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LOVE IN PACIFIC TIME

Asian Screen Culture in Vancouver

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diaspora babies, we
are born of pregnant pauses/spilled
from unwanted wombs/squalling invisible-ink poems/written in the margins
of a map of a place
called No Homeland

– Kai Cheng Thom

Poet Kai Cheng Thom's recitation of "Diaspora Baby" accompanies a series of drone aerial shots of a lush, mountainous coastline typical of British Columbia's landscape. The camera focuses on a tiny spot of red on a rocky beach, gradually zooming in to reveal drag performer Maiden China, sumptuously dressed in flowing layers of red. Her figure embodies at once the extravagance of a drag queen's costume and the blushing bridal wear of a traditional Chinese wedding, startlingly juxtaposed against the expansive wilderness of the coastal backdrop. This sequence ends on an extreme close-up of Maiden China's face, beautifully painted with the stylized makeup reminiscent of a Chinese opera performer, her haunting gaze smoldering behind a beaded veil cascading from a colorful headwear.

This memorable series of images which opens *Yellow Peril: Queer Destiny* (2019), a short film by Love Intersections – a queer arts collective based in Vancouver, Canada – exemplifies a West Coast Asian screen culture that has survived and thrived in the complex dynamics of a filmmaking city on the Pacific Coast, north of Hollywood, east of East Asia, and intimately connected to both regions through relative geographical proximity and generations of migration history. This article tells the story of this film scene and maps its survival in the at times "unwanted" and "invisible" margins of a city's dominant film culture.

In the Shadow of Hollywood North

Whenever Vancouver is mentioned in the context of film, it is unlikely that *Yellow Peril* or the homegrown independent filmmaking scene that nurtures such works would be the focus. Whether in a glossy tourism profile in *Vanity Fair* (Destination Canada 2022) or

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Figure 8.1 Still from *Yellow Peril: Queer Destiny*. Image used with permission.

a seasonal reportage of "what's filming" in the *Vancouver Sun* (Ruttle 2022), the city is invariably associated with its success as "Hollywood North," a moniker given to the wildly successful location industry that has continued to flourish. As one of the earliest cities to pivot its resource economy to the provision of location services for Hollywood (Gasher 2002, Ch. 4–5; Scott and Pope 2007), Vancouver has served as a pioneering model for cities all over the world to transform itself as a runaway production hub (Tinic 2012). Furthermore, there have also been many public and private initiatives to leverage its Hollywood North reputation, a large Asian immigrant population, and relative geographical proximity to East Asia to attract financing, collaborations, and access to markets in parts of Asia, especially China. These efforts include courting Asian productions to film on location in the city, organizing film festivals and screen writing contests with the aim to attract investors to fund local filmmakers, and developing joint film school programs (Leung 2015, 34–39; Leung 2016, 124–26). Even with the interruption of the pandemic, the industry has earned the province a "record-shattering" $4.8 billion spendings during 2021, according to a report by the Vancouver Economic Commission, which calls the industry one of the first sectors to "roar back" from the pandemic (2022). The website Hollywood North Buzz and the @YVRShoot twitter handle track and crowd source production sightings daily. *This Is Vancouver*, a massive oral history project commissioned by the Vancouver Public Library, devotes an entire section titled "Hollywood North" that collects stories about Vancouverites' "personal encounters with the industry." Ironically, an industry that thrives on erasing the city's history and identity on screen (Todd 2013, 8–9) has nonetheless become one of the most significant economic and cultural drivers of the city in the twenty-first century.

