Although Peter Li wants to write about Chinese-Canadians, he finds that they have assimilated because of Canadian policies which have prohibited them from participating in mainstream social life.

The Chinese in Canada
by Peter S. Li

Like Play Memory, Sharon Pollock's Whiskey Six Cadence is dominated by men and their perceptions of the world. The material conditions under which men live are extremely difficult. They labour long hours in mines, drink hard, and die from a sudden accident or slow physical deterioration. For most of them there are no other options. Johnny, the only son of the Furby family who refuses his fate, falling to find a job in the East, takes up with Mr. Big, the nummulist. The lives of the women are equally bleak, and even more subservient. Leah is a victim of child abuse who is ensnared because of her inability to tell the father/lover. Molly is better off. Her young raiter and with his death the dream of a woman's happily-ever-after romance is shattered. Mrs. Furby, the only woman in the play with a will and opinions of her own, commands little respect from the men and has no influence upon them. An advocate of the movement to change, with her "thin old mangy cat" manner, she is drawn as fanciful, mugging, dissatisfied and utterly impotent.

In the face of their hardships, the characters fabricate multiple versions of material reality: the miners are alcoholics; the lovers are starry-eyed; Mr. Big rants of the cosmic significance of the universe. The final, senseless tragedy would seem to undercut these interjections, yet Johnny's last words are, "It may have been all lies, but that still doesn't mean it wasn't true." Ultimately, with its dissolving images, its gossamer and gauze, the play and its theatricality are, with these romanticizations, a complexity which in the end romanticizes fatalism and hopelessness just as much as it does dreams of escape. One is left with an ambivalent yet oppressive vision of the miners and the bookkeepers and the women they abuse in this romanticization of the brutality of the patriarchal order, life in colonial yet cosmic, fixed yet full of promise, coal and gossamer.

Each of these plays depicts aspects of women's oppression with some degree of insight. However, when read together, they seem to suffer from a number of disturbing tendencies. If women have in the past been victims and continue to be so in the present, is it necessary to confine our representations to such women? If in the past women have contributed to the ideologies which oppress them and continue to do so in the present, it is necessary for our representations to acquiesce to and continue this act of complicity which supports them and continues to do so in the present. The Chinese in Canada through their cultural background, Li begins his study by focusing on the structure and policies of Canadian society. He claims that the experience of Chinese-Canadians and the characteristics of their community are more the result of interaction with the larger society than the influence of traditional Chinese values or in-group activities. The Chinese have not assimilated despite their 130-year history in Canada, not because of adherence to traditional Chinese values, as commonly believed by sociologists and the general public, but because of policies passed in Canada which prohibited them from participating in mainstream social life. In the history of Canada, Li tells us, no other immigrant group was subjected to as many discriminatory laws as the Chinese. They were the only ethnic group which was required to pay a head tax to enter this country. They were never regarded as permanent residents of Canada, and were often considered a menace to racial and moral purity. They were prohibited by law from acquiring Crown lands (B.C. 1864, c.2), from working in mines (Coal Mines Regulation Amendment Act, 1899), from admission to provincially established homes for the aged.

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Has the Chinese: "Why you send us me offes?"
Amor de Cosmos (premier of B.C.): "Because you can't or won't assimilate with us."
Has the Chinese: "What ia date?"
Amor de Cosmos: "You won't drink whiskey and talk politics and vote like us."
—turn of the century Canadian political cartoon

(Provincial Horse Act, 1893), from holding liq-
uer licenses (Liquor License Act, 1899), from hiring white female employees (The Women's
and Girls' Protection Act, 1922), from working in the civil service (Civil Service Act, 1927) and from entering the professions of law and phar-
acy. Anti-Chinese legislation reached its peak in 1923, when the federal government passed the
Chinese Immigration Act which excluded Chi-


ean from entering Canada for 24 years, until the bill was repealed in 1947. It was only until after the Second World War that Chinese-Ca-


nadians had the right to vote. The Chinese did not assimil-


ate because they were not allowed to assimilate! Reduced to second-class citizens, subjected to social, economic and residential segregation, they responded by esteeming into their own eth-


nic enclaves. Thus, the development of the Chi-


nese community was in large part due to factors in the larger society.


