



CULTIVATING CANADA

Reconciliation through the Lens
of Cultural Diversity

EDITED BY ASHOK MATHUR,
JONATHAN DEWAR, MIKE DEGAGNÉ

CULTIVATING CANADA

RECONCILIATION THROUGH THE LENS OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Edited by

Ashok Mathur

Jonathan Dewar

Mike DeGagné

© 2011 Aboriginal Healing Foundation

Published by:

Aboriginal Healing Foundation

75 Albert Street, Suite 801, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5E7

Phone: (613) 237-4441

Toll-free: (888) 725-8886

Fax: (613) 237-4442

Email: research@ahf.ca

Website: www.ahf.ca

Design & Production:

Glen Lowry

Printed by:

Dollco Printing

Ottawa, Ontario

Printed version:

ISBN 978-1-897285-98-5

Electronic version:

ISBN 978-1-897285-99-2

Unauthorized use of the name “Aboriginal Healing Foundation” and of the Foundation’s logo is prohibited.

Non-commercial reproduction of this document is, however, encouraged. This project was funded by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF), but the views expressed in this report are the personal views of the author(s).

Ce document est aussi disponible en français.

Nurturing Dialogues between First Nations, Urban Aboriginal, and Immigrant Communities in Vancouver

During 2010, I had the privilege of being involved with a unique process organized by the City of Vancouver. Recognizing that in Vancouver we stood at a historic juncture in which new immigrant communities have transformed the populations of our city, we began a conversation that we hoped would allow for the creation of a common future together for immigrant and Aboriginal communities. Moving forward meant creating a new vision of Canada that recognized a history of injustices to both Aboriginal people and non-white immigrants. This terrible history—wrought by white supremacist policies of land dispossession, residential schooling, immigrant exclusion, and racial discrimination in voting, housing, and employment—needed to be acknowledged and its legacies made widely known before a more optimistic future could be envisioned together. We hoped that if this process could be started in Vancouver, it might also inspire other cities and regions of Canada to undergo a similar process of dialogue that would help lay the groundwork for a transformation of our society.

As one of three co-chairs, along with Councillor H. Wade Grant of the Musqueam Nation and Susan Tatoosh, Executive Director of Vancouver's Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society, the Steering Committee was a diverse group of representatives from Vancouver's local First Nations of Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh, from urban Aboriginal organizations, immigrant settlement organizations, neighbourhood houses, and academics from local universities. The Steering Committee was formed to help advise city social planner Baldwin Wong and Dialogues project coordinator Karen Fong in helping plan and implement a series of dialogue circles involving members of local First Nations, urban Aboriginal, and immigrant communities.¹ The Steering Committee recognized that many new arrivals in Canada received very little information about the history of Aboriginal people and, in particular, of the devastating effects of governmental policies such as residential schooling; therefore, through no intention of their own, they were often left only with stereotypes and the negative images of popular culture as the basis for their knowledge about Aboriginal people.

What could be generated, we wondered, if we could organize a dialogue process in which small groups engaged and thoughtful participants from Aboriginal and immigrant communities could speak and listen to each other in a safe and secure environment? How could we help begin to address the gaps of knowledge that existed, so that as our society continues to be changed by new arrivals, they can work together with First Nations and Aboriginal people on building better communities through a process of shared understanding rather than ignorance and misapprehension? Could we produce together from these dialogues a story of who we are, where we are, and who we aspire to be?

Who am I? Where am I? What is an immigrant? Who was here first?

My name in English is Henry Yu. My Cantonese name is 余全毅, and I was born in Vancouver in the year of Canada's Centennial. My maternal grandfather, Yeung Sing Yew, and his brothers and their father before them, came to British Columbia from Zhongshan county in Guangdong province in China. My parents, Yu Shing Chit and Yeung Kon Yee, came to Canada three years before I was born, joining a community of family and kin who had been crossing the Pacific back and forth for over 150 years. This is my story, my history, and I tell it this way to acknowledge that although I was born here, my family comes from somewhere else, and like all the migrants whose families came to Vancouver from somewhere else, we have made our home on the unceded traditional territory of the Coast Salish people. During the Dialogues Project, urban Aboriginal participants invariably acknowledged, during their stories of "who they were," a story at the same time about the First Nations or Métis communities somewhere else in BC or Canada or the United States from which they or their families came. This story about "where they were from" was at the same time an important acknowledgement about where they were now—that they now lived on someone else's territory as a guest.

