

and serving to further inform these practices.”¹ At its best, *Re-reading Foucault* confirms Hoffman’s hypothesis, sharpening our understanding of Foucault’s entanglements with the juridical while shedding new light on the evolution of his work overall.



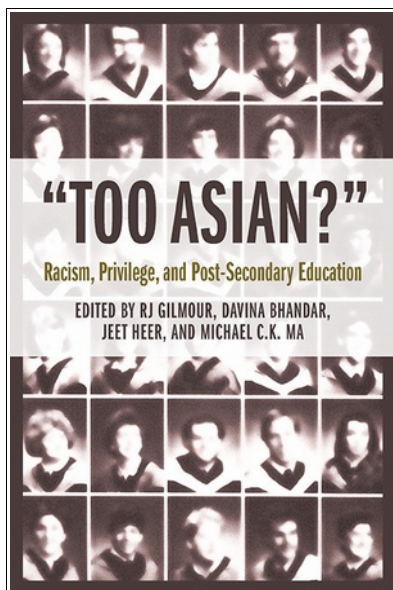
“Too Asian?” Racism, Privilege, and Post-Secondary Education

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In 2010, *Maclean’s* became the subject of popular controversy when it asked, in a piece entitled “Too Asian” by Stephanie Findlay and Nicholas Köhler (later retitled “The Enrollment Controversy”), whether university campuses across Canada were



¹ Marcelo Hoffman, “Foucault and the “Lesson” of the Prisoner Support Movement” (2012) 34 *New Political Science* 21 at 24 and 36.

not becoming demographically dominated by Asian students and, increasingly, Asian values. Findlay and Köhler rang a proverbial alarm, alerting *Maclean's* readers to the "single mindedness" of Asian students whose very presence turns top-tier institutions, such as the University of Toronto, the University of British Columbia, and the University of Waterloo, into no-fun-zones of intense academic devotion. While white students prefer to integrate social activities into their university experience, Asian students allegedly shun everything from athletics to alcohol. When they do socialize, many of them, as the article points out, have a tendency to create "segregated" organizations that "balkanize" the campuses they attend (Findlay and Köhler, 2010).

The article's claim is not novel. And neither is its brand of racism. Anti-Asian prejudice pre-dates Canadian Confederation. It has been, and is, still with us, as is evident by the claims made by University of New Brunswick's sociology professor Ricardo Duchesne. Spotlighted recently by the media, Duchesne went on record to claim that Vancouver has taken on too many Asian immigrants too quickly and that as a result the "beautiful British city" has acquired a "strongly Asian character" (*CBC News*, 2015). I could just as well be quoting the claims of the Asiatic Exclusion League on the eve of the 1907 anti-Asian riots in the same city. The crowds that took part in the racial violence sang "Rule Britannia" before smashing windows and looting businesses in Chinatown and Little Tokyo. This is an old antipathy repackaged just like the article's title. At its core lies an unease with Asian immigration itself and the presence of Asians in Canada, but this is represented variously as everything from the concern over the Asian balkanization of education to the concern over the transformation of urban space and employment. The idea of an Asian outsider working insidiously from the inside

to uproot “our” way of life is a handy trope, readily deployed in the service of white settler Canada.

The edited collection “*Too Asian?*” *Racism, Privilege, and Post-Secondary Education* features 11 chapters that respond to the now well-rehearsed anti-Asian prejudice. Specifically, the text focuses on the racism endemic to Canadian society that makes such prejudice possible within the setting of post-secondary education. With contributions from academics and graduate students working in such fields as Canadian studies, education, history, and sociology, as well as from journalists, lawyers, and activists, this is a text informed by a radical and progressive sensibility. One of its notable strengths is that a number of the chapters are grounded in what may be called an activist epistemology. As Jeet Heer notes in his introduction, the book “takes its impetus from the outpouring of anger and activism that emerged in the wake of the *Maclean’s* article” (2012, p. 9). A few chapters even evoke the well-known tradition of critical pedagogy. “*Too Asian?*” draws on and includes the recollections of those who protested—whether directly with their bodies on campuses across Canada, or by creating art exhibits, satirical music videos, or writing articles—against the original article. It considers the experience of those who went on to organize alternative classrooms, like the UBC hosted course “Way Too Asian”, which employed Freire’s dialogic method in order to turn the event into a “teachable moment” (Hsu and Paek, 2012, p. 100). The appeal of “*Too Asian?*” is that one is invited to read it as an extension of that activism, as an attempt to confront white privilege in education.

