

SOME REFLECTIONS ON ASIAN-CANADIAN POETRY AND CULTURE: FRED WAH, JOY KOGAWA, ROY MIKI AND OTHERS

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310 In recent times *Asian* has been used as a term to bring together writers from a great variety of backgrounds as it had European. If anything Asia is vaster and more diverse linguistically, religiously, ethnically and culturally than Europe. Canada, although a vast land, is not terribly populous. Still, it is one of the most multicultural countries. To speak about Asian-Canadian poetry and culture is something large and complex. What I have decided in this paper is to limit myself to brief discussions of three writers interested in culture and theory and who write about two Asian cultures, Chinese and Japanese, in Canada. Fred Wah refers to his Chinese heritage in his poems. The brief form of this paper (I do not want to keep you too much in the heat of Hong Kong in August) will concentrate on how this poet represents his own connections with China in poetry and related writings. In this short version, I will also refer briefly to the work of Joy Kogawa, Roy Miki and other Japanese Canadians in relation to the central concern of my essay—a doubling or multiplying vision of being Canadian or being in Canada. Here is in this self-representation or the representation of their cultural groups a typological or two-eyed connection with Canadian culture and Canada, where these writers were born and live and cultures overseas.¹

Fred Wah has a double vision verging on the multiple and the multiple multiplying. His poetry is suggestive about the matters of identity, faking it, fiction and truth. On the inner front flap of *Among* (1972), Fred Wah wrote of himself: “Born in 1939 in Swift Current, Saskatchewan. After the war we moved to Trail, B.C. and then finally to Nelson, B.C. in 1948 so I really sense I grew up on the shores of the Kootenay. Vancouver for university...and Buffalo for graduate school; started teaching at Selkirk College in 1967, living at South Slokan...still on the Kootenay.” Wah wrote poems to the Native pictographs in this region, writing about images the Salish and others had made in the Okanagan, Shuswap, Kootenay and elsewhere. Wah, who is Canadian

of part Chinese descent, is writing in English and also draws on the tradition of English literature. As an epigraph to his collection, *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.* (1975), Wah quotes the English Romantic poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge: “Not the qualities merely, but the root of the qualities is transcreated. How else could it be a birth,—a creation?”² The verb “transcreated” is apt for what Wah is doing. He acknowledges using illustrations from John Corner’s book of pictographs and the numbers, language and location references from this source to provide the images on the left side for the poems on the right and for the knowledge of these rock paintings.³ Wah represents various levels of transculturation and translation as well as transcreation. He uses small and delicate reproductions (representations) of large Native pictographs or rock paintings to create poetry in English, the language Wah works in despite being partly of Chinese background. His book is a representation at one remove from the paintings and at a cultural remove. He writes a book using another book that provided the pictographs and explanations of them. Wah is appropriating Native culture at a remove while using English, which from his Chinese side, is a borrowing or part of acculturation into English-speaking Canada. Wah is a native born Canadian but not a Native Canadian. His creation involves transcreation. His last poem in this collection responds to a pictograph opposite, which is based on two panels (Tye, Kootenay), and begins: “The wish / from what is inside / for what is out” (*Pictograms* 42; cf. 41). This wish could be as much a cultural desire as one that imagines what the Native creator or creators were considering when he or they created this rock painting. Here is a hybridity of experience that would be strange for any Chinese, including Wah’s ancestors, who had not come to the Americas, as much as it would be for Africans and Europeans who had not made this journey.

