

Scrawny Cats and Demoralized Nihonjin: Stories of Asian Canadian Men Coping with
Racialized Shame and Emasculation

By

Cailly Maria Wiebe VanCaeyzeele

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

The University of Manitoba

In partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English, Theatre, Film & Media

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg, Manitoba

Copyright © 2026 by Cailly Maria Wiebe VanCaeyzeele

Abstract

This thesis examines the portrayals of Asian Canadian men in Paul Yee's *A Superior Man* and Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*. By reading these novels alongside the historic policies of the narratives' present—the Chinese Head Tax, exploitative labour practices, and Japanese Canadian internment—I demonstrate how these policies have worked towards a historical conditioning of a sense of shame and emasculation that the men of the novels internalize. This systemic degradation thus produces a condition that evokes David Eng's concept of "racial castration." I demonstrate how these pressures drive Yee's Yang Hok to adopt destructive coping mechanisms. Internally, he models Gage Karahkwí:io Diabo's idea of "bad feelings;" he experiences persistent negative emotions such as jealousy and resentment toward potential allies that are rooted within his own feelings of powerlessness. Externally, he weaponizes colonial rhetoric to leverage himself above Indigenous and mixed-race individuals. The second chapter examines how internment produced a systemic emasculation that manifests across Sakamoto's three distinct male figures. My examination of Papa reveals how he experiences despondency as a result of the *Issei*—first-generation Japanese Canadian—men's lost household authority and autonomy. I reveal how his son remains isolated and emotionally stunted, trapped within a cycle of escalating shame. Yano illustrates how the compounding pressures of economic dispossession and racist emasculation can explode into tragic domestic violence. Thus, this thesis analyzes how these men ultimately project their internalized trauma as violence against themselves, their families, and their communities. Through such depictions, these novels warn that when racialized shame and emasculation are left unchecked, they can manifest as abusive coping strategies that transform the victims into perpetrators.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Lindsay Diehl, for her guidance and support throughout this project. This thesis has greatly benefitted from her feedback and insight.

Thank you to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for granting me the Canada Graduate Scholarship Master's award in support of this research. I would also like to thank the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Graduate Studies for having granted me the Tri-Agency Master's Supplemental Award.

I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to my mother, Shannon Wiebe, for her endless encouragement and positivity. I am deeply thankful for my husband, Kyle VanCaeyzeele, for his unwavering belief in me.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
1. Socio-Historical Context.....	1
2. Methodology	4
3. Chapter One Overview	9
4. Chapter Two Overview	10
Chapter One: The Nervous Father: Yang Hok’s Destructive Ways of Reasserting his Chinese Masculinity in his Struggle against Racialized Emasculation	11
1. Yang Hok Internalizes “Racial Castration”	12
2. Emotional Response to “Racial Castration”	21
3. Behavioural Responses to “Racial Castration”	28
4. The Tragic Consequences	38
5. Chapter Conclusion.....	44
Chapter Two: “Ashamed to be Nihonjin”: Emasculation and Trauma in Kerri Sakamoto’s <i>The Electrical Field</i>	46
1. Papa and <i>Issei</i> Debilitation.....	47
1.1 Harmful Coping Mechanisms	53
2. Stum’s Retreat Inwards	55
3. Yano’s Struggle with “Racial Castration”	60
3.1 Economic Dispossession.....	65
3.2 Violent Coping Mechanisms	68
4. Chapter Conclusion.....	69
Conclusion	71
Works Cited	74

Introduction

When Yang Hok, a Chinese indentured railway labourer in Paul Yee's *A Superior Man*, confesses to feeling like a "scrawny cat" (45), he highlights the shame of his dehumanization through a historically gendered lens. Aligning with feminist religious studies scholar Alleyn Diesel's assertion that cats are cross-culturally associated with femininity (71), this zoomorphic imagery demonstrates how indentured labour is emasculating and disempowering. Similarly, when Masashi Yano, a Japanese internment survivor in Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* admits to feeling "ashamed to be nihonjin [a Japanese person]" (198), he also gestures to how this racialized shame is incompatible with normative, self-assured manhood: "It [shame] isn't attractive... Especially in a man" (199). While these works of fiction explore different time periods and events—Yee illustrates Chinese Canadian railway labourers in the 1880s and Sakamoto portrays Japanese Canadian internment survivors in the 1970s—both novels offer poignant depictions of Asian Canadian men who internalize feelings of shame and emasculation in response to Yellow Peril stereotypes and discriminatory policies that target them. Their sense of inadequacy is further amplified by dominant Western standards of masculinity, which cast them as inferior. To cope with their compounding disempowerment, the men adopt destructive behaviors, ultimately projecting their internalized trauma as violence against themselves, their families, and their communities. Through such depictions, these novels warn that when racialized shame and emasculation are left unchecked, they can manifest as abusive coping strategies that transform the victims into perpetrators.

1. Socio-Historical Context

These novels expose how historical Canadian state policies degraded Chinese and Japanese men, stripping them of social and legal power and denying them access to normative manhood, which expects men to be dominant, capable, and confident providers. Masculinity

studies scholar R. W. Connell defines this type of manhood as “hegemonic masculinity,” the socially “most honored way of being a man” (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). While acknowledging that the ideals of hegemonic masculinity vary “from place to place, over time, and culturally” (“Hegemonic Masculinity”), it is traditionally legitimized in the West through actions like “bringing home a wage, sustaining a sexual relationship, and being a father” (Connell and Messerschmidt 840). Furthermore, while hegemonic masculinity is exemplified in the “white... male body” (“Hegemonic Masculinity”), all racialized men are measured “against the hegemonic masculinity ideal” (“Hegemonic Masculinity”). Significantly, discriminatory Canadian laws, such as the Chinese Head Tax (1885–1923) and Japanese Canadian internment (1942–1949), isolated Chinese and Japanese Canadian men from their families, splitting family connections that are essential to normative manhood. Yee’s novel *A Superior Man* highlights this struggle, following Yang Hok, an indentured labourer during the 19th-century railway boom. His experiences reveal how the nation’s head tax policies prevented Chinese men from establishing families in Canada while simultaneously profiting from their labour. These policies helped to engineer a bachelor society—a highly exploitable, mobile labor force without local family ties.

The forced separation of Chinese labourers from their families reinforced the Yellow Peril narrative—a dominant socio-political discourse widely circulated in Canada in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that depicted Asian immigrants as existential threats to Western civilization (Pon et al. 6). By making it virtually impossible for Chinese men to bring their wives and children to Canada, head tax policies cemented the stereotype that they were inherently selfish and immoral men who lacked “all the traditionally masculine qualities” (Chin et al. xxx) and who were incapable of domestic or community life. This systemic framing fed into broader racist caricatures that cast Asian men as “inscrutable, effeminate, [and] filthy” (Pon et al. 6), positioning them entirely outside of normative manhood and

inferior to white masculinity. Ultimately, these stereotypes were institutionalized alongside discriminatory legislation, creating a cultural framework that justified both the social exclusion and economic exploitation of Asian Canadians.

Sakamoto's novel *The Electrical Field* reveals how Japanese Canadian men were also barred from normative manhood due to state-sanctioned family separations. Just as early Chinese labourers contended with head tax policies, these men were systemically removed from family life. As critical race studies scholar Mona Oikawa asserts, factors like gender were used "to determine who went where" (126) during internment. Whether forced into physically-demanding coerced labour camps or unjustly repatriated to Japan despite being Canadian-born citizens, characters like Mr. Saito and Masashi Yano expose how Japanese Canadian men have had their family ties disrupted and their patriarchal roles undermined. Indeed, through these characters and their individual plights, Sakamoto demonstrates how discriminatory policies have had devastating consequences on Japanese Canadian men, causing, for example, lingering family fragmentation and the transmission of trauma across generations, emphasizing how the trauma of internment continues to compromise Japanese Canadian families long after the war.

Furthermore, like the earlier Chinese Head Tax, internment policies were justified by recycled Yellow Peril narratives, which pathologized Japanese men as dangerous, effeminate threats to the white majority in Canada. While the Yellow Peril originally targeted the Chinese as unassimilable "Asiatic hordes" (C. J. Kim 5), by the Second World War, this narrative was adapted and redeployed to construct Japanese men in Canada as dangerous domestic threats. As literary scholar William Wu explains, once their numbers increased in Canada, and their families became more established, the Japanese "joined the Chinese as a perceived threat" (Wu 2) to the nation. The mainstream vilification of Japanese Canadians during World War II served to justify the expulsion of over 22,000 Japanese people from

Canada's West Coast, despite Prime Minister Mackenzie King's admission in his address to Parliament that they were innocent of, in his words, "any act of sabotage or disloyalty" (Oikawa 32). The racist stereotypes produced by Yellow Peril narratives refused to acknowledge Japanese Canadian men as hardworking and dedicated husbands and fathers, therefore concealing and minimizing the pain of forced dispossession and family separation. In this way, Yellow Peril narratives laid the groundwork for exclusionary laws and internment camps, bolstering the policies that systemically deprived Asian Canadian men of their agency and denied their access to a normative manhood.

2. Methodology

While the canon of Asian Canadian literature features several foundational texts dealing with systemic racism, this thesis pairs Paul Yee's *A Superior Man* (2015) and Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* (1998) due to their unique, sustained focus on the male subjects struggling against racialized shame and emasculation within specific periods of oppression. Prominent literary counterparts within the field often approach these historical traumas through different thematic lenses. For instance, while SKY Lee's critically acclaimed *Disappearing Moon Cafe* explores early Chinese immigrant struggles, its narrative structure remains largely matrilineal and is communicated through the woman narrator's perspective. Similarly, while Joy Kogawa's monumental *Obasan* is regarded as the definitive narrative of Japanese Canadian internment, its emotional core is centered on the woman narrator and her aunts. In contrast, *A Superior Man* provides a vivid illustration of the 19th-century Chinese rail hand experience through the intimate perspective of a Chinese man narrator, while the driving action of *The Electrical Field* is propelled by a Japanese Canadian man's descent into domestic murder-suicide. Analyzing these novels together allows for a rigorous, chronological analysis of how the evolution of racist policies and colonial discourses translate into a distinct crisis of Asian Canadian masculinity.

Investigating these particular novels also addresses a clear gap in the existing critical landscape. Because both works remain relatively understudied, scholarship on their male characters is sparse. Current scholarship on Paul Yee's novel is limited; most notably, Canadian literary scholar Lindsay Diehl examines how settler colonialism produces aggressive, individualistic masculinities that oppose Confucian ideals, while simultaneously showing how early Chinese immigrant labour contributed to the systemic oppression of Indigenous populations. My arguments build directly on this foundation, expanding the analysis of how the pressures of Canadian colonial structures both harm and provoke harmful behaviours in Chinese men. Meanwhile, critical conversations surrounding Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* focus almost exclusively on its female protagonist, Asako. Scholars like Vikki Visvis read Asako through a Freudian lens to argue that her fragmented trauma narrative resists national impulses toward "collective forgetting" (1), while Andrea Stone analyzes how the psychic wounds of internment manifest as physical symptoms in the novel's women characters. While these critics offer invaluable insights for understanding the racialized trauma instilled by policies and discourse, they overlook the specific gendered consequences that *The Electrical Field*'s male figures endure and respond to. By focusing on these men, this thesis investigates how discriminatory policies and Yellow Peril narratives force an internalization of shame that ultimately drives destructive coping mechanisms and various acts of violence.

This analysis builds directly upon these existing criticisms to establish its own theoretical intervention. In Chapter One, my reading of *A Superior Man* extends Diehl's insights into how settler colonial myths were perpetuated in order to prevent Chinese-Indigenous relationships to deter cross-racial alliances. While Diehl notes that Yang Hok's abandonment of his Chinese-Indigenous son stems from anti-Indigenous stereotypes, this thesis adds nuance by arguing that Yang Hok's disregard for his son is not a passive

absorption of colonial discourse. Rather, Yang Hok is driven to engage with such discourse as an active, defensive mechanism against his own internalized inferiority and racialized shame. I extend this framework to analyze the antagonistic, masculine rivalry between Yang Hok and his Chinese-Indigenous guide, Sam, that is produced by Yang Hok's own feelings of inferiority.

In Chapter Two, my discussion of *The Electrical Field* diverges from Andrea Stone's reading of the physical manifestations of psychic trauma. While Stone argues that, unlike Asako's condition, Mr. Saito's physical impairments are merely the natural consequences of aging, I contend that his physical deterioration is entirely symptomatic of the debilitating trauma of internment. Through this focus on the outward manifestation of trauma, I demonstrate how Mr. Saito, Stum, and Yano all project their psychic wounds outward. Thus, my thesis crucially expands upon Marlene Goldman's foundational assertion that *The Electrical Field* models "how a victim can transform into a victimizer" (374). While Goldman applies this phenomenon primarily to the callous impulses of the female protagonist under the pressure of institutionalized racism, I scale this powerful insight up by revealing how it applies to the men of the novel. Ultimately, this thesis bridges both novels to argue that systemic discrimination fundamentally undermines Chinese and Japanese men in Canada, creating compounding and intersectional harms. Consequently, as the men of the narratives exemplify, they can sometimes be driven to project their resulting frustration and trauma into violent behaviours and attitudes aimed at themselves, their families, and communities.

Asian American studies scholar David Eng's "racial castration" acts as the overarching theoretical framework for this thesis. Eng's book-length study, *Racial Castration*, defines this phenomenon as how Asian men are figured as "feminized, emasculated, or homosexualized" (16) within the American imaginary through "various

political, economic, and cultural conditions” (3). Through psychoanalytic critical readings of prominent Asian American creative works, Eng illuminates how gender, sexuality, and race are inextricably linked to produce this hegemonic perception of Asian men in America. I extend Eng’s framework to the Canadian context in my analysis of the men portrayed in *A Superior Man* and *The Electrical Field*, who, as a result of discriminatory policies and dominant discourse, struggle with “racial castration,” the systemic emasculation of Asian men. This thesis thus examines these men’s internalized sense of emasculation and inferiority—their “racial castration” in Canadian culture through popular discourse, exploitation, and racist policies—that influences these men to develop destructive coping mechanisms.

In Chapter One’s investigation into the emotional implications of Yang Hok’s “racial castration,” I turn to Gage Karahkwí:io Diabo’s concept of “bad feelings.” In their article, “Bad Feelings, Feeling Bad: The Affects of Asian Indigenous Coalition,” Diabo examines creative works that portray and inspire what they term as “bad feelings,” such as jealousy and distrust, between Asian and Indigenous people. According to Diabo, “bad feelings” between marginalized groups often stem from the traumas of white hegemonic racism and the pressure of residing within the Canadian “settler-colonial superstructure” (262). This concept is a critique of scholarship that “misses something crucial” (260) by focusing on positive feelings and tidy reconciliations while overlooking the depth and persistence of negative affects between marginalized groups. An acute example of this friction appears in Yang Hok’s psychological landscape. Building upon my framework that Yang Hok is a victim of “racial castration,” I demonstrate that due to his sense of emasculation, he feels incredibly threatened by his proximity to Indigenous men, who are depicted as hypermasculine by colonial myths. In response to this insecurity, Yang Hok develops “bad feelings” towards his Indigenous and Chinese-Indigenous counterparts, feeling envious and threatened. Diabo argues that because

“bad feelings” have a “vital and ongoing role in how we shape our actions” (260), their presence must be investigated within Asian-Indigenous coalitions in order to be directed towards anticolonial efforts. I expand upon these insights to demonstrate, when left unchecked, “bad feelings” can encourage conflicts and competitions that prevent such anticolonial coalitions from being formed, thus emphasizing the urgency of Diabo’s imperative. Yang Hok’s repeated failure to surmount his “bad feelings” further emphasizes that the work of overcoming such feelings is not immediate or linear; instead, it is an ongoing, complicated, and often uncomfortable process necessary for genuine decolonial, cross-racial allyship.

I expand upon Claire Jean Kim’s theoretical framework of the “racial triangulation” of Asian Americans to investigate Yang Hok’s behavioural reaction to “racial castration.” C. J. Kim demonstrates in her article, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” that American social discourses have historically triangulated Asian Americans against Black Americans and white Americans as a mechanism to uphold white supremacy. This dynamic relies on processes of what C. J. Kim calls “civic ostracism” (107) that entails the construction of Asian Americans, unlike Black Americans, as perpetual foreigners, while simultaneously imbuing them with “relative valorization” (107) to Black Americans in terms of culture. I extend these insights by invoking Canadian constructions of masculinity, demonstrating how Yang Hok, as a victim of “racial castration,” feels triangulated vis-a-vis Indigenous men and white men, who are both constructed as having a manhood that is superior to his. Extending upon C. J. Kim’s theoretical framework, I analyze how Yang Hok and his fellow labourers aim to assuage their feelings of emasculation and disempowerment by building up their own sense of importance at the expense of Indigenous and mixed-race peoples. In doing so, they strive for what C. J. Kim terms as “relative valorization” (107) over another minority group within the confines of a colonial, white supremacist structure.

