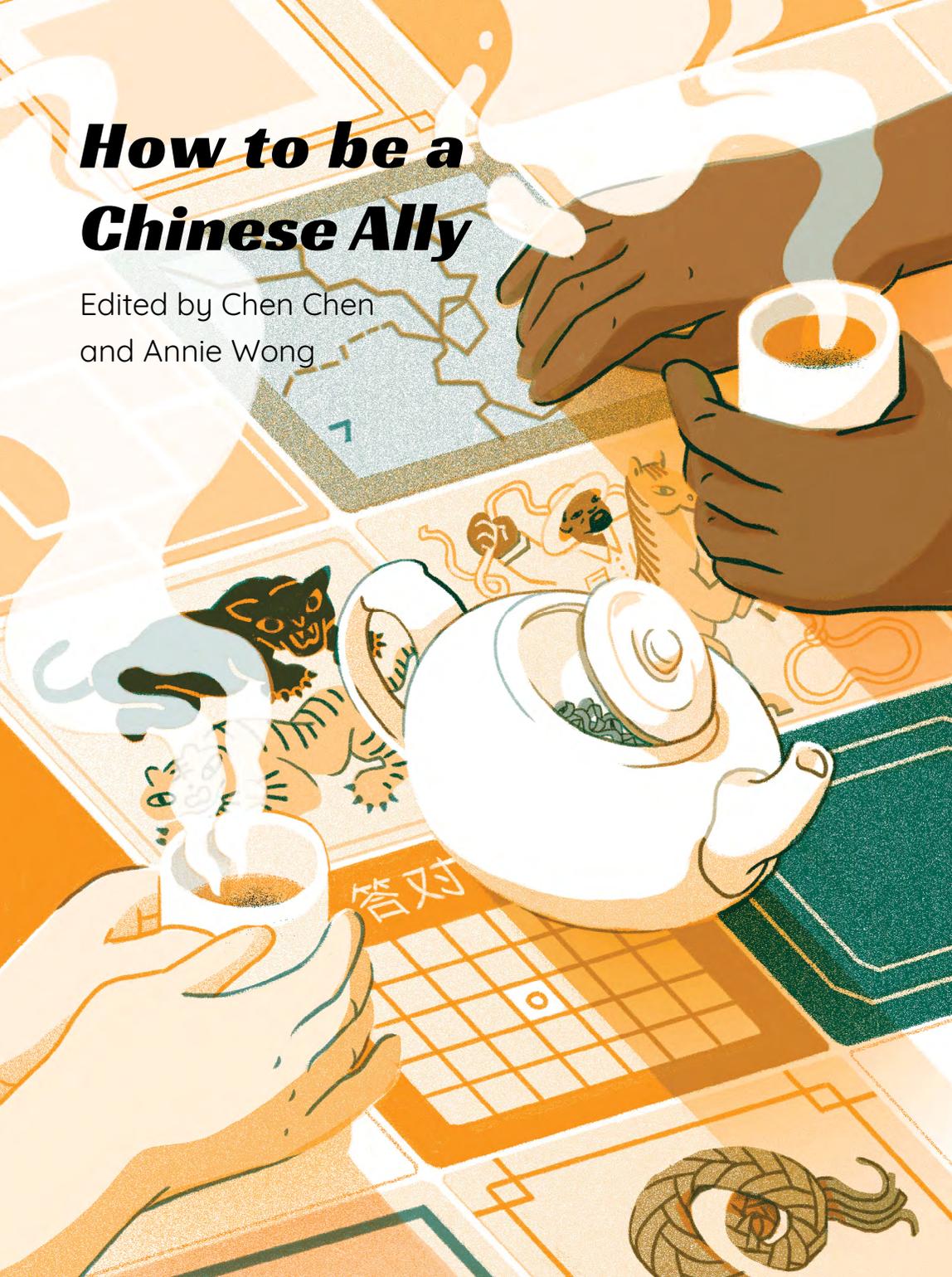


# ***How to be a Chinese Ally***

Edited by Chen Chen  
and Annie Wong







## *How to be a Chinese Ally*

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# ***How to Read This:***

## ***A Note to the Chinese Reader***

Chen Chen and Annie Wong

In the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, the spectre of anti-Asian racism in North America revealed itself, once again, in the forms of increased street harassment, defacement of private property, online bullying, and other types of hate crime. These racist acts of violence compelled the Chinese community to speak out with campaigns and initiatives like #HealthNotHate and #Elimin8hate that sparked nationwide support. This work by the Chinese community is invaluable. Alongside these efforts, *How to be a Chinese Ally* asks us to consider: how can our own experiences of racism enable us to stand in solidarity with Black and Indigenous communities? How can our community's fight against anti-Asian racism also be an opportunity for inter-community and intersectional allyship? How can we start to challenge the anti-Black and Indigenous racism in our Chinese communities?

Without diminishing its significance, the racial injustice experienced by the Chinese in Canada is incomparable to the historical and contemporary violences Black and Indigenous communities endure. Our histories and current realities are not the same. The multitude of violences resulting from the transatlantic slave trade, the colonization of Indigenous peoples, and the ongoing expropriation and occupation of their land, is still part of our current socio-economic and political systems.

We live in a so-called “multicultural” society underpinned by white supremacy. The idea that one only needs to work hard to rise to the equal status of white people is a myth that many members of the Chinese community have, unwittingly or not, bought into. This myth, often referred to as the “model minority,” may have afforded some of us relative safety from overt racism, but an ‘honorary white’ status also entails complicity and acquiescence with white supremacy, which includes the erasure and willed ignorance of our own experience of anti-Asian racism along with that of others. Undoing this myth involves acknowledging these realities.

*How to be a Chinese Ally* was sparked, on the one hand, by a call to action from Black Lives Matter in response to the death of George Floyd, and on the other hand, by the lack of Chinese language anti-racism and anti-colonial educational resources in Canada. This project was first conceived of as a short, accessible, ten-page guide with the aim of addressing anti-Black and Indigenous racism within the Chinese community. After many drafts and conversations, we realized that ten pages is not enough to unpack notions like “systemic racism” with both nuance and compassion. We also felt that as useful as reading in isolation might be, it is only one way to engage in meaningful anti-racism work in our own lives. We needed to confront our own vulnerability, complicity, and ignorance from two distinct experiences of being Chinese settlers: Annie was born here, while Chen arrived as a international student from China. Rather than attempting to speak objectively, our research included conversations with our Black and Indigenous friends (and friends in the making) whose work is entwined with the lived experience of their cultural identities.



This resource is intended to be read slowly and with intention. Divided into three parts, the first includes a personal essay by co-editor Chen Chen about how he became involved in anti-racism and anti-colonial work as a recent international student, and a comic by Jason Li about his experience unlearning racism. Part two includes a series of commissioned interviews with Black and Indigenous artists, and a researcher, who share intimate stories of their lived experience navigating systemic racism in their life, work, and art. Fiona Raye Clarke provides insights from her experience as a community-based artist, abolitionist, and Afro-Futurist writer; Seth Cardinal Dodging Horse discusses the history of Treaty 7 and the expropriation of this ancestral land on Tsuut'ina Nation; Melissa Chung-Mowat speaks about her work navigating her Chinese-Métis heritage; and Jae Sterling shares what it's like to be a Black multidisciplinary artist in Calgary. The last section includes excerpts from key texts to deepen the conversation beyond this resource.

The title of this resource, *How to be a Chinese Ally*, can be misleading. We make no attempts to provide a “how-to” guide. Instead, we invite you to engage in this work as a starting point among many starting points.

# ***Chinese in Canada: Honouring our Relationships with Indigenous Peoples***

Chen Chen

Dear fellow Chinese in Canada:

This is Chen. I am from Guizhou, China, and a grateful visitor since 2014 to amiskwaciwâskahikan (“Beaver Hills House” in Plains Cree, known as Edmonton, Alberta), the homeland for diverse Indigenous peoples, including the Cree, Blackfoot, Nakota Sioux, Dene, Saulteaux, Inuit, Métis, and others, on Treaty 6 Territory. The “Chinese” community in Canada, which is often simplified by outsiders, is diverse in terms of class, ethnic, religious, educational, and immigration backgrounds. We do, however, share important commonalities. We are a people of an illustrious culture that endured humiliation and existential threats in our modern history. Whether it was our great-great-grandparents, great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, or ourselves, we departed the homeland, no matter when, with a desire to escape war and poverty, to reunite with faraway family, to pursue education, to have a “better” life.

But how could a Chinese person live happily on this “stolen land” otherwise known as Canada? Wherein its original peoples are, generation after generation, still experiencing ongoing colonial injustices?

That is an uncomfortable and unsettling question. Yet it is at the centre of my learning experience as an international student and academic, at the University of Alberta, where I received my PhD.

While I had heard about the bloody history of genocide of Native Americans (印第安人) in the U.S., I knew nothing about peoples in Canada before my arrival as an “educated” international student. Canada has projected a very positive image of the country’s identity to an international audience. A country with beautiful landscapes, a multicultural, inclusive, and tolerant society, in somewhat stark contrast to the U.S. “Indigenous people” did not exist in my vocabulary when I first envisioned my “adventure” in Canada.

As I gradually “settled” in my new “home” in Edmonton, I became troubled by a series of personal observations and public events happening close and far. For example, I encountered a few local Indigenous community members in the city that made me wonder, “who are they?” (They didn’t look like white Canadians or other minority groups I knew at the time.)<sup>1</sup> On a trip to Ottawa, I visited the Canadian Museum of Civilization and learned, albeit superficially, the history and legacy of European colonization in Canada. But the fact that Indigenous peoples of this land are still surviving colonialism deeply struck me: what are their current situations? Why weren’t Canadians telling me anything about this?

As my questions quickly accumulated, events associated with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) were taking place within and beyond the academic space. The events opened my eyes to a disgraceful part of Canadian history. Over 150,000 Indigenous children were forcefully removed from their families and separated from their communities by the Government of Canada to attend residential schools. The TRC final

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that physical appearance or skin colour, for that matter, is not a reliable signal for a person’s racial or ethnic background. However, for a newcomer like me at the time, it served as a basic yet limited way to discern the differences among racial/ethnic groups.

report reflected a genuine desire for some part of the Canadian society to reckon with its dark past, yet the elusiveness of a true “reconciliation” in Canada also became evident.

