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Verge: Studies in Global Asias, Volume 6, Issue 1, Spring 2020, pp. 49-57
(Article)

Published by University of Minnesota Press

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Archiving the Affects of Canadian Multiculturalism

CHRISTOPHER LEE

In fall 2015, the photograph of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, whose body was found on a beach in Turkey, came to symbolize the desperate plight of Syrian refugees. Amid the widespread horror generated by the global circulation of this image, many Canadians were shocked to learn that Kurdi’s aunt, who lived in a suburb of Vancouver, had been trying to sponsor her extended family to immigrate to Canada (media reports offered conflicting reasons for why the application had been rejected). Coming in the midst of a national election campaign, the reluctance of the then Conservative government to offer more assistance to Syrian refugees sparked a public outcry that played a key role in the eventual defeat of the government and the victory of Justin Trudeau’s Liberal Party. Particularly since the 2016 election in the United States, Trudeau has come to embody a Canadian exceptionalism that attributes progressive, enlightened values to the nation as a whole at a time of rising xenophobia around the world. In a more general sense, discourses of exceptionalism have been mobilized to endow the national body with universal, albeit abstract, social and political values. Meanwhile, the state, and certainly Trudeau

himself, has sought to project an image of welcome and inclusion even as it implements its own restrictive policies when it comes to migrants.¹

While these inconsistencies have been discussed by numerous critics, my concern in this short essay is less with the shortcomings of exceptionalism; instead, I want to consider its affective links to a political culture of human rights and multiculturalism that emerged after the Second World War. This period is often associated with major changes in legislation and policy, such as the 1967 Immigration Act, which abolished immigration quotas that overtly favored arrivals of European descent in ways that extended earlier forms of racial exclusion, and the adoption of multiculturalism as official government policy in 1971. Both of these changes are widely seen as liberal responses to the pervasive racism that characterized Canada's history as a white settler colony.

The 1967 Immigration Act did not, however, result in immediate changes when it came to refugee policy. Even though it was involved in drafting the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Canada would not formally sign the Convention until 1969. Postwar policies were often ad hoc and heavily tilted toward accepting refugees from Eastern Europe while excluding those from other parts of the world. Increasing public pressure due to attention generated by refugees from Southeast Asia led the government to broaden its intake of refugees in 1976, and some sixty thousand arrivals from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos were subsequently admitted, the first time that Canada admitted a significant number of non-European refugees. As historian Laura Madokoro (2016, 188) argues, these arrivals were, "and continu[e] to be, regularly used as evidence of the country's 'humanitarian character.'" This "evidence" was regularly cited during the recent Syrian refugee crisis as a proliferation of media reports recounted the settlement of Southeast Asian refugees in the 1970s and 1980s as an example to be emulated. In an interview in the *Globe and Mail*, former prime minister Joe Clark recalled,

We were at that time a nation with increasing Asian immigration. But Vietnamese were not a prominent part of [Canadians'] view of who constituted the country. We weren't sure what kind of a reaction there might be among publics. . . . It's a real testament to the character of Canada that people who were—I'm sorry to use the phrase—"not like us" were so enthusiastically accepted by Canadian citizens. (Fine 2015)

Clark's emphasis on generosity and welcome as a matter of "character" stands in tension with how he places Vietnamese refugees within the larger history of Asian immigration. What he does not explain, of course, is why immigration from Asia was increasing during the mid-1970s (the

end of restrictive national quotas), nor does he name the long history of anti-Asian racism that rendered these migrants “not like us” in the first place. Ironically, by surfacing but then obscuring these histories, Clark fails to articulate exactly why, beyond a general expression of national values, the arrival of Southeast Asian refugees was such a pivotal event.²

What enables Clark to declare the overcoming of this past in the name of seemingly timeless values of liberal benevolence is the rise of a political culture of human rights against the backdrop of white settler colonialism and the exclusion and regulation of racialized migrants. In terms of legislation, the passage of the Bill of Rights in 1960 eventually led to the creation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms that was adopted in 1982 as part of the new constitution.³ Section 28 of the Charter states, “This Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians.” The inclusion of multiculturalism in this manner confirms its central role in discourses of human rights and made Canada one of the few nations to formally inscribe multiculturalism in its constitution (see Clément 2016).

