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2008

## "Looking through the twin lens of race and gender: a new politics of surveillance in Asian Australian and Asian Canadian women's writing"

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**“Looking Through the Twin Lens of Race and Gender:  
A New Politics of Surveillance in Asian Australian  
and Asian Canadian Women’s Writing”**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of  
the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

*by*

Robyn Morris, BA *Griffith*, BA Hons *Melb*

Faculty of Arts  
English Literatures Program

2008

## **THESIS CERTIFICATION**

### **CERTIFICATION**

I, Robyn Lee Morris, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Arts, English Literatures Program, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Robyn Morris

10<sup>th</sup> July, 2008.

## **Abstract:**

“Looking Through the Twin Lens” examines how an emergent body of fiction by contemporary Asian Australian and Asian Canadian women writers engages in revisionist tactics, complicating the hierarchical nature of the politics of looking. Recent feminist theories explore the link between the male gaze, images of the female body in mass media representations and the tradition of the high art nude, but they have neglected to contextualise other forms of embodiment such as race. This study extends the theory of a gendered gaze into the area of race. Texts by Australian-based writers Simone Lazaroo, Lillian Ng and Hsu-Ming Teo and Canadian-based Hiromi Goto, Larissa Lai and Evelyn Lau, have been selected for their intercession and intervention with established ways of seeing, gazing and looking. These texts are connected not only by each writer’s Asian ancestry and their female authorship, but also by their scopic thematics and by their literary entry into contemporary individual and national identity politics. While contemporary feminist theory has prompted a re-reading of well-known texts of the West through the lens of gender, the recurring reference to well-recognised filmic or literary narratives in many of these writer’s works, allows for an interrogative return to the original through the twin lens of gender and race. In this sense, contesting the dominance of white hegemony involves both a return of the gaze and a return to issues of misrepresentation that are central to a past and contemporary cultural politics of difference.

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## List of Abbreviations

<i>AF</i>	Lazaroo, <i>The Australian Fiancé</i>
<i>BM</i>	Teo, <i>Behind the Moon</i>
<i>BP</i>	Goto, “The Body Politic”
<i>C</i>	Goto, <i>Chorus of Mushrooms</i>
<i>CM</i>	Lau, <i>Choose Me</i>
<i>F</i>	Lai, <i>When Fox is a Thousand</i>
<i>FG</i>	Lau, <i>Fresh Girls</i>
<i>K</i>	Goto, <i>The Kappa Child</i>
<i>LHP</i>	Ingalls Wilder, <i>Little House on the Prairie</i>
<i>LV</i>	Teo, <i>Love and Vertigo</i>
<i>R</i>	Lai, “Rachel”
<i>SC</i>	Ng, <i>Swallowing Clouds</i>
<i>SFG</i>	Lai, <i>Salt Fish Girl</i>
<i>SS</i>	Ng, <i>Silver Sister</i>
<i>TW</i>	Lazaroo, <i>The Travel Writer</i>
<i>WW</i>	Lazaroo, <i>The World Waiting to be Made</i>

## Acknowledgements

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*To the wonderful teaching, administration staff and students, (past and present) in the Arts Faculty at The University of Wollongong I offer my gratitude for never failing to ask how my thesis was faring (Graham Barwell, Guy Davidson, Debra Dudek, Anne Lear and Paul Sharrad), for helping me with grant applications and document formatting (Robyn Foster), for technological support (Irene Wilton), and for the many students whose keen interest in reading, writing and rewriting made me realise why I so love teaching.*

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*To my family, especially my sister Tracey and sister-in-law Trina, and parents, to my friends: all of the Hbs, to Karen, Rochelle & "the Gails"— a simple thanks perhaps seems inadequate, but they know their value in supporting my research and travel.*

***It is with love and appreciation  
that I dedicate this thesis to  
DJ, Jordy, Eleri & the H.***

## Preface

## **Preface**

My interest in Asian Canadian studies was set in motion when I played “taxi” or tour guide to a group of Asian Canadian writers visiting the University of Wollongong as part of a collaboration between the then, newly-opened Centre for Canadian-Australian Studies on campus and ACSANZ, the Association for Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand. As I got to know these writers, as I listened to their discussions in my car and to their readings of their own poetry and fiction during the course of the conference, it occurred to me that the thesis topic I had so desperately been searching for had, literally, flown in from Canada. Meeting with these writers meant that I had finally found an engaging and new area of study. I was concerned however about the problematics of subjectivity that could arise when a white, female academic set about analysing texts by women writers of colour. When I voiced my concerns to the mentor of this group, the poet, critic and writer Roy Miki, he replied, “Well someone has to!”

