

## Asian Kanadian, Eh?

**A**s the peculiarly Canadian interrogatory mode of my title indicates, in this paper I raise a number of questions concerning the dynamics of Asian Canadian canon formation, complicate and problematize those questions, but offer speculative rather than definitive answers. Specifically, I explore certain aspects of the Asian Canadian literary canon by focusing on Roy Kiyooka and Fred Wah, two highly successful writers whose creative works have gained a good deal of critical acclaim but have not, until relatively recently, emerged as central texts in the literary tradition that resides under the signifier “Asian Canadian.” Kiyooka’s and Wah’s careers pose a number of significant questions about canon formation and about the efficacy of being identified under a rubric—“Asian Canadian literature”—defined by race/ethnicity and by cultural nationalism and grounded in identity politics, at a time when the postnational, the transnational, the postethnic, and the global appear to be in the ascendancy, at least in academic circles.

What has the term “Asian Canadian” meant in a literary and broader cultural context? What might it mean in the future? Who is served by the use of this term? These questions, among others, have been opened for discussion by Roy Miki in his productively provocative article “Altered States: Global Currents, the Spectral Nation, and the Production of ‘Asian Canadian,’” in which he places Kiyooka at the centre of his meditation on how global flows have thrown into crisis Canada’s conception of itself and in which he explores “the critical limits of ‘Asian Canadian’” as a category of identification in the hope that the field may be reconfigured “to instigate alternative

forms of collectivity” (43, 53). Entering into dialogue with Miki’s essay, I will argue that Kiyooka’s and Wah’s ambiguous, multiply hybridized situations make for a politics of race that is less binarist or explicit, and more nuanced, than the identity politics that we have come to associate with the model of Asian American literature and culture that has had such a profound influence in a broad North American context. Kiyooka’s and Wah’s peculiarly local and transnational concerns have also been at odds with the thrust of cultural nationalism that has, until recently, dominated Asian North American cultural production and criticism. Further, their often difficult multi-generic experiments and their particular concern with innovative uses of language explain in part their belated recognition as Asian Canadian artists, but these very experiments constitute, to a considerable degree, Kiyooka’s and Wah’s racial politics.

The formation of a literary canon is, of course, a complex and ongoing process involving a number of forces—cultural, political, social, economic, and ideological—whose interplay results in the valuing and reproduction of certain verbal artifacts and the devaluing and ignoring of others.<sup>1</sup> According to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the formation of a “minor literature,” by which they mean an ethnic minority literary tradition, depends upon a particularly heightened set of characteristics that include “the deterritorialization of language,” or the use of the dominant language by the diasporic minority, “the connection of the individual to a political immediacy” so that “everything in [minority literatures] is political,” and “the collective assemblage of enunciation” so that “literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation” against the hegemony of the dominant culture (59–61). Adapting Deleuze and Guattari’s argument to canon formation, I would suggest that those texts that have normally risen to canonical status in a minority tradition are politically charged in fairly overt ways—usually in the themes that they tackle—and resonate in a profound fashion with the minority community so that they are deemed to speak with the voice of the collective.<sup>2</sup>

The nexus of factors that has formed the still relatively young and quite small Asian Canadian canon will become clearer, I trust, as my argument concerning Kiyooka and Wah unfolds. One of the most significant of those factors has been the value that the Asian Canadian community, the racial “collective,” has placed on certain texts, but academic scholars have also played a strong role in shaping the canon with their preferences. In his discussion of racial minority canons, Henry Louis Gates Jr. goes so far as to

assert that “Scholars make canons” (38).<sup>3</sup> While I would not endorse such a categorical statement—the power of scholars seems to me to be more mediated than Gates admits—I should acknowledge that I belong to a scholarly community that has had a hand in shaping the Asian Canadian canon, and thus I shoulder some of the “blame” for the omissions and lacunae that I will describe here. I would also stress that my views are those of an Ontarian, with the attendant biases and blind spots of that centrist location. I make this announcement because one of the peculiar aspects of examining criticism on the work of Kiyooka in particular and Wah to a lesser degree is how much it has been treated as a western Canadian phenomenon, the project of western scholars. As Kiyooka himself states in response to the centrist-nationalist perspective of Margaret Atwood’s *Survival*, “Its my belief that WE who abide in the Westcoast do propose another take” (*TransCanada Letters* n. pag.). Or, to put it more bluntly, central Canadian critics are guilty of not paying enough attention to these important writers.<sup>4</sup>

I should also acknowledge that some of the questions I raise here have been posed previously, in somewhat different form, by Roy Miki in reference to Kiyooka and by Jeff Derksen in reference to Wah. In “Inter-Face: Roy Kiyooka’s Writing” (1991), Miki observes that, “On the road map of designated sites along the transCanada canonical way, there won’t (likely) be a sign for the writer-Kiyooka, even though the painter-Kiyooka has now been inscribed in Canadian art history. . . . [E]xcept for a few sideways glances in his direction, Kiyooka remains a neglected figure” (54). Although an important conference devoted to Kiyooka’s writing and art was held in 1999, resulting in the collection of essays *All Amazed: For Roy Kiyooka* (one of which is by Miki), the situation that Miki describes has changed only slowly since 1991.<sup>5</sup> In “Making Race Opaque: Fred Wah’s Poetics of Opposition and Differentiation” (1996), Jeff Derksen outlines a similar, if more focused, set of issues related to Wah:

In the more than thirty years Fred Wah has been publishing in Canada, his work has not—until very recently—been read by the critics and poets who have written about his work as reflective of or embodying his working-class Chinese-Canadian background. To articulate the cultural context that has elided the racial content of his work and identified him primarily as a member of the *Tish* writers is to unravel the tightly wound thread of national identity, national literature and the roles of official culture and multiculturalism in Canada. (63)

While acknowledging Derksen’s argument as valuable and enabling, I wish to suggest some alternative “answers” or speculations in exploring the issue of race in relation to Wah and Kiyooka and to pursue further the question

of how we have read these writers, how we may read them in the future, and how reading them under the rubric “Asian Canadian” may productively shift our understanding of that term.<sup>6</sup>

**R**oy Kenzie Kiyooka, a Japanese Canadian born in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, in 1926, was displaced to Alberta as an “enemy alien” during World War II, before he had finished high school. After the war, in the late 1940s, he attended the Institute of Technology and Art in Calgary to study painting, and then he studied art further in Mexico in the mid-1950s before returning to Canada to take up various teaching posts. In 1959, while teaching at Regina College, the University of Saskatchewan he came under the influence of the famous abstract expressionist painter Barnett Newman and committed himself to the rigorous precepts and methods of international modernism. He moved to Vancouver, the city with which he is closely identified, in 1961 and was galvanized by, and in turn had a profound influence on, the emerging local artistic scene. At the height of his powers as a painter in the 1960s, Kiyooka was one of Canada’s preeminent abstract expressionists: he won the silver medal for painting at the Sao Paulo Bienale in Brazil in 1965, represented Canada at the Osaka World’s Fair in Japan in 1970, and was awarded the Order of Canada in 1978. In 1969–70, however, angered by the international marketing machine that he perceived as having taken over the art world—and, I suspect, by his growing awareness of the imperialism and racism of the West towards Asia at the height of the Vietnam War—he suddenly abandoned painting and modernism, turning instead to postmodern photography, performance art, and poetry as his preferred modes of expression until his death in 1994 after a long career teaching at the University of British Columbia. In rejecting modernist painting, he recognized that the “fame game as it pertained to a Japanese Canadian artist was just another attenuated form of cultural alienation: I’d clobbered together a belated aspirant’s modernist aesthetic, one that intrinsically denied my asian kanadian origins and those immediately around me” (qtd. in Miki, Afterword 317).