The impact of this thriving industry on local creative talents is double-edged. On the one hand, it has sustained growth and innovation in the sector (most notably in the areas of film and television production and more recently, video games, digital media and VFX),

attracting investments and creating a vibrant job market for home-grown, especially below-the-line, talents who are established and qualified enough to fill even the biggest Hollywood productions. On the other hand, it has exponentially pushed up production costs in an already expensive city; hijacked resources, access to infrastructure, and distribution opportunities from smaller productions; and contributed to the deterioration of labor conditions even in one of the most unionized creative sectors in the world (Curtin and Sanson 2017, 449–50). Furthermore, the dynamics have intensified the irony that, while the city is ubiquitous on screen, variously disguised as different cities, small towns, or even alien planets – what Creative BC, the film commission agency for the province of British Columbia, proudly advertises as "a world of looks" – local productions that set their stories in Vancouver can barely afford to shoot in the city. Thus, while we see ample scenes of Vancouver as a nameless metropolis in *Deadpool* (2016), a generic small American town in *Juno* (2007), a recognizably fake Seattle in *Beijing aishang Xiyatu* (Finding Mr. Right, 2013), or a blatantly fake New York in *Hongfan qu* (Rumble in the Bronx 1995), we see very little of the city in productions where a sense of place matters. For example, the cult queer classic *Better Than Chocolate* (1999) sets its love story between an artist and a bookstore owner in and around Commercial Drive, a historic hub for Italian, Portuguese, and Eastern European immigrants that has also developed into a bohemian countercultural space with a vibrant lesbian community. Such a film would have been enriched by a distinctive evocation of its setting, but with a minimal budget of CAD 1.6 million, it could ill afford to shoot much on location in Vancouver. Similarly, while the city has appeared so often in US crime shows, such that one critic suggests "it is haunted by its American doppelgänger" (Steenberg 2013, 92), the Vancouver-set production *Blood and Water* (2015–21), an Asian-led, multilingual TV crime show (in which then future Marvel star Simu Liu landed his first significant role), had to shoot many of its scenes in a Toronto studio in order to lower production costs, rendering its Vancouver visually much less distinctive than what passes as a gritty, rain-soaked Seattle in *The Killing* (2011–14) or the conspiratorial, shadowy spaces FBI agents investigate in *The X-Files* (1993–2002, 2016–18). It seems that the more the city becomes a successful commercial filmmaking hub, the more challenging it is for its own sense of place to find expression on screen.

Pacific New Wave

This struggle for representation and for a sense of place and identity has, from the beginning, animated the independent filmmaking culture that has persisted in the margins of the city's location industry. A group of filmmakers that critics dub the "Pacific New Wave" (Burgess 2003, 29–33) or the "West Coast Wave" (Spaner 2004, 91–109) emerged in the 1990s. Film journalist David Spaner, who has documented the complex interactions of independent filmmaking with a dominant corporate film culture in places as diverse as Mexico, France, and Canada (Spaner 2012), characterizes this group of filmmakers as the first significant independent filmmaking scene in Canada outside of both the Hollywood-centered infrastructure, and the much-better-known film scene in Toronto where the careers of David Cronenberg, Atom Egoyan, Patricia Rozema, and John Greyson started (Spaner 2004, 92). The Vancouver group, which consists not only of directors but also producers, cinematographers, camera operators, and editors who work in various roles on each other's projects, is noted for contrasting influences inherited from film programs in the city's two universities: the theater tradition and narrative-driven filmmaking at the University of

