Pull Quotes – S7E4 –Race and R...nalism with Christopher Cheung

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**SPEAKERS**

Christopher Cheung, Reema Najjar

**Reema Najjar**

Welcome to Pull Quotes, a podcast about journalistic innovation. Today, we're diving into questions of race, representation, and how we can better tell stories in a multicultural country like Canada. Canadian journalism has long struggled with how it covers race, culture and identity. Too often stories about marginalized communities are told through a narrow lens, often shaped by white editors, newsroom gatekeeping and the white audience in mind. This week on Pull Quotes, we're exploring how journalists can move beyond tokenism and cliche and towards more nuanced, community-rooted storytelling. Joining us today is our guest, Christopher Cheung, a staff reporter at the Tyee. As we record today on April 4, it's actually his last day at the publication. He was previously at Metro and the Vancouver Courier, and is highly acclaimed to his reporting on urban culture, inequality and life in Vancouver's diaspora communities. He is interested in the power and politics behind urban change and how Vancouver's many diasporas strive to make a home in a city with colonial legacies. Among his many honours are two Jack Websters, British Columbia's top journalism awards. He also holds a Master of Journalism from the University of British Columbia. Today, we will be delving into his first ever published book, Under the White Gaze: Solving the Problem of Race and Representation in Canadian Journalism. Chris, thank you for being here today.

**Christopher Cheung**

Hi. Thanks so much for having me. This is a kind of a special day to be doing an interview.

**Reema Najjar**

So your book explores the pitfalls that Canadian newsrooms tend to fall into when reporting on Canada's multiculturalism. But let's start with the title of your book, Under the White Gaze. What does that phrase mean to you, and why did it feel like the right way to frame this book?

**Christopher Cheung**

Yeah, so I live in Vancouver. I was born and raised in Vancouver and Vancouver, if you've, if you've ever been over here, it is just a very, very diverse place on many fronts when it comes to race and ethnic cultural groups that have made a home over here. And, yeah, this was something I was familiar with at school when I was going around the city, very similar to Toronto, in that sense as well. And you know, when it when it came to the news, this was just not something that I saw in the news. So when I wanted to become a journalist, you know, I was just really curious about, you know, the kinds of people I grew up with, their families. How come I wasn't really seeing that represented. So I think, I think for me, when it came to, like, quote, unquote, like putting diversity in the news, I just wanted to be able to kind of help fill that gap and tell those stories that I wanted to see and that I wanted, you know, my city to be reflected in in media. But then I'm, you know, over time, you know, I realize it's not just about, you know, whether or not there are racialized people in the news, yes or no, but how they're being represented. Because a lot of the time, those the times that they do show up, you know, it might be stories that are, you know, culture is put front and centre in a very exotic way. The story might be told from an outsider's point of view, rather than from the point of view of the people who that culture actually belongs to, the racialized characters. They might be appearing in the story as sidekicks, but not really as the main character. And you might have a white character who is a guide that's taking the reader through and so, you know, as I started to ask those questions, even about my own reporting, when I when I fell into those kind of habits, I started to realize there was a perspective through which racialized people, you know, their stories were being told. And it became very apparent to me, well, it was, it was a white perspective. And I know right now the diversity conversation is in a place where, you know, journalists do tend to agree that this is something that we need in news. This is something that we should all strive towards. But on the flip side, I think it's also important to talk about, if we're, if we're not being quote unquote diverse, what's suppressing that? Or what, what kind of lens are those stories being told in? And so I felt like, you know, there was no way to ignore this, elephant in the room, and I just had to have that as the title.

**Reema Najjar**

I want to talk about how you cite Duncan McCue's Five D's regarding how Indigenous people make the news, drums, dancing, drunk, dead and defiant. You also cite your own D's about diversity. Can you walk us through them?

