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National and Global Decolonial Practices: Asian and Indigenous Inter-referencing

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ABSTRACT
This article puts local debates about settler colonialism and racialised migrants into dialogue with decoloniality with the hope of forging new critical approaches and making new political projects possible. I appeal to a global context in order to move beyond the impasse that has arisen on the national plane between settler colonialism studies which divides us into the homogenising categories of Indigenous and settler, and migrant studies which relies on a more nuanced understanding of both the transnational trajectories of migrants as well as the racialised spaces they occupy within nations. I turn to SKY Lee’s landmark novel Disappearing Moon Café to think beyond the nation-state and about the intimacies of colonial identification. This essay proposes a methodology of inter-referencing as outlined by Kuan-Hsing Chen to approach the relations between diasporic and Indigenous peoples in order to conceive of decolonial projects that can transform how we approach Canada.

KEYWORDS
Settler colonialism; imperialism; migrant; Asian; Indigenous; Canada; inter-referencing

If delinking means to change the terms of the conversation, and above all, of the hegemonic ideas of what knowledge and understanding are and, consequently, what economy and politics, ethics and philosophy, technology and the organization of society are and should be, it is necessary to fracture the hegemony of knowledge and understanding that have been ruled, since the fifteenth century and through the modern/colonial world by what I conceive here as the theo-logical and the ego-logical politics of knowledge and understanding. (Mignolo 2007: 459)

Both movements were therefore to prefigure the temptation that confronts minority discourse at this juncture, the same temptation to which the differing isms that emerged in the Sixties and Seventies all succumbed: that is, of taking the ontological “facts” of ethnicity (non-White and White) as well as of gender, sexuality, and culture as if these were things-in-themselves, rather than “totemic” signifiers in an overall system of resemblances and differences. (Wynter 1987: 216–217)

‘To Build a World in Which Many Worlds Will Coexist’

While then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s formal apology to Indian Residential School survivors, their families, and communities was initially cause for much optimism and hope, many Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars have since expressed their
disappointment with how the project of reconciliation in Canada has unfolded. The
apology made on behalf of Canada was for the century-long practice of using residential
schools to further a colonial project of cultural genocide by separating Indigenous children
from their families and placing them into schools where they were ‘inadequately fed,
clothed and housed’ and ‘deprived of the care and nurturing of their parents, grandparents
and communities’ (Harper 2008). But rather than marking a turning point in the relation-
ship between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian government, the apology has largely
proven to be yet another moment of what Sophie McCall calls ‘colonial double-talk’ (2015:
43). Without the recognition of Indigenous rights and the return of Indigenous land, Dene
scholar Glen Coulthard argues that reconciliation efforts can only ever ‘remain a “pacify-
ing discourse” that functions to assuage settler guilt, on the one hand, and absolve the
federal government’s responsibility to transform the colonial relationship between
Canada and Indigenous nations, on the other’ (2014: 127). Mohawk anthropologist
Audra Simpson also draws attention to the emptiness of reconciliation discourse when
she points out that the ‘formal apology whittles down and isolates harms to one thing –
that thing that is recognizable – the 80,000, and the violence that came with “civilization”,
with forceful education’ (2016: 439). In response to the flawed politics of reconciliation,
A. Simpson has elsewhere reminded us that ‘refusal’ is a ‘political alternative to “recog-
nition,” the much sought-after and presumed “good” of multicultural politics’, and
indeed, a strategy that she sees practiced by the Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke (2014: 11).

In Red Skin, White Masks, Coulthard argues that reconciliation is a project that is
incapable of transforming relations between the state and Indigenous peoples given that
it practices a form of non-mutual recognition. While the governmental shift from
measures designed to eliminate and assimilate Indigenous peoples to practices of recog-
nition represents an improvement for Indigenous peoples, it does not address the
settler colonial foundations of the nation. In order to unpack how Indigenous peoples
are situated within settler colonialism, and more specifically, how settler colonialism as
relations of domination work to ‘facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of
their lands and self-determining authority’ (Coulthard 2014: 7), Coulthard modifies
insights taken from Marx and Fanon. The crucial observation he makes through a reworking
Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation is that for Indigenous peoples, settler colo-
nialism has been about dispossession rather than proletarianisation (2014: 13); by using
Fanon’s work on colonialism in Algeria as an analytic, Coulthard asserts that ‘in the Cana-
dian context, colonial relations of power are no longer reproduced primarily through
overly coercive means, but rather through the asymmetrical exchange of mediated
forms of state recognition and accommodation’ (2014: 15). Coulthard analyses the struc-
tural and affective dimensions of colonial power, and while his focus is primarily on how
they are exercised against Indigenous peoples, his argument also has useful implications
for understanding how the state governs other racialised peoples. I draw these out by
focusing on two key points that Coulthard makes, the first with respect to how he sets
up his argument about recognition and the second in terms of the alternative that he pro-
poses to state recognition in order to make visible the shared structural and ideological
forces that govern Indigenous and racialised minorities.

