

Review Essay

Is Vancouver the Future or the Past? Asian Migrants and White Supremacy

HENRY YU

The author is a member of the history departments of the University of British Columbia and the University of California, Los Angeles.

Crossing the Neoliberal Line: Pacific Rim Migration and the Metropolis. By Katharyne Mitchell. (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2004. xi + 280 pp. \$68.50 cloth, \$24.95 paper)
The Oriental Question: Consolidating a White Man's Province, 1914–41. By Patricia E. Roy. (Vancouver, B.C., UBC Press, 2003. viii + 334 pp. \$85 cloth, \$29.95 paper)

In the two decades since the World Exposition of 1986 put Vancouver, British Columbia, on the map as a global tourist destination, the city has achieved an almost iconic status as the harbinger of a coming transnational Pacific world. Utilizing incentives to attract wealthy migrants and foreign capital investment, Vancouver rapidly shed its obscurity as the resource-based, provincial backwater at the end of the transcontinental railroad. The future of Vancouver would no longer be as a lonely western outpost of British and European civilization—it would achieve its destiny as the catalyst of

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Canada's new engagement with Asia and what was now called the "Pacific Rim." In the decade that followed Expo 86, policy initiatives on the municipal, provincial, and federal levels targeted wealthy and educated Hong Kong residents, in hopes that their fears of the 1997 handover to the People's Republic of China would motivate them to emigrate. Special immigration incentives were enacted, and a wave of migrants from Hong Kong remade Vancouver to such an extent that newspapers around the world reported the changes. The term "Hongcouver" entered popular usage as a name that evoked negative reactions to the "Asianization" of the city. The backlash was relatively short-lived and ineffectual. By the 2001 census, a quarter of the city reported some form of Asian ancestry, and by 2005 the proportion had grown to one-third, most of whom self-identified as ethnic Chinese. The capital flows that accompanied the migrants shifted real estate from a local to a global market and transformed the built environment almost immediately. Was Vancouver the sign of the future, the result of what happens when the anti-Asian racism of western North America is finally put aside? The rapidity of these changes, and the work of policymakers in shaping them, drew the attention of scholars, and a flurry of studies resulted.

One of the finest of those studies, a University of British Columbia Ph.D. dissertation in geography by Katharyne Mitchell, has recently been revised into a book. Mitchell, now at the University of Washington, has already published several important segments of her study in article form, but historians should welcome the arrival of her book-length monograph precisely because her articles had appeared almost simultaneously with the divisive debates over the arrival of the Hong Kong Chinese. Thus, they understandably lacked the benefit of hindsight. Looking back on the work she did in the 1990s has allowed Mitchell not only to understand more clearly the significance of those events in reshaping the city, but also to place the events more assuredly in the longer trajectory of Vancouver's history. The title points to a major argument of the book: that a "neoliberal" ideology arose in British Columbia, organized around a narrow definition of individual and property rights that allied existing business interests with wealthy newcomers. This neoliberalism, associated with Reaganism and Thatcherism, undercut earlier progressive, "social liberal" coalitions that had spurred social change in the 1960s and 1970s. One of Mitchell's remarkable insights in this study describes how neoliberals captured anti-racist

rhetoric to silence community-based, grass-roots responses to the changes that wealthy Chinese migrants wrought. Most tellingly revealed in the campaign against so-called “Monster Houses” that new Chinese were accused of building, Mitchell shows how a long history of assumed white privilege was disturbed by the intrusion of wealthy newcomers into previously segregated communities. The hypocrisy of people ensconced in large mansions calling the newly built homes of Hong Kong Chinese overly large and monstrous was not lost on the new migrants. They effectively used the rhetoric of anti-racism to skewer neighborhood activists. The tragedy and true irony of the story, however, is that the progressive gains that community-based coalition politics had built in the 1960s were lost at the same time. Some of the political activists who had fought in cross-racial, anti-racist coalitions by defending Chinese Canadian neighborhoods such as Strathcona and Chinatown from destruction by urban renewal policies in the 1970s were caught in a rhetorical bind. They had built a neighborhood-based political process designed to create more egalitarian, democratic decision-making in municipal politics and to make city planners accountable to neighborhood residents. This meant they could not defend the racism of many of those espousing neighborhood control in the monster house debates. Split by this wedge issue, progressive political coalitions fragmented.

For Mitchell, the underlying racial hierarchy that liberalism had always contained, built right into the founding philosophical traditions of European imperial conquest, was revealed and exploited by neoliberal politicians and wealthy Chinese migrants alike to cover their goals of creating explicit class hierarchies based on wealth and economic privilege. The legacy of neoliberalism’s triumph was that a newly energized notion of individualism, designed to protect the rights and freedoms of the wealthy, had enervated progressive politics built around communitarian ideals of the public good. Anti-racism, which had played such a crucial role in building progressive politics, was now effectively being deployed to destroy it. Mitchell’s argument in many ways engages with those made by Aihwa Ong in her 1998 book *Flexible Citizenship*, which observed that wealthy ethnic Chinese migrants all around Southeast Asia and the Americas had found openings in the racially exclusionary immigration policies of liberal nation-states by exploiting the desire for mobile capital. The result has been a class of wealthy migrants who use the privileges of citizenship as a flexible tool to move among the

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so-called “Pacific Rim” nation-states whose connected economies were now built by neoliberal policies around the needs of global capitalism.

