

The Importance of Being Ethnic and the Value of Faking It

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Towards the end of Rohinton Mistry's short story "Swimming Lessons," the protagonist's parents reflect on the merits of a short story collection written by their son and decide that he will be successful if he continues to write about his recent experience as an Indian immigrant in Canada, because "they are interested there in reading about life through the eyes of an immigrant" (248). The only danger, the parents argue, "is if he changes and becomes so much like them that he will write like one of them and lose the important difference" (248). Or, to use the language of the Writing and Publications Program (WPP) organized by the Canadian federal government's Department of Multiculturalism, the young Indo-Canadian writer might become so much like Anglo-Canadians that he will fail to convey "a specific cultural experience" (Young 96). Mistry's story is funny, but his suggestion that ethnic and racial minority writers are encouraged to reproduce "specific" and recognizable images of ethnic or racial difference is serious and is echoed by a number of Canadian writers. For example, Dionne Brand complains that "all black writers are expected to make signs," to act as auto-ethnographers translating the "exotic" customs of their people so that the reader may easily "identify black bodies and code them" (25). And while Thomas King has been very explicit about his attempts to frustrate readings of his novels as authentic, unmediated accounts of Native experience, he argues that he cannot avoid that "demand for authenticity," which he characterizes as a "whip that [indigenous peoples] get beaten with" (in Kambourelli 233).

Coercive mimesis is the name that Rey Chow gives to the dynamic described by these contemporary Canadian writers, all three of whom suggest that they have been asked—in one way or another—to "resemble and replicate the very banal preconceptions that have been appended to them" (107). She argues that "if it is difficult for the ethnic to become a perfect imitation of the white man, it is even more difficult for her to become a perfect imitation of herself" (116). When I read this I think of Eden Robinson's story "Queen of the North," wherein a white powwow spectator buys bannock from a young indigenous woman whom he hopes will act as a cultural tour guide of sorts: after slowly surveying her naked arms and legs he holds up the bannock and asks, "How should I eat these?" And she says, "With your mouth, asshole" (208). I also think of

Thomas King's novel *Green Grass, Running Water*, wherein the Blackfoot actor, Portland Looking Bear, is unable to find film work upon refusing to wear the plastic prosthetic nose that his director promises makes him look like a "real Indian." Finally, I think of Fred Wah, a very versatile prose-poet and essayist whose work also addresses the pressure to fake ethnic authenticity by considering what it means to consequently be construed and to construe oneself as a fake. What sets Wah apart from the writers mentioned above is his suggestion that "faking it" might also be understood as generative. And so, the purpose of this paper is to trace the uses of faking it in Wah's two most recent books in order to consider how the aesthetics and politics of faking might help disrupt the dynamics of coercive mimesis and "the legibility of race-based paradigms" (Moynagh 165) while also elucidating both the overdetermination and indeterminacies of race in a contemporary Canadian context.

The idea of "faking it" runs through much of Wah's poetry and criticism, but it is most developed in *Diamond Grill*, a collection of prose pieces that Wah calls a "biofiction," and *Faking It*, a collection of essays that often veers toward poetry. In both books, Wah's use of faking it is promiscuous, even contradictory: on the one hand, it is shorthand for a kind of critical practice that stands in opposition to assumptions about racial and cultural purity; on the other, it is a metaphor for the disavowal of racial difference via passing. So, for example, Wah begins *Faking It* by announcing that he is a poet, first and foremost, but that he is, in this instance, intent on "faking" a scholarly voice in hopes of undercutting the "hegemony" and presumably the ostensible objectivity of the essay (FI 1). But unlike what he construes as his earlier attempts to mimic the formality of academic prose, Wah's return to the essay is, he says, not about "trying to overcome the imprint of accent" (FI 1) but is rather about finding a way to articulate the imprint of accent, culture, and colour without capitulating to the pressure to confess or perform his ethnicity for a largely white audience. Central to this project is Wah's rejection of what he calls the "necessary mimesis of the other" (FI 113), that is, the expectation that an ethnic writer will write about what he or she knows best, namely his or her ethnicity, and that he or she will do so in a manner that is not merely referential but didactic, designed to explain his or her demonstrable and demonstrated "difference" to a mainstream audience. So, in place of the "necessary mimesis of the other," Wah adopts what he calls an avowedly "duplicious voice" (FI 53).