Kiyooka’s work in the 1960s and the early 1970s is difficult to categorize; he certainly did not wear the label of “asian kanadian” artist unproblematically. Kiyooka was heavily influenced as a poet during this period by the New Americanists Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, and Charles Olson, who belonged to the Black Mountain school of poetry, but his work also reaches across the Pacific to deal with issues of transnational, global capital and

the treatment of labour in Japan, as Scott McFarlane has demonstrated in his insightful analysis of *StoneDGloves* (1970). At the same time, Kiyooka firmly believed in the immediate experience of the artistic moment, in the intense presentness of art,<sup>7</sup> and he remained intimately associated with—even central to—the local scene of avant-garde poetry and performance in Vancouver. He was closely connected to the Vancouver poets who founded the *Tish* poetry newsletter at UBC in the early 1960s, a group that included Frank Davey, George Bowering, David Dawson, Jamie Reid, and Fred Wah, and that gained national prominence despite its stress on the local. Kiyooka himself became increasingly drawn into nation formation projects as he moved on to Montreal for Expo '67 and then represented Canada at Expo '70 in Japan. Once he abandoned painting and returned to Vancouver, however, his local embeddedness made him, as Roy Miki suggests, an especially apt figure for an “Asian Canadian” designation “approached as a ‘localism’ that exceeds the ‘nation’” (“Altered States” 56).

It was Miki who pushed for the inclusion of Kiyooka at the “inception” of Asian Canadian literature *qua* Asian Canadian literature, with the publication of *Inalienable Rice: A Chinese and Japanese Canadian Anthology* in 1979. This seminal anthology, the result of years of work by grassroots groups in Vancouver, includes an interview with Kiyooka by Miki in which Miki’s somewhat leading questions attempt to fit Kiyooka into a “Japanese Canadian” identity.<sup>8</sup> Brief selections of Kiyooka’s poetry have also appeared in venues clearly identified as Asian Canadian such as *Paper Doors: An Anthology of Japanese-Canadian Poetry* (1981) and a special issue of *West Coast Review* on *The Asian-Canadian and the Arts* (1981), which also contains Kiyooka’s essay “We Asian North Americanos: A Unhistorical ‘Take’ on Growing Up Yellow in a White World.” Some of Kiyooka’s photographs were included in the groundbreaking art exhibition *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered*, which toured Canada in 1990–91, showcasing “photo, film and video work by twenty-five Asian Canadians” (Paul Wong, Preface 4). But it was not until Miki edited *Pacific Windows: Collected Poems of Roy K. Kiyooka* (1997), which won the Poetry Award from the Association for Asian American Studies, that Kiyooka’s writing found a truly secure place in the Asian Canadian literary canon. This is, of course, a posthumous place as Kiyooka died in 1994 without having gained enough recognition as an “Asian Canadian” writer despite Miki’s sustained effort to insert him into the emerging tradition. One factor that we need to recognize is that Kiyooka’s prominence was gained too early for this designation, which became

commonly used only in the 1990s, although the tradition and even the term signifying this panethnic identity formation was clearly emerging among artists and activists in the 1970s and 1980s (see Beauregard, "Emergence"; and Goellnicht, "Long Labour").

Although much of the work that established an "Asian Canadian literature" went on in Vancouver in the 1970s, resulting in the founding of the Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop in 1979, Kiyooka himself seems to have been ambivalent about grounding his artistic identity in concepts of race and ethnicity. He was acutely aware of race and racism in Canada, having experienced an abrupt end to his high school education in 1942 when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and the Canadian government interned Japanese Canadians as "enemy aliens." Miki suggests that it was Kiyooka's appearance as Canada's representative at the Osaka World's Fair in 1970 that solidified his sense of being a racialized subject ("Altered States" 52). This overt racialization by the state probably galvanized Kiyooka into recognizing that as a Japanese Canadian he was always already an other, that he could never simply be a "normal" or unmarked Canadian (Euro, white, male, heterosexual), that he could not operate simply as an artist, part of the predominantly white groups of painters to which he belonged.<sup>9</sup> As he remarked of himself in an interview with Miki, "You are of it [Canada], and you are not, and you know that very clearly" ("Inter-Face" 71). It is not surprising, then, that at this point he abandoned painting and the modernist ideology of a universalism that was in fact specifically Eurocentric.

His sense of alienation from "home" emerges strongly in a 1975 interview that Kiyooka gave for the retrospective of his art organized and circulated by the Vancouver Art Gallery, *Roy K. Kiyooka: 25 Years*. When asked by the interviewer, Chris Varley, about his "Japanese heritage," Kiyooka responds with a moving account of his trip to Japan in 1963, but he concludes with a rejection of the "Japanese" label: "I'm truly bored with labels, what they pre-empt, and i'm sick of having my origins fingered. Its as though an utterly 'Canadian' experience couldn't embrace either ocean and what lies on the far side of each. Or a Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan" (*Roy K. Kiyooka* n. pag.). With astonishing prescience, Kiyooka argues for a Canadian identity rooted in both the *local*—Moose Jaw—and the *transnational*, reaching across the ocean to include his Japanese ancestry. He insists that this transpacific cultural connection is as important as the transatlantic connections that have been credited as the foundations of Canadian culture and identity by the dominant society. He refuses to be limited by such an identity, claiming for

his inheritance the reach across either ocean or both oceans to include his Japanese heritage and the influences of European modernism on his art. He boldly asserts an identity that Miki so accurately describes as “a ‘localism’ that exceeds the ‘nation’” (“Altered States” 56). His is a self-fashioned, expansive identity remarkably different from the state-based “national” one being articulated by central Canadian artists and critics (e.g., Margaret Atwood, D.G. Jones, and Northrop Frye) at the time, based largely on inward-looking distinction from the United States; it may also have been an identity that, in its diasporic sensibility, was too far ahead of the ethnic nationalism of the time for Kiyooka to have been embraced by or to embrace a strictly “Asian North American” or “Asian Canadian” identity as it was articulated by most activists.<sup>10</sup>

The transpacific hybridity and Pacific Rim exchange that Kiyooka adumbrates in his essays and talks are also evident in his poetry from the earliest stages. In “Itinerary of a View” from *Kyoto Airs*, published in 1964, Kiyooka identifies himself as “a Canadian painter / come home [to Japan] to pay homage / to ancestors, samurai among them,” but he finds that these ancestors’

children’s children gad about  
in red high heels, twisting to Ray Charles  
and ride together on black motorcycles  
to the Chion-in temple, where in the  
tall green grass between dead men’s graves  
they kiss the summer nights away (*Pacific Windows* 23)

The youth of postwar Japan are in many ways like their counterparts in postwar North America. But these treatments of race, ethnic, and national identity are relatively rare in the poetry at this stage, buried amid poems on love, nature, art, and, most important, language. An example of a later poem in which race erupts and his Pacific Rim identity emerges is “Of Seasonable Pleasures and Small Hindrances,” which first appeared in *TransCanada Letters* (1975):

. . . “I” hereby swear  
with my right hand on King James’ version of the Holy Writ  
to remember all the Disenfranchisements of the  
War Measures Act. together with the WASP supremacy of  
the Mackenzie King era and furthermore I suggest  
we let the Pope save P.E. Trudeau from further pedestrian  
discomfitures. “Viva la Two Solitudes” . . . I  
thought thinking of myself under a third no less conspicuous  
pacific pilgrim’s solitude (*Pacific Windows* 100–01)