British Columbia, where many of the group's directors were students, and the experimental and interdisciplinary ethos of Simon Fraser University where students previously trained in photography and other visual arts brought different skill sets and a countercultural mindset to filmmaking. It is notable that the most prominent women in the group, Lynn Stopkewich and Mina Shum, have maintained career longevity and versatility as directors, despite the profession's well-known male dominance. Shum was also among the first in the group to garner critical acclaim and some degree of mainstream recognition and box-office success with her debut feature *Double Happiness* (1994), the film that launched Sandra Oh's career. Set in Vancouver, the film tells the story of an aspiring actress and the complicated family dynamics of her Asian immigrant family through very distinctive spaces in the city. Critics have noted the detailed ways in which the film evokes specific neighborhoods: from the claustrophobic interiority of an immigrant enclave, to metropolitan spaces of transcultural interactions, to the wide-open green spaces that surround and permeate the city (Melnyk 2014, 229–53; Hanley 2014). Shum made two more features after *Double Happiness* but primarily worked in documentaries and television for almost two decades before returning to feature filmmaking and reuniting with Sandra Oh in *Meditation Park* (2017). Set again in Vancouver and about an Asian immigrant family, the film tells the story of a middle-aged housewife, Maria, played with emotional depth and sharp comedic timing by Cheng Pei Pei. After 30 years of marriage, she slowly discovers that her husband has been cheating on her with a younger woman. Maria's gradual journey toward gaining her independence is similarly evoked through the distinctive spaces she moves through in her daily life in Vancouver: the cloistered domestic interiors of a middle-class household which has kept her isolated and dependent; the social spaces of the residential front yards, public parks, and community centers in East Vancouver, where neighbors from different backgrounds gossip, fight, scheme with and against each other while developing unlikely friendships; the cheery haunts in Chinatown where Asian women from different immigrant generations gather; and the snowy mountains and expansive oceanscape captured in the final shot as Maria stands alone on the deck of a BC Ferry, for the first time charting a life path for herself independent from her marriage.

Asian Film Scenes

Diasporic Asian filmmakers in Vancouver who are influenced by Shum and her generation of filmmakers continue to honor this commitment to place and deftly explore the interplay among domestic, urban, suburban, and natural spaces of the city in features as well as in shorts and documentaries. Julia Kwan's debut feature, *Eve and the Firehorse* (2005), films its story about an imaginative child in interior spaces set at a deliberate distance from the hustle and bustle of Chinatown, the metropolitan downtown, or open natural spaces, to denote a close-knit, first-generation Asian immigrant suburban community where isolation and over-protectiveness fuel a child's rich fantasy life (Leung 2015, 42–44). Kwan's subsequent feature documentary, *Everything Will Be* (2014), turns its focus to Vancouver's Chinatown at a time when the neighborhood is caught in a flux of rapid urban changes, where the dynamics of gentrification intersect revitalization and preservation efforts while bypassing the most vulnerable residents in the neighborhood.

The attention to place also involves reflecting on Asian migrants' relation to the land and to Indigenous communities. Japanese-Chilean Canadian filmmaker Alejandro Yoshizawa's film, *All Our Father's Relations* (2016), is one of the first films to shine a light on

the largely undocumented history of Asian-Indigenous relations in the region. The film was made in collaboration with its subjects: four elderly siblings in the Grant family who were raised Indigenous by their mother in the First Nation community of the Musquem people. Guided by fading memory of their father, a migrant worker from China who married their mother while working on leased farmlands on the Musquem Reserve during the 1920s, but who later became estranged from the family following his divorce from his wife and subsequent departure from the reserve, the siblings were determined to find out more about their Chinese heritage. The film follows the siblings as they trace their late father's migration journey which eventually took them all the way to Guangdong to meet with relatives on their father's side. As the film explores this intimate family story, it also tries to unravel the larger interconnected histories of Indigenous peoples and Asian migrants, the social as well as legal contexts of racism and exclusion, and the entangled dynamics between the exploitation of Asian migrant labor on the one hand, and Indigenous dispossession on the other. Indigenous filmmaker Kamala Todd has described Hollywood as "a powerful place maker, writing its own narratives and geographies onto the land" (Todd 2013, 9). Films like *All My Father's Relations* is important for countering such erasure while demonstrating the need for Asian filmmakers to work with Indigenous communities to reinscribe unremembered and ignored histories on screen.