Something similar happens in *Diamond Grill*. In the Afterword to the tenth anniversary edition of that book, Wah is very explicit about his interest in ensuring that his writing is not "hijacked" by the "ready made expectations" that tend to (over-)determine readings of autobiography and life writing (184). Perhaps this is why *Diamond Grill* opens with a declaration of its fictitiousness, immediately frustrating those readings that would understand it as autobiography and value it for its truth claims: Despite the obvious overlap between the book's author and subject (both of whom are called Fred Wah), we are told that "these are not true stories

but, rather, poses or postures, necessitated, as I hope is clear in the text, by faking it” (np). Therefore, if we persist in reading these stories as true (and their very close correspondence with Wah’s biographical details makes that very easy to do), we must also ask about our investment in their truthfulness.

By advocating duplicity and choosing a critical methodology that carries connotations of counterfeiting or fraudulence, Wah warns his readers against receiving or invoking ethnic writing as truth. Implicitly, he also warns against recommending it as such. So, in the proudly multicultural context of contemporary Canada, Wah’s use of faking might be seen to caution against what George Elliott Clarke identifies as the “panacea politics” practiced by Canadian literary scholars eager to compensate for a history of racism and keen to demonstrate their own antiracism by uncritically celebrating writers of colour—heralding their “difference” while failing to engage with either the poetic merits (diction, imagery, rhythm) of their texts or with the particular histories invoked therein (163). Louis Althusser says that “there is no such thing as an innocent reading, [so] we must say what reading we are guilty of” (15). Fred Wah, like George Elliot Clarke, asks no less of us.

Although both *Faking It* and *Diamond Grill* open by proposing faking it as a shorthand for an oppositional aesthetics, they go on to foreground another kind of faking it that has more to do with disavowal than disidentification. In each book Wah uses the same passages to do so. Here is the first of those passages: “Until Mary McNutter calls me a Chink, I’m not one. That’s in elementary school. Later I don’t have to be because I don’t look like one” (DG 98, FI 71). When young Fred Wah, who is one-quarter Chinese, is forced to see himself as he is seen by Mary McNutter, he disavows his Chinese heritage and, he says, “I become as white as I can.” Secondly, both books describe a speech that Fred’s father, who is also called Fred Wah, gave to the Lions Club in Nelson, BC, in the 1950s. Fred Sr.—a Canadian of mixed Chinese and Swedish descent—begins by thanking Club members for dinner and adds that the “sloup” was especially good. Upon seeing the patronizing smiles from the crowd, he:

does what he has learned to do so well in such instances, he turns it into a joke, a kind of self put-down that he knows these white guys like to hear: he bluffs that Chinamen call soup sloup because, as you all know, the Chinese make their café soup from the slop water they wash their underwear and socks in, and besides, it’s just like when you hear me eating my soup, Chinamen like to slurp and make a lot of noise. (DG 66)

So Fred Sr. plays the Chinaman. He puts the white businessmen at ease by corroborating their idea of Chineseness. “He fakes it,” concludes his son, adding, “I guess I pick up on that sense of faking it from him” (DG 66). Implicitly, then, “faking it” extends to overt acts of racial misrepresentation or disavowal. But because Wah repeatedly uses this

phrase, with its specters of authenticity and betrayal, to refer to his father's less overtly fraudulent attempt to fit in by accommodating white ideas of Chineseness, he emphasizes the extent to which a kind of role play, even fakery, has been and continues to be asked of and imposed on ethnic and racial minorities, who are rewarded for masking their own "strange" cultural values, religious practices, and aesthetic preferences, *but* who are called upon to perform that strangeness in a manner that corroborates mainstream expectations.