Implementation of the War Measures Act in Quebec in 1970 triggers memories of the earlier invoking of the War Measures Act by Mackenzie King to intern and deport Japanese Canadians during World War II. Pierre Elliott Trudeau, the architect of Canadian multiculturalism as state policy in the early 1970s and the invoker of the 1970 War Measures Act, is coupled by Kiyooka to Mackenzie King as prime ministers of intolerance. “Tolerant” Canada is less so than it pretends to be, its purported multicultural inclusiveness undone by a narrow nationalism that continues to define itself in relation to the others that it excludes or contains and constrains. Identifying with the oppressed French Canadians, Kiyooka conceives of himself as belonging to a “third solitude,” a transnational “pacific pilgrim.” Still, he agonizes over limiting himself to the category of racialized artist/writer; he remains reluctant to commit to an identity politics. In the interview for *Inalienable Rice*, he tells Miki that the thought of himself as a “Japanese Canadian” “never entered into the writing”: “I don’t think ‘the Japanese Canadian writer’ is important as a parsing of writers into groups” (“Roy Kiyooka” 60, 64).<sup>11</sup>

As late as May 1981, at a Japanese American–Japanese Canadian Symposium held in Seattle, Kiyooka, in a talk dedicated to Joy Kogawa and Tamio Wakayama, warned against what he perceived as a growing tendency to classify racialized minority authors solely by race and victimhood: “I don’t want to go on moanin’ the old ‘yellow peril’ blues the rest of my days. Gawd save us all from that fate” (“We Asian North Americanos” 16). In this complex thinking through of his subjectivity at the very time when the publication of *Obasan* was solidifying Kogawa’s public identity as “Japanese Canadian” and would soon establish her as a central figure in not just the Asian Canadian but also the Asian American canon, Kiyooka ponders the irony that English is the only language in which he can work and concludes that, “whatever my true colours, I am to all intents and purposes a white anglo saxon protestant, with a cleft tongue” (15). This “cleft tongue,” expressed almost as an afterthought but essential to his sense of self as other, sometimes leaves him feeling tongue tied, but at other times liberates him into speaking a hybrid English inflected with other languages. His “cleft tongue” encompasses not only rudimentary Japanese, “my first language, a language I began to acquire even as I suckled on [my mother’s] breast,” but also “the N[orth].A[merican]. Blackman’s (African slave) Blues” and “the cadences of silence” that Kiyooka shared with his father (16). His title, “We Asian North Americanos,” also gestures to potential linguistic—and political—alliances with Hispanic/Latino/Chicano culture in the Americas, not a



surprising position given that he came to value Mexican culture during his time studying art in Mexico.<sup>12</sup>

Kiyooka articulates, then, an identity that simultaneously and paradoxically expresses a deep sense of “displacement” that at times leaves him feeling “bereft,” and a deep sense of having inherited a rich hybrid language and culture that result from the traumatic history of North America, where cultures have clashed with often horrific results but where Kiyooka refuses to be limited by the horror. Rather, he seeks to ground his sense of self in the local, which at times he narrows even to the individual, insisting that he is “on the side of those who hold to the minority view that we have to attend to our own pulse and extend our own tenacities. . . . It’s right here that ‘art’ (in any tongue) can and does get into the act. . . . I want to insist that everybody is a bona fide member and an activist (each in their own way) in the ongoing histrionics of a given culture” (“We Asian North Americanos” 16–17). In his insistence that the Asian North American artist is an activist, Kiyooka links himself to the Asian North American movement and beyond, to the African American and Chicano movements; at the same time, he considered the experiments with language and the breaking of form that he practised to be a revolutionary act that challenges the aesthetic and political hegemony of the dominant culture.

Before turning from Kiyooka to Wah, I want to suggest that another one of Kiyooka’s subjects, his concern with Japanese labour as it operates in a transnational, global context, expressed in his complex work *StoneDGloves*, may also have emerged too early to gain the kind of attention that it deserves within Asian Canadian criticism. *StoneDGloves*, a photo-essay published in 1970, uncovers the exploitation of Japanese labour that is the dark underside of the global capitalism celebrated at Expo ’70 in Osaka, the site of the “meeting of East and West.” As Scott McFarlane argues, “Roy Kiyooka’s *StoneDGloves* insists that globalization’s ghosts are many and that they haunt especially those sites and centres of world trade whose stony architecture would trumpet a triumphant democracy. . . . Unnamed and unmastered, the ghostly operatives of globalization [Japanese labourers] ‘live on’ within cavernous ruins, amongst un-ravelling assemblages that generate a generalized terror” (117–18). There is nothing nostalgic about Kiyooka’s vision here, no sentimental longing for Japan as a site of lost origin or “home,” although the dedication “to Father & Masako” (his elder sister) depicts his four-month trip to Japan as “a-gain,” a type of return and a benefit. In the postscript, Canada is the “home” that the speaker is flying back to as he explains that “the photos show how / the gloves fell / from the hands of work-men”

“on-site at Expo ’70 / Osaka”; “the poems link glove / to glove” (*Pacific Windows* 91) in an attempt to unite these exploited labourers through art. In a final anti-capitalist gesture, a denunciation of ownership, a symbolic throwing down of the gauntlet, there is no copyright to this text, for “copyrights, like worn out gloves, are obsolete” (92), and Kiyooka’s name appears nowhere, not even on the title page. His gift to workers and readers is complete. The treatment of labour within transnational, global capitalism that we find in *StoneDGloves* has emerged as a central concern of criticism in Asian North American studies only in the past decade or so.<sup>13</sup> Kiyooka was too far ahead of his time for the prophetic, political nature of his art to have been widely recognized until McFarlane’s insightful analysis uncovered the implications of this important work.

**F**red Wah, one of Canada’s most respected poets, is also from Saskatchewan, born in Swift Current in 1939 to parents of Chinese-WASP and Scandinavian backgrounds, although he grew up in the West Kootenay region of British Columbia. As an English and music student at the University of British Columbia in the early 1960s, he was one of the founding editors of the *Tish* poetry newsletter. Like Kiyooka, he left Canada to undertake further study, in his case moving to the United States, where he took graduate work in literature and linguistics at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, studying under Robert Creeley, and at the State University of New York in Buffalo, where he worked with Charles Olson, the same New Americanist poets who influenced Kiyooka. Wah returned to Canada to teach creative writing at a number of western colleges and universities, most notably at the University of Calgary, where he had a long and distinguished career as an English professor. He published his first book of poetry, *Lardeau*, in 1965 and has since published another sixteen, winning the Governor General’s Literary Award for Poetry in 1986 for *Waiting for Saskatchewan* and the Stephanson Prize for Poetry from the Writers Guild of Alberta in 1992 for *So Far*. After *Tish*, Wah has continued his commitment to formative literary projects both “national” and “regional” such as the journals *Open Letter*, *West Coast Line*, and *SwiftCurrent*.

Wah’s early poetic career was very much tied in with the *Tish* group, and Jeff Derksen is right to emphasize that critical approaches to Wah’s work have been largely shaped by our understanding of this group. *Tish* as a literary movement had a profound influence on Canadian writing, turning it away from the humanism of the previous generation, with its focus on the

individual self, and toward a focus on “the details of language” (Gervais 9); it also embraced an international aesthetic at a time when nationalist poetics were ascendant in central Canada. According to Frank Davey, *Tish* concentrated on language because the “divine, mysteriously structured and essentially ungraspable” core of things can be apprehended in verse (qtd. in Gervais 8), where the spirit or “breath” of things emerges in pure sounds. Warren Tallman, a UBC professor who was the *Tishites*’ mentor, claims that, although they started off under the influence of the New Americanists or “projective” poets of the Black Mountain school, by the late 1960s they “were out from under the American influence into a Modernism of their own devising” (40). Their lead in stressing language above all else later developed into “sound” and “concrete” poetry.

