

**TRANSNATIONAL POETICS:  
ASIAN CANADIAN WOMEN'S FICTION OF THE 1990S**

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**Trans.Through.Beyond**  
(A Review Essay)

This is a book about the intersection of gender and race in Canadian writing of the 1990s and since. It is indebted to the work of critics like Roy Miki (2001), Larissa Lai (2004), Lily Cho (2007), Guy Beauregard (2008), and Christl Verduyn and Eleanor Ty (2008), all of whom have identified, from an array of different positions, the dangers of the normalization and/or appropriation of difference by the literary and cultural institutions and market forces. *Transnational Poetics* stems from those critical positions and, by offering a material reading of recent Asian Canadian women's texts, contributes its own voice to the debates about the need to maintain resistance discourses that problematize the institutionalization of racial and gender difference.

The book's starting point is the failure of multiculturalism's policies to dismantle normative notions of Canadianness, and the need to rethink and rearticulate forms of cultural difference that do not comply with multiculturalism's sanctioned spaces for the representation of otherness, but rather remain resistant to them, maintaining thus their critical power (see Miki 2008). The authors single out the "Writing Thru Race" Conference, held in Vancouver in 1994 in the midst of great controversy over its exclusionary mandate (the explicit barring of white writers from the Conference), as a turning point in which the antiracist cultural production in

Canada began to focus on the identification of racialization processes as well as the discursive strategies that bring them about. The choice of this moment underlies one of the book's most significant merits, since as Robinder Kaur Sehdev has argued, "the Writing Thru Race Conference was a formative moment in Canadian cultural politics". The event as well as the controversy surrounding it, Sehdev continues,

brought the issues of political and cultural legitimacy into sharp focus and in so doing, galvanized the discourses of anti-racism and reverse racism in cultural politics. Understood as a key cultural moment where competing public spheres intersected and collided, the discourses surrounding Writing Thru Race can provide insight into the significance of cultural discourses of anti-racism as they challenge dominant or national discourses of multiculturalism. (Sehdev iii)

The impact of Writing Thru Race also coincided with the rise of a new generation of racialized women writers who, without abandoning the struggle for racial and gender equality, seemed less concerned with what Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn have called the "auto-ethnographic" tradition, and more interested in working with experimental forms, themes, genres and structures (see also Lai).

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The authors then propose a type of analysis against the multicultural grain, as it were, looking at the writing of Asian Canadian women of the last two decades, with a focus on those disruptive moments in which the (multicultural) nation shows its fissures. Working through the intersection of race and gender, and an historically informed attention to the intergenerational links or points of departures, the book provides a study of the significant contributions of a younger generation of women writers to the more recent discourses about difference in Canada, given that, according to the authors: "The appropriation of the discourses on race and gender by the dominant classes —the cooption of the "politically correct" ideologies— is seen by many feminist racialized writers as a threatening move that requires new strategies" (xi). These new strategies would include the rejection of certain "over-ethnicized" modes in favor of more experimental forms of fiction or the introduction of "lesbian politics and poetics" (xii). Additionally, the analysis also occasionally offers (especially in the first chapter) a critical view of the global literary marketplace, for reading Canadian literature from Spain, the authors argue, adds a whole new and complex set of issues to the equation: "The weight of availability", for instance, "is not a light one", they argue. "At a moment when publishing and distribution are in the hands of a few big corporations, the decisions taken on which books will be printed, in which number, and for how long, are crucial for a Canadian book to cross the Atlantic" (xii-xiii).

*Transnational Poetics* is divided into three sections or large chapters, each of them dedicated to the study of the fiction of "one ethnic constituency within Asian

Canada” (xiii). This division would seem somehow at odds with the book’s own underlying objective of dismantling the hegemonic discourses about ethnicity in Canada. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the intergenerational relationships between women writers and their texts could justify the choice of the book’s structure, for the texts are invariably discussed in connection with other texts that have preceded them within a community of writers that share a common history and ancestry in Canada: e.g. the connections between Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981) and Kerri Sakamoto’s *The Electrical Field* (1998), or the differences between SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990) and what could be called a “second wave” of Chinese Canadian writers, like Larissa Lai or Lydia Kwa.

