Timothy Yu

Waiting for Asian Canada
Fred Wah's Transnational Aesthetics

Fred Wah is one of Canada's pre-eminent living poets and perhaps its leading poet of Asian descent. In academic criticism, Wah is now most frequently discussed as the author of the 1996 book *Diamond Grill*, whose evocation of Wah's Chinese Canadian and multiracial family has made it a central text of Asian Canadian writing. But race was rarely discussed in Wah's work up through the 1980s, when he was read not as a writer of Asian descent but as a leader of the Canadian poetic avant-garde. Examining this shift in the reading of Wah's work provides a new context for the emergence of the category of the Asian Canadian in the 1980s and 1990s, while also revealing the way in which race and ethnicity have become increasingly central to Wah's writing over the course of his career.

To understand this shift in Wah's work, I look past *Diamond Grill* to a text from over a decade earlier, his Governor General's Award-winning 1985 book *Waiting for Saskatchewan*. This text arguably marks the first emergence in Wah's work of what we might call an Asian Canadian aesthetic. The aesthetic of *Waiting for Saskatchewan* is shaped in part by the US avant-garde influences that are central to Wah's early work (of Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and Charles Olson, for instance). But it also reflects a new set of influences, as Wah begins to incorporate Asian elements into both the content and form of his work, most notably through his adaptation of Japanese poetic forms. *Waiting for Saskatchewan* offers an emergent articulation of the "Asian Canadian" as a node of transnational flows from China, Japan, and the United States, while also emphasizing the cross-ethnic coalitions that give rise to the category of the Asian Canadian in the 1980s and 1990s. *Waiting for Saskatchewan* posits

Asian Canadian experience as a "language world," one in which the *form* of Asian Canadian expression is paramount. And in the forms of *Waiting*, from Olsonian projective poetics to the Japanese *haibun*, we see Asian Canada emerge as a process of transnational convergence, a dialogic space that is always being rewritten across national borders—North American borders, as well as borders with nations in Asia.

To understand the distinctive place *Waiting for Saskatchewan* holds in the emergence of a transnational Asian Canadian discourse, we would do well to review the shifting critical reception of Wah's work. *Diamond Grill*, a 1996 collection of prose pieces focused on his family history that Wah labels in his acknowledgments a "biotext" (n. pag.), has become the foundation for reading Wah as an Asian Canadian writer. Peter Jaeger calls *Diamond Grill* an "extensive investigation of hyphenated subjectivity" (200), while Carrie Dawson argues that *Diamond Grill* "is centrally concerned to address the familial, social, and psychic upheaval that is the legacy of the Chinese Head Taxes and the Chinese Exclusion Act" (5).

As several critics have pointed out, however, ethnicity has not always been the central lens through which Wah's work has been read or articulated. Prior to the 1990s, Wah was seen primarily as a leader of the Canadian poetic avant-garde, most notably as a member of the group associated with the 1960s journal *Tish*. George Bowering's "The Poems of Fred Wah," first published in 1979, typifies this framing, emphasizing Wah's American influences—Olson, Creeley, Duncan, and Ed Dorn—and seeing Wah's poetry as one which "tangle[s] with the phenomenal, the first act of noticing something" (7). Bowering makes only brief mention of Wah's ethnicity, folding it into his claims about Wah as a Canadian regional writer: "His father's side of the family was Chinese, and his mother's side Scandinavian. Thus his background is atypical, but symbolic for the creation of our west" (3). Pamela Banting's 1988 essay "Fred Wah's Syntax: A Genealogy, a Translation" examines the ways that Wah "departs from the syntactical expectations of English" in order to "avoid the outworn habits of thought inevitably imposed by the structures of standard language" (102). And in "Fred Wah: Poet as Theor(h)et(or)ician," Banting offers a deconstructive reading of Wah's *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.* (1975), writing that "Wah's grammatological practice underwrites the dialogical play between pictogram and pictograph, incorporating both the poet and the figure in the pictograph, both the spoken and the written subject(s), both reoralization and further textualization" (15).

What accounts for this seeming shift in the reading of Wah's work—this "discovery" of Wah as an Asian Canadian writer in the mid-1990s? In his essay "Making Race Opaque: Fred Wah's Poetics of Opposition and Differentiation," Jeff Derksen argues that "Wah's work, despite having working-class Chinese-Canadian content . . . has been predominantly read not as the work of a writer of colour, nor even much as an ethnic writer, but rather as a member of the *Tish* avant-garde" (70). Derksen attributes this elision to a "split . . . between the formal qualities of [Wah's] work and its content" (66), as well as to an "assimilationalist multicultural criticism" in which Wah's ethnic difference made him all the more distinctively "Canadian" (69). What Derksen's essay does not fully account for is why issues of race in Wah's work should suddenly have become visible in the mid-1990s. Indeed, Derksen's own earlier essay on Wah, "Torquing Time," reads Wah primarily through his associations with *Tish* and his adaptation of the influence of Olson, making no mention of Wah as a racialized or Chinese Canadian writer and arguing instead for the multiplicity of identity in Wah's poetry.

