



## Lyotard's Notion of Metanarratives in *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese*

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### Abstract

*High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese* is a digital poem, but an interactive experience. Developed through an interdisciplinary effort of eleven Canadian artists, programmers, and community members, the project comprises an interactive website, eight videos, and a gallery installation. The digital text explores the theme of Chinese immigration to Canada's West Coast, highlighting both historical and contemporary issues faced by diasporic communities in the host country. This research examines the work through the postmodernist framework of French theorist Jean-François Lyotard, particularly his claim regarding the demise of metanarratives or grand narratives. Postmodernism is marked by scepticism towards established beliefs and absolute truths. Lyotard challenges the validity of Western metanarratives, arguing that such grand narratives have lost their authority in the postmodern world. As *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese* engages deeply with diasporic issues, it implicitly rejects dominant narratives surrounding immigration to Western societies. Like other digital texts, it incorporates texts, images, videos, and sound, all of which will be analysed through Lyotard's lens to support the argument for the death of metanarratives. The text confronts and critiques prevailing narratives of multiculturalism, racial harmony, materialism, and economic prosperity in Western, particularly Canadian, contexts.

**Key Words:** digital literature, postmodernism, death of metanarratives, immigration, multiculturalism, diaspora.

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## Introduction

Scepticism, a defining characteristic of postmodernism, offers a critical lens through which to examine the established norms and dominant narratives of society. Following the catastrophic events of the First and Second World Wars, theorists and literary figures began to question the foundations of long-held beliefs, many of which had been crafted and disseminated by Western powers to serve their political interests. Once postmodernism entered academic discourse, it began to challenge the truths and assumptions of the modern era. It encouraged a deeper interrogation of meaning, prompting readers and scholars alike to look beyond surface appearances and conventional interpretations (Cook 317).

Influenced by Marxist, feminist, and structuralist critiques, postmodernism rejects formalist approaches and critiques the assumptions of objectivity, rationality, and universal truth. Lyotard, in particular, theorised that metanarratives, totalizing discourses that claim to explain everything through a single lens, have lost their credibility. He asserts, "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarrative ... The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, and its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language" (Lyotard 37). This critical analysis is at the heart of our research, stimulating intellectual engagement and deepening our understanding of the digital poem.

*High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese* similarly challenges the metanarratives perpetuated by Western powers and capitalist societies. This interactive, hypertext digital poem explores themes such as capitalism, diaspora, economic immigration, and racism within the context of a predominantly white Canadian society. The poem likens immigration to a game of chance, in which some immigrants succeed, while others face significant hardship. Designed to be explored through various pathways and formats, the project combines text, video, sound, and visual art. The poem opens with an image of a human torso, marked by blue dots that invite the reader to explore different sections. The text integrates both historical and contemporary references to diasporic communities in Canada, illustrating the evolving conditions experienced across generations. It reveals the lived experiences and emotional tones, what one might call the "hues" of marginalised communities within the host society.

Global capitalism and the struggles associated with immigration emerge as central themes in *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese*. Through its visual and auditory composition, the poem offers a counter-narrative to idealised versions of the immigrant experience. It encourages readers to move beyond superficial interpretations and to engage with the complexities and often darker realities of migration. Racism within white-majority societies is also exposed, revealing that while Asians may enter these societies, they are seldom entirely accepted. Given its postmodern structure and thematic focus, Lyotard's theory serves as an ideal analytical framework for interpreting the text, as both the theory and the digital poem reject the notion of singular meaning and universal truth. N. Katherine Hayles argues that electronic literature challenges traditional literary boundaries by incorporating interactivity and multimedia layers (Hayles 45). This study examines *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese* to explore how it challenges dominant Western

metanarratives, to what extent it reflects the lived experiences of immigrant communities in Western countries, and how a postmodern theoretical lens, particularly Lyotard's notion of incredulity toward metanarratives, enhances our understanding of the text's cultural and ideological critique. Drawing on relevant secondary sources, the analysis supports these inquiries and aims to fulfil the broader research objectives of this paper.

