

Other Democracies: Writing Thru Race at the 20 Year Crossroad

by Larissa Lai

Much has changed in the structure of the Canadian state and in the global movements of people and finances since the 1994 conference Writing Thru Race, and yet many of the questions it raised remain unanswered. Organized by a committee of some sixty community members, some of whom were also members of the Writers' Union of Canada, and some of whom were not, the conference was a great source of contention within the Writers' Union, in national public forums, and even in the House of Commons.

In the public arena, the debates over Writing Thru Race were carried out on a binary plane that pitted whiteness against colour. However, there were many other sites of interest and contention. Specifically, the Writing Thru Race moment was one in which relationships among differently racialized communities was just beginning to be interrogated. For instance, Black Canadian and Asian Canadian communities were then just finding a language for their relationship to one another in terms of both commonalities, differences and conflicts of interest. Further, intersectional questions around the confluences of racialized experience with other embodied experience -- classed, gendered, sexuality-- were also present, though only partially open to articulation. There were questions about the politics of representation and self-representation. There were debates around the construction of racialized subjectivity and the problem of writing from such a location. Heavy-handed framing on the part of the mainstream media, however, worked to the effect that those more

nuanced issues and questions never made it into public consciousness, but rather remained marginalized in racialized cultural communities.

Conceived during a period of many anti-racist gatherings-- notably, In Visible Colours, The Appropriate Voice, It's a Cultural Thing, and Race and the Body Politic, First Ladies and Yellow Peril Reconsidered-- Writing Thru Race was organized in Vancouver by a committee that included Roy Miki, Joy Hall, Charmaine Perkins, Anne Jew, Susan Crean, C. Allyson Lee, Scott Toguri McFarlane, Mark Nakada, Michelle LaFlamme, Angela Hyrniuk, Peter Hudson, and myself. Many other community members took part at various times; there were perhaps sixty or so people who attended one meeting or more. In effect, the committee was a coalition, loosely formed, but deeply engaged in the questions of race and racialization that were burning in the public forum at the time.

On the surface, the issue of contention was a conference policy limiting daytime events to self-identified First Nations writers and writers of colour. However, there were also public events attached to the conference open to anyone who wished to attend. This structuring, emerging from a social-justice-oriented politics of the body, was interpreted by some members of the Writers' Union and some journalists as well, to suggest that Writing Thru Race was a conference that excluded whites. Many articles in the mainstream press decried the policy. Robert Fulford, in an article entitled "George Orwell, Call Your Office" (30 March 1994) bemoans a multiculturalism that upholds the rights of groups as opposed to a liberal pluralism that respects the individual, and suggests that the redeployment of racial terms repeats South African apartheid. He criticizes then Writers' Union president

Myrna Kostash as paternalistic for supporting the opportunity for First Nations writers and writers of colour to meet without having to worry about what whites are feeling. The closing paragraph of that article specifically protests the use of public funding-- from BC Cultural Services, Vancouver City Council, the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council-- to support the conference.

In a response entitled "Why we're holding the Vancouver conference", Roy Miki argues that Fulford has got his terms all wrong. Multiculturalism is a federal policy that in fact does the work of liberal pluralism that Fulford opposes it to. Miki emphasizes the connections among writers of colour and First Nations writers along cultural lines certainly, but more specifically, he argues that what draws a circle around those described through these terms is the common experience of racism. Pointedly, Miki does not use the term "multicultural" to describe the conference, thus intentionally not invoking the Eurocentric framework utilized in Charles Taylor's *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, interestingly published in the same year that Writing Thru Race took place. Instead, he recognizes a set of violent and legally perpetrated acts on the part of the state that defines and generates racialized experience for First Nations people and people of colour. He specifies these historical/legal gestures: the Indian Act, The Chinese head tax, the Komagata Maru incident, the Japanese Canadian Internment, and the injustices suffered by African Canadians in Nova Scotia. He also asks readers to note that the conference Writing Thru Race will last for only three days, and is only one event among many needed to fight racism in our country.

The day after Miki's piece ran, the *Globe and Mail Classroom Edition* ran an article by Michael Valpy entitled "A nasty serving of cultural apartheid". Even more incendiary than the Fulford article, it calls multiculturalism a "cancer" taking root in schools, universities and government bureaucracy. Interestingly, Valpy notes the moment as one of the globalization of culture, and fears the loss of "national Canadian society". Public funding is made a key issue in Valpy's piece, addressed at some length in the body of the article, noted in both its opening and close. Like Fulford, he is unable or unwilling to make a distinction between anti-racism and multiculturalism. In perceiving a threat to Canadian society, he clearly does not see the organizing committee of Writing Thru Race or its participants as members of that society.

