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## Reflections on Attending the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies (2019)

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# Reflections on Attending the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies (2019)

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On March 24th, 2019, I presented a paper on so-called Buddhist bioethics, abortion, and *vinaya* at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) in Denver, Colorado. The interdisciplinary nature of the AAS provides networking possibilities not found in other scholarly associations. Highlights of the conference included a digital humanities expo, almost constant film screenings, and the usual book sales. But, after reflecting upon my most recent conference experience south of the border, I am unsure if presenting in the United States was the correct thing to do.

This past academic year, I have listened to stories of academics who found themselves giving presentations via SKYPE, or not at all, because they were denied travel visas for entry into the United States. Conferencing in the United States is a privilege afforded to me solely by means of my Canadian passport. The ugly spike in American nationalism, coupled with the protectionist foreign policy of the current administration, has led some Canadian scholars to avoid traveling to academic meetings in the United States altogether. When I asked one of my senior colleagues if I would see him in Denver, he bluntly responded that he

had not been to the United States since Trump was elected and wanted to keep that going. Yet, I still made the decision to attend.

On the second day of the conference, the Mueller Report was submitted. A redacted version was released to the public. Everyone wanted to discuss politics. Strangers who noticed my conference badge read “McMaster University” eagerly wanted to know what Canadians thought of their president. After introducing himself at the Book Expo, one American colleague told me that he had been living and working in Singapore for the last few years. He was considering permanently returning home prior to the last election but has since decided against it. Over drinks on Friday night, another American now living abroad lamented that his country had become “a failed-nation state.” He also indicated that he had no intention of moving back.

The current political climate in the United States is deterring Canadian researchers from visiting, and American scholars from returning. Yet, despite its steady decline into anti-intellectualism, the United States still possesses the largest job market for academics in the world. As an early-career researcher, can I really afford to pass up opportunities like presenting at large conferences in the United States? What is my role in this geopolitical climate? Am I throwing away my personal integrity, and participating in systemic racism, every time I cross the border for work?

Suffice it to say, the United States has become a strange place to attend a conference. Pennies are legal tender. Politics are tense. Academics are depressed. Perhaps as Canadians we should support regional meetings of societies taking place on our side of the border, like the Eastern International Meeting of the American Academy of Religion hosted by McGill University in April 2019. Or, we could encourage our American colleagues to participate in annual meetings of Canadian scholarly associations, like the Canadian Society for the Study of Reli-

gion, as an alternative venue for presenting research. What else can Canadians do?