This thesis approaches the Chinese and Japanese Canadian men characters' "racial castration" through the lens of Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality that highlights "the multiple avenues through which racial and gender oppression" (58) are experienced together. By examining how the racist policies that these men face are experienced as emasculating, and how racial Yellow Peril stereotypes are feminizing, this thesis allows for a better understanding of the unique position in which the Chinese and Japanese Canadian men of the narrative face oppression through both racial and gendered grounds simultaneously. In this light, the shame that these men face is undoubtedly intersectional, playing upon an instilled sense of racial inferiority, as well as manly inadequacy.

3. Chapter One Overview

The first chapter examines how the Chinese Head Tax, exploitative indentured labour, and Yellow Peril discourse work together to produce feelings of emasculation and shame in *A Superior Man*'s Yang Hok, who comes to exemplify various aspects of David Eng's concept of "racial castration." I demonstrate how, in his struggle to navigate his painful feelings of inferiority and emasculation, Yang Hok attempts to recover his damaged sense of masculinity by competing with his Chinese-Indigenous guide, Sam. Furthermore, he degrades his Indigenous and Chinese-Indigenous counterparts in a misguided attempt to prove his dominance over them within a colonial racial hierarchy. This dynamic speaks to how colonial structures prevent coalition between Chinese and Indigenous people who might have otherwise formed a mutual understanding under a common oppressor. Overall, this chapter examines how Yang Hok's violence against his son and his potential allies is a misguided attempt to cope with his feelings of powerlessness and shame that result from a deeply racist structure that encourages violent attempts to reassert one's sense of normative manhood.

4. Chapter Two Overview

The second chapter examines how the Japanese Canadian men in Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* struggle with a deep sense of "racial castration" that is instilled through the trauma of Japanese Canadian internment, their ongoing struggles with disenfranchisement and racist stereotyping. The analysis of Mr. Saito reveals the debilitating impact of internment on first-generation Japanese Canadian men such as he, who found their paternal authority undermined. Feeling ashamed and disempowered himself, he transmits this trauma onto his daughter, Asako, who bears the burden of his coping mechanisms. Mr. Saito's son, Stum, is crippled by the shame and marginalization stemming from internment, leading to his symbolic retreat into the family home that ultimately hinders him from attaining normative manhood. This chapter investigates how the shame and disenfranchisement produced by internment is experienced as painfully unmanly for Masashi Yano, who desires to embody a self-assured, normative manhood. Mrs. Yano's affair with her white boss acts as a resurgence of this trauma for Yano, who, unable to cope, commits a heinous crime against himself and his loved ones in an attempt to reclaim his sense of power and control. Ultimately, these characters exemplify the harms of the enduring legacy of internment, demonstrating how internalized trauma can erupt outwards in violent ways against themselves, their loved ones, and their descendants.

Chapter One

The Nervous Father: Yang Hok's Destructive Ways of Reasserting his Chinese

Masculinity in his Struggle against Racialized Emasculation

In his novel, *A Superior Man*, Paul Yee illustrates how the narrator, Yang Hok, develops painful feelings of shame in response to racist anti-Chinese stereotypes and exploitative practices, which were prevalent in Canada at the turn of the 20th century. Indeed, Yang Hok is targeted on multiple fronts by Canadian institutional racism: he endures emasculating Yellow Peril stereotypes, grueling underpaid indentured labour, and strict Head Tax legislation that prevents him from bringing his family with him. These combined pressures produce a condition aligning with David Eng's concept of "racial castration," instilling in Yang Hok, like his fellow Chinese workers, a profound sense of racialized inadequacy and powerlessness.

This chapter further examines how, to cope with this symbolic castration, Yang Hok adopts destructive mechanisms that operate on two distinct levels: internally, he models Gage Karahkwí:io Diabo's idea of "bad feelings," experiencing persistent negative emotions such as jealousy and resentment toward potential allies, like his guide, Sam. Externally, he enacts harmful empowerment strategies outlined in C. J. Kim's theory of "racial triangulation," weaponizing colonial rhetoric to leverage himself above Indigenous and mixed-race individuals. Ultimately, Yang Hok's misguided attempts to reclaim agency estranges him from his son, Peter, and destroys opportunities for cross-racial coalition. His thoughts and actions reveal how internalized racialized shame—engineered by hierarchal and dehumanizing colonial structures and stereotypes—can transform the victim of systemic violence into a perpetrator of abuse within his own family and surrounding community.

1. Yang Hok Internalizes “Racial Castration”

Yang Hok’s degradation as a Chinese labourer in Canada in the late 19th century manifests as a narrative of emasculation that evokes David Eng’s theory of “racial castration.” In his book *Racial Castration*, Eng explains that this phenomenon is produced by the ways Asian men have been feminized and emasculated through popular culture and through legislation.

Aligning with this theory, the Canadian state systemically inflicted this “racial castration” upon Chinese labourers like Yang Hok by barring them from attaining normative manhood.

As R. W. Connell’s explanation of “hegemonic masculinity” describes, Western norms of manhood emphasize that men should be empowered leaders and patriarchal fathers who bring “home a wage” (Connell and Messerschmidt 840). Western perspectives have traditionally valued qualities of “economic success,” “control,” and “stoicism” while being opposed to men expressing “vulnerability” (“Hegemonic Masculinity”). Furthermore, it is a “set of expectations” against which all men, such as Yang Hok and his fellow Chinese labourers, are measured against (“Hegemonic Masculinity”). In light of these standards, the exploitative labour practices of the Canadian Pacific Railway company prevented Chinese indentured labourers like Yang Hok from becoming agentic and successful providers. Indeed, Yang Hok feels trapped in his contract to perform arduous work for meager wages, a helpless condition that contrasts with the tenets of economic success, control, and social power demanded by Western hegemonic norms. This economic exploitation, compounded by the discriminatory burden of the Chinese Head Tax and emasculating Yellow Peril narratives, breeds a deep sense of racialized inadequacy in Yang Hok, a man striving for normative manhood.

Ultimately, as this chapter demonstrates, these exploitative labour practices, racist government policies, and hostile social discourses act as mechanisms of symbolic castration that systematically strip him of normative manhood.

Yang Hok feels distinctly racially castrated by the discrimination that he faces as an indentured labourer. He feels disempowered due to how the Canadian Pacific Railway, or the Company as he refers to it, has taken advantage of him—as evidenced by his shock at the meagre financial terms of his contract as well as the terrifying dangers of his work. His painful realizations reflect how historically, “these labourers were often tricked into coming to Canada with promises of well-paying jobs” (Diehl, “Want to be” 47). While Chinese workers were already paid substantially less than white workers—around \$1.00 a day compared to \$1.50 to \$2.50 a day—they also faced wage deductions from these earnings; unlike their white counterparts, “they had to pay for their food and gear” (“Building the Railway”). Yang Hok’s ruminations reveal the extent to which he feels blindsided:

the first time I got paid, I accused Bookman of stealing. I received a total of \$6.73 for twenty-six days of work. I had figured three times that amount. Then Bookman listed the costs for rent, food, and ship’s passage, plus payment for boots, blanket, and hat.

Right away I warned the men that no one would ever get rich here. (Yee 66)

The unforeseen costs are a heavy burden, a shared misery which is felt throughout his Chinese crew: “Autumns were never this cold in China, and the men complained of having to buy gloves and thicker coats” (183). Furthermore, his fellow crewman suspects that “the book men here are corrupt” (177), gesturing to the vulnerability of the Chinese workers who could easily be preyed upon by sly bookmen. These financial conditions prohibit Yang Hok from embodying the manly role of empowered provider—instilling a sense of disempowerment that is compounded by how he has been taken advantage of. He feels duped by the recruiters in China who not only concealed the abysmal pay, but the dangerous conditions of the job as well. Yang Hok feels especially deceived by the recruiters who failed to disclose to him the true nature of the railway-building work, promising to him that he would simply be “building a road” (Yee 101). Once he reaches Canada, he realizes the life-

threatening dangers of their labour. All around him, he witnesses how “men fell, broke their bones, and worked through pain” (165). Through these observations, crewmembers and Yang Hok alike become “keenly aware that their deaths might happen at any moment” (181). Yang Hok’s growing realization that the risks of the job outweigh the rewards contributes to his feelings of helplessness and emasculation. Moreover, stuck in marginalizing employment, physical peril, and systemic deception, Yang Hok is denied the capacity to act as an autonomous provider and positioned as a racially castrated subject. Indeed, his loss of both financial control and bodily agency exemplify the historic mechanics of racial castration, reducing him to the very state of legal and cultural feminization that Eng critiques.

When Yang Hok learns the painful truth that the Chinese workers are not only paid less than their white counterparts, but also given the worst, most dangerous and intensive work, he feels an intense resentment for his degraded position. His disempowerment in this lowly position starkly contrasts with the hegemonic norms of masculinity that value control and dominance. He complains that without Chinese labourers, “the redbards would be forced to do all the dirty work. They would have to pay more for everything and stop strolling around like pigeons afraid to dirty their feet” (194). Yang Hok’s complaints highlight how much he detests being used by the Company to perform the “dirty work”—the jobs that white workers preferred not to do. The comparison to “pigeons” expresses his disdain for the Company and its white employees, who walk around proudly while relying entirely on Chinese labour to keep their own “feet” clean. He is aggrieved by the inherent injustice of a labour system where Chinese workers are pushed to the limit in deadly jobs, while sparing their white peers from hardship and rich patrons from paying fair wages. That Yang Hok internalizes a humiliating sense of naiveté as a result of this arrangement becomes clear when he describes Chinese labourers as “fools” (194) who have been duped into doing a deal with the Devil: “the King of Hell invited guests, and these fools rushed forward” (194). Yang

Hok's dignity and self-worth have become so undermined that he no longer views himself and other Chinese workers as intelligent and self-assured men who have made empowered choices. Expressing the desperation felt amongst the Chinese crew, who must put up with these horrible conditions out of necessity, Yang Hok confesses: "the work was shit and we needed wages" (178). These degrading experiences render Yang Hok economically dependent, physically expendable, and culturally subjugated, showing how this exploitative framework functions as a site of symbolic and racial castration.

Feeling helpless in his situation, Yang Hok begins to internalize the feminizing aspects of Yellow Peril stereotypes, transforming his psychological distress into the lived reality of racial castration. His sense of racialized shame and wretchedness is voiced in one striking outburst: "The redbearns [white men] here owned no dogs to lick up smelly shit. Instead, they found scrawny cats like us for the dirty job" (45). This passage shows how Yang Hok interprets the unjust treatment of Chinese men as evidence of their weakness and subordination. The comparison to "scrawny cats" is particularly significant, as it acts as a vivid, painful metaphor for their vulnerability and sense of degraded manhood. As Alleyn Diesel notes, cats have long been associated with femininity: "from Neolithic sites in Anatolia, to Sumer, Crete, Egypt, Greece and India, cats, great and small, have been associated with female figures" (71). By adopting this feline comparison, Yang Hok implicitly reinforces his own symbolic castration, projecting an image of domesticity, smallness, and submission. Furthermore, describing these cats as "scrawny" suggests a bodily frailty that aligns this metaphor with Yellow Peril narratives that portrayed Chinese men as "small... and weak" (Millington et al. 198). Yang Hok is acutely aware of the racist ideas being imposed on him. As he laments, "I was a shining example for the redbearns' claim that China men brought no value to Gold Mountain" (Yee 39). Statements like these illustrate the extent to which Yang Hok has absorbed feelings of worthlessness, demonstrating how

disparaging cultural stereotypes work hand in hand with discriminatory state policies to alienate Chinese men from normative manhood. Yang Hok does not simply endure systemic oppression; he actively internalizes a racially castrated self-image as a failed man.

The “racial castration” that Yang Hok and his community of Chinese men suffer in Canada operates not only through labour exploitation, but through legislation that systemically disempowers them and prevents them from attaining other key components of normative manhood. In particular, Chinese prostitutes serve as a reminder to Yang Hok that Chinese men are prevented from attaining normative manhood, as the head tax effectively bars them from bringing over their wives and children. While he banters with fellow Chinese men, he reflects on their sad reality:

We chortled about the women who were kind and gentle enough to temper our bluster. They reminded us that we weren’t at home with wives, doing our duty to assert clan strength with more children. They saw that we weren’t fully men here because even a redbeard drunk with a walnut brain was backed up by law books and rifles. (138)

The men share a profound shame of failing to uphold their manly “duty” of having children with their wives. Eng explains how in the American context, immigration policies excluded Chinese men from normative manhood that was symbolically reserved for and aligned with whiteness: “U.S. exclusion... laws emasculated Chinese men by restricting their access to heterosexual norms and ideals such as nuclear family formations” (92). Canadian legislative frameworks operated in a comparable manner. Yang Hok’s sentiment also gestures to the lack of political and legal standing afforded to early Chinese immigrants—a reality that thoroughly demoralizes the characters in the novel. They are helpless in the face of white men who maintain control through legal and physical intimidation, or what Yang Hok describes as “law books and rifles.” When coupled with the everyday exploitation of

indentured labour, these systemic legal exclusions directly amplify Yang Hok's feelings of weakness and shame.

Yang Hok is highly aware of how white society looks down on him, which makes him insecure about his own masculinity and body. Yang Hok's feelings of emasculation are expressed throughout the novel through phallic anxieties that echo a core element of Eng's "racial castration." Eng initially describes "racial castration" as a "reworking of fetishism" (2) in his psychoanalytical reading of American playwright David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*. Eng demonstrates that French diplomat Gallimard executes "racial castration" when he "refuses to see at the site of the Asian male body a penis that *is* there to see" (2). Academic and video artist Richard Fung explains a similar phenomenon when he explains that in the West, "the Asian man is defined by a striking absence down there" (183)—a sentiment that exemplifies how "racial castration" operates through the bodily emasculation of Asian men in popular culture. It appears that on a subconscious level, Yang Hok and his male peers are fearful of having a similar bodily emasculation performed upon them. The fixation on genital dimensions among Yang Hok and his male peers reflects a deeply rooted equation between anatomical prowess and virility. Ultimately, this hyper-focus exposes a sense of fragile masculinity driven by underlying "racial castration" anxieties and a pervasive sense of inadequacy. For instance, the Chinese men engage in a competition over physical manhood when they take pride in the rumours suggesting that Chinese prostitutes see white men as having "wee little birdies" (138)—rumours that momentarily allow Chinese men to feel physically and sexually superior to their white counterparts. Yang Hok also recalls a humiliating prison encounter where his white escort mocked him, even standing side-by-side at the urinal to size each other up in a quiet competition of manhood: "[he] shamed me every way he could... When I made water, he stood by me and did the same. We glanced at each other's cocks; no doubt each of us thought his birdie was bigger" (157-8). Yang Hok's

imagined locker-room competition shows how the white jailer's focus on his body intensifies his fear of "racial castration," as emphasized when he interprets the other man as judging and shaming him. Imprisoned and vulnerable, Yang Hok views the guard's actions as a personal attack. Imagining that his own penis is larger serves as a defense mechanism to protect his fragile masculinity. Thus, Yang Hok's feelings of emasculation manifest in a narrative of symbolic phallic imagery that reflect his sense of racial castration.

Yang Hok's internalization of "racial castration" is symbolized through phallic imagery that reflects an inherited racial shame, and large-scale symbolic castration, resulting from British colonial discourses. These narratives historically frame China's 19th-century military defeats, particularly in the Opium Wars, as evidence of Asian weakness and passivity. Contrasting with Western myths that depict white colonists as embodying robust strength and forward-thinking masculinity, China's losses birthed feminizing Yellow Peril stereotypes. As sociologist Chong-Suk Han notes, the feminization of Asian men is a tool of global domination (83). Having had his own provincial capital looted during the Opium War, Yang Hok internalizes this emasculating, historically gendered narrative. Commenting on China's military defeat in the Opium Wars, Yang Hok asserts that Chinese forces were utterly incapable of resisting the British advance, lamenting that they "weren't even strong enough to piss at them" (Yee 52). Comments like this reveal how he interprets this defeat through gendered terms, manifesting as a profound sense of Chinese men's impotence. As historian Jack Hayes notes, Britain's decisive victory in the First Opium War was largely a consequence of superior military technology, particularly steam-driven warships and longer-range rifles (9). Hayes points out that although Chinese forces possessed cannons and rifles, their weapons had a much shorter firing range and were technologically outmatched by approximately 200 years (9). Furthermore, Chinese war junks were significantly smaller and designed primarily for close-quarter river combat, making them entirely unsuited against

British vessels (9). Consequently, China's vast technological disadvantage translates in Yang Hok's psyche into a glaring phallic deficiency, as evidenced by his likening of China's failing weaponry to male genitalia that is too weak to "piss at" their Western opponents. Yang Hok's "racial castration" anxiety is thus underscored by his vulgar lament, which metaphorically replaces the outmatched Chinese artillery with failing male genitalia that—much like the military's firearms—misfire during a critical moment of confrontation.