Following Heer’s introduction, which provides a much needed context and which establishes a critique of the notorious article in question, the book is divided into three sections. Section I consists of three chapters that consider the role of meritocracy and affirmative action in university

education. It bears recalling that *Maclean's* did not dismiss meritocracy; rather, it suggested that something akin to what functionalist sociology calls a “dysfunction” characterizes it. From the magazine's point of view, Canadian meritocracy is worth defending, but it faces a “dilemma” owing to the overrepresentation of Asian students (Findlay and Köhler, 2010). In light of this claim, the chapters in this section take on the task of unmasking the ways that meritocracy actually *maintains* certain patterns of social stratification.

Meritocracy is addressed head-on by Henry Yu through an imaginary exercise he calls “the parable of the textbook” (Yu, 2012, p. 21-7). In his exercise, students are asked to consider what it might be like take a class in which only half the class, those whose last names start with letters A to K, were given the necessary textbook for several weeks. Understandably, such a system would give the students with the textbooks an upper edge—in the form of a stronger start—that would continue even once textbooks were distributed to the entire class. Yu's parable is a useful exercise in the use of the radical imagination. It invites us to consider how, once the old openly discriminatory “alphabetist” system is abolished, meritocratic colourblindness reinforces racial stratification by denying the racist contours of the past and present (“Unfair? I exclaim. What could you mean? ... now that alphabetism is gone your failure must be your own responsibility. Why can't you just get over the past?” (Yu, 2012, p. 23)). Sarah Ghabrial provides an adroit critique of meritocracy as well in a chapter that compares the moral panic in education concerning the overrepresentation of women (“pink panics”) to the panic concerning the overrepresentation of Asian students (“yellow perils”). Weighing the role of gender and race in Canadian education allows Ghabrial to perform an interlocking analysis of two forms of oppres-

sion. Her writing reveals a similar discursive element at work behind both panics, one that involves "the perceived slippage of white class-privileged men from a position of dominance" (Ghabrial, 2012, p. 50). Given the legacies of racism and sexism in this country, meritocracy cannot be regarded as a system that replaces the aristocracy, as Ghabrial brilliantly argues, "but simply [as] the reorganization of signifiers of mobility, falling largely on the same historically privileged groups" (2012, p. 38). This is to say that meritocracy allows for business-as-usual. It allows for the established racial hierarchies of the past to live on precisely by couching itself in a more legitimate colourblind discourse—a discourse that imagines that no longer seeing race is the equivalent of no longer being racist.

Besides skillfully interrogating meritocracy, the chapters in this section carry out the difficult task of remaining critical of the ability of affirmative action policies to redress racial inequities. This is not to say that affirmative action (or what in Canada is known as "employment equity") should be abandoned. As David Weinfeld, whose work compares the US and Canadian approaches to meritocracy, maintains, in US universities "the admission officers implicitly understand that the 1200 SAT score of a poor African-American student from a single-parent family in Harlem is worth more than the 1300 from a wealthy white kid living in a posh apartment overlooking Central Park" (2012, p. 35). While appreciating the capacity of affirmative action to stem systemic racism, the chapters in this section identify the ways that affirmative action—and more broadly antiracism—can be exploited by racist institutions and discourses. As Yu reminds us, today's racists are also capable of cloaking their language in a discourse of anti- or non-racism: "many political conservatives in the United States switched tactics. Rather than defending white supremacy, the argument now being made was that

policies designed to counteract racism were themselves racist” because they admitted more whites and Asians than Latin American and African American students (Yu, 2012, p. 19). Such arguments, as Yu maintains, were made by those who wanted to dismantle affirmative action. Weinfield too observes that by the mid-1980s some US universities attempted to deny affirmative action to Asian Americans on the grounds that such policies were failing to “add to ‘diversity’ of elite college campuses” (2012, p. 31), or, to the “balance” of the campus, as Ghabrial notes (2012, p. 51). Such observations echo the work of Pierre-André Taguieff (2001) who challenges antiracists today to be weary of assisting the enemy. As Taguieff maintains, we must pay attention to the ways in which the celebration of identity, community, and difference, as well as the arguments for affirmative action, can be picked up by racist discourses. This is not to reject affirmative action measures; it is only to heed Taguieff’s reminder that ‘difference’ and ‘diversity’ do not form a foolproof antidote to racism.

