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Negotiating Chinese Canadian Masculinity: Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill*

Liam Waterman

Fred Wah's poetic "biofiction" *Diamond Grill* (Wah 184), notoriously difficult to pin down generically, interrogates the complexities of hybrid identity. Scholars frequently remark on the text's form, which, moving seamlessly between narrative perspectives and temporalities, enacts what Lily Cho calls a "poetics of memory" (154), reflecting the way in which both diasporic history and community are reconstructed. Guy Beauregard has drawn attention to how *Diamond Grill*'s poetic form mimics the "movements and crossings that characterize everyday life for Fred Sr and Fred Jr" (137), reflecting diasporic experience and the absence of singular, pure identity endemic to hybridity, the space of the hyphen. Joanne Saul suggests that *Diamond Grill* provides a space for Wah to "examine the various determinants of his own identity, while simultaneously foregrounding the discursive elements of subject formation by emphasizing the role of language in competing constructions of history" (106). Scholars have yet to explore, however, the way in which Wah's text constructs particular visions of masculinity, in turn informed by the differing racialized positions of Wah, his father, his grandfather, and other Chinese Canadian diasporic subjects. Historically, the dominant white discourse of masculinity in Canada has worked to emasculate Chinese Canadian men, positioning them as a foreign opposite to an ideal white masculinity (Sun 59), essentially "vile, womanly, cowardly, and cunning" (Pon 142). Approaching *Diamond Grill* from an intersectional standpoint, I suggest that Wah's use of language both reflects and interrogates how hegemonic white masculinity and Chinese masculinity are constructed and negotiated within white-dominated society.[1] Part of the danger involved in attempting to remasculinize the Chinese Canadian male body is that such attempts frequently operate through the enhancement of particular archetypical and oppressive masculine norms: analyzing *Diamond Grill* reveals how masculinity, complicated by Chinese identity along with other vectors, including language and class, can be performed or

bargained for by Chinese diasporic subjects; concurrently, this approach reveals how this process of negotiation ultimately becomes problematic, perpetuating oppressive masculine norms that work to subjugate women and other excluded individuals.

Indications of the discursive emasculation of the Chinese body are woven through Wah's reflections in *Diamond Grill*. Referring to this historical emasculation of Chinese Canadian men, Qingyan Sun tells us that "whites and Chinese are counter-posed against each other; the former is characterized as the 'height of civilization' with a superior physical constitution against the latter's supposed inferior body portrayed as small and symbolically subsumed into femininity" (58). This kind of racial masculine hierarchy appears in *Diamond Grill* when Wah visits the "Chinese Nationalist League" (110), which displays a portrait of Chiang Kai-shek, a Chinese Nationalist politician and military leader. Wah tells us that "King George is the portrait I see in some of my friends' houses. . . . We don't sing 'God save Chiang' at school; we sing to a portrait outside the principal's office, to a doll-like gracious king with porcelain skin and boy-scout-grey eyes who is the real king of the world" (110). That Wah thinks a "real king" must have "boy-scout-grey eyes" and "porcelain skin" reveals a racial qualification informing his conception of a masculine leader. His reaction is similar to that of one of the Chinese teens interviewed for Sun's essay, who, when asked to describe what made the most popular boy at his school attractive, answered "fair face; he had dirty-ish blonde hair with green eyes" (62). Sun notes that "across the data . . . the participants framed whiteness as a necessary factor contributing to masculinity status" (62).

Wah's perception of whiteness as "real" masculinity reappears when Wah discusses the Salisbury steak cooked at the Diamond Grill, one of his "favourites," "a really straight meal with a slight cachet of class and masculinity" (82). This association with "class and masculinity" is complicated by his claim that he has "never seen any of the Maple Leaf Hockey players who come in here have Salisbury"; they "always have real steaks" (82). Salisbury "really is the poor man's steak" (82). The Salisbury steak becomes a space in which different markers of otherness intersect with how the young Wah understands himself. His claim that "Lots of the day-shift workers from the CPR have it for supper" articulates himself as a worker, and his preference for Salisbury steak associates him with the French Canadian "Mr. Carrier," who "drives the coal delivery truck and speaks English with a French accent, [and] comes

in every Saturday afternoon at four-thirty for his Salisbury steak" (82). Carrier, though white, is marginalized by his class and ethnicity; Wah's appreciation of Salisbury steak thus implicitly places Wah in association with markers of identity excluded from discursive ideals of masculinity. The white hockey players, conversely, present characteristics that have been considered archetypically masculine in Canada. As Sun argues, "Physical ability as masculinity par excellence stands as one of the most important mechanisms via which Asian men are emasculated" (53). Because Chinese Canadian men historically have been characterized as weak or "effeminate" (58), the presence and menu choice of the white hockey players come to embody the discursive difference between the male Chinese body and "real" men: white, wealthy, and physically fit. The young Wah's choice of Salisbury steak itself becomes an attempt in *Diamond Grill* to compensate for this perceived deficiency: Wah orders it for the "straight[ness]" of the meal, with its "slight" rather than brawny "cachet of class and masculinity."