I don’t want to rehearse here the debates over whether the poetry of the *Tish* group was imitative or un-Canadian; what I wish to stress is that, at a time in the early 1960s when literature focused on social and political issues, including issues of race, was growing in importance in the US, this group showed little interest in such issues. In his description of the significance of *Tish*, Davey emphasizes that the group was distinguished by “the sense of belonging to a specific geography, of belonging to the political and social life of that geography, of belonging to both a local community of writers and an international community of writers, of belonging to (rather than possessing and *using*) language, of being *at home* in place, community, and language” (Introduction 19). It seems particularly puzzling, then, that in the early 1960s, when *Tish* was formed, and still in 1976, when Davey wrote this assessment, “the political and social life” of Vancouver did not include a sense of its profoundly racist past (and present).

Wah’s and Kiyooka’s ethnicities did not go wholly unnoticed, however, but were taken up in a particular way by Tallman in his celebrated essay on the *Tish* group, “Wonder Merchants: Modernist Poetry in Vancouver during the 1960’s.” Tallman uses their ethnicities to cast Wah and Kiyooka in the role of exotic others in the group:

From his father’s side Wah inherited a half-strain of Chinese blood which may help account in him, as the Spanish in [William Carlos] Williams, for a certain “otherness” in attitude, perception and proprioception, a more direct awareness of where he is than his more exclusively North American fellow poets can quite command. (60)

Kiyooka’s Japanese origins, some inner eye for the fineness in things, may account for the strict formalizing impulse with which he lets words come into

place. If Kiyooka sees an object in an unusual or grotesque position he has no impulse to interfere. (67)

Apart from the blatant orientalizing impulses in this commentary, what strikes me, first, is that Wah's and Kiyooka's "Oriental" backgrounds are considered solely in terms of the uniqueness of their perceptions expressed in *language* and, second, that their ethnicities are considered to be types of pure inheritance from China and Japan. Political and social issues such as racism in *Canada* and a sense of Asians having a cultural history in *Canada* do not enter the discussions of their writings at this point. Tallman's approach of tracing Wah's Chineseness and Kiyooka's Japaneseness back to an aesthetic sensibility and artistic form plays a pivotal role in the way that the ethnicities of these two poets have often been read since.<sup>14</sup>

In his early published poetry, Wah did not deal explicitly with matters of race and ethnicity either; as Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy observe, "It would take many years . . . for Fred Wah to explore his personal/social history as a racialized subject" (56). His first five volumes, *Lardeau* (1965), *Mountain* (1967), *Among* (1972), *Tree* (1972), and *Earth* (1974), deal, as their single-word titles imply, with landscape; according to Bowering, they established Wah as "a poet who responds to the particulars of his ground with an eye to the singularity of each. . . . In no other writer's work are we able to find such an integration of consciousness & surroundings" (10–11). The poems in these early volumes betray no explicit interest in race matters; the biographical notes on the dust jackets make no mention of Chinese or any other ethnicity. Bowering's discussion of Wah's poetry up to 1980, when *Loki Is Buried at Smokey Creek* was published, deals primarily with landscape, language, and human consciousness, placing Wah in the context of mid-century American poets and the *Tish* group. Bowering celebrates the belief that "the best of his [Wah's] poems are not full of anything—they are themselves emptyings" (18); Wah is the poet of "breath."

By the early 1980s, however, Wah did begin to deal in a concerted way with issues of Chineseness in his poetry, namely in the collections *Owner's Manual* (1981), *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* (1981), *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail* (1982), and *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (1985).<sup>15</sup> An extended interrogative poem in *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* signals Wah's obsession with locating his ancestral roots, with finding his mixed-race father:

Are origins magnetic lines across an ocean  
migrations of genetic spume or holes, dark  
mysteries within which I carry further into the World

through blond and blue-eyed progeny father's fathers  
clan name Wah from Canton east across the bridges  
still or could it all be lateral craving hinted  
in the bioplasmic cloud of simple other organism  
as close as out under the apple tree? (*Waiting for Saskatchewan* 5)

This is the start of a long pursuit of his father—with Wah's patrilinear inheritance and racial memory experienced in his body as well as his mind—extending through several books that increasingly become poetic prose rather than prose poetry. Like Kiyooka's search for his older sister, who was sent to Japan as a child and stayed on through adulthood, Wah's search for his father, who was sent to live in China when he was four and did not return to Canada for eighteen years, takes Wah on his own journey to China, which is recorded and meditated upon in *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail*. On the journey, Wah sees his dead father everywhere, in Hong Kong, Canton, Zhengzhou, Datong, Huhhot, and the recognition of his father's transpacific life cultivates his own transnational sensibility that is grounded in the local and exceeds the national, extending from "under the apple tree" in his backyard to "Canton east across the bridges."

As a quarter-Chinese person in China, Wah must keep asserting his Chineseness to the Chinese guides who remain doubtful, but the effort makes him increasingly convinced of his family's transpacific hybridity. His China journey culminates in an epiphany at Mao's mausoleum, where Wah "was struck by the very large painting of the mountains along one wall because of a poem I had written years ago as I looked out over the mountains along the Kootenay River from our house." The perceived links between Mao and his father impress upon him the connectedness of local places that exceed national boundaries and ground his Asian Canadian identity:

Mao, in front of me  
the things you cared for too  
river, mountain  
a town, the whole  
blue sky. (*Waiting for Saskatchewan* 56)

Like Kiyooka's, Wah's is a simultaneously local and transpacific identity articulated before the Pacific Rim was taken up as a central concern in Asian North American studies.

The last two sections of *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, "Elite" and "This Dendrite Map: Father/Mother Haibun," the new work in this collection, anticipate in their evocative prose Wah's "biotext," *Diamond Grill*, published in 1996—at roughly the same time as Kiyooka's *Pacific Windows* appeared. But it was

only with the publication of *Diamond Grill*, which is proclaimed on the cover to be “his first published prose work” and which won the Howard O’Hagan Award for Short Fiction, that Wah gained significant attention as an Asian Canadian writer. This is not to say that Wah’s poetry has been ignored; in fact, his poetry, which draws heavily on contemporary critical theory, has been highly acclaimed and has even ostensibly been discussed with attention to issues of ethnic Chineseness, at least since Pamela Banting published “The Undersigned: Ethnicity and Signature-Effects in Fred Wah’s Poetry” in 1990. But despite some early historical contextualization of Wah’s family, Banting’s argument centres on formalist elements of the poetry, treated from a dedicated deconstructive position that is entirely appropriate and that illuminates Wah’s linguistic concerns but does not dwell on the kinds of political and social issues that have dominated—and continue to dominate—Asian North American criticism.<sup>16</sup> My interest here is not to dispute Banting’s perceptive readings of Wah’s poetry but to illustrate what has been a dominant approach to his work.<sup>17</sup> The majority of the criticism on Wah’s poetry still places it in a tradition that grows out of the *Tish* movement and includes poets such as George Bowering, bpNichol, Daphne Marlatt, Nicole Brossard, Steve McCaffery, and the language poets. This is an approach encouraged to some extent by Wah himself, who frequently refers to European theory in his critical writing and whose position as a professor of English at the University of Calgary has made it easy to label his poetry “academic.”

