

Week 2 Reading Response

In “From Questions to a Problem,” Wayne Booth formulates two types of research problems: practical and conceptual. Practical problems are defined by a real condition and real costs; conceptual problems are defined by the condition of not knowing and the consequence of ignorance. In all research, Booth argues, it is most important to ensure that the readers and the research community finds the problem relevant, significant, and worth solving.

In Ch.1 of *Not Fit to Stay*, Sarah Wallace depicts the roots of arguments attempting to impede South Asian immigration in early 1900s Canada and the Washington state. Pseudoscientific frameworks like the climate theory and distortions of germ theory intersected with economic interests and social prejudices and interests in escalating the “Hindu problem”. Much of society’s immersion in these frameworks led to a paranoid association of South Asians with racial stereotypes, like sexual deviance and uncleanliness.

In *Not Fit to Stay*, Sarah Wallace assembles and navigates a large corpus of evidence to identify several factors that shaped the conversation on South Asian immigration in the Pacific Northwest. Wallace begins with pseudoscientific arguments, like the climate theory that proposed South Asians were scientifically not capable of standing different climates. While Wallace highlights the usage of pseudoscientific arguments to address public health concerns, she also demonstrates that these arguments were employed to protect social values. For instance, Harriett Laviolette’s allegation of sexual assault by South Asians incited an anger to protect white women from South Asians’ inherent sexual deviance¹. However, Wallace writes that a similar event in which a Chinese servant murdered his employer elicited a much more dampened

¹ Sarah Wallace *Not Fit to Stay: Public Health Panics and South Asian Exclusion* (UBC Press, 2016), 27.

response, because Chinese servants were economically advantageous to make households². While Wallace's analyses do draw out the various factors involved in the "Hindu problem," they do not articulate a relationship between them: pseudoscientific / public health, social, and economic interests. Rather, they are presented in overlapping succession with ambiguous connections. To explore the relationship between these factors, I propose analyzing discourse on South Asians in Canadian society through the lens of anxiety. In this context, Søren Kierkegaard's distinction between fear and anxiety applies: fear arises from being threatened with something concrete, whereas anxiety + a "more abstract object, namely nothingness itself"³. In this sense, anxiety is an extreme extrapolation based on easily identifiable characteristics of a few data points into a more abstract and hence more paranoid avoidance of nothingness, and hence a desire for greater control. This model of anxiety, which is more sociological in nature than history, unifies the factors Wallace highlights. Perception of the Chinese as common servants in Canadian households makes the Chinese a concrete group, one for which power can be easily asserted. On the other hand, anxiety induced by allegations of the rape of a white woman by South Asians or the possibility that South Asians could spread disease exacerbate the feeling of lack of control. A model of anxiety also explains economic interests leading to backlash against South Asians taking "white" jobs. Framing the factors Wallace identifies as contributing to discourse on South Asian immigration through anxiety and a desire for control unifies them into a cohesive sociological model.

² Wallace, *Not Fit to Stay*, 28.

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* (Denmark: Princeton University Press, 1844).