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Sonia Villegas-Lopez, eds., *Transnational Poetics:
Asian Canadian Women's Fiction of the 1990s*

Guy Beauregard

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Pilar Cuder-Domínguez, Belén Martín-Lucas, and Sonia Villegas-Lopez, eds.
Transnational Poetics: Asian Canadian Women's Fiction of the 1990s. Toronto: TSAR, 2011. 167 p. ISBN (pb): 9781894770682. CA\$ 21,72

- 1 While literature written by Canadians of Asian ancestry dates back to the late nineteenth century (notably by the Eaton sisters writing under the pen names of Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna), the self-conscious organization of such texts into the category of *Asian Canadian literature* is a more recent historical phenomenon intimately connected to community-based movements in Vancouver and Toronto and elsewhere in the 1970s. Some of the most widely discussed Asian Canadian literary texts, such as Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) and SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1990), emerged from these movements and have in different ways engaged with the histories of Asians in Canada, including but not limited to the state-directed dispossession and forced relocation of Japanese Canadians and the impact of Chinese exclusion on Chinese Canadians.
- 2 While the authors of *Transnational Poetics* readily acknowledge the significance of this earlier work, their study focuses on what they call "the new generation of Asian Canadian women writers who started publishing in the 1990s" (xi). In so doing, they

read and discuss, with evident commitment, a wide range of fictional texts by Shani Mootoo, Rachna Mara, Anita Rau Badami, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Evelyn Lau, Larissa Lai, Lydia Kwa, Hiromi Goto, Kerri Sakamoto, and others – a list that will likely be at least partially familiar to readers of *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* as some of these authors have been regional winners of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize Best First Book Award (Goto in 1995; Sakamoto in 1999) or regional winners of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize Best Book Award (Baldwin in 2000; Badami in 2001). And although one may note a gap between what the subtitle of *Transnational Poetics* promises (that is, a focus on “fiction of the 1990s”) and what it eventually delivers (a discussion of texts published in the 1990s, of course, but also of numerous texts published well into the 2000s), one might also read this temporal slippage as an attempt to track what could be called “the long 1990s” of Asian Canadian cultural production.

- 3 There is much to admire about this critical project, not the least of which is the way the authors readily acknowledge their reading positions in Spain and the glimpses they provide about the material circulation of these texts as they have become visible through the mechanisms of translation, publication, distribution, and reception. This sort of materially grounded criticism is not, however, consistently sustained throughout this study, which instead attempts an ambitiously broad overview of a field subdivided into three chapters – focusing, respectively, on writing by “Indo-Canadian” women, Chinese Canadian women, and Japanese Canadian women – with each chapter supposedly representing “one ethnic constituency within Asian Canada” (xiii). Leaving aside this conceptually dubious understanding of “ethnic constituenc[ies],” one may reasonably question the limits of such a field coverage project, however diligently executed: writers from Quebec (notably Ying Chen) are almost wholly disregarded, as are some prominent attempts to narrate histories that cut across various Southeast Asian locations (notably in the fiction of Madeleine Thien; Lydia Kwa's narratives interlinking Singapore and Canada are addressed but subsumed into the category of “Chinese Canadian”). One may also rightfully wonder why the authors elected to foreground the terms *transnational* and *poetics* in the title of their study without even a cursory attempt to theorize or explain their use of either of these key terms.
- 4 The authors conclude their introduction by asserting that “[they] are certain that Asian Canadian writers of this younger generation [i.e., the writers discussed in *Transnational Poetics*] have an important contribution to make, if only we listen to their words intently” (xvi). While this point might be read as an expression of respect for the authors and texts under discussion, it also sounds remarkably similar to a critical position put forward by King-Kok Cheung nearly twenty years ago in *Articulate Silences* (1993), a study of Asian American and Asian Canadian women writers in which Cheung attempted to contribute to “a conversation in which no one is hushed and to which everyone can listen” (23). At the level of argument, then, readers should not expect a radical repositioning of critical inquiry – a point that is further underlined by the fact that the publication years of the critical sources cited in this study for the most part stop roughly around 2007. Such a time lag, while possibly unavoidable in this sort of co-authored book, nevertheless limits the usefulness of a 2011 publication as an up-to-date engagement with contemporary critical debates. These limitations cannot be willed away. But when viewed with an eye on the future, the conditional clause quoted above – “if only we listen to their words intently” – raises fundamental questions about how such a condition could in fact be fulfilled as well as additional questions concerning the adequacy of existing institutional arrangements that make such “listening”

(im)possible. In this way, *Transnational Poetics* not only directs our attention to the 1990s and to Asian Canadian work produced during and after that time; it also points to the future and to critical work that remains undone.

AUTHORS

GUY BEAUREGARD

Guy BEAUREGARD is an Associate Professor at National Taiwan University and the founding director of the Empire and Overseas Literature Project. He is the co-editor of “Pacific Canada” (a special issue of *Amerasia Journal* published in 2007) and “Asian Canadian Studies” (a special issue of *Canadian Literature* published in 2008). His most recent work has appeared in the *International Journal of Canadian Studies* and *West Coast Line*.