The first and most obvious connection between the limits of recognition for Indigenous
peoples and racialised minorities in Canada is made through Coulthard’s critique of the
limits of recognition via his use of Charles Taylor’s well-known essay on multiculturalism
entitled ‘The Politics of Recognition’. Taylor draws on Hegel to argue that because recognition is a human need, withholding recognition constitutes a form of injury. In response to Taylor’s claim that Indigenous peoples are a key group that would benefit from state recognition, Coulthard argues that recognition does not address the power imbalance within colonial relationships and cannot heal the kinds of injuries it inflicts. He also notes that another flaw in Taylor’s approach is that it neglects the structures of colonialism as it focuses too heavily on recognition (Coulthard 2014: 35), a perplexing emphasis given that in the past, ‘Indigenous demands for cultural recognition have often been expressed in ways that have explicitly called into question the dominating nature of capitalist social relations and the social form’ (2014). Himani Bannerji makes a comparable critique when she reminds us that recognition was used by the state to pacify racialised minorities asking for economic and political change:

We demanded some genuine reforms, some changes – some among us even demanded the end of racist capitalism – and instead we got “multiculturalism.” […] As the state came deeper into our lives – extending its political, economic and moral regulation, its police violence and surveillance – we simultaneously officialised ourselves. It is as though we asked for bread and were given stones, and could not tell the difference between the two. (1996: 105)

Coulthard and Bannerji’s arguments make it evident that recognition, whether in the context of state multiculturalism or reconciliation, reinforces structural inequalities as it produces affective attachments to the state.

These insights about recognition provide a means of interrogating the category ‘settler of colour’, which, while intended to locate racialised minorities within settler colonialism and determine their political and ethical responsibilities to Indigenous peoples, makes use of this same logic of multicultural recognition. Thus, while the term settler of colour names the structural positioning of racialised migrants within Canada in order to create coalitions intended to dismantle structures of colonial power, it limits future conversations by evacuating migrant histories of displacement from these discussions. As Bannerji notes of the ‘term visible minorities’ in the context of state multiculturalism that ‘one is instantly struck by its reductive character, in which peoples from many histories, languages, cultures and politics are reduced to a distilled abstraction’ (1996: 119), the term settler of colour performs similar work as it recognises difference without nuancing the often-long and complex histories of colonialism, imperialism and displacement that lead to one becoming a ‘settler of colour’. In much the same way that Coulthard introduces colonialism into ongoing conversations about dispossession as an attempt to widen rather than displace critical preoccupations with capital and understand the ‘relations of power that inform our settler-colonial present’ (2014: 15), I put these debates about settler colonialism alongside those about other imperialisms and colonialisms with the goal of understanding in a more nuanced manner the spaces in which we are located.

The second point of Coulthard’s that I pick up on is his proposal that efforts to reconcile with the state be redirected towards a project of Indigenous self-recognition. He advocates ‘a resurgent politics of recognition that seeks to practice decolonial, gender-emancipatory, and economically nonexploitative alternative structures of law and sovereign authority grounded on a critical refashioning of the best of Indigenous legal and political traditions’ (Coulthard 2014: 179). While outlining his alternatives to reconciliation, Coulthard briefly mentions the need for Indigenous peoples to establish relations of
solidarity with other communities and includes ‘those racial and ethnic communities that find themselves subject to their own distinct forms of economic social, and cultural marginalization’ (2014: 173). He then draws on the work of Mohawk political scientist Taiaiake Alfred and Anishinaabe thinker Leanne Betasamosake Simpson to argue that Indigenous peoples must decolonise ‘on our own terms, without the sanction, permission or engagement of the state, western theory or the opinions of Canadians’ (Simpson qtd. in Coulthard 2014: 154). In advocating for a form of self-recognition that turns away from the state, the West, and Canadians, Indigenous resurgence is akin to the efforts of inter-Asian cultural studies scholars to decolonise knowledge production, in part by decolonising the West in favour of facilitating dialogues amongst sites within Asia. Instead of always attempting to engage the West, Kuan-Hsing Chen argues that we should direct our attention elsewhere as ‘ignoring others who have experienced similar pressures and trajectories of modernization makes it impossible to understand oneself. By shifting our points of reference, we can generate more strategically useful knowledge’ (2010: 225). Chen’s *Asia as Method* engages largely with the case study of Taiwan as well as other Asian examples in order to imagine decolonial and deimperial projects in Asia. My turn to Chen’s method of inter-referencing is a deliberate attempt to make visible the complex discourses of colonialism and imperialism that shape relations within Asia as well as Asian relations to other parts of the world and, moreover, to insert this messier understanding of Asia into ongoing debates about how settlers of colour are located within settler colonialism. I echo Coulthard’s belief that solidarity amongst Indigenous peoples and other racialised people is a necessary goal to strive towards, and believe that we can realise it by making each other our points of reference.

In what follows in this essay, I sketch out an overview of the scholarship that positions Asians as settlers of colour in order to consider what a decolonial project that addresses settler colonialism but also extends beyond Canada might look like. I turn to SKY Lee’s novel *Disappearing Moon Café* to consider the question of solidarity between Indigenous peoples and Asian migrants, and conclude by using Chen’s method of inter-referencing to structure such conversations. I put these local debates about settler colonialism and racialised migrants into dialogue with decoloniality with the hope that such a move can help us forge new critical approaches and strengthen political alliances. I appeal to a global context in order to move beyond the impasse that has arisen on the national plane between settler colonialism studies which divides us into the homogenising categories of Indigenous and settler, and migrant studies which relies on a more nuanced understanding of both the transnational trajectories of migrants as well as the racialised spaces they occupy within nations. In doing so, I hope to formulate an approach that lets us understand how Asian subjects are situated concomitantly within settler colonialism and in relation to other forms of colonialism and imperialism.