It seems like such a simple thing to acknowledge that my family comes from somewhere else and that, except for the First Nations who were here before migrants arrived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from across the Atlantic and Pacific, we are all late arrivals. But in Vancouver, in British Columbia, and in Canada in general, stories of arrival and claims about belonging are fraught with violence. Oftentimes the violence has been physical—involving the removal and abuse of bodies—but the violence has also been a very effective narrative violence, a mythic story of dispossession and possession that renders damage by distorting and celebrating the stories of some people, while silencing and erasing the stories of others.

I was born here, but when I was growing up, the history I learned in school was a collection of stories I could not recognize. "Our" story, I was told, was

of people who came from across the water far away, who rode a train across a vast land and built a place called Canada. Some of those people had English names, and some of them had French names. But somehow my grandfather and great-grandfather and people with names like mine were missing. I remember, just once, hearing that the Chinese had helped build the railroad upon which the Canadians rode, but then they disappeared into silence for the rest of the story. What were they doing the rest of the time?

In the third grade, my teacher asked us to build models of either the traditional long houses or the ocean canoes of the Coast Salish people. Since I was eight years old and forbidden at home to use a sharp knife, my older brother helped me carve a canoe out of balsa wood, based upon a picture we found in a library book. I was so proud of my little carving, and after the class celebrated our achievements, I kept the canoe on my desk at home all the way into high school. Seeing it reminded me of the lesson that day in school, about how Native people had lived here before the arrival of Europeans. It was the last time in school that I remember being asked to think about the Aboriginal people in whose land we lived. What were they doing the rest of the time?

The rest of the time.

It is this silent erasure of time that tells another set of histories. Stories ignored or kept in the narrow margins in the sidebars of textbooks. Stories erased from our common past. It is not that the story of my grandfather and others like him was untold. He told it to those within the family, or to his friends, in fragments and snippets. Some of those stories involved interactions and relationships between Chinese and Aboriginal people. There was a world only glimpsed by the rest of us, a world in which the railroad that my great-grandfather and his relatives helped build ran through Indigenous communities all the way up the Fraser Canyon. And even as the Chinese finished laying the tracks in 1885 and were immediately asked to pay an onerous Head Tax in order to keep coming, they kept coming. They kept coming by the boatload in the tens of thousands year after year, working in mines, and in logging camps, and in canneries, and in grocery stores, and the farms that grew the produce for those stores, and as cooks and laundry men, and café and store owners in every small town in BC and across the Prairies all the way to Halifax.

Even as those migrants whose families had come from Europe rode the train westwards and arrived to see Aboriginal people and Chinese everywhere already, those young Chinese men like my great-grandfather walked and rode the train in the other direction, often marrying into local Aboriginal

communities and creating a very different world than the one I had learned about in textbooks about “westward” expansion and settlement. When that mixed and unique world was steadily eroded and ended by the ethnic cleansing of Aboriginal people through reserves and residential schooling, and by anti-Asian immigration legislation and exclusion, the traces of memory remained within many Aboriginal communities of Chinese men who were fathers and grandfathers, and kindly local restaurant and store owners in small towns who welcomed rather than turned away all customers no matter their race. But they are only glimpses and fragments, traces of a real, lived history targeted for eradication and erased from a collective memory framed narrowly as a white settler history of the Canadian nation. We supposedly have two “Founding People” of Canada—the English and the French. But when the Canadian Confederation was invented, there were many other people already here, and the colony of British Columbia was just as much in existence as what would become Ontario and Quebec. And the presence already of Chinese, as well as Native Hawaiians and other Pacific migrants in BC, along with the complex Indigenous societies along the coast and in the interior, could not simply be erased. Stories long ignored or forgotten can be told and retold, filling the silences created by erasure.

During the opening launch reception for the Dialogues Project, a short snippet of a documentary made by the Chinese Canadian Historical Society of British Columbia (CCHSBC), entitled *Cedar and Bamboo*, was shown. The film, produced by CCHSBC board member Jennifer Lau and past board member Karin Lee, and directed by Diana Leung and Kamala Todd (who is also one of the City of Vancouver’s Dialogues Circle Project Team), focused on the stories of four people of mixed Chinese–Aboriginal ancestry. The filmmakers had a powerful vision of the impact that recovering these forgotten and ignored histories could make. By providing a historical context for considering the long history of engagements between Aboriginal people and immigrants who were otherwise unwelcome, the film created an important moment of mutual recognition through a shared past. Musqueam Councillor Grant, one of the three aforementioned co-chairs for the project, spoke movingly about growing up aware of his own mixed ancestry and of his pride of seeing the story of his own father, Howard Grant, featured in the film. The family history of the Grants perhaps exemplified the promise of opening up a dialogue about histories still too uncommonly told, and the challenge of what kind of shared future still awaits us.

