



RACE
AND
THE
CITY

SHANTI FERNANDO

Chinese Canadian and Chinese American
Political Mobilization

Shanti Fernando

Race and the City: Chinese Canadian
and Chinese American Political
Mobilization



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Preface

There was no single impetus for this book and the project that was its precursor. Instead, there were several things driving my work, including my need to explore how the Canadian and, in comparative terms, the American political systems were dealing with increased cultural heterogeneity. It seemed that the pace of change in both political systems was slow and that even modest gains were increasingly met with a backlash. It was clear this was something that should be examined, but it was not obvious how I could best conduct this examination. I wanted to shed light on the position of racialized minorities, many of whom were concentrated in a few large urban centres. I also wanted to see how they dealt with their lack of formal inclusion in the political system.

I have explored these issues and written this book as part of a continuing project to consider the political systems of multicultural cities in Canada and the United States, the political participation of racialized minorities, and the ethnospecific community groups that act as both bastions of cultural preservation and defensive institutions in the context of systemic racism. I have concentrated on racialized minorities' achievement of substantive citizenship in the form of full access to political institutions, and I have attempted to come to terms with the lack of formal participation by Chinese Canadians and Chinese Americans in the political institutions of Canada and the United States. This has required me to come to terms with the fact that social difference is not viewed as a political resource but as a cause of dissent and various social ills – and many racialized minorities have been denied opportunities for political participation because of this perception.

I believe a book such as this is necessary because of the gaps in the literature on participation and Canadian politics and because of the nature of some of the arguments that I have studied in political science, which do not reflect the reality of many racialized minorities. But I also hope that it will help in the development of an anti-racist strategy that will identify systemic

racism and work to eliminate it as a barrier to the political participation of racialized minorities. This goal is increasingly relevant in the current climate of suspicion of non-whites and recent immigrants. If political participation – and political power – continues to be restricted to a small segment of the population, it will challenge democratic principles and the achievement of full political, social, and civil rights for all the population, but it will be felt most keenly in the non-white population.

This book is not only an academic and political project, but is also part of a personal journey. I came to Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, as a doctoral student in 1996 to study the comparative politics of the United States and Canada in a fairly traditional way. I wanted to understand the differences in social policies and to assess data that would illuminate some of the differences between the two countries. This seemed a straightforward project and one that I could handle easily. Then everything changed.

Kingston is a very white town. I had lived in such places before, but this time it was different. People were looking at me. They appeared to be scared of me or confused by me, and they spoke to me very slowly, as if they thought I wouldn't understand them. I was studying and working at an upper-class school with upper-class students who were overwhelmingly white and overwhelmingly sure that racism did not exist in Canada. In the course of my first few years as a doctoral student, it became clear that I could no longer avoid, personally or professionally, the topic I had avoided most pointedly in my work to that date: race.

I wanted and needed to address race in the context of my life and my research as something important, especially in terms of anti-racist education. Researching and writing this book became a journey that made me confront my own discomfort with issues of race in Canada so that I could learn, and thereby teach lessons, about how to deal with racism. I had no choice but to confront it. It is part of the reality of politics in this country, and I am a political scientist. I had been taught that politics was about the structures of government and the political and economic institutions. They were what structured and defined Canadian political life. I was not taught about the other structures of Canadian political life, the structures of oppression: race, class, and gender. These were characterized to me as not really part of the public life of Canada, but issues of private life. Yet I myself began to see no public/private distinction. Structures of oppression were indeed part of the political life that I saw and knew, whether explicitly or implicitly. They shaped the relations within political life in a profound way. We had not been taught about these structures or processes, but as a Canadian woman of colour I was very well aware of them. It became necessary for me to look at these structures in order to get a full picture of Canadian political life. Could I ignore poverty, sexism, and racism and claim that a

neutral state existed when I did not believe this to be true? It did not seem a fair representation of the realities of political life or the political system. I therefore decided to look at political participation and one structure of oppression, race and racism.

At this point, another question might come to mind for people reading this book. I am not looking at "my own group," but at another racialized minority group. Why? Throughout the time I spent doing research for and writing this book, I have been asked "Why are you studying Chinese people?" I continue to be asked that question. Surprisingly, I had not expected this question. I don't know whether this lack of expectation resulted from naïveté or lack of foresight.