It is the longer historical perspective on the politics of anti-Asian agitation in the building of racially exclusionary immigration policies that Patricia Roy’s book provides. Focusing on British Columbia and not just Vancouver, this second book in a planned trilogy would not at first seem to engage with Mitchell’s arguments. Roy is the pre-eminent expert on the politics of anti-Asian agitation in British Columbia and has been working steadily on its long history for much of her scholarly career. Her 1989 book, *A White Man’s Province: British Columbia Politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858—1914*, might best be compared to *The Indispensable Enemy*, Alexander Saxton’s pioneering work on how anti-Chinese agitation in the late nineteenth-century western United States organized European settlers around the politics of white supremacy. Following her first groundbreaking study, this book moves into the period from 1914 to 1941, when the right to vote was denied the Chinese, and Canada finally followed the United States in banning further Chinese migration in 1923 (unlike the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act in the United States, Canada had placed a Chinese head tax in 1885 that raised revenue by charging incoming Chinese migrants the equivalent of a year’s salary as a laborer). It was also the period when Japanese migrants at times fought successfully to gain rights denied to the Chinese. Overall, this period saw ever-increasing legislation designed to curb the success of both Chinese and Japanese in the lumber, fishing, and other industries where they had been pioneers. As in the western United States, migrant communities that were highly successful in developing both rural and urban industries increasingly found themselves undermined by legislation. The culmination of anti-Japanese agitation with wartime internment and forced dispersal, as well as the gradual waning of anti-Asian politics, still await treatment in Roy’s final installment of the trilogy, which will deal with the period after 1941.

Perhaps the book on the United States that engages best with Roy’s in terms of argument and method is Andrew Gyory’s 1998 study, *Closing the Gates*, which focuses on how ambitious politicians in the United States cynically manipulated local tensions into widespread anti-Asian political movements. Gyory’s argument aimed to absolve labor leaders from the responsibility for passing exclusion-

ary immigration laws, putting the blame squarely on politicians eager to win office. Roy fortunately does not feel compelled to redeem labor organizers, and she traces a complex story of how the Chinese and Japanese became political pawns for uniting otherwise conflicting interests around a series of legislative answers to the “Oriental question.” Like Gyory, Roy’s careful attention to political contest and compromise gives us a rich portrait of how British Columbia consolidated around white supremacy. Perhaps her most important contribution is to show the contingency involved in anti-Asian politics—local conditions mattered, and the challenge for political leaders who wanted to organize around white supremacy was how to transform intermittent local tensions and conflicts into provincial and federal legislation and into long-standing social changes.

Like Mitchell, Roy tells us how racial ideology is utilized as a rhetorical tool to create political change, rather than offering the still common, simplistic stories about the past that dismiss racism as an irrationality that progress left behind. Reading the two together prompts us to see the complicated legacies of organizing around white supremacy in the early twentieth century. Having built a wide range of political and economic privileges on being considered “white,” anti-racist movements in the period between the end of World War II and the 1970s began to dismantle much of the legislation that had been passed in the century before. These privileges, however, often remained in the spatial organization of social life. The value of the perspectives of geography for historical study is clear, since focusing only on legislation misses how cities and communities were built on white privilege; the removal of legislation is only part of the story of how racial hierarchy has or has not been addressed.

Both Mitchell and Roy are at their best when they capture the voices of the historical actors. Roy eschews the cultural studies theories that Mitchell occasionally deploys (and that at times lead her analysis to lose its specificity in regard to Vancouver), but both of them revel in the complexities of political life. Mitchell excels at capturing the ironies and paradoxes of people employing universal languages of property rights and communitarian utopias to argue their rather parochial visions of neighborhood life—revealing, for instance, the often thinly veiled white supremacy of neighborhood activists caught uncomfortably between denying racist motives and professing their love for trees threatened by Chinese landowners.

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I see both Patricia Roy's and Katharyne Mitchell's excellent studies through the lens of the larger rhythms of the nationalist projects built around white supremacy that marked European settler-colonial societies around the Pacific. Whether in Australia, New Zealand, or the western regions of the United States and Canada, anti-Asian agitation arose as a political tool in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to disenfranchise Asian migrants who were already residents when subsequent waves of Europeans arrived. Within a half-century, anti-Asian movements had helped cement the Pacific regions of North America into larger national imaginations that needed to cross enormous continental divides between the Atlantic and Pacific. This successful nation-building allowed a relenting in anti-Asian practices (during the 1950s and 1960s in North America and several decades later in Australia and New Zealand, where the precarious nature of white colonialism was more acute). Thus, by the end of the twentieth century all four settler-colonies had begun to embrace wealthy and educated ethnic Chinese as essential to their future in a global economy. The next step in scholarship, perhaps, is for us to refocus how we study migration and the long history of this Pacific basin, so that we do not begin with the story of national exclusion and inclusion that still dominates almost all studies of Pacific migration. Instead we can make nation-building a dependent variable within a world where human bodies, objects of trade, and alluring ideas such as white supremacy and anti-Asian rhetoric all migrate along trans-Pacific routes. In that context, these books are important empirical studies that will ultimately allow us to understand how migration and regional identities are framed in local and global terms.