So much of our common past is left out of what is supposed to be our common history, so that we are left with an array of uncommon stories that do not add up. One of the triumphs of a white supremacist colonial history

of Canada was the mythical alchemy that made it possible for everyone who arrived from Europe to become a “Canadian,” and for all those who were non-white to remain a “visible minority,” forever arriving late, or a “native” forever destined to disappear. During the early twentieth century, when anti-Asian politics ruled British Columbia, the slogan used was “White Canada Forever,” a phrase that meant those who were considered “white” owned not only the future, but also the past. The moment a migrant stepped off the boat in Halifax from Glasgow, even before he climbed aboard the train that might take him all the way to Vancouver, he was already a “Canadian.” His “accent” would not undermine his claims to belong in the way that speaking English with an “Oriental” accent would, and still does. Despite the fact that migrants from across the Pacific arrived at the same time on Coast Salish land as those migrants from across the Atlantic, white supremacy built a sense of belonging around “whiteness.” Non-English-speaking “white” migrants could gain the status of full belonging in Canada by speaking English and converting themselves to Anglophone dominance. Those who were considered non-white were not accorded the same privileges and possibilities.

Say the word “immigrant” and who do you imagine? To those Aboriginal people whose ancestors welcomed the first trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific migrants to these shores, everyone else is a migrant to their homeland. If we are to all make a home together here, there can be no reconciliation with the inequities of our past until this simple truth is recognized. But the demographic reality of our present and future must also be taken into account. There is a “New Canada”² being made in the last four decades since immigration reform removed racial barriers to non-white migration. The top 10 places of birth for immigrants who arrived in Canada between 2001 and 2006 included only two European countries. The United Kingdom, which was the dominant No.1 sending nation for the first century of Canadian history, was on the list at No. 9, sending just over 25,000 new immigrants. In contrast, six of the top 10 countries were in Asia, and the top four on the list alone—the People’s Republic of China, India, the Philippines, and Pakistan—accounted for two-thirds of all new migrants to Canada in that period, with the People’s Republic of China sending over 155,000, India over 129,000, the Philippines over 77,000, and Pakistan over 57,000.³

In 2006, 83.9 per cent of all new immigrants to Canada came from regions outside of Europe, and the very moniker “visible minority” to designate “non-white” Canadians had become a questionable description, in particular to describe Canada’s urban populations. Over 96 per cent of Canada’s “visible minorities” live in metropolitan regions. Two main groups—South

Asians and self-identified ethnic Chinese—accounted for half of all visible minorities in Canada,⁴ with each accounting for roughly one-quarter of the total. Other migrants from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia are remaking our society. Ethnic Chinese and South Asians account for 8 per cent of Canada's total population, and because they have settled overwhelmingly in either the metropolitan regions of Toronto or Vancouver, they have transformed those cities. Between 1980 and 2001, for instance, the largest proportion of new migrants to Canada were ethnic Chinese who came from various locations in Southeast Asia (including Hong Kong), along with migrants born in the People's Republic of China. These various ethnic Chinese migrants went overwhelmingly (87%) to the five largest cities in Canada, with 41 per cent going to Toronto and 31 per cent to Vancouver alone.⁵

What is clear is that trans-Pacific migration from Asia, as well as “visible minority” migrants in general from outside Europe, has transformed Canada in the last 25 years. Vancouver in particular has become a city in which the term “visible minority” makes no sense. In 2006, four out of 10 Vancouverites had been born outside of Canada, and five out of 10 were of Asian ancestry. Richmond and Burnaby, suburbs of metropolitan Vancouver, were comprised of 65 per cent and 55 per cent visible minorities, respectively, and 50 per cent of Richmond's population is ethnic Chinese; in Vancouver, Canada's third largest city, the “visible minority” is “white.”

If the “New Canada” can be understood by looking at the changed face of Vancouver in the present, so too can the future be seen in the largely non-white faces of our youth. Visible minorities in Canada are literally the face of tomorrow—their median age in 2006 was 33 versus an average age of 39 for the population as a whole. The fast growing non-white population of our younger generations also includes First Nations and Aboriginal youth, who represent one of the fastest-growing segments of Canada's young. The future of Canada can be seen in our changing demographics, but are we ready to meet the challenges of this new world?