While postmodern theories, particularly Lyotard's concept of incredulity toward metanarratives, have been extensively applied to traditional literary texts, there remains limited scholarship exploring how these theories can be fruitfully applied to digital poems and hypertext literature such as *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese*. Electronic literature, especially works addressing immigrant experiences, often falls outside the purview of mainstream literary analysis and theoretical application. This study thus extends postmodern critique into digital literary environments where meaning is constructed through multimedia interactivity rather than linear textuality. Existing diaspora studies frequently focus on South Asian, African, or Caribbean diasporas in Canada, while East Asian diasporic narratives, particularly digital forms, remain underrepresented in the literature. This project foregrounds Chinese diasporic identity as mediated through a digital poetic form, thereby filling an important cultural and disciplinary blind spot.

## Interrogating Diasporic Identities and Global Power Dynamics

*High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese* is an expansive digital project that explores the complex realities experienced by diasporic communities in Western societies, particularly through the lens of cultural performance and economic power. The poem's title itself, *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese*, evokes themes of mimicry and identity negotiation, aligning with Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory of mimicry, where the colonised subject imitates the coloniser in ways that both conform to and subvert colonial authority. Bhabha asserts that mimicry is "at once resemblance and menace," reflecting the destabilising potential of performing identity within dominant cultural frameworks (Bhabha 86). In this context, the digital poem critiques the performative expectations imposed on Chinese immigrants, illustrating how they must symbolically "wear the master's clothes" while remaining structurally marginalised. The reversal depicted where white Canada appears economically beholden to China further destabilises metanarratives of Western supremacy, underscoring the postmodern and postcolonial dimensions of the text.

By displaying the phrase "Made in China" alongside labels for Japan, Hong Kong, and Korea, *High Muck a Muck* effectively dismantles the durable narrative of Western industrial supremacy. This aligns with critical discourse in media studies, where scholars like Oliver Boyd-Barrett argue that Western media and cultural industries often perpetuate asymmetrical global power relations, what he terms "media imperialism" by portraying Western nations as the primary producers of cultural and material value (Boyd-Barrett). As such, *High Muck a Muck* disrupts these hegemonic representations by visually and interactively foregrounding East Asian production, positioning itself firmly against Western-centred capitalist narratives.

## Stereotypical Communities and Postmodernism

Professor Rainer K. Silbereisen discusses the stereotypical representations of diaspora communities. He writes:

Some of these ethnic minorities can be positively stereotyped by mainstream society because of sociocultural qualities associated with their ethnic homelands, especially for those in developing countries whose ancestors came from more developed or first-world countries. Of course, images of ancestral homelands can vary over time depending on historical circumstances, and ambivalent, conflicting perceptions often co-exist. (Silbereisen 54)

Silbereisen emphasises how associations with their ancestral origins shape perceptions of immigrants. These perceptions, whether positive or negative, reflect the subjective nature of societal judgment in contemporary contexts.

Cook debates postmodernism's challenge to hegemonic systems of thought. He argues that postmodernism "eschews metanarrative, those sweeping interpretations that totalise human experience in some monolithic way ... anything that reflects the past or present 'hegemony' of dead white males." According to Cook, such grand narratives are designed to reinforce Western hegemony. Postmodernism resists these narratives and the assumed superiority they imply, asserting instead that they are insufficient to account for the full range of human experience. It rejects their claim to absolute truth. Scholars such as Kamboureli, Kramer, and Ashcroft further support this reading of *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese* as a postmodern and postcolonial text. Kamboureli discusses the performance of diaspora as a negotiation between visibility and invisibility, while Kramer critiques the racial assumptions embedded in metanarratives (Kamboureli 45; Kramer 78). Ashcroft argues that postcolonial readings of postmodern texts help uncover the residual forces of race and empire embedded within them (Ashcroft 22).