There are various reasons I made the choices I did in my research. First, I was still endlessly fascinated by the Canada/US comparison, as all Canadians seem to be. I was looking at two cities. I chose Toronto because I knew it and it was close at hand. I needed a comparative US city, which had to be as multiethnic as Toronto and a gateway city for immigration. Los Angeles became my comparison site, and I went through all the various racialized groups to find one that would work for both cities. Blacks and Latinos had such different histories and numbers in the two cities. Asians seemed to fit the bill. In Toronto, the largest non-white group at the time was Chinese Canadians. I had lived in Toronto and seen a great deal of racism towards them. Even friends who would never think to make a derogatory remark about blacks, South Asians, Aboriginals, or gays and lesbians would make comments about Chinese Canadians being "foreign" and would display racism towards them. Why was anti-Chinese racism more "acceptable"? Why did members of this group seem so "foreign"? Perhaps the perceived "success" of Chinese Canadians had "lost" them their status as a disadvantaged minority and they were now seen as fair game. There had to be more to this phenomenon. These thoughts led to the birth of a project.

It never occurred to me that I should study people from my own South Asian background, even though it occurred to almost everyone I spoke to about the project. I was studying race and political participation, and the experiences of Chinese Canadians and Chinese Americans seemed to fit. I was obviously naïve. For me, the question was "Why not study the experience of the Chinese Canadian and Chinese American populations?" To me, anti-racism meant fighting for human rights, not just rights for those who looked like me. Championing only those who are of the same background as oneself seemed to be part of the problem.

I then had to realize that I was not the neutral white researcher free to research any community I wished. I was a racialized subject who was not free from that racialization even in my capacity as a political scientist. This was a revelation. In the book *Racing Research, Researching Race*, Troy Duster

wrestles with his colleagues' comments about their frustration with black, Latino, Asian American, and Native American students who do "autobiographical" work: "They are referring to the fact that many students of Asian ancestry want to study problems of Asian-Americans, or that African-American students tend to study African-American issues, or that Latino students wanted to study Latino American concerns. One of these colleagues pronounced with some passion that he would never want to study 'his own group' because he was afraid of the implicit bias. What is remarkable is that his white students were routinely studying the lives of white Americans with no consciousness, no reflexivity, and little awareness that race was a feature of their studies as well."¹

I was not researching "my own group," but the fact that I was not, in itself, racialized my legitimacy as a researcher. Moreover, many people did not perceive race as an "issue" in Canada. Why was I studying racism in a racism-free place like Canada? More questions. More problems. More self-doubt. Should I study "neutral" white populations? Does a racialized researcher talking about racism always risk being seen as having an "axe to grind"? Would I be taken seriously as a researcher presenting legitimate and important facts? Would I be labelled as someone who is not doing real political science? These questions plagued me, but the more I thought about it, the more I came to realize that once I had found the topic and its importance, I could not pretend to lose it.

The complacency bred by "multiculturalism" has prevented many Canadians, including me at times, from moving forward and championing a society that has real respect for diversity and acceptance, rather than mere tolerance. Explicit anti-racism can structure our political institutions in place of implicit racism. Cities in Canada and the United States are becoming more ethnically diverse, and more non-whites are part of these societies. However, at a time when it is becoming even more pressing to deal with the systemic inequalities determined by race, there seems even less generalized inclination to do so on the part of both racialized and non-racialized groups. It seems we are being told more often that inequality does not exist, even though those of us who are members of racialized minorities do not notice this inequality disappearing. It seems the conservative backlash and conservative politics now prevalent in both countries are trying to quash any dissent from racialized minorities among equality-seeking groups. Why is this assault on existing rights occurring when there is such an urgent need to re-examine the systemic racism and systemic inequalities in these societies and to address the quest of many groups to expand their rights?

To answer the question "Why are you studying Chinese people?" I studied "Chinese" people because I am studying more than a racialized group. I have studied, and continue to study, the ways in which people are able or unable to access the political system of liberal democratic states. This is a

necessary and vital question for a political scientist to ask. Therefore, the personal and professional have met, and my obligations in both led me to the study of the political participation of racialized minorities. I believe that posing relevant questions about equal access to the political process can help us come closer to some constructive results in the future.

I hope that this type of research will lead to a greater awareness of systemic racism and will broaden our understanding of democracy in terms of political participation and the achievement of substantive citizenship for racialized minorities. This speaks not only to racialized minorities, but to all groups that are concerned, and those that should be concerned, with democratic accountability and the growing perception of a "democratic deficit." Also, I must say that I was personally dismayed by much of the backlash following the attacks of 11 September 2001. At that time, openly racist statements were made in my presence about "others," as if this was now more acceptable. This made me realize that I had to continue to teach and research on emotionally difficult racial issues. It also scared me into recognizing, once again, that gains in equity that have been made are not as solid as we think. There can be backlash. There can be a reversal of progress.

In Canada and the United States there is a growing presence of non-whites, but they do not seem to be visible in mainstream political life. This seems especially true in the case of Asian Canadians and Asian Americans. When the field of view is narrowed to Chinese Canadians and Chinese Americans, there seems to be even less visibility. What has emerged from my examination of the political participation of these two groups is that they represent a small part of mainstream political life. Their achievement of substantive citizenship, the right of full access to political, social, and economic institutions, has been hampered by the systemic racism that Chinese Canadians and Chinese Americans face. They have been racialized as "foreigners" and have thus been excluded from full political participation. My perception continues to be of a substantial Chinese Canadian and Chinese American presence demographically, socially, and economically but not politically.