If, however, Wah uses faking it to stress the function of role play in the assertion of ethnic and racial identity, he also uses it to insist on what David Murray calls the "non-choice of race" (96). Like many scholars before him, Murray suggests that ethnicity can be understood as a creative act of imagining and reimagining the past that has more to do with assertion than ascription; although some ascribed racial identities are, of course, also freely chosen, they are, he argues, less often a matter of choice. Thus he concludes that "only when being 'Black' is entirely a matter of individual choice and not a matter of assignment by others will Werner Sollors's 'invention of ethnicity' have worked its way through" (96). This is Wah on the non-choice of race: Asked to fill out a form in grade four, Fred Jr. puts "Canadian" in the blank for racial origin, but his teacher [says], "no Freddy, you're Chinese, your racial origin is Chinese, that's what your father is. Canadian isn't a racial identity" (DG 53). With the benefit of hindsight, Wah adds, "That's turned out to be true. But I'm not really Chinese either" (DG 53). The simplicity and arrogance with which the teacher insists on Fred's Chineseness simultaneously flattens and accentuates his difference. As a form of disciplinary naming intended to classify and regulate its object, her directive also echoes what Chow identifies as "ever-renewable efforts to fabricate and stabilize the kind of genealogy . . . in which ethnics can be securely contained (through surveys, statistics, scientific studies, intelligence networks, and police and immigration records)" (127). But it is as flawed as it is familiar, because it utterly fails to register the complexities of his self-understanding and thus accentuates the confusion, the anxiety, and the sense of illegitimacy emerging from the fraught and painful gap between young Fred's fluid, variable identifications and his socially-sanctioned identity. Here the notion of role play is helpful again. Despite Wah's sense that he is "not really Chinese either," he has his Chineseness prescribed, pre-scripted for him. But when he delivers his expected lines—and announces his Chinese identity—his identity claims are, he says, met with disbelief, bemusement, or laughter, thus exacerbating his sense of himself as a fake. Consider, for example, the following lines from Wah's long poem "Waiting for Saskatchewan," which he uses as the epigraph to *Diamond Grill*: "They look at me. I'm pulling their leg. So, I'm Chinese too and that's why my name is Wah. They don't really believe me. That's o.k. When you're not pure you just make it up" (np).

However, Fred concedes that his grade-four teacher was right on at least one score: "Canadian is not a racial identity." Because *Diamond*

Grill is centrally concerned to address the familial, social, and psychic upheaval that is the legacy of the Chinese Head Taxes and the Chinese Exclusion Act—discriminatory legislation aimed at minimizing Chinese immigration to Canada between 1885 and 1945—his acknowledgement that “Canadian is not a racial identity” recalls the desire for racial homogeneity that was at the heart of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nationalist efforts to bolster the myth of a “Canadian race” peculiarly suited to its northern location. But because much of the book’s setting is contemporary, it also explicitly invokes more recent manifestations of what Constance Backhouse calls the Canadian “myth of racelessness” (14). While Backhouse uses this phrase to evoke the naïve though persistent belief that systemic racism is not a problem in Canada, it is also suggestive of the extent to which state-sponsored multiculturalism in Canada has made a virtue of ignoring race and has, as Roxanna Ng notes, strategically subsumed it within the more malleable discourse of ethnicity in order to “diffuse the antagonistic relations between Quebec and English Canada, and between the native people, other minority groups, and the Canadian state” (297).

Presumably, one reason that ethnicity is construed to be less antagonistic than race as an organizing rubric for official multicultural discourses is that race is deemed—implicitly at least—to be more natural, less constructed, than ethnicity, which thus lends itself more easily to integrationist politics. Consider, for example, the erasure of race from the publicity brochure that identifies the mandate of the Department of Multiculturalism’s very effective “Writing and Publications Program” as an attempt “to encourage the writing and publishing efforts of writers who use the non-official languages for their creative work as well as those writers who use the official languages but who have a specific cultural experience to convey” (Young 96). Judy Young, who directed the cultural portfolio in Multiculturalism and oversaw the Writing and Publications Program for much of its twenty-year run between the late 1970s and late 1990s, characterizes the program’s goals this way: “The program was attempting to serve two apparently contradictory aims: on the one hand, support the maintenance of specific ethnic identity (by supporting ethnic specific writing and works in other languages), but on the other hand, encourage the literary establishment to consider the work Canadian, and accept it as part and parcel of the larger Canadian identity” (96). While the excerpt from the WPP’s program is useful here as an index of the racelessness of official multiculturalism in Canada, Young’s invocation of a “larger Canadian identity” is particularly telling inasmuch as it sheds light on Wah’s angry and repeated refusal of a “nationalistic aesthetic that continually attempts to expropriate difference into its own consuming narrative” (FI 75). To use Young’s language, Wah certainly evokes a “specific ethnic identity” that is grounded in an “ethnic specific” history, but that history is carefully constructed—via reference to the Chinese Head Taxes, the Exclusion Acts, and the Canadian Pacific Railway (the construction of which cost thousands of Chinese and Chinese-Canadian

labourers their lives)—in opposition to the “larger Canadian identity.” Wah’s frequent references to the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) are interesting in this regard: because the CPR is so often evoked as a symbol of Canadian “sea to sea” unity but has until recently rarely been understood as the product of Chinese labour, it is, for Wah, an ironic symbol of the historical erasure of Chinese-Canadians from what Lauren Berlant calls the “anatomy of national consciousness,” the “images, narratives, monuments, and sites that circulate through personal/collective consciousness” (5). Although the recent vogue for ethnic autobiography and fiction has made certain narratives of Chineseness attractive, Wah continues to demur, saying: “I don’t want to be inducted into someone else’s story, or project,” and “I’m just not interested in this collective enterprise erected from the sacrosanct great railway imagination dedicated to harvesting a dominant white cultural landscape” (DG 125).