I think that we can point to two major factors in this "discovery" of Wah as a Chinese Canadian writer in the mid-1990s. The first is, quite simply, the emergence of "Asian Canadian literature" as a critical category. Donald Goellnicht's account of the emergence of Asian Canadian literary studies in "A Long Labour" begins in 1993, with papers delivered on Asian Canadian writing at the Association for Asian American Studies and Modern Language Association conferences. In 1991, Wah's work was included in *Many-Mouthed Birds: Contemporary Writing by Chinese Canadians*, edited by Bennett Lee and Jim Wong-Chu. For critics who had previously read Wah through the lens of his avant-garde or regional connections, race became legible in Wah's work when he was recognized by other Asian Canadian writers and critics and incorporated into an emerging category of Asian Canadian literature.[1]

The second factor is arguably an increasing shift in Wah's own writing toward the autobiographical, beginning as early as his 1981 collection *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*, which thematizes Wah's own Chinese surname. In her introduction to an interview with Wah, Susan Rudy distinguishes between Wah's early books, which were "insistently located within a personal geography and history," and his work of the 1980s and after, in which "Wah emerged as a central figure in the articulation of a racialized poetics in North America" (144). As Paul Lai observes in his essay "Autoethnography Otherwise," Rudy's "bifurcation" of Wah's work "suggests

that his later work is more amenable to the (auto)ethnographic rubric of reading ethnic writing" (62-3).

While acknowledging the notion of a break or shift in Wah's work, I argue that there is an important continuity between the early "avant-garde" Wah and the later "ethnic" Wah. Influenced by US Black Mountain poetics, Wah developed a decentered lyricism whose autobiographical impulses are tempered by a skepticism of conventional narrative. The growing exploration of autobiography in *Waiting for Saskatchewan* thus takes place in the realm of *form* as much as content, as Wah seeks new forms that can help map the transnational connections that characterize both his family's history and his contemporary political context. As Lily Cho argues in "'How Taste Remembers Life': Diasporic Memory and Community in Fred Wah's Poetry," assuming a "transparency to race" in Wah's work may prevent a deeper "engagement with the formal innovations of his writing" (81); constructing a deeper formal genealogy of Wah's work can help us understand the distinctiveness of his engagement with race and ethnicity.

In arguing for a *transnational* reading of Wah's work, I gesture toward the increasingly dominant tendency to study race and ethnicity not simply in national, but global terms. As I have noted elsewhere,[2] while the term "international" suggests relationships among fixed, stable national entities, transnationalism studies flows, structures, and relationships that exceed national boundaries, yet that also register their movements across even terrains. Works such as Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic,* Aihwa Ong's *Flexible Citizenship,* and David Palumbo-Liu's *Asian/American* are prime examples of such transnational approaches to race and ethnicity. Within fields such as African American and Asian American studies, transnational approaches have been seen by many critics as part of a necessary evolution of these fields past their origins in cultural nationalism.

The historical trajectory of Asian Canadian studies—in particular, what Donald Goellnicht has famously called its "protracted birth" through the 1990s and 2000s—may have led to a field that is just now, as the critic Iyko Day suggests in her essay "Must All Asianness Be American?," arriving at its "cultural nationalist" moment (45). Day calls for narratives of Asian Canadian studies that do not make the concept of the Asian Canadian "reliant, even parasitic, on the association with Asian American literary studies and on US conceptualizations of race" (46). But as I hope my reading of Wah will suggest, attending to Asian Canadian distinctiveness does not necessarily entail looking for such distinctiveness solely within Canadian

national borders. Instead, *Waiting for Saskatchewan* reveals Asian Canada as a transnational formation, one that from its very beginnings emerges from the intersection of cultural flows from the US and Asia. To recognize this is not, I hope, to develop a "parasitic" vision of Asian Canada, but rather one that is open and flexible, with forms that are constantly being negotiated. Just as Asian American identity emerged in transnational contexts, such as the Vietnam War and "Third World" solidarity,[3] the category of the Asian Canadian emerges in Wah's work in contexts that exceed Canadian borders.

Finally, it is important to distinguish an *Asian* Canadian reading of Wah's writing from a more narrowly ethnic reading that would see him primarily as a *Chinese* Canadian writer or as a writer of the Chinese diaspora. Although Wah foregrounds his Chinese heritage, particularly in the visit to China narrated in *Waiting for Saskatchewan,* he chooses Japanese poetic forms, such as the *utanikki,* to portray those experiences. As I argue below, this seemingly counterintuitive formal choice can be understood in the context of the coalition between Chinese and Japanese Canadians that lead to the emergence of the category of the Asian Canadian in the 1980s and 1990s. What *Waiting for Saskatchewan* gives us, I argue, is a formal expression of "Asian Canada" itself, one that signals its transnational origins but also its status as a *racial* category that represents a conscious linkage between multiple ethnic identities.