The Salisbury steak segment illustrates the value of an intersectional methodology for understanding the discursive emasculation of Chineseness. Sun tells us that hegemonic white masculinity "is constructed at the intersections of, at least, race (whiteness) and physical ability, and is harnessed to organize a national identity" (56). The aforementioned Maple Leaf hockey players possess multiple vectors of identity (namely physical ability, race, and class) that combine to form a unique position of masculine superiority, in turn supporting a particular vision of Canada's national identity, the Maple Leaf symbol shared by both the NHL team and the Canadian flag. Intersectional theory explores the interplay of various aspects of individuals' identities in order to understand how factors such as race, gender, age, and class compound to form complex social inequalities (Collins, "Intersectionality's" 2). From this perspective, individual experience is never reducible to the sum of the privilege or disadvantage gained from specific aspects of identity. As Daiva K. Stasiulis notes, intersectionality has its origins within Black feminist theory of the 1970s, in which "US women of colour presented analyses that exposed the oppressions and agency of Black women and other women of colour, and which argued vehemently for the development of integrative analysis and politics based upon the non-separability of race, class, gender and other social relations" (348). Beyond the "race-gender-class triad" (351) that has dominated intersectional feminist theory historically, intersectional theory has sought increasingly to

integrate the impacts of other kinds of social divisions, including "ethnicity, colonialism, imperialism, nationalism, sexuality, religion, language, culture, citizenship, and disability" (350). When applied to *Diamond Grill*, intersectional methodology allows us to see not only how the racial identity of Chinese Canadian men affects their ability to achieve masculine status but also how the degree of emasculation experienced by different Chinese Canadian men can be complicated by several other vectors of identity, including culture, nation of origin, and language. We can observe that these complications are negotiated to advantage in some contexts to compensate for disadvantage in other contexts.

In *Diamond Grill*, during Fred Wah Sr.'s initiation into the "Lions Club" (65), his ability to enter white masculine space is complicated by both his mixed-race identity and his identity as a non-native English speaker. Filled with "Baker Street nickel millionaires" (65), the Lions Club represents whiteness, masculinity, and high-class status; the term "lion" itself constitutes both the archetypal image of a strong masculine figure and a symbol of the British Empire. Wah Sr. gets help from his white wife, Coreen, to write his speech; she "says he's very nervous about this event; worried that he might flub it, make a fool of himself, the only Chinaman at an all-white dinner meeting" (65). There is an association between being othered on the basis of his race and being emasculated, making "a fool of himself," within this space of business-owning white masculinity. Relying on his white wife becomes a way of compensating for this perceived insufficiency. To join the Lions Club, Wah Sr. has to perform a kind of stereotypical Chinese identity acceptable to the existing members, presenting himself as a "Chinaman" even though, in fact, he is half white. The members of the Lions Club seem to expect him to present the weak or unmanly characteristics discursively associated with Chinese men; Wah Jr.'s observation "there he is, with his little speech" (65), evokes this kind of physical smallness. When Wah Sr. accidentally says "sloup" instead of the word *soup*, he has to turn it "into a joke, a kind of self put down that he knows these white guys like to hear" (66). He hierarchizes different aspects of his identity, performing Chinese identity in order to become accepted within the all-white men's Lions Club as a male business owner. His maleness and class status can be expressed only through public diminishment of the Chineseness of his Chinese and white identity.

The form of biofiction in *Diamond Grill* reveals how masculinity itself is performed or constructed within particular contexts. Joanne Saul

theorizes the "biotext" (13) as a kind of reflection of the process of creating the self, "the ruptures, gaps, and workings of memory; the fictionalizing that reconstructing a life requires" (17-18). As Peter Jaeger suggests, the narrative focalization of *Diamond Grill* expands beyond Wah himself, refusing to "contain the self"; *Diamond Grill* "departs from inherited literary forms and identities, in favor of foregrounding fragmentary and unstable linguistic processes, and points to an unfinalizable, nomadic and uncontainable subjectivity" (201). I suggest that Wah's text reflects how the idea of Chinese Canadian masculinity itself is written, and often overwritten, by dominant white society. This latter process works in certain contexts by interpellating individuals *as* Chinese, or "Chinamen" (Wah 66), as Wah Sr. is required to identify in the "Lions Club" section. As Wah Jr. tells us, "until Mary McNutter calls me a Chink I'm not one" (98). The construction of the Chinese male body as weak and effeminate is complicated by the mixed-race identities of both Wah Sr. and Wah Jr.; the latter in particular can enhance his masculinity by emphasizing his whiteness in certain contexts. His afterword to the text denies the possibility of "pure" (187) or static identity; in the "Lions Club" section, Wah Sr. does not simply negotiate his acceptance within a masculine space but actively rewrites his identity momentarily, "faking it" (66), turning his mispronunciation of the word *soup* into a joke to redefine himself as a man and as someone in command of the English language. Implicitly, this act reveals the unfixedness of identity more generally: "when you fake language you see, as well, how everything else is a fake" (66). Cho stresses the importance of an approach to Wah's poetry that recognizes the "imbrication of form and content," the extent to which Wah "uses the estranging possibilities of language as a means of challenging racist culture" (135). The heterogeneous poetic form of *Diamond Grill* itself deconstructs the supposedly unified and coherent cultural construction of hegemonic masculinity, revealing how masculine identity itself is never unified or fixed but constantly rewritten and contingent on personal and cultural contexts.

