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Practitioners Essay

# Asian Canadian Studies as an Emancipatory Project

Rob Ho and Christopher Lee

## Abstract

With the rise in global neoliberalism and right-wing populism, higher education in Canada is at the forefront of the battleground for racial equality, multiculturalism, and diversity efforts. This essay argues for the importance of Asian Canadian Studies (ACS) as a means to combat ongoing manifestations of racism and racialization in the academy. We examine the necessity of ACS as an emancipatory project—its objectives and the challenges it faces. There are currently three existing ACS programs in Canada, and we will focus in particular on the University of British Columbia’s Asian Canadian and Asian Migration Studies Program as an illustrative example of how to promote social justice and civil rights in Canadian higher education. The importance of ACS and its effectiveness are discussed in the context of university settings.

## Introduction

As Canada celebrates its 150th birthday in 2017, the ongoing legacies of racial oppression that have shaped the country have yet to be fully reconciled. The nation has a long history of settler colonialism, immigration exclusion, and racism. It adopted an official government policy of multiculturalism in 1971 that became law in 1988, but as critics have argued, successive federal governments have sought to manage racial and ethnic differences by fostering multiculturalism even while obfuscating the persistence of racial domination (Thobani, 2007). In short, the lives of Indigenous (First Nations) peoples and visible minorities remain complicated by enduring racial tensions. Canada has one of the highest percentages of Asian residents outside Asia (15.3 percent, according to the 2011 Canadian National Household Survey [2013]), and amongst G8 nations, Canada had the highest proportion of foreign-born residents (20.6 per-

cent), well above Germany and the United States, with Asia being the largest source of these immigrants (*ibid.*). A long history of close ties to Asia has made these migrations key to Canada's development.

Asian Canadian Studies (ACS) has emerged as a dynamic critical vehicle to analyze and comprehend these movements in relation to global migrations, transpacific flows, and neoliberalism. As a relatively recent formation in postsecondary education, it has sought to recognize and dismantle hierarchical racial structures that limit the full participation of Asian Canadians in higher education as well as society-at-large. Postsecondary institutions do not live up to their self-imagination as idealized bastions of equity that promote harmonious relations between racial groups. To the contrary, hegemonic whiteness and mutating forms of racism have been pervasive features of Canadian academia (Henry et al., 2017; Henry and Tator, 2009; James, 2009; Ng, 1993). Calliste (2000) argues that Canadian universities perpetuate racism through formal and hidden curricula (such as campus climate and recruitment tools); the prevalence of widespread racial/ethnic slurs, jokes, and stereotyping; everyday racial harassment of Aboriginal peoples and racialized minorities; the exclusion of these groups from being positively represented in school marketing materials; and the dissemination of "objective" knowledge that actually mask the dominant groups' interests. Similarly, Henry and Tator (2009) have raised the following additional problems: underrepresentation of racialized faculty (even in urban centers with diverse populations); a Eurocentric curricula that validates only particular forms of knowledge and knowledge production; unfair tenure and promotion processes for racialized faculty; and backlash against those who expose the existence of chilly climates.

Nevertheless, especially against the backdrop of the global rise in neoliberalism and right-wing populism, as exemplified by the 2016 U.S. presidential election of Donald Trump and the eruption of anti-immigrant sentiment around the world, higher education remains at the forefront of the battle for racial equality, multiculturalism, and diversity. This essay argues for the importance of ACS as a vehicle to combat ongoing manifestations of racism and racialization in the academy. We advocate the necessity of ACS as an emancipatory project. There are three existing ACS programs in Canada<sup>1</sup>, and we will focus on the University of British Columbia's (UBC) Asian Canadian and Asian Migration Studies Program (ACAM) as an illustrative example of how to promote social justice and civil rights in Canadian higher education.

## Asian Canadian Studies across Canada

Readers familiar with U.S. ethnic studies may assume that ACS is analogous to Asian American Studies (AAS)<sup>2</sup>, but it is important to attend to the nuanced ways that ACS has emerged and developed both in conjunction with, and in contrast to, experiences in the United States. In 2013, the founding statement of the Asian Canadian Studies Network defined it as a “global network of academic and community researchers that promotes university-community partnerships to advance Asian-Canadian studies as a distinct field of study, research and cultural production for social justice” (AsianCanadianStudies.ca, 2016). While there have been relatively few academic programs focused solely on ACS, a critical mass of scholarship has emerged over the years in various academic locations, including related fields such as U.S.-based ethnic studies, Asian Studies, Asian Diaspora Studies, First Nations Studies, Women and Gender Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and Equity Studies. In recent years, there have been numerous gatherings of academics and community leaders at conferences and workshops across the country to explore and clarify what ACS can offer and how to nurture it as a formalized academic discipline. There have been debates in informal as well as public venues as to what such a scholarly field should look like, what it entails, and whether or not to institutionalize programs in ACS.