Early Work: Borders and Influences

From its beginnings, Wah's work is marked by its transnational connections, but his early work was seen primarily as crossing the border between the US and Canada; his writing from the 1960s and 1970s has most often been read through its US influences, particularly from the poets of the Black Mountain school. A brief glance at Wah's early work shows that while Wah draws on Black Mountain poetics, he retains a lyric sensibility that sets the stage for his later autobiographical turn.

"Mountain that has come over me in my youth," the first poem in Wah's 1980 selected poems *Loki Is Buried at Smoky Creek,* extends a classic Romantic genre, epitomized by Shelley's "Mont Blanc"; Wah's apostrophes to the landscape—"O Mountain" and "O creek"—are not ironized, but are counterbalanced through an earthy embodiment, as Wah observes the mountain's "burns on your sides your many crotches rocked" and calls the creek to "sing in the hot thirst my sticky tongue" (1-2). The influence of Black Mountain poetics can be seen in the poem's unpunctuated flow, as well as

in the indentation of lines that follows the rhythm of breath and thought, with direct addresses to the mountain appearing at the left margin and subsidiary thoughts following in indented lines. But Wah also maintains a strong lyric connection to the landscape, evoking the "Mountain that has come over me in my youth . . . O Mountain that has hung over me in these years of fiery desire" (1). The lyric I and the landscape are ultimately linked not through the poet's gaze or memory—the poem remains in the present tense throughout—but through the body, with an interpenetration of the mountain and the speaker's body. As the speaker drinks from a mountain creek, his mouth becomes a part of the mountain—"my sticky tongue / my jaw catch beneath the bridge"—and the water becomes the mountain entering the body: "sweet cold on teeth in flow and eddy / in swirl my gut it fills and bloats with fluid Mountain" (2). The visceral language of "gut" and "bloat" punctures the pretensions of the poem's Romantic lineage, replacing it with an embodied lyricism that follows Olson's assertion in "Projective Verse" that "man is himself an object" (n. pag.) among the other objects of nature, while still maintaining a first-person perspective that evokes personal emotion and desire.

The lyric sensibility of "Mountain" thus shows how Wah both adopts and diverges from the aesthetic of the US Black Mountain poets. Wah does not take the turn toward historical and archival materials that Charles Olson does in the *Maximus Poems*' effort to encompass the history and geography of Gloucester, Massachusetts (or that E. J. Pratt does in *Towards the Last Spike*); if Olson's impulse is epic, Wah's remains lyric, with the poetic I retained as a central, perceiving presence in the poem.[4] Wah's interest in lyric subjectivity and his strong interest in local contexts leads to an autobiographical turn in his work that becomes increasingly pronounced by the early 1980s.

In his interview with Susan Rudy, Wah observes that the writing of *Diamond Grill*, which he began in 1988, was driven by "what had been driving *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* and *Waiting for Saskatchewan*: the notion of my father, the push to try to say something about myself. Looking back, I see that I was getting caught up in questions of identity that I hadn't really had any means to think about before" (147). But perhaps what is most intriguing is Wah's two-pronged account of why "questions of identity" began to emerge in his work around 1980, an account that links a narrative of aesthetic development with a changing political and social context. Wah pegs the emergence of biographical elements in his work to a very specific moment: a poem from his 1975 text *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.*:

> The bio starts for me with a poem I wrote in *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.* in which I mention my cousins. That poem became provocative for me because I kept wondering, how did that get in there? Why all of a sudden "cousins"? And then a combination of other poems about death, about our dog dying, just sort of accumulated to a point where I started addressing my father. (148)

It's striking to note that Wah assigns himself relatively little agency in this narrative. Wah's account is consonant with the aesthetics that he derives from Black Mountain poetics and Charles Olson's "Projective Verse" in particular, in which the biographical self is not the source of poetry, but is simply one object among others in the "field" of composition. An echo of this idea can be heard in "A Prefatory Note" to *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, in which Wah writes of "the range of forms a particular content ('father') . . . has generated" (n. pag.). This is an allusion, of course, to the Olson/Creeley maxim: "Form is never more than the extension of content."

But Wah also acknowledges a shifting social and political context that helps allow this content to be heard and that gives it a particular shape and political valence. That context, as Wah discusses in his interview with Rudy, is the emergence of a discourse around Asian Canadians in the late 1970s and 1980s:

> But what permitted me to start writing about the father or about race and identity was something going on in the late 1970s both for myself as a person, as a poet, as a writer, as well as something going on in the culture more generally. The Japanese Redress movement started then for example. All of a sudden a dialogue about Asianicity in Canada was possible. . . . Joy Kogawa's book *Obasan* came out in 1981. All of a sudden there was an opening for questions of historical identity, like "where did you come from," that up until then had been possible only in a very silenced and unproblematic way. (148-9).

