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Brave New Borders: NAFTA and the Aesthetics of Multicultural Citizenship

My paper traces the cultural impact of changes in immigration policy since the elimination of racist immigration barriers in 1967 and 1965 in Canada and the US, respectively, to the increased porosity of hemispheric borders that followed the passage of the North American Free Trade Act in 1994. Inaugurating a rapidly shifting era of globalized trade and majority Asian and Latina/o immigration, these structural shifts have occurred alongside the symbolic reinvestment in Atlantic ports of entry such as Ellis Island and Pier 21, constructed as historic “front doors” to North America. Examining the politics of exclusion involved in recuperating Atlantic “gateways,” I draw on works by Karen Tei Yamashita and Ken Lum, which respond to constructions of the US-Mexico and Pacific borders as “backdoor” entryways. Karen Tei Yamashita’s novel, *Tropic of Orange*, employs a postmodern aesthetic to stage a mobile borderlands between Los Angeles and Mazatlán, refracting the uneven processes of globalization that mediate the lives of boat refugees, undocumented immigrants, and the homeless underclass. Complementing Yamashita’s vision of the southwest from the Pacific Northwest, Ken Lum’s permanent installation on the roof of the Vancouver Art Gallery, *Four Boats Stranded: Red and Yellow, Black and White*, employs humor and irony to engage with the racialized circuits of exploration, migration, labour, and capital that are invested in the Pacific port of entry. Both Yamashita’s and Lum’s works probe the contradictory workings of globalization that simultaneously register a fetishization of multicultural diversity, unregulated capital accumulation, and nostalgia for a continent defined predominantly by European immigration.