Yang Hok's subconscious feelings of "racial castration" manifests again through his narration that frames Western industrial progress in terms that suggest his and his comrades' symbolic penis envy. During his time as an indentured railway labour, he encounters a hand drill used for blasting tunnels into mountains. Tellingly, he describes the tool in phallic terms: "each crewman wanted to go home and brag about pushing the drill into solid rock, piercing it like chopsticks thrusting through tofu, like pressing one's stiff cock into a mountain suddenly turned fleshy. The men wanted to coax the power of a blazing furnace in their hands" (Yee 184). It is significant that the powerful drill, likened to a man's genitalia, is reserved for white men: "Only redbearers were allowed to use the marvellous tool, a pointed reminder of whose people had invented it" (176-7). In this light, Yang Hok and his fellow Chinese crewmen's desperation to harness the power of the drill could be likened to penis envy. The tool triggers the men's fears about Western industrial advancements that threaten China, having contributed to China's defeat in the Opium Wars. This fear is made clear when one of Yang Hok's crewmen, Long Life, says in reference to the drill that "Redbearers will use it against China, just you watch" (177). Their conversation about the drill quickly devolves into anxious arguments about China's weakness against the West: "China needed modern arms to defend itself; China must copy western methods; China needed to strengthen itself and fight back. If not, foreigners would soon enslave our nation" (177). Yang Hok and other Chinese workers repeatedly gesture to the tools of Western industrial progress—canons,

rifles, and hand drills—using phallic imagery to denote the assumed weakness and inferiority of China. By framing these technological symbols in sexualized terms, the workers reveal a deeply internalized shame. This psychological distress illustrates the mechanics of David Eng's theory of "racial castration," where Asian men are conditioned to view themselves as physically and structurally powerless.

Yee depicts how Yang Hok's feelings of disempowerment and weakness are the result of his degradation in Canada; they do not represent an essentialized view of the inherent inferiority of Chinese men. Tellingly, at the beginning of the novel, Yang Hok is introduced as a physically intimidating, traditionally masculine, and courageous man. At Mr. Long's Chinese gambling hall, for example, Yang Hok describes himself as "taller than most men, I never feared a fight" (Yee 9). He also boasts about his striking aptitude for manhandling rowdy patrons for Boss Long: "I had kept peace with a free hand. No one doubted my clout" (9). Not only does Yang Hok easily beat trouble-making customers, but he puts on an exaggerated performance of rugged muscularity. Before his audience of Chinese gamblers and staff, he shows off his sculpted physique: "I lifted two cups, tilted them, and let tea spill onto my head. One stream slipped by my ears and spine to my waist. The other passed my forehead and nose and ended on my chest. I flexed my shoulders and let my shirt absorb the liquid. The crowd laughed" (12). To finish this spectacle, he grins and boasts about his virility: "I bathe to smell nice for Rainbow" (12), the famed Chinese prostitute. This moment at Boss Long's gambling hall shows how Yang Hok in many ways meets, or even exceeds, hegemonic ideals of masculinity, including strength and aggressiveness. His emasculated self-image is thus revealed to be a consequence of his experiences with racism and exploitation in white society—underscoring the psychological pain of "racial castration."

2. Emotional Response to “Racial Castration”

Due to Yang Hok’s “racial castration,” he becomes susceptible to developing what Gage Karahkwí:io Diabo terms, “bad feelings.” This concept refers to enduring negative feelings such as envy, resentment, or paranoia—distinct from more dramatic but short-lived feelings such as rage (261)—that arise between marginalized groups. Diabo emphasizes that these feelings are rooted in the trauma of racism from the white hegemony and the effects of colonialism. Rather than to short-sightedly “dwell in the positive” (260), this perspective uncovers how such “bad feelings” can shape interactions between marginalized groups. For example, Yang Hok’s internalized emasculation breeds “bad feelings” towards Indigenous people, such as persistent jealousy and resentment. While Diabo highlights the investigation of these negative affects as a crucial step toward interracial coalitions, Yang Hok cannot sustain such a complicated, uncomfortable process. His inability to confront these destructive emotions prevents him from developing any fruitful relationships with Indigenous and Chinese-Indigenous people, including potential allies and his own son.

Yang Hok begins to adopt “bad feelings” of jealousy and resentment towards Indigenous people, primarily his Chinese-Indigenous guide, Sam Bing Lew, who exacerbates the insecurities instilled through “racial castration.” Indeed, Yang Hok’s interactions with Sam reveal how he feels incredibly threatened by a stereotype of a rugged Indigenous masculinity—a stereotype emerging from colonial discourses of fearsome Indigenous men. As Daniel Francis explains, colonial imaginings of Indigenous men associated them with a physical “standard of... manliness”—an ideal of bodily strength “against which Europeans measured themselves, and often found themselves wanting” (8). Sam McKegney further illustrates the ways colonial ideology constructs Indigenous men as hypermasculine, “collapsing Indigenous men with physicality” (8). These colonial imaginings produced the pervasive image of the “ignoble savage,” the muscular, “bloodthirsty red-skin [featured in] so

many history books and cheap novels” (Francis 221). Yang Hok shows how he has absorbed such stereotypes when he describes a brawl between a group of Indigenous and Chinese men:

Chinese rail hands and Native men shoved and shouted, fighting over something.

With their faces painted red and yellow, the Native men and their beastskin clothes were fearsome. They towered over my people, brandishing stone-head clubs that took both arms to wield. They could have saved their strength; sledgehammers weren’t needed to smash sparrow eggs...The China men backed off. (Yee 47–48)

Tellingly, Yang Hok’s explicit comparison of the size of the Indigenous men compared to the Chinese men reflects his preoccupation with the physical threat that Indigenous men pose to Chinese men. His own sense of bodily emasculation is evident when he thinks that Indigenous men “towered over my people,” and that Indigenous men wield “sledgehammers” to the Chinese men, who are likened to “sparrow eggs.” Certainly, his likening of the Chinese men to small and fragile “eggs” highlights an internalized sense of racialized weakness and inferiority—a sense that is furthered by his descriptions of how the Chinese men “backed off” from the Indigenous men. Yang Hok’s comparisons of the men indicates how his perception of Indigenous men is rooted in his internalization of “racial castration.” As signalled above, Yang Hok’s sense of “racial castration” is often expressed through phallic symbolism. By utilizing the size and shape of eggs to suggest testicles, Yang Hok subtly highlights a perceived emasculation of the Chinese men by their Indigenous counterparts. Through this anatomical metaphor, he constructs racialized Chinese manhood as fragile and easily shattered, vulnerable to the crushing force of Indigenous men wielding “sledgehammers.” This comparison sheds light on how Yang Hok’s own sense of emasculation can thus inspire certain “bad feelings” towards Indigenous men who exacerbate his sense of threatened and symbolically castrated manhood.

The brawl passage also demonstrates how Yang Hok is influenced by his own “bad feelings” of self-doubt and intimidation—when he alienates Sam. This scene marks Yang Hok’s first meeting with Sam, who acts as Yang Hok’s “attacker” (48). From this moment on, even though Sam has a Chinese father and an Indigenous mother, Yang Hok sees Sam as strictly Indigenous, a member of the fearsome band of men. He also describes Sam’s superior size and strength in ways that allude to the threat that he poses to Yang Hok’s sense of manhood. For instance, Yang Hok describes Sam as “bigger and stronger than most Chinamen” (47), which adds to the sense that Sam, as an Indigenous man, physically threatens Yang Hok’s masculinity as a Chinese man. Comments like this reveal how Yang Hok is caught up in a complex colonial dynamic, where he constantly contrasts his own systemically feminized identity as a Chinese man against stereotypical, hypermasculine representations of Indigenous men. Owing to how he is fixated on this constructed binary, he refuses to acknowledge Sam as a member of his own community. This divisive mindset, driven by “bad feelings” and his underlying sense of damaged manhood, persists even when the pair begin working together.

Due to Sam’s threatening masculinity, and the “bad feelings” of jealousy and intimidation that it inspires in him, Yang Hok feels drawn to compete with him in a misguided attempt to recover his sense of manhood. This sense of competition emerges when Yang Hok begins his journey with Sam to find the mother of his son, Mary. He attempts to prove his physical strength in comparison to Sam, who is carrying a roughly equal amount of weight to him. Yang Hok’s desperation to come out on top is made clear when he thinks of himself as “lurching drunkenly, I acted as if the weight of the pack was nothing and tried to walk alongside Sam, even march ahead” (77). Motivated by his damaged pride, Yang Hok desires to appear both socially and physically greater than Sam: “[W]e were both long-legged,” as he recalls thinking, “but my clothes were better made and cleaner so I looked like

a boss” (78). Thoughts like this reveal how, in his struggle against the insecurities instilled through “racial castration,” he attempts to recover a sense of pride by positioning himself above his Indigenous counterpart. Much to Yang Hok’s chagrin and humiliation, however, Sam proves to be more adept at travelling long distances than he: “Sam had the surer foot and pulled ahead without effort” (78). Yang Hok’s failure to win this competition with Sam further entrenches his sense of inferior manhood. Tellingly, this chapter closes with Yang Hok lamenting his inferiority to Sam: “here I was, fighting a mix-blood who was superior to me” (91). This defeat reinforces his deep sense of physical weakness that he sought to overcome through this competition. He thus exemplifies his earlier sentiment that he, like a small rodent, never stood a chance against Sam: “Sam tied a brick onto this mouse’s back” (77). Feeling the weight of this defeat, Yang Hok fails to recover his damaged sense of masculinity, and ends up feeling even more emasculated, compounding his sense of his racialized weakness.

Sam’s presence serves as a constant reminder of Yang Hok’s feelings of manly inadequacy. Yang Hok adopts “bad feelings” of jealousy towards Sam, specifically when he highlights his sense of racialized weakness. When they pass by three white men on their journey to find the mother of Yang Hok’s son, Yang Hok admonishes Sam for not heeding his warning of lowering the lantern, asking him accusatorily, “what, you wanted to fight them?” (79). Sam demonstrates his bravado by dismissing Yang Hok’s fears nonchalantly, asking “fight who?” (79). Clearly, Sam does not share Yang Hok’s fear of white men, an apprehension that stems from both his personal trauma of racist aggression and his internalization of racialized weakness. While Yang Hok “never feared a fight” (9) amongst Chinese men, he loses confidence in the face of white men. His paranoid fear in this moment thus has a racial component—perhaps indicating how he has internalized Yellow Peril stereotypes that Chinese men are “weak in relation to the bodies and masculinities of white

men” (Millington et al 198). Sam’s self-assured nonchalance in this moment only heightens Yang Hok’s pre-existing shame and his insecurity—pointing to the influence of the colonial superstructure, which makes Yang Hok not only fearful of white men as a symptom of “racial castration,” but also creates “bad feelings” between him and Indigenous men, like Sam. This exchange produces painful feelings of weakness in Yang Hok, who indicates “bad feelings” of jealousy towards Sam when he thinks: “after this, my son clung to Sam the brave warrior, not his nervous father” (Yee 79). Yang Hok’s sense of inferiority is widened like a festering wound due to Sam’s seeming lack of worry. His view of Sam as a “brave warrior” not only perpetuates the colonial hypermasculinity imposed on Indigenous men, but it underscores his disempowered self-image as an ineffectual “nervous father.” Furthermore, because Sam’s masculinity threatens his own, it reinforces his self-deprecating identity of Chinese men as effeminate and weak that was originally instilled through Yellow Peril stereotypes—a mechanism of “racial castration.” Watching Peter seemingly forsake his own “nervous father,” Yang Hok feels replaced by a more competent, traditionally masculine leader, a painful sentiment that amplifies his feelings of emasculation.

In response to his “bad feelings,” Yang Hok adopts extremely harmful coping mechanisms that harm his relationships with both Sam and Peter. Yang Hok projects his feelings of inadequacy onto Peter, specifically when he discovers that he has chosen to sleep next to Sam instead of his father: “the blankets were thin against the chill so I drew the boy close...I slept poorly and awoke when it was still dark. The boy was gone. I sprang to my feet. The worm had crawled to Sam and slipped under his blanket. Those two shared a similar stink, I told myself” (79). To Yang Hok, Peter seeking Sam out for comfort and protection at night proves that the boy has defected to the more courageous man. Feeling a profound sense of betrayal, he dehumanizes the boy, describing him as a lowly creature, a “worm.” His attack on Peter represent a self-protective instinct that is geared towards preserving his own sense of

destabilized masculinity. His accusation that Sam and Peter share a “similar stink” (79) is also a disparaging reference to the mixed-racedness that they both share—as if the pair’s Indigenous ancestry has muddied their Chinese blood. Thus, Yang Hok belittles both Sam and Peter in racially coded terms, in an attempt to restore a sense of superiority over them. In this light, Yang Hok’s “bad feelings” of jealousy and intimidation provoke him to reject and criticize others, whom he might otherwise ally with—a coping mechanism that unfortunately prevents meaningful cross-racial coalitions and support networks from being formed.

Significantly, Yang Hok feels doubly threatened by his Indigenous counterparts: first, by his perception of Indigenous men’s superior manhood, and second, by the agency of Indigenous people that highlights his exploitation, thus underscoring his sense of inadequacy. Yang Hok’s resulting “bad feelings” towards Indigenous people prevent him from connecting with people with whom he shares a common oppressor. His traumatising and symbolically castrating experiences as an indentured worker lead him to adopt “bad feelings” of jealousy towards Indigenous people, whom he perceives as having greater agency and freedom in comparison to desperate Chinese labourers. For instance, Yang Hok feels ashamed that he and his fellow Chinese labourers seem to willingly accept their mistreatment by white bosses, and this shame is compounded when he compares their subjugation to what he perceives as the superior autonomy of Indigenous people: “Native men and women paddled dugout canoes. Those boats took them anywhere they wanted, while we coolies obeyed like dancing monkeys the Company’s every whim” (Yee 96). Yang Hok feels jealous in the face of the contrasting agency and self-respect that he perceives in Indigenous people who, unlike Chinese indentured labourers, are not subjugated by white patrons nor are they dependent upon them for wages, and thus vulnerable to labour exploitation. Overcome by his shame, Yang Hok misses a valuable opportunity to recognize how, while Indigenous people might appear to have an advantage over the Chinese railway workers within this colonial landscape,

they are actively being oppressed by this nation-building project. Yang Hok is thus blinded by his “bad feelings” of jealousy from acknowledging the commonalities between Chinese and Indigenous groups under settler-colonialism.

Yang Hok projects his shame onto Sam Bing Lew, his mixed-race Indigenous guide, a behaviour that prevents meaningful connection between the two racialized men. At one point in their journey along the Fraser River, Sam points out a landmark waterfall that is named after the *Skuzzy*: “the boat that China men pulled through Hell’s Gate” (205). This landmark references a historical moment during the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, where Chinese laborers were forced to haul the sternwheeler—the *Skuzzy*—through the treacherous chasm of Hell’s Gate. In response, Yang Hok falls silent. His quietude stems from intense humiliation regarding the grueling, low-status grunt work consistently imposed upon Chinese men. This silence ultimately signals a deep-seated shame over the historical indignities and profound physical hazards these laborers endured to accomplish such a nightmarish feat. He continues their journey without so much as a response: “I strode on. I knew about *Skuzzy* but refused to discuss it with Sam. He would only sneer at how we [Chinese men] had been used as beasts of burden” (205). The diction here is striking; Yang Hok feels as though Chinese men have been reduced to pack animals, instrumentalized for their bodies in contempt of their humanity. The shame that Yang Hok feels due to his mistreatment provokes him to imagine his counterpart’s disdain, provoking “bad feelings” that further estranges these men from each other.