Directly commenting on the city's weak sense of place, film editor Tony Zhou – whose YouTube channel Every Frame A Painting (2014–2016), where he posts thoughtful video essays on film form, is immensely popular and beloved by film buffs – made a brilliant short video, *Vancouver Never Plays Itself* (2015). Narrated by Zhou with his signature humor and made with an editor's cinematic eye, the video essay assembles clips from Hollywood's most famous productions and analyzes the technical expertise and artistry with which they disguise Vancouver's location while simultaneously lamenting the impact the location industry has on the city's own "lack of film identity." Zhou then pays homage to films from the Pacific New Wave where "Vancouver does plays itself." For Zhou, these indie films offer perspectives of the city that he, "as a child of immigrants, who mostly explored the city on foot," could relate to. Zhou's plea to filmmakers to diversify settings and to challenge the "ubiquity but invisibility" of the "third largest filmmaking city in North America" very much echoes that of filmmakers from the Pacific New Wave generation, many of whom view it as a matter of ethics. Larry Kent, who appears in Zhou's short, once said in an interview that he considers films that set Seattle in Vancouver to be a "lie" that betrays each city's "completely different emotional feeling" (Spaner 2004, 44), while Bruce Sweeney, whose film *Excited* (2009) Zhou quotes in the video, once called shooting in Vancouver while setting a film elsewhere "reprehensible behaviour" (Spaner 2004, 159).

The connection that Zhou's video essay makes between the indie ethos of the Pacific New Wave films and his Asian immigrant experience has resulted in a distinct "West Coast Asian" film culture, which Su-Anne Yeo describes as "eclectic, elusive, sometimes collaborative, and frequently contradictory" (Yeo 2007, 114). Among the many place-specific circumstances that Yeo has identified as defining factors, two strike me as most illustrative of the contradictory as well as collaborative nature of this film scene. First, Yeo suggests that while Vancouver is marginalized from the main national cultural institutions located in Toronto and Montreal, and never benefitting from the same level of funding or infrastructural development, the city's inferior cultural status affords local filmmakers the creative freedom to flout conventions favored by revered public institutions like the National Film Board (NFB) and the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) (117). Yeo contrasts

the hybrid works by Asian diasporic filmmakers like Anne Marie Fleming and Karen Lee, who blend fictional and documentary elements in their films, with the documentary realism favored by NFB and CBC. This realist style was especially expected from racialized filmmakers making "serious" films about social justice during the 1990s and 2000s, when the earlier influence of John Grierson and the British documentary film movement was very dominant. Anne Marie Fleming's most acclaimed work, *The Magical Life of Long Tak Sam* (2003), very much goes against such expectations by deploying an atypical whimsical visual and narrative style to trace the life of Fleming's great-grandfather who left China to tour the world as an acrobat and magician. The film comprises a playful pastiche of animation, comic strips, found photographs, and a highly self-reflexive personal travelogue. The fantastical style does not hinder the film's rich evocation of a turbulent global history of war, migration, and racism, but it steadfastly refuses to pin down any "truth" about its subject's relation to this history. The film's emphasis on illusion (it is about a magician after all) and the unreliability of memory has even been characterized as its own kind of magic trick (Trimboli 2015). After making the film, Fleming also published an illustrated graphic memoir (Fleming 2007), thereby giving the film an "afterlife" in a different artistic medium. This multidisciplinary approach to filmmaking is still very much embraced by independent filmmakers working in the city today. The interest in and ease with connecting filmmaking with other art practices stems, in part, from a long history of artist-run-center movement in Vancouver, which is another defining factor Yeo attributes to the distinctive style of Vancouver's Asian film scene (Yeo 2007, 121–22). Rooted in the countercultural resistance against institutionalized art that erupted during the 1960s–'70s and has since continued in response to the ongoing paucity of resources for cultural production and distribution in the region, the artist-run-center scene in Vancouver has influenced filmmakers not only to work collaboratively with artists in other disciplines but also to be actively involved in creating alternative avenues for distribution, exhibition, and curation, in addition to making and producing their own films. Moreover, the movement's politicized ethos has created a space where it is normal for artists to tackle potentially controversial issues: much of the scene's activism in the 1990s and 2000s is "preoccupied with issues of gender and sexuality as they are implicated with race" (Yeo 2007, 122), and the notion "that art and aesthetics are ideologically inflected . . . is presumed as a baseline for aesthetic production in the Vancouver context, where artists either play with the ideological implications/potentials or else wage open war against them" (Betts and Polyck-O'Neill 2017, 6).