Like many others, Wah links the emergence of Asian Canadian issues to the campaign for redress for the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II beginning in the late 1970s. But Wah also draws particular attention to the close linkage of social activism and literature. *Obasan*, a fictionalized version of Kogawa's own childhood experience of displacement, dislocation, and internment, became central to public discourse around internment and redress, with a passage from *Obasan* even being read on the floor of Parliament by NDP leader Ed Broadbent during the announcement of the redress settlement in 1988. And one of the leading figures in the redress movement was Wah's fellow poet and frequent collaborator, Roy Miki, who would go on to become one of the major theorists of Asian Canadian literature.

It's worth noting that Wah's citation of Kogawa, a Japanese Canadian writer, as an influence for his own foray into autobiography and ethnic heritage, is made possible because of Wah's use of the category of "Asianicity," a category that emphasizes commonalities between Chinese and Japanese Canadians. For Wah, the historical and cultural differences between China and Japan are less relevant than the contemporary Canadian political context, in which people of Chinese and Japanese ancestry can be linked through the racialized category of the "Asian." It is this sense of a racialized Asian Canadian coalition that we will see Wah negotiating through the forms of *Waiting for Saskatchewan.*

Waiting for Saskatchewan

Waiting for Saskatchewan represents Wah's first full-length foray into autobiographical material. It incorporates a half-decade of work, including selections from *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* (1981) as well as the entirety of the short collection *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail* (1982). The book's title, which is also the first line of its first poem, signals a continuity with Wah's early interest in place. *Waiting for Saskatchewan* reflects the remembered landscape of Wah's early childhood, which he evokes in the opening poem as a transnational node of convergence:

> Waiting for Saskatchewan
> and the origins grandparents countries places converged
> europe asia railroads carpenters nailed grain elevators
> Swift Current my grandmother in her house
> he built on the street
> and him his cafes namely the "Elite" on Central
> looked straight ahead Saskatchewan points to it (3)

The effect of these opening lines is of a kind of zooming in, as "origins grandparents countries places" converge on the small town of Swift Current, and then on the individual figure of "my grandmother in her house." In the following line, however, the focus shifts to the unnamed "he" who built the house, a shift that is reinforced with the "and him" that opens the next line. With this shift of subject, our angle widens again, taking in the cafés, the town, and returning in chiasmic fashion to Saskatchewan. We see illustrated here Wah's sense of the intertwining of person and place, with individuals introduced in relation to the places they occupy or build, and the entire passage contained within the frame of "Saskatchewan." But we can also, I think, see indications of Wah's new lean toward the biographical. Saskatchewan is not simply a place, but also a *sign*, something that "points

to" the personal history Wah begins to evoke here, marked in the following line by Wah's citation of his family's European and Chinese surnames: "Erickson Wah Trimble" (3).

Wah's new sense of a changing political context for his work—one that we might retrospectively label Asian Canadian, even if that label was not entirely available to Wah himself as he wrote this poem—can be glimpsed in the poem's striking statement that the location it evokes is "the most political place I know" (3). If we see this as a moment—perhaps *the* moment—of the emergence of an Asian Canadian politics in Wah's poetry, then it is worth making two crucial observations about this moment.

The first is that the politics invoked here is an explicitly transnational and multiethnic one. Swift Current is not itself an "origin," but a place where different origins and countries "converged." It is a meeting point of "europe asia," and Wah's refusal to capitalize either term or to place punctuation between them suggests a fluidity and continuity that differs strikingly from, say, a more conventional narrative in which the "Asian" immigrant arrives in, and is defined in opposition to, "European" North America. The troika of family names, "Erickson Wah Trimble," alludes to Wah's own mixed-race heritage, but also establishes Wah's Saskatchewan as a multi-ethnic space, a subject Wah will return to later in the collection.

The nation, however, is strikingly absent as an identifying location. Although Saskatchewan is named repeatedly, Canada is not. When the speaker wonders of his family, "why on earth would they land in such a place," that place is defined not in national but geological terms, "mass of Pleistocene / sediment plate wedge" (3). While this geological framing is characteristic of Wah's earlier work, in this context, its explicitly prehistoric orientation displaces the modern nation as the primary label for this space. So, while Wah's Swift Current is explicitly defined through its transnational flows, its status as a "Canadian" space is left undefined.

The second point to note is that, unlike in works such as *Obasan*, Wah's engagement with Asian Canadian politics is not primarily a *narrative* one. In his interview with Susan Rudy, Wah remarks that although the shifting contexts of the late 1970s provided an opportunity for him to delve into his personal history, he remained skeptical about exploring that history in narrative form:

> Well, I wasn't a storyteller. I wasn't a prose writer and I had always been suspicious of story because story is something that had been very much controlled by the "mainstream," by the West, a British inheritance. I had been able to undermine that for myself in poetry because poetry is language-based, whereas story is much more context-based. (149)