Notably, when Yang Hok refuses to continue the conversation that Sam has initiated, he misses an opportunity to have a meaningful conversation about their shared oppressor. Ironically, Sam has already signaled a point of political solidarity, suggesting that white-settlers have severely impacted the Indigenous community. Shortly before arriving at Hell’s Gate along the Fraser River, Sam points out the landmark Big Tunnel:

This mountain suffered greatly. Redbeards packed in black powder and blasted its head, chest, and arms into the river. Fish were blocked from going upstream. Native crewmen urged the Company to take action, but it refused. We cleared the rubble on our own. Finally the Company sent some China men to help. (153)

The Company's negligence shows its disregard for the Indigenous peoples, who rely heavily on fishing. Yang Hok himself knows the importance of fishing to the Indigenous people, whose "men eked a life from fishing and chopping wood" (52). In this sense, Hell's Gate and Big Tunnel, two physically and symbolically significant locations along the men's journey upon the Fraser River, point to the similar traumas of Chinese and Indigenous peoples, who have both been harmed by the building of the CPR. Sam's attention to both the exploitation of Chinese men at Hell's Gate, as well as the environmental devastation caused by the blasting of Big Tunnel, points to their overlapping experiences of discrimination. However, instead of bonding as "people who all despised the redbear" (294), which Yang Hok only later acknowledges, Yang Hok is blinded by his "bad feelings" and refuses to talk in what otherwise could have been a healing and supportive exchange. Yang Hok's silence, borne out of humiliation and fuelled by his "bad feelings" against Sam, destroys the potential for productive allyship between the two marginalized men. His silence is a response to his sense of emasculating disempowerment, it is a coping mechanism for his embarrassment, furthermore, that exacerbates his racialized shame as he continues to bear it alone.

3. Behavioural Responses to "Racial Castration"

Yang Hok and his fellow Chinese counterparts develop harmful behaviours in an attempt to assuage their feelings of shame resulting from their "racial castration." In the face of the widespread belief that Chinese men have "no value" (93), Yang Hok and his Chinese crewmembers act in impulsive ways to prove their strength, competence, and overall manhood. Such actions prove to be not only ineffectual but dangerous, as in one case the men

indirectly cause the premature and avoidable death of their companion. Detrimentially, the Company's exploitation and discrimination of Chinese men inspire Yang Hok and his fellow rail hands to work even harder. He confesses, "We were idiots, moving too damned fast for our own good, always trying to prove to the redbear bosses that we were hardworking and willing, as if they might suddenly smile at us and treat us nicely" (95). Yang Hok disapproves of such desperate means of appeasing their bosses in a particular passage when his fellow rail hands, Monkey and Long Life, make a dangerous competition out of the already risky job of chopping down massive trees. He thinks to himself, "these louts deserved to be slowed down. Monkey was keeping count of who cut down the most trees. His own name, of course, was always at the top of the list. Long Life labelled Poy and me as 'big girls' for being the last to fell our first tree" (56). The men's use of 'big girls' to shame slow labourers demonstrates a misogynistic, gendered discourse aimed at distancing themselves from perceived weakness and femininity. This rhetoric mirrors Yellow Peril narratives by attacking their manhood and highlights a fear of being viewed as feminine. This fear is paramount for these men, because embodying such a characteristic would further alienate them from the hegemonic ideals of manhood and thus reinforce their own symbolic castration. Importantly, the labourers' impulse to work as quickly as possible in a show of masculinity and stamina is not rewarded; instead, it culminates in the bloody and preventable death of their peer, Pig Boy. Just before the event, Yang Hok observes how unstable the trees that Monkey and Long Life emphatically chop are: "On Pig Boy's last day, Monkey and Long Life's tree tilted into a neighbour and stayed standing" (56). Yang Hok and his friend Poy "looked at each other" (56) in knowing glances expecting that the trapped tree might give way at any moment. It is unsurprising that violent masculinity and misogyny, employed to counter perceptions of racialized feminization, results in a fatal outcome: "Monkey's trapped tree gave way with a sharp crack and slid as if greased. No one got warned. Pig Boy was crushed under the trunk,

face down, flattened over a pointed stump. Sawdust soaked up the blood” (56). While none of the men outwardly acknowledge it, Monkey and Long Life’s actions result in Pig Boy’s gruesome death. Such a bloody tragedy exemplifies the extremes that these men are willing to go to in order to overcome the stereotype that Chinese men are weak and unmanly. This death points to the larger theme in the novel about the destructive and even deadly consequences of the Chinese men’s attempts to counter threats to their manhood and underscores the violence of “racial castration” that provokes such violent defence mechanisms.

Yang Hok and his community of Chinese men attempt to mitigate their degraded social position and their internalized feelings of emasculation—the effects of systemic “racial castration”—through destructive behaviours that have a wide-scale impact on Chinese, Indigenous, and interracial groups. Yang Hok, in response to feeling disempowered and emasculated, turns to degrading Indigenous people in ways that reveal his adoption of colonial racial hierarchies as a self-protective mechanism. In doing so, he upholds the very hierarchal system that symbolically castrates him. Claire Jean Kim’s concept of “racial triangulation” offers a vital lens here, as it highlights how Yang Hok’s violence against Indigenous peoples can be read as indicative of his racially triangulated position between white and Indigenous people in the Canadian colonial system. C. J. Kim provides useful insight into how American social discourses have historically positioned Asian Americans in a competition with both white and Black populations. This dynamic relies on processes such as “civic ostracism” (107) that entails the construction of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners, while simultaneously imbuing them with “relative valorization” (107) over Black Americans. C. J. Kim carefully illustrates that this “racial triangulation” (107) serves a white supremacist purpose, contributing to white domination over both Asian and Black groups in America. Extending this concept to my reading of *A Superior Man*, I illustrate how racial

constructions of whiteness, Chineseness, and Indigeneity are continually at play and influencing each other. Not only are Chinese men victims of “civic ostracism” (107) in this colonial landscape, but they are triangulated vis-a-vis Indigenous men and white men specifically in terms of masculinity. Colonial discourse positions white men as the norm in relation to Indigenous men who are positioned as hypermasculine (McKegney 8). Chinese men, through “racial castration,” are constructed as inferiorly masculine to both Indigenous and white groups. Situated within this triangulated framework, Yang Hok and his fellow labourers attempt to bolster their own social standing by marginalizing Indigenous and mixed-race communities, by employing what C. J. Kim terms “relative valorization” (107) to reclaim a sense of personal worth. C. J. Kim defines “relative valorization” (107) as the dominant group’s practice of praising one minority group over another. For instance, Asians with limited cultural merits can gain leverage over Black Americans, who are unfairly portrayed as “infantile, imitative, and cultureless” (110). C. J. Kim outlines how racial triangulation encourages minority groups to weaponize “relative valorization” at the expense of another group as an empowerment strategy (129-30). In attempting such valorization, however, they inadvertently end up upholding the racist hierarchy that preserves white supremacy.

In the following passage, Yang Hok reveals the harmful workings of this racially triangulated dynamic:

Redbeards loudly disdained the Chinese as being one and the same as Native people. We China men never let that pass. They didn’t weave cotton or silk but wore animal skins. They didn’t grow rice or wheat to make noodles or bread. They ate instead whatever grew wild. Without earthenware, they served food on mats. Without writing, they didn’t make books. (52)

Yang Hok expresses some satisfaction in finding evidence of Chinese men's supposed superiority to Indigenous peoples. He is not alone in indulging in such hierarchical thinking; in fact, many of the Chinese men of the narrative adopt such a mindset, including the Secretary of the Chinese Council, who says that "we Chinese are a refined people... It's best not to mix with lesser races" (31), in reference to Indigenous people. But the satisfaction that comes with this way of thinking is rooted in the shame at how white men have embarrassed the Chinese on the international scale. Yang Hok, like others, cannot forget the "trouncing" (52) that China suffered at the hands of the British during the Opium Wars. Neither can he forget the shame endured by Chinese workers, whose lives are "bruised and swollen ... wrapped in far too much shame to ever be discussed, aloud or in whispers" (51). The degradation of Indigenous peoples by Chinese men thus offers a strategy to assuage painful feelings of inferiority in their marginalized and degraded position. This strategy allows Chinese men to align more closely with the superior positioning of white settlers—a strategy Sam picks up on when he tells Yang Hok that "you China men are the same as redbeards. You think you are smarter than us" (235). Chinese men have thus adopted a colonial mindset to emphasize their presumed superiority over Indigenous communities, in an attempt to minimize their own shame. This dynamic demonstrates how the shame of enduring "racial castration" encourages harmful coping mechanisms, exemplified by how these men weaponize "relative valorization" (C. J. Kim 107) to distinguish themselves as culturally superior to Indigenous people.

Yang Hok's feelings of shame and emasculation—resulting from living within this colonial structure that racially castrates him—have inspired an intense desire to flee from Canada as a way to recover his lost masculinity. To facilitate this mission, Yang Hok doubles down on his destructive behaviours. These harmful coping mechanisms prove to be tragic for Yang Hok, who loses potentially meaningful connections in his quest to abandon his Chinese-

Indigenous son, Peter, with his Indigenous mother, Mary. Such actions effectively plunge himself further into a tragic state of loneliness and shame. At the same time, Yang Hok's impulse to flee suggests a larger historical trend: many Chinese laborers sought to return to China to escape a painful colonial structure in Canada, often abandoning the meaningful ties they had built with Indigenous communities. The consequence of this trend is shown to be the disruption of Chinese-Indigenous relationships, effectively diminishing the potential to build long-lasting and supportive cross-racial allyships.

Yang Hok's intense wish to flee Canada positions Mary and Peter as obstacles or opponents in his scheme to finding refuge in China. Canadian literature scholar Lindsay Diehl observes how "Yang Hok has appropriated disparaging colonial stereotypes about Indigenous women to interpret his interactions with Mary and deny his responsibility for their mixed race son" ("Want to Be" 46). Indeed, his struggles in Canada have led him to adopt "Western -style greed and selfishness" (Diehl, "Want to Be" 44). I build upon this observation to demonstrate how Yang Hok's denigration of Mary and Peter is also rooted in his deep desire to flee Canada, where he and other migrant Chinese men workers live a "wretched life" (17). In the beginning of the narrative, he views his saving grace as having the financial means to return to China. He repeatedly looks down upon Chinese rail hands without the means to pay the return passage, referring to them in dehumanizing terms as a "plague of vermin" (15). He distinguishes himself as superior to these men: "I was no railway worm, trapped here without means to leave. I could go at any time" (21). However, his intense disdain for such labourers "snared in Gold Mountain shit" (25) is indicative of his denial of the trauma he has suffered as a rail hand, as well as the deep-seated fear he has developed of losing all agency by becoming just as trapped as they. Not only would this entrapment guarantee his continued degradation in a nation that racially castrates him, but this loss of agency would reaffirm his feelings of emasculation through their stark opposition to the

norms of hegemonic masculinity that uphold control and dominance. He feels as though “everything in Gold Mountain brought pain” (121), and he is completely focused on escaping such pain, and regaining a sense of masculine empowerment, through a return passage to China—regardless of the harm that he inflicts upon himself and others along the way.

Yang Hok’s self-preserving impulse to leave Canada manifests in intensifying “bad feelings” of resentment and frustration towards both Mary and Peter—a phenomenon that points to how attempts to exit hierarchal colonial structures, instead of dismantling, can end up bolstering them. When Mary attempts to leave Peter with him at the teahouse, Yang Hok has already bought the expensive ticket home. He revels in the anticipation of finally regaining his sense of dominance and control, which he describes through the symbolism of flatulence: “at long last, I was homeward bound. Time to perform a reverse salute: turn my back on Gold Mountain, bend forward, and release a caustic fart” (21). Yang Hok fantasizes about overcoming his present state of victimization, turning his back on the nation that has so deeply hurt him while comically propelling himself forwards to a brighter future in China. This vivid imagery emphasizes his desire to offend the nation that has so deeply offended him in an attempt to redeem himself. Exemplifying how Diabo’s concept of “bad feelings” between minority groups arise due to the trauma of residing within the colonial superstructure, his frustration towards Mary is thus borne out of his desperation to make this dream of escape a reality; he views Peter as a ball and chain that prevents him from doing so. He expresses his resentment and frustration in the following statement: “I cursed Mary. How dare she suddenly appear like this?” (25). This negative sentiment is furthered when he regrets not mistreating the two: “I should have shoved them aside and let the cashier evict them with their broom” (22). Yang Hok’s resentment and frustration, directed towards Mary and Peter, speaks to how the colonial superstructure divides minority groups and nurtures tensions between them.

Yang Hok's time as a low-paid labourer in Canada results in a scarcity mindset that pushes him to view Mary and Peter as opponents rather than loved ones. He focuses on his "bad feelings" towards Mary that prevent him from feeling empathy; he has become accustomed to fending for himself. As he reflects, "fighting was crucial in this wretched life" (17). This self-preserving impulse emerges when Mary appears before Yang Hok with Peter and he completely refuses to sympathize with her. He has gone from admiring her to thinking of her as his adversary who just wants to drain him of his precious and hard-earned resources: "No doubt the fox wanted money. She would get none" (22). Furthermore, in a projection of his own learned selfishness, he develops "bad feelings" of suspicion and mistrust towards her. Sceptical that Peter is truly his child, he thinks: "I wouldn't trust her even if she was the god I prayed to" (23). Even though Mary has likely brought the boy to him out of sheer necessity—having "no food at home" (23)—Yang Hok remains steadfast in his desire to flee Canada without the burden of a son. To overcome feelings of sympathy and concern, Yang Hok focuses on "bad feelings" of repulsion and indignation towards her, harshly judging Mary's apparent destitution: "Bones jutted from Mary's taut, thin skin. Her face had lost much flesh. I hardened my heart. Her tattered shawl reeked of animal grease and wood smoke as she moved closer. I fought the urge to back off" (22). While Yang Hok is, like Mary, a victim of colonial structures, he hardens his heart against her. His "urge to back off" from her is symbolic of his attempts to deny his trauma, to distance himself from his own painful experiences with poverty and hunger. His "bad feelings" are thus indicative of his own trauma, reflecting how colonial structures create barriers between minority groups, limiting acts of kindness and sympathy and acting to prevent collation-building.

Racial hierarchies have made his time in Canada miserable, yet, ironically, to make his escape he leverages such hierarchies to cut the ties that he has made and to exit this colonial structure. This is reflective of how the traumas of residing within Canada might have

provoked labourers to utilize such mindsets to forsake their mixed-race children. In his urge to rationalize abandoning Peter, he uses sentiments of racial superiority to villainize Mary's justified request that he take responsibility for his own son and to justify his indignation. Racial hierarchies are clearly at work in his following statement: "No Native woman should scoff at a China man. That demeaned our homeland" (24). In a similar vein, Yang Hok disavows Peter on racial grounds, rationalizing that the boy's mixed-racedness disqualifies him as a proper son: he proclaims, "My children would be Chinese, not mix-blood" (23). He is even able to convince himself that Peter belongs strictly to the Indigenous community and not to him. His illogical reasoning is evidenced through his refrain: "I take him to his people" (43)—a refrain that suggests that he has to repeatedly convince himself, not just others, that his actions are warranted. As a victim of systemic racism himself as a racially castrated subject, he turns to weaponizing similarly hierarchal and racist logic in order to facilitate his escape.

Yang Hok's disavowal of Peter gestures to the wider effects of "racial castration" on the future-orientation of Chinese labourers in Canada. Observing the presence of many "mix-blood people" (138) throughout the region, Yang Hok explains how Chinese labourers came to adopt the local precedent of forming relationships with Indigenous women: "Redbeard men had set up house with Native women, and these were their offspring, so China men thought we had discovered a custom of the land. Soon we beckoned to Native women too" (139). Indeed, under the oppressive conditions of the Chinese Head Tax, many Chinese men took comfort in relationships with Indigenous women. There are records that in 19th century British Columbia, at least one in six Chinese men had children with a local Indigenous woman, but considering the many obstacles to accurate record-keeping, "the proportion is almost certainly higher" (Barman 47). Notwithstanding their creation of such irrefutable ties to Canada, these men, as suggested through the character of Yang Hok, often could not

envision a future here. As Yang Hok acknowledges: “the redbearers stayed here while China men were forced to think of home” (139). In this sense, white men have the ability to nurture such relationships and their offspring, if they so choose. In contrast, Chinese men like Yang Hok are discouraged, through racism and systemic discrimination, from thinking of Canada as “home.” He represents a trend of Chinese indentured labourers staking all their future-oriented plans on a return to China, leading to the problematic disavowal of their Chinese-Indigenous partners and children in Canada. The racist logic of the time offers a way for Yang Hok to brutally cut ties with Peter and Mary—illuminating a wider phenomenon amongst early Chinese arrivals who, in their desperation to escape the structure that imposes “racial castration” upon them, forsake the responsibilities they have made within it.

