

Notably, working-class periodicals helped to canonize the work of now famous American and European authors, by being the first to publish writings by individuals such as Marx and Engels and George Sand.

In poetry, the working-class periodical publishers likewise sought out material germane to their political views. Shelley, Byron, and Burns were favourites, and Murphy demonstrates how working-class writers, if they could not find a way to make poets of past ages fit contemporary contexts, sometimes would merely take to revising earlier poetry for parodical and satirical, as well as literary and political, ends.

What both *Periodicals of Queen Victoria's Empire* and *Toward a Working-Class Canon* amply suggest is that a great deal of academic research and publishing on Victorian periodicals is yet to be done. The conviction, dedication, and will to communicate displayed by so many involved with the production of periodicals during the nineteenth century, certainly deserves the tribute of continuing scholarly work.

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## Rattling a Noisy Hyphen

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**Fred Wah**

*Diamond Grill*. NeWest \$16.95

Reviewed by Guy Beauregard

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In Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill*, the first-person narrator repeatedly makes his presence known by gleefully kicking doors open with a "Whap!" With similar energy, *Diamond Grill* announces itself as a significant publication: it had the largest initial order of any book ever published by NeWest Press, becoming something of a "multicultural" literary phenomenon for the small Alberta publishers; it is Wah's

first published book of prose—what he has called a fake "biotext"—and it thus marks a generic shift for one of Canada's most accomplished poets; and it succeeds in extending over the course of an entire book the stylistic and thematic implications of the brilliant "Elite" series in *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, a Governor General's Award winner from 1985.

*Diamond Grill* consists of little sections, 132 in all, that provide Wah with a flexible form to explore issues of identity, "race," and culture without being locked into a linear narrative—as Wah writes, "Maps don't have beginnings, just edges." The result is a sophisticated and moving text that is multivocal and insistent in its questioning of generic stability.

*Diamond Grill* begins with a description of Fred Wah Jr. moving through the "two large swinging wooden doors" that lead into the kitchen of the Diamond Grill, a cafe operated by Fred Wah Sr. in Nelson B.C. in the 1950s: "I pick up an order and turn, back through the doors, whap! My foot registers more than its own imprint, starts to read the stain of memory." Wah thus begins what he calls the "heterocellular recovery" of identity as it has been racialized and erased in Canadian social spaces and narratives. The doors—or rather moving *through* the doors, noisily, dramatically—become a recurring metaphor for this process of recovery. Through the doors, Wah performs an ongoing act of cultural negotiation; through the doors, he articulates the potential for movement between cultural spaces. Consider the book's last—but because I'm always flipping back, not final—section, which narrates Fred Sr. opening the cafe in the early morning, unlocking the dead bolt and the padlock, jarring open the door, which "clangs and rattles a noisy hyphen between the muffled winter outside and

the silence of the warm and waiting kitchen inside.” Fred Sr., in the apparently simple but increasingly heroic act of opening the cafe, moves through the liminal space of the doorway; his historical agency emerges as the ability to move noisily *through the hyphen*, to unlock the doors that separate outside and inside.

This movement, however, is risky business in a racist society, and *Diamond Grill* neither glamorizes the act of crossing cultural boundaries nor discounts the costs of doing so. Exemplary in this regard are the often painful passages that deal with Fred Jr. internalizing anti-Chinese racist imperatives and choosing to “pass” as white. In one scene, Fred Jr. has gone fishing with one of the “old Chinamen” who is friends with his dad: “We’re walking back up the hill with our catch of suckers and some kids start chinky, chinky Chinaman and I figure I’d better not be caught with him anymore. I become as white as I can. . . .” The decision to “pass” as white, however, is never settled, for although Fred Jr. describes himself as “racially transpicuous,” being in certain social contexts calls his “invisibility” into question. While in Toronto’s Chinatown, for example, Fred Jr. hesitates but eventually crosses the street to visit a childhood friend in the kitchen of King’s Family Restaurant, where he suffers “the negative capability of camouflage” when he listens to his friend relate in Chinese something Fred Jr. neither understands nor knows. What makes this scene especially powerful, however, is the way Wah narrates the “covering over” of the “ambiguous edge of difference” Fred Jr. had been forced to confront:

back outside, on the street, all my ambivalence gets covered over, camouflaged by a safety net of class and colourlessness—the racism within me

that makes and consumes that neutral (white) version of myself, that allows me the sad privilege of being, in this white world, not the target but the gun.

In this passage and elsewhere, Wah narrates the implications of racism with an honesty and clarity that insist that “the real last spike has yet to be driven.”

Perhaps Wah’s most significant contribution to driving home this “last spike” is his engagement with the complex interpenetrations of “whiteness” and “Chineseness” in a family where these cultural and racialized categories could not (and cannot) be separated. The implications of *Diamond Grill* are therefore profound for anyone engaged in anti-racist projects that refuse to collapse “race” into “colour,” and instead attempt to theorize “Canada” as a “hybrid” cultural space. By hybridity, I do *not* mean a postmodern free-for-all in which we playfully and freely “choose” identities. Rather, following Asian-American cultural critic Lisa Lowe, I refer to hybridity as a form of cross-cultural contact marked by massive asymmetries of power and ongoing racist exclusions that may nevertheless become a site of significant social transformation. And without backing away from these asymmetries and exclusions, Wah has produced a memorable account of how we might begin to move through them, rattling a noisy hyphen along the way.

