

Book Review

“Too Asian?": Racism, Privilege and Post-Secondary Education

R. J. Gilmour, Davina Bhandar, Jeet Heer, and Michael C. K. Ma, editors
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This book, an anthology of essays by university faculty, graduate students, cultural critics, and human rights activists, examines issues of race and exclusion in Canadian postsecondary education. It responds to the highly controversial and inflammatory “Too Asian?” article published in *Macleans*' magazine in November 2010. The article begins with interviews with two white female students from an elite Toronto private secondary school about their university application choices. The interviewees disclose preferences for selecting universities with fewer Asian students based on their assumptions that these universities may be more socially rewarding and less academically competitive. The *Macleans*' article constructs a profile of Asian students as socially rigid, unassimilated, obsessed with academic performance, and under intense parental pressure. The composite emerges in comparison with their Canadian counterparts, assumed to be white, non-immigrant, middle-class, upwardly socially mobile and fun-loving.

While the article acknowledges Asian students' experiences of discrimination, it reinforces predominantly the problematic stereotypes of socially disengaged Asian students who perform well in academics despite perceived poor English skills. According to the article, Asian students socialize only with other Asians. By raising the question about whether or not Canadian university campuses have become too Asian, *Macleans*' posits that the once admirable Canadian meritocratic approach to admissions, intended to be fair and neutral, may be allowing for an unintended racialization of the university campus. Furthermore, *Macleans*' suggests that the Canadian university may be suffering a deterioration of a culturally, socially, and academically rich campus life that has long been held in the Canadian imagination and portrayed in university admission brochures.

I begin this book review with a synopsis of the controversial *Macleans*' article to provide a context for the multiple perspectives that contributors bring to this anthology. Using the *Macleans*' article as a catalyst for scholarly and provocative discussion, the book calls into question common assumptions made about Canadian postsecondary education as merit-based and race-neutral (often held in stark contrast to postsecondary education in the United States and deemed to be rife with racial politics). The book begins with a foreword by Winnie Ng and an introduction by Jeet Heer, followed by 11 chapters, organized in three main sections. The first section explores the mythology of meritocracy surrounding Canadian postsecondary education. It starts with Henry Yu's essay on the inherently exclusionary and hegemonic values embedded within merit-based selections which, as he creatively argues, all too often privilege attributes

historically common in one group, while excluding others. Chapter 2, by David Weinfeld, compares and contrasts postsecondary education in the United States and Canada, noting how the distinct histories have given rise to different higher education policies. Weinfeld argues that in the United States, a nation with a history of slavery, the civil rights movement, and a significant African American population, postsecondary institutions address historical wrongs through admissions policies. However, in Canada, a nation with neither a sizeable comparable minority population nor the same degree of politicization, race relations in the postsecondary system have been relatively unquestioned. Sarah Ghabrail's essay, *Pink Panics, Yellow Perils and the Mythology of Meritocracy*, cleverly challenges the commonly held notion of Canada's education system as colour and gender-neutral (rewarding only those most deserving). Ghabrail explores the current social panics surrounding declining academic performance among boys in K-12 education and the increasing number of Asian students in higher education.

The second section examines the legacies of settler colonialism on university campuses and in curriculum. Adele Perry's essay, *Graduating Photos: Race, Colonization and the University of Manitoba*, illuminates the complexity of progress in race and gender relations in postsecondary education as a non-linear and fluid history. At first glance, photographs of University of Manitoba graduates and hockey teams from around the turn of the 20th century look predominantly white and male, and easily misguide us to believe that gender and racial diversity on university campuses are a recent phenomenon. On closer examination, it becomes evident that the university's history in Winnipeg has been inextricably tied to the histories of the Métis of the Red River Settlement and migrant workers from Asia. Chapter 5 continues the discussion of omitted and misrepresented Indigenous histories with Mary Jane Logan McCallum's essay. In it, McCallum compares old social science textbooks used in elementary schools during the 1970s with textbooks used in today's university history courses and reveals that not much has changed. Canadian university history textbooks continue to reproduce knowledge that fails to address settler colonialism and instead normalizes white privilege.

The book's final section, and also its lengthiest one, explores the issue of race in the classroom. In Chapter 6, Dan Cui and Jennifer Kelly refer to empirical data from their study of Chinese-Canadian youth in Alberta. They challenge the model minority representation of Asian, capturing the diversity of youth experiences across gender, class, ethnicity, geographical location, and time in Canada. Ray Tsu and Julia Paek's essay demonstrates how Tsu's University of British Columbia creative writing class responded to the *Maclean's* controversy by turning an incident of racist journalism into a teachable moment through the incorporation of a Freirian pedagogical approach. The challenges associated with getting students to think through and talk about identity, race, and privilege are discussed more fully in two essays by Victoria Kannen and Anita Jack-Davis, respectively, as they recount their experiences teaching critical identity classes to pre-service teachers. In Chapter 10, authors Soma Chatterjee, Mandeep Mucina, and Louise Tam offer their own unique stories as women of colour in academia and in doing so, challenge the stereotypical and singular narrative of Asian. The final essay by Diana Younes questions the neutrality of Canadian legal education, which, in its own attempts to gain legitimacy within the larger academy, adopted a method of teaching and learning that aims to present and understand law as neutral and detached from social/political contexts.

