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Sea Change: Asian Diasporas and Atlantic Routes

This paper begins with two images.

The first image: an engraving of the *White Falcon* from the 1855 London Illustrated News

The second image: 1866. Somewhere between South China and Callao, Peru. The ship is on fire. There are 650 Chinese indentured labourers in the hold who have started the fire in a desperate attempt to seize the ship. The crew cannot put out the fire because they had placed tarps over the hatch in an attempt to suffocate the mutineers and every time they lifted the tarp to pour water into the hold, they accidentally created a huge backdraft which only worsens the fire. Eventually, the crew abandoned ship leaving the hatches locked and everyone inside the ship's hold to burn alive.

In many ways, this paper is a meditation on the space between these two images – the one sanctified in full and glorious colour for historians and sea buffs, the other little more

than rumour appearing at the edges of history.

The *Napoleon Canavero* was originally named the *White Falcon*. It was built in Pittston Massachusetts in 1853 and was one of the fastest clipper ships of its time. It was mainly used on the trade routes between China and the west Coast of South America. It momentarily disappeared in 1859 when it left Callao for Hampton Roads with a load of guano. It was found in 1862 ashore at Foo Chow in South China “being floated with the loss of a portion of keel” (Howe 693). Had this ship already survived one mutiny? What had happened between 1859 and 1862 and how did it end up in China when it was last seen in Peru? But I am getting ahead of myself – these are questions we will come back to. The *White Falcon* was docked and repaired at Hong Kong and then sent to Manila. It was sold in 1864 for \$28 000 to Cana Vero and Co. of Lima, became a Peruvian ship and renamed the *Napoleon Canavero*. She was then put into the service of what is euphemistically called the China trade until she burned with the screams of those trapped in her hold echoing in the guilty ears of the crew who escaped.

In this paper, I want to trace the ship’s disappearance, not only from the waters of the Pacific Ocean, but also from discussions in Chinese diaspora studies. Except for some notable exceptions, including the work of Evelyn Hu-Dehart and Lisa Yun, the space of ships such as the *White Falcon* and the people who made up their desperate cargo, are not generally given much attention in contemporary discussions of the Chinese diaspora. At best, they are recognized as part of an earlier wave of migration, one that is quite remote from current diasporic formations. One goal of this paper is to contest the relegation of

this history to a past that is situated only in the past. This research also comes out of a series of unanswered questions from my doctoral research on Chinese restaurants and diaspora. In the course of that research, I encountered again and again the stereotype of the Chinese indentured labourer as supremely passive and docile. Unlike slave revolts, there seemed to have been very little history of overt resistance amongst Asian indentured populations. And yet, surely, I wondered, people did something? It is clear enough that the conditions of indenture were not much better than that of slavery and sometimes not much different at all. What is the relationship between the formation of slave subjectivity and that of indenture subjectivity? These questions have led me to my current research project, *Pacific Genealogies*, which examines the mapping of a stereotype of passivity onto Asia-Pacific peoples and reads for the various forms of subaltern resistance which emerge from this genealogy. Today, I will take up one section of this research. Specifically, I want to historicize the image of the ship for Asian diaspora studies. In so doing, I hope to begin to map out a genealogy of Chinese diaspora subjectivity and resistance, and to argue for an understanding of this resistance and subject formation as crucially connected to the Black diaspora.

Throughout this paper, I will be referring alternatively to Asian diasporas and then to the Chinese diaspora; I am aware of this slippage; I am making these arguments about Asian diaspora but the limits of time and space mean that, in instances when I turn to specific histories and cases, I will focus mainly on the Chinese diaspora.

As many of you will recall, Paul Gilroy opens *The Black Atlantic* with the image

of the ship, suggesting that we can understand it as the “central organizing symbol” of the Black Atlantic (4). For Gilroy, “[t]he image of the ship – a living micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion is especially important... ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs” (4).

In discussions of the Black Atlantic that have followed, there seems to be remarkably little attention paid to the unmistakable visual element at the center of Gilroy’s articulation of the cultural formation that he named the Black Atlantic. Very few people talk about the *image* of the ship and in particular Gilroy’s discussion of John Turner’s painting of a slave ships which had been owned by Ruskin, and later sold to an American when Ruskin found the painting too difficult to live with. If you recall, Gilroy uses this discussion of Turner, Ruskin and the exile of the painting to an obscure Boston collector “as yet another pointer towards the shape of the Atlantic as a system of cultural exchanges” (14). Further, Gilroy notes that the trajectory of the painting intimates the inability of the British New Left and British Cultural Studies to deal “with the discursive slippage or connotative resonance between ‘race,’ ethnicity and nation”(15).

Perhaps we may be forgiven for overlooking Gilroy’s discussion of Turner, Ruskin and the role of the visual in our discussions because Gilroy himself does not take the discussion much further after these introductory pages. Indeed, *The Black Atlantic* closes not with the visual, but with a resounding return to the aural, to music, dissonance, syncopation and the interruptive rhythms of diaspora culture.

