

**BEFORE I WAS A CRITIC
I WAS A HUMAN BEING**

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Prologue

PART I

I was last notably called a “chink” in 2011 while living in Scotland, that land and people who still fancied calling Indian restaurants “pakis” and Chinese restaurants “chinkies.” I was cutting through a schoolyard when a young boy called over in my direction about what a chink I was. His mom stood nearby, waiting to pick him up and watching in silence. I was stunned, but not because a small Scottish child was throwing slurs at me or that his parental figure did nothing. I was shocked and confused because I spoke better English than he did, and that in my mind made me better than he would ever be.

Born in Hong Kong and raised in Canada, my mind has been a deeply colonized place.

While this lad showed me the prejudice in his heart, I wasn't exactly injured by his words. Neither he nor anyone in that town held any power over me. I was a visitor, para-

chuted in for a six-month arts writing residency under the guise of a diversity fellowship. I was an imported foreign good, put on display in the local museum during weekday hours as the visiting writer. I fielded frequent questions about whether I was actually Korean or Japanese. When I simply replied I was Canadian, no one ever followed up about where within Canada I had come from. They just politely smiled as if they already knew it was a place where I couldn't belong.

Perhaps in the context of a small town in the North East of Scotland, it was unbelievable to see a person of colour, at least one who wasn't working at one of two ethnic restaurants. I was being paid to review the goings-on of the town from my foreign perspective, complete with critiques, which has on more than one occasion led to the notion that I must be an "ungrateful bitch." Because how dare I try and critique the status quo, when I should just be thankful for being here.

The role of playing the foreigner, the Other, amongst a sea of Scottish people, was neither pleasant nor anything new to me. The main difference was that there was no myth of multiculturalism in Scotland, and when racism reared its egregious head, it never appeared in sheep's clothing.

I share this story as a way to demonstrate my thinking about language and power. I also understood Canada a lot better after living in Scotland. One of the central themes in this collection of stories is the violence of whiteness that is both around me and inside of me. Words alone can lift you up and throw you down, but I am more interested

in thinking through who gets to speak and to whom are they speaking.

As another entry point, during a 2017 welcoming ceremony for Syrian refugees in Toronto, the officials gave a land acknowledgement and informed them that they were now settlers on this land. I would be later told how the translator could not find an appropriate Syrian word for *settler*, as the closest translation would be *Israeli*, who for generations have settled and occupied unceded Palestinian land.

I can't begin to assume the mental and emotional reception of those Syrian families and individuals who were told they have now become the Israelis of Canada. I can only point to the double-speak of the Canadian government's language. There is at once an admission that this land is inhabited by Indigenous Nations and, at the same time, still no official regard for Indigenous sovereignty on the land that so many of us have come to call home. It is akin to welcoming strangers in need into your neighbour's house, which you have pilfered and taken by force.

A core theme I revisit throughout this collection is how racialized immigration is perpetuating colonialism into the twenty-first century. I know the nation-state wants and depends on this continuation of internalized colonial entitlement, but what about the agency of new immigrant settlers? When I became a Canadian citizen in 1992, there was no land acknowledgement offered. Only in my thirties am I becoming aware of just some of the names of the hundreds of nations who live across these lands. I have mostly learned these names through the voices of Indig-

enous leaders and thinkers, scholars and activists, artists and writers, and more recently by settler politicians and bureaucrats. There is a lot of listening and unlearning that most settlers, newly immigrated or not, have to do in this generation and the ones still yet to come, and asking from a logistical point of view, how do we support Indigenous rights in this country without it being controlled and commodified by empire? I am aware I am writing in English and this is being read in English, that the production and research of this text was paid for by the Canada Council for the Arts, and that I hold citizenship to the nation of Canada. I am thankful for these opportunities, even if I am repeatedly told and shown how I don't really belong.

In my twenties, I distinctly remember the first time I used the phrase *Turtle Island*. I remember it well because I used it incorrectly and was immediately shamed by a white woman in Vancouver for not knowing how much land Turtle Island encompassed. She quickly and passive-aggressively suggested, in a sentence that lifted into a question, *I'm pretty sure Turtle Island covers all of North America?* I shrugged. I didn't know. I grew up in Edmonton, where I had never heard that phrase before 2010.

I didn't know the Anishinaabe creation story of Turtle Island back then, but neither did this white woman when I asked her where that name came from. This disconnection between information sharing and shaming has been typical, unhelpful, and continues on. As a first-generation settler, I began holding a lot of shame about not knowing Indigenous history and world views. I also hold a lot of privilege as an Asian woman with no accent other than a

faint British enunciation. And yet, being shamed by the very same white Canadians who feel the need to create a diversity box and also lord their racial solidarity and Indigenous allyship over me is far more insulting than being called a chink by that small Scottish boy. The intention here is far more insidious through the hegemony of language and belonging.

PART II

As a product of the Canadian education system from 1988 through 2008, I was systematically taught nothing that would suggest Indigenous culture was anything but a historical chapter between the Hudson Bay Company's insatiable appetite for beaver pelts and the glory of the Loyalists during the War of 1812. Everything I learned I have had to unlearn. For example, when my family immigrated to Edmonton in the late 1980s, I would often see individual men, sometimes women, laid out on the sidewalks and front stoops across Chinatown. At first I couldn't tell what ethnicity they were. My only reference at that point, coming from Kowloon, was that they looked Filipino, but taller. I didn't understand the conflation of poverty with segregated ethnic neighbourhoods until decades later, but I ended up associating Indigenous identity with the brutal and indecipherable circumstances of street-level poverty for years to come.

