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a
mixed
race
issue

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HyphēNation

a mixed race issue

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Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill*, a biofiction about racial hybridity and growing up in a small-town Chinese-Canadian cafe, is the most recent of several of his books, including *Breathing My Name with a Sigh* and *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, that have been concerned to voice a hyphenated poetics. This is a shortened version of a paper originally presented at the Association for the Study of New Literatures in English, Politische Akademie Biggese, Attendorn, Germany, July 2, 1994. For a fuller treatment the reader is invited to locate it at Wah's Web site at <http://www.ucalgary.ca/~wah>

Half-Bred Poetics

The recent bag of re- poetics (recuperate, rewrite, transport, transform, and so forth) proffers the opportunity to confront many of the assumptions and confusions of identity I feel compelled to "reconfigure." The site of this poetics for me, and many other multi-racial and multi-cultural writers, is the hyphen, that marked (or unmarked) space that both binds and divides. This henopoetic punct, this flag of the many in the one yet "less than one and double" (Bhabha 177), is the operable tool that both compounds difference and underlines sameness. Though it is in the middle, it is not in the centre. It is a property marker, a boundary post, a borderland, a bastard, a railroad, a last spike, a stain, a cypher, a rope, a knot, a chain (link), a foreign word, a warning sign, a "head tax," a bridge, a no-man's land, a nomadic, floating magic carpet, now you see it now you don't. The hyphen is the hybrid's dish, the mestiza's whole wheat tortillas (Anzaldúa 194), the métis' apple (red on the outside, white on the inside), the happa's egg (white out, yellow in), the mulatto's café au lait.

What I want to do here is focus on the scene of the hyphen as a crucial location for working at the ambivalences in hybridity. In order to actualize this hybridity, what Homi Bhabha sees as "a negative transparency that comes to be agonistically constructed on the boundary between frame of reference/frame of mind" (175), the hybrid writer must necessarily develop instruments of disturbance, dislocation, and displacement. The hyphen, even when it is notated, is often silent and transparent. I'd like to make the noise surrounding it more audible,

How to pass through
without being appropriated.

the pigment of its skin more visible. But, and this is crucial to the use of the hyphen as a tool, "it is not a question of harmonizing with the background," writes Lacan, "but, against a mottled background, of being mottled — exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare" (cited in Bhabha 181). Bhabha has described hybridity as a persistent thorn in the side of colonial configurations, rather than "a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures" (175). This constant pressure that the hyphen brings to bear against the master narratives of duality, multiculturalism, and apartheid creates a volatile space that is inhabited by a wide range of voices. My own interest in the site and sign of the hyphen is essentially from a blood quantum point of view; that is, as mixed blood Others occupy the site as immigrants, or as visible minorities, or as allies. Whoever they are, as writers, they have a poetics available that helps materialize what has been otherwise "denied knowledges" (Bhabha 175). This paper attempts to profile this hybrid borderland poetics.

In opposition to a nationalistic aesthetic that continually attempts to expropriate difference into its own consuming narrative, writers of colour and aboriginal writers gain a significant social empowerment by engaging in dialogues that relocate the responsibility for their own subjectivity within themselves. Even though many of these writers share in the avant gardist strategies of ethnopoetics and feminist poetics, they feel a strong need to participate in a

tangible community (despite the cries of “separatist”) in order to locate the cortex of their own social content without it being conditioned by first-world perceptions.¹

Though those opposed to the “Writing Thru Race” conference claim that everyone is hyphenated somehow (not unlike Margaret Atwood’s insistence that all Canadians are immigrants anyway), my own hyphenation strikes a particular ambivalence. I can pass for white until I have to explain my name. And even though the blood quantum shows only one quarter Chinese, that name, Wah, is enough of a shade to mottle an otherwise transparent European background.