The interviews that I conducted in both Toronto and Los Angeles gave me further insight into how Chinese Canadians and Chinese Americans actually do participate, and also revealed some of the reasons why their political presence felt more limited than one might expect given their demographic presence. These interviews were extremely important in giving me an overall picture of participation in Toronto and Los Angeles and making me feel a part of the communities that I was examining. I very much appreciate the way in which all my interview subjects welcomed me so graciously into their "world" and gave me their time and the benefit of their wealth of experience. Their hard work and dedication inspired me, and I think it is this inspiration that is their gift to their communities. This is what helps to motivate people to act, and there is a great need for more

action. My interviews were great conversations that were full of stories, and I hope I am able to convey this in *Race and the City*. I hope this book, a story of two countries and two cities, will create more great conversations and inspire others.

One can look at numbers of formal participants in the political process and try to draw some conclusions about the political participation of Chinese Canadians and Chinese Americans or racialized minorities in general, but it is a difficult task. What is needed is both a broader definition of political participation, which includes community-level participation by groups and individuals like the ones I interviewed, and an understanding that political status is an important consideration. If one is part of a racialized minority and accorded a lower political status, how is it possible to view politics as a level playing field? Some people have explained away the low numbers and visibility as matters of culture or disinterest. However, the reality is that the barrier of systemic racism and the racialization of certain minorities has denied them full access to political participation, and it is with this reality in view that I proceed.



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1

Introduction: Racing against Time and Place

This project is about “racing” politics, by which I mean advocating for the inclusion of “race” as a central concern for Canadian politics in general and for cities in particular. It is a project ultimately about time and place because racialization is about the historical and geographical contexts within which ethno-racial groups come to be seen as the “others.” I wrote *Race and the City* to contribute to an ongoing and developing dialogue about what constitutes political participation and how racialized minorities could become part of that dialogue. Some of the alternatives suggested in this dialogue include informal avenues such as community groups, lobby groups, NGOs, activism, and involvement in programs that seek to educate citizens about racism and the positive aspects of diversity. These can allow political dialogue and the creation of political and social capital, especially for racialized minorities. This dialogue includes a focus on the importance of civic politics and political participation in cities, especially since large cities are where recent immigrants tend to settle and where important changes and grassroots movements are taking place that will affect recent immigrants and racialized minorities. This offers them opportunities for political mobilization.

I also want to add to the growing debate on cultural and ethnic studies and the inclusion of critical race theory, especially in the Canadian context. Critical race theory is important because it seeks to expose systemic complicity in racialization and encourages systemic examination and change. I have used this theory as a framework because it is this systemic complicity and the existence of systemic racism that form the basis of my argument. I hope to encourage further research and analysis, especially comparative research and analysis, in this area. Research based in critical race theory goes beyond debates and literature reviews to reflect the lives of racialized minorities in North America. These are lives of challenges, possibilities, and frustration.

I do not set out to say everything about Chinese Canadians and Chinese Americans or their community groups, nor do I put myself forward as their spokesperson. Rather, I give examples of racialized minorities that are affected in the same way many non-white groups are affected by systemic racism and the frustration born of their members' inability to be included in the social, political, and economic infrastructure of their countries. I hope to show how political mobilization is difficult yet possible and absolutely necessary if people are to become part of those structures in the multicultural city and elsewhere. This mobilization is necessary because of the challenge of systemic racism, made even more pressing since the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the resulting anti-terrorism measures that can make racialized minorities feel more vulnerable than before. I hope to encourage this mobilization and to encourage, along with my fellow researchers and scholars in this area, further development of the research and dialogue that can facilitate political mobilization.

Systemic racism is a force that can impinge upon the political participation of racialized groups, such as Chinese Canadians and Chinese Americans, though it takes diverse forms and produces different effects in each country, particularly at the local level in large multiethnic cities. The tensions displayed in these cities should not be seen as "problem cases," but as examples of what Iris Marion Young refers to as the political resource and opportunity of social difference.¹ Social differences "create complexity and reveal conflicts that can change structural relations."² They can be viewed as obstacles to political communication or as opportunities to seek mechanisms that will facilitate increased communication and increased political participation. According to Young, "especially where there are structural relations of privilege and disadvantage, then, explicit inclusion and recognition of differentiated social positions provides experiential and critical resources for democratic communication that aims to promote justice."³ However, the opportunity to improve conditions for equality and democratic ideals is sometimes lost, and the supposed costs of increased diversity are emphasized. Rather than placing some of the blame on a society that is unable to accept the experience of diversity as a political resource, racialized minorities are blamed for dissent. A society can confirm its commitment to justice and equality only by testing these tenets, taking up the opportunity of diversity and playing out the role of a just society. If there is no difference or need for accommodation, equality remains an untested, abstract concept.