With this context in mind, it becomes evident that Yang Hok’s belittling of Peter functions to ease the pain of abandoning the relationships and responsibilities he has formed in Canada. In a telling moment, Yang, an older Chinese washman and proud father of a mixed-race daughter, scoffs at Yang Hok: “You, you won’t miss your son. You don’t even know him” (131). This comment hits upon the motivation behind Yang Hok’s impulse to belittle Peter. If, as Yang suggests, Yang Hok does not truly know his son or connect with him, then he feels more free to leave Canada without a heavy emotional burden. Thus, throughout his journey to find Mary, Yang Hok diminishes and abuses his son, hitting him and calling him a “brat” (44). These abusive behaviours prevent the boy from forming an attachment to his father, as is made evident when Peter begins leaning on Sam, while distancing himself from Yang Hok, along their journey. Sam picks up on this dynamic, when he privately acknowledges that “the boy liked him better” (327). Despite some brief moments when Yang Hok acknowledges Peter as his son— “my son, my bone and flesh” (45)—mostly, he resorts to demeaning and belittling him. It is a coping mechanism, moreover, that is borne out of his urgency to escape the traumas of “racial castration” within Canada.

4. The Tragic Consequences

On an individual level, Yang Hok's responses to the trauma of "racial castration"—his desire to compete with Sam, his endeavour to establish superiority over Indigenous people, and his impulse to flee Canada—are revealed to be extremely self-destructive. In light of how lonely he is, meaningful connections could bring tremendous healing for this traumatised man, who expresses through statements like "the iron road had defeated me" (91) how working in Canada has thoroughly isolated and degraded him. Yang Hok's tragic loneliness comes to haunt the narrative, as is evidenced in passages that illustrate the heartache that indentured labourers feel. He paints a tragic picture of sacrifice, showing how Chinese workers in Canada often gave up their own happiness and well-being for their loved ones back in China:

sadly, there wasn't ever enough money. Families grew larger. The harvest was poor. A man with a barren wife needed a second one. Bandits attacked with greater daring. Land taxes went up. Orchards and dikes were swept away by the wind and waves of typhoons. Sojourners were every clan's trusted hope, but if a man failed, it was his own fault. ...Those who depended on you, they called you kin and brother, they labelled you dependable, as heart and head to one shared body. They were always glad to raise bowls of warmed wine to toast you. When far away, you couldn't look at the autumn moon without weeping; when kinfolk feasted and you were alone, you longed for their praise. (182-183)

The reference to "the autumn moon" gestures to the Chinese Mid-Autumn festival, an annual Chinese tradition that has a strong emphasis on connecting with loved ones. At its core, this tradition is a "family occasion as the Chinese believe the full moon symbolises reunion" (Hulsbosch 25). Yang Hok, thinking of loved ones, at home feasting and toasting the migrant workers abroad, resonates with the festival's customs that include thinking of "relatives and friends not present, extending best wishes to them" (27). The pain of forced separation is

made even more glaring during this celebration because even when a loved one cannot attend the customary family gatherings, “the praxis includes an empty chair being placed at the dinner table even if a family member cannot attend, to symbolize that person’s presence at the meal” (25). Migrant Chinese workers’ heartache is emphasized through the juxtaposition of the unified family feasting in China, while the heartbroken labourer is weeping all alone in Canada, longing for his family’s praise as a consolation for his miserable solitude. The passage’s use of “you” places the reader in the position of the Chinese labourer, amplifying the generated affect by encouraging a vivid imagining of this miserable situation. The tragic loneliness of working as a Chinese indentured labourer in Canada underpins Yang Hok’s narrative, and his forlornness makes meaningful human connection all the more crucial to restore his well-being.

Given Yang Hok’s loneliness, the abusive coping mechanisms that he adopts in response to feeling disempowered and ashamed as a racially castrated subject become even more nefarious as they destroy relationships that have the potential for healing and connection. The consequence of tarnishing such relationships also evokes a wider sense of the loss of cross-racial alliances that could create a better future in Canada for both groups. The narrative denotes a poignant sense of lost potential—Chinese men like Yang Hok could have bonded with the Indigenous and mixed-race people over their shared oppression and abuse within larger colonial structures. Yang Hok himself recognizes the similarly marginalized positions of these groups, referring to both the Chinese and Indigenous as “people who all despised the redbear” (294). However, Yang Hok’s intense desire to flee Canada, borne in response to the exploitation and discrimination that he’s faced, manifests into the destruction of his relationships. This begins with his disrespect and anger towards Mary that effectively sullies their former relationship that was once mutually fulfilling and healing.

Yang Hok's behaviour towards Mary is especially devastating due to how healing and loving their former relationship was—a reality that highlights the lost potential of Chinese-Indigenous support networks. Their former cross-racial relationship also signalled a sense of empowerment that worked against racial hierarchies that are inherent to the colonial structure, signalling the future-building power that these coalitions carry and envisioning an anticolonial future without racial hierarchies. When Yang Hok undermines this bond, he sacrifices more than just the intimate emotional healing it offers him; he also strips away the broader anticolonial power of such an alliance. The comfort they found in each other's shared oppression—and their ability to lighten each other's struggles—highlights how they cultivated moments of joy despite living under restrictive colonial conditions. As he reflects,

In my mind, we had made each other content, even though we couldn't say much to each other. We shared a quiet sorrow... Both Mary and I were alone and lonely, even though our own people and languages churned around us. Some mighty force had shaken us loose from all that, like apples falling from a high tree and rolling far downhill. (140)

During their time together, Yang Hok and Mary become “shaken... loose” from the politics of their own communities within the colonial superstructure, enjoying a time of mutual contentment in defiance of dominant racial hierarchies. Even three years after their split, Yang Hok continues to enjoy the restorative power of his memories with her. In an opium induced haze, he dreams of his time in years passed with Mary, “where each moment was pleasing” (26). He dreams of playfully chasing Mary around her boss's house in a beautiful recollection filled with desire and hope for the future: “In the big bedroom, we land on the bed's satiny covers. We stand and stare in the mirror. We're brother and sister with our tan skin and dark hair... We're man and wife, mulling over our bridal bed and the number of children yet to spill forth” (27). It is clear that in these moments with Mary, he felt deeply

connected to her. In this dream, he recognizes the shared similarities between not only him and Mary, but between Chinese and Indigenous peoples; his description of them as siblings evokes the sense of kinship between communities that are differently oppressed but share a mutual understanding under the same oppressor. Furthermore, it seems that Yang Hok had been planning a beautiful future with her, imagining them as husband and wife with plenty of children on the horizon. Such loving reflections seem to gesture to the productive potential of Chinese-Indigenous unions, with future generations embracing hybridity and a future outside of racial hierarchies. Even mere recollections of their time together continue to wield restorative powers, as his dreams of Mary soothe his physical and psychic pain, in combination with the opium. He alludes to this healing potential as he ascends into this wistful dream-like memory: “the pain and shame from the vermin’s beating and kicking eased as my mind and face loosened. I’m with Mary” (26). Yang Hok’s positive recollections of their year-long romance suggest that this connection was real and meaningful, built on their similar experiences of hardship and oppression, and their mutual desire to soothe each other. Their bond represents the powerful, reparative promise for Chinese-Indigenous solidarity. It holds the potential to heal Yang Hok from his despair and to actively challenge the racial hierarchies imposed by colonial structures. Tragically, his destructive coping mechanisms lead him to discard this relationship, leaving the narrative haunted by a sense of squandered possibilities.

Due to the restrictions preventing Chinese family formations in Canada, the consequence of disavowing mixed-race children for labourers such as Yang Hok is a compounding sense of emasculation that was originally instilled through “racial castration.” By disavowing Peter, Yang Hok denies himself access to family connections that he deeply desires, and to his own detriment. This self-sabotaging behaviour compounds his existing shame and sense of emasculation, because by failing to nurture a father-son relationship with

Peter, his only child, he prevents himself from attaining normative manhood that is, in part, attributed to fatherhood. In his attempt to escape the pain and degradation he experiences in Canada, he forsakes the opportunity to find pride and fulfilment in the role of fatherhood, further estranging himself from normative manhood and therefore reinforcing the mechanisms of “racial castration.”

Yang Hok continues to destroy potentially meaningful connections as a result of his internalization of shame and emasculation, though his adversarial treatment of Sam. The sense of the two racialized men’s potential for friendship is evoked when a dangerous scene with potentially violent white men encourages Sam to create a ruse, telling Yang Hok to “be my best friend and tell me everything in the world” (237). Not only does this conversation foster a deep sense of their potential friendship, but cross-racial allyship is also on the horizon. Feeling so impressed by Sam’s ability to recite his paternal Chinese ancestors during this conversation, Yang Hok invites him to journey back to China with him, explaining to him that “we go together... I want to be there when you recite the family tree” (237). Such an invitation demonstrates profound interracial solidarity from Yang Hok, who has formerly warned Sam against the racism he might face in China as a Chinese-Indigenous man. The source of such hostility appears to have colonial influences, arising from imperialist attacks: “there was no worse time for an outsider to enter China. Our borders were long ones, and outsiders had pierced them again” (236). With this context, Yang Hok’s offer to support Sam in such an endeavour proves to be a true act of solidarity against racial hostility and colonial influences.

Ultimately, Yang Hok’s “bad feelings” scuttle his promise to accompany Sam to China, marking the dissolution of their potential allyship. Once they separate from each other, Yang Hok feels more confident without his brave counterpart: “with Sam gone, I grew taller” (279). Yang Hok, too caught up in a sense of competition and resorting back to his familiar,

adversarial dynamic with Sam, chooses to go back on his word, thinking to himself, “the last thing I wanted now was to go to China with him” (286). Yang Hok’s broken promise marks a turning point in the story, highlighting his decision to foster, rather than overcome, “bad feelings.” This choice underscores that moving past such “bad feelings” is not a finite event, but an ongoing process—a requirement for coalition that Yang Hok fails to uphold. Their subsequent discussion about meeting in China is immediately clouded by Sam’s suspicion; as Yang Hok observes, “the pained look on Sam’s face said he didn’t trust me” (247). Yang Hok recognizes his own reprehensible behavior in a moment of clarity:

Not only had Sam helped me cross the river in that creaky canoe, but he had also saved me from the trestle, the bandits, and the thugs on the train. He was entitled to receive prime favours from me and my family. My entire family and I should be on our knees before him. But this parting meant that those debts would never be repaid. I had slipped like a determined eel from his hands, and we would never see each other again. He had fallen, and a hundred men like me were trampling over him. (248)

Yang Hok feels guilty for forsaking of Sam, made clear by his knowledge of how he “should” be on his knees before him, not forsaking him at the last moment and “trampling over him.” He perceives his deception of Sam as “like a determined eel,” denoting the slimy nature of his actions. Such ruminations only add to Yang Hok’s preexisting sense of shame.

Furthermore, the language of “a hundred men like me were trampling over him” underscores how Chinese labourers such as Yang Hok, while victims of colonial structures, have also benefitted from them, gaining employment through the building of colonial projects, like the railway, which denigrated Indigenous ways of life. The injustice of Yang Hok’s treatment of Sam is underscored by how, by going back on his promise, he indirectly causes Sam’s unjust death. Driven by a need to reassert his manhood, Yang Hok devises a plan to get revenge against the Company. When “through a twist of circumstances” (Diehl, “Want to be” 48),

Yang Hok's plan leads to Sam being framed for the murder of a white man, Yang Hok is plagued with regret. When he visits Sam in jail in a futile attempt to rescue him, he knows full well that "this isn't right" (370). While Yang Hok demonstrates a newfound impulse to aid Sam in this moment, this kindness is overshadowed by the permanence of his actions—Sam will be hanged for Yang Hok's crime when, if he had followed through on his promise, they would have "sailed off as two free men" (368). Not only does Yang Hok's mistreatment of Sam add to his loneliness and shame, but it is rife with symbolism gesturing towards his complicity within the colonial project.

5. Chapter Conclusion

Paul Yee's protagonist in *A Superior Man*, Yang Hok, internalizes the trauma of racialization and emasculation inflicted by Canada's colonial labor exploitation, discriminatory legislation, and Yellow Peril narratives. Exemplifying David Eng's "racial castration," these factors combine to symbolically castrate Yang Hok, creating a degraded condition that manifests as a gendered anxiety over his perceived inferior manhood. In light of his painful insecurities and sense of disempowerment, Yang Hok adopts destructive emotional and behavioural responses that hurt himself and those close to him. Namely, instead of building cross-racial and solidarities, his feelings of inadequacy drive him to develop "bad feelings" of jealousy and intimidation towards his Indigenous counterparts. He also engages in C. J. Kim's mechanism of "racial triangulation," weaponizing relative valorization and dominant racial hierarchies against Indigenous men like Sam to assuage his own perceived inferiority. This reactive impulse to leverage himself above Indigenous people to reclaim a sense of masculine dominance ultimately costs him a vital opportunity for meaningful cross-racial allyship. Yang Hok's destructive coping mechanisms culminate in his desperate mission to escape the trauma of colonial structures that racially castrate him. This impulse ultimately ruptures his healing relationship with Mary and fractures the potential for Chinese-Indigenous future-

building. His subsequent disavowal of his son, Peter, reflects how colonial structures put pressure on Chinese labourers to forsake their plans of laying down roots in Canada and abandon the ties they have made here. Yang Hok's narrative of being an indentured worker in Canada thus animates the tragic dissolution of cross-racial connections. The narrative exposes how, as mechanisms of "racial castration," Yellow Peril narratives and discriminatory policies contributed to a combined racialized and gendered trauma for Chinese indentured labourers, sometimes leading to destructive coping mechanisms that destroy healing relationships and sabotage potential alliances.

Chapter Two

“Ashamed to be Nihonjin”: Emasculation and Trauma in Kerri Sakamoto’s *The Electrical Field*

In her novel *The Electrical Field*, Kerri Sakamoto explores the profound psychological and intergenerational damage inflicted on Japanese Canadian men in the wake of wartime internment. Building on the framework established in Chapter One, I argue that the state-sanctioned disempowerment, economic dispossession, and anti-Asian rhetoric of the internment era function as an enduring site of what David Eng calls “racial castration.” As Claire Jean Kim observes, Yellow Peril narratives, which justified the Chinese Head Tax and exclusion, effectively “laid an ideological foundation” that paved the way for state exclusion and internment (115). Sakamoto’s novel, filtered through the eyes of the first-person narrator, Asako, vividly illustrates how Japanese Canadian men across generations internalize this historical trauma as a deep, gender-based shame, barring them from Western norms of hegemonic masculinity and driving them toward destructive coping mechanisms.

This chapter examines how this unaddressed emasculation manifests across three distinct male figures. First, Asako’s father, Mr. Saito (“Papa”), embodies the *Issei*—first-generation Japanese Canadian—men’s experience of despondency; his decrepit body in the post-war years acts as a physical manifestation of coerced labour and lost household authority and autonomy. Second, her brother, Stum, absorbs his father’s wounds, remaining isolated and emotionally stunted—trapped in a codependent family dynamic with Asako that arrests his adult development. Finally, their neighbor, Masashi Yano, exhibits the most violent response to the trauma of internment. Upon discovering his wife’s affair with a white executive, Yano’s pre-existing racial and gendered shame culminates in a horrific domestic murder-suicide—a tragic, distorted attempt to reclaim his castrated manhood. Ultimately, the novel serves as an indictment of the enduring legacy of internment, suggesting that

suppressing state-inflicted trauma only causes violence to manifest in devastating, intergenerational ways.

1. Papa and *Issei* Debilitation

To understand Papa's physical decline in the novel's post-war present, it is necessary to first recognize how wartime internment targeted a pillar of first-generation, or *Issei*, Japanese Canadian men's identity: the father's role as patriarchal leader and autonomous provider. Before WWII, *Issei* men had established economic stability through years of industry, and were securely positioned, like their American *Issei* counterparts, as the "supreme authorities" (E. Kim 135) of their households. However, as legal scholar Eric Adams and historian Jordan Stanger-Ross document, the Canadian government's mass internments and forced liquidations of property systematically stripped these men of their livelihoods and savings. Formerly self-assured *Issei* men were devastated by the requirement that Japanese Canadian households "exhaust their equity in order to pay for their own incarceration" (Adams and Stanger-Ross 711). Not only did economic dispossession undermine the economic well-being of such families, but the *Issei* father, in particular, struggled from a loss of social standing and status as the leader of the household. Scholar Elaine Kim's observations about American *Issei* fathers apply equally to their Canadian counterparts—both groups, overcome by feelings of insecurity and inertia, "were painfully cognizant of the fact that they could not protect their families," and that they could no longer direct their children's lives (135). From the perspective of David Eng's framework, furthermore, this state-sanctioned disempowerment operated as a profound site of "racial castration," abruptly severing *Issei* men from Western standards of hegemonic masculinity—which privilege economic agency, bodily control, and patriarchal protection. This chapter therefore contends that, in *The Electrical Field*, Papa's impaired, post-stroke body is not merely an effect of aging; rather, Sakamoto presents his

physical debilitation as the concrete, embodied manifestation of an unhealed internment trauma that figuratively crippled *Issei* fathers long before their physical health failed.