I look through *The Big Aiiiiieeeel: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* for Eurasians, checking out the balance and looking for new voices. I skip around and then realize I’m looking for clues in the names. Lawson Fusao Inada. “Lawson” sounds like a pretty intentional white name. Good poetry. Jazzy. Nice sense of line and rhythm. I go to his poem “On Being Asian American” (619) and notice he doesn’t use a hyphen between Asian and American. His bio remarks that he’s a sansei. That makes sense. He comes from Japan and now lives in America. Not so good. That would mean I couldn’t be a Chinese Canadian since I come from Canada. I look at other names. Wing Tek Lum—no. David Wong Louie—maybe. Jeffrey, Frank, John, Larry—what sort of hint am I looking for? Mixed names, like Fred Wah. But not mixed. Yet mixed.

I stop at Violet Kazue Matsuda de Cristoforo as a likely possibility. But no, several marriages have gauzed over her identity.

And then there’s Sui Sin Far, the chosen pseudonym for Edith Maud Eaton, a turn-of-the-century

Eurasian American writer.

An article by another young Canadian writer, Kyo Maclear, reminds me of Han Suyin.

I e-mail a writer friend in Vancouver, Scott McFarlane, a tall, white-skinned (like me) Eurasian. His Japanese roots are so hidden you can’t see them and you can’t read them even in his name. I could have been like Scott if my father had been Swedish and my mother Chinese. Race concealed by the patronym of marriage.

So names and naming encounter not only a blood residue but also indicate the camouflage possibilities of the name (both visible and invisible, both dash and cypher). I need to look beyond obvious possibilities in names like John Yau and Mei Mei Berssenbrugge to locate the voices of Métis writer Maria Campbell and Okanagan writer Jeannette Armstrong. It is, after all, necessary to determine who occupies this hyphen, if not only to hear their different stories, then at least to read their texts for particular tactical possibilities.

We cannot take the names for granted, since, when they have been manipulated and recycled by the language of the master, “we may not only read between the lines but even seek to change the often coercive reality that they so lucidly contain” (Bhabha 181). Mestiza, for example, may need to engage the recuperative possibilities available through naming. In a fascinating account, the cultural linguist Mary Louise Pratt tells how the name of La Malinche, the 14-year-old Aztec concubine of Hernán Cortés who helped the Spanish conquer the Aztec empire, came to denote “traitor” and “treason” in Mexico and how the Chicana women writers of the Mexican-American ethnic minority north of the American border have tried to

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rehabilitate her name "into a powerful poetic medium to query the often conflicting interests of the champions of gender equality and racial equality, and of feminism and ethnic nationalism" (Preface 171).

Or, witness how Jam. Ismail's hybrid subjectivity gets determined in her nomadic wanderings:

ratio quality young ban yen
 had been thought italian in kathmandu, filipina
 in hong kong, Eurasian in kyoto, Japanese in
 anchorage, dismal in london england, hindu in
 edmonton, generic oriental in calgary, western
 Canadian in ottawa, anglo-phone in montreal,
 métis in jasper, eskimo at hudson's bay
 department store, vietnamese in chinatown,
 tibetan in vancouver, commie at the u.s. border.
 on the whole very Asian.

(Lee and Wong-Chu, *Birds* 128)

In a collaborative bookwork with Palestinian-Canadian artist Jamelie Hassan, where the two women collide the similarity in their names in a delightfully playful collage of cross-cultural image and text, Jamila Ismail describes herself as "(b. 1940 hongkong), poet, a.k.a. jamu (bombay), jam (hongkong), jemima (edmonton), dismal (london, england), jan isman (vancouver)" (Hassan). Both of these artists, highly politicized about cultural subjectivity, underline the poetics of naming as central to the race writer's toolbox. The naming tool can be used to mottle, then. To flaunt. To make trouble. To get in your face.

In her essay on Malinche, Pratt also cites the practice of code-switching as a tactic that "lays claim to a form of cultural power" (177).