Wah frames his rejection of narrative as both an aesthetic and a political choice, identifying "story" with a British colonial heritage and proposing poetry's focus on language as a means of critiquing that heritage. What Wah offers as an alternative to narrative is the experimental, language-oriented aesthetic he derives in large part from the Black Mountain poets, thus using the influence of the US poetic avant-garde as a means of critiquing Canada's colonial heritage. It's important to note, however, that this resistance to narrative is distinctive to Wah's conception of Asian Canadian writing, diverging both from the narrative work of Asian Canadian novelists like Kogawa and from the post-confessional and largely narrative aesthetic of many Asian American poets of the same period.[5]

Memory for Wah is not a process of recounting a story, but of positioning the self with regard to a place, as the speaker presents himself as "waiting / for Saskatchewan to appear for me again" (3). The speaker juxtaposes his own body with the landscape in a manner reminiscent of Wah's earlier poem "Mountain," as the "huge sky" and the "mass" of the mountains press against the speaker's body with surprising intimacy: "the hard edge of it sits on my forehead" (3). But unlike in "Mountain," where speaker and landscape interpenetrate as the mountain is incorporated into the speaker's body, in this poem speaker and landscape exist in a new tension, as the speaker regards the landscape "as if the mass owed me such appearance," and the poem concludes: "it still owes me, it does" (3). What is it that the landscape "owes" the speaker? The debt is never specified, but the surging up of autobiographical material in the poem suggests that it is this transnational history the speaker wishes to recover: "I want it back" (3). The recovery of that history will not be the completion of a story, but the making whole of the speaker's own body ("my body to get complete"), a trope that is congruent with Wah's longstanding examination of the links of landscape and body. It is this "waiting," then, that constitutes the poem's politics; this history is not something the speaker can command through narration, but must wait for the landscape to grant to him. Yet the political necessity and urgency of this recovery is expressed in the language of owing and debt, in the impatience of "it still owes me, it does." The impulse to relate personal history—a task that had become politically pressing in the early 1980s with the redress movement and beyond—runs up against Wah's skepticism of narrative and story, leaving the poet in a posture of "waiting" for the landscape of his childhood to yield up its history in a way that can be communicated through the body: in short, an embodied history rather than a narrated one.

The remainder of *Waiting for Saskatchewan* is a struggle to find a *formal* solution to this political dilemma. Wah's movement toward prose poetry as the collection develops might on the surface appear to be a concession to narrative. But a closer look at the *range* of forms with which Wah experiments in this collection shows that the struggle for an embodied history leads Wah to increasingly complex poetic forms that, like his Saskatchewan, embody the convergence of transnational forces that constitute his Asian Canadian aesthetics.

It is in the second section of *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, "Grasp the Sparrow's Tail," where Wah truly begins his formal investigation of an Asian Canadian aesthetic as he chronicles a trip with his family to China. It would be simple enough to read this as a return to origins, a reversal of the diasporic arrow that brings a writer of Chinese descent closer to his heritage. But the form Wah chooses for "Grasp," I argue, marks it as an *Asian* Canadian text, one that registers the transnational and cross-ethnic nature of such a category while also signalling the broader North American context in which the category emerges.

In a prefatory note to *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, Wah writes that "Grasp the Sparrow's Tail" is "a *utanikki,* a poetic diary of mixed prose and poetry" (n. pag.). This Japanese poetic form has been adapted by a number of Canadian poets, including Daphne Marlatt and bpNichol.[6] Wah cites the earliest exemplar of the poetic diary, the tenth-century Tosa Diary (or *Tosa Nikki*), in one of the sequence's early poems. Wah's version of the *utanikki* is a dialogic form in which short, diaristic prose entries are paired with more explicitly poetic passages, either in prose or verse:

> *Friday the 20th August in Beijing*
> *Touring the city. Lotus fields everywhere. Look at the hats they wear. Everything happiness and longevity.*
>
> At the Summer Palace the peach
> the symbol of "lucre"
> each picture different
> from the classics
> 5,000—no repetition (54)

As Susan Fisher remarks in her article "Japanese Elements in the Poetry of Fred Wah and Roy Kiyooka," it is tempting to read Wah's adoption of Asian forms as an extension of his growing interest in his own Asian heritage: "[C]onnections between Japanese literature and the work of Asian Canadian writers are usually explained as reflections of ethnicity" (94). But of course, as Fisher points out, such an argument runs into the awkward

fact that Wah's ancestry is not Japanese: "Whatever aesthetic a Canadian-born person of Chinese ancestry might unconsciously absorb from the conversation of parents or grandparents, it is not a Japanese one" (100). Although Fisher concludes from this fact that there is "no particular 'politics of ethnicity'" in Wah's work (101), Lily Cho critiques Fisher's conclusion as assuming a "transparency to the racialization of Wah's writing," driven by "an ethnographic desire" (83). Instead, Cho argues for a more complex examination of the "relationship between race and aesthetics" (83). Wah's use of a Japanese form to recount a trip to China does indeed disrupt a simplistic notion of diasporic or Asian Canadian poetics in which Wah's work can be examined for its diasporic Chinese influences, but I argue, following Cho, that it points toward a more complex relationship between *race* and form. The apparent "disconnect" between form and content in "Grasp" pushes the reader away from "natural," *ethnic* connections toward a *racialized* transnational and coalitional mode of reading.