Though Miki's was the only article in favour of the conference to appear in *The Globe and Mail*, many other writers of colour wrote in support of it, both during and after, including Richard Fung, Gerry Shikitani, Cyril Dabydeen, Cecil Foster and Afua Cooper. Dionne Brand, for instance, offered a scathing critique of Fulford at a talk at the Western Front, later included in her book *Bread Out of Stone*: "When... Robert Fulford... says that colour is his least important feature, he is, of course, disingenuous. He could not exist without it... He is doing his most important job as a member of the white cultural elite.... Invoking liberalism, appealing to rights won through Black struggle as if he had a role in their accomplishment, paternalistically warning those whom racism affects the most that they are going down the wrong path in how they choose to organize against it..." (175-76).

These arguments were heated and painful. Beneath the surface of this debate structured through the fraught binary white/colour, were contentions among variously racialized communities attempting to work together within the broad coalition that existed under the banner "First Nations writers and writers of colour". I suggest that in the intervening 20 years between Writing Thru Race and the present, there has been much fracturing of that coalition, with variously racialized writers, artists and cultural producers for the most part retreating to specific national and race designations, with both more and less productive consequences. For instance, the rise of Indigenous sovereignty movements has been an important and positive aspect of this divergence. Increasing tensions between Black and Asian communities (in some arenas) have been difficult and painful, though such a tension can and does further present opportunities for dialogue and alliance work. I would argue, then, that the need for articulation and coalition activity remains as pressing as ever.

So then, one key problem regarding the binary framing of the conference by the mainstream media was that it tended to homogenize both "whiteness" and "colour", allowing little room for nuance or complication within either term. The fetishization of the binary also refused historical analysis of either term. And further, a second important issue went unanalyzed and taken for granted, which is this: While the public debates about Writing Thru Race focused on the white/colour binary, economic relations and conceptions of the public were also shifting in relation to it. One important, if fraught argument coming from liberal thinker/writers like Pierre Berton, was the argument that it was all well and fine to

have a conference that "excludes whites" as long as such an event did not take place on the public dime. "Have a conference! Have many conferences! Just don't do it with taxpayer money!" Berton said at a notorious preconference meeting, causing Makeda Silvera, the publisher of Sister Vision Press, to stomp off the stage, furious at having to explain her actions to a white elite. (Berton later made a private donation of his own money to the conference.)

And then, famously, weeks before the conference was to start, an upstart member of the burgeoning Reform Party called Jan Brown stood up in the House of Commons and asked then Minister of Culture Michel Dupuy how he could justify using public money to fund a conference that barred whites. Writing Thru Race was funded by a grant from the Department of Canadian Heritage (among other sources) under its mandate to support culture, the arts, heritage and citizenship. The distinction between barring whites as opposed to radically including First Nations writers and writers of colour for a limited time barely seemed to hit the mainstream forum, and arguments about the history of specific racisms against specific kinds of bodies also barely made it into the public discourse, and certainly was not debated or elaborated in any direct way. For this was also the moment of the Conservative/Reform "common sense revolution", in which nuanced critique was dismissed as over-intellectual, while incendiary misconstruing of events like the conference worked to roll out of neoliberal ideals masquerading as old-fashioned liberal ideals. But the idea of public money and the public forum were now key. Makeda Silvera's remark when she stormed off the stage at the Writers' Union pre-conference meeting --"I pay taxes too!"-- was an astute one. It recognized that there

is more than one Canadian public, and also, presciently, that economic relations both nationally and internationally were shifting in that precise historic moment.

1994 also marked the rise of neoliberal economics in Canada. Paul Martin had just been celebrated for his balancing of the budget in response to Standard and Poor's lowering of Canada's rating on foreign-denominated govern debt. The Reform Party was one the ascendant, and with it, the drive towards the privatization of much that had once belonged to a democratic public sector. Media concentration and control over the terms of the debate coincided with this redrawing of the lines between public and private to produce an absurd discursive frame in which many were willing to accept a "common sense" discourse in which terms like "reverse racism" actually seemed to hold real meaning. Such deliberately dishonest tactics worked by doubling back on themselves to accuse the marginalized of precisely the actions that the dishonest were enacting. What was lost was a sense of the historical and material, as well as the real legal history of Canada as a white settler state. The public forum never really opened to have the debate in an honest and nuanced way; what happened instead was the entrenchment and commodification of positions. Department of Canadian Heritage funding for the conference was indeed withdrawn. Conference organizers had to scramble at the last minute to find other sources of funding, and, thanks largely to the efforts of TWUC members like Susan Crean and Myrna Kostash, found support with the unions, which could see the injustice of the unfolding events and rallied to support the conference.