Many of the Asian-led, film-focused artist-run collectives in the city today have retained this multidisciplinary focus and political orientation. Even as digital technology has expanded the capacity for online and transnational initiatives, these collectives have also demonstrated a renewed commitment to place-specific projects and local engagement. For example, the arts collective Cinevolution – co-founded in 2007 by three Asian women and currently run by a diverse team of Asian filmmakers, producers, visual artists, and curators – is based in the city of Richmond, a suburb south of Metro Vancouver where, according to a 2021 census, the current population is close to 75% Asian, with a diversity of backgrounds including early-19th-century Japanese settlement in the adjacent fishing town, influx of Hong Kong immigrants during the late 1960s and again in the 1980s–'90s, as well as more recent waves of immigrants from China and parts of South and Southeast Asia (Statistics Canada 2023). Cinevolution characterizes itself as "grassroots, women-led, migrant-driven" (Cinevolution n.d.). It organizes film festivals and digital media skills workshops, makes podcasts, and mentors young artists, in addition to making and producing films and

multimedia projects. While its projects are not confined to one place, the collective devotes a lot of efforts to collaborating with Richmond's local art gallery and public library to program projects that directly engage communities in the neighborhood.

Queer/Asia Intersections

Similarly collaborative and multidisciplinary, Love Intersections is another artist-run collective that continues to animate the city's independent film scene. Based in Vancouver's Chinatown, which is located near the downtown core, Love Intersections was co-founded by Asian filmmakers David Ng and Jen Sungshine, who use screen media to tell queer migrant stories and explore the intersections of sexuality, race, and intergenerational dynamics. With the explicit aim of connecting the experiences of racialized queer communities, the collective has made short films on queer subjects' Deaf identity, Muslim faith, experience as refugees, Two-Spirit identity, and involvement in Black Lives Matter, among other themes (Love Intersections n.d.).

The collective's 2019 short film, *Yellow Peril: Queer Destiny*, consciously situates their work within the city's indie lineage by paying homage to the work of openly gay artist Paul Wong, who has been an important figure in the city's queer and arts scenes since the 1980s. Wong curated *Yellow Peril*: *Reconsidered*, a major exhibition that toured the country in 1990–91 with the works of 24 multidisciplinary visual artists of diverse Asian backgrounds from different parts of Canada, all of which explored the history of anti-Asian racism and exclusion through experimental perspectives. The project was groundbreaking not only for the unprecedented national spotlight it shone on Asian artists but also its frank critique of institutional racism against Asians as well as of Asian immigrant communities' own conservatism and indifference toward alternative art (Wong 1990, 8). Wong also pointedly highlighted the works of gay and lesbian artists, including Richard Fung, Helen Lee, and Chick Rice, whose film and photography works explicitly explore sexuality and gender in relation to race (Wong 1990, 12). By invoking Wong's work in the film's title, Love Intersections connects *Yellow Peril: Queer Destiny* to a long history of independent artistic practice and activism in the city and the seminal role queer Asian artists have played in this history. *Yellow Peril: Queer Destiny* follows drag artist Kendall Yan, a.k.a. Maiden China, as her colorfully clad figure lusciously inhabits spaces in the city: posing against the expansive coastal vista in the opening sequence, crouching down to burn incense in front of a make shift ancestral shrine in a leaves-strewn downtown parking lot, sauntering on the railway tracks built on the backs of migrant Chinese labor in the late 19th century, standing in full drag in the middle of a formal hall in a Ming-dynasty-style house, and riding on a cycle rickshaw on a rooftop overlooking the city's skyline. Interspersed between these visually enigmatic shots is *vérité* footage of Kendall navigating daily life: chatting about childhood stories in her father's kitchen, swapping coming out stories with her brother while playfully balancing on a mini seesaw together, and reflecting on changes in the drag scene with fellow House of Rice performer Shay Dior. The most affecting of these everyday scenes is a discussion Kendall has with lion dance performers Kimberly Wong and Dora Ng, who describe the panful experience of being told they are "disrespecting" a traditional practice that others have perfected with blood and sweat. Often, the perceived "disrespect" is felt by those offended by a traditionally male practice being taken up by women or trans people and performed in queer spaces, such as a lion dance performed during a drag show. Kendall recalls being accused of "commodifying" a cultural practice and turning something solemn

