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## Minding the Gaps: How a Canadian Jamaican Victorianist Wandered into Caribbean Asian America

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I was made aware of the vagaries in articulating and performing cultural identities early in life because of two questions that dominated my childhood. One had to do with my last name and was any variant of the question: “What kind of a last name is that?” The second question was in some ways related to the first: “Where are you from?” Both questions were similar in that any answer that I might provide eventually faded into an inarticulate silence. With regard to questions pertaining to my last name, this silence had to do with the simple truth that my grandfather had died while my father was very young. At his death, my father and his siblings were raised by their native Jamaican mother and were largely cut off from knowledge of their Chinese ancestry and from a connection to the Chinese community in Jamaica. Thus, there was very little information that I could provide to answer questions about my last name other than to simply say that my grandfather had been a migrant to Jamaica from China. The story of my Chinese heritage began and ended with that one fact.

The silence pertaining to the second question, “Where are you from?” was more complex. I was born and raised in a small city in southern Ontario, Canada. The city that I grew up in did not really have a Jamaican, much less Caribbean, diasporic presence and my family did not travel to Jamaica. I had no real attachment to Jamaica and my cultural identity was primarily southern Ontarian. In fact, my family was fairly typical of the nuclear Ontario family that was then the norm: my father worked nine to five in an office and my mother stayed home to raise three children; English was our first language and our culture was, in most ways, very British; and we were, in a landscape dotted with churches, conservative Protestant Christians. I was also growing up under the heavy rhetoric of multiculturalism as the narrative framework for Canadian national identity (a narrative not yet tested by massive influx of ‘brown and yellow’ immigrants of the 1990s and onwards). Multiculturalism’s claim was, on the surface, quite simple: “All of us, no matter where we have come from, can be Canadian”. Even as a child, however, I understood that there was a caveat to this statement: “All of us, no matter where we had come from, could be Canadian – as long as we mastered English (or French if we lived in Quebec) and publically recognized hockey, maple syrup and Tim Horton’s coffee as fundamental components of our identity”. In other words, all of us could be Canadian as long as we kept any cultural excesses invisible, except on those officially sanctioned celebrations of the Canadian identity as a cultural mosaic. To claim Canadian identity came at a price: silence regarding my Jamaican heritage. There would be realities I could not acknowledge, stories I could not tell. My “Jamaicaness” must be relegated to private intimate spaces with family and friends so that my Canadianness could take centre stage.

I became very good at maintaining this silence – at being Canadian. I was well-behaved, pleasant, polite, responsible and always unobtrusive and

inoffensive. I was the kid other parents on the street wanted their children to play with. Nevertheless, as I was reminded each time I was asked “Where are you from?” – and especially, when my answer, “Canada”, was consistently rejected through follow up questions like “But where are you *really* from?” or “Where are your parents from?” – Canadian identity was not simply a cultural expression. Canadianness was also grounded in the racial construction of “Whiteness”. The colour of my skin and the “Asianness” of my last name meant that both the performance and the construction of my Canadian identity would always have gaps. Even when plastered over with layers of silence, the gaps were still noticeable. I slowly came to understand that at some point and in some way, I would eventually have to give these gaps in my identity some attention.

Perhaps it was just such an attempt to negotiate these gaps that attracted me to Victorian literature. I had been an early reader who had been largely left alone by my parents to read voraciously and randomly through the aisles of the public library and family bookshelves. As a child, I could just as easily be found reading a Nancy Drew book as my mother’s collection of Emily Dickenson poems. I was, however, particularly encouraged by my parents to read what they considered to be Great Literature – works by authors like Dickens, Eliot, Hardy and Austen – and, in the process, I found myself drawn to the huge novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although the physical landscapes of these novels were totally unfamiliar to me, the culture of the Victorians was not. The morals, the values, the anxieties of the characters – particularly, their obsession with acceptable social conduct and class – were very recognizable. These were, I found, very much the mores, norms and language of my Jamaican diasporic culture, at least as it had been transmitted to me by my parents, other close family and friends. At the same time, such fiction was understood to be part of the literary heritage of English-Canadian literature. As such, in a strange way, Victorian literature provided me with a space within which I could think through some of the complexities of my Jamaican heritage in ways that were unthreatening to my claims to Canadianness; that did not, in other words, require peeling away the silence that so carefully shrouded my Jamaicaness. In fact, by the time I entered undergraduate studies, my goal was to become a Victorian literature specialist – at least until I entered fourth year. That was the year that I took an elective course, which would change the direction of my academic journey and my attitude towards how gaps in the performance of cultural identities should be managed.