Wah offers a clue to his own path to Japanese-inspired poetic forms in a poem describing a stop in Japan before continuing on to China: "*Dreaming in Tokyo. The margins of the page, the limits the 'boundary walker' and Duncan's Shinto gate, the arche, the architecture, the roof beam (?), prime, oriental ridge pole*" (37). Here, Wah references one of his most important mentors, the poet Robert Duncan; the particular allusion is to Duncan's *Passages* 23, "Benefice":

the sun

on the horizon
in the West

(setting)
rises

thru the Shinto Gate
as at Stonehenge the Mid-Winter Sun

rise a message

from the Orient West of us (76)

That Wah sees Tokyo through the lens of a Duncan poem reminds us that the US avant-garde tradition from which his aesthetic emerges is one that is already deeply influenced by Japanese culture. What might initially appear to be a return to Wah's Asian "roots" instead points toward a much more complex transnational poetics, in which Asian poetic influences are already present in the "American" aesthetic from which Wah draws.

There may be yet another way to understand Wah's turn to Japanese forms, one that points toward the cross-ethnic coalitions that characterize the emergent category of the Asian Canadian. As Wah notes, one of the primary sources of his own turn toward issues of race and ethnicity was the example of Japanese Canadian political and literary activism. Since the belief that "form is never more than the extension of content" is central to Wah's aesthetic, we can conclude that Wah perceives a necessary relationship between the content of "Grasp the Sparrow's Tail"—a trip to China, and the search for the Chinese father that is at its core—and its Japanese-inspired form. In this link of Chinese content and Japanese form, then, we might read a political allegory of Wah's emerging sense of the link between Chinese and Japanese Canadians that leads to the developing category of the Asian Canadian. The routing of these Japanese influences through American poetics further reinforces this idea, presenting Asian poetic forms not as exotic and foreign, but as already having migrated to and taken up residence within North American writing. The nexus of Chinese, Japanese, and American influences thus makes "Grasp the Sparrow's Tail" a transnational space, but one that allegorizes the cultural location of Asian Canadians.

Paradoxically, this moment of Asian Canadian emergence takes place entirely outside of Canada. It is only through his travels in China that the speaker seems able to "find" his late father. Touring Hong Kong, he "start[s] taking notes re places I've seen my father since he died" (39); upon reaching Guangzhou, "I see my father everywhere" (41). Here, the dialogic form of the *utanikki*, in which the speaker's diaristic musings are followed by a kind of poetic riffing on the topics raised, disrupts what might otherwise become a straightforward narration of the speaker's travels. Perhaps most importantly, Wah uses the dialogic form to open up a transnational space of memory, as the speaker follows his observations of "seeing" his father in Guangzhou with a more expansive evocation of the father's departure from and return to Canada:

> You would have had to learn Cantonese
> just as you acquired Canadian prairie world view age 5.
> Must have hurt to have to find new boyhood lingo
> (no silence)
> then at 19 to relearn English Swift Current
> Elite Cafe sufficiency. What tax on your life
> left you with all that angry language world inside
> and from China too (silent) (41)

It is the encounter with the father in China that seems to allow Wah to enter, at least speculatively, the experiences of the father in Canada. What the speaker

encounters in his father's experience, however, is not a straightforward narrative of memory but an "angry language world," focused on his Canadian-born father's experience of having to learn Cantonese upon being taken to China at age five, then having to "relearn" English upon his return to Canada at age nineteen. Moreover, that world remains inaccessible to the speaker, "inside" the father and "silent."

This transnational encounter, and the glimpse of the "language world" of the father that it enables, is also what allows the speaker himself to begin to describe his own Asian Canadian position, a position for which the form of the *utanikki* provides space. Two poems later, the speaker describes telling his tour group and guides that "*my father was sent here as a child to be raised and educated by his Chinese relatives*" (43). Contained within the italicized, diaristic section of the poem, this recitation of the bare facts of the father's biography proves inadequate to establish the speaker's identity; since the mixed-race speaker does not *look* Chinese, his claim is rejected by his listeners: "You were part Chinese I tell them. / They look at me. I'm pulling their leg" (43). How, then, is the speaker to articulate his own disputed, invisible Chineseness? Again, the dialogic form of the *utanikki* provides the answer. The verse lines that form the poem's second half create an open space of poetic response to the narrative facts of biography. Just as the father's Chinese Canadian experience can be found in his "angry language world," the speaker locates his Chineseness not phenotypically, but linguistically: "So I'm Chinese too and that's why my name is Wah" (43). And if identity is not merely genetic but also linguistic—written—then it can be rewritten, available to the creative intervention of the poet. This insight leads Wah to one of his pithiest statements of identity as an open and creative process: "When you're not 'pure' you just make it up" (43).