**Christopher Cheung**

So when I went to UBC, I was very lucky to have Duncan around. Unfortunately, didn't get a chance to take his class, but I did attend a talk where he shared those days, and he was, he was saying he had, he was speaking with an elder about the times that Indigenous people make the news again. It's like that question of, you know, are they missing? Are they misrepresented? And so the elder said, you know, that's very easy. You know, the D's that you just shared like, those are the times that they do. Duncan was thinking, you know, that's, you know, that's kind of simplistic. That can't possibly be. But the more and more he looked at the headlines, it seemed like those, those tropes, seem to be coming up again and again. And for me, as I was starting to think about the kinds of journalism that I found was missing, and also the traps that I was falling into when it came to doing any kind of reporting on race or culture, I felt like there was a pattern there, too, and it just so happened that, you know, I found a frame for myself that also started with with D. So I'll share them with you now. So I have darlings, deviants, damaged and delicious, and I hope that it's something that can stand, you know, alongside Duncan's when it comes to, you know, people of colour, not, not at all, to replace his D's, but darlings. You know, we, I've written so many stories about model minorities, model minor, you know, kind of Invincible immigrants, people who can, who can seemingly do anything, you know, maybe running a restaurant that everybody loves, or is some super kid who does really well at school, but I feel like stories like that kind of tell you that, you know, everybody can make it in Canada, but we're not really looking critically at why somebody might be able to succeed more than others. And also, yeah, it's kind of it has that myth about Canadian benevolence as well, but not really examining what might be some barriers to somebody's success. And the next is deviance. So I think this one is pretty self explanatory. We do see a lot of stories about racialized people involved in crime, but I think aside from crime as a kind of deviance, we have to think about deviance as social deviance as well. So times when racialized people do something that upsets white people. And in my book, I give the example of a city over here, Richmond, which is quite similar to Markham, and like Richmond Hill, where there is a lot of East Asian immigration, mostly from Hong Kong and Taiwan. And so just by being too numerous, this is something that a lot of journalists framed as being wrong having signs in another language, this was something that they felt was un Canadian and was making white residents feel excluded. And it's not illegal for a lot of people to settle in the same place. It's not illegal to have signs in another language, but they were, they were being treated as they were deviants in this way, and in those stories that reported on this phenomenon, it focused on a lot of locals who were, you know, complaining about newcomers, but they never really gave voice to the people who are coming over here or understanding why they might feel safer being together and then damaged. We see this a lot in stories about refugees. This, you know, the book sites, when, when Justin Trudeau was bringing in a lot of Syrian refugees over here, a lot of the stories were, yes, they were, they're very sad, but then they treated people as without some kind of agency. And so in stories about refugees, we see people having, you know, these big forces enacted upon them, but we don't really know how they responded to it. It was as if they were just kind of carried on by the tide of the times. So I think it's important in these stories, you know, if people push back in some way, you know, it's, it's great to include that, or if the stakes were very, very high and they were unable to achieve some sort of goal, I think it's important to spell that out as well, just to just humanize people a bit when we tell those stories, rather than, you know, having that kind of playing up the drama and playing up the suffering that people go through, and the last one, D for delicious. So I do write a lot of stories about food, and this is a really big thing about food journalism, where, you know, whenever we get reporting on racialized people, it does tend to be where there are these big displays of culture. And, you know, I think it's, it's totally fine to do those stories, but what's the perspective those stories are being told from? You know, are we just doing a 101, story about a particular culture? Is the reporting coming from the outside in? Like, is it taking the reader through as if they're a tourist, or are you doing that story from the inside out, where it is something that, you know, the people who belong to that culture, they might be interested in reading about it too. Also, you know, for for a lot of these, these cultural phenomena like these people have been in Canada for a very, very long time, and the stuff that they've been celebrating, or the stuff that they practice or eat that's been around for a very, very long time. So I think it's very disingenuous to treat it from a perspective, as if these things are just being discovered. And so, yeah, I think with all of these D's, it's not to say whatever they pop them in a story, we should totally avoid it and never cover it. Thing. The point is to make them a little bit more complex, give the characters a little bit more humanity. And particularly think about that point of view, like, are we telling these stories from the inside out? You know, I've fallen into a lot of these traps, but I think it's part of being a journalist to be reflective and thinking about them all the time.

**Reema Najjar**

How can self reflection be essential to the reporting process for Canadian journalists?

