Timothy J. Stanley

Contesting White Supremacy

School Segregation, Anti-Racism, and the Making of Chinese Canadians

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Contesting White Supremacy

To Ann and Norman,

WHOSE LOVE SHOWED THAT RACISM IS ALWAYS A LIE

Now I hear what you cannot hear; the hearts of greedy gamblers, the pulse of petty thieves. I hear the game coins rattle under the brass cup, and the unique sound that each combination makes. I hear everything.

– Paul Yee, 'Gambler's Eyes,' *Tales from Gold Mountain: Stories of the Chinese in the New World.*

Acknowledgments

This book began many years ago when the Vancouver Chinese Benevolent Association allowed a returned exchange student from China of dubious lineage to work on their ad hoc committee against *W5*. It continued when Charan Gill, Kay Ryan, Harinder Mahil, Stuart Rush, and others welcomed me as a founder of the BC Organization to Fight Racism and helped teach me about racism and the power to change the world. It deepened with my PhD thesis when Vincent D'Oyley created a safe space that allowed me to explore racism as an academic topic and J. Donald Wilson lent me the depth of his knowledge of Canadian and BC history. In an unofficial post-doc, while I was on the academic margins of part-time teaching, Leslie Roman treated me as an equal and introduced me to cultural studies, while deepening my knowledge of the critical literatures in anti-racism education. Meanwhile, Edgar Wickberg, my MA thesis supervisor, allowed me to discover that he had in fact taught me a great deal about the pitfalls of winner's history and the need to take marginalized voices seriously. The work of what is now two generations of scholars is possible only because of the foundation he laid, along with his collaborators Graham Johnson and Harry and Ronald Con. Jean Barman repeatedly encouraged me to get the book done and strongly suggested that I speak to UBC Press about it. Neil Sutherland early brought my attention to Sing Lim's autobiography and to several photos of Chinese children. My colleagues and friends Sharon Cook, Lorna McLean, Doug Fleming, Ralph de Smit, Ken Montgomery, Trevor Gulliver, and Ivana

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Note on Chinese Terminology

During the period covered by this book, Cantonese was the principal language of migrants from China living in British Columbia. Accordingly, for the names of people, places, and organizations, I have followed local usages insofar as I have been able to establish what these usages were. However, to be consistent with scholars of China, I have rendered Chinese characters in Mandarin using the Pinyin Romanization. All reference material is cited in Pinyin. I commonly give both the local usage and the Mandarin Pinyin when a term is first mentioned in the text.

Chinese surnames present other difficulties. In traditional Chinese usage, the surname appears first, followed by the personal name. Usage in British Columbia varied, and it was not usual for a parent's personal name to become his or her BC-born child's surname. This is explained at the excellent website of the Vancouver Public Library, "Chinese Names in Canada," at http://www.vpl.ca/. Contemporary Chinese names can follow either westernized or traditional Chinese forms and may be romanized in either Pinyin or the older Wade-Giles system. To take the case of my own name in Chinese, I can variously be Timothy Shi, T'ien-li Shi or Tianli Shi, Shih T'ien-li or Shi Tianli. All would be correct, with Shi in Pinyin or Shih in Wade-Giles as the surname. Since there is no one acceptable method for handling this, I have tried to use the system preferred by the person involved.

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Introduction: Questioning the Existence of the World

As real and untouchable an element in their lives as the rules of arithmetic.

– Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

On September 5, 1922, shortly after classes began in the new school year of the Victoria, British Columbia, School District, the principals of seven of the district's elementary schools called certain students out of their classes, lined them up, and marched them down the road. The principals were putting into effect a school board order to segregate these children from their peers.[1] The board had spent much of the summer arranging the move: approving a plan for accommodating these students, building a 'new' school, negotiating with the city for the purchase and servicing of a school site, and hiring additional teachers and another principal.[2] According to the plan, an estimated seventy-one second and first reader pupils (that is, grades three and four today), previously at Quadra Primary and North Ward schools, were to be sent to the old King's Road School, a school that had once been condemned by the provincial school inspector as having 'quite possibly the worst physical conditions of any school in the province.'[3] Over the years, the building had sunk into its foundations as the surrounding streets had been built up, with the result that much of the school was actually below ground level.[4] A third classroom was now being opened in the school for

thirty-seven primary pupils, aged six to ten. Thirty-seven other primary pupils, aged eleven to fourteen, were being relocated to the old Rock Bay School, a school that during the previous ten years had been closed as often as open. Seventy-seven advanced third and junior fourth reader pupils (that is, grades five and six) were being accommodated in two classes at the newly established Railway Street School. This school was made out of two wooden huts relocated from the now closed Fernwood School. The last of these huts had been delivered to the site only the Friday before the start of classes, at which time a Victoria newspaper reported, 'A certain amount of rock will have to be blasted and plumbing will have to be done to make the schools [sic] ready for occupancy.'[5] Years later, parents and their children would less than fondly remember Railway Street as the 'Chicken Coop School.'[6]