I remember clearly in 2016 an event on campus titled, “Truth and Reconciliation, Good Relations, and Indigenizing the Academy.” When the speakers proceeded to acknowledge the relevant progress made in Canadian universities, an Indigenous student stood up and asked: “if we are ‘Indigenizing’ the academy, how is it that everything on this campus is written in English? Why can’t I see my language?”

As I struggled to find my own place in the Euro-Western dominated academic space, the student’s challenge to the university, for me, was a wake-up call. I was not only disappointed by my lack of knowledge, but also bothered by the chilling fact that within my social circle at the time made up of mostly White students, many were unwilling to talk about it.

Then in 2017, Canada embraced the 150th anniversary of its Confederation with celebrations highlighting all those beautiful things mentioned earlier. I quickly noticed the criticism from Indigenous communities but also non-Indigenous “progressives” alike. In *Now Magazine*, a local Toronto newspaper, Mi’kmaq scholar, lawyer, and activist Pam Palmater’s article titled “Canada 150 is a celebration of Indigenous genocide” illustrated the irony of celebrating the genocidal origins of Confederation.

As a researcher interested in the connection between sport and social issues, I was thrilled to find out that a number of Indigenous sport events would be hosted across Canada in that same summer. With the intention to learn from Indigenous peoples but also to contribute my labour, I decided to volunteer at the World Indigenous Nations Games, the North American Indigenous

Games, the World Indigenous Basketball Challenge, and the Alberta Indigenous Games.

I was welcomed and supported by Indigenous hosts and delegations not only from within Canada but from across the world. Most notably, in witnessing the invigorating get-together of communities, I had an invaluable opportunity to learn about their cultures, ceremonies, and ways of being rooted in worldviews and cosmologies alternative to the dominant Euro-Western one. In these spaces I was educated about other injustices faced by the Indigenous communities, not least the environmental destruction caused by extractive industries, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), and child abuse at foster care facilities. These learnings deeply challenged my worldview, compelled me to reflect on my own pathway of coming to Canada, and to re-examine my purpose as a visitor to this land.

This self-reflection, however, was uncomfortable and unsettling. Unpacking settler colonialism asks contentious questions that we Chinese in Canada need to confront: What is the role of Chinese communities in Canada, a settler-colonial state that is built upon the ongoing effort to eliminate Indigenous peoples (through either physical violence and/or assimilation), the occupation of Indigenous land (and its transformation into private property) as well as the myth of “progress” and “benevolence” that justify colonial violence?

We might start by thinking about how early Chinese migrants, for a long time, were exploited as cheap, racialized labour in Canada’s colonialist economic development (e.g., the indentured Chinese workers in the Canadian Pacific Railway construction). We can also reflect on how more recent, highly-educated Chinese immigrants (including myself) might unwittingly become complicit with the



white-supremacist social structure that continues to benefit from the dispossession of Indigenous land and erasure of Indigenous peoples.

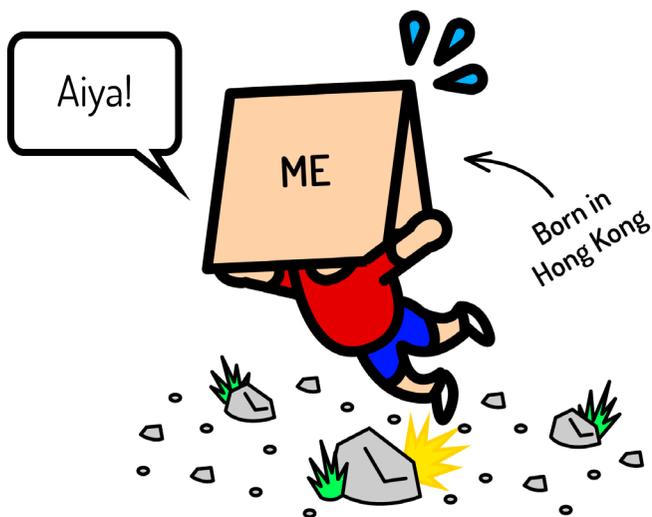
As guests and visitors nourished by this land **we are obliged to honour and (re)center this relationship in our collective future.**

Below are just a few questions for us to, perhaps, think about together:

- Whose land am I living on? Who are the original peoples of my city/town? What is my relationship with and responsibility to this land?
- How is anti-Chinese racism related to anti-Indigenous racism and settler colonization?
- How can I establish meaningful relationships with Indigenous peoples and how can I contribute to supporting Indigenous peoples' struggles in empowering their communities?
- What are the ways I could educate other fellow Chinese about this?

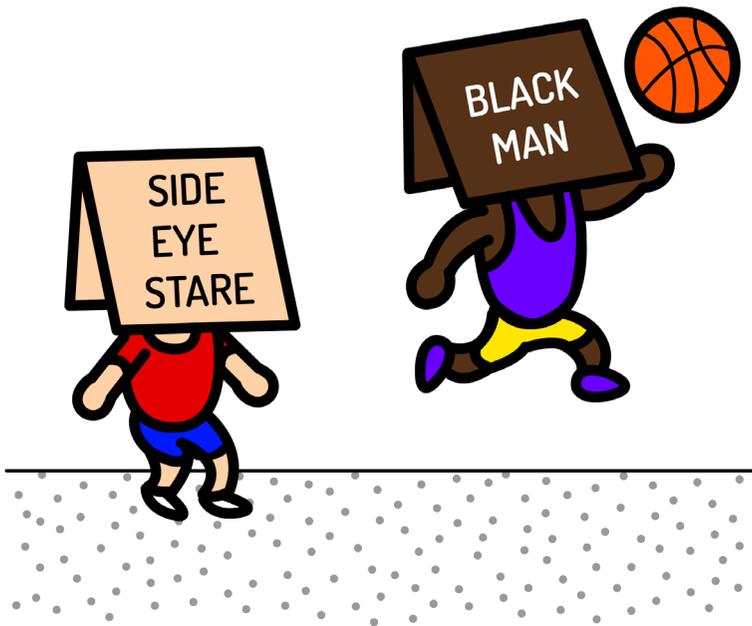


# Adventures in Unlearning Racism



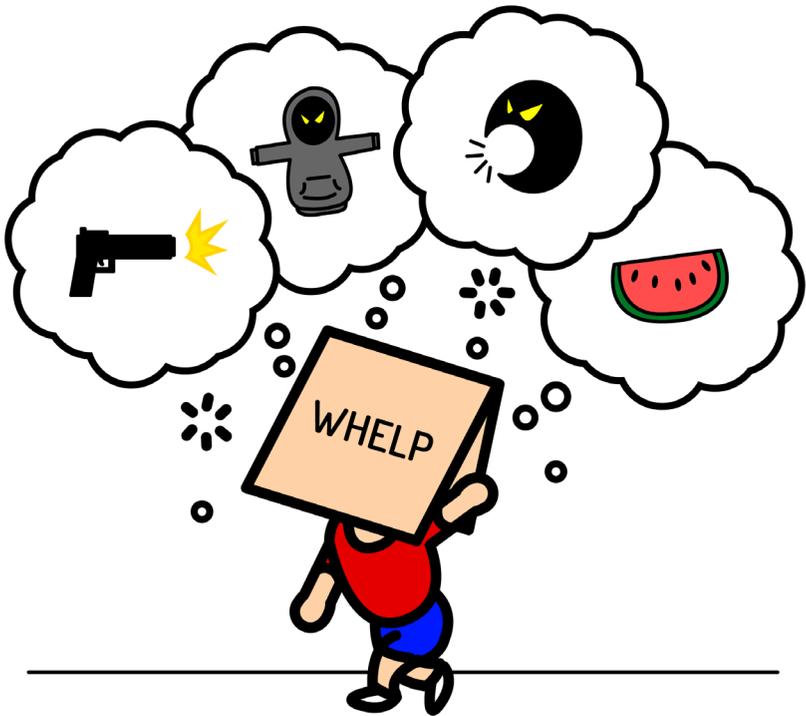
By Jason Li. Edited by Annie Wong.

I was that kid. Stealing glances at Black people.



Curious but scared to make eye contact.

It's not easy overcoming those instincts.

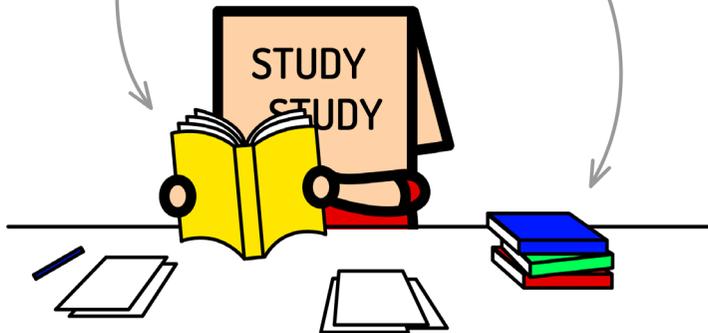


I had to undo a lot of brainwashing.

I had to learn about how our systems leave Black and Indigenous folk behind.

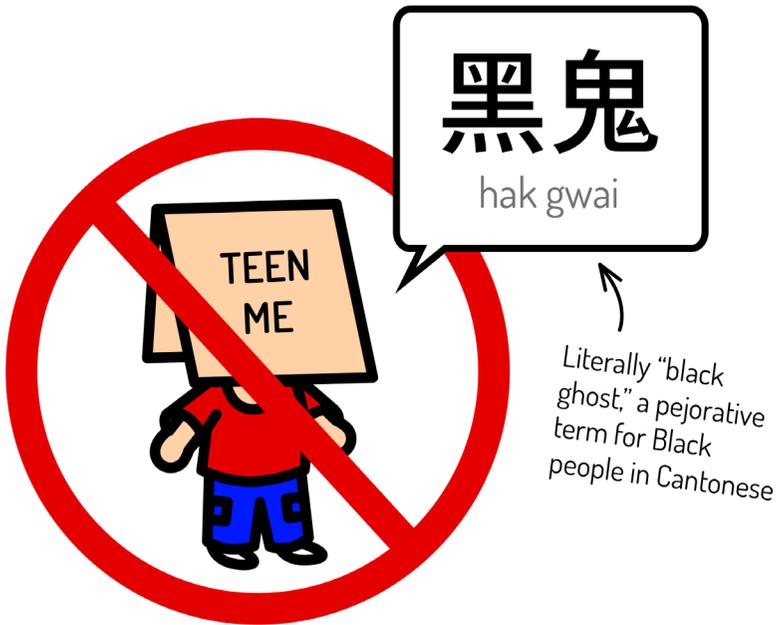
There Are No Children Here  
by Alex Kotlowitz

They Called It Prairie Light:  
The Story of Chilocco  
Indian School  
by K. Tsianina Lomawaima



For me, this really hit home during my university days in the US.