Shifting characterizations of Chinese Canadian masculinity are informed by the history of Chinese immigration to Canada. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Chinese men were often brought to Canada to work as contract labourers (Li 11-12). These immigrants were regarded as undesirable citizens (2) despite playing integral roles in building the Canadian Pacific Railway and in the broader development of western Canada. Legislative controls intended to stop Chinese

immigration began with the Chinese Immigration Act in 1885, which introduced a fifty-dollar head tax, later increased to five hundred dollars in 1903, and eventually led to the updated Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, which restricted the entry of Chinese immigrants to "diplomatic corps, children born in Canada to parents of Chinese race or descent, merchants, and students" (30). Laura Madokoro tells us that

> From 1885 to 1947, Chinese families bore the brunt of Canada's exclusionary immigration regime. The expensive head tax reduced the amount of money that migrants could send home, and restrictions on entry separated husbands, wives, and children for years. From 1885 to 1923, legislators inserted clauses in successive versions of the Immigration Act that made it particularly difficult for Chinese women to migrate to Canada, as admission was largely dependent on the male's eligibility. (30)

Although Madokoro asserts that these policies were intended to induce the Chinese in Canada to return to China, they seem rather to have withheld the achievement of heterosexual masculine norms from Chinese men living in Canada, the "married bachelors" (Li 63), unable to reunite with families left behind or marry Chinese women in Canada. Madokoro suggests that Canadian officials feared "the kinds of families Chinese migrants might bring or create" (30): that is, the Chinese family was framed as a threat to a traditional, monogamous, heterosexual white family, with concerns built upon the possibility of Chinese men marrying multiple women (31). According to Constance Backhouse, "white women's labor laws" (315) seem to have been similarly motivated by fears that Chinese men — associated in the eye of the white populace with vices such as opium consumption, concubinage, and plural marriage — would corrupt supposedly innocent white women (333). These laws, which began in Saskatchewan in 1912 with "An Act to Prevent the Employment of Female Labour in Certain Capacities" (326), restricted white women from working in businesses owned by Chinese, Japanese, or other "Oriental" employers (327). Again this legislation worked to prevent male Chinese Canadian migrants from entering marriage or raising families.

Little scholarship has drawn attention to the possible queer identity of the Chinese "married bachelor" communities or to how Canadian institutions deliberately positioned these communities as queer in order to accentuate their otherness. The *Report of the Royal Commission on*

Chinese Immigration: Report and Evidence, working to justify exclusionary policy on Chinese migrants, notably claimed in 1885 that "sodomy" was a "common practice" among male Chinese migrants to Canada (Chapleau and Gray 194). The construction of these "married bachelor" communities by white authorities largely served to denigrate Chinese Canadian men by relation to a heterosexual norm. Margot Francis tells us in her analysis of Richard Fung's *Dirty Laundry* that "the strict enforcement of heteronormative sexual contact" works "to produce the ideal citizen as a respectable, white, heterosexual man" (193). Chinese bachelor communities in America were coded as "'queer spaces,'" as David L. Eng argues, "institutionally barred from normative (hetero) sexual reproduction, nuclear family formations, and entitlements to community" (18). During the era of exclusion, Chinese migrant men were not so much emasculated as feminized, Eng suggests, completely removed from masculine norms; subsequent characterizations of Chinese masculinity as weaker or insufficient compared with white masculinity function as an "opaque screen" (18) masking the previous feminization and homosexualization of these individuals. The emasculation of Chinese migrant men becomes a kind of unfolding process of rewriting, meant to negotiate the presence of the Chinese man within supposedly white spaces.

The impacts of these legislative controls and the discursive emasculation of Chinese bodies reverberate throughout *Diamond Grill*. The heterogeneous poetic form of *Diamond Grill*, reflecting the hybridity and constructedness of identity itself, becomes a reflection of the fragmentation of male Chinese immigrants to Canada. When Wah Sr. returns to Canada after being traded to Grampa Wah's first wife, he is held in a "detention hospital" (22) in Victoria since his parents cannot find his birth certificate. Here "earlier Gold Mountain men" had written poems on the walls:

> my heart is filled with a sadness
> and anger I don't understand
> . . .
> Day after day
> how can I vent my hatred
> but through these lines? (22)

The younger Wah's literal rewriting of these earlier poems, products of racial exclusion, becomes a kind of self-expression, venting "my

hatred"; this expression is always fragmented or insufficient, broken up by ellipses, something the speaker "can't understand." Wah Sr. himself is unable to speak English, "pretty much languageless" (17), on arrival. After briefly leaving home, he accedes to the expectations laid out for him by hegemonic masculinity to "buckle down, have a family of your very own, . . . do what the father's fathers tell you; their words are your commands" (17). This paragraph is made up almost entirely of commands with rarely varying punctuation; the poetic elements of this section of *Diamond Grill* reflect the weight of tradition and expectation, the product of Wah Sr.'s diasporic history.

