# "The Negative Capability of Camouflage": Fleeing Diaspora in Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill*

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I don't think you felt there was anyone else in the world like you.
— Wah, *Waiting for Saskatchewan* 62

Contemporary discourses of diaspora are sometimes torn between competing imperatives: essentialized notions of cultural authenticity, on the one hand, and the material reality of contingent hybridities, on the other. Even as diasporic experiences invite a reconception "of familiar notions of ethnicity and identity" (Clifford 108), the discourse of diaspora can often fold back into an essentialized version of hybridity. As a general guide, Victor Ramraj defines diasporic writing as being "about or by peoples who are linked by common histories of uprooting and dispersal, common homelands, and common cultural heritages" (229). However, for second- or third-generation diasporans, often writing out of a syncretic cultural and racial context, such linkages become problematic. If an articulation of diasporic identity threatens to embroil one in a reductive essentialism, a number of recent writers and theorists have attempted to deconstruct this delimiting configuration by applying a non-paradoxical vision of resistance and reconciliation to the diasporic experience itself (see Ramraj, Kamboureli, Hall, Bhabha).

In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall considers the ways all identities are framed by both commonalities and difference. Accordingly, he defines diaspora not in terms of "those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland," but as "a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference" (401-02). The paradox of diasporic uprootings, he notes, is that they unified diverse peoples (396). This conception of intercultural movement is echoed by James Clifford in his well-known essay, "Traveling Cultures." While traditional ethnography resulted in a "representational essentializing" of cultural identities (100), a more nuanced account would emphasize the

ways cultures travel and are "travelled through" (103) — that is, the ways cultures function as meeting points, junctures, cross-overs, hyphenations, etc. Similarly, Homi Bhabha has emphasized the split subjectivity of all inhabitants of postimperial contexts by highlighting moments of disruption and ambivalence rather than authenticity. In "DissemiNation," he interrogates metaphors of social cohesion — the metaphor of "*the many as one*" (142) — used to describe the collective experience of diaspora and nation. Focussing on instances of "the *locality* of culture" within the nation, Bhabha identifies these hybrid localities as "a form of living that is more complex than 'community'" (140). His account helps to highlight the way any attempt to invoke the singularity of identity — "nation, culture or community" (153) — is disrupted by an internal dispersal. These theorists have all contributed to a radical rethinking of cultural and diasporic identity. As Clifford notes, it may be the diasporic experience that most clearly reconceptualizes notions of identity, for it reveals "unresolved historical dialogues between continuity and disruption, essence and positionality" (108).

Integral to the diasporic experience is a constitutive split between the "centrifugal homeland" and "a yearning for a sense of belonging to the current place of abode" (Ramraj 216). For later generation diasporans, this transitionality becomes complicated not only by the fact that the homeland(s) exist as an ancestral memory, and hence without the signifying desire or nostalgia for an identifiable but "lost" origin, but also in that identity itself becomes a more than usually unstable signifier, since cultural "authenticity," if there ever was such an essence, remains wholly untenable. Diasporic writings, therefore, tend to be marked, not by a nostalgic attempt to reproduce the past, but by a "coming to terms with alterity" (Kamboureli 16).

In her study of diasporic "self location," the Canadian postcolonial theorist Smaro Kamboureli develops a way of merging these conflicted positions through her conception of "diasporic mimicry," a type of colonial mimicry in which the Other "mimics" a version of him/herself as authentically diasporic/ethnic, but which in its more radical version "has the potential … to undo its structure as an apparently seamless history of identity" (111). As Kamboureli notes, Canada's official policy of multiculturalism is flawed because "it recognizes a subject's ethnic difference only insofar as that subject identifies herself with a given, coherently structured, community" (112).

Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill* (1996) undertakes just such an "undoing," in which he subverts the unitary identity politics of a more restricted

diasporic imaginary premised on notions of authenticity. Wah's work suggests a resolution to the dilemma Kamboureli sets out for the Canadian diasporic subject, "at once Canadian and ethnic": "The objective is neither to construct an opposition nor to effect a balance between these positions; instead it is to produce a space where … hybridity is articulated in a manner that does not cancel out any of its particularities" (22). In other words, Wah strives to articulate a non-paradoxical vision of identity. He previously explored the mixed diasporic legacy of his ancestors in *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (1985). In *Diamond Grill* he pursues this interest more extensively by giving voice to an experience of diaspora that is not limited by singular identity constructions, even as his focus remains on the historical contingencies and continuities of diasporic experience (primarily, the Chinese community in and around his father's café).