The course was called “Postcolonial Literatures” and my interest in the course had been piqued by the course description’s promise that we would be reading a selection of West Indian literary texts over the semester. At that time, my knowledge of West Indian literature was limited to the book of Louise Bennett poems on my parents’ bookshelf. Invariably, this book would be pulled off the shelf whenever someone wanted to memorize and perform a poem for

occasions like alumni dinners for my parents' high school *alma maters* or at International Evenings organized by the church's social committee. The logic that I had used to negotiate my Canadian identity up to that point told me that this thing called West Indian literature, whatever it was, should be relegated to private space – to silence in the public sphere. And yet, here it was being offered – being “un-silent” – in the very public space of a Canadian institution of learning; here it was disruptively revealing a gap in the narrative of Great Literature which my parents had established for me and my high school and university curriculums had, so far, confirmed. What was this thing? What made it a valid topic of study? How did it relate to the body of English texts I had already studied? What could it possibly offer that I could not obtain from the study of the canonical literary texts that had made up my studies up to that point?

I would find the answers to these questions and more during that semester. Admittedly, I also had a visceral reaction to the West Indian texts we studied. Those novels brought me into a world that I knew intimately, but had never felt free to examine. I knew those West Indian characters in a way I would never know the characters in the Victorian novels I had studied. I knew the lilt of their voices, the food on their plates, their laughter, tears, confusions, ambitions and fears. I mapped my parents' histories in the postcolonial migrant tales of V.S. Naipaul, Paule Marshall and Samuel Selvon and, in so doing, found new ways to answer the question “Where are you from?” that relied less on national boundaries than on the cultural trajectories of diaspora. It was not, however, this comfort factor in terms of the literary content of these texts that ultimately attracted me to postcolonial literatures as a field of study. Instead, it was the way in which critically assessing texts through a postcolonial lens changed how I thought about cultural and national identities and their relationship to literature. Indeed, four postcolonial concepts that I was introduced to that year continue to have a formative impact on my work.

First, postcolonialism's argument that the colonial process was as much an assertion of control over representation and knowledge as it was a military and economic endeavour, positioned the literary text as both product and producer of culture. I saw how the literary text was implicated in the construction and articulation of cultural identities and was particularly struck by how Edward Said's *Orientalism* gave such significance to literary texts in tracing the metanarrative of Western European superiority over “the Orient”. Said's work validated for me the importance of literary texts as a site for exploring the discursive strategies by which identities are created and become embedded in cultures – or, conversely, where such identities can be subverted, challenged or otherwise disrupted. Second, in their focus on the colonized body as an over-determined signifier, postcolonial theories gave me a language to address what always seemed to me to be the fraught relationship between race and national