### Migrants, Settlers of Colour, Arrivants

The call for Asians to reckon with their place within settler colonialism has largely come from Asian Canadian and Asian American scholars themselves, many of whom are deeply invested in working through Asian relations to Indigenous peoples and to Canada and the US. Rita Wong’s ‘Decoloniasian’ essay – an early and influential contribution that many subsequent Asian Canadian thinkers have returned to – and Larissa Lai’s ‘Epistemologies
of Respect’ are anti-racist and feminist attempts to build political solidarity with Indigenous peoples. Wong’s essay begins by asking:

What happens if we position indigenous people’s struggles instead of normalized whiteness as the reference point through which we come to articulate our subjectivities? How would such a move radically transform our perceptions of the land on which we live? (2008: 158)

Such a question resonates, of course, with Chen’s method of inter-referencing, as does Wong’s realisation that directing our political energies towards whiteness means that we continue to neglect engaging the positions of racialised subjects (2008). To consider what such a project might look like, she turns to literature by Indigenous and Asian writers to interrogate ‘immigrant complicity in the colonization of land as well as the possibility of making alliances toward decolonization’ (2008: 158–159). A similar concern with Asian complicity is also shared by Lai who asserts that before undertaking recuperative work, she must first recognise that

I am complicit even as I am colonized. What I want to ask, then, is how a poetics and a politics of relation between Asians like myself and the Indigenous peoples of the land we call Canada can be enacted, at this late hour, under these imperfect conditions. (2013: 100)

Wong and Lai take seriously the question of how to live ethically alongside Indigenous peoples when settler colonialism and capitalism constrain our relations. This problem is also taken up by Malissa Phung who argues for a settler of colour critique to understand Asian–Indigenous relations, stating firmly that ‘today’s Asian Canadians must confront and acknowledge their roles and responsibilities in the ongoing structure of settler colonialism, even if they or their ancestors do not benefit from the same privilege systems as many white settlers’ (2015: 57).

While the political and ethical questions posed by these critics are crucial ones that demand our attention, for many of us located within the field of Asian Canadian studies, they have proven to be very difficult ones to answer. To help us move beyond the current impasse, I turn to a recent essay by Mohawk literary scholar Gage Karahkwi:io Diabo that argues for the importance of examining the affective dimensions of Asian–Indigenous coallitional work. He notes that the interventions made by Wong, Lai, and Phung assume that Asian and Indigenous relations are structured by shared feeling, specifically and respectively as respect, a need to claim responsibility, and gratitude (Diabo 2019). While recognising the lure of these more positive emotions, Diabo asserts that we need to also include within these deliberations what we might consider negative affects, especially since ‘those feelings are responsible to and potentially critical of the sense of non-inclusion and non-progress which marginalized peoples are liable to experience in relation to the supposedly universal attraction of modernity’ (Diabo 2019). Rather than bracketing negative feelings, we need to address and perhaps even redirect them towards the common goal of dismantling settler colonialism (Diabo 2019). His essay concludes by using the method of inter-referencing to recognise that the ‘bad feelings’ that appear in Lee Maracle’s short story ‘Yin Chin’ and Peter Blow’s Village of Widows, ‘stem from the fact that the residual legacies of colonialism are already present in and therefore connect all parts of the world’ (Diabo 2019). Diabo’s call to complicate our understandings of how Asian and Indigenous peoples are positioned in structural and affective terms in relation to settler colonialism and to each other is worth heeding, as
it can be used to forge unruly kinds of coalitions with much decolonial potential. It is with this insight in mind that I reflect upon ongoing debates in Canada about migrants and settler colonialism.

As Patrick Wolfe reminds us, settler colonialism is a project that makes use of the logic of elimination with the goal of acquiring territory (2006: 388). In Canada, it is a European expansionist project that has relied upon Christianity and the doctrine of terra nullius to justify Indigenous genocide and used social, legal, and economic institutions to legitimise these acts. Scholars such as Bonita Lawrence (Mi’kmaw), Enakshi Dua, Eve Tuck (Unangax), and K. Wayne Yang place all non-Indigenous peoples, including racialised minorities, within the category of settlers. Tuck and Yang, for example, write that because the United States is a settler colonial nation-state that operates as an empire,

dispossessed people are brought onto seized Indigenous land through other colonial projects [...] In this set of settler colonial relations, colonial subjects who are displaced by external colonialism, as well as racialized and minoritized by internal colonialism, still occupy and settle stolen Indigenous land. Settlers are diverse, not just of white European descent, and include people of color, even from other colonial contexts. This tightly wound set of conditions and racialized, globalized relations exponentially complicates what is meant by decolonization, and by solidarity, against settler colonial forces. (Tuck and Yang 2012: 7)

I am sympathetic to the point that Tuck and Yang make here and elsewhere in their article, namely that the occupation of land by non-Indigenous peoples further marginalises Indigenous peoples and exacerbates their conditions in which they live, and moreover, that the attempts of racialised peoples to better their lot by striving economically, politically, and socially, rely on capitalist and national structures that put Indigenous life at risk. However, I want to step back and consider the implications of these framings by focusing on another one of Tuck and Yang’s insights, namely how
derolonization in a settler context is fraught because empire, settlement, and internal colony have no spatial separation. Each of these features of settler colonialism in the US context – empire, settlement, and internal colony – make it a site of contradictory decolonial desires. (Tuck and Yang 2012: 7)

I do so in order to meditate on the ‘contradictory’ nature of ‘decolonial desires’ and consider what is at stake in situating all migrants within the category of settler.