Papa's physical decline in his later years mirrors the loss of autonomy that wartime incarceration imposed on Japanese Canadian *Issei* men, effectively reviving that sense of powerlessness in his old age. Indeed, Papa's disability is severe—he is bedridden, weak, and due to partial aphasia, he is materially voiceless in reflection of his symbolic loss of voice. His loss of agency leads Asako to compare him to “A helpless child who must assert his will any way he can” (151). Such statements reveal how Papa is drastically disempowered; his children perceive him as far less than a man. His profound powerlessness is even more apparent by his confinement; not only is he physically incapacitated, but his children actively refuse to push his wheelchair, leaving him trapped in his room. Asako testifies to how “we brought Papa home from the hospital after his second stroke, Stum carried him up to the bedroom... I knew then he'd be perched up here forever, and he'd never come down again” (40). Papa thus becomes “perched,” or rather, like a caged bird trapped, in his bedroom seemingly for the remainder of his life, evidencing how Papa's impairments are all-encompassing; he is effectively stripped of all autonomy.

Papa's post-war depression stems directly from the devastating upheaval of internment, which disrupted the livelihood he had spent a lifetime building. This severe disruption affected many interned fathers; Elaine Kim observes that *Issei* men “thought that they had lost everything they had worked for in America and were now too old to start over” (E. Kim 135). The devastating shift in Papa's life is laid bare when Asako recalls how “bad” it was to watch him face a future of “not knowing how he would start up again once we got out” (Sakamoto 222). Facing the monumental challenge of starting “up again” likely triggered feelings of despondency and injustice for Papa, painful feelings that are compounded by his loss of status within his family. Furthermore, the Saito's neighbor,

Masashi Yano, attests to how Papa continues to suffer from significant disenfranchisement even after internment, telling Asako that, “if it weren’t for the war,” Papa would not be doing the lowly work of “sweeping up on that chicken farm” (104). Instead, he and other *Issei* men would be “doing something else. Something important” (104). Papa’s experience thus evokes the broader sense of loss that *Issei* men collectively underwent as a result of internment.

Papa’s physical and social degradation after internment becomes even more striking in comparison to how, before internment, Papa was a robust, confident man who was quite assured in his normative role as a father and provider. He formerly fulfilled various hegemonic ideals of masculinity, such as successfully providing for his wife and two children. This past reality is evoked when Asako wistfully comments: “I now heard Stum’s slippered feet, slow and lumbering, coming down the steps. Walking like a man, I thought, a man all settled in life. Almost like Papa used to be” (50). Such passing thoughts demonstrate how Papa formerly embodied a self-assured, normative manhood and was comfortably established or “settled in life” (50). Furthermore, Asako’s reflections reveal that he was an authoritarian father, for she describes him as “brutish” and physically intimidating (Sakamoto 89). By exerting absolute authority within the domestic sphere, Papa firmly reinforced the standards of hegemonic masculinity during Asako’s youth. His pre-war dominance and household control thus underscore the physical and social deterioration he suffers after the war.

The internment’s emasculating effect on Papa is intensified by Asako’s reductive and demeaning descriptions of his body, particularly his genitalia. These depictions signify a symbolic castration, directly evoking Eng’s concept of “racial castration.” Asako’s musings on Papa’s penis highlight the common association between anatomy and “what it meant to be a man” (Sakamoto 43). Asako reflects that in her girlhood, Papa’s manhood was captivating: “When I was a girl, my eyes were always drawn to that hitch of fabric in his trousers” (43).

The potency of Papa's manhood is evoked through its capacity to "always" draw Asako's attention. However, post-internment, Papa loses such impressive standing in her eyes. When she cares for him, she thinks that "His mystery, power, [is] gone" (9). Such reflections illustrate how Papa has suffered from a loss of power and intrigue. Asako's lowered perception of Papa's masculinity and authority mirrors the broader, systemic emasculation experienced by *Issei* men during internment. Elaine Kim emphasizes how *Issei* men suffered from such a demoralizing experience: "Probably the group most adversely affected by internment were the *issei* men, who felt useless and frustrated, particularly as their wives and children lost confidence in them" (135). Asako's view of her father indicates that Papa has suffered a lowering of status both inside and outside of the home: "He was nothing now, less than an infant" (Sakamoto 89). The sense of Papa's "racial castration" is indicative of a radical loss of phallic power, which is reflective of how *Issei* men's patriarchal authority was undermined through internment.

The sense that Papa has been physically and psychologically wounded by internment is evoked through Asako's reflections that imbue his former work at a sawmill with a sense of permanent injury and loss of manly agency. It is likely that Papa's work at a sawmill was coerced labour during internment, for "there were several logging camps and sawmill sites where the [interned] men worked as loggers producing firewood, poles, posts and logs" ("Popoff Internment Camp"). Significantly, Asako compares the products of Papa's work to severed phalanges: "Papa's logs that he stood on and rolled by the mill, floated like broken off fingers" (46). Such allusions evoke a sense of physical harm inherent to the arduous and dangerous work that Papa must perform while interned. Furthermore, the sense of amputation could be reflective of how coerced labour induces a loss of bodily autonomy that can be likened to a symbolic amputation. The sense of injury evoked by Asako's reflection, particularly to the fingers, persists into Papa's old age, when his arthritic fingers appear like a

“gnarl of petals” (187). This allusion likens Papa’s aging fingers to something separated from his body, recalling the “broken off fingers” at the sawmill. Ultimately, the repeated references to physical severing or amputation speak to how the trauma of coerced labour outlasts the internment period itself. The imagery of permanent wounding highlights the physical hardship of such work, as well as the indelible marks that it has left on Papa.

The wounds of internment manifest into Papa’s degraded physical condition. His condition gestures to a generational phenomenon, in which the forced dispossession and confinement of the *Issei* left many first-generation patriarchs psychologically despondent and figuratively crippled. Andrea Stone observes that the wounds in the narrative are “more than representative; rather, they are concrete, physical symptoms of that history” (2), adding that, “internment produced internalized repercussions, both physiological and psychological” (1). While Stone focuses primarily on Asako, I extend these powerful insights to demonstrate how Papa’s physical impairment in his old age mirrors his psychic wounding. As I emphasize, his strokes represent a bodily surrendering to the trauma that he endured during internment. Tellingly, when Papa meets a fellow interment survivor, Asako likens the process of the older man remembering and speaking about his experiences to his brain bleeding: “Papa’s memory had long been ailing by then, and any name or incident could start it bleeding like an unhealed wound” (152). The imagery of Papa’s brain—as the bearer of memory— “bleeding” evokes the physical reality of a haemorrhagic stroke, which is caused by broken blood vessels that create bleeding inside or around the brain. This passage thus attests to the lingering trauma of internment as an “unhealed wound,” suggesting that the severity of such trauma exacts a physical toll in contributing to his brain bleeds and strokes. Such portrayals work to reflect how injurious the racially castrating experience of internment was and continues to be for *Issei* fathers.

The internment-induced trauma, symbolized by Papa's declining body in his senior years, is so impactful that it even warps Asako's perception of time—he is debilitated in her recollections of the internment camps, long before his strokes. Asako's dream of her father sprawled out on the beach in the Port Dover internment camp is particularly telling: "There was only Papa struggling on his side, half out the toppled wheelchair, his bony legs and arms treading air uselessly, calling me" (126). Papa's helpless "struggling... uselessly" is indicative of her perception of her father as ineffective and incapacitated. Her timeline disorientation in this dream is significant: "What a peculiar dream... How Papa was there in the wheelchair he would not be confined to until years and years later; when in those Port Dover days he was rolling and manoeuvring logs at the mill" (Sakamoto 127). What becomes apparent is that, in Asako's mind, Papa has already become debilitated in internment, long before his stroke-related physical disability. Similarly, Asako recalls when her father's incapacitation scared her when she was a "girl" (89): "Papa was suddenly no longer strong, no longer brutish, and could not rise from his bed" (89). Crucially, Asako confuses the timeline. She notes that she was a "girl" during this episode—a description that fits her childhood years spent in the internment camp, yet she was already in her twenties by the time the family moved to Ontario, where Papa suffered his strokes. Her temporal confusion indicates that, in her mind, Papa's impairment does not occur after his strokes in old age but rather started during internment. The trauma of the broken *Issei* father manifests in Asako's mind as a physical inability to rise from bed. This state of decline echoes Elaine Kim's observations that, due to internment, "formerly enterprising, energetic *issei* men had become obsessed with feelings of hopelessness, insecurity, and inertia," while noting how one father "spent all day simply lying on his cot" (135). Asako's conflation indicates that Papa became incapacitated long before he became physically disabled; rather, he was figuratively crippled by internment. Moreover, this portrayal reflects how "racial castration"—through the

systemic alienation from normative manhood—has debilitating effects for formerly self-assured and agentic *Issei* men such as Papa.

1.1 Harmful Coping Mechanisms

To cope with the enduring trauma of his internment-induced symbolic castration, Papa adopts destructive behaviors that manifest his deep psychological pain. These behaviors put immense strain on his relationship with Asako, showing how the effects of internment are transmitted across generations. While Papa becomes completely reliant upon Asako in his old age, leading Asako to refer to him along with her brother as “helpless children I must look after every moment” (85), the reversal of the caregiving role between child and father began when Papa turned to alcoholism as a coping mechanism while undertaking coerced labour while interned. As Lindsay Diehl observes, Papa used alcohol to “numb his exhaustion of having to work long grueling hours on a road construction crew” (“Shining” 16). Building on this observation, I contend that Papa is also numbing the pain of his loss of agency. Such coping mechanisms are harmful to Asako, who routinely had to endure the “burden of his drunkenness” (Sakamoto 191). In these episodes, Papa became physically dependent on his young daughter who was tasked with bringing him home safely: “he had not hesitated to lean his heavy body, heavy with drink on Saturday nights, on my slight girl’s frame” (95). This passage illustrates how the trauma of internment is passed down intergenerationally. As Asako literally bears the brunt of her father’s weight, “heavy with drink” when they walk home, she simultaneously carries the symbolic weight of his coping mechanisms. The image of a broken father leaning on his young daughter is also suggestive of how the *Nisei*, or second-generation Japanese Canadians, in many cases, were tasked with bearing the repercussions of the *Issei*’s trauma. Asako’s contemporary reflections point to his resulting, lingering shame: “Perhaps in some ways he was haunted by that memory, for he would not allow me to help him up the stairs, preferring Stum to do so” (95). In his old age, Papa

remains cognizant of the destructive effects of his alcoholism, aware of how he burdened Asako as a child. Furthermore, this dynamic evokes a direct link between Papa's contemporary disability and his historical loss of control. His dependence on Asako emerges precisely as internment strips him of his claim to normative masculinity, transforming state-enforced disempowerment into a routine domestic reliance. Ultimately, this household strain encapsulates the transmission of intergenerational trauma, as younger generations directly absorbed the fallout of their fathers' "racial castration."

The way Asako absorbs her father's fears and begins to set severe limitations on her own life demonstrates how internment events "produced deep wounds cutting across generational lines" (Diehl, "Shining" 24). Before internment, Papa relied upon his own aptitude in English to carry out everyday interactions. However, after internment, he becomes fearful interacting with white society. Such fear manifests in his cowardice when partaking in mainstream society, which is evidenced by Asako's reflections that "all he could do was huddle behind me" (44). In response to his anxiety, Papa and his wife rely completely on Asako to talk with strangers. She recalls such incidents with displeasure, thinking in frustration how her parents tell her to, "Ask this, say that, while they hung back" (44). The intensity of Papa's fear, cowering behind his daughter, suggests that he is not using Asako as a mediator in the name of efficiency, but as a buffer against hostility and racism. Papa's diffidence gestures to the psychological effects of "racial castration;" formerly self-assured *Issei* men have been conditioned to view themselves as weak and ineffectual, ultimately inspiring a profound sense of insecurity. His coping mechanism proves to be harmful as it causes Asako to internalize a negative self-image and to inherit his fear, thus demonstrating the intergenerational endurance of internment-induced trauma. Her recollections reveal how, in being used as a mediator between her parents and a racist world, she has absorbed the negative impacts to her self-confidence: "I cringed at how I stumbled along, each sentence

gaping like an open mouth with missing teeth” (44). Due to this internalized insecurity, Asako lowers her expectations of what she can reasonably expect for herself: “I became clear in my own mind just what I could expect of myself. Exactly what I could desire from life... so I would not be disappointed” (44). Such statements reveal how she internalizes a sense of limited personal potential due to perceiving her own inadequacy at having “stumbled along” at her parents’ request. Furthermore, she inherits her father’s fear of larger society, as evidenced by how she remains for most of her adult life, with the exception of grocery shopping, within the boundaries of her home and surrounding neighbourhood. Papa’s coping mechanism for his historically conditioned anxiety thus has repercussions that extend beyond him and infiltrate his daughter, demonstrating the intergenerational effects of wartime racism.

2. Stum’s Retreat Inwards

As Papa’s only surviving son, Stum represents the *Nisei* (second-generation) experience of inherited internment trauma. While *Issei* fathers suffered the sudden loss of an established patriarchal role, *Nisei* men like Stum came of age under the shadow of their families’ displacement and marginalization. In *The Electrical Field*, Sakamoto illustrates how this inherited “racial castration” operates not as a sudden downfall, but as a persistent anxiety that arrests *Nisei* development. Rather than venturing into wider society to establish an independent household and normative adult relationships, Stum responds to this systemic disempowerment by turning inward—withdrawing into the domestic sanctuary of the home and forming a deeply dysfunctional, codependent reliance on his sister, Asako. Unable to form normal outside connections, he strays from the hegemonic norms of manhood, undergoing a symbolic social castration; thus, he remains trapped in a loop of escalating shame and failed masculinity, well into his adulthood.

Stum lives in a state of social and geographic isolation that is indicative of the marginalization and geographic displacement imposed upon Japanese Canadian families

during the internment era. Indeed, when Stum is twelve or thirteen-years-old, the Saito family moved from their postwar relocation in Toronto to a small suburb in Ontario. Such a relocation caused not only a physical isolation for Stum, but a social one, for he mourns the loss of his friends in Toronto (49). Furthermore, the Saito's bleak and undesirable neighborhood highlights the lasting impact of post-war displacement and disenfranchisement on Japanese Canadians. This geographic uprooting and socio-economic marginalization forced families into a state of "internal exile"—a condition that scholar Victor Burgin uses to define the way that "institutionalized racism" traps "racial minorities" in a kind of social limbo, where they live "within the nation in which they are citizens" but they are also not socially recognized as belonging to this nation (26). Through divisive binaries that "oppose one racial group to another within national borders," minorities may be constructed as outsiders and placed into a psychic and social exile, one that "if it is not legal, cannot be named" (26). The Saito family home reflects this condition, for, they have been pushed to the margins of the city, into an "old vet farmhouse" (112) next to an electrical field. This field further mirrors their exclusion from wider society because they sit across the field from their neighbours, whose homes "all kept each other company," while in contrast, theirs sits "all on its own" (3). Asako's descriptions evoke a sense of how the family has been trapped within a perpetual state of isolation—a result of their "internal exile." This isolation is indicated particularly when she refers to their home as a "cage with its unbearable loneliness" which is "suffocating" (122). The Saito family home thus attests to the persistence of the socio-economic harms of the internment era; the undesirable location of the Saito home is symptomatic of the family's disenfranchisement.

Stum's crippling adult enmeshment with his family has its roots in a childhood internment wound. The trauma of family and community fragmentation, forced relocation, and even death arising from internment inspires an intense fear of separating from his family,

provoking an anxious attachment that persists into his adulthood. Asako's recollections of an infant Stum reveal how far back his fear of abandonment goes, when, on the family's last day at the internment camp decades prior, he is terrified about being separated from his mother and from his older brother, Eiji, not grasping that his brother is dead. Asako recalls how, upon their departure, "Stum thought that we were leaving him and Mama behind and they'd have to live there forever. He didn't trust that we'd send for them soon enough" (51). Evidently, two-year old Stum is preoccupied with the terrifying prospect of family separation, which was a reality for Japanese families during internment. He seems to have absorbed such fears from his older family members, losing a sense of security that he will be reunited with his loved ones. This fear is reflective of how internment created mass uncertainty for the interned who were often separated from family and community members without knowing when they would be able to reunite. This terrifying uncertainty is underscored by Asako's revelation that "it was bad... the not knowing" (222). He carries his resulting fear of separation into adulthood. He confesses to these fears in a rare emotional moment with Asako when she attempts to insult him by accusing him of being "Afraid to leave us!" (167) in reference to herself and Papa. In a deeply vulnerable gesture, Stum exposes his fear, addressing his older sister: "I am afraid, Asa-chan" (167). The weight of his fear is underscored by his visceral reaction to his own revelation: "His cheeks were wet with tears; his shoulders heaved" (167). Stum's terror of having to separate from his family provokes him to cling onto them more tightly—at his own detriment, for, this compulsion prevents him from nurturing normative relationships outside of his family.