I want to historicize the image of the ship in the Asian diaspora. As a cultural

critic, I want to take up the image of the ship and follow what can be understood as the path Gilroy so tantalizingly pioneered but did not himself take. I want to explore the movement and circulation of ideas and activism for Pacific populations by grounding my investigation in the image of the coolie ship.

While Gilroy can look at the legacy of slavery in colonial texts such as Turner's painting, the legacy of Asian indenture, of slave ships which became coolie ships, and coolie ships which were modeled after slavers, is even more oblique. The visual representations of this history and its cultural resonances are not obvious. There are no famous paintings of the White Falcon burning in unknown waters with several hundred Asian men and possibly women locked in its hold. These are images that exist only in the memory of those haunted by complicity, of the sailor who whispered the story to another sailor, who then told another, and so on. This brings us to the problem of visually representing diaspora. As Nic Mizzroeff notes, diaspora is, in many ways, visually unrepresentable:

Diaspora cannot by its very nature be fully known, seen or qualified, even – or especially – by its own members... A diaspora cannot be seen in any traditional sense and it certainly cannot be represented from the viewpoint of one-point perspective. The nation, by contrast, has long been central to Western visual culture. While we have become accustomed to thinking of the nation-state as an “imagined community” it can nonetheless call on a range of geographical sites, monuments and symbols to create a powerful visual rhetoric of nationality. (2)

Mizzroeff refers to the difficulty of representing multiple viewpoints. However, and this is one of the places where diaspora is related to postcolonialism, it is also hard to capture

because its memory has been suppressed. One of the tasks of diaspora criticism is to seek out the interruptions in the powerful visual rhetoric of the nation, the colonial narratives and images, and to read for the alternative memories embedded within them.

In this spirit, let us turn now to reading the map [of clipper ship routes] that you have before you. When I first began this project, I had assumed, wrongly of course, that an examination of nineteenth-century Asian migration would largely be one of looking at trans-Pacific routes. However, this assumption is based not only on the biases of twentieth-century air travel, but also an assumption of migration whose sole destination was North America.

Looking at this map of common nineteenth-century shipping routes shows that while some ships, particularly those headed to ports such as Vancouver , San Francisco or Callao from Asia did indeed traverse the Pacific, and yet many other ships left Asia and sailed *west* across the Indian Ocean, round the Cape of Good Hope, and across the *Atlantic*.

If we take seriously the importance of routes for thinking about diaspora culture, then understanding the routes of Asian indenture means understanding the Black Atlantic as *formative* of Asian diaspora culture. Not only in the sense that Black slavery precedes the mass migration of Asian indentured labourers, but also, and more importantly, in the sense that Black Atlantic formations can be understood as *constitutive* of Asian diaspora formations. That is, the Black Atlantic was not solely Black and Asian diasporas are not simply trans-Pacific.

There are a number of implications for this re-orienting of our understanding of Black and Asian diasporas. I will briefly touch on some of these implications for Asian diaspora studies, namely the connection between black and Asian populations. Asian American critics such as Gary Okihiro and Lisa Yun have long argued for the importance of thinking about Asian diasporas in relation to Black diasporas. My hope is that this exploration of the routes of indenture builds on their work by giving us a tangible, potentially visual, perception of the deep intertwinings of these populations and histories.

Further, it gives us an opportunity to think about the passage itself as deeply transformative and to meditate on what these transformations might be for diaspora culture. The average journey from Macao to Havana took over half a year. What happens in that time? What kinds of bonds are formed and what communities emerge from these experiences? How do they resonate in contemporary culture?

While slavery is commonly understood as a foundational event in the history of the black diaspora, indenture tends not to be addressed in similar ways in Asian diaspora discussions. And so the most vigorous debates in Chinese diaspora studies revolve around the problem of Chineseness with Rey Chow and Ien Ang arguing for a deconstructed ethnicity on the one hand, and Ling-chi Wang and Tu Wei Ming calling for an organicist notion of the living tree as a metaphor for the Chinese diaspora. While these discussions have been important for our understanding of what it means to be Chinese outside of the nation-state entity known as the PRC, these discussions tend to be bound to the problem of locating Chineseness outside of China rather than the formation of diaspora culture.

Understanding the Asian diaspora as constituted by Black Atlantic formations

opens up the discussion of Asian diaspora which are not so entirely focused on the problem of ethnicity and membership, on who is diasporic and who is not. However, this means that we have to make a number of changes in most of our current understandings of Asian diaspora. First, we have to understand the history of Asian indenture as a crucial part of contemporary Asian diaspora culture. The resonances of this history have yet to be fully explored in current discussions. It is a past that, to borrow the words of Richard Terdiman, continues to colonize the present. Second, we have to consider Asian populations in the South as a crucial part of Asian diasporas. While people such as Evelyn Hu-Dehart and Rachel Lee have done a lot of important work arguing for the importance of taking Asian populations in places such as Cuba, Peru, Brazil and South Africa into consideration, my argument takes these claims a little further. I suggest we cannot afford to lose sight of non-North American trajectories because to do so would also be to lose sight of the relation to Black diaspora formations.

