

Slanting I, Imagining We: Asian Canadian Literary Production in the 1980s and 1990s

Larissa Lai

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Larissa Lai's *Slanting I, Imagining We* is a book that is both a "personal project" (ix) and a community mapping. Lai is well-known for her creative work, for the novels *When Fox Is a Thousand* and *Salt Fish Girl*, and for the books of poetry *Automaton Biographies* and *sybil unrest* (with Rita Wong) in particular. Lai's creative practice has marked her as a key writer working in Canada today, one whose work attracts a great deal of attention from critics concerned with the intersections of race / racialization, gender / sexuality, embodiment, and cyborg / posthuman futures. The arrival of her first critical monograph is certain to be read by critics in these contexts in order to continue to understand the possibilities for, in particular, anti-racist literary work in contemporary Canada and beyond. *Slanting I, Imagining We* is a book that emerges directly from Lai's personal and political engagements in Asian Canadian literary and artistic scenes from 1980s and 1990s onward. It is, as she notes, her own personal and critical mapping of the emergence of a public voice for Asian Canadian writers. It is a book that strives for inclusivity, yet it is also one that is quick to own the positionality of its author; in other words, Lai is clearly situating herself as but one potential writer of a community's literary history similar to that which she composes here: others might do so in turn, each producing their own, variously storied historiographies of a particular moment in time.

Lai's book, then, is necessarily idiosyncratic. It begins by framing the core of her arguments, particularly by opening with the announcement that it is her "contention that the formation of Asian Canadian literature as it was conceived in the 1980s and 1990s emerges as a rupture" (1). The particular historical period that is the focus of *Slanting I, Imagining We* provides the context for this rupture; Lai cites poststructuralism, Multiculturalism (as a legislated norm in Canada), and the Japanese Canadian redress movement and settlement as indices of this rupture. That is, for Lai, the emergence of something that we can critically appraise as Asian Canadian literature is something that emerged in a disruptive manner at a particular moment and for specific reasons. For Lai, this concept of rupture is one that is also profoundly coalitional: as she looks to the broader anti-oppression movement, she notes that Asian Canadian anti-racist thinking, writing, and art all exist very profoundly in relation to and in coalition with other community work.

The notion of rupture upon which Lai works is one that is, at the same time, genealogical in Foucault's sense: while she is working with

events that can be historically situated in time, Lai nevertheless resists the orthodoxies of linear narratives that would clearly link earlier events with present ones in a teleological manner. Her desire to make historical connections while noting the contingency of genealogies is well borne out in, for instance, her analysis of the “Too Asian” controversy in *Maclean’s* magazine in 2010. She notes the ways in which this controversy – in which a *Maclean’s* article queried whether, and hence suggested that, the student population at UBC was “too Asian” – rearticulated the “yellow peril” discourse from a more overtly racist era. At the same time, that the scandal did not seem to be directly continuous with that previous racism – although Lai demonstrates precisely how continuous it was – suggests that readers need more than a linear, progressivist, teleological way of understanding the anti-racist issues that she discusses. Breaking teleological thinking, in other words, allows readers to understand how the past and present may change while remaining much the same, or, rather, how readers might witness Canada repeating its history of racism in new, displaced forms.

The texts with which Lai works are wide ranging. Ling Zhang’s controversial *Gold Mountain Blues* and SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* are placed into conversation alongside the “Too Asian” controversy, remixed with “the spectre of the cultural appropriation debates” (26) generated in Indigenous literary contexts, a combination that allows Lai to argue that “Asian Canadian literature shares a decolonization imperative with First Nations literature” (31). She places the autobiographical writing of Wayson Choy alongside that of Evelyn Lau in order to consider the ways in which the “truth regime” of autobiography (48) may lead to rearticulations of racist tropes, such as Lau’s potential confirmation of “all the most virulent stereotypes of the Oriental woman” in her book *Runaway* (51). Special journal issues are examined in order to demonstrate the ways in which different modes of cultural production can intervene in cultural imaginaries, while racialized anthologies like *Many-Mouthed Birds* are considered in order to substantiate Lai’s argument that “inter-racialized relations is a taboo subject, at least among activists, artists, writers, and thinkers with anti-racist leanings” (93). Lai devotes a great deal of attention to Hiromi Goto’s “anti-realist stance” (138) and the poetics of Jam Ismail and Rita Wong. Finally, Lai ends by looking toward the coalitional anti-racism that she invokes at the outset, examining the characters Oryx in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and Quy in Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For*. These characters, written by writers situated well outside the label of Asian Canadian, enable Lai to close the book by looking toward broader communities with whom the writers in her book enter into conversation.

The particular strengths of *Slanting I, Imagining We* are Lai’s clear arguments in each chapter and her willingness to take positions. On the topic of autobiographical writing, for instance, she argues that “writing the self can deepen oppression, not just by reiterating it, but by driving deeper underground aspects of marginalized subjectivity that do not fit into conventions of autobiography” (37). When considering the role of special journal issues, she “argue[s] that [they]

offered an imperfect but productive way of bringing into presence histories, experiences, and subjects who had little articulated place in the Canadian cultural landscape until that point” (63). While discussing anthologies, she notes occasions on which she “see[s] a progress narrative as still valuable and viable” (117). In her intersectional chapter on queer Asian Canadian writing, Lai “argue[s] that the work of Hiromi Goto offers an alternative strategy, one of queer/abject utopianism” (135) and observes that “though we didn’t think about it in those terms then, the anti-racist work of the 1980s and 1990s involved a kind of nationalism” (158), one that she views as being challenged and rerouted today. In discussing Atwood, she notes that, “as a dyed-in-the-wool activist, [she] still long[s] for the text that is also a call to action” (200) and, in her discussion of Brand, that her “hope . . . remains with some variation of the human” in our posthumanist (or should that be posthumanizing?) world (200-201). In all of these articulations, readers gain a sense of Lai’s political commitments, her willingness to make claims, and her earnest ambition for writing that can take on the vagaries of the contemporary neoliberal order, things that make *Slanting I, Imagining We* a valuable contribution.