Postmodern fiction frequently explores themes of race, particularly when viewed through a postcolonial lens. In the opening chapter of *Postmodern Literature and Race*, Bill Ashcroft asserts: "Postcolonial nevertheless remains a useful point of reference, not least because questions regarding its politics also draw attention to wider issues surrounding the use of postmodernism in the service of liberal or transformative racial discourse." Ashcroft views postcolonial theory as a productive tool for understanding racial dynamics that continue to influence Western writing. When postmodern texts are read through this framework, latent issues of racial tension and representation can be brought to light.

The aforementioned theoretical insights provide a solid foundation for analysing *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese* from a postmodern perspective. The study aims to uncover deeper layers of meaning within the text, exploring how it challenges dominant ideologies. In doing so, it not only contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the work itself but also situates it within broader discussions on capitalism, immigration, and the realities of diasporic identity in contemporary society.

## The Death of Metanarratives: Lyotardian Theory and Digital Text Analysis

We adopt a qualitative approach to the digital text *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese*, situating it within the theoretical framework of Jean-François Lyotard's postmodernist concept of the death of metanarratives. Our analysis employs a content analysis methodology, examining the text's visual, auditory, and textual components, including images, videos, sounds, and written segments to uncover embedded meanings. We draw upon relevant secondary sources from various disciplines to support our critical interpretation. Our findings are substantiated by direct evidence from the digital project.

Postmodern theory is often characterised by scepticism and doubt. It fundamentally challenges the notion of absolute truth, arguing instead that there is no singular, objective reality. For postmodern thinkers, all representations of truth are subjective and culturally situated. Among such thinkers, our study particularly involves Lyotard, who strongly critiques metanarratives. As Jerkins observes, Lyotard "famously defines postmodernism as incredulity towards metanarratives" (Jerkins 33). According to Lyotard, doubt, scepticism, and disbelief in grand narratives define the postmodern condition. He proposes replacing such totalising frameworks with smaller, localised narratives. Lyotard argues that grand narratives are losing their authority and are no longer relevant to contemporary society. Lyotard asserts:

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives... The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, and its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language. Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside? (Lyotard 37)

For Lyotard, metanarratives no longer provide legitimate or universal truths. In the postmodern world, reality becomes a construction shaped by individuals and social groups. It is not a fixed essence, but a fragmented and contingent perspective. Linda Hutcheon's concept of "historiographic metafiction" highlights how postmodern literature rewrites historical narratives while simultaneously questioning their truth claims (Hutcheon 5). In *High Muck a Muck*, this manifests in its fragmented digital structure that resists linear immigrant success stories and instead confronts historical and racial realities.

*High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese* similarly destabilises the dominant narratives of Western modernity. It challenges ideas of multiculturalism, racial harmony, and economic prosperity by offering alternative perspectives rooted in the lived experiences of diasporic Chinese communities. The reality it constructs stands in opposition to the mainstream, Western-centric view. As one description of the text asserts:

*High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese* troubles the cliché of historical tales of Chinese immigration to North America's 'Gold Mountain' by juxtaposing this classic narrative of struggle against one of mobility driven by the exigencies of contemporary global capitalism. (...) The project expresses some of the internal community struggles that erupt between different generations and classes of

immigrants, and it challenges the racist paradigm of an all-white Canada into which Asian immigrants enter but are never fully allowed to arrive.

The text not only critiques the hardships faced by immigrant families but also exposes the persistent racialised assumptions and hypocrisies embedded within Western claims of cosmopolitanism and inclusivity. Its postmodern approach makes Lyotard's theory a highly suitable lens through which to conduct an in-depth critical analysis.

## Deconstructing Western Metanarratives: Analysis and Findings

*High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese*, a representative example of digital literature that integrates various disciplines, addresses pressing social issues faced by immigrant communities in Western societies. Comprising poems, videos, and sound elements, the project constructs a layered narrative that critically examines diasporic identity. Alongside its thematic engagement with migration, the text also critiques the myth of Canadian multiculturalism. Several Western metanarratives are directly challenged in the piece. These include: (i) the idea of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism; (ii) racial harmony in developed nations; (iii) the promise of economic prosperity through immigration; (iv) the superiority of the West in global production; and (v) the capitalist belief in money as the ultimate measure of success. Each of these metanarratives is deconstructed below using examples from the text.