Code-switching is the movement between two languages, usually the intentional insertion into the master language of foreign or colloquial terms and phrases that represents

the power to own but not be owned by the dominant language. Aesthetically, code-switching can be a source of great verbal subtlety and grace as speech dances fluidly and strategically back and forth between two languages and two cultural systems. (177)

A poem by Scott McFarlane, for example, opens with a rhythmic and subtle adjectival

movement:

my eyes don't
 "look Japanese"
 Canadian

between silky furyu lines
 and tempered steel bushido slash
 my batting lashes

This slight intrusion of "foreign" terms into incisive, short lines leads, later in the poem, to a more intensive use of "Japanese" phrases that, in the context of questioning the poet's own hyphenation, recognize the blurred edges of language and culture.

not-to ii-ben
 hi-sto-ryu i-zu
 na-ra-ti-bu

eyes remember
 snow white drift
 international
 mentality garrisons

(Skin 46-48)

As Pratt points out, "code switching is a rich source of wit, humour, puns, word play and games of rhythm and rhyme" (177). More importantly, however, it functions as part of hyphen poetics in how it helps to locate what I call a "synchronous foreignicity" (Alley 38): the ability to remain within an ambivalence without succumbing to the pull of any single culture (cadence, closure). In other words, code-switching can act to buttress the materialization of the hyphen, an insistence of its presence.

The extent to which the hyphen floats along the shore, however, can be seen when code-switching indicates a complicity or compromise with the dominant culture. Gloria Anzaldúa's wonderfully accurate poem "To live on the Borderlands means you"

are neither hispana india negra española
 ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-
 breed caught in the crossfire between camps
 while carrying all five races on your back
 not knowing which sides to turn to, run from
 (194-195)

offers a short glossary of the English translation of some of the Chicano language. Joy Kogawa's well-known novel about the internment of Japanese-Canadians during World War 2, *Obasan*, includes the same apology to the master

for her cross-coding of Japanese terms. Such deference, in the form of a glossary, has drawn a contentious response from younger writers who see it as “cow-towing” to the mainstream. Code-switching is an ambiguous site for the bilingual writer since it is usually not an assaultive strategy but more a desire to synchronize two or more cultures. But these glosses are frequently the result of editorial advice or insistence and so it is the publishing industry that is assaultive, that seeks to appropriate or melt such difference into a consumable item.²

The roots of such linguistic attention as cross-coding come, for some writers, from a sense of the hyphen as a locatable place, an *ethnos* otherwise unavailable due to migration. In an essay explaining her own poetics, Yasmin Ladha says that “home” is a word she tends to forget:

But I do have a home. It exists in my re-departures. My language stems from a layering and matting of words, images, songs, folk stories, from a myriad of places; layering Indian thumri in a Kudoki ballad; Trudeau's red rose in the pink city of Jaipur; plump Shiv lingam cresting Crownsnest Mountain in Bellevue, Alberta. . . . Often my language has a physical hyphen which is not a border-restraint between words but a trans-evoker, arousing a collective energy from a double or triple hyphen. The hyphen is an extension of my identity, home.

These diasporic writing tactics, though interventionist, still participate in an ethnic/ethic paradigm of “setting it right”—in this case, setting otherness “right.” So the elusive migrant floating carpet hyphen offers a literal “place” where the race writer can define her own occupancy of this “no-man's land.” Trinh T. Minh-ha helps to qualify this site:

Not quite the Same, not quite the Other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition, her intervention is necessarily that of both a deceptive insider and deceptive outsider. She is this Inappropriate Other/Same who moves about with always at least two/four gestures: that of affirming “I am like you” while persisting in her difference; and that of reminding “I am different” while unsettling

every definition of otherness arrived at. (74)

In order to apply pressure and presence to whatever external investments claim the hyphenated site, however, these nomadic gestures must unceasingly attempt to “deterritorialize”³ the (textual) space through the use of evasive language:

For the unitary voice of command is interrupted by questions that arise from these heterogeneous sites and circuits of power which, though momentarily “fixed” in the authoritative alignment of subjects, must continually be represented in the production of terror or fear—the paranoid threat from the hybrid is finally uncontainable because it breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/Other, inside/outside. In the productivity of power, the boundaries of authority—its reality effects—are always besieged by “the other scene” of fixations and phantoms. (Bhabha 177)

In other words, in the process of deterritorializing the dominant properties, say, by code-switching or asking questions, the site of the hyphen being constructed as a possible *ethos* (an ethic, a rightness) is seen as threatening, thus wrong, thus contaminated, polluted. Carol Camper, in her introduction to the anthology *Miscegenation Blues* unpacks the “stereotype of mixed race women [as] that of moral and sexual degeneracy.”