The elevation of human rights into a fundamental attribute of Canadian society and its institutionalization through law and policy have enabled a symbolic economy in which shameful histories of racialized exclusion can be exchanged for an enlightened and seemingly timeless present in which the nation reaps the moral benefits that accompany its benevolent embrace of diversity. Encapsulated by Clark’s reference to “the character of Canada,” the attribution of moral superiority to the national body involves the erasure of racist pasts as aberrant and no longer operative, replaced, in the case of refugee resettlement, by a kind of humanitarian embrace that is put forth as an expression of Canada’s authentic character. I suggest that this kind of historical distancing is enabled by the positive affects—enthusiasm, optimism, even euphoria—generated by the embrace of human rights and humanitarianism. In what follows, I outline a critical engagement with such affects via an archival (re)turn to the primal scenes of multiculturalism.

Ann Laura Stoler (2002, 94) suggests that the archive “may serve as a strong *metaphor* for any corpus of selective forgetting and collections—and, as importantly, for the seductions and longings that such quests for, and accumulations of, the primary, originary, and untouched entail.” Following Foucault, she notes that “the archive is neither the sum of all texts that a culture preserves nor those institutions that allow for that record’s preservation. The archive is rather that ‘system of statements,’ those ‘rules of practice,’ that shape the specific regularities of what can and cannot be said” (96). One of Stoler’s strategies for reading the archive

is to elicit traces of sentiment and affect in seemingly rational colonial discourses. Extending this method, I want to ask how we might look for archival traces of the affective conditions that subtended the rise of multiculturalism in Canada by turning to the work of Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn, a Montreal-born artist now based in Stockholm.

Nguyen's work has repeatedly explored the logics and legacies of multiculturalism, in part as a response to her own family history as Vietnamese migrants, most of whom arrived in Canada as refugees. Contending with a national culture that often excludes these kinds of histories, Nguyen has frequently focused on the role of archives as key sites through which to work through questions of representation. In her ongoing project *The Making of an Archive*, for example, she works with local galleries and organizations in cities like Toronto and Vancouver to create a digital archive of family and personal photographs in order to supplement conventional collections in which such images are absent. The process of creating this archive involves working through questions of access and representation, as well as the quotidian ways in which racialized migrant communities are excluded from institutions of culture and memory.⁴

For the remainder of this essay, I focus on Nguyễn's 2012 installation and film *Space Fiction and the Archives*, which was reshowed at the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina in 2017. *Space Fiction* explores a confluence of events in 1967, the year in which Canada marked its centennial and, as I noted earlier, instituted a new point-based immigration system to replace national quotas. The year 1967 marks something of a high point for Canadian nationalism due to the centennial celebrations, and it is notable that the recent remounting of this exhibition took place during Canada's 150th anniversary year. But while the federal government invested tremendous resources in marking 2017 as "Canada 150," the difference in tone between 1967 and 2017 can be seen not only in Nguyễn's work but also in the fact that it was shown next to a retrospective exhibition by prominent Indigenous artist Alex Janvier, whose paintings explore the painful effects of colonization and the residential school system.

Space Fiction sheds light on how the progressive social transformations associated with 1967 involved the erasure of racist pasts. Nguyễn focuses on an obscure centennial project, the building of a UFO landing pad in the small town of St. Paul, Alberta, about two hundred kilometers northeast of Edmonton (see Figure 2). The exhibition reconstructs this event by assembling and displaying records like local newspaper coverage of the ceremonies that officially opened the landing pad on June 3, 1967, and an assortment of maps, archival records, images, and memorabilia pertaining to the pad. Presented with minimal commentary, these objects

Figure 2. Newspaper coverage of the St. Paul landing pad. Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn, detail of *St. Paul Journal Series*, 2012. Photograph framed with Plexiglas, as installed in *Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn: Space Fiction and the Archives*, MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2017. Photograph courtesy of Don Hall.

encourage visitors to piece together the details and significance of the landing pad. *Space Fiction* also includes etched black acrylic sheets that display the appendixes of Order-in-Council PC 19 1967-1616, which set out the categories and criteria for assessing immigration applications under the point-based system. The exhibit is accompanied by 1967: *A People Kind of Place*, a nineteen-minute film that includes footage of the landing pad, interviews with those who participated in the 1967 opening, and assorted film clips and images that explore its thematic implications.