## Multiculturalism and Cosmopolitanism

Countries such as Canada and the United States often present themselves as multicultural and cosmopolitan spaces, where individuals of diverse cultural backgrounds are free to practise their traditions. However, *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese* reveals a different reality. In the poem, non-white cultures are not celebrated but instead marginalised and marked as 'other'. The dominant white culture is treated as superior, relegating immigrant cultures to the periphery.

In the section titled "Canada," a video portrays a man hanging upside down by a rope, attempting to write Chinese characters. The imagery in Figs. 1 and 2 symbolise the profound difficulty early immigrants faced when trying to integrate into Canadian society. The metaphor reflects not only physical displacement but cultural dislocation.



**Fig. 1 & 2.** An early Chinese immigrant hangs suspended while attempting to write in Chinese script, reflecting the physical and psychological hardship of cultural assimilation in Canada. Source: "*High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese*". [www.highmuckamuck.ca](http://www.highmuckamuck.ca).



This video segment, accompanied by its textual description, illustrates the early experiences of Chinese immigrants in Canada. Rather than being welcomed, they were compelled to undertake low-paying, labour-intensive jobs, such as laundry work, to survive. As the text poignantly states:

“Selflessness

Opened the laundry

Before it could speak” (*High Muck a Muck*).

The word selflessness underscores the sacrifices these individuals had to make to adapt to life in the host land. Another interpretation is that the immigrant is rendered voiceless, forced to work before acquiring even the basic ability to communicate in the dominant language. Their labour begins before their identity can be recognised.

In the “Nelson” section of the poem, further marginalisation is revealed through a metaphorical comparison of immigrants to dogs:

“I’m just a little Chihuahua

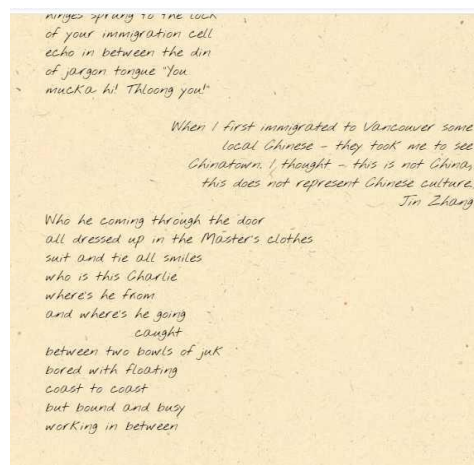
Against a German Shepherd

That’s ok.

We’re all dogs.

Just different sizes” (*High Muck a Muck*).

These lines suggest a social hierarchy in which immigrants are tolerated but treated as inferior. The analogy paints a bleak picture of coexistence marked by inequality and dehumanisation. The white majority is cast as dominant, while racialised immigrants are relegated to the margins of society. Furthermore, Chinese immigrants were not permitted to maintain their cultural identity freely. They were required to adopt aspects of their host culture, often under coercive social pressure. Like many diaspora communities, they were expected to modify their dress, language, and customs to align with the norms of the dominant white culture. This forced assimilation reflects a broader pattern in which the so-called multiculturalism of Western societies is exposed as a veneer concealing cultural hegemony.