The first chapter, “Indo-Canadian Women’s Fiction in English: Feminist Anti-Racist Politics and Poetics that Resist the Indo-Chic”, opens with a succinct history of South Asian Canadian writing in the larger international context with the boom of Indian literature in English, and puts the relatively recent success of these texts down to recurrent marketing strategies that simultaneously depoliticize and exoticize them: “The literary value of these novels is thus paradoxically put into question by the very system that promotes them”, the authors write. “By foregrounding the victim/object (the exotic woman in a sari), the reader’s attention is directed away from the political issues raised by these narratives” (9). This chapter then proceeds to identify and unveil those political issues discussed in texts by writers such as Anita Rau Badami, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Yasmin Ladha, Rachna Mara and Shani Mootoo, including sexual and cultural purity, (neo) colonial relations, and racism and gender violence (namely, war rape and incestuous rape). The survey-like tone of this first chapter occludes close reading of any of the selected texts and the reader may feel bewildered by the implications of the extremely hefty issues the authors bring to our attention. Yet the analysis succeeds in highlighting the intensely political meaning of many Indian Canadian texts, reading them against and outside the powerful exoticizing packages associated with multiculturalism, as effective critiques of racist and sexist practices both in India and in Canada.

Under the title “Racialized Bodies: Chinese Canadian Women’s Fiction”, the second chapter provides a closer reading of texts by Evelyn Lau, Larissa Lai and Lydia Kwa in an attempt to identify the shifting paradigms of the intersection between race and gender and how these changes are thematized through the body. After an informative summary of Chinese Canadian literature and its institutional contexts since the publication of SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café*, the authors note the thematic and formal departures of a younger generation of writers (to which Lau, Lai and Kwai belong) from the historical and autobiographical fictional forms of their predecessors. The analysis in this part provides some illuminating

readings of six excellent texts, like the discussion of the prostitute's body in Lau's *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid*, the cyborg body in Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*, or the diseased body in Kwa's *This Place Called Absence*. However, despite a declared emphasis on form and genre experimentation, an emphasis supported by important critical work that argues for the need "to set up interpretative strategies that move beyond the thematization of cultural difference" (Gunew 257), the approach here seems largely thematic. Moreover, the discussion of the representation of female bonds, sexual orientation or racialized identities seems most pertinent in Lai's and Kwa's texts and less so in the case of Lau's, which appear somehow forced, her writing resisting this type of analysis from within. The reader wonders whether the analysis of the power of market forces undertaken in the previous section would have been a more appropriate critical framework for Lau's work (see Wong). This chapter nonetheless achieves the goal of showing how once they have abandoned the structure of the immigrant narrative (as well as the auto-ethnographic form associated with it), these writers have very little in common, their texts demanding altogether new approaches and reading strategies.

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First acknowledging and then moving beyond the historiographic practice that has characterized Japanese Canadian novels, the last chapter, "Beyond Redress: Japanese Canadian Women's Fiction", focuses on the work of Hiromi Goto, Kerri Sakamoto, Sally Ito and Tamai Kobayashi to show the diversification of strategies employed by a new generation of Japanese Canadian women writers "[i]n the shadow of [Kogawa's] *Obasan*", but also beyond the experience of internment. Although still firmly on feminist grounds, I would suggest that the gender focus in this chapter is less explicit and more transversal than in the previous two, the analysis offering critical insights into the representation of historical as well as cultural violence through intricate codes of language, silence and food in the texts. This chapter is also the most theoretically informed of the three, giving the discussion remarkable weight and coherence, as, for instance, in the application of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection to the emasculated bodies of Japanese Canadian characters in Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*. Most notable in this sense is the reading made of some key stories in Goto's collection *Hopeful Monsters* from Kristevan perspectives on (her own) motherhood as related in "Stabat Mater".

*Transnational Poetics* is an important contribution to the articulation of a critical language on race and gender that interrogates and resists national and global modes of appropriation and homogenization (see Ty). As can be inferred from my comments above, it also is an uneven work, both methodologically and discursively, a condition that often results from the difficulties of collective authorship. The book's objective of reading Asian Canadian literature by women as acts of resistance against and outside the ideology of multiculturalism is sometimes thwarted by a

critical discourse that tends to reproduce the very categories, assumptions and language of the identity politics it seeks to undermine. However, in exposing the labyrinthine ways of what Judith Butler has defined as “the domain of the sayable” (Butler 133), this discursive contradiction becomes a formative moment in the book’s (and our own) search for alternative critical spaces. *Transnational Poetics* is also a valuable work in other ways. Its value resides in the thematic scope of the analysis as well as in its attention to the social, political, institutional and historical specificities over the range of the texts discussed. In its emphasis on the need to rethink the location of racialized and gendered constructions of Canada, this book takes a positive step towards that space of constant transitioning which Smaro Kamboureli and Roy Miki devised in their groundbreaking collection of essays *Trans.Can.Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature*, and which the title of this review seeks to evoke.

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