In more recent essays and in recently revised versions of earlier essays, however, particularly those collected in *Faking It: Poetics and Hybridity* (2000), Wah foregrounds his interest in racialization. As he explains in the introduction to *Faking It*, it wasn’t until the Canadian studies conference on “Twenty Years of Multiculturalism,” held at the University of Manitoba in February 1991, that “I was then just coming to the discourses of multicultural, racialized, and ethnic writing” (4). This is a stunning revelation, given that discourses of racialized and ethnic writing had been circulating on the West Coast since the early 1970s, when the Asian Canadian Coalition formed at UBC, followed by the founding of the Chinese Canadian Writers Workshop and the Powell Street Revue in Vancouver.<sup>18</sup> In his “A Poetics of Ethnicity,” written for the 1991 conference, Wah “wanted to locate for myself, in the context of an official Canadian multiculturalism, the terms of a writing that had been marginalized by continued attempts to homogenize CanLit” (*Faking It* 4). A concluding note to “Strang(l)ed Poetics,” a revised version of the original essay “Making Strange Poetics” that was first published in 1984, announces

that “Through the nineties I’ve adjusted some of the above poetics to address issues of formal innovation and racialization in writing. . . . Political and social frames have surfaced that enable a broad range of poetic singularities, particularly for marginalized writers (and their histories)” (*Faking It* 44). In “Strang(l)ed Poetics,” Wah also adds a section in which he identifies himself as part of a group of “Asian-Canadian writers such as Jim Wong-Chu, Sky Lee, Roy Miki, Gerry Shikatani, and myself, [who] seek to redress and rewrite the colonizing racism of western transnational ideologies” (43).

By “Strangle Two,” adapted from “Making Stranger Poetics” (1990), Wah consciously signals his crossing over into what at first appears to be a fully fledged racial poetics by attacking a white, centrist, hegemonic concept of CanLit, as put forward by the likes of Barry Callaghan. He asserts that

Their Canada isn’t. For me. Not the same anything when you’re half Swede, quarter Chinese, and quarter Ontario Wasp. My hybridity obliges me to locate by difference, not sameness. My sense of place has become informed by distinctive features, particulars, sometimes minute particulars. In fact, the landscape of this large and hypothetical country seems to me best known and valorized by the singular. . . . Place therefore seems specific and particular. Where one is, here, is who one is, albeit contaminated at times by the sledgehammer tactics of the Wasp hive. (*Faking It* 47)<sup>19</sup>

Wah here links his newly emphasized concern with race and ethnicity to his older concern with the “local,” with “place”: “The immediate ‘here,’ the palpable, tangible ‘here’” (48). In spite of his reaction against the hegemonic notion of white CanLit, however, Wah cannot commit himself wholly to an ethnic cultural nationalism based in Asian Canadian identity politics, perhaps fearing that in itself would be too constraining a position. His reluctance is also understandable in light of his mixed-race heritage, his unique hybridity.<sup>20</sup> He therefore finds his subjectivity on place: “Where one is, here, is who one is.” With a brilliant riposte to Frye’s famous question “Where is here?”—which was meant to elicit a unified response rooted in a national identity—Wah asserts the local, with its uniqueness, as the ultimate site of *difference*. In *Diamond Grill*, he pushes the significance of mixedness, hybridity, and hyphenation even further: “There’s a whole bunch of us who’ve grown up resident aliens, living in the hyphen. . . . That could be the answer to this country. If you’re pure anything you can’t be Canadian. We’ll save that name for all the mixed bloods” (53).

In the early 1990s, Wah’s self-identification as Asian Canadian was announced not only in his essays but also in the venues where his poetry appeared. In 1991, a series of his prose poems, “Elite” from *Waiting for*

*Saskatchewan*, was published in *Many-Mouthed Birds: Contemporary Writing by Chinese Canadians*, and the spring 1994 special issue of *Canadian Literature* on Asian Canadian literature included a piece titled “Seasons Greetings from the Diamond Grill” that is identified as a “poem” but that became part of the “prose” text *Diamond Grill*. The “Elite” cycle, with its determination to recover Wah’s “lost” half-Chinese father, had started Wah down a path of racial anger that led to *Diamond Grill*, the text that now stamps him as “Asian Canadian.” In 1997, he joined “Prairie Asians” on a reading tour through western Canada, a group that included mainly younger writers, a number of whom had been Wah’s students and some of whom—Hiromi Goto, Ashok Mathur, Larissa Lai—have emerged as central figures in Asian Canadian literature. Once Wah self-identified as Asian Canadian, critical articles begin to appear that focus on issues of race in his work, but still few of them place him in the context of an Asian Canadian literary tradition.<sup>21</sup>

In closing this section on Wah’s work, I should point out that for Wah, unlike for Kiyooka, identifying as Asian Canadian is a choice; as he explains in *Diamond Grill*, “I don’t have to be [Chinese] because I don’t look like one,” and he admits that in his youth “I become as white as I can, which considering I’m mostly Scandinavian, is pretty easy for me. . . . I only have the name to contend with” (98). He acknowledges that he has led a life “camouflaged by a safety net of class and colourlessness” (138). Unlike Kiyooka, who experienced the racism of being labelled an “enemy alien” as a child, Wah experiences racism vicariously, through his inordinately close bond with his father, who, as a mixed-race person, was subjected to the racism of both the Chinese and the white communities. Although Wah agonizes over the privilege that he has of choosing his ethnicity and race, his somewhat belated decision to self-identify as Asian Canadian has contributed, I would contend, to his delayed inclusion in the Asian Canadian canon, which has up to now been based largely on identity politics.

**A**s my brief account of Kiyooka’s and Wah’s careers indicates, central to the question of their place in an Asian Canadian literary canon is the issue of genre. Apart from its presence in anthologies,<sup>22</sup> poetry, with a few notable exceptions, has not held as prominent a place as prose fiction in racialized minority literary traditions in North America, in part because these literatures are founded on an ethnic cultural nationalism, and we have come to recognize that prose fiction, particularly the novel, has been essential to nation formation.<sup>23</sup> Before the novel, and continuing even today,



life-writing, particularly prose autobiographies, held a prominent place in the formation of racialized and ethnic minority literatures. In the Asian American tradition, novelistic autobiographies/autobiographical novels such as Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* are considered central texts, and in the Asian Canadian tradition two novels—Kogawa's *Obasan* and Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, the former with strong autobiographical elements—were arguably the first texts to gain canonical status. This is perhaps not surprising since Kogawa's and Lee's novels deal with material that has, up to now, formed the principal narratives of an Asian North American tradition: the exclusion of Chinese immigrants and the internment of Japanese Canadians and Japanese Americans. No single poetic text or collection of poems in the Asian North American literary tradition comes close to holding the foundational place held by novels and autobiographies.<sup>24</sup> To be sure, these genres have not been treated as unproblematic: many critics have viewed these texts as the type of sociofiction that the dominant culture demands in its voyeuristic desire to know and thus possess the culture of a minority group; others, including myself, have argued that these texts are subversive to the extent that they break and reshape, for political purposes, the literary genres that they inhabit (see Goellnicht, "Blurring Boundaries").

Coupled to the valorization of prose fiction in racialized minority traditions is the view held by some, including prominent academic critics, that poetry is an apolitical form. I don't wish to enter here the long-standing debate about the political and social efficacy of poetry as a genre;<sup>25</sup> I do wish, however, to consider Kiyooka's and Wah's highly self-conscious positions on the literary forms that they employ. In broaching this complex subject, I have found most useful Marlene NourbeSe Philip's productively provocative and inventive essay "Interview with an Empire," in which NourbeSe Philip wrestles with herself over the dilemma faced by all racialized minority poets who write "complex and abstract" poetry in the language of the colonizer or the oppressor race, a poetry that is often considered to appeal only to academics and to be divorced from the racialized minority communities that it is meant to serve. NourbeSe Philip, as the "answerer" in this dialogue with herself, explains her conflicted relationship to language and poetry:

Essentially what I'm saying is that the potential seductiveness of language is dangerous. I believe many of those poets who are described as language poets begin from this premise. But for me there is another layer of distrust—historical distrust if you will. . . . [I] do not believe that english—or any European language for that

matter—can truly speak our truths without the language in question being put through some sort of transformative process. A decontaminating process is probably more accurate since a language as deeply implicated in imperialism as English has been cannot but be contaminated by such a history and experience. . . . The only way I can then work with it is to fracture it, fragment it, dislocate it, doing with it what it did to me and my kind, before I can put it back together, hopefully better able to express some of my own small truths. And for me this is where form becomes so very important, because part of the transformative and decontaminating process is also to find the appropriate form for what I'm saying. (196–97)

I quote at length here because I think that NourbeSe Philip echoes many of the ideas about poetic form put forward by Kiyooka and especially by Wah. Wah himself identifies Kiyooka and NourbeSe Philip as writers who “have chosen to utilize more formal innovative possibilities” than writers such as Rohinton Mistry and Joy Kogawa, who, he claims, “operate within a colonized and inherited formal awareness” (*Faking It* 52, 51).

