

"Heathen Chinees: 'Why you sendee me offee?'

Amor de Cosmos [premier of B.C.]: 'Because you can't or won't assimilate with us.'

Heathen Chinees: 'What is datee?'

Amor de Cosmos: 'You won't drink whiskey and talk politics and vote like us.'"

—turn of the century Canadian political cartoon



(Provincial Home Act, 1893), from holding liquor licences (Liquor License Act, 1899), from hiring white female employees (The Women's and Girl's Protection Act, 1912), from working in the civil service (Civil Service Act, 1927) and from entering the professions of law and pharmacy. Anti-Chinese legislation reached its peak in 1923, when the federal government passed the Chinese Immigration Act which excluded Chinese from entering Canada for 24 years, until the bill was repealed in 1947. It was only until after the Second World War that Chinese-Canadians had the right to vote. The Chinese did not assimilate because they were not allowed to assimilate! Reduced to second-class citizens, subjected to racial, economic and residential segregation, they responded by retreating into their own ethnic enclaves. Thus, the development of the Chinese 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, claiming that the discrimination against the Chinese and whites' fear of non-whites. It was mainly linked to the exploitation of labour within a capitalist structure. The early Chinese immigrants were recruited as cheap labour to fill the shortage of white workers during the economic expansion of western Canada in the 19th century. They worked in such labour-intensive jobs as mining, lumbering, and most of all, the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Racism, Li explains, benefitted 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., as threats to white workers' jobs) and social ills (i.e., as public menace because of their "inferior" 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 1981 indicates that the average schooling for all Canadians was 11.56 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 average. 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 restaurant or laundry works. Chinese-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 expertise 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 into the larger society. They 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 education level 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 experiential aspect 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 experiential 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 experiential 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 affluent, 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

Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1987, 311 pp.

Not long ago I attended a panel discussion on the relationship between writing and feminist criticism. The panellists were writers rather than academics, so they tended to approach the question of theory from the standpoint of being involved in a game as players, not as sideline strategists. I should make it clear that the participants were respectful of theory and what it could offer in terms of understanding the necessity of rigorously examining texts. But there also seemed an unstated consensus that each writer's creative process couldn't be, and shouldn't be, dictated by

theory. So the relation between feminist literary criticism and this particular forum, is simply sharing space and to keeping the co-

As a writer myself, I am inclined toward literary criticism, a close look at why I am reading *The Vernacular Muse*. In eight critical essays by this Manitoba critic, Cooley challenges the standard and insisting upon the value of a text. Talking about the text, analyzed, and a new education, nothing to do with such a view whose work has so much to do with the vernacular (meaning, as Forché points out, that it is formally acceptable, and that it should be cheering, right in the sober dwelling of criticism, a renegade decla-

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theory. So the relationship between writing and feminist literary criticism, at least according to this particular forum, appeared to come down to simply sharing space in the house of literature. And to keeping the connecting doors open.

As a writer myself, I've always felt ambivalent toward literary criticism. But I'd never taken a close look at why I felt this uneasiness until reading *The Vernacular Muse*, a collection of eight critical essays by Dennis Cooley. Here is this Manitoba critic championing poetry that challenges the standards of "literary Mounties" and insisting upon the examination of the politics of a text. Talking about the voices of the marginalized, and a new economy of poetry that has nothing to do with succinctness of style. Those of us whose work has sometimes been judged polemical (meaning, as American poet Carolyn Forché points out, that it doesn't celebrate politically acceptable, and therefore invisible, values) should be cheering, right? Finally we have an ally in the sober dwelling of Canadian scholarly criticism, a renegade declaring that:

This is a common and a continuing fight—to be able to use yr own voice in yr own world. To get out from under the smother of an official culture that is imported and "high." To be at home in the world. To name and proclaim an unwritten part of ourselves, spoken but never written because the writing available to us would not accommodate our worlds.

Part of me did cheer, not only because Cooley writes with (unscholarly) political conviction laid bare but because he does so clearly and inventively. Part of me wanted to argue, too—not a bad thing, of course, since it proves that *The Vernacular Muse* is engaging enough to make me pay attention. But I realized that my quarrel was often with the nature of criticism itself rather than with Cooley as a practitioner of the art. And I think that comes down to writers and critics having different relationships to language.