This subversion of the identity/hybridity dialectic occurs in the narrator's various attempts to "flee diaspora," which he undertakes, paradoxically, by rehearsing his family's experiences in the New World. This occurs not only via an accounting of the multiple complexities that mark his inheritance, but also through an emphasis on *continuity*, which is itself undercut by the inherent failure of self-identity as the narrator experiences it. The irony is that it is flight itself that creates diaspora in the first place, since it establishes the distance between disparate times and places necessary to enforce the spatial/psychic divide so integral to the definition of diasporic experience. However, *Diamond Grill* has its narrator, through various manoeuvres, displacing himself from the very experience/identity of diaspora, in order that he may become reconciled to his family's history of displacement and hybridity. He comes to reconcile himself to the experience in the very act of resisting it.

Hall notes the inherent paradox in the fact that diaspora is defined as discontinuity and hence designates an originary aporia. Ironically, attempting to flee diaspora only enacts it all the more, for it enacts the diasporic trajectory once again, just as, in Freudian terms, a disavowal of an experience only more securely affirms it (albeit in different form). However, one might argue that Wah's narrator flees from one version of diaspora to another — from a diasporic identity based on essence and authenticity to diaspora as defined by the colonial predicament, "not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity" (Hall, "Cultural" 402). In this way, the de-diasporized experience entails a notion of identity through the slippage of "*différance*," in which the trace of the old remains in the midst of the new, or, as Hall observes, the cross-relations of the diasporic function to "supplement and

simultaneously dis-place the centre-periphery," enabling a means of thinking in "non-originary ways" ( "When" 247, 251).

What is crucial to the exploration of these trajectories in *Diamond Grill* is the way Wah plays with the notion of place as a space that both grounds and disrupts identificatory structures. If the diasporic experience is typically defined by spatial concepts of displacement and relocation, Wah complicates this construction by reconceptualizing Canada, through his father's eyes, in terms of "the impediment, authority and, above all, the possibility of place" (*Diamond* 20). In other words, the diasporic experience of relocation is never altogether disjunctive or exhilarating, but always an unfinished palimpsest of shifting social and psychic codifications. Thus the narrator describes his father's perception of Canada as a potential space from which one can escape the rigidities of diasporic singularity, a kind of "Petri dish of hope and plenty … [from which] he and his kind can go on, away from … the fragmented diaspora" (20).

In the main storyline of *Diamond Grill*, the narrator is articulating not an immigrant's experience of a new world but the experience of a native-born part-Chinese-Canadian who seeks to ground himself as a "landed" Canadian, even as he problematizes what an "authentic" Canadianness might mean. If many diasporic writings deal with "diasporic people's placelessness" (Ramraj 226), Wah also writes very clearly about their emplacement — especially, in this case, in the Diamond Grill itself. In this way, Wah engages in a reinscription of conventional Canadian spatiocultural iconography, transposing the traditional Canadian expression of colonial disjunction in terms of the question *Where is here?*, as articulated by Northrop Frye in *The Bush Garden* (220), into the more agential diasporic voicing of the assertion *I am here*, in which an embracing of the spatio-ontological "here" takes place via an identification with one's ancestors' experiences of displacement. Thus, the traditional colonialist insistence on spatializing other worlds (via maps, via conquest, via settlement, via migration) is reclaimed in the postcolonial emphasis on that space as the locus of newly asserted and shifting hybridized identities.

In this paper I will examine three means by which Wah effects this de-diasporization, all of which involve ontological identifications with Canadian space: (1) through the mixed ancestral incriptions on the "diasporic body" — both as a localized body politic and the physical/psychic body of one of its bearers; (2) through the narrator's ontological introjection of Canada as it was experienced by his displaced ancestors — so that "here" becomes a viscerally experienced, if anguished, identity location; (3) through the de-ontologized locale of the Diamond Grill itself.

Indeed, one finds a microcosm of the unsettling space of the diasporic imaginary in the locus of the Diamond Grill, which exists for the narrator as a kind of nostalgic world of belonging, yet one in which he is never able to be clearly nondiasporic.

## I

The main storyline of *Diamond Grill* traces the narrator's confusions between the poles of authentic identity and syncretic hybridity, for as a boy he seeks to "flee" the experience of diaspora that he encounters in his father's Chinese café, while also feeling himself drawn to the lives of the Chinese community as they are played out there. On a superficial level, this identity deconstruction occurs most obviously in the narrator's account of his own "hybrid" composition: part Chinese, part Scottish, part Irish, part Swedish, yet situationally "Canadian." This hybridity allows him to enact a form of camouflage, itself a form of mimicry, in which he feels himself to be "transparent," "racially transpicuous" (136). However, this multiethnic vision is further complicated by the narrator's own confusion about his Chinese diasporic identity — on the one hand having internalized his father's experience of displacement and transposition, while on the other hand not being quite diasporic enough to feel utterly at odds with his world. I am "not Chinese," he tells us, "but stained enough by genealogy to make a difference" (137).