identities that was part of both my Jamaican and Canadian heritage. Official articulations of national identities in both locations denied the significance of racial markers as impediments to claims to such identities. Theorists, like Frantz Fanon, however, who insisted on the fact of the racialized body, gave me the theoretical foundation as well as the impetus to consider how the body's difference or otherness is inscribed in structures of knowledge and power that underpin cultural identities. Third, postcolonial writers' resistance to the notion of closed, self-contained, binarized cultural identities and their insistence on the significance of a Third Space through which the creolizing process of cultural transactions inherent in cultural contact are mediated challenged me to rethink my early perception of dichotomy in my own cultural inheritance, as well as that of Caribbean peoples more broadly. Finally, and perhaps, most importantly, the postcolonial emphasis on making and claiming space for the voice of the colonized, encouraged me to explore, rather than silence those moments when gaps in the narratives of my Canadianness were revealed. Before that class, I had often found myself baffled by my peers' ability to easily elide over textual details that seemed, to me, to so blatantly call attention to alternative narratives and realities within the text's main storyline. While their attention was fixed on Becky Thatcher's latest scheme in *Vanity Fair*, for example, I was still wandering who her briefly mentioned frizzy-haired West Indian schoolmate was and what she was doing in England; when they were caught up in the twists and turns of the various love affairs in *Mansfield Park*, I was still contemplating what exactly Sir Thomas was doing in Antigua. Their and my instructors' silence on these matters led me to believe that, as with the relationship of my Jamaican heritage to my Canadian identity, these gaps were irrelevant at best, and disruptive at worst. Silence was the appropriate response to these gaps. Reading Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* forever rid me of that assumption and convinced me of the validity – of the necessity, even – of drawing attention to and exploring the marginalized and suppressed gaps in the narratives through which cultural identities are articulated.

If postcolonial studies gave me the means and the methods to finally negotiate answers to the question, "Where are you from?" (and to see how such answers might allow me to contribute to debates and dialogue in that field), it also gave me the impetus and the framework to attempt to address that second question of my childhood: "Why do you have that last name?" Upon our first meeting, my doctoral supervisor greeted me with that very question; however, he also presented me with an intriguing challenge when he suggested, "Why don't you try and figure out if there is any work you might be interested in doing on the Chinese in the Caribbean?" Up until that time, I had been exploring the limitations and possibilities of applying postcolonial theories to the literature of the Caribbean diaspora located in Canada. I had been interested in understanding

the inherent tensions in how Caribbean Canadians negotiated their multiple ways of being and how their writing both drew attention to and resisted constructions of Canadianness that excluded them. When faced by my supervisor's challenge, however, I began to consider how my overall interest in exposing and exploring silences in Caribbean narratives of identity throughout the diaspora converged with my personal Chinese Caribbean heritage. The Chinese experience in the Caribbean was largely unknown not only to my family and me, but within the broader discipline of Caribbean Studies itself. To explore this experience would help break this silence and rectify a significant gap in the discipline. At the same time, it offered me an opportunity to complicate settled notions of Caribbeanness. Indeed, my research in this area is less interested in a reclamation of Chinese history in the region *per se*, as it is in the implications of this recovery for the articulation and performance of cultural identities, including Chineseness, in the Caribbean itself and beyond. I wonder, for example, did the massive 19<sup>th</sup> century movement of Chinese migration across the globe, of which Chinese migration to the Caribbean is only one part, impact the place that the Chinese hold in Caribbean imaginations? How does the construction of Chineseness in the Caribbean relate to its counterparts elsewhere? Is Chineseness an intercultural identity that transcends national boundaries? And how do such questions pertain to the disciplinary boundaries of Asian American and Caribbean Studies? Is there space for Asian American Studies within Caribbean Studies? Simply, acknowledging and breaking the silence that surrounds Chinese experience in the Caribbean is no longer enough for me; I seek, instead, a diaspora dialogue.

Riders of the underground in London, England are constantly told to "mind the gap"; that is, to avoid tripping or getting stuck in the space between the train platform and train by taking a large step over that gap. For years, I accepted that any narrative gaps in cultural identities should be treated in a similar fashion. They threatened the smooth-running of the performance of those identities and should, therefore, be consistently avoided. But minding the gap can also mean paying particular attention to that very same gap; and it this careful scrutiny of those moments when narrative stumbles that ultimately drives my research and has led me away from my Victorian ambitions into the blurred spaces where the Caribbean and Asian America meet.

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