By bringing together a seemingly minor, albeit amusing, event with landmark immigration reforms, Nguyễn encourages her audience to reflect on the implications of their synchronicity, to read one in light of the other. As the exhibition introduction states,

Canada's centenary was a time of unparalleled optimism as the country unveiled ambitious projects showcasing its culture and history to the world.

One of these projects was the construction of the world's first "UFO Landing Pad" that was built in St. Paul. This curious construction was proclaimed a "symbol of Western hospitality" by Paul Hellyer then Minister of National Defence. This monument for hospitality becomes a focal point for [Nguyễn's] investigation of significant changes in Canadian immigration regulations at the time.

Space Fiction offers an archive of the "unparalleled optimism" that infused Canadian nationalism during this time. In recognition of its embrace of centennial activities, St. Paul was awarded a Centennial Star of Canada for being, according to the local newspaper, "the most exuberant town in Canada—during Confederation year."⁵ In the film, this affective state is aptly articulated by the mayor of St. Paul; standing in front of the landing pad, he proudly proclaims, "The idea behind this landing pad is, frankly, to welcome everybody from this earth and also extraterrestrial beings if there are any and we hope there are." In one of the newspapers displayed, the mayor is quoted as saying, "U Thant, Secretary-General of the United Nations, would find around this landing pad, the atmosphere of friendship and understanding in the Councils of the United Nations General Assembly." Statements such as these translate optimism into expressions of welcome and hospitality, locating these cosmopolitan values in a quintessential Canadian small town.

What is most likely to strike contemporary visitors, however, is the utter transparency with which the landing pad and its discourses conflate the alien-as-foreigner with the alien-as-extraterrestrial.⁶ The effect of this conflation is to enhance a dimension of kitsch—as evidenced by the local contests for best Martian costume and hairdo, not to mention the frequent tongue-in-cheek references to extraterrestrials—that came to dominate media coverage. By offering what is literally outlandish content, projects like the landing pad obscure more complex histories of race and globality through a self-deprecating humor that confirms the decency of the town and its people.⁷

To counteract these narratives, Nguyễn includes numerous details in *Space Fiction* that interrupt forgetting and retrieve suppressed memories. Perhaps the most poignant material in the exhibit concerns the history of Indigenous peoples in the area. St. Paul, we learn, used to be called St. Paul de Métis, a reference to the community's origins as a Métis settlement, but the ending was dropped in the 1930s, soon after the Blue Quills Residential School was built nearby. In a particularly disturbing audio interview included in the film, a survivor recalls participating in a school play in which the Indigenous students dressed up as different

Figure 3. Video footage of Indigenous participants at the opening of the St. Paul Landing Pad. Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn, 1967: *A People Kind of Place*, 2012. Super 8mm, 16mm, and 35mm films transferred to SD video, as installed in *Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn: Space Fiction and the Archives*, MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2017. Photograph courtesy of Don Hall.

nationalities, such as French, Ukrainian, and Irish (she herself dressed up as Mexican). But the speaker also recalls the absence of Indigenous cultures in the play, a reminder of how liberal multiculturalism has been complicit in the perpetuation of settler colonialism. Adding to this irony, local Indigenous peoples were featured in the opening program of the Landing Pad (see Figure 3).⁸

The peculiar force of *Space Fiction* lies in how it registers and foregrounds the novelty (and, indeed, the strangeness) of the material presented as it conveys traces of the exuberant optimism that accompanied the building of the St. Paul Landing Pad and, by extension, the rise of liberal multiculturalism. In this sense, the exhibit is both an archive of

the landing pad as an event and a memorial to the affective conditions that made it possible in the first place. Once named and displayed, this optimism cannot but be revealed as naive at best and, at worse, complicit in ongoing forms of racial domination. As the audience, we have, in other words, left these affects behind, a realization that restages the kinds of historical erasure that have been key to liberal multiculturalism. The power of *Space Fiction* lies in how it provides an archive of this recurring process even as it stands as a memorial to a moment that passed long ago, but whose structures continue to operate in our contemporary moment.