Receiving this green light was a significant moment and I began to research and contemplate the body of work produced by these writers. I began to see a thematic link that circulated around an examination of the constructedness of identity. I observed that these writers engaged with issues of race and gender by using the motif of vision. As I began to read work by Asian Australian writers I realised that this engagement with the politics of the gaze was not geographically isolated. In identifying the use of the metaphor of vision within this body of work I began to simultaneously research how photography, art, film and literature have historically constructed and perpetuated hierarchies of difference. What became increasingly important to my project was the investigation into how Asian Australian and Asian Canadian women writers, minoritised as visibly invisible by a dominant, white, male, culture, engaged in a literary-based politics of counter-surveillance.

My project was challenged by the geographical distance of Australia from Canada and I have been fortunate to receive grants to extend my research abroad. I am extremely grateful to ACSANZ for their Postgraduate Travel Award which I received in 2003, and ICCS Postgraduate Scholarship (the International Council for Canadian Studies) which I received in 2004. The trips undertaken after receiving these awards were also generously supported by Wollongong University Postgraduate Research Grants. These

trips were instrumental in allowing me to network with scholars and writers who were based primarily in Vancouver. I also used this time to do archival research at the University of British Columbia and at Simon Fraser University unearthing treasures otherwise hidden, despite the information highway that I travel so frequently from my desk back in Australia.

While I had so many assumed knowledges about the history of race in Australia, I had much to learn about the Canadian context. During my first trip I discovered the huge parallel between both countries, in terms of political and cultural acts of racism against Asian sojourners and immigrants in both nations. I travelled home with a suitcase brimming with photocopies, books, journals and notes, and a head swimming with ideas for chapters. My second trip consolidated this research, but I also found time to attend a conference and interview the Canadian writers, Larissa Lai and Hiromi Goto as part of the stipulations of my travel grant. My work on the writers who feature in this thesis has been widely published.<sup>1</sup> While it is lifting to have had my early thesis research accepted by respected, refereed, academic journals, it is also particularly exciting to be a part of an ever-growing field of comparative race and gender studies in Australia and Canada.

---

<sup>1</sup> Published articles include: "Consuming Asianness: Food, Race and the Power of Recuperative Identity Politics within the Literary". *Journal of Australian Studies*. Special Edition. *Asian@Home: New Directions in Asian Australian Studies* (Nov 2008) forthcoming; "Japanese Canadian Border Poetics." *New Dimensions in Canadian Studies: Asia-Pacific Perspectives*. Eds. Stewart Gill & R.K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2008. 39-50; "'growing up an Australian': Renegotiating Models of Mateship and Australianness in Hsu-Ming Teo's *Behind the Moon*." Special Issue *Journal of Intercultural Studies-Locating Asian Australian Cultures*, 27: 1 & 2 (Feb-May 2006); "'many degrees of dark and light': Sliding the Scale of Whiteness with Simone Lazaroo." Eds. Kam Louie & Tseen Khoo. *Culture, Identity, Commodity: Diasporic Chinese Literatures in English*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2005: 279-98; "Re-visioning Representations of Difference in Larissa Lai's *When Fox is a Thousand* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*." *West Coast Line* 44. 38: 2 (Spring 2005): 69-87; "'What does it mean to be Human?': Racing Clones, Monsters and Replicants." *Foundation: International Review of Science Fiction*. 33:91 (Summer 2004): 81-96; "Making Eyes: Colouring the Look in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* and Larissa Lai's *When Fox is a Thousand*." *Australian Canadian Studies* 20:1 (2002): 75-98; "Reading Photographically: Translating Whiteness through the Eye of the Empire." *Hecate* 27:2 (2001): 86-96; "Piecing Together Female Stories in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*." *New Literatures Review*, 36 (Winter 2000): 35-45; "'sites of articulation—An Interview with Larissa Lai.'" *West Coast Line* 44. 38: 2 (Spring 2005): 21-30.