To use the language of settler colonialism is to return to the arrival of European colonialism with its expeditions, armed soldiers, traders, missionaries, and settlers that began hundreds of years ago and to struggle with how the structure of settler colonialism continues to operate in our current moment even as we remain mindful that Indigenous existence did not begin with the advent of colonialism. In this same spirit of engaging with the present as it is shaped by historic systems of power, we must consider the complexities of how migrant groups are also situated in terms of the histories and logics of imperialism. The restrictive conditions under which Asian and Black bodies were brought to Canada are of consequence as their intention was not to acquire land by dispossessing Indigenous inhabitants but often more simply to survive and also to permit their families abroad to survive. In other words, while Asian and Black migrants entered into a settler colonial structure, they occupied restricted spaces within them. This marks them in crucial ways as different from European settlers who ‘come with the intention of making a new home on the land, a homemaking that insists on settler sovereignty over all things in
their new domain’ (Tuck and Yang 2012: 5). For those brought to North America as slaves, as well as for those who travelled to Canada or the US as temporary labour and did so with the intention or aspiration of returning home, their occupation of Indigenous land did not come with exactly the kind of settler sovereignty Tuck and Yang critique. These distinctions trouble the simple conflation of migration with colonialism by drawing our attention to the design of empire and enable us to consider how racial logics shape the nation without letting go of the fact that the flow of migrant bodies into Canada displaced Indigenous peoples from their land.1 Jodi Byrd uses Kamau Braithwaite’s term arrivants ‘to signify those people forced into the Americas through the violence of European and Anglo-American colonialism and imperialism around the globe’ and to theorise how Indigenous peoples, settlers, and arrivants ‘have functioned within and resisted the historical project of the colonization of the “New World”’ (Byrd 2011: xix). Iyko Day suggests that while nuancing the category of immigrant does not absolve groups of their participation in settler colonialism, not doing this work and ‘folding them into a generalized settler position through voluntaristic assumptions constrains our ability to understand how their racialized vulnerability and disposability supports a settler colonial project’ (2016: 21). Such insights underscore the need for us to think about the simultaneous and reinforcing nature of colonial and imperial projects and find ways to interrupt how they continue to exercise power. In relation to Asian migrants to North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it is important to register the ways in which they were both subjects of settler colonialism and subject to it. This does not absolve them of the role they played in the settler colonial project, but recognises how they were instrumentalised as part of that project.

By attending to the various histories of colonialism and imperialism that intersect in Canada, we become conscious of what Walter Mignolo refers to as the ‘colonial matrix of power’ that undergirds Western civilisation and structures knowledge and subjectivity (2011: 2). Central to the colonial matrix of power is the intertwining of modernity and colonialism, ‘a narrative that builds Western civilisation by celebrating its achievements while hiding at the same time its darker side, “coloniality.” Colonality, in other words, is constitutive of modernity – there is no modernity without coloniality’ (Mignolo 2011: 2–3). Transforming the structures of power instituted by coloniality requires the undertaking of projects that are both epistemic and political, and in this respect, decolonial projects differ from those of decolonisation as the latter replaces state power without interrogating it (2011: 53). In contrast, decoloniality requires that we engage in ’both the analytic task of unveiling the logic of coloniality and the prospective task of contributing to build a world in which many worlds will coexist’ (2011: 54). There are two points that Mignolo makes in his analysis of decoloniality that I find particularly pertinent for contemporary debates about Indigenous and minoritised migrant relations in Canada. The first is the distinction between where we are (or the physical space we are located within) and where we dwell (which is situated within the colonial matrix of power) (2011: xvi). Dwelling is premised on the understanding of ‘Eurocentrism as an epistemic rather than a geographical issue’ (2011: 54) and it prompts us to be mindful of the impossible choices that migrants have been forced to make with respect to coloniality and modernity. The second is Mignolo’s idea of delinking from the colonial matrix by dewesternisation and decoloniality, which he maps out in terms that include economic agendas, political directives, and knowledge. Within the case of Canadian cultural politics, delinking can be used to
envision new conversations that begin with migrant and Indigenous histories instead of with whiteness. It is a very different practice to delink dialogues in order to engage with these subjectivities as they are shaped by colonial trajectories than it is to expand and modify critiques of settler colonialism to include migrants. Redirecting our attention away from whiteness and towards each other is a means of ‘chang[ing] the terms and not just the content of the conversation’ (Mignolo 2007: 459).