In the narrator's case, the complication arises because visibly he does not appear to *be* Chinese (nor does he speak Cantonese), which enables his own guilty version of mimicry in which he pretends to be white alongside his school friends: "Until Mary McNutter calls me a Chink I'm not one. That's in elementary school. Later, I don't have to be because I don't look like one" (98). However, there are always two things that give the camouflage away: the name, Wah, and his father.

As Susan Rudy Dorscht argues with reference to Wah's *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*, the text sets up a "paradoxical naming of oneself in recognition of both the burden of one's given name and the relief of knowing who one is" (219). The narrator in *Diamond Grill* struggles to come to terms with this paradox in order that he may reformulate it as non-paradoxical, which in turn involves a coming to terms with the psychic and genetic legacy of his father, whose name he bears. One might indeed argue, as Dorscht does of *Breathin'*, that many of Wah's texts involve a "refiguring of the father's name" (222), both literally and symbolically — and, by extension, psychoanalytically. In the schoolyard, the

narrator of *Diamond Grill* repeatedly has to account for his name — What kind of name is Wah? — and elide its otherness by blending with the kids at school who spit racist epithets at the Chinese children: "I'm white enough to get away with it and that's what I do" (136). It is only in the Diamond Grill that he can traverse both worlds. Even if he doesn't share a language with many of the Chinese kids who work in the café, "downtown … things are different. … I work alongside some of these new Chinese and become friends" (136-37). His father, he figures, is not quite so fortunate: "I become as white as I can, which, considering I'm mostly Scandinavian, is pretty easy for me. Not for my dad and some of my cousins though. They're stuck, I think, with how they look. I only have the name to contend with" (98). In later life, the name continues to highlight his duplicitous hybridity. In Toronto's Chinatown, he is an oddity, a white guy masquerading as Chinese: "I'm picking up a pair of new kung-fu sandals and the guy checks my Mastercard as I sign and he says Wah! You Chinese? heh heh heh! because he knows I'm not" (136). Elsewhere, the name sets him apart, highlighting his difference: "The name's all I've had to work through. What I usually get at a counter is the anticipatory pause after I spell out H. … Chinese I say. I'm part Chinese. And she says, boy you could sure fool me. You don't look Chinese at all" (169). The signifier of difference here literally *is* a signifier, a word, an inscription which does not link with the signified of his bodily reality, ultimately putting the lie to the proverb the narrator invokes as a youngster to ward off the curse of his diasporic inheritance: "Sticks and stones might break my bones, but names will never hurt me" (98).

More intrinsically, the name marks his diasporic hybridity in another way as well. As he is told by an old Chinese doctor, Wah means "overseas Chinese. So I'm just Fred Overseas" (166). Clearly, it is this hyphenated "overseas" space designated by his mixed genealogy that keeps insisting on his attention. However, much as he might have tried to escape the implications of this mixed alterity, much as he has "assumed a dull and ambiguous edge of difference in [himself]; the hyphen always seems to demand negotiation" (137). Just as the hyphen operates as a sort of liminal gatekeeper, marking the transitional space between Orient and Occident (16), it marks him materially — through his name, through his features, through his relatives — so that he becomes not so much a transitional figure, but one who traverses multiple worlds and identities.

It is this resistance to a reductive conceptualization of identity that sparks the narrator's protest against those who seek to reify the multicultural components of Canadian society. When, in elementary school,

the narrator describes his "Racial Origin" as "Canadian," he is immediately corrected by the teacher: "no Freddy, you're Chinese, your racial origin is Chinese, that's what your father is. Canadian isn't a racial identity. That's turned out to be true. But I'm not really Chinese either. Nor were some of the other kids in my class *real* Italian, Doukhobor, or British" (53). In response, the narrator turns to the marker of nationality as a way of revoking this insistence on racial/ethnic purity: "If you're pure anything you can't be Canadian. We'll save that name for all the mixed bloods in this country and when the cities have Heritage Days and ethnic festivals there'll be a group that I can identity with, the Canadians" (53-54). If nationality is not a racial origin, then the narrator seeks in the national label a means of enabling his "racial transpicuousness." This move involves a form of both visual and psychological camouflage (both a "blending in" and a hiding from the self), whereby the "mixed bloods" willingly mimic their role as pan-national Canadians. However, this positing of alternatives is paradoxical, for it is also the case that "Race makes you different, nationality makes you the same," and, the narrator concludes, "Sameness is purity" (36). The "national" therefore becomes the space where you become purely heterogenous — where to be of "mixed blood" is to experience the security of homogeneity without the delimiting demands set by the diasporic condition.[1]

This attempt to flee the diasporic for the national is problematized, however, for ultimately the reality proves to be less utopian than one might wish (as the narrator has known all along). Indeed, he cannot shake the undeniable (if invisible) taint of (racial/ethnic) distinction as others insist on perceiving it: "I don't look Chinese. I'm pretty white. I have a lot of good friends, play hockey and trumpet." But he is unable to get involved with a local girl in town because her father doesn't want her "marrying a Chinaman" (39). The narrator responds by denying and affirming his difference in the same breath, demonstrating a fiercely agential hybridity:

> Well fuck! I can't even speak Chinese my eyes don't slant and aren't black my hair's light brown and I'm not going to work in a restaurant all my life but I'm going to go to university and I'm going to be as great a fucking white success as you asshole and my name's still going to be Wah and I'll love garlic and rice for the rest of my life. (39)

The limitations imposed by strict categories of racial and ethnic identity restrict the narrator from expressing his own sense of self-location, much

as Kamboureli describes in her account of diasporic "self-fashioned authenticity" (4). As the narrator finally explodes in exasperation, neither category — Canadian and/or "ethnic" — adequately describes his sense of identity: "stop telling me what I'm not, what I can't join, what I can't feel or understand. And don't whine to me about maintaining your ethnic ties to the old country. … Sometimes I'd rather be left alone" (54).

His hyphenated "identity" becomes more perplexing, however, the more he sees various branches of his familial inheritance appear as physical markers on his and his relatives' bodies. On the one hand, the narrator appears to most resemble his Scots great-great-grandfather (81), who, paradoxically, is a relation on the "Chinese" (i.e., his father's not his mother's) side of the family. Significantly, this distant relation is described as having a "Mongolian-looking squint, as some Scots are prone to have." To add to the confusion, his mother responds, "oh Fred he looks just like you," a reference which makes it unclear whether she is referring to the narrator or his father, who both share the name Fred. Similarly, "my grandmother on my Chinese side, the Scots-Irish one from Ontario," has passed on to her progeny her "large lower lip" (92). On the other hand, he plagues himself with the niggling sense that he has also inherited the Nordic "doom and gloom" of his Swedish ancestors (on his mother's side), and yet we're told that his wife married him for his smile (49). The narrator also cannot help but examine his children for traces of their ancestry, detecting "a brief Chinese glint in your eyes that flashes some shadow of track across your blond and ruddy Anglo-Swedish dominance" (133).

Ultimately, the (physical) Chinese markers remain elusive, even as they persist as what have most indelibly impinged on his consciousness. As Wah writes in his poem "Elite 3," "there are certain flavours which are unmistakeably part of us" (*Waiting* 62). Haunted by the sights and smells of the Chinese cooking he associates with his youth, the narrator is perturbed when his brother proves to be "more Chinese" than most of his Chinese relatives. At the family reunion, while the narrator putters uselessly about the community hall, he notices that his "brother Donnie, the blondest Asian in our family," is the head chef: "He's too blond to be the best Chinese cook in the family, I think to myself. Brotherly racism?" (140). And yet, the knee-jerk essentialism embarrasses him: "what foolish stereotyping," he stops to correct himself on another occasion, "to generalize ethnic property like that" (133).

## II

Just as the hyphen links his multiple genealogies, so is it what most surely connects him to his father, whose own "hyphenated" blood he has inherited. Indeed, it is this necessity of coming to terms with his "overseas" yet "landed" identity that haunts the narrator in his movement through his father's migrations, first to China, then back to Swift Current, Saskatchewan, and eventually to Nelson, British Columbia. The narrator is compelled by his father's unusual history, and seeks to identify with him on a number of counts. First, he closely identifies with his father in that they are both racial and cultural hybrids, since "His mother's family are stern and religious Scots/Irish railroad people from Ontario" (20). This is important, since the son identifies with his father, not as *Chinese*, but as *mixed blood*. A key segment from one of the "Elite" poems in Wah's *Waiting for Saskatchewan* expresses this identification via a heterogenous ancestry:

> You were a half-breed, Eurasian. I remember feeling the possibility of that word "Eurasian" for myself when I first read it in my own troubled adolescence. I don't think you ever felt the relief of that exotic identity though. In North America white is still the standard and you were never white enough. But you weren't pure enough for the Chinese either. You never knew the full comradeship of an ethnic community. (62)

Like the son, the father's identity is marked by hyphenation, marred by others' insistence on reductive conceptualizations of identity: "Never mind the problems my father has from both the Chinese (he's a half-breed, he's really a white man, he's married to a white woman) and the Wasps (he looks Chinese, he can talk Chinese, and he runs the cafe, right?)" (39).

This identification is carried even further as the narrator begins to feel himself merging, psychically and somatically, with his father — literally, at times, feeling himself to be inhabiting his father's body. The entire text, indeed, functions as a tribute to his father and his mixed experiences of exile and belonging (note that the Grill is both the place that sets the family apart as "Chinese" and the hub of the town's business and social activity). Having been extricated from his Canadian childhood home as a four-year-old boy and sent to live with his stepmother in China, Fred Wah senior returns as an adult only to find that he has become "languageless" (31) in his diasporic homeland (his family speaks

English, he doesn't). After his existence as a "half-ghost" in China, he hopes that the "mixed grill" of Canadian society will provide the opportunity through which he can escape "the fragmented diaspora" (20), having, in effect, re-enacted the historical experience of diasporic displacement of his ancestors only to seek its annihilation — to lay those ghosts to rest, so to speak. The father, in short, seeks in "the possibility of place," and not in ethnicity, a gateway into identity.