Stum's internment-era trauma and post-war marginalization prevents him from embodying a normative manhood in various ways. Firstly, his fear of separating from his family and venturing into the world is inherently emasculating, considering that normative ideals of manhood traditionally require the suppression of emotions associated with

vulnerability (“Hegemonic Masculinity” 412). Living with this institutionalized trauma thus primes Stum to internalize a degraded self-image that evokes “racial castration.”

Furthermore, Stum’s separation anxiety is reinforced by how state-sanctioned racism works to condition an apprehension of the public sphere within its’ victims. This imposed sense of unease can prevent *Nisei* men from building normal adult lives, provoking a kind of social castration that Stum exemplifies. Yano indicates how the deep shame and fear resulting from the experience of internment has pushed some people inwards: “We’re so full of shame... We hide away, afraid that they’ll lock us up again” (199). He addresses how in response to this shame and fear, Asako, a *Nisei* woman herself, makes her daily existence smaller: “You hide in your house taking care of Papa and little brother. You should get on with life. Have your own family” (199). Similarly, Stum’s separation anxiety and his apprehension of the public realm prevent him from fully venturing into the world and adopting normative relationships as a self-assured man. Asako recalls thinking about an adolescent Stum: “Soon he’ll be out nights, girls will call, and he’ll be gone” (49). Instead of being “gone,” however, as a response to his trauma, Stum develops a kind of social paralysis; he withdraws from the wider world and symbolically stays within the comfort of his home. Asako’s reflections attest to how Stum’s hesitation to engage in civic life persists into his adulthood. Observing her early-thirties brother, she is provoked to reflect on his lack of romantic experience: “as far as I knew, he’d held only day-old chicks... He’d never brought a girl home” (5). In his avoidance of the uncertainty of the outside world, he nurtures a co-dependant relationship with his sister. Reflecting on their bond, she notes, “the things we’d shared all these years. Our discomfort in the world. The consolation of one another’s company, which had sustained us within the walls of our home” (184). This memory is indicative of how Stum soothes his separation anxiety by staying close to his sister—he consoles his “discomfort in the world,” through his sister’s presence. Stum’s retreat into the domestic sphere and total reliance on his

sibling induce a form of social castration—a paralysis engineered by broader, structural forces.

Stum adopts nefarious domestic behaviours that are symptomatic of the legacy of internment. Through this portrayal, the novel thus critiques the state-enforced containment of Japanese Canadians—a legacy perpetuated by post-war geographic dispersion, enduring social marginalization, and a historically conditioned culture of fear. Provoked, in part by his failure to nurture healthy relationships, Stum directs his desire for romantic connection onto his sister. Just as Asako's longing for her older brother, Eiji—who functions as “a kind of sexual partner” (Stone 6)—stems from “the isolation of the camps” (Diehl, “Shining” 19), Stum's attraction to Asako is rooted in the same kind of confinement. Driven by the profound isolation imposed upon his family, Stum retreats deep into the domestic sphere. Instead of risking vulnerability in a hostile, racially oppressive world, he redirects his need for attachment inward, transforming his sister into a safe, viable object of desire. Asako noticed Stum's attraction to her as soon as they moved to the small Ontario suburb: “I saw Stum's eyes drawn to my breasts, watching them, wondering; the mystery I held for him... The lingering of his fingers on my hand when we passed dishes across the table” (50). Such a dynamic persists into their middle-age, as evidenced by how Asako continually catches him in possession of her undergarments (5). This dysfunctional coping mechanism leads to his development of a quasi-spousal relationship with Asako. The siblings perform the domestic roles of a husband and wife; Asako cares for the home and prepares meals, while Stum works outside of the home and provides for the family. The optics of their living situation, and perhaps, their general behaviour, leads at least one of their neighbours to assume that they are a marital couple (161). Asako acknowledges to herself the “unnaturalness” (173) of their relationship when, in conversation with her neighbour Chisako, she compares Chisako's husband Yano to Stum, indicating the similarity between these two relationships (173).

Observations like these gesture to the extent to which Stum and Asako have become enmeshed as adults. Stum's choice to parody a matrimonial relationship with his sister into his thirties underscores a total retreat into the family unit. This domestic insularity not only exposes his profound separation anxiety but also reflects the enduring marginalization that Japanese Canadians experienced even decades after internment. Faced with persistent societal stigma, men like Stum are driven to severely restrict their outward engagement with the world. Moreover, this self-imposed isolation works to prevent Stum from attaining a normative sense of manhood for the majority of his adult life. The resulting symbolic castration serves as a stark testament to the corrosive, cross-generational legacy of internment.

3. Yano's Struggle with "Racial Castration"

If Papa's physical decline represents the quiet, debilitating erosion of *Issei* authority, Masashi Yano embodies the volatile, compounding pressures of "racial castration" pushed to its breaking point. Yano's trauma is shaped by layers of state-inflicted violence: wartime internment, forced post-war repatriation to Japan, and ongoing economic dispossession and social marginalization. Yano is not only emasculated by Yellow Peril narratives that stereotype Asian men as weak, passive, or sexually deficient, but he is systemically positioned below white authority figures like his wife's boss, Mr. Spears. In *The Electrical Field*, Sakamoto demonstrates how these larger forces are not confined to the public sphere and outside interactions; rather, they infiltrate the most intimate domestic spaces and intimate connections. Ultimately, Chisako's extramarital affair with Mr. Spears leads to Yano's violent breakdown, serving as a tragic testament to how state-sanctioned disempowerment corrupts marital relationships, sometimes driving victimized men to become victimizers in damaging attempts at reclaiming their manhood.

Yano has suffered deep psychological wounds due to institutionalized racism and social discourse. He reveals how in the camps, he became so crippled by shame that he and other internees contemplated suicide: “there were a few who did kill themselves. Out of shame...I thought about it myself” (222). Yano’s suicidal ideation reveals his struggle to cope with the overwhelming sense of shame that has been conditioned in men like him through these experiences. Similarly, he continues to be haunted by a lingering sense of injustice and a lack of agency due to undergoing repatriation to Japan. This policy was particularly disempowering and cruel—while repatriation was deemed “voluntary,” Japanese Canadians like Yano were left without viable options, being pressured to depart for a devastated postwar Japan. He alludes to the inherently disempowering aspect of this policy when he explains that, after the war, “That’s how it was, they shipped you back to where you’d never been” (81). Yano is further demoralized through Yellow Peril stereotypes that not only justified these policies but that continue to degrade Japanese men as effeminate and weak, working to reinforce their “racial castration” within the cultural imaginary. The inferiorizing aspect of this rhetoric is alluded to in Joy Kogawa’s ground-breaking novel, *Obasan*, published nearly 20 years before *The Electrical Field*. The narrator describes a wartime propaganda boardgame that bolsters Western military prowess: “To be yellow in the Yellow Peril game is to be weak and small. Yellow is to be chicken... One time, I remember, a white hen pecked yellow chicks to death, to death in our backyard” (Kogawa 134). Tellingly, *The Electrical Field* seems to gesture to this metaphor when Yano confides in Asako that he feels “ashamed to be nihonjin” (Sakamoto 82), a Japanese person. Asako’s perception of him evokes the victimized yellow chicks in this moment: “He pushed back his greasy, tangled hair. It resembled a black nest against the buried sky, and his eyes were holes pecked out of his large face” (81). The allusion to Yano’s face being pecked out by birds suggests how he has been severely wounded by the Yellow Peril; his eyes have been symbolically pecked out by the

white hen. These experiences have instilled in Yano a deep sense of shame that persist into his middle-age, indicating the enduring consequences of institutionalized racism on Japanese Canadian men's self-image.

The experiences of internment and disenfranchisement work towards a historical conditioning of shame within Japanese Canadian men like Yano. His deepest insecurity lies in the compounding nature of his shame that is incongruous with a normative sense of manhood that exhibits control, strength, and confidence. When Asako reveals that his wife, Chisako, is having an affair, he reasons that his unmanly shame is responsible: "Chisako saw it [shame] in me.... It isn't attractive, Asako. Especially in a man. I don't blame her" (199). This comment reveals how Yano recognizes that his shame alienates him from normative manhood that upholds the "suppression of emotions that convey vulnerability" ("Hegemonic Masculinity"). Yano thus reveals his belief that shame is emasculating and, because Chisako has perceived this emasculating quality within him, it has led to her infidelity. Her affair is in of itself a demoralizing experience for Yano that only heightens his pre-existing sense of failed manhood. Yano's reflections gesture to how the societal pressure to maintain the ideals of normative manhood can add to the trauma of internment and other postwar policies targeting Japanese Canadian men. His experiences illustrate "racial castration" in action, showing how shame was systematically bred within Japanese Canadian men.

In many ways, Yano is correct: Chisako's perception of her husband's unmanliness contributes to her affair. Indeed, she has internalized racist beliefs, particularly those surrounding the physical inadequacy and social inferiority of Japanese men—their "racial castration" in popular discourse. This phenomenon points not only to the pervasiveness of such discourse, but how these stereotypes infiltrate into relationships, attesting to Richard Fung's insights that specify that racialization is "a factor in even our most intimate relationships" (182). When Chisako compares Yano's genitals unfavourably to those of her

white lover, she indicates her absorption in such cultural myths. She tells Asako, “And I suppose you’re wondering if it’s true what they say about hakujin [white] men, compared with nihonjin [Japanese]... I cannot say for all, but I can say that with my friend [Mr. Spears] I feel very—” but then she freezes (Sakamoto 180). Even though Chisako abandons her crude comparison, the sentiment is clear: Yano is lacking in comparison to Mr. Spears. It is significant that Asako grasps what she leaves unsaid, showing her familiarity with this discourse as well. Yet, in contrast to Chisako’s diminishing perception of Yano, Asako sometimes describes Yano as a strikingly masculine figure. For instance, while gardening, Asako suddenly starts thinking of his body: “It was Yano, the thought of him... his clothes too tight at the armpits and the crotch, so they showed his bulge” (4). Such reflections give a sense that Yano’s literal and figurative manhood is impressive. Furthermore, when Asako describes Yano’s odour, it becomes an embodied experience of assertive male sexuality: “it was alive and pungent, insistent, a man’s odour probing you all over” (5). This odour contributes to the overall sense of Yano’s virility. Asako’s observations thus reinforce how Yano, in many ways, is aligned with the ideals of normative manhood that laud “sexual appetite and virtuosity” (Schrock and Schwalbe 283). While Yano’s “bulge” is enough to momentarily disrupt Asako’s gardening, it lacks the symbolic power to overcome the disparaging myths that have permeated into Chisako’s mind. Her distorted view of Yano is a response to a dominant discourse that degrades Japanese Canadian men, revealing the pervasiveness of its influence.

Yano’s victimization by “racial castration,” particularly in terms of bodily emasculation, is emphasized by Asako’s symbolic castration of him. As explored in Chapter One, Asian Canadian men are “defined by a striking absence down there” (Fung 88); they are racially castrated by Canadian popular culture. Asako’s inability to visualize Yano in possession of a gun reveals the embeddedness of such “racial castration:” “I tried to imagine

a gun, long and dark, notched in intricate ways, a thing I'd never seen in real life, laid across those thick, parched palms. I could not" (53). The gun operates as a submerged sexual metaphor, not solely due to its long, dark form, but also because of the virginal Asako's response that she had never seen anything like it before. Because guns, in general—and this gun, in particular—are inherently rife with "phallic symbolism" (Neville-Shepard and Kelly 466), Asako's failure to visualize Yano with one speaks to her internalization of stereotypes that characterize Japanese Canadian men as sexually deficient and passive. Furthermore, by failing to attribute Yano with a symbolic phallus, she is performing a symbolic castration upon him, exemplifying Eng's initial description of "racial castration" as the refusal "to see at the site of the Asian male body a penis that *is* there to see" (2). This refusal could also be indicative of Yano's exclusion from white patriarchal power due to the "historic relationship between gun ownership, masculinity, and Whiteness" (Neville-Shepard and Kelly 466). In this light, Asako's failed imaginings thus gestures to the compounding conditions of Yano's "racial castration:" because he is excluded from the hegemonic masculinity ideal that is implicitly white, he is denied the institutional power that comes with it. Ultimately, Asako's failure to view Yano as wielding such phallic power exposes how he has been racially castrated—he has been emasculated through discourse and excluded from hegemonic male privilege.

Yano's systemic emasculation shapes Chisako's perspective; she dismisses his opinions while actively seeking validation from Mr. Spears, who embodies a dominant, hegemonic masculinity. This dynamic illustrates how systemic racism privileges the gaze of hegemonically ideal white men like Mr. Spears, while systematically stripping Japanese Canadian men like Yano of intellectual and social authority. Indeed, Mr. Spears embodies the essential tenets of hegemonic masculinity not only through his tall, white, male body, but through other signifiers such as his economic success and social power. His occupational

status as an “important executive” (Sakamoto 223) further aligns him within the normative ideal of manhood, for, hegemonic masculinities remain associated with such jobs (“Hegemonic Masculinity”). In alignment with how hegemonically masculine men exemplify “the most honored type of man” (“Hegemonic Masculinity”), Mr. Spears wins Chisako’s deference over her racially castrated husband. This socially conditioned factor contributes to Chisako’s affair—she seeks Mr. Spears’ validation as the ultimate authority. Chisako relishes in being tenderly held in Mr. Spears’ gaze, telling Asako “To see yourself in such a man’s eyes, as he holds you... I find I can’t stop myself” (181). Her desire for his approval is apparent; she finds being held in “such a man’s eyes” such as white, powerful Mr. Spears to be intoxicating. She racializes this act of being seen by Mr. Spears: “‘His eyes,’ she murmured. ‘So deep and large. Not like nihonjin,’ Her voice turned petty, against herself. ‘So small, like slits’” (181). The diction is striking, because while she covets the gaze of Mr. Spears as “large” and important, she denigrates the gaze of Japanese men as “small” and insignificant; she thus devalues Yano’s estimation of her in favour of Mr. Spears. Rather than a simple personal rejection, Chisako’s choices reflect the devastating capacity of racist discourse to infiltrate the psyche, alienating Japanese Canadian subjects from both their community and each other.

3.1 Economic Dispossession

The historic “racial castration” of Japanese Canadian men was facilitated, in part, through the economic dispossession of Japanese Canadians that occurred through internment. The enforcement of such policies created lasting conditions that damaged these men’s capacity to attain the ideals of normative manhood and therefore perpetuated a systemic emasculation. As Adams and Stanger-Ross attest, during the war, the Custodian of Enemy Property confiscated what would currently be valued at “hundreds of millions of dollars worth of property” (705) from Japanese Canadians. Although stipulations to this original order

guaranteed the return of property at the end of the war, in what amounts to a “promise broken,” devastatingly, the “Custodian sold everything” (687). Furthermore, the dispossession of Japanese Canadians has systematically benefitted the larger white hegemony in many ways. Indeed, Mona Oikawa gestures to how “economic motives” (5) could have influenced the decision to dispossess Japanese Canadians. This observation is based, in part, on scholar Ann Sunahara’s findings that “the quick sale of the bulk of Japanese Canadian farms to the government for eventual use by veterans” (Sunahara 107) was an appealing prospect for government officials. This dynamic is symbolized by how Mr. Spears benefits from Yano’s dispossession in an abstract sense, because the wealth disparity is an underlying factor that motivates Chisako to have an affair. Thus, the harms of the economic injustice against Japanese Canadian men, in particular, are symbolized through Chisako’s affair—Yano’s low socio-economic status, directly caused by institutionalized racism, leads Chisako to forsake him for wealthy Mr. Spears. This dynamic gestures to how internment continues to have ongoing consequences for Japanese Canadian men, pervading their daily lives and intimate relationships. Furthermore, Yano’s awareness of how he has been financially disadvantaged compounds his preexisting feelings of disempowerment and injustice, reinforcing his racially castrated perception of himself as a permanently failed man.