Scholars have argued that there is a lack of attention and resources allocated to research and teaching about Asian Canadians, leading to their invisibility as racialized minorities (Coloma et al., 2012). ACS can be seen as addressing this erasure by offering opportunities for racialized communities with ties to Asia to recover histories of discrimination and demand justice for historical transgressions (Coloma, 2012). Pon et al. (2017) argue that institutionalized programs are critical for supporting researchers and students committed to ACS scholarship and teaching. In this regard, there is a demonstrable need for institutionally-supported and ongoing activities such as conferences; academic journals and other publications; the promotion of research collaborations and the sharing of findings; and the building of pathways for the next generation of researchers and activists. We need to reiterate here that Asian Canadian activism has long occurred in existing humanities and social science departments. Many researchers in different academic disciplines have had a strong desire to engage in and fight for Asian Canadian causes. The experiences of Asian Canadians and Asian immigrants in Canada have been closely studied by scholars, many of whom have close connections

with Asian communities. While not traditionally coalescing under the term ACS, this work has informed current conceptions of the field, as can be seen in the recent publication of the ground-breaking *Asian Canadian Studies Reader* (Coloma and Pon, 2017).

At the same time, the relative absence of ACS programs stands at odds with the high visibility of Asian Canadians in certain regions of the country. Courses in aspects of ACS are offered at a number of institutions nationwide, although their availability varies widely. No ACS programs currently exist at the graduate level, though graduate courses on ACS are regularly offered at several universities and growing numbers of graduate students are producing theses/dissertations on Asian Canadian topics. As of 2017, there are three formal ACS programs in Canada, all of which offer an undergraduate minor. The three current programs are: the Asia-Canada (ASC) Program at Simon Fraser University; the ACS program at the University of Toronto; and the ACAM program at the UBC. It is no coincidence that these programs are located in Vancouver and Toronto, cities with sizable Asian populations and deep connections to the Pacific Rim.

Founded in 1996, the Asia-Canada Program at Simon Fraser University (SFU) was the country's first official ACS program. Created in response to increasing economic, migration, and cultural connections between the Pacific Rim and Canada, the program was also an institutional response to the fact that more than 30 percent of the student body was of Asian descent (S. Kong, personal communication, 2014). The decision to have the Asia-Canada Program be based on trans-Pacific ties underscored its dual focus on Asian Studies as well as ACS. The program began operations with a founding director, Dr. Jan Walls (a China specialist), two cross-appointed faculty, and two language instructors. The Asia-Canada Program emphasizes intercultural communication and the complex relationships between Asia and Canada in a multicultural society. It seeks to encourage a better understanding of Asian Canadian history and its effects on shaping identity, while providing training in Asian languages, primarily Chinese or Japanese, and culture (ibid.). These foci were seen as strategic priorities for SFU as part of its internationalization efforts while engaging with diverse local communities. As the oldest and most established ACS program in the nation, the program has educated thousands of students, offering eight to eleven courses per year. One of the co-authors of this essay has been a long-time instructor in the Asia-Canada Program, usually teaching upper-division ACS courses on identity formation, Asians in North

American media/public discourse, and selected topics such as Asian Canadian communities in Metro Vancouver.

The University of Toronto began its ACS program in 2012, and offers a minor that “provides students with an opportunity to better understand the historical, sociocultural, economic, and political forces that shape our knowledge about people of Asian heritage in Canada, and in relationship to Asia and the diaspora” (University College, 2016). The ACS program is part of the Canadian Studies Program, which is housed in University College, one of the university’s seven undergraduate colleges. The program examines race/ethnicity and its intersections with other forms of social difference such as gender, class, language, religion, and sexuality (*ibid.*). It places great emphasis on community-engaged research and requires a significant number of courses taken in Canadian Studies while providing flexibility for students to take courses in other arts, humanities, and social science disciplines. As part of the largest research university in Canada, with three campuses in the Greater Toronto area, the program draws on a critical mass of faculty teaching in various departments. Within the program, regularly offered courses focus on Asian Canadian history and cultures, Asian Canadian space and place, and Chinese Canadian Studies. Additionally, a partnership with the Asian Pathways Lab at the university’s Asian Institute allows students an opportunity to conduct local research projects. Also of note is that the Canadian Studies program is the home of the Richard Charles Lee Chair in Chinese Canadian Studies, which was established in 2012 to increase understanding about Chinese Canadian concerns and related issues of multiculturalism, migration, and integration.