Not surprisingly, then, the son identifies not with his father's sense of displacement, but of disjunction. He is impressed by his father's own premeditated act of diasporic mimicry, in which he performs the self-parodying "Chinaman" for the men in the Lion's Club:

> when he hears himself say *sloup* for soup he stops suddenly and looks out at the expected embarrassed and patronizing smiles from the crowd. Then he does what he has learned to do so well in such instances, he turns it into a joke, a kind of self put-down that he knows these white guys like to hear: he bluffs that Chinamen call soup *sloup* because, as you all know, the Chinese make their cafe soup from the slop water they wash their underwear and socks in. (66)

The key lesson here is the father's use of diasporic mimicry as a way of exploding the divide between east and west, for by mimicking western stereotypes of the Chinese, he undercuts the power hierarchy embedded in these constructions through his obvious dexterity with the English language. Most importantly, the son learns how mimicry can be used strategically: "I pick up on that sense of faking it from him. … But I quickly learn that when you fake language you see, as well, how everything else is a fake" (66). If language is a fake, then so is a singular sense of diasporic identity, which is something both son and father have known all along. And it is through this performed masquerade, a kind of invocation of diaspora as a means of retreat from it, that the narrator moves toward an articulation of his own emplacement between worlds.

If it is true that diasporic writings often cope with the experience of displacment via processes of transformation and impersonation (Ramraj 223), *Diamond Grill* explores a particular version of this process through having the narrator, at points, fuse somatically with his father. In part this is connected to what he terms "the negative capability of camouflage" (138), for he literally enters the identity of the character on the page. However, the "negative" potential of mimicry as camouflage (as opposed to a strategic diasporic mimicry) functions to dissolve the narrator's ego boundaries in a more disturbing way, for it describes the narrator's flight,

through masquerade, from the historical/genealogical realities of his diasporic heritage and present. It is one thing to fuse one's identity with one's ancestors in order to explore various alleys of self-identity; it is another to blend in with one's surroundings to such a degree that one's inheritances are abandoned. As he admits, his particular talent is to be able to disappear in the surrounding social world, to become "transparent": "on the street, all my ambivalence gets covered over, camouflaged by a safety net of class and colourlessness" (138).

It is via his self-transformation through his father, and more specifically, through the act of writing as a kind of "swallowing," that the narrator is able to articulate a way of retaining that ambivalence without relying on a singular version of identity composition. At points the identity fusion assumes a profound, endopsychotic form (i.e., as a kind of ingestion/incorporation into the psyche); not only does it become difficult to disentangle one character from another, since they both share the name "Fred Wah," but the narrator physically senses himself fusing with his father's body. In *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, the fusion of son and father is expressed in the following endogenous terms, in which self and other become merged through a process of imaginary ingestion:

> that look on his face
> appears now on mine
> my children
> my food
> their food
> my father
> their father
> me mine
> *the* father
> very far
> very very far
> inside (7)

While the internalization of the symbolic father here may seem to cry out for a Lacanian interpretation — particularly in terms of the potential superego effects that might be seen to characterize the narrator's guilt and obsession with his predecessor[2] — the passage is more usefully read in terms of what object-relations theorists describe as the psychic process of introjective identification, in which the subject internalizes the identity of another[3]. In this case, we are presented with a crucial twist on this process, for the narrator here engages in an evocative fantasy of being

himself introjected by another — a sort of fantasy of consumption (which is carried on in the emphasis on eating throughout the work — and in the very locale of the Diamond Grill as a location of ingestive consumption) in which one wishes to be engulfed by the identity of another. It becomes unclear just who is "very very far/inside" whom.

The experience takes hold of the narrator at specific moments in *Diamond Grill*, facilitating his progressive acceptance of his problematized diasporic inheritance. Specifically, he must begin to see through his father's eyes in order that he can comprehend, finally, both their sameness and difference. The recording of this fusion does not aim to "exorcize" the ghost of his father, but rather the reverse, for through the process of introjective identification the external object becomes integrated — yet not equated — with one's self-identity (even as it has to pass through a process of such apparent equation). This fantasy of otherworldly (overseas?) possession occurs at various moments throughout the text, as, for instance, when he feels "my father's face implanted on my scowly brow, body rigid" (36), or, when fishing, he feels "his body exten[d] out of me holding the rod" (148). Elsewhere, as he marvels at his father's ability to traverse the bounds across languages, he wishfully imagines that he "speak[s] from out of his/our mouth" (61).