What these first two sections of *Waiting for Saskatchewan* sketch out is a transnational path toward an articulation of what we might call an Asian Canadian identity, both in content and in form. The figure of the father, at first circumscribed in the local space of Saskatchewan, is opened up and made accessible as a poetic subject through the speaker's travel to Asia. But access to the father's "angry language world" also requires a formal intervention through the Japanese form of the *utanikki*—an influence that points as much to Wah's American precursors and the context of Japanese Canadian activism as to ancestral origins. And it is also this formal intervention that allows the speaker to begin to locate himself with regard to his father, using the tenuous linguistic connection of his surname as a grounds for "making up" his own identity.

The remaining two sections of *Waiting for Saskatchewan* "return" to Canada, but reflect a new opening of content and form. The third section, "Elite," takes its name from the café in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, run by the speaker's family. In his prefatory note, Wah describes his use of the prose poem here as an extension of his experiment with the *utanikki*, as it "explores further the tenuous division between those two genres [prose and poetry] in working with the prose poem" (n. pag.). The pieces in "Elite" appear more conventionally narrative than almost anything in Wah's previous work: "I was driving across the prairies on New Year's eve last year and we decided to stop for the night in Swift Current. It was close to midnight and so we thought we'd welcome in the New Year in a pub downtown. I hadn't been there for over thirty years but I felt natural in following Central Ave. to the old train station" (59). But Wah also signals that he does not intend to use prose narrative for conventionally autobiographical purposes. Having responded to the inaccessibility of his father's language world through an embrace of the aesthetic of "making it up," he immediately signals the self-consciously fictive nature of his historical investigation: "I know all these 'facts' existed once, and I could check some of them out . . . somehow I don't want it or need it. The facts seem partially unreal" (59). The prose of "Elite" is a speculative space in which the speaker imagines his father's experiences and emotions, often by projecting himself into them:

> I know when you came back from China you must have felt more Chinese than anything else. . . . 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. (62)

While the opening poems emphasized Saskatchewan as a signifier, one whose meaning is always deferred—"waiting for Saskatchewan"—"Elite" brings with it a new assertion that "Swift Current Saskatchewan is at the centre" (59). But if Swift Current is a "centre," it is not an "origin," but a node of diasporic flows: "The ethnicity here feels so direct. I mean the Chinese are still connected to China, the Ukrainians so Ukrainian, in the bar the Icelanders tell stories about Iceland, the Swede still has an accent, the French speak French. Here you're either a Wiebe or a Friesen, or not. What is a Metis, anyway?" (62). At first glance, we might see here an idyll of a multicultural, diasporic Canada, in which the integrity of different cultures is preserved in a Canadian space. But Wah quickly makes clear that this landscape of managed ethnic particularity is *not* one in which the father, or the speaker himself, feels at home:

> But I remember you saying later that the Chinese didn't trust you and the English didn't trust you. . . . 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. So you felt single, outside, though you played the game as we all must. To be a mix here on the prairies is still noticed. . . . I don't think you felt there was anyone else in the world like you. (62)

Wah punctures multiculturalism with a blunt acknowledgement of *racial* hierarchy: "white is still the standard." "Ethnic community" here is as much an exclusive as an inclusive force, and the relationship among ethnic and racial groups is a "game" all are compelled to play. The condition of being "a mix" is, of course, one the speaker shares with his father, and it complicates any straightforward sense of belonging within a diasporic community, while also alienating the speaker and his father from the space of "the prairies" that could otherwise provide a grounding.

If the dialogic form of the *utanikki* lays the groundwork for a dialogic, transnational frame for Asian Canadianness, "Elite" seeks to "re-centre" Asian Canadian identity in the landscape of Swift Current, using prose narrative as the vehicle for an autobiographical exploration of memory. But Wah also uses the prose poem form to critique the closure of narrative, replacing the recitation of facts with a more speculative space. The last two poems of "Elite" dramatize this rejection of narrative closure by dispensing with periods. Each unfolds in a single run-on sentence that incorporates the projective qualities of Wah's earlier aesthetic into a prose form that includes autobiography and history without narrativizing them. The prose form developed in "Elite" will become the form used a decade later in Wah's most widely read treatment of Asian Canadianness, *Diamond Grill*. Thus, while *Diamond Grill* is most often cited by critics as the urtext of Wah's exploration of Asian Canadian identity, *Diamond Grill* is in fact extending a proto-Asian Canadian aesthetic pioneered in *Waiting for Saskatchewan*.

It is characteristic of Wah that this turn toward prose is not the book's final gesture, but is instead followed by another dialogical form, that of the *haibun*. Like the *utanikki*, the *haibun* is a Japanese poetic form that has been widely adopted by North American writers. Wah also describes his version of the *haibun* as a mixed-genre form of "short prose written from a haiku sensibility and, in this case, concluded by an informal haiku line" (n. pag.). Although, as Susan Fisher notes, there are significant differences between Wah's use of the form and its Japanese original,[7] Wah's evocation of a "haiku sensibility" again routes the question of "Asian" identity through poetic form.