Li argues that sociologists would not be able to present an adequate analysis of racism without focusing on political economy. He steers away from the cultural aspect of race-relations, claim-


ing that the discrimination against the Chinese had little to do with cultural differences or whites' fear of non-whites. It was mainly linked to the exploitation of labor within a capitalist structure. The early Chinese immigrants were recruited as cheap labor to fill the shortage of white workers during the economic expansion of western Canada in the 19th century. They worked in such labor-intensive jobs as mining, lumbering, and most of all, the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Racism, Li explains, benefited capitalism by reducing the social standing and market value of this group, and thus justifying their low wages and unequal treatment. In times of economic recession, the Chinese were convenient scapegoats for economic problems (i.e., an threats to white workers' jobs) and social ills (i.e., as public menace because of their "inferi-


or" culture). Such scapegoating subsequently led to large numbers of racist laws which denied their political and civil rights.


Even in the present time, with the absence of discriminatory laws, Li claims, there is still a cost for being Chinese in the Canadian labour market. The Census of Canada 1961 indicates that the average schooling for all Canadians was 11.55 years; for Chinese-Canadians it was 12.12. Yet, the census indicates, on average they had an income level of $1,295 below the national aver-


age. Furthermore, being a racial minority still places a limit on their choice of professions. The early Chinese immigrants avoided competitions and hostilities of white Canadians by limiting themselves to restaurants or laundry work. Chi-


nese-Canadians today are still in professions away from public involvement. Statistics show that many have occupations in the scientific and engineering field which require technical expert-


ise rather than social skills or interactions with the public.


The conditions of Chinese-Canadians in recent years have no doubt improved. Yet these changes, Li claims, are brought about mainly by changes in the economic structure rather than by racial equality or greater assimilation. These are mainly determined by new immigration policies in the post-war period which reflect the need for new types of workers in the contemporary capitalist economy. The make-up of the Chinese community with its large number of professionals, skilled workers and people of higher level education is the result of such need.


Peter Li's The Chinese in Canada is no doubt an invaluable, insightful sociological study. My only problem with it is his over-reliance on statistics. Being a good empirical sociologist, statistics are, of course, important to him, but their quantity can make his book rather dry and dull for readers who are not statisticians. At times, they can even divert from the main point of the discussion of the social condition of Chinese-Canadians. In the midst of charts, graphs, numbers, decimals and percentages, his illustration of the experience of being Chinese in Canada tends, at times, to be obscured. This is more so with regard to this analysis of contemporary Chinese-Canadians. There is a noticeable difference in his analysis of Chinese-Canadians before the Second World War and those who came after the war. With respect to the former, Li conveys the expen-


tential aspect of their condition through the use of historical documents, eyewitness reports and a style of writing that relies less on statistics and


more on sensory metaphors. The reader gets a sense of the emotional involvement between the writer and the people he writes about. However, in his analysis of the latter, such involvement is totally lacking as the pages become filled with statistic after statistic. Perhaps there is a bias on Li's part (being a sociologist who stresses class analysis) to place greater focus on the exponen-


tial aspect of Chinese-Canadians in the pre-war era, who were poor, uneducated, unskilled labourers of rural background as opposed to contemporary Chinese-Canadians who are afflu-


ent, educated professionals who dwell in large urban centres.


In spite of such problems, one must still give Li credit for presenting an original, in-depth study of Chinese-Canadians. By focusing on the structural context of Canadian society in his understanding of Chinese-Canadians, his book in essence is about Canada and how Canada has treated a minority group. So far, the picture of such treatment does not contain much to be proud of. Perhaps a better picture may emerge if we begin with the view, as Li has done, that Chinese-Canadians are not foreigners but people who do belong here.


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The Vernacular Muse


by Dennis Cooley


Not long ago I attended a panel discussion on the relationship between writing and feminist criti-


cism. The panelists were writers rather than academicians, so they tended to approach the ques-


tion of theory from the standpoint of being in-


volved in a game as players, not as sideline


strategists. I should make it clear that the partic-


ipants were respectful of theory and what it could offer in terms of understanding how language operates. No one denied the necessity of rigor-


ously examining texts. But there also seemed an unstated consensus that each writer's creative process couldn't be, should be, divorced from theory. So the relation between feminist literary criticism and this particular forum, a simply sharing space And to keeping the co-


As a writer myself, I have always been interested in feminist critiques of literary texts. My search for this consciousness has often led me to the margins of the text, finding ab-


nonal, often in the space of the silence and voids that exist between the lines, the spaces that are not covered by the established tradition. As soon as I began to write, I realized that the female voices of this kind of writing are often spoken, but never written. It is strange to me that this is the case, but it is not difficult to think of examples where it is true of even the women's movement. As such, the Veneral Muse is the work of a writer who is aware of the possibilities that lie in the margins, and who is using them to create a new body of literature. I would like to think of this book as a response to the question of whether or not feminist literary criticism can be successful within the framework of the academic world. While it may not be possible to do so, I do believe that there are ways in which these two worlds can coexist, and that the Vernacular Muse is a step in that direction.