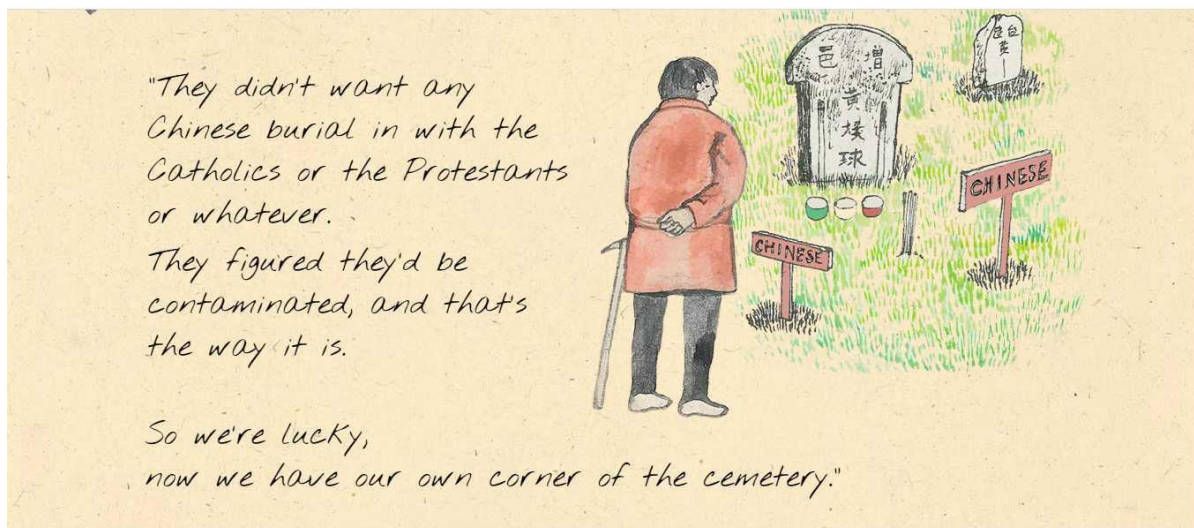


**Fig. 3.** In a depiction of Chinatown, a visitor observes that the setting feels inauthentic, noting “People were wearing the master’s clothes”, which is a critique of forced cultural conformity. Source: *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese*. [www.highmuckamuck.ca](http://www.highmuckamuck.ca).

In one section of *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese*, a visitor describes an encounter in Chinatown, recalling that upon arriving in Canada, he was taken there by Chinese individuals already living in the country. He reflects that what he saw was neither authentically Chinese nor representative of Chinese culture. Instead, he remarks that “people were wearing the master’s clothes”, which is a powerful metaphor for cultural assimilation (*High Muck a Muck*). This observation is not limited to Canada; it reflects a broader reality in many Western nations, where immigrants are often compelled to adopt the customs, behaviours, and appearances of the host society. Clothing becomes one of the first sites of this forced assimilation. Immigrants frequently face social backlash if they choose to wear traditional attire, as their dress becomes a visible marker of difference. The poem critiques this dynamic by highlighting how cultural conformity is demanded under the guise of multicultural inclusion. As Bill Ashcroft argues that racial and imperial residues persist in even the most progressive postmodern texts (Ashcroft 22). In this sense, *High Muck a Muck* not only exposes these residues but also reclaims space for immigrant voices through digital poetics that critique whitewashed multiculturalism.

### Racial Harmony

One prominent metanarrative promoted by Western nations is the belief in racial equality and the absence of discrimination based on religion, colour, or nationality. Countries often present themselves as post-racial societies in which all individuals are treated fairly, regardless of ethnic background. However, *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese* offers a critique of this idealised image, revealing that racial prejudice is deeply ingrained in the social fabric of these so-called egalitarian states. The text illustrates how Chinese immigrants in Canada were historically marginalised and alienated due to their ethnicity. One of the most striking examples is their exclusion from Christian burial grounds, which is shared by Protestants and Catholics, and reflects the systemic nature of racial discrimination.



**Fig. 4.** A visual reference to the burial exclusion of Chinese immigrants from Christian cemeteries, exposing racial purity ideologies and institutional discrimination. Source: *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese*. [www.highmuckamuck.ca](http://www.highmuckamuck.ca).



White racial superiority is made evident in this example, as white Canadians believed that even sharing burial grounds with individuals of other races would contaminate the purity of their own. Such practices were not merely acts of exclusion but expressions of a deeply rooted ideology that viewed whiteness as inherently superior. Access to burial spaces became a symbol of privilege, with white individuals claiming moral and cultural dominance even in death (*High Muck a Muck*).

## Economic Prosperity

One of the most persistent metanarratives associated with immigration to the West is the belief in guaranteed economic advancement. Many individuals migrate to countries such as Canada and the United States in hopes of improving their socio-economic conditions and providing better lives for their families back home. However, *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese* challenges this assumption, portraying the notion of economic prosperity as a constructed illusion rather than a universal reality.