Wah does not explicitly use faking it to address his opposition to the “great sacrosanct railway imagination” or the “nationalistic aesthetic” that it encourages, but faking it, as imagined by Wah, is entirely in keeping with what Jeff Derksen calls a “tactical refusal to be recognized or interpellated” under and through a discourse—such as national identity—“that, in making the subject recognizable, regulates it” (64). Because Wah uses faking it to insist on the un-ending, frequently fraught, but also imaginative play between and within identities that are interpellated (“[N]o Freddy, you’re Chinese”) and those that are intuited or self-articulated (“But I’m not really Chinese either”), and more generally, because he imagines identity in terms of fluidity as well as duplicity, faking it “resists or shuns recognition by such articulatory forces” as race or nation (64).

Therefore, faking it operates as an antisystemic strategy of disidentification that means being unrecognizable to or within various regulatory rubrics, but it also needs to be understood as a strategy that emerges *in response* to the condition of coercive mimesis, the sense that one is bound to and compromised by attempts to fake ethnic and racial authenticity. Although Wah’s use of the trope to both evoke the experience of coercive mimesis and to outline a means of resistance to the expectations that coercive mimesis creates is often disorienting, faking it, in all its guises, is posited as a response to the non-choice of race. As I have tried to establish, in a Canadian context the non-choice of race refers to the ways in which the dominant discourse of liberal pluralism discourages discussions of race and racialized structures of inequality, preferring either to maintain—with what Dionne Brand calls “stupefying innocence”—that ours is not a racist country (Backhouse 14) or to disavow race in favour of the more flexible and thus inclusive notion of ethnicity. But in a more general context it takes on at least three more meanings: the use of race-thinking to regulate and subordinate some individuals, to circumscribe the choices available to them; the extent to which race shapes readings of literary texts written by racialized writers; and not least of all, the process by which racialized subjects “are expected

to objectify themselves in accordance with the already seen and thus to authenticate the familiar imagings of them[selves]" (Chow 107).

I am not the first scholar to be attracted by the seeming mobility and the intellectual promise of Wah's use of faking it. Citing Wah's argument that there is "No other way but to be in language, but to bluff your way through it," Dean Irvine understands faking it as central to Wah's interest in the process and the implications of improvisation and of generic subterfuge (200). Similarly, in "Faking It: Fred Wah and the Postcolonial Imaginary," Smaro Kamboureli recommends faking it as a means of revealing "the different ways in which post-colonial critical discourse responds to history, culture, and the national imaginary" (115). Certainly Kamboureli is right to suggest that faking it "is synonymous with a politics that does not want to overcome the incommensurability of identity" (122), but, because she begins by announcing that she is "faking it" as a post-colonialist and then goes on to use faking it to articulate those anxieties about authoritativeness and originality that haunt so much scholarly work, Kamboureli overestimates the extent to which faking it, for all its pleasing and worrying mobility, is generalizable: Without question, faking it evokes both a "certain excitability" and a "complex intentionality" (Kamboureli 119; 118), but these qualities need to be considered in the context of Wah's attempts to expose the self-conflictual modes of coercive mimesis. To do otherwise is to foreground the trope's "excitability" or playfulness at the expense of its "intentionality." In an attempt to address how these qualities work together, I want to turn now to a brief discussion of a sequence that is contained in *Faking It* and that Wah says was mistakenly omitted from *Diamond Grill* (FI 78).

In an essay called "Half-Bred Poetics," Wah argues that in response to so many attempts to excoriate, calibrate, or commodify what is popularly understood as their "difference," ethnic and racial minorities need to "relocate the responsibility for their own subjectivity within themselves" (FI 76). But, tellingly, he follows that directive with a sequence describing his telephone conversation with an employee of the Vancouver office of the US Consulate: when Wah identifies himself by name and explains that he wants to apply for a work visa, she says, "I'm afraid you'll have to apply under the Asian quota, sir, and there's a backup of several years on the Asian list" (77). Wah then drives to the Consulate and presents his dilemma to another employee, who says, "But you don't look Chinese." That individual proceeds to reassure him that his mixed-race background "makes all the difference," that he is, in effect, white enough to pass (77). So, to borrow a phrase from Kamboureli's reading of *Faking It*, "the nation," represented here by the Consulate's office, "fakes its benevolence and inclusiveness" (122). But what is most interesting about these two sequences is their juxtaposition with one another: in the passage that precedes the visit to the Consulate's office, Wah insists on the political efficacy of self-determined identity in a general sense; but he then goes on to demonstrate how a particular attempt to articulate a self-determined identity fails because he is identified by his name, with its