The poetic form of *Diamond Grill* reflects the difficulty Chinese Canadians experience in attempting to articulate themselves as men. When we meet Pong, an immigrant directly affected by Chinese exclusion, he is "in the middle of yapping about his wife. She never gave him any children and now she's too old" (24). His complaints reflect the experiences of the Chinese "married bachelors" kept from reuniting with their wives in the years prior to the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1947. As Millington et al. tell us, "[S]uch restrictions on their social roles as fathers, husbands and lovers inevitably served to stifle the expression of Chinese men's identities, further feeding white men's view of themselves as superior in both masculinity and civilization" (199). In *Diamond Grill*, Pong responds to this kind of institutional emasculation by emphasizing other archetypically masculine aspects of himself; class status becomes a focal point on which he can work to rewrite or redefine Chinese Canadian identity. "One of the most notorious gamblers in western Canada," whenever Pong is successful in gambling, "he comes back spiffy, new suit, gold rings, and all smiles" (24). His exuberant lifestyle works to compensate for his lack of children and to negotiate masculine status on the basis of income: he can smile only when he is "spiffy." Pong constantly attempts to express vocally this class-based masculinity, "berating the others with what sounds like I told you so you stupid dog bastards. Look at me; I'm willing to take some chances!" (113). But, as Wah tells us, Pong "ends up yapping mostly to the swinging glass portals of the kitchen doors" (24): that is, the boundary between white and Chinese society. His voice, attempting to cross the boundary between Chineseness and whiteness, falls on deaf ears.

Following the example of Pong, the idea of bargaining for or negotiating masculine status provides us with a framework for understanding how Chinese Canadian men attempt to find a place within white

hegemonic masculinity. As Sun tells us, "Chinese males, seen as less or not masculine, resort to various tactics to 'bargain' with [hegemonic masculinity] for masculine statuses through their otherwise privileged positionality in society, such as socio-economic status and heterosexuality" (60). One might be able to cash in on class or heterosexuality to enhance one's masculinity. Grampa Wah, like Pong and other Chinese "married bachelors," has travelled to Canada to seek his fortune and subsequently become cut off from his family in China. However, through his marriage to Florence, a white woman, he is able to buttress his sense of masculinity around a possessive relation to his two sets of wives and children. This enables Grampa Wah to lend his son Fred and daughter Ethel to his Chinese wife, an act of "patrimonial horse-trading" in Wah Jr.'s terms, inscribing Grampa Wah's children as commodities in an exchange economy. Grampa Wah does so against the wishes of Florence; "that caper convinced her that he was the devil, a gambler, and a womanizer" (57). Even after he is eventually put in a nursing home, "the nurses complained about how he'd try to lift their skirts with his cane, . . . how he'd say dirty things to them, how he'd try to catch them with that smile in his eyes" (59). His confidence and masculine posture depend in part on success with women; the ability to control them along with his Canadian wife and children allows him to align himself with white hegemonic masculinity. Grampa Wah also uses signs of wealth to negotiate masculinity in a manner similar to that of Pong, attaching his wealth prosthetically, literally enhancing the Chinese male body: "[L]ucky Jim always had a big gold-toothed smile" (58). Wah describes Grampa Wah playing the "Chinese Lottery," telling us, "'Eight spot!' he'd say, and laugh with his eyes and teeth full of gold" (58). Both his proclivity for gambling and his exuberant personality identify him as a man of wealth; that not only his teeth but also his eyes are "full of gold" show that his self-assured, masculine mannerisms depend on a certain level of confidence in his class status.

The difficult labour history of Chinese Canadian migrants makes negotiating masculinity on the basis of class status particularly powerful for the men of *Diamond Grill*. Generally, Chinese migrants were forced to work low-paying jobs; as Gunter Baureiss notes, "as early as 1878, British Columbia passed a resolution banning their employment in the public works of the province" (26). He adds that "the denial of political participation also disqualified [Chinese Canadians], at the turn of the century, from practicing certain professions, such as law, pharmacy, or

accounting. . . . [T]hey were not hired by the larger department stores or banks, and Chinese restaurant owners could not employ white females" (27). These restrictions, combined with agitation among white workers against the employment of Chinese Canadians, ensured that they were relegated in large part to the service industry (27). The "white women's labor laws," Backhouse observes (315), also had a severe economic effect on male Chinese Canadian business owners. Effectively preventing Chinese Canadian men from employing women at all, given the existing restrictions on female Chinese immigrants, these laws "hindered the ability of Asian entrepreneurs to compete with white proprietors" (329).

