

*Asian Canadian Writing beyond Autoethnography*

Eds. Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn

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Reviewed by Y-Dang Troeung, McMaster University

*Asian Canadian Writing beyond Autoethnography* takes up a timely issue in contemporary identity politics that centers on the challenges and contradictions inherent in speaking about a strategically unified field of cultural production—Asian Canadian Writing in this case—while at the same time considering how individual writers classified within this field are challenging, or moving beyond, its essentialist configurations. Consisting of twelve critical articles written by various scholars, the anthology begins with editors Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn’s useful introduction, in which they state their interest in exploring how Asian Canadian authors of the past decade have “consciously attempt[ed] to problematize the link between ethnic identity and literary production” (3)

Ty and Verduyn, along with the other contributors in the volume, draw repeatedly on Deborah Reed-Danahay’s definition of autoethnography as a term that combines a challenge both to the realist notion of an objective, authoritative ethnographer and to the idea of a coherent, stable autobiographical self (3). In addition, the contributors consistently invoke the foundational work on autoethnography by Francoise Lionnet, James Buzzard, Mary Louise Pratt, and D. Soyini Madison in order to call attention to the limitations of this body of theory. The underlying problem with autoethnography, according to Ty and Verduyn, “is the belief in the ‘essentialness’ of a particular group, an implication of the special ‘insider’ status of a group member” (4). The problem has to do with the notion that an individual member of a community, whose inclusion exists on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc., necessarily speaks for, or represents the experience of, the community as a whole. The anthology makes apparent that what is at stake in moving “beyond autoethnography” is the liberation of Asian Canadian writing from a surrounding hegemonic discourse that reduces this writing to purely sociological or “authentic” information.

Ty and Verduyn are quick to caution us, however, against too uncritically celebrating a stage of “the beyond,” explaining that they “are not signalling the end of the trend of autoethnography,” nor are they discrediting its important role in the feminist and postcolonial identity

politics of the 1980s and 1990s (4). Perhaps an even stronger claim could be made here about the dangers of adopting a progressive developmental narrative with regards to Asian Canadian Literature in particular, since, as the editors themselves note, Asian Canadians are “still in the formative stages of developing hybridized group identities” (4). While the writing of Chinese Canadians, Japanese Canadians and South Asian Canadians has dominated the field of Asian Canadian literature for some time now and can be characterized in many cases as going beyond political concerns such as “breaking the silence,” the cultural production of Cambodian Canadians or Vietnamese Canadians has just now begun to emerge. Given the strong emphasis on the autobiographical testimonial form in Vietnamese American and Cambodian American writing over the past two decades, one can see how it might be premature to make any overarching generalizations about the end of an autoethnographic trend in Asian Canadian writing.

It is precisely the theoretical contradictions and risks of articulating a limit point of autoethnography that Smaro Kambourelli takes up in her chapter entitled “The Politics of the Beyond: 43 Theses on Autoethnography and Complicity.” Kambourelli argues that it is more important to understand *how* autoethnography has been complicit with a history of “hegemonic and imperial practices” than to celebrate “some unspecified critical space awaiting us” in the beyond (32). In reading Kambourelli’s employment of the definition of complicity as “being an accomplice to something that is at best wrongful, at worst criminal” (39), one might want to say that she unfairly discredits and charges with complicity individual writers who write in an autoethnographic mode; however, Kambourelli anticipates this opposition, clarifying that “there is a fundamental difference between a writer wanting to record his or her own experience of displacement through life-writing or fiction and the overdetermination of the critical act to read diasporic authors autoethnographically—whether they write in that mode or not” (36). By locating the complicity of autoethnography within disciplinary institutions and practices of reading, Kambourelli makes it clear that critiquing autoethnography is not synonymous with—as Larissa Lai puts it in her contribution to the anthology—“blaming the [writer/]victim” (94). Echoing this critical sentiment, Paul Lai, in his chapter “Autoethnography Otherwise,” argues that instead of burdening individual authors and literary texts with the task of recognizing what is “beyond (or not) autoethnographic” (55), we should shift “the burden of autoethnographic *reading* onto the literary critic, onto the formations of literary studies as a whole” (57). In providing his own analysis of the prose writing of Fred Wah, Lai convincingly demonstrates how scholars can “perform a kind of autoethnographic criticism otherwise” (56). Working in conjunction with

each other, Kamboureli's and Paul Lai's opening chapters offer a measured and nuanced meditation on the issue and provide a theoretical framework for the rest of the anthology.

Other chapters in *Asian Canadian Writing beyond Autoethnography* also overlap and speak to each other in interesting and illuminating ways. For instance, in her chapter "Strategizing the Body of History: Anxious Writing, Absent Subjects, and Marketing the Nation," Larissa Lai challenges assumptions about any kind of inherent liberatory function of autobiography. She argues that the self-writing of racialized subjects has the potential to not only deepen the oppression of the writer, but can also be "put into the service of the same capitalist white supremacist hegemony under which we still live" (109). Lai is in favour of writing strategies that resist the relentless exposition of ethnic trauma, although she demonstrates that even enhancing the metaphoricity of the text is still not necessarily enough to prevent it from playing into the racist status quo.

Significantly, two other chapters in the anthology illustrate exactly Lai's point by focusing on her creative work. Pilar Cuder-Dominguez compares Lai's novel *Salt Fish Girl* to Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* and argues that, in choosing the speculative fiction form, Lai and Goto self-consciously work against "the tendency to read the texts as ethnography" (128). Christine Kim examines Lai's first novel *When Fox is a Thousand* and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, arguing that in comparison to Mootoo's text, Lai's text has not been as well received in academia or by the mainstream public. Kim attributes this difference in critical reception in part to the way in which Lai's novel "critiques dominant representations of Asian Canadians within the nation and troubles discourses of multiculturalism," whereas Mootoo's text "is typically packaged as postcolonial, a move that foregrounds exclusion as it includes it within national culture" (154). Read together, the three chapters mentioned above illustrate the complex ways in which the writing of Asian Canadians is entangled within the politics of genre, aesthetics, and audience. Moving 'beyond autoethnography' in writing and literary criticism can come at the cost of a writer's or a critic's "success"; however, as the anthology brings to our attention, there are many Asian Canadian writers and critics in the field already engaged in this important political work.

An excellent and much needed addition to the small number of existing anthologies devoted to Asian Canadian material, *Asian Canadian Writing beyond Autoethnography* shines a spotlight on the continuing importance of identity politics and literature in Canada, charting the new direction and form this pairing has taken over the past decade.