Central to such efforts is the need to address these power dynamics via the relations between Indigenous peoples and diasporic populations within Canada in ways that take into account the possibilities that are imaginable for migrants during earlier periods as well as in this current moment. Even though an understanding of all non-Indigenous arri-
vants through the homogenising category of settler is morally and structurally persuasive when read within the logic of the nation-state, it underestimates the complexities of imperialism that are at work in the histories that lead to this moment and continue to shape how we think and live. For this reason, I propose that we engage with the relations between diasporas and Indigenous peoples in Canada within a frame that accounts for the long and unwieldy histories of empires that intersect but are not contained to local spaces. The conditions of diasporic migrations and the structures of power that regulate Canada need to be remembered as we think about migration in relation to the settler colonial project and racist logic of European imperialism. To make such a point is not to argue for a diasporic innocence in the face of the violences that Indigenous individuals and communities continue to experience, but rather to consider what is at stake in framing these conversations in terms of guilt and complicity and to ask whether there are other, poten-
tially more generative, approaches to these dialogues and decolonial work. It is also to think about the necessity of decolonial projects that include, but also extend, the project of indigenising Canada. To point out that empire extends far beyond the borders of the Canadian nation-state is not to turn our attention away from what happens within this space or to minimise the struggles of Indigenous peoples in Canada, but rather to reframe both settler colonialism in Canada and Indigenous struggles against it as part of global imperialism. I do so in order to focus our gaze on the kind of ‘cosmopolitanism at home’ that the special editors of this issue draw our attention to or what Sneja Gunew highlights when she asks, ‘what might it mean to assume an approach in which citizens of and in the world include all its parts?’ (2017: 2). A crucial element of including all peoples throughout the world is thinking through and with the histories and logics of empires as they complicate and turn back on each other, and also locating and shaping the multiple trajectories that have displaced peoples from local and global sites. My contention is that being mindful of the transnational dimensions of local struggles will serve us well as we undertake decolonial projects that include and also extend beyond settler colonialism in Canada.

To understand this bind, we need to approach the local within the context not only of nation-building projects but also imperial efforts that exceed individual nations. In response to the simultaneous exploitation and participation of early Chinese Canadians within the project of nation-building, Christopher Lee argues that ‘the promise of citizen-
ship and national belonging is no longer sufficient to redeem violent pasts. Rather, the entire project of nation-building can no longer serve as the horizon of emancipation for Chinese Canadians or First Nations peoples’ (2017: 293). I see this point as gesturing towards the need to think beyond the nation-state in order to also engage with what
Lee has elsewhere referred to as transnational lifeworlds in an effort to destabilise liberal multiculturalism (Lee 2015). To undertake this work is to consider the material effects of colonialism within the context of the structures of knowledge and power that reproduce these dynamics in a myriad of ways. It is, moreover, not to reduce the work of decolonisation to metaphor as Tuck and Yang warn against but rather, to think about decolonial work in ways that trouble colonial systems of knowledge. While the restitution of material resources is a crucial part of decolonial projects, if we are to transform relations between communities as well as to the land and the state, we must also reexamine the histories of colonialism and imperialism as they shape knowledge production.

The Intimacy of Identification and SKY Lee’s Disappearing Moon Café

To demonstrate some of the possibilities of this reframing and recontextualisation, I turn to SKY Lee’s landmark novel, Disappearing Moon Café ([1990] 2017), as it has anchored many examinations of Asian and Indigenous relations in Canada. As many readers of Canadian and Asian diasporic literatures are well aware, Lee’s novel was the first Chinese Canadian novel to be published by a major Canadian press. It makes a significant contribution to conversations about diaspora and Canada by examining pressing issues of historical memory, race, gender, sexuality, class, and social justice. As Christopher Lee notes in his Afterword to the anniversary edition of the novel, part of the contribution of Disappearing Moon Café was ‘its ability to bring the activist conversations in which she [SKY Lee] participated to the attention of mainstream’ (2017: 286). Since then, the novel has continued to perform this work for readers by generating rich discussions of settler colonialism, migration histories, and the nation-state. The story of four generations of the Wong family, Disappearing Moon Café begins with the family’s patriarch, Gwei Chang, who has migrated to Canada from China, and it traces the family’s genealogy through the children that he has with two different women. When the novel opens, Gwei Chang is working for the Benevolent Associations to collect the bones of Chinese men who perished while building the Canadian Pacific Railway. While searching for the skeletal remains of these migrant workers, Gwei Chang meets and falls in love with Kelora, an Indigenous woman, and it is thanks to the hospitality of her family that he is able to survive in the wilderness, away from the protection of his Chinese migrant community. This idyllic existence comes to an abrupt end when Gwei Chang abandons Kelora in order to return to China and take a wife. In an attempt to be accountable for his past, Gwei Chang later takes Ting An, the son he did not know Kelora was pregnant with, under his wing after Kelora passes away. While he makes Ting An his righthand man, Gwei Chang does not acknowledge that he is Ting An’s father until late in their lives. Gwei Chang’s son with his Chinese wife, Mui Lan, is, however, recognised as his heir and receives all of the benefits of this legitimation while Ting An’s labour and business acumen ensure that the family’s fortunes flourish.

Critics such as Wong, Lai, and Phung have critiqued Gwei Chang for his refusal to do more to honour the ‘socio-political debt’ that he owes to not only Kelora, but also to the Indigenous communities that sustained him (Phung 2015: 62). In addition to betraying the trust of his lover and her extended family, Gwei Chang aligns himself with the nation-state that has violently dispossessed Indigenous peoples when he returns from China and contributes his labour to building the colonial nation. His fortunes prosper as he reaps the
benefits from the intertwined machineries of colonialism and capitalism. Lai reads Gwei Chang’s acts in individual as well as allegorical terms, noting that they speak to how we Chinese Canadians are indebted to the Indigenous peoples of the country some people call Canada. The early Chinese in Canada were exploited by the Canadian state and Canadian companies, yet they also participated in the colonial nation-building project that disenfranchise Indigenous peoples. (2013: 103)