“blood residue,” its stain of race (FI np). Despite his claim that “When you’re not pure, you just make it up,” making it up in the Consul General’s office is unadvisable, and—if your last name is Wah—it’s also very difficult.

Like Wah, Rey Chow also cites “ever-renewable” government efforts to fabricate a kind of genealogy through which ethnic and racial minorities may be regulated as a barrier to their attempts “to authenticate themselves” (127). Referring to the American context, she continues:

While they demand and reward the reiterations of self-mimicry in Western societies by Asian, Asian American, African American, Latino, and other such demographic groups, the forces of coercive mimesis are ultimately what engender the profound sense of self-hatred and impotence among ethnics, because, however conscientiously they attempt to authenticate themselves—and especially when they attempt conscientiously—they will continue to come across as inferior imitations, copies that are permanently out of focus. (127)

Here, though, Wah is more hopeful and perhaps more helpful than Chow, because he insists that even in those moments when the racialized subject feels bound to comply with those regulatory and identificatory regimes that mis-recognize him, he inevitably exceeds that interpellated identity. This is implicit in the passage that directly follows the scene in the Consulate’s office: with startling alacrity, Wah moves from the very situatedness of that office to a much more poetic register and cites numerous examples of code-switching, which he, with a nod to Mary Louise Pratt, represents both as a restless movement between two languages, but also a “faking” of language that introduces a “synchronous foreignicity . . . [an] ability to remain within an ambivalence without succumbing to the pull of any single culture . . . source, origin, containment” (FI 83).

Even in the context of a discussion of code-switching, this move from a very situated and manifestly political negotiation of a particular attempt to define his identity to a very poetical mode is surprising because it reminds the reader that faking it, as a poetics of estrangement, does not help Fred Wah when the Consul General’s secretary warns him about the “Asian quota.” Nor does it help him when Mary McNutter calls him a “Chink.” And yet, as I hope I have demonstrated, Fred Wah’s refusal of “the necessary mimesis of the other,” his declared distaste for confessional writing, his avowal of duplicity, and his refusal to “settle anything” must be understood as determined and political responses to demands that he identify himself, that he confess his ethnic secrets, that he correspond to a predetermined “ethnic imprint.” Although Wah suggests, as Chow does, that “the forces of coercive mimesis” create a “profound sense of self-hatred” and a sometimes debilitating anger among racialized writers, they are not, for Wah, insurmountable. Where Chow, writing in a very scholarly register, imagines only “impotence,” the very restlessness of Wah’s “compositional tactic of nonclosure” (FI 25) allows for the possibility of what Kambourelli calls a “complex intentionality,” not just

because the “dynamics of improvisation” (FI 261) are employed in such a way as to insist that the racialized subject always exceeds the overdetermined and frequently derogatory identities that are ascribed to him, but because the combination of Wah’s compositional commitment to a poetic mode that resists any kind of fixity with his ideological commitment to exploring the experience and practice of faking it means that Wah’s readers must ask the question of authorial and textual identity within “an ‘economy’ . . . of the fake” (McFarlane 124).

Put differently, Wah ensures that the reader (or scholar) who attempts to arrest the question of identity under the sign of race is, as Scott McFarlane argues, “falling for his fake” (124). As McFarlane uses it, “falling for” Fred Wah’s fake means being seduced by the promise of a single culture, source, or origin. We also “fall” for his fake if, just for a moment, we forget his strategic interest in subterfuge, praising *Diamond Grill* for its “real” evocation of ethnic difference and acclaiming its author as the earnest, eth(n)ical informant he—most strenuously—is not. Finally, because he declares his disdain for those commercial and intellectual ventures that attempt to turn “difference into a consumable item” (FI 84), we fall for his fake wherever we fail to examine our own critical strategies for contending with race and for considering how our readerly, scholarly, and pedagogical practices might “expropriate difference” into narratives that suit our ends. So, where Scott McFarlane asks “How do we read a fake?” I say, closely. Often. And, with care.

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