The "sensibility" Wah seeks is not one identified with a particular culture (of which Wah himself might not be a part), but one identified with a particular poetic form, and one that may be altered with new poetic interventions.

This final section, titled "This Dendrite Map: Father/Mother Haibun," can in some ways be seen as completing the integration of Wah's earlier aesthetic with his new interest in Asian Canadian concerns. "This Dendrite Map" returns to the lyric preoccupations and post-Black Mountain style of Wah's earlier work, with an emphasis on the first person and a fluidity of syntax that blurs boundaries between the self and other, between the self and landscape: "you, my father, almost too, thus me, such particles caught in the twig-jam holding the water back impedimenta and this dendrite map I'm finally on now for no reason but time" (75). But in contrast to *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail*, where the prose sections take on a more conventionally diaristic form, in "This Dendrite Map" both the prose and poetic sections of each poem share a lyric sensibility and style. The prose sections emphasize interiority and, unlike the prose of the preceding sections, most frequently take the form of run-on statements without periods. The "haiku line" that concludes each section is set off in boldface, and superficially they appear most like Wah's work of the 1970s: simple, direct statements often evoking landscapes: "Smoke sits on the lake, frost tonight, eyes thinking" (94).

We might understand "This Dendrite Map," and *Waiting for Saskatchewan* more generally, as providing a retrospective, and revisionist, genealogy of Wah's aesthetic. If earlier in his career, Wah's work was often read through its US antecedents, the positioning of his lyric lines at the end of prose passages that evoke his own negotiations with family history provides a very different context for that aesthetic, placing his work within an expansive transnational framework that includes Chinese heritage and Japanese forms in addition to US and Canadian influences. In short, "This Dendrite Map" shows Wah newly understanding his own aesthetic as a possible answer to the *formal* questions presented by his father's and his own racialized experiences. The "wordgame" of poetry, as Wah puts it in "Father/Mother Haibun #12," is nothing more—and nothing less—than a "strategy to get truth's attention" (87).

Perhaps the most significant value of returning to *Waiting for Saskatchewan* for insight into the emergence of the Asian Canadian is the very complexity of the model Wah offers. It is the *distinctive* convergence of transnational flows in Wah's book that resonates with Iyko Day's call for "categorical self-possession" in Asian Canadian studies (45). And the range of forms employed in *Waiting for Saskatchewan* challenges what Lily Cho calls the

assumption of "transparency to the racialization of Wah's writing" that may result from limiting our view to a single, more narrative text like *Diamond Grill.* In short, Wah's formal experimentation in *Waiting for Saskatchewan* offers a highly nuanced and complex *theorizing* of the Asian Canadian as a transnational, racialized category at the very moment of its emergence.

NOTES

1 The Asian Canadian framework did not, of course, arise in an academic vacuum; Goellnicht places the emergence of the category in the context of the discourse of Canadian official multiculturalism from the 1970s onward, as well as of ongoing critiques of multiculturalism.
2 See Yu, "Transnationalism and Diaspora in American Poetry."
3 In "Denationalization Reconsidered," Sau-ling C. Wong observes that even in the 1960s and 1970s, Asian American studies "was already witness to much critical interest beyond the domestic American scene" (127), including the "inherently transnational" struggle against the Vietnam War (128). She quotes Sucheta Mazumdar's assertion that "the very genesis of Asian American studies was international" (128).
4 See Louis Cabri's discussion of the way Wah's poetry "offers lyricism—without lyricism's I-centric, i-dentical iteration of poetic voice" (xiii) in *The False Laws of Narrative*, as well as Iyko Day's argument that "Despite his disjunctive formal style, Wah nevertheless commits to an author-situated rather than subjectless exploration of race, ethnicity, and class experience" ("Interventing" 42). Wah's critical negotiation with lyric is part of the *Tish* poets' wider interest in going beyond the lyric tradition, and can also be understood as extending the poetic project of Canadian modernism. In "E. J. Pratt and the McGill Poets," Adrian Fowler cites Northrop Frye's assertion that Pratt "rudely shattered" the Romantic lyric, creating "unsentimental" and "unromantic" portraits of nature (274), while David Staines, in his chapter on "Poetry" in *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature,* remarks on the emphasis on "the unadorned language of everyday speech" in the work of writers such as Pratt, A. J. M. Smith, and F. R. Scott (141).
5 For a more extensive discussion of the relationship of Asian American poetry to the mainstream US post-confessional aesthetic, see my *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965,* especially Chapter 5.
6 Joanne Saul's *Writing the Roaming Subject* discusses Marlatt's use of the poetic diary form (59), while Susan Fisher remarks on the links between the *utanikki* and Nichol's *The Martyrology* (100).
7 Fisher observes that there are "obvious differences" between Wah's *haibun* and the *haibun* of the form's most famed practitioner, Basho, most notably in Basho's much more explicit link between the prose and poetry sections. Without Wah's labelling of this form as *haibun,* Fisher argues, "readers would never think of comparing it" with Basho (97).

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