In framing the problem of responsibility for Gwei Chang’s failings in collective terms and arguing that it extends to subsequent generations of Chinese Canadians that include herself, SKY Lee, and other Chinese Canadian critics, Lai takes a position that aligns in many ways with settler of colour critics as they seek to locate themselves within colonial projects that marginalise Indigenous peoples. As Dean Saranillio notes in his examination of Asian presences within the histories of Hawaiian settlement,

settler states have no interests in non-Natives identifying with Native movements, as it opens their purview to processes of settler accumulation by Native dispossession, thus serving to oppose a system set by White supremacy that while differently, ultimately comes at the expense of all of us. (2013: 291)

While I agree with Saranillio and Lai that each of us must engage with the histories and systems of power that produce us, I remain unconvinced that a settler of colour critique is the best way to approach the decolonial work that lies before us. Rather, I believe that we need to expand this discussion to foreground how Asian and other diasporas enter into projects of colonialism, nationalism, and modernity as well as how they are discursively positioned within them in order to understand the complexities of imperialism and colonialism.

To think through Mignolo’s invocation of multiple worlds coexisting, I direct our attention to that fateful moment in Disappearing Moon Café when Gwei Chang decides to leave Kelora. How do we understand Gwei Chang’s decision to leave Kelora, the great love of his life, to undertake a transpacific voyage back to China in order to fulfil his familial obligations? The choice is made while Gwei Chang and Kelora are speaking about the winter that is slowly approaching and Kelora mentions the likelihood that they will experience hunger. Gwei Chang could see how famine was the one link that Kelora and he had in common, but for that instant, it made him recoil from her as surely as if he had touched a beggar’s squalid sore. The memory of hunger flung him back to that other world again, where his mother’s wretchedness plucked at his sleeve and gnawed through his stomach. (Lee [1990] 2017: 277)

It is, of course, a moment in which the characters are drawn together through this shared experience, and yet this common memory of hunger also repels. How can we think through what appears to be a potential moment of solidarity and recognition and yet also reminds us of precisely what makes solidarity challenging, and perhaps at times, seem impossible? What, in other words, does it mean to identify with each other? And in 1894, what does the intimacy of this identification mean for Gwei Chang and Kelora?

Wong observes that Gwei Chang’s fear drives him back to China and causes him to dehumanise Kelora. She argues that ‘[j]t is symptomatic of dominant power relations that Gwei Chang functions within what might be termed a sinocentric worldview, one
that eventually allows him upward mobility within the confines of the ethnic enclave of Chinatown’ (Wong 2008: 163). Without disagreeing with Wong’s observation that Gwei Chang’s actions give us insight into how he is shaped by racialised and gendered relations of power, I also suggest that we approach his familiar fear of starvation in terms of what Lisa Lowe calls the ‘intimacies of four continents’, a term she coins to describe ‘the often obscured connections between the emergence of European liberalism, settler colonialism in the Americas, the transatlantic African slave trade, and the East Indies and China trades in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries’ (2015: 1). Lowe uses the language of intimacy to describe the intertwining of subjugated lives and this touches on the unacknowledged connections between, for example, African enslavement and Chinese indentured labour. Lowe reminds us that the British introduced the Chinese worker into the plantation economy as a liminal figure with the intention of using the Chinese as a barrier between the British and Black slaves:

The British introduced the Chinese into the community of settlers and slaves as a contiguous “other” whose liminality permitted them to be, at one moment, incorporated as part of colonial labor, and at another, elided or excluded by its humanist universals. Neither free European nor the white European’s “other,” the Black slave, neither lord nor bonded, the Chinese were represented as a paradoxical figure, at once both an addition that would stabilize the colonial order and the supplement whose addition might likewise threaten the attainment of any such stability. (Lowe 2015: 31)

This crucial insight into the design of colonial spaces helps us understand Gwei Chang’s lifeworld and why, when confronted with the possibility of starvation, he elects to return to China and marry a woman who will ensure the survival of his family. This pivotal moment in Gwei Chang’s life speaks to the long histories of disciplining colonised subjects as well as encourages us to imagine the experiences of poverty and starvation that drove Gwei Chang and others from his community to migrate. Moreover, it highlights how the British empire deliberately engineered a sense of placelessness for Asian migrants within the colonies, and ensured that a pervasive sense of fear and loneliness would be intertwined with a desperate desire for survival. Even for those migrants from parts of China not colonised by the British, the effects of European colonialism and modernity are still felt through discourses that imagine Chinese migrants as alien and inassimilable and Canadian immigration laws and provincial and municipal policies designed to limit the movements of Asians within Canada. What is recognised, perhaps subconsciously, by Gwei Chang is vulnerability in the face of structures intended to displace and destroy colonised subjects and an intuitive understanding of how the condition of being what Lowe calls ‘unfree’ extends to love and family (2015: 3). And to understand his decision, we must think about how the Canadian context is part of a racialised, transnational, and interlocking imperial economy.