I had to acknowledge my (relative) privilege and complicity.



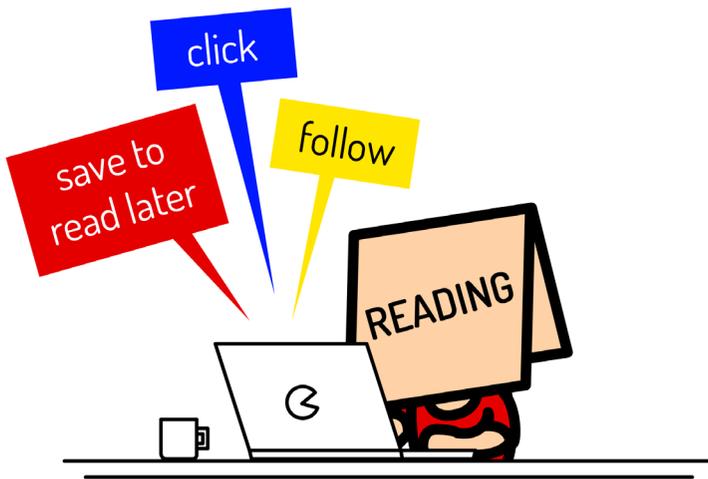
Which also meant I had to work on myself.

I pushed myself to break bad habits.



Even small, simple acts like this take effort. And that's the point.

I started looking to find out what was happening to Black & Indigenous communities around me.



Thank god for social media, because I didn't have any Black or Indigenous friends for a long time.

I try to support and help where I can. Retweet and repost. Donate. Join a rally.



Sometimes, rallies feel magical and make me giddy all week. Sometimes, it's important to show up even though it's tiring.

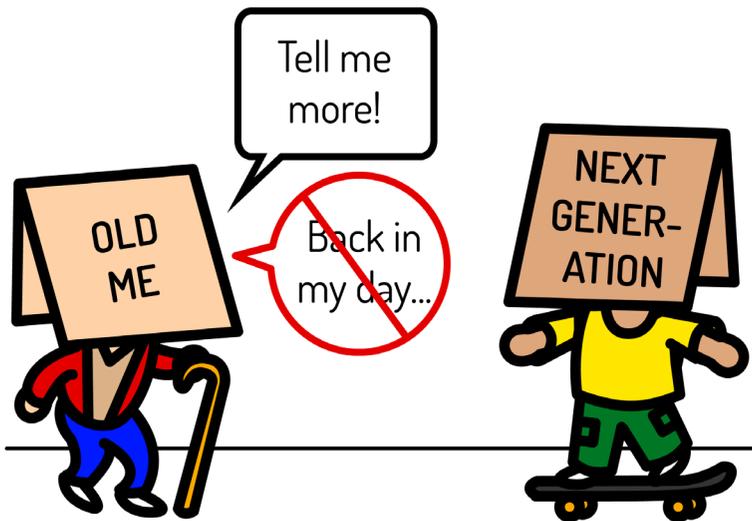
I'm still learning about how to share my Asian privilege and intergenerational wealth.



How can I educate and mobilize my communities to combat racism, and what are the best ways to donate my time and money?

**Jason Li** is an independent designer, cartoonist, frontend developer, and researcher. His practice centers around telling missing stories, exploring alternative media ecosystems, and making the internet a fun, safe and inclusive place. Previous works have appeared at the Victoria and Albert Museum (London), Asian Art Museum (San Francisco), on the BBC, and on the radio in Spain. He is a co-author of the forthcoming Hanmoji Handbook, and is editor at Paradise System.

And I will be learning and unlearning for the rest of my life, because there's always something new around the corner.



I want to follow in the footsteps of those rare elders who remain full of hope, perseverance and humility till the end of their days.



An illustration of a traditional Chinese tea ceremony. A white teapot is being poured into a white cup held by a hand. Another hand holds a small white cup. The scene is set on a tray with a grid pattern and a decorative border. The word '茶对' (Tea Dialogue) is written on the tray. The background features a cracked stone floor and a decorative pattern. The word 'INTERVIEWS' is written in bold, orange, italicized letters across the center of the image.

***INTERVIEWS***



Image courtesy of the artist. 2018.

## ***I Do the Work for Them***

### **An Interview with Fiona Raye Clarke**

Annie Wong

Formerly a criminal defence lawyer, Fiona witnessed the failures of the so-called “justice system” and its role in systemic racism. A Trinidadian-Canadian, she left her practice in law and turned to art as a better way to serve her community. Working in film, writing, theatre, and publishing, her work with Black communities is a long process of building relationships through storytelling. Her practice is not without the emotional hardship of testimony and revisiting histories of violence. In her play, *2168 Ancestors Rising*, the actors read verbatim interviews held with members of their community about Black futures. These conversations cannot happen without looking at Black history. It took time to gather, process, and craft these conversations with care. Fiona is driven by a genuine love for stories told by and within Black communities. “I just love these stories,” she tells me in this interview, “I will cherish them forever.” We talk as friends for an hour and she shares her connection with ancestors, her search for Canadian Black history, and her work with youth and elders and incarcerated women. Forty-five minutes into the interview, her voice begins to strain. It is not easy to talk about this work to which she has dedicated her life. Yet she shares it here, generously.

**Annie:** Can you tell us about your artistic practice?

**Fiona:** My artistic practice is about not only being interested in my own personal professional success, but also community development and engagement. As a writer, a theatre artist, and even as a lawyer, I make sure to bring community with me [through my practice]. I discovered this community-engaged creative writing practice founded by Pat Schneider called the Amherst Writers & Artists (AWA) method. It's a way of facilitating creative writing workshops that strongly believe, among other tenets, that writing belongs to everyone. [...]

INTERGENERACIAL [is a community-engaged theatre] project that involves about a dozen Black youth interviewing Black elders. Based on their answers and stories, [we create verbatim plays]. We've done two so far. *From Their Lips* looked at historical Black lives in Toronto and stories

of arrival, like growing up in Toronto during the 60's, for example. *2168 Ancestors Rising* was future-looking and about Black lives and life 150 years from now. My personal writing has informed these experiences and gravitates towards Afrofuturism: looking forward in my own work and looking back. Honoring my writing's ancestral lineage, [my work] is a little bit in conversation with James Baldwin, Toni Morrison—I'm really inspired by her magical realism elements; Octavia Butler, who I absolutely adore, and Maya Angelou. Those are my biggest influences in terms of my literary lineage. I would say to a smaller extent Dionne Brand; if I could write poetry like her I would.

I've also edited a couple of anthologies. The first [*Basodee: An Anthology Dedicated to Black Youth*] was dedicated to Black youth and published in 2012. At that time, I wanted to write about Black history, being Black, and being young and

Black in Canada. But I couldn't really find anything, so I asked for funding to make work on any topic relating to Blackness and came up with the idea of an anthology. [...] When Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman happened [...], I won the ArtReach pitch contest and got funding to do *Black Like We: Troubleshooting the Black Youth Experience*. This anthology talks about police violence, incarceration, and a host of other things, including discussions and celebrations of our Black bodies, like our hair, in addition to the more serious and systemic issues.

**A:** Can you describe what Afrofuturism is?

**F:** Afrofuturism is placing Black bodies and lives in the future. This was tough to do during our interviews for *2168 Ancestors Rising*. One of the questions was, "where do you see Black folks 150 years from now?" Most people answered: "first of all, nowhere. We're not there." And so I think Afrofuturism is

this reaction to our erasure during the last four centuries and planting ourselves firmly into existence for the next 50 years, 100 years, 400 years into the future. Sometimes people talk about [Afrofuturism] as engaging with different types of fashions, technologies, or alternate worlds. But the point is to put us in the future.

**A:** How do you begin a conversation like that?

**F:** For *Ancestors Rising*, we had to have a lot of conversations like, "Okay, let's debrief the past, what we're doing now, and let's look at the future." For some it was really discouraging. I had to really work with them and say [that] even though the present is hard and the past has been even harder, there can still be hope for the future. We owe it to the people [...] along the way who have died, who have sacrificed and struggled for us to be here right now. Hope for the future comes from that struggle. The present circumstances

are obviously really difficult. For young men, for example, there is a real understanding and fear that they will not make it to certain birthdays. There are some young men that [...] are like, “I am so lucky to have made it to 20, 16, 23.” They have to celebrate each year that passes because they were told, have seen, or have lost more people than you can understand at such a young age [...]. So, through the medium of Afrofuturism, we are creating this future and putting it on the page and on the stage so they can see it. But it’s very, very difficult.

**A:** I feel like the passion of a Black artist is unlike what white, Chinese, or even other artists of colour can ever experience. The work you do is so hard—why, for example don’t you just paint pretty pictures as an artist? Why do you commit to this difficulty and from where does your passion come?

**F:** As a Black artist specifically, and as an artist of colour more broadly, I don’t know if we have the freedom to be like a white writer or artist and make work for ourselves, cut off from our influences. [We are not] able to say “I do this, and this is my success alone and it’s my story.” I feel like we bring the burden and the love and the community of our ancestors in everything we do. I know that I was bred into existence. I know that I wouldn’t be here unless violence happened to my ancestors. To honour that choice they made to survive and to keep my ancestors surviving so that I can be here—I do the work for them. And I do the work for all the Afro-descended people, because I believe that hurt and harm has affected all of us. No matter if you are a Continental African now, I think the results of slavery have infected and influenced the way that every Black person and Black body is viewed. As an artist, I have to do this work because, if I

don't, white folks and even other communities of colour will continue to diminish my humanity [...]. It's a humanizing practice to make work as a Black artist. If a certain [view of Black people] keeps occurring and is allowed to be made without question, without [our] input, we're going to keep dying. And we might keep dying anyway, but as Zora Neale Hurston says, *if you're silent about your suffering, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it*. So, you have to make that noise even if it's going into the ether, and hope maybe one day it will be rediscovered. Because we can't afford to stay silent. It's life or death.

