of an Asian Canadian literature, see the essay by the Wakayama Group as well as Ron Tanaka's article "The *Sansei* Artist and Community Culture," published in the lone issue of the *Powell Street Review*, 1972.

³⁰ Vassanji: "the South Asian presence in Canada and the West . . . is a twentieth-century phenomenon inextricably linked to the colonial experience. . . . It is no accident that people from former British colonies seek

refuge in other parts of the Empire and its affiliations" (1). For a recent and much more conflicted and antagonistic view of the "postcolonial" tag, see Mukherjee.

³¹ See Vassanji's essay "The Postcolonial Writer: Myth Maker and Folk Historian" for a summary of the subject matter of early South Asian Canadian literature. Vassanji himself is an interesting case in point: of his first three books of fiction, two — *The Gummy Sack* (1989) and *The Book of Secrets* (1994) — are set in east Africa and the third — *No New Land* (1991) — in Canada, but the two dealing with Indian communities in east Africa have received the most praise and attention.

³² A focus on the immigrant's country of origin may even constitute its own form of protest, as when nonstandard English is used, but it has taken a long time for mainstream Canadian publishers to accept these demotic forms as more than an exotic curiosity.

³³ Writing in 1972, the Wakayama Group stated that "The Asian [Canadian] is allowed to be creative within the conventional framework of values established by white society or he can imitate the forms of some foreign, e.g. Japanese, society, but what he cannot do is challenge the values of white society as a whole" (18).

³⁴ See Kibria for a brief discussion of some of the issues.

³⁵ See Verduyn on the work of Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Arun Mukherjee, and Himani Bannerji.

³⁶ Twelve writers of South Asian ethnic origin, five of East Asian ethnic origin.

³⁷ The *Fireweed* issue has contributions from thirteen South Asian Canadian writers and twenty East and Southeast Asian Canadian writers.

³⁸ There are articles on and/or interviews with Wayson Choy, Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka, Fred Wah, Roy Kiyooka, Sally Ito, Hiromi Goto, and SKY Lee. Beauregard's article, also published in 1999, also takes "Asian Canadian" to mean East Asian Canadian.

³⁹ I should observe again that Asian American literature did not include in its initial stages South Asian writers, but there was a mass of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino American literature sufficient to gain and sustain critical attention on its own, and that attention has now been directed to the literatures of smaller Asian-origin groups and nationalities, such as Hmong and Vietnamese, as well as South Asians. For a fairly comprehensive survey of the current field of Asian American literature, taken in the large sense of Asian North American literature, see the essays collected in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, edited by King-Kok Cheung.

⁴⁰ Richard Fung observes that "Asian' consciousness only begins to eclipse national consciousness in the context of white racism, and particularly as experienced here in the diaspora. It is premised on a shared sense

of visibility, and less on any common cultural, aesthetic, or religious roots. . . . [I]t is worth remembering that Asia is not in fact a natural entity but exists only in relation to notions of Europe and Africa developed in the West" ("Seeing Yellow" 162-63).

⁴¹ See Miki's essay "Sliding the Scale of Elision" in *Broken Entries* for an illuminating discussion of this issue.

⁴² On the advantages of a diasporic approach and the dangers of denationalization in relation to Asian American studies, see Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered." Much of her argument would be applicable to an Asian Canadian context.

⁴³ Rather than bemoan a Canadian "lack" in opposition to an implied American "plenitude," it may be more accurate to observe that what we might take as the founding moment of Canadian ethnic studies, the 1971 policy of "multiculturalism within a bilingual framework," already carried within it a slippage from "race" to "ethnicity" to "language" that unfounded critical race studies in Canada. Even earlier, in 1965, the *Preliminary Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism* identified the English and the French as "the two founding races" of Canada, thus not only ignoring and insulting Aboriginal peoples in Canada but also reducing "race" to language.

⁴⁴ York University has recently established a centre for the study of black culture in Canada, but as yet there is no program, and Simon Fraser University has recently begun an Asia-Canada program in the Department of Humanities.

⁴⁵ See also Murase on the spread of Asian American studies as a national phenomenon. For a summary of the development of ethnic studies more generally, see Gutierrez.

⁴⁶ Gordon Hirabayashi and K. Victor Ujimoto edited several volumes of proceedings of the Asian Canadian symposia.

⁴⁷ See Wickberg, appendix, for a list of studies on Asian Canadians.

⁴⁸ The most recent AAAS conference, held in May 2000, had as its topic "Community Politics in the Next Century."

⁴⁹ This recent shift gained prominence with the Appropriate Voice Conference organized by the Racial Minority Writers' Committee of the Writers' Union of Canada in 1992 and the subsequent Writing thru Race Conference organized by the Writers' Union in 1994. They were followed by academic conferences such as that on Race, Gender, and the Construction of Canada, which was held at the University of British Columbia in 1995 and resulted in the publication of *Painting the Maple*.

⁵⁰ The question of what place academics have in this fight is considered by Elaine Kim, who turns to Fung (without identifying him as Asian Canadian) for an answer: "Richard Fung warned against what he called 'a retreat into representation,' a burial of ourselves in textual analyses and

debates over representation, which would be enticingly safe, clean, and even glamorous, unlike the class-based struggles over immigration politics and police violence in our grass-roots communities. I'm sure he did not mean that we should drop our books, quit school, and rush headlong into the simple-mindedly idealized 'community' side of a binary; I think he was saying that when we do textual work, we must do it in concert with, not instead of, contextual work" (3). It is revealing that Fung's work has received more attention in the United States than it has in Canada.

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