311 Wah explores this mixed identity in his writing. In *Breathin’ My Name with a Sigh* (1981), Wah presents the book as a long poem with sections. At first it can appear that Wah is exploring his name and identity in a book in which the poems have no titles or numbers and in which the pages are numberless. In this exploration of language, this draft of truth, Wah attempts, in this flow without title or number, to come to terms with what one of his teachers told him that ontogeny is a recapitulation of phylogeny (*Breathin’* Preface, n.p.). As Wah suggests, the any and the all, are related in “a pattern of things” just as, as we saw in his earlier poem, the inside and outside are connected (*Breathin’* Preface, n.p.). In the fifth poem from this collection, Wah asks whether origins are “magnetic lines across an ocean” or whether they are “migrations of genetic spume or holes, dark / mysteries within which I carry further into the World / through blood and blue-eyed progeny father’s fathers clan-name Wah from Canton east across the bridges / still” (*Breathin’*, 5th poem, n.p.). In his exploration of word and world in the sixth poem, Wah places the Yangtse and the Columbia rivers side by side and alone in the same line and in an imperfect bracket that includes the thrice-echoed and capitalized Ocean and the double-echoed shore, the first time in lower case and the next in capitals (*Breathin’*, 6th poem, n.p.). There are three brackets, not the four called for in more conventional grammar. An ocean separates

the two shores of Asia and western Canada, which contain these rivers respectively. Wah's words fall as leaves in fall or autumn in a kind of staring context between them that involves eating and hunger. In the next and seventh poem, Wah starts with this declaration: "Father, when you died you left me / with my own death." (*Breathin'*, 7th poem, n.p.). This desire to find out more about names, origins, genetics is also located in the life and death of the speaker's father. In the third poem from the end of the book, beginning "waiting for saskatchewan," Wah evokes the Swift Current of his birth: "Erickson Wah Trimble houses train station tracks / arrowed into down-town fine clay dirt prairie wind waiting / for Saskatchewan to appear for me again over the edge" (*Breathin'* n.p.). The horizons of the prairies, of British Columbia, of Canton and of the ocean involve waiting, receding and distance as well as expectation, approach and closeness. The speaker in the poem says that he is waiting not just for the province in which Wah was born but also in his native town "the origins grandparents countries places converged / europe asia railroads carpenters nailed grain elevators."

It is no surprise that Wah reprints (with new lineation) this poem from near the end of his earlier book to start his collection, *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (1985). In fact, Wah reprints a section with the same title, "Breathin' My Name with a Sigh," as used for his earlier collection (Wah terms it a "Long poem"), and includes the three poems I just discussed (*Waiting* Prefatory Note, n.p.). In a book called *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, that place is only the first of many expectations or surprises. In the Prefatory Note Wah explains that the first section ("Breathin'") is from a long poem, that the second part, "Grasp the Sparrow's Tail," which was published privately in Kyoto in 1982, "is a *utaniki*, a poetic diary of mixed prose and poetry" and the third section, "The Elite," "explores further the tenuous divisions" between the long poem and the *utaniki*, "in working with the prose poem." In this same note, Wah presents, "This Dendrite Map: Father/Mother Haibun," a series of haibun, which, as he explains, are "short prose written from a haiku sensibility and, in this case, concluded by an informal haiku line." Wah seeks to explore his mixed European and Chinese origins, as expressed through his father and mother, but also brings in Japanese forms to do so.

In the second part of *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, "Grasp the Sparrow's Tail (a poetic diary)," Wah sees his dead father throughout China. In Ghuangzhou (Canton), he says: "I see my father everywhere. I realize he was only five years old when he arrived in China" (*Waiting* 41). In the same poem, the speaker imagines how his father had left the prairies and had to learn Cantonese at five: "Must have hurt to have to find new boyhood lingo / (so silence) / then at 19 to relearn English Swift Current / Elite Cafe sufficiency." Despite seeing his father everywhere, the poet admits that he will not be able to connect with actual relatives: "I've misplaced the family information my mother gave me so I can't check out actual possible connections still here in the Canton region" (*Waiting* 43). In this poem Wah explains to his guides that his father was part Chinese, but "They look at me. I'm pulling their leg." The speaker makes a

connection with his father but with the same result: "So I'm Chinese too and that's why my name is Wah. / They don't really believe me." He concludes the poem with resignation and an irony that has a touch of affirmation: "That's o.k. / When you're not 'pure' you just make it up." Being a mixture, dwelling in hybridity, can be lonely but it also means that neither of the backgrounds you come from fully understand you, so it allows for fiction, invention and creativity.