**A:** What does Black Lives Matter mean to you?

**F:** In order for Black life to be shown to matter, externally as proof, I'd say defunding and abolishing the police is necessary and I would even go so far as to say abolishing prisons. [Based] on my experience as a criminal

defence lawyer and my engagement as an artist, these institutions take a serious toll and disproportionately affect [Black] and Indigenous communities. We can't just keep sweeping it under the rug and ignoring it because we don't think that they are productive members of society. In the Grand Valley institution, for example, where I ran writing and art workshops with women in the minimum security unit, for them to get basic things like sanitary pads, medication, and phone calls [required the women to] pay exorbitant rates for things. That should not be the case. To keep people living under these conditions is entirely immoral and inhuman [...]. It is costly, violent, and invasive. And recidivism is high, which is the likelihood of ending up back into an institution for breaking parole, or getting into "trouble again." The system doesn't work and it's very expensive—from the lawyers, court reporters, the judges, to legal aid. And now legal aid

**Fiona Raye Clarke** is an award-winning Trinidadian-Canadian writer and community-engaged artist. Her writing has appeared in various publications online and in print, including the Puritan Town Crier, the Room Magazine blog, and alt.theatre. Her plays have been produced by the rock.paper.sistahz festival and InspiraTo Festival, and her co-created short film won the 2017 CineFAM Short Film Challenge, screening at the CaribbeanTales International Film Festival and the San Francisco Queer National Arts Festival. She was a top ten finalist for 2018 Magee TV Diverse Screenwriters Award and is an alumnus of the Banff Centre for Creativity and Art. She is the Artistic Director of the Black youth oral history theatre project, INTERGENERACIAL, currently in its fifth year.

has been cut so people have less access to fighting these charges. For those who can't afford to miss work or pay for representation, they often plead out or accept the charges and don't know the trouble they are actually getting themselves into. The whole thing is rigged and ridiculous and is serving a sector of society by employing a bunch of people, like the prison guards, people in the legal profession and the justice system more than it's serving [to better] society. The police force is the same thing. It's padding a lot of people and providing them with a great living, but having serious adverse effects on [the communities that lack resources].

**A:** The very simplified way of thinking about the faults of the so-called justice system is that people are being punished because they are poor. Or that Black people are unequally targeted and don't enjoy the same rights as white people or other communities of colour.

**F:** The presumption of criminality is already there unless we prove otherwise. And we don't even get a chance to do that because the consequence of being stopped by the police can end with death.

**A:** I want to go back to your work with ancestors. Respecting ancestors is an important practice in Chinese culture too and I feel the way you talk about it through Afrofuturism is beautiful. Can you share more?

**F:** A unique position for myself as an Afro-descended person of enslaved people, in addition to the usual existential issues of the average first worlder, is questioning my existence and literally asking, "what have you done with all that sacrifice?" It's the ultimate showing and telling and retelling of all of that. I feel that is what I want my work to answer and say: this is what I did with it. That's what I did with that gift and that sacrifice.



Image by Gavin Young/Postmedia. 2020. Calgary Herald.

## ***These Rocks are a Reminder***

### **An Interview with seth cardinal dodginghorse**

Annie Wong

When seth cardinal dodginghorse reaches the podium, his first words are: “I am going to speak, and you are going to listen.” seth, who is in his mid-twenties, is not invited to this event. The Chief of Tsuut’ina Nation, the Premier of Alberta, the Mayor of Calgary, and a slew of media outlets, broadcasting live, are gathering for the opening of The South West Ring Road, a controversial \$1 billion dollar portion of a mega highway. The day marks the end of more than 20 years of planning and negotiations over the selling of land with the Tsuut’ina reserve to the Province of Alberta for the highway’s construction. After years of opposition, negotiations were reopened in 2013 with 69 percent of the Tsuut’ina people voting in favor of a \$340.7 million deal for the transfer of 1,058 acres of treaty land.

Fast forward to October 1, 2020 where seth, who has harboured six years of traumatic loss over his ancestral home, speaks on the mic: “Imagine your home and your history being removed all in the name of ‘progress’.” As a cultural act of mourning and grief, he takes a pair of scissors, cuts off his braids, then dashes them on the concrete ground. Major Canadian and international news outlets reported on the event and videos of seth went viral on social media.

seth isn’t an activist. He’s an artist who grew up in Tsuut’ina Nation. He and his mom are my friends. In this interview, he shares what it means to lose ancestral land and have his treaty rights violated. If seth had not interrupted the ceremony, the Southwest

Calgary Ring Road would have been remembered as a celebrated business deal. But Seth made vivid another understanding of its history. To fully understand the controversy of the Ring Road is to see its “business per usual” agenda as a continuation of colonization by the Canadian government since the signing of Treaty 7 in 1877.

In this interview, we talk for nearly two hours and I learn about how his life, art, and even future are bound by the stories of his people’s past. He speaks slowly as if consulting an encyclopedia in his mind. His stories have dates, names, and scenery. I am engrossed in the conversation, and as he advises, I simply listen.

**Annie:** Can we start with, “who are you”?

**Seth:** Sure. My name is Seth Cardinal Dodginghorse. I grew up on my mom’s land in Tsuut’ina Nation and am part of the Dene, which is an umbrella term for other nations with similar ancestral backgrounds. We lived with my grandma and my great-grandma. Depending on how you look at it, there were up to six generations that lived specifically on that land. But our connection to it goes back before the reserve was even formed. My ancestors have been going to that area

since forever or since we were forced to become stationary through the reserve.

The world I’m coming from [is one] where my grandparents went to residential school, and then my mom and myself to Catholic school in the city, which I consider a continuation of residential school. Fortunately, I was taught by my uncle. Our land had horses, animal trails, and ones my family created over time. It was fenced off and growing up, we’d spend a whole day checking and fixing the holes in the fence. As we did, he would tell me stories like, “that’s

where your grandma used to go and eat berries” or “if you follow this trail, you’ll find a field of strawberries.” He taught me a lot about our history on that land. It was cultural teaching through lived experiences. In residential school, my family wasn’t allowed to have lived experiences of our culture. Having a cultural perspective was not [linked to the land] or framed that way. [...] It took me a long time to recognize it [as cultural teaching], because I wasn’t taught to [understand] it as something like, a ceremonial thing. To survive from residential school, these things had to be suppressed and hidden. So, it was also taught to me in a suppressed and hidden way.

For the past six years, I’ve been making art and speaking up about [the Ring Road]. Tsuut’ina Nation is right beside Calgary. But now with the Ring Road, Calgary actually cuts through the reserve. We were forced off our land, our

ancestral land, so the [highway] could be built. And we were treated terribly, like discarded beings. A lot of people within my own nation don’t know their cultural history and I think that definitely influenced why the Ring Road ended up happening.

### **Treaty 7**

Tsuut’ina Nation reserve is right beside Calgary, which has been a great and terrible thing. Overtime, we had easier access to the city. Some nations are still isolated and because of that are discriminated against in ways where they have to pay extreme prices [for basic needs] like food at grocery stores. So, a benefit of being close to the city is access to town to get food and goods. But a terrible thing is since the Ring Road was planned, it had always been so to cut through my family’s land on the reserve. The sole purpose was easier access for Calgarians to get from one side of the city to the other. That’s the main point.

It's important to know our connection to that land predates Calgary, Alberta, and Canada. In 1877, Treaty 7 was signed by the Siksika, Piikani, Kainai, Stoney Nakoda, and Tsuut'ina with the Crown. But Treaty 7 doesn't just include those nations. It also involves all of the settlers who live on Treaty 7 land.

The whole point of Treaty 7 was [in response to] the Louis Riel rebellions and the wars with the tribes who fought against American army occupation. I use the term "Native American," but the tribes are also the First Nations there. Up until 1877, all of these lands were unceded. But there were talks that there was going to be a huge war here in Canada, and all of these nations were going to fight against the Crown. I can't remember the exact wording but according to the Indian Act, the Queen is my "Great White Mother." So, the great White Mother decides, "Okay, if we're gonna make Canada, we gotta

make peace treaties with these nations to ensure they won't go to war with us." So, all different treaties were created and signed. When it comes to the formation of Canada, Treaty 7 was the last one [now there are eleven] that was needed to be signed to ensure Canada could occupy what is Alberta.

### **Chief Bull Head**

My Tsuut'ina ancestors and their Chief, Bull Head, were there with the other nations that signed Treaty 7. To them, the treaty was only understood as a peace treaty [stating that] they wouldn't incite battles, wars, or attack settlers. So, they signed the treaties. Then, a few of the nations were put on one giant reserve, including [a few] Blackfoot nations and the Tsuut'ina. [This caused a lot of] fighting [between nations] for their own independent identity to be recognized, culturally, and linguistically. They were also fighting for things like rations and resources. With so many tribes in one area, it

was hard to take care of that many people. Tsuut'ina was the smallest nation on that reserve. Our Chief Bull Head knew [under these conditions] his people were going to die and go extinct. He and the Tsuut'ina people thought, if we're going to survive, we need our own reserve. So, he led them to Fort Calgary. He packed them up, escaped the reserve, and went on foot. Even with the wagon back then, it was quite a ways away.

[At the Fort] Chief Bull Head said, "I want our people to go to Wolf Creek [the colonial name is Fish Creek]. That's where we've always camp[ed]. That's where our ancestors had been. We want a reserve there." They told him, "no," then the RCMP arrested them and sent the whole nation to Fort MacLeod, which is way past the Blackfoot reserve. They camped there for almost three years [while] going back and forth [between Fort Macleod and Fort Calgary to demand their own reserve].

After three years of traveling back and forth while starving, a lot of families and people died out. On the third time Bull Head took his people to Fort Calgary, he armed the women, children, elders, and everyone with rifles and weapons. Then they held Fort Calgary hostage. Bull Head said, "Give us our own reserve or else we're gonna bring the fort down."