The Dialogues Project was meant to engage in a sharing of our pasts—who we are and where we are from—but also to create a shared understanding about who we aspire to be in the future. Nine locations were chosen as sites for dialogue, with a mix of participants selected from volunteers and those identified and invited by the Steering Committee as having valuable insights to contribute to the conversations. We strove to include both Elders and youth of Aboriginal and immigrant backgrounds in as many of the groups as possible, recognizing that wisdom and life experience blended with the fresh curiosity of the young was an important element of bridging

many of the generational gaps that exist in both Aboriginal and immigrant communities. Each of the groups met three times and was guided in its discussions by one of a set of trained facilitators, led by Eric Wong, and a group of volunteer youth leaders played a prominent role with the intention of having them also lead an outreach process to broaden the process to other youth. A closing dialogue circle involving all of the groups together was held at the Vancouver Public Library, with the Mayor of Vancouver, Gregor Robertson, and several city councillors in attendance, as well as Her Honourable Adrienne Clarkson, the former Governor General of Canada, and her husband John Saul who had taken a keen interest in the Dialogues Project, with the intention of exploring how similar dialogues might take place in other sites across Canada.

After the dialogue circles ended, a series of site visits were organized. The Steering Committee believed that these were crucial for creating a sense of familiarity and welcome among the participants. Urban environments so easily become segregated spaces, and like welcoming a neighbor into one's own home, a mutual process of visitation and hospitality was seen as an organic outgrowth of the sharing of stories within the dialogue circles. At the conclusion of the Dialogues Project, some of the most interesting insights and moments will be made available in both a written and video form. Although all conversations from the circles themselves were private and kept anonymous in order to create and maintain a safe and secure atmosphere for dialogue, follow-up interviews and a summation of many of the issues brought up during the dialogues will become a valuable document that we hope will become the basis for further discussion and educational outreach, in particular, for addressing the dearth of information about First Nations and Aboriginal issues and history currently provided to new immigrants to Canada.

Even as we break the silences and speak the truth about many of the terrible things that have been done in our past, we are left with the task of trying to understand what we have in common, what we can take from our broken past, upon which we can build a shared future. Do we need a shared past in order to have a common future? I became a historian in a quest to answer this basic question, and the Dialogues Project for me is an important part of a collective, collaborative project for those sets of people whose stories have often been silenced or ignored, so that they could speak and hear each other's stories. We hoped that each of us in listening would be able to know ourselves and each other a bit better, and to generate a dialogue that created a mutual understanding of our differences as well as what we shared in common.

We remain so far away from creating together a new shared future. The settlement of land claims and treaty negotiations, and a much-needed reconciliation process, will be long and hard. But perhaps through one story at a time about who we are and where we are from, we can begin to build in a collaborative manner a new shared history, one that recognizes the painful aspects of our past, and perhaps even provides a common understanding of who we are and where we are.

Notes

- 1 The Steering Committee's first task was to help advise social planner Baldwin Wong on the City of Vancouver's application for a grant from British Columbia's Welcoming and Inclusive Communities and Workplaces Program (WICWP), which receives most of its funding from the federal government under the *Canada-British Columbia Immigration Agreement* (retrieved from: http://www.welcomebc.ca/wbc/service_providers/programs/welcome_program/index.page). The Dialogues Project homepage and a documentation of the process can be found at: <http://vancouver.ca/commssvcs/socialplanning/dialoguesproject/index.htm>
- 2 The information here has been adapted and/or excerpted, including statistical data, from my 2009 article: Yu, H. (2009:1012-1013). Global migrants and the new Pacific Canada. *International Journal* 65(4):1011-1026.
- 3 Statistics Canada, Geography Division (2007). World: Place of Birth of New Immigrants to Canada, 2006. In *2006 Census of Canada*. Romania at No. 7 was the origin of just over 28,000 immigrants. Also see: Immigration to Canada from the Asia Pacific, 1961-1996. In *Population & Immigration Statistical Report*. Vancouver, BC: Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. (Original source: 1996 Census).
- 4 Chui, T., K. Tran, and H. Maheux (2007). *Immigration in Canada: A Portrait of the Foreign-born Population, 2006 Census*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Industry.
- 5 Chinese Canada is not homogeneous, with a great variety of linguistic and social variation reflecting varied origins not only in Asia, but from around the globe. The same can be said of South Asians, who, like ethnic Chinese, often come to Canada as part of global diasporas that emanated from home villages decades and even centuries earlier, bringing with them to Canada a wide array of family journeys and complicated histories from around the world and over many generations. By 2006, South Asians had slightly surpassed ethnic Chinese as the largest group of "visible minorities" in Canada, but both are categories that envelop a complex spectrum of family and personal histories that cannot be reduced to simple ethno-cultural or racial categorizations. See: Guo, Shibao and Don Devoretz (2005, February). The Changing Faces of Chinese Immigrants. In *Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis*, No. 05-08. Vancouver, BC: Vancouver Centre of Excellence.