While such a condition is illustrated with respect to nineteenth-century Chinese migrants in Lee’s novel, this complex relationship with displacement extends beyond Asian populations to include other colonial subjects. Rinaldo Walcott approaches this dilemma from the perspective of the Black diaspora when he asks,

[is it possible to have sovereignty without land? Most, not all, Caribbean people are people who must make themselves native to a place they are not from, as Jamaica Kincaid once put it. Such a conception begs for different ideas of sovereignty, nation, and citizenship. (2014: 199)
Read alongside each other, we see how European efforts to undertake colonialism and modernity produced multiple forms of diasporic placelessness not only in geographical but also epistemological terms. This is a central point that Sylvia Wynter makes in her critique of Western knowledge as produced via colonial power and the structures of knowledge that establish European Man as the political subject and relegate non-Europeans to the category of ‘irrational or subrational Human Other’ (2003: 266). Wynter demonstrates repeatedly how within our systems of thought, ‘Women and Minorities, taken together as a systemic category, constitute the set of negative Ontological Others by means of which the descriptive statement of man-as-natural-organism, encoded in the figure of man, is stably brought into systemic being’ (1987: 235). Wynter’s argument aligns with Mignolo’s investigation of the colonial matrix and colonial difference and they each call on us to look beyond the parameters of individual nation-states in order to also engage with the historic, affective, social, and political dimensions of spaces and how they travel. In taking seriously diasporic and Indigenous subjectivities and making them central to our inquiries, my hope is that we can dislodge the systems of power that restrict us and begin to move towards more just futures. For this reason, I propose an inter-referencing methodology for approaching the relations between diasporic and Indigenous peoples and for conceiving decolonial projects that can transform how we approach Canada.

**Inter-referencing in Canada**

In the final section of this essay, I speculate as to what an oppositional politics that is attentive to the national, but also has an eye to the imperial, might look like. I think about such a politics not simply in historical terms, but also within the context of the present day, in relationship to a post-Cold War globalised reality. To do this work, I return to Taiwanese cultural critic Chen Kuan-Hsing’s political project as sketched out in *Asia as Method* and attempt to extend it to include the Canadian context as Chen’s work offers useful directions for future intellectual and political projects. Chen’s work examines how knowledge production in Asia has been constrained by imperial histories and what he calls ‘its obsessive critique of the West, which bounds the field by the object of its own criticism’ (2010: 1). The imperial foundations of knowledge production can be seen in the global division that sees the West as the source of universalist theory and Asia as a site of cultural difference and place to conduct area studies. Given the complex relations of power at work within Asia, Chen argues for a multipronged approach to political and intellectual labour that includes decolonisation (work first undertaken by the colonised), deimperialisation (work first undertaken by the coloniser), and de-cold warring which addresses the structural, psychic, and cultural effects of the Cold War in Asia, much of which has taken the form of Americanisation (2010: 212).

In nuancing the relations of power that shape knowledge in Asia and attending to the different interventions that decolonisation, deimperialisation, and de-cold warring can make, Chen outlines a critical approach for understanding the complex and contradictory relations of power produced by colonialism, imperialism, and the Cold War that can be of use for examining places such as Canada and minoritised formations such as Asian Canada. Chen’s last form, ‘de-cold war’, asks us to think about decolonisation and deimperialisation not just as processes that occur in the immediate aftermath of war, but also as ones that need to be undertaken long afterwards as we negotiate ‘the legacies and ongoing
tensions of the cold war’ (2010: 4). For Asian diasporas in Canada, the kind of work that Chen proposes requires multiple forms of positioning. It demands that we acknowledge our positioning within the settler colonial structures of Canada in relation to Indigenous peoples without flattening out the hierarchical structures and uneven dynamics of colonisation. At the same time, de-cold warring also requires that we explore how our location within North America is largely shaped by the hot and cold wars that have taken place in Asia and often the result of colonial and imperial efforts there. In other words, Asian diasporas in Canada are both part of the colonial structures in Canada but also produced by Canada’s imperial loyalties and support of displacing conflicts in Asia. To see these efforts as intertwined political projects is not a perspective that is encouraged by the nation-state as the logic of Canadian multiculturalism discourages us from seeing colonialism within Canada and within Asian countries as related transnational systems that take place on particular national stages.

Asia as Method also suggests new ways of conceptualising Canada that can incorporate our multiple ways of dwelling and being in this place. As mentioned earlier in this essay, central to the Inter-Asia cultural studies project and Chen’s own intellectual project of decolonising knowledge production in Asia is the idea of inter-Asian referencing; by ‘using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other’s points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt’ (Chen 2010: 212). Putting countries in Asia in dialogue with each other and seeing how each other negotiates comparable conditions and obstacles is both immensely useful for finding new solutions and also a means of decentring the West as a reference point for Asia. Asia as Method does not suggest that Asia try to erase the West altogether, but rather that it use the West as one cultural resource instead of as its only resource, and is comparable in this respect to Mignolo’s notion of delinking. In this way, Chen suggests that ‘[t]he task for Asia as method is to multiply frames of reference in our subjectivity and worldview, so that our anxiety over the West can be diluted, and productive critical work can move forward’ (2010: 223). This is a method that can also be used by Canadian literary and cultural studies to understand how colonial and national aspirations have been intertwined in and for Canada and also to develop alternative ways of negotiating dominant histories and publics in Canada. By decentring dialogue about Canada, we might be able to realise Wynter’s vision of generating ‘the possibility of a “demonic observer” ground outside the consolidated field of meanings of our present analogic, a ground in which these “new objects of knowledge” can find their efficient criterion/condition of truth’ (1987: 207–208).