"Elite (pronounced ee-light)," the third part of this book of poetry, continues the search for the father. In *Elite* 1, the speaker does not want to check out the facts about his father's life on the prairies any more than he did about his relatives in China: "But, like the information on distant relatives I lost just before going into China, somehow I don't want it or don't need it. The facts seem partially unreal" (*Waiting* 59). In this search for his father's identity and his, the speaker faces the matter of language. On a business trip with his father, the speaker meets Chinese people only: "You and they talked and talked. Chinese always sounds so serious, emotional, angry" (*Waiting* 61). Language separates son and father, who himself had to wrestle with learning Chinese and then having to relearn English. Being caught between cultures is an ancient situation and became critical in the New World after the arrival of Columbus. Being a mediator, a go-between or a "Métis," could mean that a person was needed for linguistic and cultural translation and mediation, but it could also make others suspicious or resentful of that figure.⁴ This ambivalence occurred as much in the twentieth century as in the fifteenth. In *Elite* 3, the speaker asks what a Métis is and knows, even though he had not been born then, that his father felt more Chinese than anything when he returned to Western Canada from China. Métissage, then, is not necessarily easy and advantageous: "But I remember you saying later that the Chinese didn't trust you and the English didn't trust you" (Wah, *Waiting* 62). Mixed identity can pose problems: "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." This isolation was not consoling: "I don't think you ever felt the relief of that exotic identity though." The life of the speaker's father was difficult with his own father, sent to China in 1916, "only four years old unable to speak Chinese and later in the roaring twenties when each time Grampa gambled away your boat passage so you didn't get back to Canada until 1930 languageless again with anger locked up in the immigration cells on Juan de Fuca Strait" (*Waiting* 69). The father-son relation is difficult. All seem to feel displaced.

The fourth part, "This Dendrite Map: Father-Mother Haibun," expresses the complex genealogical and cultural map of the speaker. In the first haibun, he raises the "Salvation Army Englishness" of his grandmother (*Waiting* 75). Haibun #7 mentions the father's funeral and thereby picks up on the death of the father, who at 54 died of a heart attack in his wife's arms as he danced, an event described in *Elite* 9 (*Waiting* 81). The speaker talks of his mother as well as his father and remembers her for mother's day. In the last haibun (#21), the speaker, although expressing these words in an Asian literary form, says: "I try to phone you on mother's day, everyone does, more Swedish

than Chinese" (*Waiting* 96). This Eurasian odyssey that is waiting for Saskatchewan ends with a reference to Pindar and Japanese plums, a book partly about pain and displacement ending with the word "sweetest" in bold and with no period. The quest involves, perhaps, a sweet boldness without end.

Wah's prefaces are suggestive. In one, he begins: "The notion underlying *Music at the Heart of Thinking* comes from a Chinese movie I saw in Japan several years ago. It was a martial arts film about the Shao Lin monks in China" (*Music* Preface, n.p.). With wit and ingenuity, Wah explains that one of the monks would practise tai chi when he was drunk, so he could learn to be off-balance without falling over and this skill came to confuse his opponents in battle. This, Wah tells us, is the method he has chosen for this book, a kind of "negative capability and estrangement I've recognized for many years," what I would also see as a yoking of Keats and Brecht. Wah calls his work here "a series of improvisations and translations." In this volume European critical or literary theory meets Wah's jazz and word music (see #1-10). Along the way,

314 Wah engages with Canadian poets, like Roy Kiyooka and George Bowering (see #31) but especially with bpNichol (see #21-30). Wah also describes sunlight on patio steps that take him to a temple in Kyoto and in a string of associations he ranges from there to "le vrai visage" to "the Shanghai dialect Mori-san" and the eyes of the addressee and the desire for the word for sunlight (#15). Taking a part of the stream of words and consciousness, the landscape of the interior of British Columbia lies: "underneath thoughtlessness/how history lingers as the blue sky above Okanagan / Lake on August afternoons" (#32). In a dream about a bear in a bush, Cabot, Champlain and Moodie are there, the first two exploring perhaps and the third roughing it in the bush possibly (#38). In Canada, this country in the Americas or New World, Europe and Asia meet, but Wah also conflates Chinese poetry with the landscape of the interior of British Columbia: "Track Li Po to Castlegar, / the Kootenay River flows down from the sky, / never returns" (#54). In #69, which ends the book, Wah calls into his writing Hesiod and a Quebec Cedar map boat w/ motor." The typology of Europe and Asia though Canada (New World/Americas) provides a texture and contexture.