Understanding equality in terms of social differences, such as "race," is necessary to critically assess how democracy is functioning in terms of citizenship and equality claims. I use the term "racialization," rather than the more static "race," because it highlights the constant change and the social

process of creating identity. Many scientists have dismissed the term "race," arguing it is not biologically significant, but it is socially and politically significant given its prominent place in the construction of hierarchy. Racialization refers to the assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of individuals that characterize a certain group, usually with negative connotations associated with a designated "race." This racialization process also posits a connection between race and culture; in the Canadian and American contexts, non-white groups are negatively racialized.

We need to recognize negative racialization and use this understanding as a means to achieve "fairness, equal opportunity and political inclusion."⁴ The goal of all racialized groups is to be able to participate on a level playing field, where their ethnicity is not a barrier to participation and their citizenship is constructed in the same way as that of non-racialized groups. Their access to substantive citizenship and equality must therefore go beyond official doctrine and take practice into account. Engin Isin and Myer Siemiatycki explain that "this is why we conceive of citizenship broadly – not only as a set of legal obligations and entitlements which individuals possess by virtue of their membership in a state, but also as the practices through which individuals and groups formulate and claim new rights or struggle to expand or maintain existing rights."⁵ The state, however, may conceive of new citizens' struggle for new rights as a hegemonic crisis, and it may move against such a struggle to maintain the social order. The contradictory nature of the state that claims to be democratic, but then denies rights and equality to certain citizens, is a further challenge both to those seeking greater equity and to others committed to greater democratic accountability of government.

The Contradictory Nature of the State: A Challenge to Democratic Accountability and Equity

The state's contradictory nature is often expressed in national myths. In Canada there is a pervasive myth that immigrants are viewed as the backbone of the country and given equal opportunities. Officially, all immigrants, including those who are non-white, are equally welcomed legally. In practice, however, recruitment policies show a preference for European and white immigrants, a pattern that has been in place since Canada's inception.⁶ Despite identifiable lasting patterns, over time there have been changes in Canada's immigration system. Originally, preference for a white Canada was overt, and (non-British) diversity was not formally accommodated, but over time changes in Canada's immigration system have made this preference less overt.⁷ The legacy of these origins means that those non-white groups who have arrived over the last 150 years are not recognized as builders of the country.⁸ This is especially true for Chinese Canadians. Their history

is commonly forgotten or distorted; instead they are seen as recent immigrants who are "taking over" the country.

The United States also sees itself as an immigrant country, where the hard work of immigrants is rewarded by a neutral system. The picture currently presented by the dominant media in the United States, however, characterizes Chinese Americans and other racialized minorities, especially recent immigrants, as a cause of social unrest and problems rather than as positive contributors to their country and its economy. This view tends to be rooted in the popular discourse of moral panic and an "us versus them" mentality; it is based on fear and racist stereotypes rather than facts. An alternative view, which I put forward in this book, stresses the contributions of Chinese Americans and recent immigrants, including the fact that they have helped the American economy and, indeed, are necessary for its success.

The current fears play into an old discourse familiar to governments in Canada and the United States. In this discourse, the state accommodates racist views by placing undue importance on the fear expressed by a section (often a minority) of the white populace, thereby increasing its credibility. This legitimizes the "immigrant fear," which in turn victimizes all those people, whether they are immigrants, citizens, or long-time residents, who do not "look like" a stereotypical white "Canadian" or "American." Non-white immigrants and minorities are made justifiable targets of those who wrongly see them as "taking away jobs," "getting into the country illegally," causing "social unrest," or, since 11 September 2001 in particular, "acting as agents of terrorism."

The governments of Canada and the United States have increased restrictions on immigration and supported the idea of "good immigrants" – commonly those with money – and "bad immigrants," who are motivated primarily by family concerns. As Abu-Laban notes, "these restrictions colour the nature and extent of possible integration, inclusion and equality."⁹ Non-white immigrants feel the greatest impact of these policies because they now represent the largest group of immigrants in Canada and the United States. They are also vulnerable to established race and class biases and are at risk of being denied permanent residence status, employment, or educational opportunities. All of these factors contribute to a lack of legitimacy and support for non-white immigrants, which calls for a careful examination of the beliefs that underpin these racist assumptions. Systemic racism continues to be a pervasive factor and the main barrier to full political participation for racialized minorities and society's denial of its existence is a barrier to anti-racist political change.

The gap between the equality that is promised and the inequality that is experienced by Chinese Canadians and Chinese Americans, and visible minorities in general, is present in many areas and institutions, and there is