into a "gimmick." This crucial conversation was shot in an observational mode and the filmmakers refrain from leading the audience to any easy answer or clear-cut judgment on the issue. Nonetheless, the painful conversation in this scene indirectly gives meaning to the more abstract sequences of Maiden China's visually flamboyant presence in the city's various spaces, always with a somber expression and embodying, or in the vicinity of, a "traditional" Asian symbol whether in the form of bridal wear, an ancestral shrine, or sticks of incense. Furthermore, the film is divided into sections titled after five elements: wood, fire, air, earth, and water. Its visual evocation of a visibly queer figure ostensibly "out of place" in both her surrounding and with traditional objects of her heritage seems to be the film's way of rebalancing the elements to acclimatize its viewers to what may initially be perceived as cultural "dissonance," but which may, in time, be experienced as a new kind of queer harmony.

Continuing the multidisciplinary approach of previous filmmakers, Love Intersections has gone on to develop *Yellow Peril: Queer Destiny* into various "afterlives," one of which was an installation in the heart of Chinatown in 2020, just before the COVID-19 lockdown. At the installation, footage from the film was projected onto two giant double screens mounted on the walls of a room where queer objects, such as a dildo or an erotic text, were displayed among traditional ceremonial objects. The installation was also accompanied by "place activation" events including a lion dance in the middle of Chinatown and an ancestral veneration ceremony at the nearby historic site of a violent anti-Asian riot that took place in 1907. Subsequently, the filmmakers added another chapter to the film, titled *Yellow Future: Queer Destiny 2.0* (2022), which follows Maiden China's reflection on her trans identification and experience during the pandemic and related incidents of anti-Asian racism. This "afterlife" of the film was similarly "activated" by place-specific events featuring intergenerational dialogues on the potential of arts practices and the future of local community-building.

For the Love of a Place

Asian diasporic filmmaking is often studied primarily through the lens of the filmmakers' identity, which sometimes runs the risk of homogenizing works that come from very distinctive filmmaking contexts while also overlooking works that are produced and disseminated outside of major filmmaking centers. I have tried in this article to offer a case study to highlight the place-specific dynamics of a diasporic independent filmmaking culture that has continued to survive despite (and at times because of) its proximity to a mammoth commercial film industry. An Asian film scene in a city that is projected to comprise 59% of "visible minorities" who are predominantly Chinese, South Asians, Filipinos, Koreans, and West Asians by 2031 (Hiebert 2012) is bound to be dynamic in its interpretation of what constitutes "Asian" and constantly evolving its ongoing creative directions. It may also seem surprising that such a film scene would produce so many significant female and openly queer filmmakers, considering the generally challenging climate of the industry toward such creators. On deeper reflection, it seems logical that a film culture eking out its existence on the margins of dominant institutions and industries would, by its very nature, value and nurture similarly marginal experiences.

The unexpected recent mainstream success of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), an Asian-led indie production that has become both a box office hit and critical sensation in Hollywood, will likely bring increased visibility to diasporic Asian filmmaking.

Under this welcomed spotlight, it is worth also making the critical efforts to highlight other distinctive contexts where lesser-known diasporic Asian filmmaking scenes have been producing daring and unconventional works for a long time and is poised to continue to do so for many generations to come.

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