The project presents immigration as a form of gambling, where outcomes are uncertain, and success is not guaranteed. While some immigrants may achieve financial stability, others struggle with economic insecurity, social marginalisation, and limited opportunities. As the poem suggests, the immigrant experience is not a straightforward tale of progress but one of chance, hardship, and ongoing negotiation.

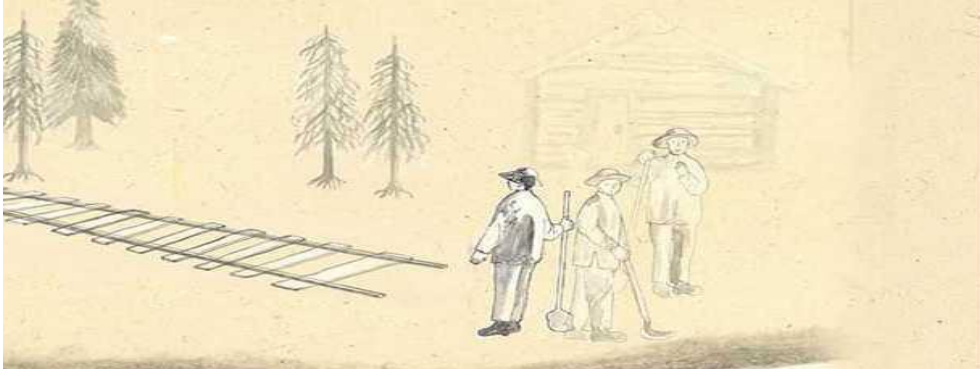


**Fig. 5.** A video shows a group playing gambling games, illustrating immigration as a risky venture where some succeed, and others face loss and uncertainty. Source: *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese*. [www.highmuckamuck.ca](http://www.highmuckamuck.ca).

One of the videos in *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese* depicts individuals seated around a table, playing cards and other gambling games. This imagery acts as a metaphor for the immigrant experience, portraying life in the host country as a gamble. For every individual who succeeds, another may face loss. The narrative that immigrants are assured improved economic conditions or financial prosperity is thus revealed as overly simplistic and misleading.

Throughout the work, Chinese immigrants are frequently shown engaged in manual labour, holding tools associated with physically demanding jobs. This depiction highlights the reality that survival in these lands requires relentless effort. Rather than immediate financial gain, many immigrants face precarious working conditions and high living costs, including numerous taxes and state obligations (*High Muck a Muck*). The dream

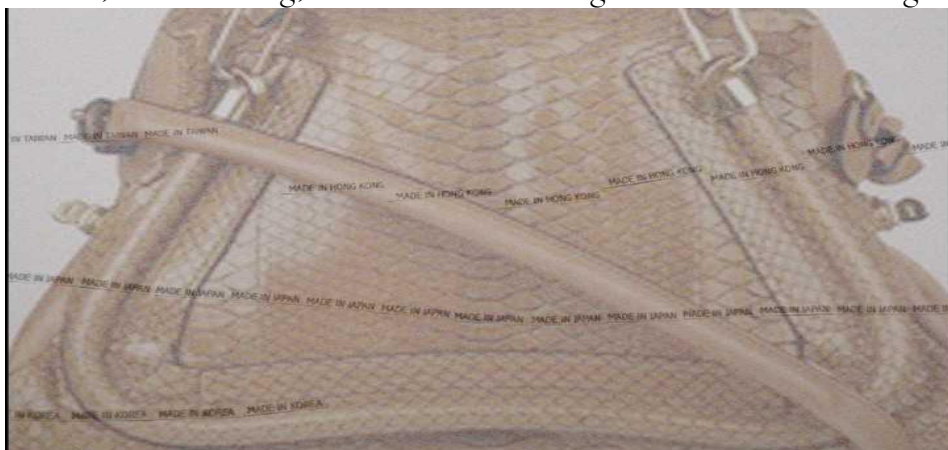
of effortless economic advancement is challenged by the poem's honest portrayal of hardship and struggle.