Section II consists of two chapters that examine the role of settler colonialism in today’s classroom. Both execute a far-reaching analysis of colonialism by performing work on material culture. Adele Perry tackles the subject by writing about graduation photographs on display in the hallways of the University of Manitoba. In what to me reads like a Foucauldian inspired approach to history, Perry dispenses with “linear and salutary stories of improvement and uplift” (2012, p. 55)—stories that perhaps would have us believe that the University and the city of Winnipeg are becoming less fortified, less defensive of their white privileges and more reasonable, tolerant, and even Indigenous overtime. “Winnipeg has always been an Indigenous city, and Indigenous people have been city-dwellers since cities existed in Canada”, Perry maintains

(2012, p. 63). As such, "[i]nstead of seeing the late twentieth century as a new era, we might see the period between the Canadian takeover of Red River and the onset of a highly visible presence of urban Indigenous people in cities in the 1960s as the unusual years" (Perry, 2012, p. 63). To this end, she exposes, or rather creates, cracks in what looks like a neat Anglo past. The graduands in the photographs all appear white by today's racial standards. Perry, however, challenges "[t]his apparent homogeneity" for "mask[ing] a more complicated history" (2012, p. 55). In a time when "a quota system... limited the numbers of Jews, Poles, Ukrainians, and women" (Perry, 2012, p. 59), passing as white was a preoccupation of Indigenous people who strove for a university education, as well as of the peripheral Europeans who today can take their whiteness for granted. Mary Jane McCallum also does work on an object in order to read history. She demonstrates the complicity of Canadian history textbooks in settler colonialism. Such textbooks construct "Canada" by including Indigenous people only in terms of an excluded, pre-history of the country itself. As McCallum documents, Indigenous people are usually featured in the first chapter in history textbooks. Such first chapters serve the function of the literary "anteroom" (McCallum, 2012, p. 75) through which one must pass in order to reach Canada. Canada, as modern, living Canada thus only properly begins with European "discovery." This is an old strategy of exclusion through inclusion which normalizes colonialism while preserving it.

This section, in the space of two chapters, loses, however, something of the momentum and focus established in the previous section dealing with meritocracy. To be sure, Perry's and McCallum's chapters reflect sound scholarship on the understudied topic of settler colonialism. They offer much to students of racism. They are clear, penetrat-

ing, and provocative in the best academic sense. Yet their fit within this collection is haphazard. I say this because the relationship of both chapters to the *Maclean's* article is collateral at best. Only McCallum's chapter mentions it, but just once and then only as an afterthought in the last paragraph. There is no sense that either of these chapters have been written as a response to it. Settler colonialism certainly informs the white privilege of the *Maclean's* article, but those looking for something like a sustained analysis of anti-Asian racism in education, or even for its connections to settler colonialism, will have to look elsewhere.

Section III consists of six chapters that examine the ways that race features in the Canadian classroom. With the exception of Diana Younes' last chapter, which focuses on the role of whiteness in Canadian law schools, the first five chapters do restore the focus by bringing *Maclean's* back into the discussion, either by closely examining it or by treating it as a necessary referent for Canadian racism. Dan Cui and Jennifer Kelly, for example, respond in a point-by-point manner to the claims made in the "Too Asian?" article. Their work serves as a useful introduction to antiracist critique, but, I suspect, for most readers the myth/fact approach—debunking, for example, the idea that all Asian students study and work hard (Cui and Kelly, 2012, p. 89)—will not deliver any new insights. Rather than accepting the terms of the debate offered by *Maclean's*, the authors could have gone further by questioning the discursive formation that allowed the news-magazine to make its claims. Similarly, Victoria Kannen provides an upfront denunciation of white privilege in the classroom that can serve as introduction to thinking critically about race and racism. However, the idea that whiteness shields white people from racial self-awareness (Kannen, 2012, p. 109) or that the question "where are you

from?” is a technique of othering (Kannen, 2012, p. 111) does not deliver anything that has not already been established by scholars of race and racism.