Across Canada, Chinatowns were formed on the "other side" of the tracks due to another type of segregation, but as most of central Edmonton in the late eighties and nineties looked like it had formed on the "other side" of the tracks, it took longer for me to untangle the strands of

homelessness, resource extraction, displacement, and the legacies of oppression in that boom-and-bust fort town.

By 1990, my family had moved into our third home in two years as my mother searched restlessly for a neighbourhood to call home. Living in older established neighbourhoods made her feel like an outsider, so we kept moving into newer and more distant subdivisions where everybody was a stranger to each other. In my new elementary school, new to me and new in the sense that the building had just been constructed, I remember first learning about Inuit culture during a special module on the topic of cultures in the far north. At the time, I actually couldn't imagine going any farther north than Edmonton. The entire class watched a video that I would see repeatedly over the years that showed an Inuk man cutting out large cubes of snow to assemble an igloo. Everyone would try and fail to create our own igloos during recess, eventually settling for cavernous holes instead. Every student was also given a piece of soapstone to sand down into our own version of a four-legged silhouette. After firing them in the kiln, we were told that carving and selling soapstone had become an important part of Inuit economy. We were not told why art had replaced hunting and trapping, but this was the first time anyone had conflated art-making and commerce to my young mind. This was a Grade 3 class, so I understand if there was no discussion of the forced relocation of Inuit communities by the federal government or how northern communities face the country's highest rates of youth suicide. We were taught that Inuit were a unique people and culture, living just north of us, and that it was

no longer acceptable to call people by outdated language like *eskimo*, even if our city's football team thought otherwise.

The following year, my entire school was assembled into the gymnasium to watch *Dances with Wolves* on what was then still known as Aboriginal Day. I know we were not the only elementary school in the Prairies to offer this type of miseducation. It was the first time I watched this Oscar-winning movie, the first of many times, and I still remember that initial feeling of visceral and emotional manipulation when the music swelled and the camera panned to the dead wolf. As feature-film narration goes, all of the empathy centred on a white man's disillusionment with his own culture and subsequent appropriation of other people's traditions. Of course, it won Best Picture. While the teachers fast-forwarded through the sex scenes, it was business as usual for the entire elementary school as we sat through scenes of massacre and violence.

PART III

Leaving the Prairies, and after extensive and repeated travels coast to coast, the only thing authentically Canadian across all its distinct regions is the ugliness of the Canadian myth that Indigenous peoples, Black people, and people of colour, are somehow less than white settlers. Specifically, language used to denigrate Indigenous peoples was so common and varied that it was a lexicon unto its own. The same derogatory words that have been echoed to me for my entire lifetime in Canada, words that have been spoken to me by friends, neighbours, radio,

television, newspaper articles, and editorials, and I never questioned any of it. I was caught off guard by these racist slurs when they appeared in KC Adams's *Cyborg Hybrid* portraits. I encountered this work for the first time in 2008 at the Banff Arts Centre. As I passed each photograph of a model wearing a white shirt with white text stitched across the front, I could hear the countless times someone uttered these stereotypes of Indigenous people to me, and how I never once challenged them. The series as a whole marked the first time I was visually confronted with contemporary Indigenous art outside of an anthropological and ethnographic setting, and by an artist of my generation.

In the region, important and often invisible figures like Marjorie Beaucage had already been doing the work of building systems of self-representation. Along with a group of people in the Edmonton region, Beaucage would relay years later how they took over an existing film festival that showed works about Indigenous culture and turned it into *Dreamspeakers*, a film festival for and by Indigenous people. This is an art history I am only learning decades later, and this knowledge still does not yet exist in the shape of textbooks or archives. It had taken twenty years of living in Canada before I came across Indigenous self-determination, and where political organizing was out of my purview then, art showed me how we see the world through individual subjectivities.

The majority of models in *Cyborg Hybrid* were also the faces of artists and curators leading contemporary Indigenous art to the forefront of national and international dialogues. People like Greg Hill and Candice Hopkins were building on the monumental work of curator Lee-

Ann Martin, and before her, artists Daphne Odjig, Alex Janvier, Jackson Beardy, Norval Morrisseau, and others as they successfully fought for the first contemporary Indigenous art exhibitions in this country in the late sixties and seventies.

From 2008 and on, I observed a rise in exhibitions featuring contemporary Indigenous artists in the Prairie region. After *Anthem* at the Walter Phillips Gallery, the next memorable show was *Face the Nation*, an exhibition at the newly rebranded Art Gallery of Alberta that brought together KC Adams, Dana Claxton, Maria Hupfield, Kent Monkman, Lori Blondeau, and others. At the opening, I remember seeing three of the women artists linked together, walking arm in arm, grinning ear to ear. I would ask Maria about this moment a decade later, and she remembered it, too, naming it the first time many of them had ever shown together.

But a few days after the opening at the AGA, I went back to see the exhibition without the crowds and witnessed a young Indigenous man trying to get into the show. Judging from his questions, he had never been to the gallery before and didn't know where to go. The front-desk attendant, an older white woman who had been at her seat for decades, gave him so much grief about his questions and his backpack that he turned around and left the building. She offered me a conspiring look of exasperation and relief, and I regret to say that I saw the show again that day and that young man did not. In that moment, I felt closer to whiteness than not. I was completely complicit and didn't think twice about entering a space that could cover its walls with images of contemporary Indigenous perspec-

tives, but exclude their physical bodies from entering and experiencing. In that moment, I felt like a *real* Canadian.