**Christopher Cheung**

I think reporting on anything that you're unfamiliar with, or any group that you don't belong to, that is part of the job, and so I'm absolutely not saying that journalists should shy away from writing about cultures they don't belong to, even if they are white by the title of this book, like I'm not I'm not out to set any of these hard and fast rules and journalists dive into stuff that we don't know about all the time, right? Whether that's it is about culture or about a specific area of knowledge. I think just asking those questions is a very healthy thing. You know, news is something that is very fast paced, so it is okay that we make mistakes. I don't think we should be afraid of asking questions that might feel silly. I mean, that is our job to be that conduit for our audiences. So I think it's totally okay to go in and admit you don't know something. And you know, it would be great if there are people in your newsroom who could help you, so that you don't have to be going in completely unprepared. But if not, this is something that we should be doing research on our own, and it does help if you have trusted sources who can help you as well. So when I was writing a story about like Punjabi suites. For example, I felt this was entire genre that I was unfamiliar with as a report and somebody who lives in Vancouver, even though this is very much a part of our food scene over here. So, you know, I kept going back to my source, like, Am I describing this the right way? Is this a way that you would describe it? Am I spelling this correctly so it is. It is good to have sources who can have a more of a two way street with you, where you might be able to share, you know, parts of your story to them, just to make sure it feels culturally accurate and it feels authentic to what they know. And, you know, I've been pigeon holed a couple of times as a reporter where, you know, as the Chinese Canadian reporter, I, you know, I get all of the Chinese Canadian pitches. And I think it's totally fine, too, if somebody gets one of these stories and they don't want to do a story like that like I don't think anybody should be forced to. And sometimes it takes a while to be familiar with what you're writing about. So I do understand that it is a news cycle if we if you don't have time, unfortunately, you do have to just publish and move on. It's it's fine, because that's, you know, if you make an error, it's going to become yesterday's news. If you, if you do feel that you're waiting to something that is more complex, that it requires more relationship building, I think it's good to have a conversation with your editor to see if you can give it more time. And if you know this is not just one story, right? Like, if you're going to be in a city and you're going to be doing multiple stories, multiple stories down the line about people from a particular group, I think it's totally fine to think about it as a long game, right? You're not just writing one story. You're building your own familiarity. You're building your newsroom sense of trust with that group as well. So it is a, I do see it as like a long term mission of newsrooms to be doing this. Thanks so much for that elaboration. You also discuss shut down commands in your book. What are they and how have they been used against journalists of colour when reporting on the diaspora? Yeah. So when I started to write about this topic of the white gays. A lot of people ask me, like, oh, like, you must get a lot of like, hate mail from people who are upset with you touching this topic. And I have, but these people tend to be, you know, they're in the minority, and I find them very unreasonable. So it's people who say, like, you know, go back to China. Or, like, racist. And like, I, you know, I'm very upset that you decide to do this. I'm just trying to help you by saying that you're not helping anybody by writing this, blah, blah, blah. But the majority of the feedback that I get from people who are upset, they usually they try to say things like, you know, you're creating more racism by talking about race, or racism doesn't exist anymore. You know, talking about divisions is what's going to make people more divided? Yeah, questions like that. So it's, it's as if they're trying to use logic to try and get me to stop reporting on race. Oh, and the most common one that I get is that there's much more important topics than this, life and death topics like the environment, you should stop focusing on something to them is as low stakes as race. And yeah, I speak a lot with this urban planning expert from Simon Fraser University over here, Andy Yan, and he's very familiar with this in his work on planning, and he likes to call them shutdown commands. So I credit that phrase to him, and it's just from anybody who doesn't really want to engage in this conversation about race. You know, it's strange that I'm talking to you now about this post Trump coming in, because I feel like this conversation has become one that people have wanted to shy away from. Even more people don't really have this understanding of why it's important. Yeah, and so I feel that a lot of those people who ask me questions, they're coming from this perspective of like, you know, anything to do with race or culture, that's something that's extra, that's added on. Anyone who's not from those communities is not going to be benefiting from that reporting as that other guys and a lot of other people have said, like, there are higher stakes things for me to be reporting on, and so I think all of them come from this place of viewing. There's like, there's like, a mainstream and that there's everybody else, and that white mainstream is white, and then there's everybody else who is racialized. And I think that's really untrue, because this is just about reporting on reality. If we're missing anybody from a particular background, whether it's race or culture or religion or whatever, you're missing that segment of reality. You're missing those people who who share the city with you, who share this country with you, so if you don't report on them, it's not like something that's added on. And to that point, about like this not being as important as other things. When we talk about environment, when we talk about climate change, the people who are affected the most tend to be marginalized people, and a lot of a lot of the time, those have racial intersections. And so, you know, speaking generally here, I think a lot of audiences don't have that kind of literacy about race and why reporting on race is important and not thinking it has anything to do with them. And so I yeah, I do in my stories, try to try to push back like it whenever I can. I'll explain like, Why? Why the reader, whoever they are, should be paying attention to this. I don't think a shutdown and avoiding this conversation is going to be better for solving this problem, for racism. I think these are things that we need to talk about, because if we don't talk about it, how are we going to ever have solutions?

**Reema Najjar**

I wanted to reference one of your terms that you coined, journales, and how it sort of melds into the harm that journalists can have with their language without knowing it's insensitive. How can journalists refrain from causing harm, especially when they don't realize their words might be harmful? This episode of Pull Quotes was hosted by me, Reema Najjar. It was produced by Chloe Kim, Matthew Hanick, and myself. If you enjoyed this episode, explore all of our podcasts in the podcasts tab at reviewofjournalism.ca. I'm your host, Reema Najjar, thanks for listening.