The yoking of European and the Asian continues in Wah's *Alley Alley Home Free* (1992). For instance, Chinese food and the Greek messenger of the gods live side by side: "or ciping the Green Door / for Shanghai noodles / she says they say pretend / but snuff with Hermes' stealth" (*Alley* 58). This doubling identity that Wah carries into his poetry explores the ambivalence of celebration and apology for métissage. The back cover of *Diamond Grill* (1996) identifies itself as Wah's first published prose work (probably entirely in prose as Wah has used some Menippean mixing of prose and poetry in other texts). This cover celebrates Wah's representation of the dual identities of Chinese and European:

Thus we enter the perfectly remembered *Diamond Grill*, in 1951 the newest and most modern Chinese cafe in Nelson where Fred Wah serves up the story of his hyphenated identity, the sweet and the sour in tasty mouth-watering slices. Fred Wah's father was a Canadian-born Chinese-Scots-Irishman raised in China; his mother is a Swedish-

born Canadian from Swift Current. Wah senior ran the *Diamond Grill*, where Fred, the future writer and poet grew up, white enough to "pass," yet marked for life by a foreign name and a taste for foong cheng and lok bok. (*Diamond Grill*, back cover)

In the Acknowledgements, almost in counterpoint to the description of the book on the back cover, Wah talks about "the anger and the pain behind these stories" and taking responsibility for his text, which he calls a "biotext" (*Diamond Grill* ix). The question of truth and fiction also arises as part of what Wah acknowledges: "I wish not to offend any of my family or any of the Chinese Canadians who have known and experienced some of these stories more tangibly than I have. These are not true stories but, rather, poses or postures, necessitated, as I hope it is clear from the text, by faking it" (*Diamond Grill* ix). Oscar Wilde's art of lying meets Plato's insistence on truth qualified by the allegory of the cave, but with a twist of hybridity and the question of identity in multiculturalism. How does one square experience with faking it?

In *Diamond Grill*, the genealogy of father and mother and where they came from persists as a concern. This is a Canadian pastime: the teacher asks the children to write down what background their fathers come from and therefore are. The narrator says: "Race makes you different, nationality makes you the same. Sameness is purity. Not the same anything when you're half Swede, quarter Chinese, and quarter Ontario Wasp" (*Diamond Grill* 36). Questions of purity, nationality, race and métissage come out once more, here in a brief narrative on betting, fiction, relativity as it resides between writer and reader. Who is inside and who is out and who sits on a hyphen and where does that lead on both sides? This book ends with a swinging door in the café: "the door clangs and rattles a noisy hyphen between the muffled winter outside and the silence of the warm and waiting kitchen inside" (*Diamond Grill* 176). Nature and culture, cold and warmth, quiet and noise, the Canada out there and the Chinese restaurant: much sits on the hyphen inside and outside the *Diamond Grill*. Is the door slamming shut or will it open again?

In the Preface to *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions* (1990), which plays on the title of Hugh MacLennan's novel about the two solitudes of English and French in Canada, Marion Richmond discusses the role of immigration and multiculturalism in Canada: "As Margaret Atwood wrote in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, 'we are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here.' This awareness is a fundamental part of the Canadian sensibility" (Hutcheon & Richmond ix). This experience of being a displaced immigrant no matter whether a person was born in Canada is, as we have seen, something Fred Wah explores in his poetry. A tension exists in him and others between celebrating the new land and confusion and anger over a displacement into it. Immigration and multiculturalism are controversially generally and in Canada particularly: are they a celebration of diversity and do they strengthen or weaken a country and are policies in these areas now masks and diversions for past errors and prejudice? (Hutcheon & Richmond 15-16; cf. Hart, "Canadian Literature" and "Traces"). The relation between first nations and immi-

grants and among colonial, multiculturalism and postcolonial are problematic. It would be interesting to see whether Tom King and Thomson Highway think multiculturalism is a positive term as opposed to postcolonialism (Hutcheon & Richmond 350-355).⁵ Are both terms in a colonial framework, or is multiculturalism a beginning that allows for other identities, like Native Canadians, to receive recognition or is the multicultural a ploy to give the immigrants of the past century the same permission as the two founding nations or settler cultures to disregard and exploit the aboriginal peoples?