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■ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Cathy Schlund-Vials and Tina Chen for inviting me to present an early version of this essay at the 2017 Global Asias 4 conference and for their ongoing editorial support. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the MacKenzie Art Gallery, especially executive director Anthony Kiendl and Marie Olinik. Last but not least, I am grateful to Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn for generously sharing her work and ideas throughout the writing of this essay.

■ NOTES

1. While a fuller engagement with current debates in critical refugee studies is beyond the scope of this short essay, the analysis presented here is indebted to works such as Walia (2013), Troeung (2013), Goellnicht (2015), and Nguyen (2018, 2019).
2. For a moving series of reflections on and interventions into the recent refugee crisis by former Southeast refugees in Canada, see <https://compassionatecanada.wordpress.com/>. For a critical reflection on this project, see Nguyen, Phu, and Troeung (2018).
3. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms is the first section of the Canadian Constitution, which was ratified in 1982. Before that, the power to amend the Canadian constitution was formally vested in the Parliament of the United Kingdom. The repatriation of the constitution by the government of Pierre Elliot Trudeau, the father of the current prime minister, and its foregrounding of human and civil rights was an important milestone in postwar political history.

4. See <https://themakingofanarchive.com/>.
5. Confederation refers to the formation of Canada as a Dominion in the British Empire in 1867.
6. During her research, Nguyễn asked local residents whether there were reports of UFO sightings in the area that would indicate the need for a landing pad and was told that there were not any (pers. comm.).
7. In one of the clips included in *1967: A People Kind of Place*, we see a comedy sketch in which a Canadian immigration officer rejects an extra-terrestrial arrival for not conforming to the new admissibility criteria.
8. Such pageants were quite common at the time across Canada. As for the school itself, it underwent a complete transformation when some three hundred Indigenous activists and their supporters staged a successful seventeen-day sit-in in 1970, demanding that control of the school and its operations be given to the local community (today it operates as the Blue Quills First Nations College). See “How Stanley Redcrow and First Nations Activists Reclaimed the Blue Quill Residential School” (*CBC News* 2017).

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Circumventing the Archive: *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* and *To Singapore, with Love*

JOANNE LEOW

What art can and must be made in a state where access to the archives is fraught? How does a (post)colonial state like Singapore address its seemingly seamless transition to an independent yet deeply authoritarian government? The contemporary acts of artistic *circumvention* that I will examine in this brief essay are deeply engaged with the contested histories of Singapore's transition to independence and their ongoing legacies in the postindependence period. Contemporary texts like Sonny Liew's graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* and Tan Pin Pin's documentary film *To Singapore, with Love* are works of art that produce alternate archives and subjectivities that seek to question the status of human rights movements in Singapore in the period after the Second World War.¹ Their circuitous and self-reflexive methods are a reflection, a media/tion of the closed access to the official archives of this period and the political status of dissidents in the country.

Growing up in Singapore during the 1980s and 1990s meant reading history textbooks and attending state-sanctioned National Education programs that were invested in producing a dominant narrative of Singaporean history. This narrative begins with the city-state's colonial founding in 1819 and in the postindependence period, proceeded apace along the principles of free trade, multiracial and multireligious equality, and meritocracy under the uninterrupted rule of the People's Action Party (PAP). Yet, there were strange lacunae in the high school history curriculum regarding the time after the Japanese occupation of Singapore (post-1945). This tumultuous period—which includes the Malayan Emergency or the Anti-British National Liberation War, a colonial war against communist guerillas (1948–60); decolonization (1963); a failed merger with present-day Malaysia (1963–65); a declaration of independence through separation (1965); and the consolidation of the ruling party's power—was glossed over in our history textbooks.