#### The Asian Canadian and Asian Migration Studies Program at the University of British Columbia: A Case Study

The newest ACS program is the Asian Canadian and Asian Migration Studies Program, formed in 2014 at the UBC in Vancouver. The co-author of this paper is the founding director of ACAM, which we use here as a case study to reflect on the possibilities of and challenges facing ACS. UBC’s Vancouver campus is located on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the hən̓q̓əmiñəm-speaking Musqueam people. While the land on which UBC currently sits has historically been a place of learning for the Musqueam, the university was founded at a time when legislated exclusion and everyday racism adversely affected the lives of Asians on the West Coast. One of the darkest chapters in the university’s history occurred in 1942, when

seventy-six students of Japanese descent were removed from UBC as the Canadian government forced all Japanese Canadians to leave the West Coast and sent many to internment camps located in the interior of British Columbia. After the war, as overt exclusionary measures were repealed and immigration policies liberalized across the country, UBC gradually reconfigured itself into an Asia Pacific university with an international student body. As of 2012, visible minorities make up 65 percent of all students at UBC, with Chinese (39 percent), South Asian (9 percent), and Korean (5 percent) students comprising the bulk of this population (Todd, 2014).

Faculty and students at UBC have long been involved in the production of knowledge about Asian communities in Canada. But even as many of its graduates would go on to become community leaders and activists, there have been relatively few opportunities to integrate these activities into academic studies. Since at least the 1990s, there have been serious attempts to create more formalized programming in ACS but what finally prompted the creation of ACAM was a movement led by the local Japanese Canadian community and its allies to recognize and grant degrees to the students who had been removed from UBC in 1942. Informed by similar conferrals of diplomas at U.S. universities, local activists, led by a retired teacher named Mary Kitagawa, petitioned the university to act similarly.<sup>3</sup> While these efforts were initially rebuffed, mounting pressure finally prompted UBC to grant honorary degrees to the students of 1942 in 2012. In addition, UBC committed to establishing an educational program to ensure that histories of anti-Asian racism would not be forgotten.

In 2014, ACAM was created as a multidisciplinary minor in the Faculty of Arts. The name of the program reflects an emphasis on the interconnections between local communities and global movements. One of its primary aims has been to encourage a critical, historically informed, understanding of knowledge production, often through significant community-based learning. For example, in fall 2016, ACAM helped one of its affiliated faculty members teach a literature course on Asian migrant foodways. The program provided a media production consultant and research assistant to work with students on digital projects that involve local community collaboration, some of which were later shown to the public at a local museum. A new course on media production that emphasizes the ethics of community-based research was taught for the first time in 2017 and an introductory survey course is currently being planned.

Recognizing that community-engaged learning must be mutually respectful and beneficial, much of the teaching that happens in the program involves building awareness of and capacity for community-based research. These efforts often run against the limitations of a term-length class (thirteen weeks at UBC and most other Canadian universities), which severely restricts the time available to build relations of trust while developing and completing research projects. One solution has been to encourage advanced students to develop or incubate projects beyond the confines of a class. Projects that have been supported in the past two years include a student creative journal, a sound-mapping project in Vancouver's Chinatown, a series of video vignettes chronicling the history of Asian Canadian students at UBC, and a virtual literary field trip of Chinatown.

As a new program, ACAM has had to simultaneously engage students, expand enrollment, and create new courses. We have been lucky to have a (still) small but committed group of students and alumni whose positive experiences in the program continue to be our best recruiting tool. We have also worked with first-year programs and student advising to inform students about ACAM and we rely heavily on our affiliated faculty to direct students to the program. Like many public universities, funding is closely tied to enrollments, and one of the main challenges of the program has been how to work toward financial sustainability with limited faculty and staff resources (we have been fortunate to have a dedicated team of student workers who take up many of the day-to-day tasks in running the program). More broadly, ACAM must continue to build relationships with diverse Asian Canadian communities, including those that remain underrepresented in UBC's curriculum.