The first observation that I would like to make about this edited book is that it is not limited to a scholarly discussion of Asians in postsecondary education; instead, it strategically uses the *Maclean's* article as a launch pad for discussions on race, other forms of exclusion, and privilege. It does, however, appropriately acknowledge the historical and political connections

between the *Macleans*' article and the equally problematic and racist W5 television episode titled *Campus Giveaway*, which aired on CTV in 1979. Both Ng and Heer indicate that not much has changed over the past three decades and that Asians (including those born in Canada and multi-generational Asian-Canadians) continue to be represented as foreigners, others, and potential threats to the success of deserving white Canadians.

What differs, however, is the level of ensuing political organizing following these incidents. The 1979 W5 report, for example, marked an important political and historical turning point in Chinese-Canadian communities, resulted in political organizing across the country, and gave birth to the Chinese Canadian National Council. I recall the incident even among my own family, who, as immigrants from Hong Kong, had experienced first-hand Hong Kong's violent pro-Communist riots of 1967 and in Canada, generally preferred to remain apolitical and far away from contentious political issues. My apolitical family found itself politically incensed by the W5 story and quickly swept up by the collective political action. I vividly remember sitting at a dim-sum lunch with my family at East Court Chinese Restaurant in Scarborough, Ontario, when the restaurant owner *stopped everything* as prominent members of the Chinese community came into the restaurant to bring the W5 story to our attention and then proceeded from table to table to gather signatures for petitions. The political activism that ensued among Chinese-Canadians was supported by other racial minority groups and progressive journalists across the country. The action resulted in public apologies from W5 and CTV. In contrast, the *Macleans*' "Too Asian?" article has neither garnered the same political activism nor a retraction or apology from the magazine. Instead, the magazine simply renamed the article *The Enrolment Controversy* on its website and issued a response article titled *Merit: The Best and Only Way to Decide Who Gets into University*.

Rather than focusing solely on the experiences of Asian students or faculty, I appreciate the authors' intention of weaving multiple perspectives of race, class, religion, and gender while, at the same time, retaining the visibility of different Asian perspectives. Too often cast aside in identity discussions or relegated to model minority status, Asian-Canadians in academia oscillate from being left out of the conversation entirely either because they are deemed to be performing well academically (in contrast to other racialized groups seen as struggling) or viewed as eternally foreign, other, and not-Canadian (regardless of citizenship or time in Canada).

In addition to its ability to bring into thoughtful discussion multiple points of view, this edited book has several other notable strengths. Its exploration of collective assumptions about Canadian postsecondary education as merit-based when the history suggests otherwise is well documented in essays by Yu and Ghabrail. Yu demonstrates how privilege historically advantages select groups. Furthermore, despite changes in practices intended to *level the so-called playing field*, traditional power imbalances continue to reinforce dominant and powerful groups. Yu's use of parable is a clever fictional illustration of a more complex concept, presented in a manner that is accessible to a wide range of readers. Similarly, Ghabrail juxtaposes the moral panic arising from two seemingly divergent issues: boys' poor academic performance and the Asian dominance of academically elite university programs, and shines light on societal preoccupation with upholding whiteness and masculinity as politically dominant and normative (Henry & Tator, 2009; Simpson, 2003).

While there are far fewer scholarly works on race in Canadian postsecondary education compared to the U.S. context, writing about race in academia is not new. Nevertheless, *"Too Asian?" Racism, Privilege and Post-Secondary Education* takes the discussion beyond the usual

debates about faculty hiring, representative leadership, and inclusive curriculum. The six essays that make up the book's most comprehensive section on *Race in the Classroom* cover a range of topics from student services, extra-curricular pursuits, and critical and anti-racist pedagogy and identity in the classroom. The ways in which university faculty (like Ray Hsu, Kannen, and Jack-Davis, through curriculum and class discussion) engage in what bell hooks (2003) describes as a kind of teaching that goes beyond studying race to talking about race, hold promise for a uniquely Canadian critical pedagogy.

Conversely, the section on *Colonial and Imperialist Legacies* is the shortest, with only two essays, both addressing the damaging effects of colonialism on Indigenous communities. These two essays by Perry and McCallum raise several critically important questions that could have been explored more fully and left me, as a reader, somewhat wanting. Perry's essay reveals a poorly documented but established history of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students attending university, living in urban environments, and seeking opportunities for individual and community social mobility through postsecondary educational attainment. Perry's essay, in contrast to McCallum's examination of the legacy of misrepresentations of Aboriginal people in social science and history textbooks, strikes home the issue of the continued exclusion/mistreatment of Indigenous communities. Despite slight improvements to elementary school textbooks (spurred by numerous calls to action since the 1960s by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups), university history textbooks continue to situate Aboriginal history in a textual anteroom (a pre-colonization/pre-white era that remains timeless and mysterious) and apart from the "central narrative [of] European colonization and settlement" (p. 75).

Given Canadian universities' growing interest to attract and retain more Aboriginal students and current public policy interest in this area, the anthology could have explored this issue further since it remains a significant gap in historical understanding of Canadian postsecondary education and also because of the timely nature of this discussion. The book could have also expanded discussion about postsecondary education beyond universities to include apprenticeships and community colleges as they are part of the landscape of postsecondary education in Canada. With regard to apprenticeships and colleges, notwithstanding that privilege exists, historically and contemporarily in these spaces, as well, issues such as race, class, and gender may be taking on different forms that would also have been worthy of exploration.

Overall, the book makes valuable contributions to scholarly and public policy discussions about race and privilege in Canadian universities. The text is well organized, essays categorized into appropriate sections, and presented in a format that brings in a multiplicity of voices in relation to interests and disciplines without being cacophonous. While the book is not necessarily geared to any specific audience, the writing is such that it achieves a fine balance between the personal and political as well as historical and imagined futures and therefore has the potential to appeal to a diverse audience.

References

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