**A:** Woah.

**S:** Fort Calgary was really small then with just a few white settlers. They didn't want us to find this out because we could have easily overtaken them. So, they sent a commissioner to Ottawa and then, finally, they agreed and said, "Go mark where you want it and you can have it." So, Bull Head sent a few runners. They ran to where the reserve is now and started building the foundations of a house to mark that they had settled it. When the Tsuut'ina arrived, Bull Head put a rock down and told everyone, "Go find a rock and put it in

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***These rocks are a reminder to never sell our land and to never surrender it because we fought so hard for it.***

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this pile.” One by one, my ancestors put a rock in the pile. Bull Head said, “These rocks are a reminder to never sell our land and to never surrender it because we fought so hard for it.”

Bull Head knew because they were so close to Fort Calgary, that soon the fort would grow. He knew it would expand to be right beside the reserve and that soon, they would want the land. The rockpile was a physical and spiritual reminder to never sell or surrender the land.

Bull Head passed away in 1911.

So, this is the timeline: Treaty 7 was signed in 1877. Bull Head and Tsuut’ina people got their own reserve in 1883. Then, Bull Head passed away in 1911. Up until his passing, there were many changes and attempts to get rid of [our] culture and language. Residential schools opened on the reserve. While Bull Head was alive, he made sure [to resist that].

While Bull Head was alive, there was an Indian agent who reported back to Ottawa each year with a list of how many “pagans” and how many Christians there were.

While Bull Head was alive, he was never baptized. A lot of people at the time were never baptized. They believed it would cut their power in half, and the reason why they survived for so long was because they had their spiritual power.

Bull Head was a hereditary Chief. His minor chiefs were also hereditary but chosen by the people with a lot more cultural influence. After Bull Head, they got rid of the term “minor chief,” and it became [a system of] “elected chief” and “councils”. Those were created as colonial “jobs.” That’s what still runs and controls the reserve today. To get into chief and council, you have only got to know how to be a businessman. You just need to show you’re a “good Indian” and make sure your nation can

profit with businesses, the city, province, or the government.

After Bull Head, the next leaders who came in were the first generation of men from residential school who were Catholics and Anglicans. These new leaders didn’t have the same connection to the land and the place. I have a lot of sympathy for them because they would have been going through a lot, identity-wise. They [were men] whose parents had hunted buffalo and existed before Canada was a country. But [these men] weren’t allowed to be warriors or have the same experience as their parents.

After Bull Head, the newly elected leaders were the ones who agreed to sell and lease nation land. They leased the land to the Canadian military for 100 years. Now, that land is extremely toxic and poisoned from the oil of tanks, bomb blasts, and detonations. There are still live munitions and mines found in the ground.

Every time there is a sweep of the area, they'll find new unexploded ordinances. Now that land can't be used for anything.

### **The Ring Road**

Calgary really wanted a highway built through the reserve because it was cheaper for them to pressure the "Indians" than to ask settlers in Calgary to move. There were alternative plans to cut through settlers' homes in Calgary. But they were opposed to it. It's interesting because when settlers said "no" to the Ring Road going through their homes and those lands, the Province of Alberta and Calgary listened. They were like, "Okay, we won't do it. You guys said no." But when it came to Tsuut'ina, they kept asking, "will you surrender that land to us and sell it?" In the early 2000s, [Tsuut'ina people] had a vote and the majority voted no. [Calgary] was like, "Okay, all right. You guys said no." But then they opened

up negotiations again. So, it's interesting because throughout history, if Calgarians say "no", they'll say, "Okay, no means no." But when it comes to anything with Indigenous people and Tsuut'ina here, if they say no, they'll try again in five years, and are like, "we'll see what you say, then."

The Southwest Calgary Ring Road goes around Calgary. But the Southwest portion cuts through the reserve and my family's land. The history of the military occupying the reserve, Treaty 7, residential school, all of these things are connected to the Ring Road. It's such a dense and rich history. But the way colonial history is taught erases the actual true histories [that continue] to exist. It's just amazing—how much I am doing the research myself and spending time with elders, and even white historians. Something I've thought about is—"how can I make this information more accessible to people?"

When I was young and learning about Treaty 7, it seemed to mean a treaty with the First Nations that signed it. I didn't know much else. But when you read the treaty, it literally means everyone who occupies Treaty 7 land, including all the settlers. Everyone in [southern] Alberta is part of Treaty 7. So, how come no one knows about it? They are treaty people, too. That was a big thing for me. I kind of went all over the place. I don't know if that answers what you're asking.

**A:** I forgot what I asked.

**S:** Hahah.

**A:** I think it's important that, being treaty people, you have to know this history. But our histories are taught as occurring in disparate timelines. Like, we're taught to think the history of Chinese railway workers history is over here, and Indigenous history is over there. But it's really entangled in the entire history of colonization and white supremacy.

**S:** Yeah, someone was telling me there were also First Nations people that worked on the railways with the Chinese workers.

[But] people of colour, Black people, and immigrants don't have the same history as [white] settlers. Chinatown has its own history. I'm actually doing a project in Chinatown right now with a curator. She's curious about what the interactions would have been like [between the two communities]. As the Chinatown was [forming], my ancestors would have been on the reserve with limited access to the city. Even though they were so close [to Calgary], in order to leave the reserve they would need passes. I definitely want to do more research. Even meet with Chinese elders and think about the interactions that would have occurred back then. As an Indigenous person, when you're at a grocery store filled with white people, but you see that one other person that isn't white and they give you "the nod."

**A:** Haha. Ya.

**S:** There's safety in that. I'm trying to imagine my ancestors going to downtown Calgary and seeing a Chinese person [...]. What would it have been like, to see someone who also looks very similar to you "physically" back then, surrounded by like, a bunch of white people in Calgary?

### **The Speech**

**A:** Can we talk about the opening ceremony of the Ring Road? I feel so much learning has to be done to fully understand that moment.

**S:** [The night before the opening] my friend who's a journalist told me that the Ring Road was going to open the next day. I was [shocked] because no one mentioned it. No media outlets mentioned it. It felt very strange how it was kept a secret, private media event.

The night before, I only slept two hours. I thought, "Oh no,

tomorrow's the day the road opens and Calgarians are going to be driving over my family's land. They're going to be driving through all those trails, the fields and the fences me and my uncle used to fix. They're going to drive through the forest I used to play in. That my ancestors played in."

And I thought, "Okay, I need to be there." So, I woke up and went to the opening ceremony. [The Premier of Alberta] Jason Kenney; the Calgary Mayor, Naheed Nenshi; the current Transportation Minister, Ric McIlyver; the Tsuut'ina Chief, Roy Whitney, and council members; and a bunch of news outlets were there. I thought, the moment there's an opportunity to speak, I'm going to seize it, go up to the podium, and see how long I can talk for. There were five police officers behind me. It was broadcast live, so I thought if I get arrested or forced off the mic, people are gonna see that. So, I waited. I watched the whole event. I

watched people be happy and celebrate this terrible moment for my family.

Earlier that morning, my mom wrote a letter to the people within our nation who were involved with the Ring Road. We were ignored and she wanted them to hear, just this once, about how traumatizing [this was]. I found the right moment, walked up there, started speaking, and read my mom's letter.

I thought about this for six years: when's the Ring Road going to open? Where am I going to be? I knew I wanted to be there and intervene in some way. The words were mostly [from my] mom's [letter], which she wrote very quickly [that morning]. The letter summed up all the things my family was feeling, what I was feeling, and what she felt people should know. I also read a quote from Bull Head: ["We don't want to quarrel about it. We don't want to sell. The reserve is just big enough for

ourselves. But the white men are bothering us to give up our land. The treaty was made."] I want people within the Nation to hear his words to learn what he was about. He wasn't about surrendering or selling land. A majority of us from the reserve are related to Bull Head. I'm related to Bull Head. Our ancestry is our family, our words, values and beliefs. I wanted people to remember those things.

I also wanted to mention the treaty, and that Chief Roy Whitney, basically signed away Tsuut'ina's treaty rights. My family was forced off our land. We never gave up our treaty rights. We never gave up our values. I wanted to address those things.

I had scissors with me and thought, at some point, I'll cut my hair. In my culture, we cut our hair when we're mourning a loved one who has passed away. It's a sign of pain and hurt. Without hesitating, when I was done talking, I cut my hair.

***seth cardinal dodginghorse*** is a multidisciplinary artist, experimental musician, and recent graduate of the Alberta University of the Arts. He grew up eating dirt and exploring the forest on his family's ancestral land on the Tsuut'ina Nation. In 2014, he and his family were forcibly removed from their homes and land for the construction of the Southwest Calgary Ring Road. His work explores his own experiences of displacement and family history.

It's kind of a blur. But I don't regret any of the things I said.

**A:** The moment you cut your braids was riveting. I didn't know what it meant in Tsuut'ina culture, but for the Chinese people in Canada back in the day, a man's braid connected him to the homeland while overseas. When I saw you cut your braid, for me—and I'm sure for many Chinese people—your hair's connection to homeland resonated with me deeply.

**S:** Yeah, hair is powerful. There's a photograph of my grandfather going back a few generations. He was Chief Bull Head's older brother. His name was Big Plume. From the scalps of his enemy he collected the hair and would braid it into his own.

**A:** Wow, what?

**S:** He had this one really long, giant braid. It was long enough that he could wrap it around his body.

**A:** Sick.

**S:** There was this competition in Calgary for who had the longest hair. This would have been around the 1910s. It might have been part of the Calgary Stampede—not sure. My ancestor, Big Plume, entered that competition. There's a photo of him with his long braid and a guy measuring it.

**A:** Haha. Wow.

**S:** The guy he was against was a Chinese man who had a really long braid too.

**A:** Wow, what? Haha.

**S:** Ya, haha. They were in this hair competition together. I can't remember who won.

**A:** Only the white man would put us up against each other in competition, right?

**S:** Haha. I know. I'm trying to imagine if the competition was at the Calgary Stampede, they probably entered [thinking]: "Oh, this seems easy to win" to get money for some rides and cotton candy and stuff.

**A:** Haha.



Image courtesy of the artist.