Kiyooka's experiments with the revolutionary or subversive power of language were politically motivated from an early age. In the interview with Miki for *Inalienable Rice*, Kiyooka claims that his “sensibility is grounded in two languages” (“Roy Kiyooka” 59), a foundation for the hybrid, transnational subjectivity that he came to value. He also asserts that a “touchstone” for his poetic practice is “that it be grounded in the actual experience of one's life, that you'd bring the possibilities of language to some occasion in your life” (60), a principle that indicates his commitment to shaping the English language into what he calls an “inglish” that can represent his unique lived experience and resist the hegemony of the dominant culture. At the same time, he recognizes that he has an obligation “to come to articulateness for the sake of the inarticulate among the world you live in,” a responsibility to speak on behalf of “tongue-tied” Japanese Canadians, to be “a cultural voice in a collective sense” (60–61). Kiyooka wanted his art to speak for a wider community, but he envisioned that role in terms of his personal experience standing in metonymically for the experience of the larger Japanese Canadian community. His need for his art to have a social function existed in tension with his self-perception and self-presentation as the lonely prophet called to speak to/for his people, the Romantic artist still in touch with the “magic” of his childhood. Ironically, his insistent individualism as manifested in his revolutionary poetics may have contributed to his belated entry to the Asian Canadian canon, where texts have frequently been valued for their accessibility or “relevance” to the wider “community.” Experimental poetic practice often alienates the

ethnic communities that it is intended to appeal to and to serve as they consider such art to be elitist, academic, divorced from “reality” rather than speaking with the voice of the collective. Kiyooka is intimately aware of the difficulties that his writing poses for most readers: “I’m the kind of artist that any culture finds very difficult to deal with. . . . And because I’ve been multi-disciplinary, most of my life, people don’t know how to get a handle on me. I think the most critical thing about my activity is the inter-face between myself as a painter and myself as a language artificer. But what has to be understood is how the two inform each other” (“Inter-Face” 73). This is the challenge that Kiyooka’s art poses to more conservative conceptions of “Asian Canadian” literature, the invitation that it extends to expand our understanding of the term.

Kiyooka was willing to trust that his critics would come to an understanding of his artistic form as politically radical; Wah, however, theorizes his experiments with language in a way similar to NourbeSe Philip. In “A Poetics of Ethnicity” (1991), he tackles the political implications of innovations in literary form, arguing that formal experimentation along ethnic lines “might properly be called something like ‘alienethnic’ poetics” (*Faking It* 52). In 1994, when Miki and Wah coedited a special issue of *West Coast Line* titled *Colour: An Issue*, they stated boldly in the preface that “One of the means of resistance to homogenization and the elision of racialization has been the unpredictability of writing in terms of both transference and textuality. In the actualities of language, contemporary writers have located a medium to make visible the subjectivities, histories, narratives, and theoretical issues that surround that four letter word” *race* (5).

In an interview with Wah conducted in the mid-1990s (an exact date is not given in *Faking It*), Ashok Mathur raises the issue of *Diamond Grill* being “touted not only as your first full-length published prose work, but as a departure from your earlier, so-called language-centered, poetry” (97), to which Wah responds, “the prose is also a continuation of the prose poem that started germinating for me as far back as *Breathin’ My Name With a Sigh* (1981). The prose poem became more necessary as, through the eighties, my father’s visage pursued my writing into a layering of race and identity previously unacknowledged” (98). Here Wah considers again the ways in which his concerns with language in his “language-centered poetry” intersect with, or are even central to, his concerns with race and ethnicity. Like NourbeSe Philip, but more implicitly, he distinguishes his breaking of form from that of white language poets. Part of his purpose in fracturing form is to do away

with a rigid distinction between poetry and prose, although it is interesting to observe that the publisher of *Diamond Grill* chose to emphasize the prose as a new genre for Wah in an attempt to market the book to a wider audience.

By 1997, in "Speak My Language: Racing the Lyric Poetic," Wah identifies a crux that has plagued racialized (and other othered) writers for some time: Can the master's tools ever dismantle the master's house, to paraphrase Audre Lorde's famous question? Wah himself expresses this dilemma as a "split option, political for sure," a choice between asserting that "the revolution will succeed on the common tongue of the people," which in the Americas is almost always the master's/colonizer's tongue, or believing, with feminists, that "there will be no revolution until that (male-based) common tongue is troubled into change" (*Faking It* 109). He is suspicious of attempts to deal with issues of race within what he sees as the confining and containing genres of established Western writing (the novel, the verse paragraph, the central lyric voice), so he seeks to disturb, disrupt, and to some extent dethrone those established forms in all his work. Wah considers that "A racialized poetics might, for some writers, necessitate the adoption of the dominant form of poetic 'speaking' as a way of securing some platform of stability or complicity with power, or, as the case may be, as a critical ironizing" (113), but in the end he remains sceptical of attempts to employ established mimetic forms. He champions, instead, radically experimental writers such as Theresa Cha and Jam Ismail, who use the prose poem to challenge the authority and to escape the containment of the conventional Western lyric, "to trouble a dominant and inherited structure (social or poetic)" (125). It should come as no surprise that he returns, at the end of this essay, to Kiyooka as exemplary of the kind of iconoclastic work that he values.<sup>26</sup>

Critics considering Wah's work have seized upon what they perceive as his revolutionary poetic practice. Derksen champions Wah's concept of radical poetics as politically engaged:

These poetics risk identity throughout the representational sign, but do not abandon a politicized identity. Identity politics within rather than through language provides an alternative to the containable performances of race, class, and gender and rewrite the limits of identity. These politics are both oppositional and differential. . . . And for Wah, the disunity of alienethnic poetics resists normative narrative strategies. This distrust of literary structures parallels a distrust of larger social structures as these structures have rendered writers of colour invisible through assimilation. ("Making Race Opaque" 72, 74)<sup>27</sup>

As attractive as this argument about the value of experimental poetry in deconstructing conventional racialized performance and subjectivity may be—and I am convinced by much of it—it also raises a number of troubling questions. First, we must recognize that these ostensibly radical poetics are not *sui generis*; they do in fact have a tradition of their own. In the case of Kiyooka, Wah, and the *Tish* poets, the line of inheritance can be traced back to the New Americanists and Black Mountain poets such as Duncan, Creeley, and Olson—and, beyond them, to high modernists such as William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein. Certainly, aligning with this avant-garde tradition places these poets outside the concerns of Canadian nationalist centrists such as Atwood and Frye, but at the same time we might ask how “revolutionary” these poetic techniques were by the late twentieth century. I would argue that what began as a revolutionary poetics at the start of the twentieth century had become somewhat conventional, at least within the academic circles of those who read poetry, by the end. Wah, self-conscious as always, himself warns of the danger involved when “the strange becomes familiar” (*Faking It* 37). Further, we need to remember that, for all of the attempts to link this poetics to the working class (and then to oppressed races), the tradition of high modernism from which it derives disdained what it perceived as the philistinism of the lower classes. The other literary school to which the *Tish* group traces its inheritance, this time in its theoretical mode, is Russian formalism, where the primary role of art was one of “estrangement”: to use language in unconventional ways in order to shock the reader out of complacency and make her or him perceive objects afresh. These radical techniques were condemned by the Communists, however, as bourgeois remains antithetical to the proletarian revolution.