Although the school board trustees alleged that segregation would be 'of great advantage' to the children involved, 'as special stress could be put on [the] subjects most needed by them, such as English, etc.,'[7] the trustees' actions were easy politics, popular with their electorate. Most residents of Victoria saw these children and their adult guardians as aliens who did not really belong in British Columbia, let alone in its provincially controlled schools alongside their own children. Many claimed that those being segregated were so different from themselves, morally, intellectually, and socially, that their mere presence threatened the educational progress and the physical and moral well-being of their own children. They even saw the older boys as a sexual menace to their children of tender years. Meanwhile, in January 1922, the most important official of the Victoria School District, the Municipal School Inspector George H. Deane, had urged the segregation of all of these students for 'sanitary' reasons.[8] Meanwhile, respectable groups, including the Victoria Chamber of Commerce, the Retail Merchants Association, and the Great War Veterans' Association, had long been calling for the segregation of these children.[9] For their part, the parents and adult guardians of the children being segregated were barred from voting in any of the Canadian state's elections in British Columbia, including those for the school board. As one trustee had put it a year earlier, school segregation was 'a method well calculated to meet a difficult situation.'[10]

After all their careful planning, the trustees and school officials expected segregation to go smoothly. However, they had not reckoned with the people to whom the segregation order applied. Far from needing special instruction, many of the children spoke English as their first and only language. Far from retarding others' academic progress, most were

performing above their class averages.[11] Far from being aliens, the majority were Canadian-born British subjects and, in the case of at least one affected family, the children were third-generation residents of Victoria, a claim to roots in the city that few other than the members of the Songhees First Nation could match.[12] Those being segregated were at most one or two years older than their former classmates, something not unusual in a school system where grading by student reader level (first primer, second primer, first reader, second reader, and so on) commonly produced multi-aged classrooms. The sexual menace of older boys, if it had ever existed, was already contained, or had been until segregation would once again place younger children in the same school. First in 1915 and continuously since 1919, boys more than two years older than the average for their grade level had attended special classes at the Rock Bay School where, before this segregation plan, they had little contact with other students.[13] In fact, the only thing that the children being marched down the street had in common was that English-language discourse widely racialized them as members of the same group. And although the school board claimed that it never intended to single out this group specifically, its measure applied to all children from this group who were below the entrance class to high school (grade seven) and only to children from this group.[14] Indeed, the school board's minutes repeatedly refer to those being segregated and their segregated classes and schools in racialized terms, and on September 5, several students were allowed to return to their classes after they explained that they were Japanese and thus not part of the racialized group to which the segregation order applied.[15]

Although less polite terms were also used, those being segregated were usually referred to as 'the Chinese.' This term referred to people who spoke different languages (four mutually unintelligible dialects of Cantonese, as well as Hakka, Mandarin, English, and Chinook), people of various citizenships (Chinese, naturalized British, and native-born British), and multiple ethnicities (primarily Cantonese and Hakka). It referred to first-generation resettlers and the fourth generation locally born, to those who had been in the territory since the Fraser River gold rush of 1858, and to those who had only recently arrived. Like migrants from Upper Canada, Britain, and the United States, people from China had resettled in British Columbia within living memory, displacing the First Nations, who were the original settlers. Like almost all other Victoria residents in the era before automation, 'the Chinese' worked hard – children as well as adults, women more so than men. Like other migrants, the first generation had brought their parental languages, their cultural practices, and hopes and

dreams with them. Most of the adults had chosen to come to Canada, whereas the children (as with those of other groups) were involuntary migrants. As with most resettlers, men migrated first, intending either to return to the old country once they had made fame and fortune or to send for their families once established. Like their counterparts of European origins, they practised patriarchy, a system of masculine dominance maintained through a gendered division of family roles, of work, and of control over property and public institutions. Like Victoria residents of European origins, those of Chinese origins took their religious beliefs seriously and were not prepared to give them up just because they were proselytized or another religion promised a better life. Like almost all other first-generation resettlers, those who had migrated from China had not entirely abandoned the old country but lived in constant hope of news from home and the possibility of returning. Like resettlers from Britain and Old Canada, those from China were part of a larger transnational cultural community: the educated among them closely following the political news from home and from the other places where 'their people' had resettled. As with others, both educated and uneducated alike were actively involved in helping relatives and friends make their way in the world, including in some cases migrating to Canada. Meanwhile, for the members of the second and later generations, as with other locally born people, return to the old country was their parents' dream. Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, was their place. 'The Chinese' too had made Victoria with their sweat, their talent, and their wealth. Above all, they were no different from any other sample of humanity, people of multiple and complex moral qualities.[16] Indeed, except for their racialization, 'the Chinese' were not so different from other Victoria residents.

Those being segregated were neither aliens to British Columbia nor prepared to become such. According to the *Victoria Daily Times,* when Major Jeffree A. Cunningham, the principal of Boys' Central School, and his charges reached the segregated King's Road School, 'a Chinese boy holding the reputation of being the quietest and most studious in the class shouted something in the Oriental lingo, and like a flash the parade disbanded, leaving Principal Cunningham in the middle of the roadway and wondering how he could overcome the difficulties of the situation.' Similar events unfolded with the students from the George Jay School.[17] To pressure the school board into allowing the segregated students to return to their former classes, the affected community had organized a students' strike against the Victoria school system. Despite various attempts at resolution, the strike continued for the entire school year.[18] The annual