During ACAM's first year, we routinely used the hashtag #itsabouttime in our publicity materials. In one slide, we added the words "We're Here (Since 1788)" (see Figure 1). Alluding to the earliest recorded arrival of the Chinese on the West Coast, we were acutely aware of how late ACAM was vis-à-vis the long history of Asian migration to Canada. Since then, I have spoken to numerous alumni who lament that they did not have access to this program when they were at UBC (as an alumni myself who got to enroll in the first undergraduate Asian North American literature class taught at UBC in 1999, I can understand these sentiments). I have met older alumni who personally experienced the denial and erasure of their histories while studying at UBC. These stories motivate us to continue building the program, and they carry forward into new students coming into the program, whose passion and commitment will be crucial for its sustainability and success.





Figure 1. ACAM #itsabouttime

### The Importance of Asian Canadian Studies

As Canada's population continues to become more diverse through immigration (with Asians being the largest source of immigrants [Chui et al., 2013]), racialized peoples continue to suffer discrimination. They remain largely underrepresented in the nation's major educational institutions (Henry et al., 2017), their histories and experiences are erased and marginalized in the curricula, and they face daily racial microaggressions. They are excluded from leadership positions and there are barriers to faculty hiring, promotion, and tenure. They are absent from positions of leadership and administration, and are often ostracized in institutional chilly climates. The perseverance of systemic barriers and implicit biases (Monture-Angus, 2001) have created hostile environments that need to be fully addressed and systematically confronted. Amidst the ongoing marginalization of Asian Canadians in higher education, it is crucial to understand ACS as a means for emancipation.

ACS can play a pivotal role in enhancing equity in postsecondary education. Its emergence has enabled an assortment of antiracist and social justice initiatives for Asians/Asian Canadians. In addition to classes that provide educational opportunities on the histories, experiences, and struggles of Asians in Canada, there are significant spillover effects at these institutions. Such benefits include conferences, workshops, special projects, and the continued documentation of various aspects of Asian Canadian history and experience. This work has become even more

pressing as many elders who experienced earlier histories of racism urgently need to have their stories recorded and preserved for future generations. At an institutional level, we see ACS as an important intervention that can facilitate network building and collaborations by connecting students and faculty in different departments, disciplines, and other units with like-minded persons in student organizations, student affairs, student support services, and external/community relations. For example, in the fall and winter of 2016–17, ACAM organized a series of events to examine sexual violence through an Asian Canadian perspective. Prompted by a campus-wide effort to formulate policies around sexual assault, these sessions were meant to create a space for racialized students to explore various aspects of this difficult topic while interacting with university staff working in this area. This series not only addressed topics that students had felt were absent in discourses about sexual violence on campus, but also offered opportunities for networking and community building among students, staff, and community partners.

ACS can also be instrumental in inspiring and sustaining engagement and collaboration with local communities while moving beyond the hierarchies of the classroom to foster and enhance mutually beneficial relationships. To engage with vexing community issues requires understanding the needs of the neighborhoods in which we live and work so that we can build alliances, create solutions, and advocate for people who have been silenced. In Vancouver, an excellent example of this is the South Asian Canadian Histories Association, cofounded by ACAM affiliated professor Anne Murphy. The group merges art, history, and research, and has organized public art displays, performances, exhibitions, and cultural productions to discuss South Asian history, culture, and identity. In addition, many ACAM students have been actively involved in counteracting gentrification in Vancouver's historic Chinatown by advocating for low-income resident seniors. In these examples, students apply what they learn in their classes, including community-engagement skills and media production techniques.

At SFU, students, staff, and faculty have been immersed in local projects and relationship building that have strengthened ties to Asian Canadian communities. Award-winning film documentaries have been produced while the David See-Chai Lam Centre for International Communication has long promoted cross-cultural academic and community dialogues between Canada and the Asia-Pacific region. A new Institute for Transpacific Cultural Research was launched in 2016 to promote SFU as a hub for research and community engagement. At all three institu-

tions, ACS has facilitated student-centered social justice pedagogies while taking advantage of technological advances so that students no longer need to be confined to textbooks and traditional lectures to learn about Asian Canadian issues. Instead, they have become active producers of knowledge by using tools ranging from digital filmmaking to virtual reality to understand and present Asian diasporic experiences in Canada. At the University of Toronto, a class on Chinese diaspora foodways in greater Toronto uses the oral histories of community members to examine the influence of ethnic food culture. At SFU, student projects have involved creating sophisticated Asian Canadian magazines, interactive websites, and graphic novels. This technology has helped to enable experiential learning that is more student based and community centered.