There is, then, nothing to link these unconventional techniques *naturally* to a particular racialized or classed community. I raise these points not to discount Kiyooka’s, Wah’s, Lorde’s, and NourbeSe Philip’s arguments about the fracturing of form as a powerful decolonizing and antiracist project but to caution against overenthusiastic or excessive claims for its effects. Until we have an accurate method of measuring the ability of literary texts to initiate political and social change, we should not dismiss out of hand the revolutionary value of *conventional* narrative forms that employ the master’s/colonizer’s tools for subversive or radical political purposes. Kogawa’s fiction, for example, which Wah categorizes as operating in a colonized form, had a very significant effect on public attitudes during the Japanese Canadian

campaign for redress. Surely it is the end result rather than the tools used to (de)construct it that ultimately matters. Wah and NourbeSe Philip acknowledge this dilemma even though they have come down, in their own writing, on one side of the debate. We would also do well to remember that the master's/colonizer's language was not, by the twentieth century, pure and pristine—if it ever was. English, like all colonizing languages, has been for centuries inflected with, “contaminated” by, African, Caribbean, Native American, South Asian, and East Asian traits, so that it is itself hybrid and transnational. As Susan Fisher reminds us with regard to Wah's and Kiyooka's poetry, Chinese and Japanese influences had a significant impact on early twentieth-century modernist poetry, so evidence of Asian traits in their work cannot simply be accounted for by reference to the perceived ethnicities of the writers.

I close with a series of questions about the possible “advantages” that Kiyooka and Wah may have gained by not being identified solely or primarily as “Asian Canadian writers.” Have they, for example, avoided what Kogawa has called the burden of always being labelled “the ethnic writer,” made to represent the race? Does race/ethnicity as a category of classification act as a force of containment as much as it does one of coalition for the purposes of resistance and liberation? Is it better to be classified simply as “Canadian,” although both Kiyooka and Wah are vitally aware that, despite national acclaim as “Canadians,” they are never quite accepted as wholly “Canadian”? As Kiyooka has stated, “You are of it [Canada] and you are not” (“Inter-Face” 71). “Belonging” clearly is not just a matter of self-identification. Up to this point, it seems that the application of the signifier “Asian Canadian” has operated in a complex mixture of self-identification (after Wah said he became interested in racial discourses, he began to be included), of scholarly attention (Miki repeatedly bringing Kiyooka in), and of literary content concerned with race in works by a writer of that “race.” Wah complicates the classification by being only a quarter Chinese and able to pass as white. In his case, self-identification in solidarity with Asian Canadian writers is crucial. It also seems clear that the term “Asian Canadian artist” or “Asian Canadian writer” cannot, on its own, adequately describe the life and work of a creator as diverse and multidisciplinary as Roy Kiyooka—painter, poet, photographer, musician, performance artist—or Fred Wah—poet, prose writer, photographer, musician. Rather than allowing the term to confine these multi-genre creators, we might use their diverse

bodies of work and their self-consciously radical experiments with language to expand our understanding of the term, to make the category more capacious. If we are truly to value “Asian Canadian” as a marker of coalition building rather than as a sign that contains and constrains, then we should see that expansiveness, with its accompanying lack of neatness, its classificatory messiness, as a strength.

Although clearly there are certain disadvantages that have accrued to Asian Canadian studies by not being firmly institutionalized in the way that Asian American studies has been for the past thirty-five years, and although Asian Canadian studies may suffer from the fragmentation inherent in Canada’s federal system of regionalization, there are also certain advantages to be gained by the Asian Canadian situation. Asian American studies, as Kandice Chuh observes in her book, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*, is currently engaged in the difficult process of redefining itself, a process that involves dealing with its own foundational narrative of political activism rooted in community work toward the goal of social transformation. What role does literature play in that enterprise? What role can it play? Despite its own activist beginnings, Asian Canadian studies perhaps cannot be said to have a strong foundational narrative, but such a “lack” may afford the field the opportunity to define itself more expansively, while not losing site of its role of building collectivity, addressing injustice, and critiquing hegemonic power. The work of writers and artists such as Kiyooka and Wah can push us toward a recognition that the field is not a matter of poetry *or* prose, activism *or* theory, ivory tower *or* real world, community *or* academia, east/centrist *or* west/regional, diasporic or national, local *or* global but a web of negotiated relationships between all of these different nodes with their differential repositories of power, their internal divisions, and their shifting positionalities. More than ever, in our present moment we need a politics of complexity and interconnectedness rather than one of simple binarism and opposition. The work of Kiyooka and Wah points us toward such a complexly negotiated politics.

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## NOTES

- 1 As Barbara Herrnstein Smith observes, “When we consider the cultural re-production of value . . . , the model of evaluative dynamics . . . suggests that both (a) the ‘survival’ or ‘endurance’ of a text and . . . (b) its achievement of high canonical status . . . are the product neither of the objectively (in the Marxist sense) conspiratorial force of establishment institutions nor of the continuous appreciation of the timeless virtues of a fixed object by succeeding generations of isolated readers but, rather, of a series of continuous interactions among a variably constituted object, emergent conditions, and mechanisms of cultural selection and transmission” (47). In order to gain and maintain canonical status, a text must “perform certain desired/able functions particularly well at a given time for some community of subjects, being perhaps not only ‘fit’ but exemplary . . . under those conditions” (48).
- 2 We need to recognize, however, that a racialized or ethnic minority community is never itself homogeneous, so that there are often competing evaluations of texts within a “community,” and the “community” may not value texts in the same way as scholars from the racialized or ethnic minority do. Often when we speak of “the community” in these circumstances, we refer more accurately to community activists.
- 3 John Guillory agrees with Gates about the prominent role of academic institutions in canon formation; he argues “that it is only by understanding the social function and institutional protocols of the school that we will understand how works are preserved, reproduced, and disseminated over successive generations and centuries” (vii). Guillory asserts that the school curriculum plays a major role in perpetuating the class structure of capitalist society, which is certainly the case, but we need to recall that ethnic minority curricula were introduced into American higher education in the late 1960s and 1970s as part of a radical pedagogical revision meant to challenge race and class privilege and to make higher education more relevant to and reflective of oppressed racialized communities. The inheritance of ethnic studies approaches in the United States has had a strong influence on the formation of minority canons in North America, including the Asian Canadian one, over the past thirty years.
- 4 The situation has shifted in recent years with scholars like Cynthia Sugars, Joanne Saul and Sally Chivers attending to Kiyooka and Wah, and with Smaro Kamboureli, a major Kiyooka scholar, having moved to the University of Guelph. Saul observes that “Many of the long poets [including Kiyooka and Wah] were writing from either British Columbia or the Prairies, and, because they refused to define themselves in relationship to what they considered to be the more mainstream literature being produced largely in Ontario, they resisted the category ‘Canadian,’ focusing instead on the particularities of a given time and space, and their relationship to it” (15).
- 5 We are now in the midst of a significant revival of interest in Kiyooka’s work with the reissue of his *TransCanada Letters* and the publication of an edition of previously unpublished letters, *Pacific Rim Letters*, edited by Smaro Kamboureli, both in 2005. In addition, a series of interdisciplinary conferences organized by Kamboureli and Miki and titled *TransCanada: Literature, Institutions, and Citizenship*—with an obvious nod to Kiyooka, although his work is not the focus—has been taking place since June 2005, while recent publications by Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy and by Joanne Saul position Kiyooka and Wah as central to Canada’s radical poetry and biotext traditions.
- 6 In casting much of the “blame” for the elision of race in criticism dealing with Wah’s work on the policy of official multiculturalism in Canada—a policy that I am quick to