While Canada obviously differs from Asia in the sense that it is not composed of multiple countries, the idea of inter-referencing can still be used to remap Canada with various communities acting as each other’s reference points and drawing inspiration from each other’s intellectual and political work. For example, Phanuel Antwi’s ‘Dub Poetry as a Black Atlantic Body-Archive’ argues that dub poetry is a collective enterprise that brings the reader into the text and its project. It examines how dub, produced in sites such as Canada, Jamaica, and England, brings together sound and desire in ways that give us insight into black modernity. In asking us to listen with our whole bodies, ‘dub poetry instantiates a form of culture, one in which the art of poetry is not separated (or easily separable) from the art of living, or the art of the living, embodied self’ (Antwi 2015: 69). And while the histories embedded within this artistic form are particular to
the Black Atlantic, they nonetheless offer valuable insights about race, affect, and aesthetic labour that can be used to understand how transpacific migrations have shaped Asian diasporas in Canada. Similarly, Vinh Nguyen’s ‘Me-search, Hauntings, and Critical Distance’ examines how his complex relations to his research, as both a former refugee from Vietnam and a scholar of Southeast Asian studies, make conventional understandings of critical distance impossible, but also produce other forms of scholarship that are simultaneously critical and intimate (2015: 472). Moving through different histories and experiences, Antwi and Nguyen each carefully examine the intimate entanglements of self, collective pasts, and decolonisation projects and suggest ways of moving ‘towards a less violent, decolonised future’ (2015: 469). In much the same way that Chen argues that cultural imaginaries are not merely theoretical abstractions but rather problems that ‘exist in our bodies and minds, and the related desires and psychic pain that must be overcome are palpable parts of our everyday lives’, Antwi and Nguyen’s projects speak to the kinds of ideas, aesthetic problems, and experiences that need to be included if Canadian studies is to move in a decolonial direction (Chen 2010: x).

Inter-referencing diasporic and Indigenous work within Canada can decentre European settler perspectives without excluding them from dialogues about decolonial work. But if we are to transform these conversations, we need to attend to the ‘[g]eo-politics of knowledge (for example, emerging from different historical locations of the world that endured the effects and consequences of Western and capitalist expansion)’ in order ‘to break up the illusion that all knowledges are and have to originate in the imperial form of consciousness (for example, the right, the left and the center)’ (Mignolo 2007: 462). Localising knowledges and being aware of their specificity is key to undertaking political and intellectual projects that imagine new rather than simply ameliorative futures. As a source of inspiration, I invoke Wynter’s description of the social movements of the sixties and her attribution of part of their power to the simultaneity of these movements:

The sixties’ movements had begun that whole ripping apart of the emperor’s clothes – and remember the sixties movements had been fueled by the earlier anticolonial movements all over the world, which had climaxed in Vietnam, Algeria, and elsewhere. All such humanly emancipatory struggles, all then so fiercely fought for! You bring them together, and the world system has begun to question itself! (Wynter and McKittrick 2014: 23)

These various struggles for liberation took on the oppressiveness of colonialism, patriarchy, racism, heterosexuality and other regimes and worked to decentre social orders by pushing from multiple angles. If we look towards the political movements of the sixties as a model to think through our current Canadian political moment, we can perhaps imagine a collective project that similarly asserts in multiple contradictory, disruptive, and even shocking ways the geo-politics of knowledge.

In much the same way that Black studies and Southeast Asian studies can be put in dialogue to analyse notions of history, subjectivity, and intimacy as they relate to Canada, we can promote other kinds of decolonial dialogues. For example, one comparative project is to put into conversation scholars working on questions of land, power, and sovereignty in the context of Indigenous struggles in Canada with those that are researching how militarised colonialism in sites like Guam, the Philippines,
and Okinawa has displaced people from their homes, and often forced them to move overseas. Transnational dialogues also push us to be conscious of the site-specificity of discourses with examples such as the Malay who are Indigenous within the space of Singapore (Yue 2018: 20) but become part of the Asian diaspora once they enter into Canada or the US. My point here is simply that using the ‘localized knowledges’ of various communities as reference points for imagining Canada would let us produce a very different kind of nationalism. In much the way that Chen argues that ‘[u]niversalism is not an epistemological given but a horizon we may be able to move toward in the remote future, provided that we first compare notes based upon locally grounded knowledge’, I suggest that by decentring dominant notions of Canada and nationalism, we can reformulate ‘Canada’ as goal to which we can aspire (Chen 2010: 245). And to return to my initial discussion of reconciliation and settler colonialism in Canada, reworking the nation in this manner would be a means of responding to the troubling politics of recognition that are present in national reconciliation projects (Coulthard 2014: 25). By making Indigenous and diasporic questions and concerns our entry points for conversations about justice, place, and collectives, we can begin to undertake decolonial work that is capable of transforming the conditions of knowledge production in Canada and imagining new futures.

Note

1. A similar question about the difference between migration and settler colonialism has been posed by Nandita Sharma and Cynthia Wright as they query the description of ‘settlement colonialism [as] the forced movements of enslaved Africans, the movement of unfree indentured Asians, or the subsequent Third World displacements and migrations from across the globe, many of them indigenous people themselves’ (2008–9: 121). I appreciate this nuancing of global movement and their engagement with power, voluntary and involuntary migrations, and colonialism, but differ in terms of how I pursue this insight. Sharma and Wright focus largely on the naturalisation of people to places and critique Indigenous nationalisms in order to construct an argument about the need for a global commons. I make a different argument by focusing on global imperialism and proposing a methodology of decentring Sylvia Wynter’s category of Man or what Walter Mignolo calls the zero point (Mignolo 2011: xvii).

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