

THE HYBRID WORLD

CULTURAL HYBRIDIZATION IN *DIAMOND GRILL* AND *I AM A JAPANESE WRITER*

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Abstract

This essay tackles the ambiguity of culture through the lens of *Diamond Grill*, and *I am a Japanese Writer*. These texts deconstruct the concreteness of culture and identity. The world's interconnectivity is producing a fluidity of culture more than ever, and diverse countries such as Canada are struggling to define themselves. Writers such as Fred Wah and Dany Laferrière find themselves in conflict with their own cultural identities, and attempt to navigate this ambiguity through their writing.

Culture is now confused. We live in an age of complete connectivity. Lines have less meaning, and the world is becoming more fluid. Everything is a spectrum. Individualism is at the forefront of a global movement. Yet, we are still defined by groups such as Canadian, Chinese, Japanese, Black, White, Irish, the list is inexhaustible. As soon as you come to the end, a new identity would be made. How can we navigate this sliding landscape and not tumble into chaos? Who is it we truly are? It is in the literary world we can find the answers, or more useful questions.

Both *I Am Japanese Writer* and *Diamond Grill* frustrate notions of culture and identity. They are occupied with the hybridisation of this new world and approach it from different

perspectives. Canada is a place defined by its blended culture. It pretends to be multicultural, but both Laferrière and Wah question the motives behind such terms. It does not seem to represent the fullness of their identity, compressing Chinese, Immigrant, Swedish, Black into a single word. Canadian.

Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill* is an act of rebellion. It is personal, it is experimental, and it is defiant. Wah grapples, tackles, sideways slants the notion of identity. He is an Americanised carbonated diner mixed with bok choy. Fred Wah uses *Diamond Grill* to reclaim his voice, and his voice alone. However, by carving out bark to etch his own ambiguity, it opens the floor for everyone. It

deconstructs the social aspects of culture, allowing for more self-determination. This is the difference between literature and the literary. The literary is occupied not with inclusion, not with true openness, but with argumentation. It speaks through a certain framework, the same voice that props up the status quo in Canada. Writing within the academic structure words are filtered through another culture, the literary world. Academic language imposes itself onto the article. It persists through a Western ideology that can never truly represent the full character of the Canadian experience. It is instead of it's, a formality that supposes superiority, a certain structure of thought which extends beyond the simple condescension of condensing into form and ideas. Laferrière even points out his own Eurocentric thinking, 'I confine myself to semiology' he says.¹ By engaging with the literary world, both Wah's and Laferrière's identities are distorted so that the word Canadian means even less.

The structure of the literary world is a pseudo analytical one, in which stories are intellectualised. Laferrière and Wah reject the normative approach of literary theory and seek to disrupt the status quo. Its formality cannot

adequately represent them. Instead of trying to pin down definition and attach arbitrary labels, values, assign meanings, and decipher texts, they frustrate with an active ambiguity. An ambiguity that is not just an admittance of the unknown but a refusal to know.

However, Wah is a literary academic. He uses Western terms like 'poetics' to frame his arguments on ethnicity.² At its core, Literary criticism is Eurocentric and occupied with a wholeness. It seeks to encapsulate everything. Wah actively speaks against multiculturalism for this reason. It wants flatness, a technicolour blanket woven from our differences, and there is a desperation with which it shawls itself over the problems of the world and tries to be fuzzy and warm. The world is not made of rainbows. People are 'snarls' competing or being drowned out.³ Identity is imposed, and we must fit inside the cultural frameworks around us. For the purposes of a Visa, he is Canadian but inside Canada Wah is everything but.

Diamond Grill does not lay itself out according to convention. The chapters come in snapshots and without a sense of time, it blends between scenes and switches

¹ Dany Laferrière, *I am a Japanese Writer* (Douglas McIntyre: Madiera Park, 2011), p.10.

² Fred Wah, 'A poetics of ethnicity', in *Twenty Years of Multiculturalism: Successes and Failures*,

ed. by Stella Hryniuk (Saint John's College Press: Winnipeg, 1992), pp. 99-110.

³ Fred Wah, *Diamond Grill* (NeWest Press: Alberta, 2006) p.53.

perspectives without warning, without explanation. Text comes in blocks, grafted out, chipped, and chiselled but the language can seep into the poetic and back again. At every turn there is deception, and you cannot know it from looking at its surface. Wah himself is 'camouflaged by [...] colourlessness'.⁴ Comprehension requires contemplation and engagement and listening. What is more important than being understood, is that someone is willing to listen. This contradicts the literary world, which is often obsessed with interpretation, unweaving the blanket, pulling it apart and leaving behind a single thread. A clean line.

Instead, we live in a world of 'polluted rootless living' in which context is lost to the moment.⁵ Our identities are transfused, and the transculturation that can be found in *Diamond Grill* is amplified in the modern age. The present contains so many pieces of the past, some we feel intimately, and others distort like Chinese whispers. You can't be now. Forced to be a culmination, an appropriation of old wounds. Historical turned mythological, some sort of false natural order. Ancestors forgotten but felt, and all inside a cultural battleground.

The protagonist in *I am a Japanese Writer* is at the centre of this battleground. The book

continuously questions what identity means. It plays with hybridity, that mixed message gene vs environment vs experience vs belief. As a writer he is the nationality of those who read him, but he is Japanese because he reads Basho, but he is indifferent also. The question of authenticity bores him. Then, he later says he isn't a Japanese writer, only that he is writing a book with that title. It also makes clear through constant comparison that concepts such as American and Japanese rely on each other to exist. 'Americans will never become Americans again because they don't realize they're already Japanese.'⁶ It is through opposition they become distinct. Titles, the same as names, decide who we are and say nothing at all.