Beneath the surface, however, the conference organizing committee itself fractured under the weight of internal divisions, some of which occurred along

racial lines, some of which occurred over intersectional issues, and some of which had to do with relative access to public voice. As the conference came to a close, deep fissures developed between those organizing committee members who were not members of the Writers' Union and did not feel beholden its protocols of reportage, and those, largely members of the Racial Minority Writers' Committee, who felt that such a report was necessary. Monika Kin Gagnon notes that there is no reason why such an interesting and disparate gathering should, at the culminating meeting, have as its primary work a report back to the Writers' Union. Why not report instead to our own communities, other cultural institutions, funding bodies or publishing houses? (67)

Writing Thru Race, though its overt framing occurred on the binary white/colour, was actually a chiasmic event through which the forces of multiple facets of the world order manifested as they shifted in relation to one another. Through it were refracted the death of an old nationalist liberalism and the birth of a globalized neoliberalism in which the power of international, oligarchic economics was retrenching itself; the rise of minority nationalisms in commodified, fundamentalist and military forms; the rise of a neoliberal Canadian nationalism; and a new enclosure of the public forum coinciding with privatized forms of knowledge and privatized bigotries. The structure of the state was being reconfigured at both a global and a national scale. At a global scale, we later saw the true violence of these developments with the fall of the Twin Towers, the second American war in Iraq, and the financial crash of 2008. But the conference was also a

key part of a brief flowering of profoundly democratic cultural production by Indigenous and other racialized writers and artists.

For instance, among the many workshops held was one on community and the politics of editing in which a group of small magazine editors gathered to talk about the relationship between the small (racialized) magazine and white Canadian literature, and attempted to unravel the power relations involved. Interestingly, the debate became one in which class and gatekeeping were key issues. The editors at this session, including Karen/Miranda Augustine, Neesha Dosanj, Maureen Henry, Kyo Maclear, Greg Young-Ing, Ashok Mathur and Mark Nakada, recognized the impossibility of ever fully representing any community, or ever fully equalizing power relations, even within racialized communities, but then sought to do both, while remaining modest about the possibilities.

Writing workshops also took place, which afforded attendees the chance to share work under the guidance of a senior mentor. Discussion of technique and craft took place beside discussions about the writing industry. Movingly, one participant— Mark Nakada— writes that what was usually spoken went unspoken in these workshops (21); in other words, without having to attend to white guilt and recrimination, First Nations writers and writers of colour were able to get down to the actual practice of writing. For Nakada, the time was so short and so precious that he spent it all talking and thinking with other participants, and was so exhausted by the end that he lost his bag— with all his journals, tapes, notes and contacts in it! (21)

In a questionnaire conducted after the conference, participants described feeling energized, inspired and rejuvenated. It was a joy for many individuals involved to recognize that they were not alone, and to have the chance to meet and interact with writers like themselves and with more established racialized writers. The readings, panel discussions and book tables, and all of the interaction that emerged from these planned elements worked to produce a feeling of unity in collectivity that many felt had been missing in their lives and writing practices up until that point (24). One respondent, for instance, described the conferences as "a space where we writers of colour and First Nations could speak freely, without having to educate the mainstream before we could talk about the issues in writing which affect us. (24)" One of the main themes garnered in the questionnaire was that writers at the conference felt visible in a positive way, and felt that their longstanding isolation had been broken. That said, the many productivities of the conference remain largely open for further research. The sessions were recorded, and are available in Roy Miki's archive in Special Collections at the University of British Columbia.

It is important to recognize that many books, anthologies, special issues and readings emerged from Indigenous communities and communities of colour in the aftermath of Writing Thru Race. These alone are a testament to the value of the conference. In remembering Writing Thru Race, I hope we remember the kinds of thinking, discussion and cultural production possible in a culturally and politically rich democracy. The dream we were working towards has been decimated by the brutal shutdowns and enclosures of neoliberal economics and culture. Twenty years

after the Writing Thru Race conference, we have lost much of the capacity for public democratic debate that progressive cultural communities were developing and fighting for at that time. As a result, writers working today continue to bear a responsibility to think, imagine and write a more democratic future into being.

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