# ***What does it mean to be both Chinese and Indigenous in Canada?***

## **An Interview with Melissa Chung-Mowat**

Chen Chen and Annie Wong

**Chen:** Arriving here as an international student from Guizhou, China and as an uninvited guest to Turtle Island, my personal learning journey has been to locate the otherwise hidden historical and contemporary relationship between Asians (and Chinese more specifically) and Indigenous peoples within the settler state. An early source that helped me during my research was Fujikane and Okamura's (2008) edited volume *Asian Settler Colonialism*, which asked critical questions about the responsibility and obligation of Asian immigrants as settlers who unwittingly became complicit with the U.S. settler colonial violence in Hawai'i. Then I came across Melissa Chung (2010) master's thesis, "The Relationships between Racialized Immigrants and Indigenous peoples in Canada: A Literature Review," a few years ago when I first started searching for sources about Asian-Indigenous relationships.

**Annie:** Melissa, who is of Métis and Chinese descent, was a student at Ryerson University at the time. Part of her research resembles a form of "storytelling" about untangling white supremacy within her own identity. She begins, "I must acknowledge and reclaim my Aboriginal identity and find a way to understand myself as a colonized body but also as one implicated in colonization processes." (Chung, 2010, 2) Speaking directly from her lived experience, her research was an example of adapting Indigenous methods to understand how white supremacy worked on both sides of her identity. To us, Melissa's stories were about a crisis of identity as much as healing through relationship building, resilience, and reciprocity.

**Chen:** Melissa, can I invite you to introduce yourself to our readers?

**Melissa:** I am in Winnipeg, on Treaty 1 territory, homeland to Ojibwe, Cree, and the Métis Nation. I was born here. My mom is Métis and our ancestry is part of the Red River Settlement. There is a historic area in Winnipeg along the Red River, which for millennia, Indigenous peoples used as a trading route. It was a pivotal area during the fur trade when the Hudson's Bay Company established themselves and built relationships with Indigenous people. And so my mom's family, of Scottish-Métis heritage, settled here.

My dad came to Canada in the early 1980s as an international student. He is a Hong Kong resident, but a Dutch national. His side of the family emigrated from southern China. So we are Hakka people. My grandparents moved to South America in a country now called Suriname—it was [formerly]

Dutch Guiana. When the country gained independence [in 1975], my dad's family left and settled in the Netherlands. He and many of my cousins were born in South America, but my dad went back to Hong Kong when he was a kid and was raised by his grandmother, whom I called "atai" 太. [When he was a student in Canada], he returned to Hong Kong when I was probably around four years old. I was raised by my mom for the majority of my life. Having said that, I also was able to maintain a strong relationship with my dad's side of the family by going to Hong Kong since the age of six during summer holidays. I don't speak [Cantonese], but most of my family aside from my grandparents speak English.

**C:** Can you share with us the story behind your research as a master's student?

**M:** I learned from an early age that my father's knowledge and understanding of Indigenous peoples was impacted by

mainstream, racist viewpoints. This made it challenging at a young age to talk about identity with my dad. One of the most impactful moments in my youth took place when my mom and I were living in a tiny village north of Winnipeg. I recall playing with a friend in her backyard. She suddenly said something like, “Oh, I need to go inside now, but you’re not allowed to come with me.” When I asked why, she said, “my parents don’t let *native* kids in the house.”

I was probably only seven or eight when that happened. These different experiences led me to hide and reject my identity for many, many years. I started seeking out more information and wanted to reconnect and learn more about my Indigenous heritage. Going to Ryerson University allowed me a kind of fresh start and opportunity to explore that. I chose the Immigration and Settlement Studies program to learn [and

ask]; how do immigrants and newcomers to Canada learn about Indigenous people here? What are we seeing in terms of relationship building? And what are the opportunities to expand that work (to really build alliances and allyship between communities, given that we are all part of this system of white supremacy)? And if we can build alliances between one another, how can we be stronger in that?

**Annie:** I went to a talk last night by Dawn Maracle and she described how the Indian Act, residential schools, and the reserve system were designed to prevent settlers from relating to Indigenous peoples, and to ensure no relationships were built. [In your thesis], you say that “this is something that needs to be done now to think about the future.” How are you doing that work in your community, now?

**M:** Winnipeg is a really interesting city. But I definitely felt that moving to

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***Perhaps there are way more intersections on ways that people identify with the “creator” or whoever that is, where there might be opportunities to explore and build more [mutual] understanding.***

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Toronto presented me with a very different “climate of knowing.” In my experience, the Indigenous population in Toronto was not very visible and [as a result], much of understanding Indigenous peoples was kind of separate. Instead of having interactions with Indigenous people personally, [newcomers] are knowing of Indigenous people through, for example, a historical text or something removed from their own community. Whereas in Winnipeg, the way they experience Indigenous people is very “first hand.” And when newcomers arrive, they often settle in our inner city first, which has a high Indigenous population. So, I think there’s a lot of initial misunderstanding that’s established, because what they see are “homeless” people or people who are suffering from addictions. And being a newcomer who has worked so hard to come here, it’s easy to misunderstand why people here aren’t able

to benefit from the different systems in place that are “supposed” to help [them] thrive.

In Winnipeg’s context, there has been a lot of work done by inner-city organizations, newcomer-serving organizations, [and] Indigenous organizations to build relationships. For example, I’m doing work right now with an organization that serves Indigenous [Peoples] and newcomers. They are non-Indigenous [led] but have programming for both groups. They do a lot of work around education and offer all their staff education based on the Calls to Action [from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada], and provide access to culture for their Indigenous participants. They’ve created their own land acknowledgment and do things like commit to not accessing funds meant for Indigenous organizations to not create competition. So, I think in Winnipeg, nonprofit

organizations are aware of the situation [and are] ensuring that there are opportunities to learn and build relationships. [...]

**C:** Can we switch the topic to talk about family? You live in a very special situation with regards to your families. What does it feel like, for example, to communicate in between two sides of your family?

**M:** It’s something that I struggle with all the time. I don’t necessarily have as many opportunities to connect with the Chinese side of my family on these issues, mainly because my dad is really the only one in my family who has any knowledge or experience in Canada. My cousins in the Netherlands, with whom I am close, just don’t have a framework of understanding—it’s not part of their culture, the systems, or experiences they’ve had. I think they could relate in other ways. Some of them were born in a [formerly] colonized country in South America, which created upheaval and brought

them to the other side of the world, again. My dad [though] has become more curious and less rigid in his thinking over the years. I've definitely had opportunities to counter his thoughts or assumptions.

As far as navigating, most of my work has not happened within my family, but externally. And even then, it's a very strange line I walk. When I think about what ties me to my Indigenous culture, it is not what you [may] think of as a Métis family, person, or community. When I grew up, I didn't have access or presented with any kind of Métis "culture." It wasn't part of my family situation. My mom's parents died before I was born and within her family, there was lots of trauma. So, the family itself wasn't a stable unit. We moved so often we [couldn't] really [be] tied to where her family had roots for many generations: we were separated from the community. It's a strange thing, but laughter is a big part of Indigenous

culture[s]. Laughing and teasing is a big thing. That's been a big part of that side of the family that ties me. There's going to bingo with my great Auntie. There's my mom from a very young age, calling me a "neechi," which is an Indigenous word for an Aboriginal person. But then [there's] also [the] trauma of mental health issues [and] addictions. It's homelessness. It's upheaval, it's family violence. So it's hard when so much of how I identify [with my Métis side] is trauma-based. [...]

**A:** Are there possible ways in which being both Indigenous and Chinese can offer healing? What is the healing work that you are doing for someone who is "mixed-blood"?

**M:** Despite the many challenges, I'm proud of where I've gotten to in life. It's been this really strange dichotomy. I had this life with my mom, where we were really poor: we went to soup kitchens, got Christmas hampers, stayed

in women's shelters and all these things. On the other side, I had this very weird privileged life, where I'd go to Hong Kong and eat amazing food, and see beautiful places, simultaneously and very often. In my adulthood, part of reconciling with and engaging in my own healing journey has been really about first being open and upfront about this mixed heritage. Having the opportunity through grad school for a kind of fresh start in Toronto [was] like, "Okay, this is my opportunity to just put it all out there." Having opportunities to be really upfront, to share my story, to build relationships with Indigenous people, communities, organizations here and in Toronto, and [having] my second reader for my research project, Dr. Lynn Lavallée [who] was a great mentor, helped me navigate this work. Often, when I'm talking about my family, I talk about my mom being Métis and my dad being Chinese, and it

kind of [felt] like [it was] almost separated even for myself. I remember Lynn was one of the first to say, "well, you know, that's you too, right? Your mom is Métis, but you're also Métis; your dad's Chinese but you're also Chinese." Accepting both identities has been healing. It's hard when you carry shame and feel like you have to hide things or wear a mask. [...]

One thing I'm interested in, and it's something someone asked me, is: "Do you see any similarities between Indigenous cultures in Canada and Chinese culture?" I really had no response, [but] recently, I went to the Netherlands to attend my grandfather's funeral. It was a sad but also beautiful time. I learned so much about what that looks like—how a family comes together, and what's to be done. Monks came to the service and seeing all that was very interesting. [It] was powerful for me. Everything from the food offerings and the shrines in

***Melissa Chung-Mowat*** identifies as a mixed-heritage Chinese-Métis woman. Her father is Chinese from Hong Kong and her mother is Métis, a descendant of the Red River Valley Métis. She was raised by her mom in Winnipeg, Portage la Prairie, and the Interlake region of Manitoba. She has spent her adulthood exploring her own identity as a mixed-heritage Indigenous woman in her studies, personal life, and in her career. Melissa is a graduate of Ryerson University with a Master of Arts degree in Immigration and Settlement Studies, where her research focused on Indigenous and new Canadian relations. She currently works for an Indigenous-owned company called AMIK, which is located on Swan Lake First Nation in Headingley, Manitoba.

the homes. Perhaps there are way more intersections on ways that people identify with the “creator” or whoever that is, where there might be opportunities to explore and build more [mutual] understanding. A lot of Indigenous cultures do a food offering and to see that, as far as I know, in different Chinese cultures too is very interesting to me. Maybe there’s an opportunity to build a bridge or explore.

**A:** This is such a loaded question, but I’m going to ask it anyway: what does reconciliation mean to you, and what can the Chinese community in Canada do towards Truth and Reconciliation efforts?

**M:** [...] I think it starts with understanding where you are, what land you’re on, and its history. Sometimes you’re on unceded territories. So what does that mean? If you’re on treaty territory, what does that mean? It [also] starts with an

openness and willingness to learn and be uncomfortable, very uncomfortable at times, and being self-reflective when doing that learning. There’s a lot of resources out there. Finding those resources first and then making sure any attempts at extending invitations to build relationships come from a place of reciprocity and understanding that there’s something you want to gain from creating those relationships, but then, What are you offering in return? It also starts within families and having conversations with those closest to you. Because sometimes that’s where the most impact can happen.