In an essay called "The Credible Word," John Berger wrote that authenticity in literature "comes from a single faithfulness: that to the ambiguity of experience." Within this framework, language is about possibility. But criticism, by the nature of its discourse, sets up standards, an organization of understanding that can't be ambiguous or it loses its authority as theory. Loses, in other words, its legitimation, which is based on narrowing possibilities. And this is true even of the most anti-conservative criticism, such as that contained in *The Vernacular Muse*.

A considerable chunk of the book is taken up with the analysis of work by Dorothy Livesay, Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Laurence, Robert Duncan and Sinclair Ross. These essays were a

critic's criticism—insightful, but not as interesting to me (as a writer) as Cooley's work on the vernacular in poetry. So most of my remarks will concentrate on two essays on this topic, as well as a complementary piece on line breaks.

Cooley points out that "literary value resides...not as is often supposed, independently and inside the poem, but in how we decide to read the poem, and our thinking will vary tremendously depending on a whole series of assumptions, strategies and claims we bring, however unreflectingly, to bear." And he goes on to speak for "refusing the presented terms" and "bringing unassuming voices into the poem." I'm with him all the way on this (ideological) stand. How we differ is in strategies.

In the opening essay, Cooley compares "eye" poetry and "ear" poetry. He is careful to say that he finds merit in both forms, though he also makes evident, in his delineation of their characteristics, where his greater allegiance lies. No pretence of disinterested scholarship. He regards eye poetry as more individualistic, setting up a particular hegemony: "the poet's eye—a *different* eye, a higher understanding—presides...over a spatialized, silenced, and therefore scarcely populated landscape" with the poet as "originator of meaning."

Ear poetry, on the other hand, doesn't depend on dazzling metaphors or expressive language so much as colloquial patterns of speech, the quality of a "found" text. In contrasting the two modes, Cooley argues "how important the matter is: for one poet, in soliloquy, unengaged in a dialogic way, sings her sensitive impressions to herself—monologic; the other poet enters dialogue, acknowledges a social setting...—dialogic." (Cooley describes vernacular, or ear poetry as more often written by males and eye poetry by females, but unfortunately he doesn't pursue the social/cultural factors that might account for this difference.) He admits that the two forms aren't mutually exclusive but *because criticism is based on opposition*, he ends up not considering ambiguities. Scrupulously fair on the surface, he is quick to say "we can cultivate *both* of them, enjoy each for what it is."

But look at the political implications of the two forms as Cooley has characterized them! He suggests that "we witness the migration of authority from author to reader" in poetry that abandons metaphor and nuanced language; that vernacular poetry subverts the dominant order through its resistance to formal structure and conventional interpretation. Essentially, that meaning resides in form.

I realize that content is a dirty word nowadays and that meaning is ambiguous anyway (like

experience itself). My concern with language-based theory (what we've been talking about here and finally naming) is exactly the same objections that Cooley raises to contemplative poems as being merely "objects of interpretation whose primary interest is semantic." Like him I'm often impatient/dissatisfied with the inwardness of much formal poetry. But the apparent outwardness of the vernacular doesn't necessarily mean that the form is less centered in the poet. The organizing sensibility of the author is always situated in the text, even though it may be disguised; the problem is how to open up the authority of the poem, whether using colloquial language and/or metaphor.

I think Dennis Cooley and I would be in agreement about this, since all of the essays in *The Vernacular Muse* refuse to be cloistered, isolated from the social context. They challenge the unthinking use of language—as does good poetry. Proving, I guess, that whatever problematic the relationship between writing and critical theory remains, because of their respective forms, there is a common bond.

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**The Last Intellectuals:
American Culture in the Age of Academe
by Russell Jacoby**

New York: Basic Books, 1987, 290 pp.

The gist of *The Last Intellectuals* is the argument that a dramatic attitudinal and behavioural shift took place between the past two generations of American—and Canadian—intellectuals, and that the recent predominance of academic institutions is largely responsible for this phenomenon.

According to Jacoby, many intellectuals of the older generation—those born in the first decades of this century—were able to convey their ideas to the educated public in plain English; they stimulated many discussions across the nation and were instrumental in enriching the intellectual life of all Americans. As a result, a number