Zhongping Chen explores the difficult economic position of Chinese Canadian migrants in the first half of the twentieth century within his investigation of Chinese-owned hand laundries in Peterborough, Ontario. He suggests that, "with such a marginal position in the local economy, these Chinese laundries only survived by performing menial washing and ironing tasks for a ridiculously low price" (77). Chen associates the Chinese hand laundry with femininity, doing "the 'women's work' for a large segment of the white males in Peterborough" (76). In a similar vein, Backhouse notes that Chinese immigration was encouraged at times as a solution to the "servant problem," with male Chinese domestic servants filling in for working-class white women, being "highly regarded by turn-of-the-century white Canadian women" (334). This phenomenon resonates with an excerpt that Wah includes in *Diamond Grill* from a promotional brochure meant to advertise immigration to British Columbia, published by his wife's grandfather, mentioning that the servant problem "is best solved by a Chinese cook. A good Chinaman will do the work of two ordinary maids" (135). The narrow range of labour historically available to Chinese Canadian men had the effect of both reducing their economic status and forcing them into occupations associated with femininity, implicitly working-class "maids" rather than masculine owners or employers. Pong's and Grampa Wah's ability to bargain for masculinity on the basis of wealth becomes a way of minimizing the historical association between poverty and Chinese Canadian men, thereby gaining a position of masculinity formerly withheld from most male Chinese Canadians.

Within the context of the labour history of Chinese Canadians, the Diamond Grill becomes a space in which Wah Sr. can redefine and reassert his masculine identity. Masculinity is always already exceptionally complicated for him and his son as mixed-race individuals

subject in often contradictory ways to cultural perceptions regarding both whiteness and Chineseness. The Diamond Grill is the site of the mediation of these two elements, the centre of a relationship between primarily Chinese staff and primarily white customers. Wah Jr. relates the swinging kitchen doors of the Diamond Grill to the function of the hyphen, swinging "between the Occident and the Orient" (16). Julie McGonegal approaches this boundary as a site of conflict, representing contact zones, "intercultural relations that are, more often than not, based on coercion and conflict," the "apparently unbridgeable chasm between oppositionally positioned races and cultures" (184). The nature of the doors as a cultural boundary reflects the potential disruptiveness of their crossing: "When I first start working in the cafe I love to wallop the brass as hard as I can. But my dad warns me early to not make such a noise because that disturbs the customers" (Wah 21). McGonegal's reading does not account for the musical or creative value that Wah attributes to these kitchen doors. When service becomes busy, pretensions to moving through the doors "discreetly and deceptively" (McGonegal 185) are dropped, and "all the waiters and waitresses, including my dad, will let loose in the shape and cacophony of busy-ness, the kicker of desire, hidden in the isochronous torso, a necessary dance, a vital percussion" (Wah 21). The act of crossing racial boundaries itself becomes creative, a kind of self-expression, reflected by the flowing and alliterative poetic form of the section itself, "a vital percussion, a critical persuasion, a playful permission" (21). The precondition for this act of recreation of the boundary between whiteness and Chineseness is economic success: that is, a busy service; the economic value of the Diamond Grill allows Wah Sr. to work to redefine creatively his hybrid identity.

The Chinese restaurant historically has been an important source of economic mobility for Chinese Canadians. As Cho indicates, "according to the 1931 Canadian census, Chinese people made up less than one per cent of the Canadian population, and yet one out of every five restaurant, café, or tavern keepers was of Chinese origin. More than one out of every three male cooks was Chinese" (8). The "North American Chinese restaurant" continues to be "a landing place for Chinese migrants with few or no options" (12). As a vehicle for achieving social mobility, the Diamond Grill provides class status to Wah Sr., allowing him to join the Lions Club. The restaurant becomes a kind of representative masculine body, constituting both his wealth and his personal success as a business owner. Wah Sr. declares at its opening banquet that the Diamond

Grill is "the most modern, up-to-date restaurant in the interior of B.C." (Wah 25). While Wah informs us that the titular Diamond "stands for good luck" (25), white Canadian society, his father's primary clientele, would be more likely to associate diamonds with wealth and luxury. Wah Sr. admonishes his son "that [the] soda fountain has to sparkle. . . . It's your job to keep it neat, clean, and ready — real pizzaz" (41). In the same way that Grampa Wah compulsively signals his class status by adorning himself with symbols of wealth, Wah Sr. displays his status through the "up-to-date" appearance of his restaurant, its cleanliness, modernity, and sophisticated "pizzaz."