Image courtesy of the artist. 2020.

# ***Where it Comes from***

## **An Interview with Jae Sterling**

Annie Wong

While listening to Jae Sterling’s song “Hiatus,” I catch the phrase, “good time spent, reflecting with no address, in Chinatown feeling blessed.” I nod along and can’t help but smile. Jae is a rapper and the artist behind the mural *The Guide & Protector*, commissioned by Black Lives Matter in Calgary. It features a Black woman on a bull emerging from a billow of clouds alongside John Ware, the first Black cowboy in Calgary. Before Jae came on as the artist, the commission was originally planned to replace an older mural in the downtown core. When alt-right media groups learned about the project, the organizers of the mural were hit by a torrent of racist backlash that led them to postpone the project. In a public statement they wrote, “We do not wish to add to the harm our community experiences [...] it is no longer safe to carry out the Black Lives Matter Murals this year.”<sup>1</sup> The backlash, however, was not unmatched by an outpouring of support from the community. After some confusion with locals and an uneasy transition, not long after the postponement the project secured a new site in Chinatown and Jae was brought on as the lead artist.

In this interview, Jae speaks the way he paints: intimate but rough, revealing but reserved. He talks about how being a Jamaican immigrant in Calgary has messed with his mind, how

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1 Smith, Madeline. “Black Lives Matter mural project postponed to 2021 after ‘violent vitriol’ directed at community group.” *Calgary Herald*. August 12, 2020. <https://calgaryherald.com/news/local-news/city-councillors-say-downtown-mural-wont-be-replaced-after-public-opposition>

he deals with the unintended effects of healing and potentially harming in his art, his discovery of the first Black cowboy in Calgary and finding safety in Chinatown. Sometimes he elides details too heavy to talk about. I'm familiar with this tacit form of talk. To "get into" the traumas of your cultural histories involves an emotional labour given to the ones you truly trust or for your art. We are meeting for the first time over Zoom, so when he moves the conversation into ellipses, I catch it like a lyric in his song and nod along.

**Annie:** Can you tell us about your artistic practice?

**Jaе:** [My work] usually pulls from life experiences. I think that's more poignant. Most of what I work on was from my Jamaican perspective of being in Calgary for 10 years. A lot of artists [think] these are all new stories, but the exhibition [*Riding Horses with White Men*] has been 10 years in the making. But yeah, [I pull from] life experiences like, well, culture [...]. I do music as well. I've been obsessed with hip hop culture ever since I was 15. [...]

**A:** What are the stories and life experiences you pull from?

**J:** I don't say it so bluntly, but immigration is one of them. It really flipped my life in a crazy way where I have this perspective of Jamaica now, through an outer—or third person perspective. So, in [*Riding Horses with White Men*], I try to narrate that transition period in my life. I came straight to Calgary and it's rare for a Jamaican to come to Canada and not go straight to Toronto, you know? [When I arrived], I was really disconnected from the Jamaican community [here], because it's so small and spread out. You really have to make a conscious decision to hold on to your Jamaican identity, especially when you're dealing with racism and shit.

People will try to snap that out of you real fast—or you get embarrassed being asked the same stupid questions over and over again, right? It took a lot to get acclimatized. It was a culture shock of another level. [Calgary] feels like a little bit of Texas; the downtown feels a little like New York. It was a lot to take in so I try to translate that in my work and use a lot of Western references and imagery [like bulls].

The more interesting stories are the spikes in your life. Like, speaking about the violence that I've seen, been through, probably started myself, or from the side being affected by it—once you put that out there, you're opening yourself up to so many different types of perspectives. I had one person who came to the gallery [tell] me they were healed by the experience. You know? That's real. Some people walk in, see what I've been through and will feel less lonely and heal. Whereas others will

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***You really have to make a conscious decision to hold on to your Jamaican identity, especially when you're dealing with racism and shit.***

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walk in having never seen anything like this. Or some will be traumatized by it, not wanting to relive it. And that's [a] mindfuck because I'm not trying to hurt anybody. You know what I mean? I'm not trying to be anything more than—I'm not even trying to be a healer. That's not my job. I'm not a therapist, by any means. I'm just trying to make interesting art. But I have to deal with those two elements [harm or healing], especially with this exhibition. And it comes with a mindfuck.

### **JOHN WARE**

**A:** Let's talk about John Ware, the figure in your mural, *The Guide & Protector*. Who is he?

**J:** Before I knew about [John Ware], I had the sketch of the mural planned out. Then I found out about him. It was crazy, because [I thought,] this guy is literally me. From what I've been told he goes by the first Black cowboy who brought the first Longhorns [cows] to

Calgary. He was an ex-slave and came all the way from the south in the States. Just knowing that, what he left, and what he experienced coming here...

When people tell me "Oh, yeah, there weren't any slaves in Canada," but this guy was an ex-slave and [still] dealt with racism as far as I'm concerned, you know what I mean? These guys suffered so much. I heard stories of his Black friends who died from heart attacks because of the stress they went through. But I don't want to go into it.

**A:** Mhm.

**J:** When I read his stories, [I thought] this is how I felt. When I came [to Calgary], I had to do a lot of labor work and [when I worked] at the warehouse with white people, [I was] trying to outdo everyone because [I was] terrified of getting fired. The things that they would tease and call me. Literally, til this day it is still happening.

So, when I heard [Ware's] stories, it was crazy [to learn] the things he went through. His life in Calgary really spoke to me and made me realize that I have a story here as well. I'm learning lots about him. But him just being a Black cowboy, that's all I need to hear to feel empowered, because that's how I feel. Right?

**A:** It's cool that you see yourself in his history.

**J:** It's cool but it's also so crazy that his story exists. I wish I found out about it a long time ago. That's why representation is so important. Right? That's why when a Black kid sees this mural, he'll feel like, "oh, Calgary is mine too." You know, living for somewhere for so long, and working somewhere for so long, and feeling like you are still an outsider is not a healthy feeling. You're putting in a lot of energy into this thing. It's yours too.

**A:** Where does the title of the mural, *The Guide & Protector*, come from?

**J:** The title comes from something very direct in my life. In Jamaica, whenever we would leave and fist-bump, the Rastafarians would be like, "guide and protection." It's a slang. And when I got older, it really resonated with me. A lot of Jamaican talk is very profound but said casually. It's like calling someone "youth," casually, or how we call each other "lord". When I was young, it didn't really mean much to me. I was like, "Okay, cool. Thanks, bro." And I would say these things back because that's how I learned them as a kid. Someone says something cool on the street and it becomes a part of your dialect—that's patois. Patois changes every season. And a lot of it just sounds so fucking profound. So that's where the title came from: a slang.

**A:** That's really cool. I love that.

## CHINATOWN

**A:** Can we talk about the site of the mural in Chinatown? I know that there was some controversy even in Chinatown. But I don't know...

**J:** The controversy was started by some white people. By something called Rebel Media. That's where it started. They instigated and started some shit. Most of the hate that I'm getting is no one from the Chinese community, which is so weird for me to experience.

**A:** Why is that weird?

**J:** Because it's like, "Why are so many white people talking for Chinese people?" How do you have the audacity? It's weird. In fact, when they told me I could have this spot in Chinatown, I was like, lit. [At the original site] these people wouldn't leave it alone. So, I thought Chinatown was a safe zone. And then, here comes a bunch of weirdos trying to talk for Chinese people. How do you have such a huge ego and

sense of entitlement? I've never seen anything like it.

**A:** Yeah, it's fucked. When I was reading up on the controversy, I read that Terry Wong, the Executive Director of the Chinatown BIA, had to make a public statement to clear things up.

**J:** [...] Everyone, the building owners, even the lot owner approved this mural. They thought it and everything that was going to surround it was good for the community. We spoke to the Chinese community. So, he had to come out and say, "there is no conflict here." I don't know, man. It's a really bad thing that happened. But [Rebel Media] didn't pull it off. The mural got done and made waves.

**A:** Yeah, it's gorgeous.

**J:** Thanks. Yeah. Well, let's see what happens, now.

**A:** What do you mean?

**J:** One thing I'm learning about the controversy is that it picks up more and more conversations, which is good. [...] but a lot of tension is not dying out. That's what I mean. But let's see where the conversation goes. As far as the art is concerned, my job is done. The art is done. A lot of people are asking me if I'm concerned about it being defaced. Street art comes with that territory. I'm not concerned. I was concerned about getting it done and getting the idea out there, that Black people are here. And that happened. And usually, throughout history, whenever that happens, all these [other] things happen. It's like we never get to poke up our head without controversy. It's weird to me. And It's hard for me because I thought we were past a lot of things, but we're really not.

**A:** I'm really happy the mural is in Chinatown. It's a sign of solidarity for me, especially in a place like Calgary. I feel safe

in Chinatown and Black people should feel safe in Chinatown too, you know? There aren't enough safe spaces, like you said, in a hostile ecosystem. So how do we actually create safe spaces where we can tell our stories and imagine a future together?

**J:** You're right. At least that's my intention. And at least that's what I felt when I got the opportunity to work there. Because I always go to Chinatown. When I came to Calgary, that's where I hung out. That's where I'd shoot music videos. That's where my friends would eat, you know?

**A:** That's cool.



Image courtesy of the artist, 2020

**Jae Sterling** is a multidisciplinary artist and founding member of the SANSFUCCS/THOTNATION collective. A musician at heart, he has also extended his art form over the years to include painting (acrylic and oil), digital design, mixed media, and more recently, written essays. Through his early years in Kingston, Jamaica to the landscapes of North America, Jae has spent the past few years developing his artistry by weaving his experiences growing up in Jamaica, South Florida, and coming into adulthood in Canada into all his projects. In 2019, his exploration in hip hop led him to be one of 10 artists selected for the National Music Centre's Alberta residency program. Sterling has so far released four music projects and has toured in Alberta and Ontario. In 2020, Sterling embarked on an ambitious year-long multimedia exhibition, *Riding Horses with White Men (RHWM)*. This exhibition debuted in Calgary in summer 2020 and is currently touring across Canada into 2021. Jae's more recent work, falling under the self-styled title of 'BULLY,' veers towards examining race, sexuality, violence, and art's ability to retell and heal histories while simultaneously violating them. In 2021, Jae intends to release a collection of essays from the *RHWM* exhibition.