The section does offer, however, a more far-reaching examination of racism in the classroom from a radical pedagogical perspective. Ray Hsu and Julia Paek consider the ways in which resistance to the *Maclean's* article took place in the classroom setting. They examine how “[t]he Way Too Asian (WTA) class was born out of a feeling of dissent” (2012, p.97). Paek speaks of WTA as an attempt to round out what was “missing from these forms of protest” (Hsu and Paek 2012, p. 96). In doing so, she echoes the insight of Jeff Shantz that movements have to at some point come off the streets and transform themselves into “infrastructures of resistance” (2013) if they are to offer more lasting alternatives. Following the tradition of Freire’s dialogical method, WTA “was hardly a traditional classroom setting in that there was no syllabus, there were no course guidelines, and no expected outcomes” (Hsu and Paek, 2012, p. 97). Much like this edited collection, WTA was an open-ended event that solicited the participation of a diverse range of actors, serving as a kind of temporary (“it was a reactive course” (Hsu and Paek, 2012, p. 100)) infrastructure that facilitated the “effort to collectively ‘take back’ and update Eurocentric (i.e., *Maclean's*) definition of ‘Asian’” (Hsu and Paek, 2012, p. 97). Like many antiracist attempts at education, WTA attracted whites along with visible minorities. Anita Jack-Davies’ chapter complements Hsu and Paek’s work by offering lessons to white allies as well as to non-white social justice teachers. As Jack-Davies points out, “the [*Maclean's*] article reveals that Canadians, like Americans, continue to engage in racial discourse that is simplistic, stereotypical, and fixed” (2012, p. 116). Any attempt to move in an antiracist direction must therefore move past

simplistic racial discussions. Whites who attend in order to purge their white guilt, or in order to “[learn] about the ‘politically correct’ language for use in their interactions with racialized students and parents and behaviors they should avoid in order not to offend the racialized Other” (Jack-Davies, 2012, p. 116), are favoring aesthetic responses to racism. Their concern, as Jack-Davies shows, is misplaced, as merely appearing non-racist does not actually override the structure of racial privilege. And wanting to be taught by non-whites on how to appear non-racist is a subtle perpetuation of that very structure. Much can also be learned from Soma Chatterjee, Mandeep Mucina, and Louise Tam whose chapter considers anti-Asian and anti-East-Asian racism in the context of Canadian education. Sharing their own experiences in the first person, the authors draw on such personal examples as being automatically placed in ESL classes on the basis of their non-white skin colour, and of their own attempts to “model whiteness” (Chatterjee, Mucina, and Tam, 2012, p. 127). Having to constantly prove their self-worth, to “accept inequality by adopting self-help strategies or by contributing to white-centered social activities” (2012, p. 130), Chatterjee, Mucina, and Tam, demonstrate the outline of the dominant discourse of race that allows *Maclean’s* to assume that universities are naturally white spaces. An undefined whiteness rules over Canadian post-secondary education and their chapter does much to name it.

“*Too Asian?*” features work that will be useful to scholars of race and racism and to antiracist activists. From advancing critiques of meritocracy; warning us against the capacity of racists to utilize affirmative action; considering the relationship between education and racism, as well as education and anti-racism; to frank, head on criticisms of the *Maclean’s* article, this edited collection addresses a range of related issues. Despite the oc-

casional thematic divergence in the road, it is an invaluable source for those wishing to make sense of *Maclean's* claims from a radical, as opposed to liberal, position. Courses on multiculturalism, settler colonialism, anti-Asian racism, the media, and immigration will find a lot of well-written resources here. And given the continuity of anti-Asian racism (the fact that such racism is not just confined to *Maclean's* article but continues to re-emerge elsewhere) this edited collection is likely—albeit in a dreadful sense—to remain timely.

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