Most striking, however, are those occasions when he envisions what it is he imagines his father to have seen upon his return to the Canadian homeland from which he had been forced into exile. Very casually, the narrator notes how "One of the first times I become him, about fourteen years after he dies, I walk around the corner of the garage and see a black bear in the cherry tree. … I stand and look at that bear and sense I'm looking through my father's face" (12). Experiencing external reality through his father's perception, the narrator sees, not just the bear, but an entire history of diasporic experiencing. More significantly, he begins to sense this experience becoming a physical part of his genetic constitution: "I feel decanting through my body his ocean … all he could ever comprehend in a single view; that this is, in me, part of some same helical sentence we both occupy, the asynchronous grains of sand along a double-helix dream time track, the *déjà vu* of body, skin and fur and eyes" (12).

This version of a swallowing of the landscape, as in turn it was originally internalized by his father, marks a radical transformation of the traditional Canadian settler motif of engulfment *by* the landscape (as articulated by Frye, Atwood, and so many others). Paradoxically, the narrator accomplishes this via an identification with his "landed" ancestor, his father who had himself returned from China to Canada in order to

reclaim his Canadian birthright. By introjecting his father's experience of the "alien" land — so that "here" becomes a viscerally experienced identity location — the narrator is able to reconcile himself to his family's diasporic history. The twist in this case is that instead of the man occupying the landscape of the new world, the landscape — via the genealogical diasporic experience of his father — has set up residence inside the man. As the narrator words it, "Biology recapitulates geography; place becomes an island in the blood" (23). In this case, a different experience of self/landscape has been accomplished. Here, the experience of disjunction has been internalized via the fantasied internalization of the landscape as experienced by a diasporic ancestor. Thus, when the narrator imagines he is inside his father's body, he in turn sees himself to contain within an incorporated Canadian landscape (as he imagines the experience of this world as it was internalized by his father), which in turn facilitates his understanding of the land as "his" (or himself as the land's).

For instance, he speaks of his genetic inheritance in terms of this internalized body/land as "these straits and islands of the blood." What he envisions are "whole worlds genetically traced," as these worlds were experienced by his father in the past (22). The memories of places left behind, for the immigrant to the new world, "become cankers of irritation" (27), though in their reimagined form they become constitutive of identity — both as related traditions and as biological blood-lines. Specifically, however, he perceives the land as his father experienced it himself — "I know, for example, the coagulation of Victoria on Hong Kong Island and Victoria on Vancouver Island have become, in my inheritance, planetary junctures of deep emotion" (22) — though always with a difference (to adapt Bhabha's refrain in "Of Mimicry and Man," almost diasporic but not quite). If the father's experience of himself as doubly diasporic — he becomes recreated as "China-Chinese" through being sent back to China as a child and hence returns "home" (to Canada) unable to speak the language (English) of his family (31) — has resulted in his not having the words to place his experience, the narrator transforms the double negative into an agential expression of emplacement: "Rocks I can translate into signals, 'disembarked at last'" (134).

Central to the narrator's transformation of this diasporic memory trace is his ability to insert himself into the landscape of the colonizers, "this land secured through my wife's British heritage" (134). By asserting his presence in the scene, he also asserts his material presence as a signifier of multiple identities, as both a holder of the gaze and as one of those who are gazed upon (both Self and Other): "I can't get out of the

way now that I've stepped into the frame. … I add myself who's watching, who's interloped into this fold of property imagined by power and class as simply the echo of an old empire heaven, who's slipped into this tribal paradigm in a bog of algae" (134). Like the family dog, who is now buried near the creek, the narrator becomes integrated in the tableau even as he is also an "interloper," psychogenetically reimaging himself as *located within* — if not *indigenous to* — the land.

What is significant, though, is the way this fusion with place is of such importance to the narrator, and yet of relatively less significance to his father. If the narrator is obsessed with the "embellishment[s] of geography," for his father, "place never seems to be important" (171). Thus the narrator articulates an attempt to evade the limitations of a displaced diasporic identity by making of himself a grounded — if not "authentic" — Canadian. In other words, the "possibility of place" offers itself as a would-be antidote to the dis-ease of diaspora. If "biology recapitulates geography" (23), as the narrator attests, so does it function to "em-place" the subject in a grounded locale and history: "place becomes an island in the blood" (23). This simulated flight and regress plays out the narrator's own articulation of a means of enacting a reconciliation with the inherited diasporic experience itself.

## III

The most grounded Canadian space that the narrator invokes is that of the Diamond Grill itself. While evoked as a site of nostalgia, it is also the space where his ambivalences are most visible to him, for it is here that he can be neither clearly white nor purely Chinese. Even though the Grill should hold promise as a kind of deracialized haven, it is not one, for its boundaries are always intruded upon. It is the space where the narrator can never be truly nondiasporic, nor quite diasporic enough. Like the teacher at school, the white customers "identify" him, along with his father, as singularly Chinese. The more the narrator tries to impress his white school-friends with his elaborate milkshakes and desserts, the more he sets himself apart from them, for he remains, nonetheless, the ("Chinese") boy who serves them in the café.