Wah Sr. uses this economic relationship in order to gain entry into white masculine spaces. Cho suggests that Chinese restaurants historically have allowed Chinese Canadians to engage with white culture through their interactions with white patrons, since small-town Chinese restaurants have served as "de facto community centres and gathering places when there was nowhere else to go" (80). Yet the cost of entering white space through the Chinese restaurant seems to be acceding to racist expectations of "Chineseness" (79). Cho explores this issue through her study of Chinese restaurant menus, which she argues allow Chinese Canadians to take agency in discursively constructing Chineseness. She points to the reproduction of "inauthentic" (66) dishes, such as chop suey, as evidence of the intentional "fixing" (67) of Chinese diasporic identity: "at once at the margins of culture, disparately spread out over vast geographies and away from urban centers, the consistency of the menus nonetheless asserts a pervasive Chineseness which departs from the definitions of Chinese perpetuated in Canadian law" (67). Concurrently, however, these menus represent "texts of survival" required in part to echo "the logic of racist exclusion" (56). The contradictory value of the Chinese restaurant as a vehicle for asserting Chinese Canadian identity within white space can be applied in turn to Chinese Canadian masculinity; Wah Sr. is required to accede to racist expectations of Chinese masculinity in order to enter white masculine space within the Diamond Grill, just as he is required to perform Chineseness to enter the Lions Club. In one of his morning conversations with his customers, "he asks Sandy the contractor about his riff with the building inspector. He knows Sandy is riled up and will welcome the chance to spout off to the guys about those goddamn paper pushers at city hall" (Wah 29). Wah Sr. engages in a kind of masculine banter, positioning himself alongside Sandy and "the guys" against a

common and discursively unmasculine enemy, the bookish bureaucrats or "paper pushers." Yet, after Wah Sr. makes a joke about "how Sandy couldn't be getting enough tail," Sandy mocks Wah Sr.'s curling skills, or as Wah tells us, "throws a dime on the counter, and quips back at him about how a Chinaman who can't take out an unguarded rock in the center of the circle probably couldn't find a hole" (29). Recalling Sun's claim that "physical ability as masculinity par excellence stands as one of the most important mechanisms via which Asian men are emasculated" (53), we can understand that Sandy is connecting two discursive norms of hegemonic white masculinity — namely, physical ability and sexual prowess with women — in order to challenge the masculinity of Wah Sr. In this case, his position as the owner of the Diamond Grill requires him to accept this emasculating discourse in order to succeed in other ways; "he laughs with them. They're his customers, he wants them to come back" (Wah 29).

Yet his position as restaurant owner does give Wah Sr. at times a certain sense of power and status in relation to his patrons, which he can use to upset or redefine the hierarchical position of high-class white men. When he catches a "Baker Street nickel millionaire" (Wah 69) stealing tips from a table, he

> goes up to him and says jesus christ Murphy what do you think you're doing lifting the girls' tips. They work hard for that money and you got more'n you know what to do with. You think you're such a high muckamuck. You never leave tips yourself and here you are stealing small change. I want you to get out of here and don't come into this cafe again. The guy leaves, cursing my dad, saying he doesn't know why anyone'd wanna eat this Chink food anyway. He never does come back. A pipsqueak trying to be [a] high muckamuck. (70)

Restaurant ownership allows Wah Sr. to ban this customer from a space of community, reversing the historical relationship between dominant white Canadian subjects and Chinese migrants as foreign others. Wah Sr. compromises the customer's class-based perception of his self-worth by criticizing his stinginess. By the end of the interaction, the "nickel millionaire" becomes figured as a "pipsqueak," an unmasculine figure of small stature. The timber games that Wah Sr. plays against the "nickel millionaires" of Nelson similarly allow him to gain this sort of control within white masculine space: "They start out betting just for coffee

but no one can stand to lose so the stakes go up. He taunts them with jokes about their luck, he loves it" (123). This small-scale gambling is not just a performance: when the younger Wah finds the timber money "spread out on the living room floor" for Christmas, he recalls his father "spangled with his proud gambling smile and wink[ing] to us kids that he could do that, bluff each day past those white guys and always have jingle jangle high jinks deep into his right pocket for his family" (124). The process of bluffing past "white guys" in order to win money is equated with providing for his family, a traditionally masculine role. Wah Sr.'s entrepreneurial spirit fulfills a particular expectation of himself as a masculine provider within white society.

The younger Wah, in contrast, negotiates masculinity by embracing the whiteness of his shifting racial identity. His peers during his childhood discount the masculinity of Chinese men, particularly the Chinese teens who immigrate after the end of the Chinese Exclusion Act. They form a basketball team, an archetypically masculine activity; "they're good, too. Fast, smart" (136). Nonetheless, Wah avoids associating with them; "my buddies at school call them Chinks and geeks and I feel a little embarrassed and don't talk much with the Chinese kids" (136). The white teenagers' use of the term "geeks" defines the more recent Chinese immigrants as studious and unsociable. Wah avoids this unmasculine reputation by associating with his white peers instead: "I'm white enough to get away with it and that's what I do" (136). Embracing the white majority means directly reinforcing the white masculine discourse that historically has discounted the masculinity of Chinese Canadian men. His identity presentation, as Saul suggests, is context dependent (108), meaning that he can "kid around" safely with Wing Bo, the "paper son" who lives in the Diamond Grill (Wah 118), as long as he is out of sight of white society. Wing Bo works in the basement at first, and this is where Wah's initial meeting with him occurs, in "the darkness" (118). During his childhood, Wah hides his Chineseness in order to fit in within white male homosocial circles.[2]