Nevertheless, there remain many challenges when it comes to building ACS into a nationwide network. It is inherently difficult in a geographically large country to create a dynamic and sustainable network of students, scholars, and community members. Though there are occasional national gatherings of scholars and community activists, it has been much easier and sometimes more effective for regional meetings to occur instead. The high costs of travel in Canada make it challenging to regularly meet and collaborate. These barriers are particularly felt by graduate students who often experience isolation at their home institutions and have significantly less resources for research travel; pilot national workshops have been hosted by UBC, SFU, and McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario to find ways to support emerging scholars in ACS. At the undergraduate level, increasing student enrollment is always a concern, particularly because program funding is often tied to enrollments. In the almost entirely publicly funded Canadian higher education system, all programs need to be concerned about their ability to attract and retain undergraduate students. From a structural perspective, ACS programs currently focus heavily on undergraduate students. No graduate programs currently exist in the field, and this has certain implications in terms of training and mentorship as undergraduate programs can only provide a limited exposure to ACS. More advanced theoretical and empirical training that is only available at the master's and doctorate levels remain unavailable at many campuses.

The various issues ACS faces resonate with some of the challenges that Asian American Studies has encountered throughout the years (see Vō, 2016). AAS, because of the institutionalized space it occupies within a neoliberal university structure that conforms to traditional academic and bureaucratic hierarchies, has had to contend with how to sustain

collaborative and meaningful community engagement. Asian American scholar Timothy Yu (2017) questions the impact AAS has had on public consciousness as part of a provocative argument about the possibility of AAS as a failure. Yu critiques its ineffectiveness in intervening in public debates and current controversies due to the sometimes-glaring disjuncture between AAS's institutional achievements over the decades and the influence it has had in the public realm (*ibid.*). AAS's roots in student activism and civil rights has been replaced with a need for programs to adhere to the marketization of today's university and the resulting defunding of the humanities, the decreased economic value of the social sciences, and the rising financial importance of the STEM disciplines (Schlund-Vials, 2017).

In Canada, these ongoing challenges are shared by programs that are rooted in commitments to social justice and seek to develop and sustain engagement and collaboration with local communities. The changing conditions of the neoliberal university, as Smaro Kamboureli (2012) argues, can render grassroots efforts to resist racial oppression limited and muted due to their dependency on academic structures that create restraints while more effort is redirected toward professionalization and career advancement. In effect, the original rectitude of social activism becomes a watered-down and ineffective set of practices. While these challenges have been widely discussed, the specific task of program building is to produce creative strategies for harnessing, supporting, and enhancing the ideas and work of faculty, staff, and students. By building infrastructure for research and teaching that emphasizes collaboration and mutual respect, programs such as ACS can model better practices for community engagement while attracting a critical mass of faculty and students that can also bring about increased community support—as well as demands for equity and accountability across the university more widely.

As the experiences of diverse fields including AAS suggest, ACS will continue to confront these challenges by virtue of the structural conflicts embedded in its institutional locations. We end, though, with the exciting possibilities of ACS moving forward. We have already discussed some of the benefits of ACS for students: the development of a critical consciousness that allows them to acknowledge and challenge the racism in their lives and the ways in which racial oppression underscores their social status (Osajima, 2007); an understanding of Asian Canadian history and experiences that provides context to their family migration patterns; and community-engaged learning that pushes them to become cocreators of knowledge and resist racist ideologies

and harmful stereotypes like the model minority myth (see Ho, 2014). Enhanced relationships among university faculty, graduate, and undergraduate students, staff, and local community groups already have produced strengthened civic ties in Toronto and Vancouver. These greater connections with the community provide the university with increased relevance and students with real-world applications of their formal studies. Although ACS has had a relatively short history, there has already been measurable improvements with community engagement and local Asian Canadian public outreach.

The paths taken by ACS have been long, punctuated by tensions but driven by a genuine desire for social justice. Its existence at three of the nation's leading universities is a testament to the steadfast commitment of academics, students, and community members to establish ACS as an agent of social change. As an emancipatory project, it creates vital opportunities for Asian Canadian activism, advocacy work, and the advancement of knowledge of marginalized communities. Its potential for future progress is predicated on an unremitting desire to improve the lives of those who continue to suffer the effects of racial oppression.

## Notes

1. The other two ACS programs in Canada are Simon Fraser University's Asia-Canada Program and the University of Toronto's Asian Canadian Studies program.
2. The origins and history of Asian American Studies programs including such prominent ones at UCLA (<http://www.asianam.ucla.edu/>), San Francisco State University (<https://aas.sfsu.edu/>), and NYU (<https://as.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/as/departments/apa.html>) had particular trajectories that are well documented elsewhere (see Umemoto, 1989; Vo, 2016).
3. For further information, visit <http://japanese-canadian-student-tribute.ubc.ca/>.

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