Similarly, in the back kitchen, the narrator is repeatedly forced to confront the fact that he is a foreigner/outsider (albeit a welcome one) in this world. He loves to hear the Chinese cooks swear at one another, yet he is unable to understand the language. For instance, the immigrant Chinese boy he encounters peeling potatoes in the basement speaks to him, but the narrator cannot understand him.[4] This sense of "languagelessness"

is epitomized in the cooks' expletive, "You mucka high!" (70), which for years the narrator takes to be a Chinese swear-word, only to discover that it has a long indigenous history, coming from the Chinook, "*hyu muckamuck*," and transposed in English as "high muckamuck" (68). The hybrid malleability of the phrase points up the impossibility of stable identity markers. While the Chinese cooks have "transed the phrase out of their own history here," and while the insult has shifted in meaning through the generations, his Swedish mother "adds a syllable by saying high mucketymuck" (70). (This lesson in radical hybridity is repeated when the Chinese doctor reveals to him that Kuan Yu, the Chinese epic hero, "wasn't even Chinese, probably an invading Moor" [166]).

However, the more the young narrator seeks to flee the world of the kitchen for the ease of his friends in the booths of the café, the more he is unable to do so, for he remains drawn to it: "I [like] to be in the kitchen, and can hover, if only for a few minutes, within the meaningless but familiar hum of Cantonese and away from all the angst of the arrogant white world out front" (63). Most alluring of all is Shu's cooking, which draws him back again and again. Ironically, his favourite meals are the "real Chinese food" (not the Diamond's regular Chinese menu) prepared specially by Shu for the Chinese staff in the café. Best of all is when the "takeout is to our house" (46) — or when the Diamond is transplanted at home. By their very "foreignness" these meals assume the guise of constitutive familiarity — "ox tail soup, deep fried cod, chicken with pineapple and lichee — things we don't always taste willingly but forever after crave" (46).

And yet the ironies of contingency continue to taunt the narrator throughout his life. When he attempts to reconstruct some of these repasts in later years, he does not have the words to ask for the items in the Chinese grocery stores, as is the case with tofu: "It's one of those ingredients that are transparent to me in the multitude of Cantonese dishes I grow up eating. So, until my dad tells me what that white stuff is called, I'm unable to order it during my forays into Vancouver Chinatown" (151). Imposed on the narrator is a different kind of languagelessness from that instilled in his father; the tastes he remembers are both familiar and foreign, since he is unable to give them a name: "You know what I like to have with this, besides a bowl of rice? Some of those bitter greens; I don't know what you call them" (91). Nevertheless, the memory of certain tastes, like the landscape traced in the blood, has etched itself in "some blind alley of the mind" and lodged there, mingling with the morphologic traces of geography: "The taste roots itself as a miscegenated bitterness of soil and ocean" (67).

In this way, the conception of diasporic "identity" is transformed from a synchronous marker to one of "'disjunctive temporality'" (Kamboureli 3), a spatiotemporal movement which is highlighted via the swinging doors of the Diamond Grill's kitchen. The narrator is exhilarated by the feeling of traversing one world into the other, a privilege he and his father share: "ready Freddy, open up with a good swift toe to the wooden slab that swings between the Occident and Orient to break the hush of the whole cafe before first light the rolling gait with which I ride this silence that is a hyphen and the hyphen is the door" (16). Significantly, the book ends with a final scene of the narrator's father opening the café first thing in the morning, gliding through the liminal inside/outside gateway into the hyphenated spaces of the café itself: "The smoky glass in the top half of this door is covered by a heavy metal grill and, as he jars it open with a slight body-check, the door clangs and rattles a noisy hyphen between the muffled winter outside and the silence of the warm and waiting kitchen inside" (176).

The Diamond Grill thus functions as a transitional zone of multiple and shifting diasporic identities, marked by both alienation — he does not speak Chinese nor is he sufficiently "white" — and familiarity. It is an "unhomely space" that is never not quite home, nor ever quite elsewhere either — yet one in which the unsettling "unheimlich" is the place in which one most truly feels at home. By "keeping the hyphen hyphenated," as Wah puts it in his interview with Ashok Mathur (97), the Grill becomes a resonant metonym for the integrally hybridized, uneasily resolved locus of Canadian identity, a place in which diaspora is resisted even as its multiple historical and material realities are most viscerally — and endogenously — embraced.