Approaching masculinity as a quality continually negotiated and rewritten reveals the unfixed and at a certain level illusory nature of white Canadian hegemonic masculinity. Nonetheless, the tactics of negotiation presented by Grampa Wah, Pong, Wah Sr., and others tend to operate by supporting and perpetuating existing oppressive and exclusionary masculine standards. It is easy to recognize how the attempts that Wah makes in his childhood to bargain for masculine

status by downplaying his Chinese identity uphold exclusionary notions of masculinity; rather than attempting to reassert Chinese Canadian masculinity, he directly reproduces a racialized masculine hierarchy enshrining whiteness. Lindsay Diehl argues, however, that even attempts to reassociate masculinity with the Chinese male body can ultimately reinforce problematic standards of masculinity, "reaffirming exclusionary notions of manhood, which were once directed at Chinese men, and which continue to mark the female body as subordinate" (45). Although Chinese Canadian men face racialized oppression, they concurrently leverage power over women and sometimes, as in the case of Grampa Wah, class privilege. Through these vectors of identity, these men can become oppressors themselves.

Hegemonic masculinity has functioned historically through gendered power relations, legitimating the "global subjugation of women to men" (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). The negotiation of masculinity in the case of Grampa Wah leads him to approach the women in his life as possessions to be controlled rather than as equal subjects. This possessive masculine rewriting of women resonates throughout *Diamond Grill*; when Wah Jr.'s first girlfriend is sent away to Spokane, her father tells Wah that he does not want "my daughter marrying a Chinaman" (39); the girl becomes an object that he refuses to give away. In order to enhance his masculinity, Grampa Wah takes this kind of paternalistic attitude toward women to an extreme. After sending Fred and Ethel to live with his first wife in China, Grampa Wah began "gambling away" (6) the money that Florence, his white wife, was sequestering for their return passage. Disregarding the feelings of the women in his life, Grampa Wah approaches Florence's labour and person as objects to which he is entitled. In their old age, Grandpa Wah looks "still fairly lean and spiffy, wears a tie, a knowing pleased curve to his lips," whereas Florence "looks frumpy and stooped, caved in" (90). Wah's claim that Grampa Wah "has his arm around her" (90), immediately followed by a description of his outward wealth, may suggest a continuing possessive attitude towards his wife. He treats Ethel, his daughter, in a similarly controlling manner, marrying her to two Chinese men, marriages "of convenience, to them and her father, not her" (89). This possessive relationship represents the "perpetual masculine writing of [Ethel's] memory and her history" (89). In attempting to rewrite himself as a man, Grampa Wah overwrites the agency of the women around him.

A desire to maintain masculine status similarly leads Wah Sr. to engage in abusive behaviour toward his family. His attempts to negotiate masculinity revolve around ingratiating himself in positions of control within white-dominated spaces; because of his marriage to Coreen, the daughter of Swedish immigrants, his family becomes more white than he is, turning it into a space in which his masculinity is always precarious, dependent on his fulfillment of particular masculine roles. Patricia Hill Collins identifies the family as a space in which broader societal hierarchies, notably those of "gender, age, and sexuality" ("It's" 65), are constructed and instilled within individuals. The hierarchical structure of the traditional family tends to glorify the father figure, assuming "a male headship that privileges and naturalizes masculinity as a source of authority" (65). Challenges to his authority, including over language, become destructive to Wah Sr.'s perception of himself as a man. Admission to the Lions Club requires Wah Sr. to navigate his difficulties with the English language; that moment, with his conquering of the mispronunciation "sloup" (Wah 66), can be juxtaposed with the "slip[s] of the tongue" that he makes during family dinners, which, when laughed at by his children, prompt "his quick dagger defense" (61). As Wah Jr. tells us, "that'll be the redness in his face the English problem, him exposed" (61). Fear that he might be "exposed" as a Chinese man within a white family, and thereby lose his masculinity, leads Wah Sr. to abusive behaviour: "when he gets really mad, the colour of that is black and blue" (102).