The question becomes whether we can claim or choose our culture. Both books are occupied with this need for self-definition. Wah employs language and distorts meaning in order to find a new world. Whereas Laferrière simply denies the question, he throws it back at itself. In both texts others try to name them, to apply their views on them. Japan becomes obsessed with Laferrière's book by title alone and it ends up affecting the culture. Through literature culture bleeds into other's veins, so that they are 'impure'.

⁴ Fred Wah, *Diamond Grill*, p.138

⁵ Fred Wah, *Diamond Grill*, p.53

⁶ Dany Laferrière, *I am a Japanese Writer*, p.113

Wah focuses on language. An attempt to reevaluate the language used, to speak about himself as he wants to. To use ethnicity, if he wants to. Influenced by the code switching in his early environment. He recognises the importance of language, that the vowels moan through history, and their etymologies mythologise the present alongside the past. The world is full of a grand generalness group speak that is the opposite of literature. Literature dwells in specificity and the unique. Detailing extensive encyclopaedia of individuals. Paradoxically, it is in this minutia that we find the universal. A story can speak of everyone whilst speaking for only one, and it does so by discarding the general. It is the fwap door slam, a family recipe, the creases of a face blown up.

We look through people and see what we want, and as we look through them, they become self-conscious and they feel like an outline, your eyes imposed upon them, and we are made of other's vision. 'we see ourselves only in other people's eyes, despite our best efforts.'⁷ Can we escape the gaze, especially when they wear suits, and they have the coins, when they are entrenched in the status quo? There is a sense in which Wah is at the mercy of how others see him. It is not for him to decide his own name, it is War or Roy or Was

⁷ Dany Laferrière, *I am a Japanese Writer*, p. 85.

⁸ Lin Fang, Yu-Te Huang, "I'm in Between": Cultural Identities of Chinese Youth in Canada',

and when it is Wah it comes as a comic strip WAH! It is filled with presumptions that make him more, or less, Chinese, that gives him more, or less, privilege, more, or less, freedom. It splits him into pieces. Two aspects connected by a Wah. Being in between, there is a feeling in which he is neither.

That 'in-between' is real. It exists.⁸ A feeling rising amongst the youth. An exchange between them and their environment. Culture is not confined to the individual or family. It is transient. Who has claim to the word Chinese or Japanese or Canadian? However, without definition culture still exists. Untitled our choices, practises, beliefs and so on create a community.

We are connected, and in constant mutation. Reflexively responding to each other. Wah spends a lot of time focusing on the hyphenated. That bridge and separator. It pushes two letters apart or ties them together. Wah is Chinese, but White, but doesn't speak the language. Is it appropriated, or is it that Wah is a hyphen? The question creeps in and out of the text, folds between the binding, and Wah files himself into the miscellaneous file. Bottom of the box, junk. There is no answer only a blurring. A blurring that is even more present in the modern age.

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Nations and borders are dissolving, disintegrating through web weaving integration, the distinctness of culture is less sure of itself. Now everything is self-aware, memetic and information is downloaded, millions, billions making place less concrete more glass, the reflective sort that shines back at you. We are infused with images, and there is a collective individualism which is bloodily transfused into the streets. Place becomes us, but place is everywhere now. It is beamed up to a satellite and back down, so that the Great Wall of China circles the whole world. It is in your bedroom. The need for words like Canadian is less and less, but people are still permeated by the Canadian borders.

Place infuses with us. China town half housed in a cut-out of the cityscape; the cultural Chinese landscape is different inside Canada. Imported recipes, re-diced and sliced till they there are wafer thin see-through. A 'translucent' world. That ever shifting, sliding between. Lines fall into the sea. Boats have been buried. Immigrants lost in the waves. 'We are born in one spot, and afterwards we choose our place of origin.' says Laferrière.⁹

Except our right to decide ourselves is not so clean. We do not always have power over ourselves. The I of *I am a Japanese Writer* is abused by the police. His race ultimately

defining his power, and thereby limiting his identity. His search to redress himself or be naked is at odds with publishers and police officers alike. They tell him who he is and what being alive means. It means he is the target of violence; it means he must write about being a Japanese writer.

'By dressing up as Japanese, she is less herself' remarks the narrator, even though she is Japanese¹⁰. Cultural identity doesn't always match the individual. They are placed in misshapen clothes, sleeves too long, frayed trousers, rips where they step on them and trip. Kimonos that are too cold.

As Laferrière and Wah allude to, names and titles compressing meaning. The meaning of culture has changed, it is the same source of conflict as it has always been. The difference now, is that people are lost and without a sense of home. The questions asked of people are where you come from, who is your family, when were you born? To truly find people you cannot look at them merely as a Canadian, a silhouette, you must be specific. Culture is a prism through which light fractures into all colours. There is no Canadian. There is only the navigation of temporary states of being, in which one is more or less. Through their literature Wah and Laferrière reclaim their details and frustrate their outlines. They resist

⁹ Dany Laferrière, *I am a Japanese Writer*, p. 10.

¹⁰ Dany Laferrière, *I am a Japanese Writer*, p. 8.

the need to be understood. The importance of the unknown cannot be understated.

Acceptance over seeking, acknowledgement before understanding. Misinterpretation.

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