* * *

Ultimately, to invoke conceptualizations of "Canadian identity," however "uneasy" they may be, is problematic, for it is the very straitjacketing of such categories that Wah is seeking to dismantle in the first place. It is therefore important to distinguish this figuration of Canadian space from an assimilationist Canadian multiculturalism that incorporates difference as a constitutive contribution to national unity. In the latter scenario, the more heterogenous Canada is, the more it is seen to represent a distinctive national culture, and the more the historical and social contingencies get obscured. This is where the poetics/ethics of the hyphen proves especially useful; it does not resolve tensions but rather "its coalitional and mediating potentiality offers real engagement, not as a centre but as a provocateur

of flux" (Wah, "Interview" 103). Jeff Derksen's account of Wah's oppositional poetics notes how Wah's writing avoids the representation of "hybrid subjectivities in a manner that is assimilable by multi-cultural discourse," namely "a cultural discourse in which assimilation becomes invisibility" (74). It is also the case, as I have been arguing throughout this paper, that Wah seeks to evade the restricting designations of a narrow identity politics. To typify Wah as a "writer of colour" or as a "Chinese-Canadian," as Derksen does, is to override the sense in which a text like *Diamond Grill* demonstrates the restrictions of such labellings, for the narrator identifies himself, at any given time, as "of colour" or "not of colour" or neither or both at once. It should come as no surprise, then, that in an interview with John Goddard, Wah stated, "I don't know what it feels like to feel Chinese" (41), though he does very tangibly know what it feels like to partially fit under various labels. As Rey Chow asserts in her collection on Chinese literature and diaspora, "Part of the goal of 'writing diaspora' is … to *unlearn* that submission to one's ethnicity such as 'Chineseness' as the ultimate signified" (25).

Wah's extended meditations on a very specific experience of diaspora ultimately point to the ways in which diasporic locations can be viewed as sites of radical reorientation — of language, subjectivity, emplacement, identity, inheritance. In these non-paradoxical spaces one can indeed, at times, integrate issues of race and ethnicity,[5] as well as problematizing the divide between centre and margin, origin and exile. Wah's discussion of hybridity and hyphenation in his essay "Half-Bred Poetics" explores these identificatory ambivalences:

> Though the hyphen is in the middle, it is not in the centre. It is a property marker, a boundary post, a borderland, a bastard, a railroad, a last spike, a stain, a cypher, a rope, a knot, a chain (link), a foreign word, a warning sign, a head tax, a bridge, a no-man's land, a nomadic, floating magic carpet, now you see it now you don't. (73)

For the narrator, the swinging doors of the Diamond Grill function not just as a border between "Occident and Orient," but as the hyphenated divider and connector between multiple identity markers. This generative space is, as Roy Miki argues, more than just "the passageway between inside/outside," but also "a place of static, of noise, of perceptual destabilizations … the disturbed subject/writer set adrift in a shifting space of vertiginous pluralities that awaken the desire to speak" (142). It is significant therefore that throughout *Diamond Grill* the narrator continually "ride[s]" the hyphen "and the hyphen is the door" (16). In the end, the

space he enters is interpellated by the "undreamed-of switching devices" (175) of this diasporic in-between — a diaspora which is not (quite) *one*.

## NOTES

[1] See Jeff Derksen's "Making Race Opaque" for a discussion of the ways Canadian literary criticism, influenced by the nationalist discourse of official multiculturalism, has "collaps[ed] difference into commonality" (68). According to Derksen, it is this cultural bias that has led to the omission of discussions of "the racial content" of Wah's work (63).

[2] See Susan Rudy Dorscht's "'mother/father things I am also'" for an examination of Wah's *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* in terms of the oedipal relation between father and son. Dorscht applies a useful extension to this reading of father-son relations by suggesting that Wah's treatment of this dynamic works against conventional notions of masculinity by configuring the relation as one of reciprocity. She argues that Wah's poems "investigate the problem of configuring identity on the basis of the oedipal relation alone" (222). Dorscht's analysis forms a useful complement to the object-relations reading I am positing here.

[3] Introjective identification involves the internalization of an external object (or some aspect of that object) and the resulting assimilation or identification of that object to the self. According to object-relations terminology, this process (along with others) is necessary to the formation of selfhood. For further accounts of this mechanism, see *The Selected Melanie Klein*, in particular Klein's article entitled "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms." In addition, Susan Isaacs's "The Nature and Function of Phantasy" contains a useful account of this and other psychic processes, as does R.D. Hinshelwood's *A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*.

[4] The boy might function as a sort of repressed version of the self for the narrator — which could also be linked to the repressed ancestry/language that the narrator would like to revive but cannot. That this figure of repression is not frightening says something about the narrator's acceptance of self-difference. I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers of this article for suggesting this interpretation.

[5] Derksen takes issue with the ways many critical writings on Wah's work have conflated the categories of race and ethnicity. In some instances this conflation is indeed problematic. However, one of the central concerns of *Diamond Grill* is a demonstration of the ways these categories, and so many others — including, of course, the crucial area of class — are never so easily separable.

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