Food as a marker of racialized identity becomes a particular place in which Wah Sr.'s masculinity is challenged. Wah Jr.'s white mother criticizes the smell of garlic: "She knows the girls don't like garlic breath on her boys so she always reminds us to eat some parsley after dinner" (47). As a common ingredient in Chinese but not British or Scandinavian food, garlic becomes a marker of Wah Sr.'s racialized identity: "Dad has a bird over that. What's the matter with us. He doesn't worry about his breath. Garlic's good enough for him. What makes us think we're so much better than he is" (47). Rosalia Baena tells us that "food serves not only as a conduit of memory, but also provides a living for Wah's family and a means to participate and prosper in Canadian society" (108). Food supports Wah Sr.'s masculinity, his position as restaurant owner allowing him to achieve a certain class status. Yet, as Wah Jr. tells us in *Diamond Grill*, "the Chinese section of the menu is actually quite small" (45). Real Chinese food is generally rejected by the white popu-

lace of Nelson. For the younger Wah, food becomes a space in which he can explore his mixed-race identity. As Baena argues, "culinary language enables Wah to explore his personal identity through metaphors of additions, mixing, and cooking of elements" (109). Yet the same idea of "mixing" white identity with Chinese identity constitutes a challenge for Wah Sr. when his family increasingly becomes associated through their food preferences with the same white culture that historically has discounted Chinese Canadian masculinity. "Whenever I accidentally bite into a piece of ginger root in the beef and greens," Wah Jr. writes, "I make a face and put it aside. This makes him mad, not because he doesn't think ginger is bitter but because I've offended his pride in the food he prepares for us. Ginger becomes the site of an implicit racial qualification" (11). The son's dislike of ginger, like his mother's advice for taking garlic off the breath, evokes for his father a larger rejection of Chinese identity. The hybrid racial identity present in the Wah family creates a kind of distance between son and father by which the father's confidence as patriarchal head of the household is threatened.

Toxic masculine norms instilled by the discursive denigration of Chinese Canadian masculinity become reproduced in subsequent generations. Describing a Christmas trip to Buffalo, Wah Jr. recalls one instance of his father's masculine anger: "We play cards a lot — hearts — and he really gets into it. But one night the game blows up because he misunderstands one of the rules. We all side against him and his ire rises. At times like this he's alone" (71). We can compare this scene to the victories against the "nickel millionaires" (123) in which Wah Sr. takes pride in his ability to "bluff each day past those white guys" (124). Not just losing at but also misunderstanding the game of hearts when playing with his family, the members of which are all whiter than he is, challenges his masculinity, revealing "some armature of temptation at work that urges on bravado and resistance" (71). Connections between separate but parallel sections of *Diamond Grill* reflect the reproduction of the effects of racial exclusion through generations; this moment becomes a kind of link in a chain connecting Wah Sr.'s relationship to the Baker Street "nickel millionaires," along with other supposedly highly masculine, high-class white men, to the anger that Wah Jr. feels toward his daughter at a different Christmas many years later:

> [L]ast christmas when I grabbed you by the shoulders and shook you from so much anger welled up in me after days of frustration

> . . . , totally enraged there on the stairs at some little thing you'd said or not done, that, that was from that well deep within me and at least my father maybe his who knows now your anger too could be ours this pit of something having gone on but only surfacing like Ahab's whale unpredictably in a sudden eruption. (72)

This paternal anger is a kind of heirloom, the product of a history of exclusion and emasculation, that of "at least my father maybe his." As Wah Jr. tells us, "Rage to the skin's story is colour-deep, colour deep. Later in my life, or always, maybe even yours, this anger gram becomes the free-floating and yet forever-foreign im from migration" (72). Following how Chinese Canadian masculinity has been challenged historically, problematic norms of masculinity become disseminated and reproduced across men for generations, even those who can pass for white, like Wah Jr. History becomes inseparable from subjectivity; the family history of immigration, including the emasculating legacy of the head tax and other legislative controls, affects the Wah men into perpetuity, designating them as forever "foreign" and other to white norms of masculinity in Canada.

Approaching masculinity in *Diamond Grill* from an intersectional standpoint helps us to recognize how models of masculinity in Canada, particularly as they work to denigrate and subjugate Chinese masculinity, are continually constructed and rewritten in order to serve a dominant order enshrining whiteness, physical fitness, class status, and other exclusionary discursive values. An exploration of Wah's text suggests that traditional methods of regaining masculine status, notably bargaining on the basis of class or other forms of social capital, themselves tend to reproduce oppressive notions of masculinity; "the very practice," in Sun's words, "entrenches an intersectional oppressive regime with whiteness and physical ability at its centre" (62). Rather than attempting to valorize Chineseness within a white standard of masculinity, we must rethink the broader, white-dominated structure of masculinity that imposes these standards on individuals. There might be room for hope; if studying *Diamond Grill* shows us anything, then it is that structures of identity are never fixed but can always be rewritten or redefined in different contexts. As Wah tells us in his afterword, "the hybrid has as much possibility of 'a' sure identity as anyone; the only thing sure about it, however, is . . . that it's always shifting. The sureness of shifting" (187).

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Notes

[1] For an introduction to intersectionality, see Crenshaw; Stasiulis.

[2] The concept of homosociality, referring to non-sexual relationships between individuals of the same sex, was popularized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who suggests that male homosocial desire exists on a continuum with homosexual desire yet is "radically disrupted" (2) by the misogynistic disavowal of male homosexuality (20).

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