Yano’s observations make it clear that his lowly occupational status and income is rooted in the economic dispossession of Japanese Canadians—factors that estrange him from the normative ideals of manhood. Chisako’s material dissatisfaction with him creates, for Yano, a resurgence of this internment-induced injustice that is compounded by how this historically constructed disadvantage contributes to her affair. He gestures to how Chisako is dissatisfied with him as a provider when he confides in Asako that Chisako is ““difficult...Mon ku, mon ku. Complains and complains” (103). He finishes this thought with a sense of futility in appeasing her: “You know, Saito-san. I do what I can... I work hard”

(103). Clearly, he falls short of Chisako's expectations despite his best efforts to be a good provider. Asako observes "the anger in his furrowed brow" (103) as he confides this to her, revealing how his inability to meet Chisako's expectations frustrates him. Such anger could also be indicative of his frustration of having failed, despite his effort; he falls short of the financial ideal by which normative manhood is measured. Tellingly, he shifts from this lamentation to expressing how truly wronged he continues to be by internment: "if things had been different, if it weren't for the war, I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing. Pressing collars and cuffs all day, cleaning other people's dirty clothes. Would I, Saito-san? Would I? He wanted an answer; demanded it" (104). Evidently, he resents his lowly laundry work, believing that without wartime policies he would have attained a higher status. Some of this pain over his lost potential stems from Chisako; in an alternate reality where he had a better job, and thus embodied a more socially respected masculinity, she might have been content with him. Tellingly, as Yano voices these frustrations, he "turn[s] towards Mackenzie Hill" (104), focusing his gaze on the garbage hill named after the politician who authorized internment. This grotesque reminder of internment remains, for Yano, simultaneously "far off and yet so large" (104), indicating how internment is continually and immensely affecting his life despite the perceived distance. Like the putrid garbage hill, the lasting economic setbacks resulting from internment and postwar policies loom over Yano's household, quietly seeping into his marriage and further degrading his claim to normative manhood.

Ultimately, Chisako's alignment with Mr. Spears is driven by the structural realities of postwar Japanese Canadian dispossession. Sakamoto underscores this economic disparity through material symbols: the Yanos are relegated to a modest, shared "navy Pontiac" (55), whereas Mr. Spears commands the ultimate marker of white capitalist success, a Cadillac Eldorado. Entering this luxurious car offers a temporary escape from the claustrophobia of systemic poverty, a moment captured through Asako's imagination of "the eely shimmer of

that beige Eldorado catching the light... Her tiny feet in heels lifting from the pavement, one, then the other” (221). When, as this passage suggests, Mr. Spears opens the Cadillac door for her, it symbolizes a conceptual door opening to the realm of white privilege and wealth. Rather than proving a personal moral failing, this imagery highlights how white wealth operates as a predatory allure, offering an illusion of upward mobility to those stripped of their resources. This dynamic exposes the devastating impact that wartime policies continue to have on the Japanese Canadian domestic sphere. Not only does economic dispossession enact the “racial castration” of Japanese Canadian men by estranging them from the ideals of normative manhood, but it demonstrates how state-sponsored poverty infiltrates intimate spaces. The collapse of marital solidarity between Yano and Chisako reflects a structural reality where the Canadian state, through the disenfranchisement of Japanese Canadians, engineered a wealth gap that makes their prosperity outside the white norms nearly impossible.

3.2 Violent Coping Mechanisms

When Yano responds to his wife’s affair by committing a murder-suicide against Chisako and their two adolescent children, his horrific violence cannot be decoupled from the structural trauma of Japanese Canadian dispossession and internment. The historical conditioning of state-enforced shame is inherently emasculating under dominant standards of normative masculinity, which prize stoicism and self-reliance while punishing vulnerability. This institutional castration shapes Yano’s fractured self-image—a trauma that Chisako “saw” within him (199). Internalizing these racist hierarchies, Chisako seeks the validation of Mr. Spears, a man who embodies the hegemonic ideal. Consequently, Yano’s rage is amplified not just by a personal rejection, but by the stark economic dispossession that leaves him unable to compete within a white capitalist framework. However, Yano’s perception that internment “sullied everything” (243) does not absolve him of his crimes; rather, it demonstrates how

state-sponsored trauma can curdle into a lethal desire to regain patriarchal control. When Detective Rossi asks, “what kind of man would do this?” (241), Asako’s response—that “everything was ruined for him” (243)—alludes to how systemic disenfranchisement can psychologically break a subject. “Everything” encompasses Yano’s masculinity, his livelihood, and his domestic stability, all rendered “no good” by internment and repatriation. Analyzing Yano’s crime through a structural lens does not minimize his monstrous choices; instead, it exposes the tragedy of white supremacy—its capacity to breed a destructive internalized violence that targets the most vulnerable within the marginalized community itself.

Yano commits murder-suicide in a horrific, distorted attempt to reclaim the masculine agency systematically stripped from him by the state. Asako’s observations highlight his desire to reassert patriarchal authority; upon learning of the affair, he shakes his head “in that manly way that shows regret for an action that must be taken, whatever the consequences” (203). To counter his profound disempowerment, Yano seeks to dominate his domestic sphere, choosing destruction over powerlessness. Rejecting Stum’s caricature of Yano as a villainous “kamikaze” figure (220), Asako offers a structural context for his thinking, reflecting that “there was an impressive man who’d had his chances taken away” (242). Her insights suggest that Yano’s violence is the product of severe, unaddressed trauma that erupted into a desperate bid for control. Ultimately, the slaughter of his children, Tam and Kimi, exposes the devastating intergenerational violence of internment. Just as Yano turns his rage inward upon his family, the children of survivors remain profoundly vulnerable to the catastrophic, unaddressed legacies of their fathers’ trauma.

4. Chapter Conclusion

Through the distinct trajectories of Papa, Stum, and Yano, Kerri Sakamoto constructs a powerful warning about the destructive, intergenerational consequences of state-sanctioned

trauma. By portraying how these three men internalize “racial castration,” *The Electrical Field* does not position their tragic fates as inevitable representations of all Japanese Canadian men. Rather, the novel functions as an indictment of the systemic violence of internment policies and Yellow Peril narratives, demonstrating how unaddressed historical wounds can warp domestic spaces and interpersonal relationships. Papa’s physical decline reflects the debilitating toll of disempowerment among *Issei* men, who faced a symbolic castration through the loss of their livelihoods and their roles as family patriarchs. Meanwhile, Stum’s inward retreat warns of the emotional and social stunting caused by inherited isolation, illustrating the enduring legacy of institutionalized racism and marginalization against Japanese Canadian families and communities. Finally, Yano illustrates how compounding pressures—of economic dispossession and racist emasculation—can explode into tragic domestic violence. His breakdown demonstrates that when state-sanctioned “racial castration” is left unhealed, the resulting shame does not merely remain an internal burden—it corrupts intimate relationships and destroys family units. The novel suggests that these men have all variously internalized a sense of failed manhood, shame, and disempowerment—feelings that provoke harmful coping mechanisms. While the portrayals of Papa and Stum gesture to how the enduring trauma of internment is passed intergenerationally, speaking to the devastating impact of internment upon Japanese Canadian families, Yano’s tragic violence illustrates the horrific extreme of repressed, compounding shame. Ultimately, Sakamoto’s narrative posits that unless the deep injuries of internment are confronted and healed, the lingering fallout of state violence will continue to inflict harm across generations.

Conclusion

This thesis examines the important portrayals of Chinese Canadian and Japanese Canadian men characters suffering from racialized and gendered shame in Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* and Paul Yee's *A Superior Man*. By reading these novels alongside historical policies that deeply affected Chinese and Japanese communities in Canada—namely, the Chinese Head Tax, exploitative labour practices, and Japanese Canadian Internment—I demonstrate how these policies have worked towards a historical conditioning of a sense of shame, disempowerment, and emasculation. I have also revealed how deeply intertwined these experiences of discrimination are with Yellow Peril stereotypes that degrade Chinese Canadian and Japanese Canadian manhood as inferior to that of white men. Together, these mechanisms work together to produce sentiments of racialized and gendered shame on Yee's Yang Hok, and Sakamoto's Papa, Stum, and Yano in ways that echo David Eng's theory of "racial castration." I illuminate how these men, in struggling to navigate these painful feelings, adopt destructive coping mechanisms that harm themselves, their loved ones, and their communities.

This literary analysis operates in the spirit of Gage Karahkwí:io Diabo's insight that "The project of coalition-building begins and develops as a literary one" (259), contributing towards this decolonial project. My examination of the "bad feelings" between Yang Hok and his Indigenous and Chinese-Indigenous counterparts works to illuminate the broader phenomenon of how colonial structures encouraged Chinese labourers such as Yang Hok to participate in colonial hierarchical ways of thinking, and to disavow their ties with Indigenous communities. This analysis thus sheds new light on the "empowerment strategies" (C. J. Kim 130) that are available to disempowered men such as Yang Hok, as well as the consequences of engaging in such mechanisms at the individual and the broader community level. This interpretation opens up new avenues for examining how the pressures of Canada's

colonial structure might have complicated, or continue to complicate, coalition-building between Chinese and Indigenous and Chinese-Indigenous groups.

My analysis of the competition between Yang Hok and Sam Bing Lew within the colonial structure provides a new, gendered perspective on Claire Jean Kim's concept of the "racial triangulation" of Asian Americans. This offers a new framework for investigating the racialization of masculinities that are at work within the "field of racial positions" (106). Furthermore, this work invites an evaluation of this field within the Canadian context, with respect to the simultaneous and mutually influencing processes of racialization and gendering of various groups within Canada. This work enriches existing understandings of Chinese Canadian and Japanese Canadian men's placement within this structure, with the aim to dismantle hierarchal constructions.

This research broadens existing understandings of the gendered implications of the disempowerment of Japanese Canadians that was inherent to internment and postwar policies. My analysis of *The Electrical Field* works to expose the emasculatory nature of such events, and the possible emotional consequences on Japanese Canadian men. Such a perspective encourages a more nuanced approach to discussions about redress, trauma, and healing, that honours the lived experiences of *Issei* and *Nisei* men in Canada. Furthermore, the attention to the intergenerational aspect of the trauma of internment enriches ongoing discussions about the widespread and ongoing impact of such policies that continues to harm Japanese Canadian families.

Considering Richard Fung's assertion that "antiracist strategies that fail to subvert the race-gender status quo are of seriously limited value" (236), this thesis takes a valuable approach to these novels by exposing the construction of derogatory, essentialized views of Chinese Canadian and Japanese Canadian manhood. In doing so, this thesis exposes how

these discourses can condition feelings of shame and emasculation in men such as Yang Hok, Mr. Saito, Stum, and Yano.

While this thesis focuses on Asian masculinity in response to the persistence of emasculating discourse targeting Chinese Canadian and Japanese Canadian men, it does so while acknowledging that Chinese Canadian and Japanese Canadian women and queer people are targeted by cultural and systemic racism differently. Furthermore, this framework directly compliments feminist goals. By interrogating how the imposition of normative manhood compounds the trauma the men of these novels face—and the harms they commit in response—I align with the feminist mission of exposing how patriarchal systems generate violence and emotional damage across all genders. This lens works towards what David Eng terms, a “progressive sexual politics” (102) that is “both antiracist and antihomophobic” (102). Indeed, by illustrating how dominant myths surrounding Asian manhood are systemically engineered, this thesis exposes the violence inherent to upholding restrictive norms of masculinity. My analysis thus dismantles entrenched gender hierarchies, encouraging liberatory ways of imagining Chinese Canadian and Japanese Canadian manhood in ways that are released from restrictive gender norms.

Works Cited

- Adams, Eric M., and Jordan Stanger-Ross. "Promises of Law: The Unlawful Dispossession of Japanese Canadians." *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* (1960), vol. 54, no. 3, March 2017, pp. 687-740. *HeinOnline*, <https://doi.org/10.60082/2817-5069.3156>.
- Barman, Jean. "Beyond Chinatown: Chinese Men and Indigenous Women in Early British Columbia." *BC Studies*, no. 177, March 2013. *ProQuest*.
- "Building the Railway." *Government of British Columbia*, January 19, 2017, <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/multiculturalism-anti-racism/chinese-legacy-bc/history/building-the-railway>
- Burgin, Victor. "Paranoiac Space." *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 7, no. 2, September 1991, pp. 22-30. *Anthrosource*, <https://doi.org/10.1525/var.1991.7.2.22>.
- Chin, Frank. et al. "Introduction: Fifty Years of our Whole Voice." *Aiiieeee! An anthology of Asian American writers*, edited by Frank Chin, et al. Howard University Press, 1974, pp. xxi-lxii. *Internet Archive*.
- Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender & Society*, vol. 19, no. 6, December 2005, pp. 829-59. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>.
- Diabo, Gage Karahkwí:io. "Bad Feelings, Feeling Bad: The Affects of Asian-Indigenous Coalition." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2019, pp. 257-70. *Taylor & Francis*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2019.1613729>.
- Diehl, Lindsay. "Shining a Light." *The Routledge Introduction to Asian Canadian Literature*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2026.

- . ““Want to Be a Superior Man?”: The Production Chinese Canadian Masculinities in Paul Yee’s Writing.” *Canada and Beyond*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2019, pp. 41-50. *DOAJ*, <https://doi.org/10.33776/candb.v8i1.3606>.
- Diesel, Alleyn. “Felines and Female Divinities: The Association of Cats with Goddesses, Ancient and Contemporary.” *Journal for the Study of Religion*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2008, pp. 71-94. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/24764036.
- Eng, David L. *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*. Duke University Press, 2001.
- Francis, Daniel. *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*. Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992. *Canada Commons*, <https://coilink.org/20.500.12592/ccq9dm>.
- Fung, Richard, and Richard Fung. “Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn.” *Asian American Sexualities*, edited by Russell Leong, 1st ed., Routledge, 1996, pp. 181-98. *Taylor & Francis*, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203760512-20>.
- Goldman, Marlene. “A Dangerous Circuit: Loss and the Boundaries or Racialized Subjectivity in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* and Kerri Kakamoto’s *The Electrical Field*.” *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2, July 2002, pp. 362-88. *Project Muse*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2002.0028>.
- Han, Chong-suk. “Being an Oriental, I Could Never Be Completely a Man: Gay Asian Men and the Intersection of Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Class.” *Race, Gender & Class*, vol. 13, no. 3/4, 2006, pp. 82-97. *JSTOR*.
- Hayes, Jack. “The Opium Wars in China.” *Asia Pacific Curriculum*, Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, asiapacificcurriculum.ca/learning-module/opium-wars-china.

“Hegemonic Masculinity.” *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*. Edited by Jodi O’Brien. SAGE, 2009.

Hulsbosch, Marianne, et al. *Asian Material Culture*. Amsterdam University Press, 2009.

EBSCOhost, research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=ea72eb48-c370-3112-9081-239680c98719.

Kim, Claire Jean. “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans.” *Politics & Society*, vol. 27, no. 1, March 1999, pp. 105-38. *Sage Journals*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329299027001005>.

Kim, Elaine. *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and their Social Context*. Temple UP, 1982.

Kogawa, Joy. *Obasan*. Penguin Canada, 2017. Lee, SKY. *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. Douglas & McIntyre, 1990.

Lee, Christopher, and Paul Yee. “From the Past, For the Future: An Interview with Paul Yee.” *Canadian Literature*, no. 257, 2024, pp. 44-68. *ProQuest*.

McKegney, Sam. ““Pain, Pleasure, Shame. Shame’: Masculine Embodiment, Kinship, and Indigenous Reterritorialization.” *Canadian Literature*, no. 216, March 2013, pp. 12-33. *ProQuest*.

Millington, Brad, et al. “Making Chinese-Canadian Masculinities in Vancouver’s Physical Education Curriculum.” *Sport, Education and Society*, vol. 13, no. 2, May 2008, pp. 195-214. *Taylor & Francis*.

Neville-Shepard, Ryan, and Casey Ryan Kelly. “Whipping It out: Guns, Campaign Advertising, and the White Masculine Spectacle.” *Critical Studies in Media*

Communication, vol. 37, no. 5, October 2020, pp. 466-79. *Taylor & Francis*,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2020.1813902>.

Oikawa, Mona. *Cartographies of Violence: Japanese Canadian Women, Memory, and the Subjects of the Internment*. University of Toronto Press, 2018. *ESBCOhost*,
<https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442664302>.

Pon, et al. "Asian Canadian Studies Now: Directions and Challenges." *Asian Canadian Studies Reader*. University of Toronto Press, 2017. *EBSCOhost*.

"Popoff Internment Camp." *Canada's Historic Places*, Parks Canada,
<https://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=22980>.

Sakamoto, Kerri. *The Electrical Field*. Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1998.

Schrock, Douglas and Michael Schwalbe. 2009. Men, Masculinity, and Manhood
Acts. Annual Review of Sociology pp. 277-295. *Annual Reviews*, <https://doi-org.uml.idm.oclc.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-115933>.

Stone, Andrea. "Internalized Racism: Physiology and Abjection in Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*." *Canadian Literature*, vol. 193, no. 193, 2007, pp. 36-52. *ProQuest*,
<https://uml.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/internalized-racism-physiology-abjection-kerri/docview/218808352/se-2?accountid=14569>.

Sunahara, Ann Gomer. *The Politics of Racism: The Uprooting of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War*. Lorimer, 1981. *Canadian Electronic Library*.

Wu, William. *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction, 1850-1940*. Archon Books, 1982.

Yee, Paul. *A Superior Man*. Arsenal Pulp Press. 2016.