In the past, I have been criticized for focusing too heavily on indenture. This criticism usually takes one of two forms. One is around the problem of being too morose, of dragging us back to a history that people have worked hard to move beyond. I do not want to take away from the achievements of those who have come before. I do want to question the terms of these achievements. It is precisely this sense of having “moved up” or beyond these experiences of exploitation that makes me feel all the more urgently about the need not only to remember the past but to understand the ways in which it is constitutive of the present.

The other concern lies in the problem of flattening out the particularities of

indenture histories. That is, the experience of working on the Canadian Pacific railway is not the same as hauling guano in Peru which is not the same as working on the sugar plantations in Cuba and so on. I take this point seriously. However, my sense is that we need to explore the similarities, the ways in which these histories of displacement create common cultural formations. One of the challenges of diaspora theory is to think through the what David Scott, in reference to a Braithwaite poem, calls “an obscure miracle of connection” – how is it that one of the effects of the isolating experience of displacement is that of a powerful sense of connection to communities that are not even necessarily bound by nation, race, or class?

Related to the concern over the particularity of these multiple histories, people have also brought up the diversity of labour practices and the dangers of lumping all Chinese labourers in the post-slavery era as indentured. Once again, I do appreciate the diversity of contracts and agreements under which men and women left their homes for work. However, I want also to question the definitions and terms of these labour practices. I argue that, at least in the case of labourers imported from Asia for reasons of economy and ease of exploitation, that the division between voluntary and involuntary, contract and indenture, is a false one. As postcolonial historians such as Madhavi Kale and Gyan Prakash have noted, the cartegories of free and unfree labour emerge out of colonialism. I don't have enough time to unfold this discussion today, but let me just say that we need to be cautious about taking for granted categories and definitions of freedom as they are grounded in the imperatives of colonial expansion.

I want to close by turning back to the *White Falcon* and its literal and figurative disappearance.

According to reports compiled from newspapers at the time and a number of secondary histories, one out of eleven coolie ships mutinied. It was not unheard of for the crews of entire ships to resign upon learning that they would be sailing a coolie ship because the dangers of these voyages -- the potential for mutiny was so common. Persia Crawford Campbell notes that “[c]oolie-voyages to South America become so risky that in August, 1852, though large contracts were in the market, no vessels could be procured for shipment” (97).

I am haunted by the stories of these ships, burning in unknown waters with hundreds of the already dispossessed burning alive locked in the hold. I want to find a way of understanding their resistance as neither futile nor naïve. Yes, these were desperate acts. But surely, just as there is still no end to the desperation which unhomes hundreds of thousands of people every year, then acts of resistance do not simply end with the terror of those did in the hold.

One glimmer of possibility lies in re-orienting our understanding of coolie subjectivity and following the history of some ships that really do seem to have disappeared. While there are records of ships that have burned at the hands of mutinying indentured labourers, there are also records of ships that have simply seemingly disappeared. If you think about it, this doesn't make sense. Usually, some member of the crew survives to tell the tale. Ships are vast objects and do not simply disappear. One possibility then would be to read in these disappearances the possibility of successful mutinies.

One of the most fascinating parts of the indenture archive is the occasional slippage which occurs between coolie subjectivity and pirate subjectivity. It doesn't

happen often, but every once in a while, there are moments where we get a sense of the intermingling between pirates and coolies, of pirates infiltrating the barracoons where coolies would be imprisoned prior to sailing, of pirates leading ship board mutinies on indenture ships, of coolies and pirates as being one and the same. The slippage in this language around piracy and indenture captures a fascinating area of ambivalence between these terms. As the work of historians such as Dian Murray and Marcus Rediker suggests, many pirate communities can often be understood as anti-colonial and anti-capitalist communities made of the desperate and the dispossessed. While there are relatively few records of coolie rebellion in the imperial archive, there is a vast record of piratical activity and the fight to suppress piracy along the very coastal towns from which coolie labour was recruited. Maybe, just maybe, what the British called piracy and terrorism in the nineteenth century would be what a diaspora critic might now call agency. This is a possibility that I am hoping to explore.

Returning to the gap between the two images of the *White Falcon* with which I began this paper, I hope to have mediated part of this gap by exploring the tension between the historical and the rumoured, the visual and the oral. As Nic Mizroeff, following Homi Bhabha's thoughts on newness and the way in which "the past-present becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living," one method of responding to the problem of diaspora and visual representation "lies in writing diasporist genealogies of the present that refigure the past in order to facilitate the theoretical and phenomenological understanding of the multiple viewpoint of diaspora" (7). Finally, I hope that in historicizing the image of the ship for Asian diaspora discussions, we can begin to explore the polyvalent symbols which are shared and contested amongst multiple

diasporas.

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