- acknowledge is full of anxieties and difficulties as it attempts to build a sense of national unity under the guise of celebrating ethnic and other differences—Derksen’s argument fails to account for why in the work of some other writers, who operate in the same cultural climate, race *is* recognized as a significant factor and why those writers have been classified as “Asian Canadian” much more frequently, and earlier, than has Wah. Derksen’s argument has proved valuable, however, in provoking a number of responses from critics who, in the past decade, have approached Wah’s work through the lens of race.
- 7 “Localism” is a lesson taught, ironically, by the New Americanists and is traceable to modernists such as Gertrude Stein. Kiyooka used Stein’s assertion that “The business of art is to live in the complete actual present” as an epigraph to *TransCanada Letters*.
  - 8 Remarkably, the photographs of Kiyooka that accompany the interview show him sitting naked, an apparent gesture of openness and revelation, but wearing a mask, a contradictory gesture of hiding what are believed to be the most salient features of identity. In one of the three photographs, he lifts the mask in a tantalizing gesture of complete revelation, although the presence of the mask acts as a reminder of the performative nature of identity. See Kiyooka, “Roy Kiyooka.”
  - 9 Butling and Rudy make a similar point about writers like Kiyooka in relation to the *Tish* collective: “Even the women, mixed race, and bisexual writers associated with the group enacted the dominant male ethos and in so doing participated in a violence against themselves as well as in the group violence against other outsider positions” (56).
  - 10 In the afterword to *Pacific Windows*, Miki tells of having found among the Kiyooka papers “an application for a Canada Council grant to undertake a multidimensional art project in Japan, around his ancestral home in Kochi. He wants to ‘get in touch with the pulse of the place,’ he says, and admits to ‘a barely inscribed Pacific Rim Dialogue—one borne of the time immemorial impact of Asians of N.A. that “i” go on lending my voice to til all the racial epithets disappear into the flux of our multi-national discourse” (316). No date is given for the application, but again it is clear that Kiyooka conceives of his identity in terms of the Pacific Rim well before it became common for Asian North American artists and scholars to do so.
  - 11 Saul observes that “Although all four writers [Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, Wah] are to some degree shaped by their ethnic or immigrant consciousness, they also cannot be collapsed into ready-made ethnic categories” (21).
  - 12 In the interview with Varley, Kiyooka asserts that “Mexico was/is important. It’s played a vivid role in the lives of a number of Canadian artists of my generation. . . . Nothing in my own experience prepared me for anything like Mexico” (*Roy K. Kiyooka* n. pag.).
  - 13 Dirlík and Wilson; Kang; Lowe; Lowe and Lloyd; and Palumbo-Liu, among others, have dealt with transpacific connections in Asian American cultural studies.
  - 14 In his introduction to *Loki Is Buried at Smokey Creek: Selected Poems*, written in 1980, George Bowering takes a somewhat different approach to Wah’s ethnicity: “his father’s side of the family was Chinese, & his mother’s side Scandinavian. Thus his background is atypical, but symbolic for the creation of the west” (9). Bowering thus wraps Wah’s ethnicity into a liberal multicultural ideology of the time that sees all ethnicities as equal—and treated equally.
  - 15 Sections from *Breathin’ My Name with a Sigh* and *Grasp the Sparrow’s Tale* were incorporated into *Waiting for Saskatchewan*.
  - 16 See Nguyen on the coercive nature of Asian American criticism, which he claims has privileged works dealing with politically left, race-based themes.
  - 17 Even in her expanded treatment of Wah’s poetry in her 1995 book *Body, Inc.: A Theory of*

*Translation Poetics*, Banting relegates Wah's ethnicity to literary form, relating his use of pictograms to Chinese ideograms. She concludes that "Fred Wah is the poet as theor(h) et(or)ician" and that "Wah's Chinese-ing of English syntax encrypts and disseminates between two languages his name, ethnicity and poetic influences, his genealogy, in short" (41, 58). Following Banting, Charlene Diehl-Jones treats *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* as an autobiographical poem that "is willfully knotted: the self, the life, the writing—auto-bio-graph—all enter an equation that stubbornly resists resolution. . . . The self is, finally, a name that is a sound that is a breath, a signifier that refuses its gifts" (144). Her treatment of Wah as an autobiographical figure does not include his ethnicity. In "Faking It: Fred Wah and the Postcolonial Imaginary," Smaro Kamboureli places Wah—again very productively—in the company of Derrida, Butler, and Bhabha before going on to map out the three kinds of postcolonial discourse that she sees operating in Canada today.

- 18 On the political and cultural dimensions of the Asian Canadian activist movement in Vancouver, see Chan; Watada; and Wong-Chu. In none of these firsthand accounts does Wah appear; Kiyooka appears, but not as a major figure. The writers recognized as central to Asian Canadian literature at its inception include Jim Wong-Chu, SKY Lee, Paul Yee, Rick Shiomi, Joy Kogawa, Sean Gunn, and Garrick Chu.
- 19 In *Diamond Grill*, Wah also blasts Margaret Atwood's notion that "We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here" and refuses the bland platitudes that attempt to smooth over racial difference and racism: "Sorry, but I'm just not interested in this collective enterprise erected from the sacrosanct great railway imagination dedicated to harvesting a dominant white cultural landscape" (125).
- 20 Early in *Diamond Grill*, Wah proclaims "Hybridize or disappear" (20); "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" (36). On hybridity in *Diamond Grill*, see McGonegal.
- 21 Robert Budde, Jeff Derksen, Cynthia Sugars, Julie McGonegal, and Smaro Kamboureli deal with issues of race, often in the context of postcolonialism, while Lien Chao places Wah in a Chinese Canadian tradition. Guy Beauregard and Lily Cho treat Wah's work in an Asian Canadian cultural context in their doctoral dissertations, and both discuss it in the context of Chinese diasporic literatures in their essays in *Culture, Identity, Commodity: Diasporic Chinese Literatures in English*. Joanne Saul's book, which appeared after I had initially completed this paper in 2005, devotes considerable attention to race and ethnicity in the work of Kiyooka and Wah.
- 22 On the importance of the anthology as a tool for building ethnic community, see Chao 32–50.
- 23 The "notable exceptions" would include the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, although in the latter much of the poetry was considered occasional and so did not survive into the written tradition. In a Canadian cultural context, dub poetry is a powerful exception; it too depends significantly on performance and so is transmitted primarily through sound recordings. Poetic biotexts that are difficult to classify as either poetry or prose have also been influential, but largely in academic communities.
- 24 An examination of an influential introduction to the subject, the *MLA Resource Guide to Asian American Literature* (see Wong and Sumida), reveals fifteen essays devoted to "Book-Length Prose Narratives" (including *Obasan*), six essays devoted to "Drama," and four essays devoted to "Other Genres" (two on poetry, one on anthologies, and one on short fiction).
- 25 For a sustained debate on the political valence of Canadian language poetry, see Derksen, "Where"; and Nichols.

- 26 Miki observes that Kiyooka has been considered a “slippery writer to comprehend, especially because his texts resist the formal expectations of anglocentric Canadian taste by undermining the customary lyric stance of much canonical poetry” (*Broken Entries* 54).
- 27 Building on Derksen’s position, Budde takes up and pushes further the argument about radical, deconstructive poetics in relation to Wah and Miki, relating their poetics to antiracist activism and concluding with the bold and, for me, naively optimistic assertion that “Form undoes ‘race’” (293).

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