**Christopher Cheung**

Yeah, journalism is a really funny thing. You'll see it a lot in headlines or display copy. It's all about language that journalists like to use, and it's usually because display copy is very short and we have to be catchy as well when we're trying to catch the attention of our audiences. So I know, like, you know, Buzzfeed and all that, they get into a lot of trouble for writing clickbait. But there will be terms where we talk about, like, you know, like big something, like Big Pharma, or like big oil, or, if we're talking about, you know, nicknames for politicians, something's being hit hard by something, anything that we're using as shorthand. But when it comes to racialized people, we do see that kind of language too, where there is a shorthand for like, like waves of immigrants, or there's like a tsunami of newcomers coming in, usually language that's associated with natural disasters or a sense of being overwhelmed. So I feel like when language like that is used, it is very dehumanizing, right? Like, especially if it's being associated with a calamity, like a natural disaster, or not really telling us, like, precisely who we're talking about here, talking about people as a kind of mass so I think it's important when journalists are crafting this kind of copy, like, Yes, I guess I, you know, I get that they want to be catchy, but at the same time, we have to be very conscious of the fact that is anything we're writing over here. Is that going to stigmatize people in a certain way, or losing its precision in some kind of way.

**Reema Najjar**

What an insightful answer. Thank you so much. Sometimes it could be hard to include underrepresented voices in journalism when there's a language barrier between a journalist and their sources. How can journalists best approach telling stories about people they don't share common language with?

**Christopher Cheung**

Yeah, this is incredibly tricky. If you look at the census data, we know that a lot of people who who live here, they speak a different mother tongue, other than our official languages at home, even if they do claim that they have knowledge of an official language like we know that people are most comfortable in whatever they grew up with. And so I think that tells us that there are a lot of stories out there that we're not going to be able to access if we don't speak those languages. So it would be great if newsrooms were hiring diversely, and then they have people who do speak diversity of languages. We know that that's not the case with surveys like the Canadian Association of Journalists that comes out every year. It is great if you do have sources who can help you, if you can hire. You know, I think outsourcing is a problem, but it is a way to remedy a particular story. If a newsroom really needs somebody to come in as somebody who is a Cantonese speaker, I'm by no means like completely literate, but I am able to know enough that I can conduct my reporting, there are a lot of stories that I'm able to access that I feel like a lot of my colleagues are not, and I think that's really shown me the importance of this, especially the kinds of people those are right. Like it is a lot of newcomers, it is a lot of seniors, it is a lot of working class people. And these are dimensions that we see left out of news a lot. And I know that without that language ability, I would, I would not have been able to access those stories. So you know, I feel particularly if you're in a big city like Vancouver or Toronto, like how important it is to have people who work alongside you, who work with you, who speak those languages. So I think it is something that newsrooms and editors really need to be cognizant of when they're working in places like these. I would hope that 510, years down the line, that we're only going to get better at this.

**Reema Najjar**

My last question for you today, Chris, after such an insightful conversation, is, how can younger, emerging journalists evolve from the mistakes of legacy media?

**Christopher Cheung**

For me, having worked in this industry for 11 years now, it's already it's already gotten better in that time, and I think it's going to be better in the future as people have more literacy about this. I think the most important thing is not to shy away from these topics and to not think that we've reached some sort of end point already. You know, I have spoken with some older journalists who are people of colour, and they think that, like, Oh, it's so great that we've gotten to this point and we've arrived, and that things are good now, and we do see diversity, it might be better from when they entered, but I still think there's a lot to be a lot of work to be done in terms of not just, you know, having a person of colour, like on the cover of a publication or featured prominently in the story, but but but how they show up in that stories as well, what kind of stories are being told? Yeah, and if we're constantly thinking about these questions, I don't think we've arrived there quite yet. But, uh, yeah, not to not think that you know that we're, we're immune from making mistakes like this is, this is a process. It happens to me when I do stories. I do make mistakes too, but this is something that we should constantly be in dialogue about with our colleagues in the newsroom, but also with the communities we report on as well, if we want to hold a more holistic picture. So having that like two way street, not just being so extractive with our sources, but listening to what they say as well.

**Reema Najjar**

Thank you so much for coming on Pull Quotes, Christopher. Those are all my questions for you today.

**Christopher Cheung**

Thanks so much for having me.