**KEY TERMS**

## ***What was the Residential School System and the Sixties Scoop?***

Residential schools were an education system established by the Canadian government and operated by churches from the 1880s into the closing decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The system forcibly separated Indigenous children from families to assimilate them into Canadian society. Education was subpar while Aboriginal language, cultural and spiritual practices were aggressively suppressed. The intergenerational trauma of the system would continue through the “Sixties Scoop.” The following are edited excerpts from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Executive Summary:

“The educational goals of the schools were limited and confused, and usually reflected a low regard for the intellectual capabilities of Aboriginal people. For the students, education and technical training too often gave way to the drudgery of doing the chores necessary to make the schools self-sustaining. Child neglect was institutionalized, and the lack of supervision created situations where students were prey to sexual and physical abusers.” (TRC 2015, 3)

“Residential schools are a tragic part of Canada’s history. But they cannot simply be consigned to history. The legacy from the schools and the political and legal policies and mechanisms surrounding their history continue to this day. This is reflected in the significant educational, income, health, and social disparities between Aboriginal people and other Canadians. It is reflected in the intense racism some

people harbour against Aboriginal people and in the systemic and other forms of discrimination Aboriginal people regularly experience in this country. It is reflected too in the critically endangered status of most Aboriginal languages. Current conditions such as the disproportionate apprehension of Aboriginal children by child-welfare agencies and the disproportionate imprisonment and victimization of Aboriginal people can be explained in part as a result or legacy of the way that Aboriginal children were treated in residential schools and were denied an environment of positive parenting, worthy community leaders, and a positive sense of identity and self-worth. (TRC 2015, 137)

“The residential school experience was followed by the “Sixties Scoop”—the wide scale national apprehension of Aboriginal children by child-welfare agencies. Child Welfare authorities removed thousands of Aboriginal children from their families and communities and placed them in non-Aboriginal homes without taking steps to preserve their culture and identity. Children were placed in homes across Canada, in the United States, and even overseas. This practice actually extended well beyond the 1960s, until at least the mid- to late 1980s. Today, the effects of the residential school experience and the Sixties Scoop have adversely affected parenting skills and the success of many Aboriginal families. These factors, combined with prejudicial attitudes toward Aboriginal parenting skills and a tendency to see Aboriginal poverty as a symptom of neglect, rather than as a consequence of failed government policies, have resulted in grossly disproportionate rates of child apprehension among Aboriginal people.” (TRC 2015, 138)

## ***What was the Transatlantic Slave Trade?***

The following is an edited excerpted from Gary Pieters's essay "Slavery's long destructive legacy" published in the *Toronto Star* on March 24, 2007.

"Slavery coincided with the rise of European empire-building, with many European powers, notably Britain, France, Spain, the Netherlands and Portugal, participating in the slave trade in their empires up to the 1800s. Denmark and Sweden also had colonial possessions and slaves, while the Americans and Brazilians, who did not have colonial possessions, also had significant populations of enslaved Africans.

These empires participated in the exploitative practices of plantation slavery, chattel slavery, domestic slavery, and the use of the resources, raw materials and coerced unpaid labour of Africans to better the economic well-being of Europe and the Americas. [...]

It is estimated that more than 12 million enslaved Africans were brought to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade.

During the years of the slave trade, my ancestors were treated as chattel goods. Their enslavement was physical, economic and mental. Consequently, the legacies of centuries of racialized enslavement continue to have a lingering impact on the continent of Africa, the African diaspora and Canadians of African descent, to this day.

Manifestations of racism against people of African origin; the breakdown of the African family; the racialization of poverty; criminalization and high rates of incarceration in the penal system; “shade-ism”; and limited access to opportunity and to full participation by those already lacking in resources, are some of the cascading effects of slavery that still undermine the full socioeconomic development and vitality of African peoples. [...]

Abolition of the slave trade, however, did not abolish slavery, which continued in British possessions until 1833, in the United States until the end of the Civil War in 1865, and in Brazil until 1888. The text of a United Nations resolution in late 2006 recognized “the slave trade and slavery as among the worst violations of human rights in the history of humanity, bearing in mind, particularly, the scale, duration and lingering impact.” It also acknowledged that the institution of slavery is at the heart of “profound social and economic inequality, hatred, bigotry, racism and prejudice which continue to affect people of African descent today.” [...]

While Canada cannot change this aspect of its early history, it can, by acknowledging the act, show leadership in ensuring that Canada’s complete history is known and credit given to all who contributed to the building of the nation.”

## ***Why Does Black Lives Matter Call for the Abolition of the Police?***

The experience of police for many nonwhite people is one of ongoing discrimination, over surveillance, and violence often resulting in death. The demand to abolish the police and to redistribute funds to social services such as employment youth services, child support, and food security is based on 1) research demonstrating that communities with access to a healthy standard of living have far less crime, and 2) the reality that the police cause more harm than protection to vulnerable people and nonwhite communities. It is important to understand that the failure to serve and protect is more insidious than a “few bad apples”; it lies in the system’s design to serve the interests of private property, primarily belonging to white people. In this excerpt from her book *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present*, Robyn Maynard connects the overpolicing of Indigenous and Black lives to the history of slavery and colonization:

“public associations between Blackness and crime can be traced back to runaway slave advertisements dating back to the seventeenth century, in which self-liberated Blacks were portrayed as thieves and criminals. All free and enslaved people were subject to the surveillance of a larger white community and law enforcement officials, who together scrutinized the presence of Black bodies in public space as possibly criminal “runaways” (Kitossa 2005; Nelson 2016a, 2016c). After slavery’s abolition, the associations between Blackness and crime served important political, social, economic and cultural functions in maintaining the racial order, and

the ongoing surveillance and policing of Blackness —and the corresponding wildly disproportionate arrest and incarceration rates —were quintessential in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Canada. These associations with Blackness, today, while articulated through a slightly different language (thugs, gangsters or, in Québec, “les yos”), remain markedly unchanged.

The history of racialized surveillance, policing and incarceration in Canada was also profoundly shaped by, and geared toward, the aims of settler colonialism. The imposition of forcing Indigenous persons onto reserves and then, beginning in 1846, residential schools, were the initial modes of confinement levelled at Indigenous persons, confining Indigenous populations onto tiny portions of land and attempting to destroy political sovereignty and traditional relationships to land, to clear the way for settler societies and resource extraction (Hunt 2013). Canada’s first policing body, the North-West Mounted Police (now the Royal Canadian Mounted Police), created in 1873, played an important role in the Canadian government’s arsenal toward quelling Indigenous rebellion and protecting the economic interests of white settlers (Comack 2012). In recent years, though, the criminal justice system, particularly law enforcement, jails and prisons, has become a primary means of settler violence over Indigenous bodies; “criminal control” remains an integral part of conquest (Nichols 2014, 448). Indigenous persons now make up a substantial proportion of those

held captive in Canada’s jails and prisons: while representing around 5 percent of Canadian society, they make up almost one-quarter of the current total inmate population Canada-wide (Sapers 2015). This is a rate of incarceration even higher than that of Canada’s Black population. Policing remains a site of colonial dispossession of Indigenous peoples and their resources.” (Maynard 2017, 83–84)

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## ***What is the Model Minority?***

Model minority is the myth that claims hard work and tolerance of racial injustice, rather than resistance, will uplift immigrant communities to the equal status of white people. The success of the Chinese community in particular have been used as an example of the model minority to invalidate the hardships other communities of colour experienced, particularly Black people, as the result of poor work ethics. In an article by NPR's podcast, *Code Switch*, Dr. Ellen D. Wu explains, "since the end of World War II, many white people have used Asian-Americans and their perceived collective success as a racial wedge. The effect? Minimizing the role racism plays in the persistent struggles of other racial/ethnic minority groups—especially Black Americans" (Chow 2017). In her book, the *Colour of Success*, Wu traces the origins of the model minority in the United States during the Cold War as part of an international campaign for "American exceptionalism." The model minority served as the illusion of racial harmony in an anti-Communist society (Wu 2014, 4). In Canada, the model minority was similarly used to tout the country's brand of multiculturalism in an effort to attract a class of economic immigrants in the wake of an aging Canadian workforce. With a point-based immigration policy and the passing of the Multicultural Act in 1988, the construction of the model minority carefully elided the role of selective point-based immigration policies, the reality of anti-Asian racism, and the racial hierarchy it created among people of colour. All the while centering whiteness as the invisible hand of privilege, the model minority is in essence, a tool of "colour blindness" in the service of white supremacy. While Asians are granted privileges by being in proximity to whiteness, it is at the cost of social and racial injustices experienced by Black, Indigenous, and other communities of colour.



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## **About the Editors**

**Annie Wong** 黃秀盈, is a writer and multidisciplinary artist working in performance and installation. Conceptually diverse, her practice explores the intersections between the political and poetic in everyday life. Wong has presented across North America including at the Toronto Biennale of Art, Studio XX and SBC Gallery (Montreal, QC), Third Space Gallery (Saint John, NB), and has been awarded residencies with the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Power Plant (Toronto, ON), The Khyber Centre for the Arts (Halifax, NS), and Banff Centre for Creativity and Art (Banff, AL). She is the Community Artist in Residence at the Varley Art Gallery (2020), and one of the three participating artists in Calgary Chinatown Artist in Residency, created in partnership with The New Gallery and the City of Calgary (2021). Her literary works in poetry, art writing, and non-fiction can be found in *Koffler.Digital*, *The Shanghai Literary Review*, *C Magazine*, *Canadian Art*, and *MICE Magazine*.

**Chen Chen** 陈晨 (Ph.D.), is a grateful visitor to miskwaciwâskahikan (also known today as Edmonton, Canada) on Treaty 6 Territory. He is a postdoctoral fellow at the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation, University of Alberta. An educator and researcher, his current work addresses the intersection of sport with colonialism, migration/displacement, and environmental justice. He is particularly interested in how non-Western epistemologies (theories of knowledge) and worldviews can mobilize sport and movement spaces to be more just and equitable, and facilitate more meaningful community-building towards decolonization and abolition