The questions underlying this racism operate in both directions and point to an important aspect of half-bred poetics. In a poem entitled “Sorry, Our Translator's Out Sick Today,” A. Nicole Bandy pivots on the questioning tactics of Black, Indian, and white:

YOU
ask me questions
and won't believe the answers.

Did you ever think that
maybe I get tired of translating?
(Camper 8)

The contradictions, paradoxes, and assumptions active at the hyphen all indicate a position and a process that is central to any poetics of opposition (feminist, sexual, racial) and that is the poetics of the “trans-,” strategies of translation, transference, transition, transposition, and so on. The action is aimed at

occupying a site that is continually being magnetized. How to pass through without being appropriated.

This is not simply the burden of indeterminate subjectivity as in the nomadic confusion described in Jam. Ismail's "ratio quality" quoted above, or the silt-like pressure-chamber of cultural purity troubling Michele Chai's

Don't
ask me
to choose between you
Caribbean
Blue (Red)
Yellow (White)
Black (Black)

...
I will not choose
between you

(Camper 19)

The paradigm of *trans* poetics, whatever its oppositional impetus, situates the writer in an aperture (to extend Homi Bhabha's metaphor of "negative transparency") that offers a greater depth of field, a wide-angle lens that permits distortion at the edges. Though this vantage has been honed through a popular modernist and post-modernist awareness of disruptive and subversive tactics in morphology, syntax, and meaning, the most significant aspect of these dynamics is in how to maintain the levitation.

A primary strategy for the hyphen, as part of this *trans* (levitational) poetics, is to locate and indicate the blank space, both to preserve and perpetuate the passage position as well as to problematize it so that it doesn't become static. The resistance becomes actualized in a number of formal and semiological ways. It can be visual and asyntactic, as in Annharte's poem "Emilia I Shoulda Said Something Political:"

want explanations	make it right for others
be a non statistic	be understood
in the marketplace	let's for once

inside you let that jaguar purr	asleep
she shifts leg but inside growl	deep
I hear it compañera	growl dark like me
	(Camper 181)

Silence, in fact, becomes part of the grammar. (Kogawa's *Obasan*, Philip's *Looking for Livingstone*, and so forth).

I'll stop, for now, with Mary Louise Pratt's description of the "contact zone," an accurate characterization of the activity and dynamics of the site of the hyphen for half-bred poetics as well as one that bespeaks hope and possibility:

the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. . . . "Contact zone" . . . is often synonymous with "colonial frontier." But while the latter term is grounded within a European expansionist perspective (the frontier is a frontier only with respect to Europe), "contact zone" is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. By using the term "contact," I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination. A "contact" perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations among colonizers and colonized . . . not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power.

(Imperial 6-7)

So that is part of what the hyphen does.

Notes

¹Jeff Derksen's "Making Race Opaque: Fred Wah's Poetics of Opposition and Differentiation" situates my own writing in this context, as well as delineates the aesthetics of first-world expectation, a term he gets from Laura Kipnis' "Aesthetics and Foreign Policy."

²Roy Miki's essay "Asiancy: Making Space for Asian Canadian Writing" provides both an excellent analysis of the critical reception of Kogawa's novel as well as an insightful note on the "compromise and appropriation" of a recently published anthology *Many-Mouthed Birds: Contemporary Writing by Chinese Canadians*. "The old truism, 'you can't tell a book from its cover,' may once have been true, but in this design-obsessed consumerist era, the cover is often a tell-tale sign of power relations, stereotypes, and expectations. The cover of *Many-Mouthed Birds*, the dressing for the anthology, becomes a revealing text of the interface between a minority community and the sociocultural majority. It is the face that strikes the (potential) reader immediately: the exotic 'Asian' soft-featured feminized male face, appearing out of the dark enclosure of bamboo leaves. . . . The cover invites the reader in to eavesdrop, to become a kind of voyeur — to listen in on the foreign, the effeminate 'Asian' of western fantasies" (14).

³Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "What is Minor Literature?" (59) or also see their *A Thousand Plateaus*, particularly the section on "Nomadology."

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