316 What role do Chinese and Japanese Canadians have in this multicultural literature? This question is too large even to be approached, let alone explored, in any detail here. Chinese Canadians had to pay a head-tax and men were used as labourers on the railroad that paradoxically was supposed to bring Canada together, to forge a nation and an identity. It was difficult for them to bring their families with them and for Chinese women to come to Canada. This injustice probably contributed to marriage between Chinese men and women from other groups, including Europeans. Unfairness also affected the Japanese community in Canada. In a history of Japanese Canadians, Ken Adachi set out to tell the story of his community in Canada and his experience since childhood of "a virulent form of racism," revealing "the demon in all its scaly ugliness and perhaps" exorcising it (xii-xiii).⁶ Adachi sees the internment of the Japanese from after Pearl Harbor to four years after the end of the war as an object lesson in the fragility of democracy and the danger that arbitrary measures have for civil liberties in Canada. Roy Miki and Cassandra Kobayashi also tell the story of the internment of Japanese Canadians, how their community was destroyed on the west coast during the Second World War, how their human rights were violated and how it took until 22 September 1988 to acknowledge the redress movement and the wrongs done to Japanese Canadians (16-17; cf. A. Miki 9-13). As early as 1907, there were riots by white mobs that involved an attack on Chinatown and the Japanese area of Powell Street in Vancouver (Thomson 6-8). Roy Miki picks up on Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined community when in *Broken Entries* he speaks about rummaging through archival boxes that he has on redress for Japanese-Canadians (esp. 15). Why was this community broken and what are the effects for it and for Canada?

Like Fred Wah, Roy Miki and Cassandra Kobayashi show in their Acknowledgements a sensitivity to their community and hope their story is a proper expression of their experience: "We hope that the story presented here will 'ring true' for those Japanese Canadians who took an active part in the redress movement, many of whose comments during the years of the campaign, in print or conversation, helped to shape our understanding of redress" (Miki & Kobayashi 158). In a recent work Roy Miki speaks about being Japanese-Canadian as "contingent and mobile, producing in its mediated relationships a network of signifying effects—effects that have been unpredictable, sometimes turbulent, sometimes imprisoning, sometimes liberating, and sometimes dumbfounding" ("Turning In" 25). Miki also calls on Fred Wah's

term, "foreignicity," which Wah discusses in the context of Mary-Louise Pratt's "contact zone," which is a space in which cultures of asymmetrical power are copresent, interactive and involved in practices and understandings that are interlocking (Wah, *Diamond Grill* 69-70; cited in Miki, "Turning In" 32).⁷ Home and exile become tensions in the situation of Asian-Canadians and other groups.

Joy Kogawa's novel, *Obasan*, also brought back to light the suffering of Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War. As the untitled acknowledgements to that novel says, in chapter 14, Kogawa drew on Muriel Kitagawa's material (*Obasan* v; cf. Davidson). Roy Miki explains that Kogawa had uncovered the archive of this community activist and nisei writer, especially in her letters to her brother Wes Fujiwara in Toronto about the same time—the mid-1970s—that Ann Sunahara, through the offices of nisei, Tom Shoyama, Deputy Minister of Finance, had first access to the federal government files on the uprooting of Japanese-Canadians ("Turning In" 29-30). Miki actually edited Kitagawa's writing, which appeared in a volume four years after *Obasan*. In an interview with Magdalene Redekop, Kogawa, the daughter of Gordon Nakayama, an Anglican minister, and a mother who was also a Japanese-Canadian Christian and a kindergarten teacher, speculated on the future of her community in Canada:

It's likely that there aren't going to be any Japanese Canadians. They'll just be all mixed up. I've seen grandchildren of *nisseis*...you can't see any Japanese-ness in their physical features at all. I imagine that's the way it's going to be in the future. There'll be the story of a people; something happened once, and it'll be part of their background. But I think that will be part of a new gathering of people with a growing identity. I think the Canadian identity is evolving. (Hutcheon & Richmond 100; cf. 94-101)

This métissage, then, is part of an unfolding narrative in the Americas generally and in Canada specifically since the late fifteenth century. The person of mixed background or even the mediator who goes between cultures is unidentifiable, misunderstood or new to the cultures from which they have come. This is a theme as much in Fred Wah as his fellow writers in the Japanese-Canadian community. They are not "pure" any more either because of race, religion or ethnicity. Increasingly, however, there has been a movement to celebrate this mixture and difference.

Within the Japanese-Canadian community, much work has been done on all facets of their contribution to Canada. For instance, Yuko Shibata has "explored Japanese Canadian women's, or *Nikkei* women's, interpretation and reinterpretation of their experiences in relation to the past and the present" (365). Part of this hermeneutics is a coming to terms with the past. In the collection, *A Choice of Dreams* (1974), Kogawa's poem, "Ancestor's Graves in Kurakawa," ends with "Strange dew drops through cedar incense / And I greet the dead who smile through trees / Accepting the pebbles that melt through my eyes" (10). The Japan of her father's past before he emigrated now becomes part of her world. Kogawa also writes, "On Hearing a Japanese Haiku," which begins, "Throat blossoms to sounds / Sama zama no mono" (*A Choice* 15). Languages mix here—Japanese and English form and content mingle. In "Girls

in Ginza," Kogawa starts off with the mocking standards of beauty of a white world: "Bleach me brown or bleach me blonde / The Japanese girl demands / Surrounded by caucasian mannequins / Mocking oriental beauty" (*A Choice* 42). Even in Japan, as in Canada, the cultural pressures are written on the bodies of women. Being other sometimes means trying to be alike.

For Fred Wah, Roy Miki, Joy Kogawa and others, the nature of writing and the collision of identities lead to creative and painful tensions. Home and exile, inside and outside, then and now, pure and mixed are all oppositions that inform their actual and fictional worlds. Whereas Miki sees the instability of being Japanese-Canadian, Wah lives and explored in his writing his hybrid Chinese-European identities and Kogawa sees a future in Canada of mixed identities. We have many Asian identities, including the equally complex and problematic South-Asian and East-Asian—and many regionalisms in Canada for all groups who produce and read literature. Despite all the changes and the intricacies of Asian-Canadian literature, Kogawa's voice has
 318 gained a wide audience: she was probably the first to make Asian-Canadian writing about Asian identity in Canada popular and to create a widespread awareness in the schools of the plight of Japanese-Canadians. People and peoples seem to mix and vanish, but as she reminds us, their stories remain behind. It is these stories and their interpretation and reinterpretation that are left and will be left.

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ENDNOTES

1. For one of my earlier discussions of Canadian literature as multicultural, see Jonathan Hart, "Canadian Literature."
2. S. T. Coleridge, *Literary Reminiscences* (1839), IV, 166, quoted in Wah, *Pictograms*, page facing the copyright page.
3. See the copyright page to Wah's *Pictograms*; he acknowledges John Corner, *Pictographs (Indian Rock Paintings) in the Interior of British Columbia* (Vernon, 1968).
4. See Jonathan Hart, *Columbus, Shakespeare and the Interpretation of the New World*.
5. On the ambivalent nature of multiculturalism and of related ideas, practices and policies, see also Burnet and Palmer vii-ix; Hart, "Traces;" Hutcheon 15; Fleras and Elliott. I also discuss King in Jonathan Hart and Terry Goldie, "Postcolonial Theory," and Jonathan Hart, "Translating and Resisting Empire: Cultural Appropriation and Post-colonial Studies." See also Taylor.
6. The Preface is dated 1976 and the book 1991.
7. In a long footnote, Wah also quotes from Mary-Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 6-7.