**Fig. 6.** Chinese immigrants are shown holding manual labour tools, underscoring the economic reality that hard work, not prosperity, defines many immigrant experiences. Source: *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese*. [www.highmuckamuck.ca](http://www.highmuckamuck.ca).

## Western Superiority

Western nations often assert their superiority not only in racial terms but also across domains such as knowledge, industrial advancement, and global production. They frequently present themselves as the primary producers and suppliers of goods to the rest of the world, reinforcing a metanarrative of economic and technological dominance. This ideology frames the West as the engine of modernity, sustaining global demand and development. However, *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese* directly challenges this assumption. In one of its video segments, floating text repeatedly displays phrases such as “Made in China,” “Made in Hong Kong,” and “Made in Japan” (*High Muck a Muck*). This visual sequence disrupts the myth of Western industrial supremacy by highlighting the economic contributions of Eastern nations. The poem suggests that the global flow of production is far more complex than Western narratives admit. It questions the idea that the West is the centre of productivity, revealing instead a world where Asian countries play a significant, if not leading, role in manufacturing and economic exchange.



**Fig. 7.** Scrolling text with labels such as “Made in China” and “Made in Japan” challenges Western industrial supremacy by acknowledging Eastern economic contributions.

Source: *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese*. [www.highmuckamuck.ca](http://www.highmuckamuck.ca).

## Belief in Money

While postmodernism is often associated with the collapse of grand narratives, one dominant ideology continues to shape Western capitalist societies: the belief that money is the ultimate measure of success and fulfilment. Western powers, often positioning themselves as champions of postmodern critique, paradoxically cling to the notion that economic stability guarantees peace, happiness, and a meaningful life. This enduring belief functions as a contemporary metanarrative, equating material wealth with human value.



**Fig. 8 & 9.** A woman walks past affluent homes, recalling her emotional disconnect from material comfort and reflecting on the void left by lost cultural roots. Source: *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese*. [www.highmuckamuck.ca](http://www.highmuckamuck.ca).

*High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese* dismantles this illusion by revealing the emotional void that can accompany financial security. In one video, a speaker passes through an affluent neighbourhood, reflecting on what has been gained and lost through immigration. Despite material comfort, the speaker admits, “emptiness screams inside me” (*High Muck a Muck*). This moment underscores the limits of economic achievement: without cultural belonging, meaningful relationships, or emotional connection, wealth becomes hollow. The text, therefore, critiques the capitalist metanarrative that equates money with fulfilment. It argues, instead, that identity, community, and emotional well-being are just as, if not more, essential to the human experience than financial success.

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that *High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese* exemplifies Lyotard's postmodern critique of metanarratives by structurally and thematically resisting fixed, totalizing narratives of multicultural harmony, economic mobility, and cultural integration. Rather than simply recounting immigrant experience, the digital poem functions as an epistemological critique of Western ideologies, using hypertextual fragmentation, non-linearity, and multimodality to challenge the legitimacy of dominant cultural truths. It illustrates how digital literature can enact postmodern theory in both form and content, thereby expanding the application of Lyotard's philosophical insights to interactive, born-digital texts that speak from and to marginalised diasporic positions. Countries such as Canada, often celebrated as cosmopolitan and inclusive, are shown to harbour deep-rooted racial biases and stereotypical perceptions of non-Western

communities. The notion of white racial superiority continues to persist beneath the surface of official multiculturalism. Similarly, the belief that immigration to Western countries guarantees economic success is revealed to be an illusion. Immigrants are often subjected to hardship, underemployment, and systemic exclusion. The text also challenges the Western claim to being the sole producer of global goods, presenting Eastern nations, such as China, Japan, and Hong Kong, as central players in global production. Furthermore, the capitalist metanarrative that equates money with happiness is critiqued; the poem illustrates that material success without cultural belonging or emotional connection results in alienation and emptiness.

*High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese* thus stands as a powerful example of postmodern digital literature. It challenges dominant ideologies and sheds light on the lived experiences of diasporic communities. By disrupting established narratives of progress, race, and capitalism, the text offers a compelling critique of contemporary Western societies and their contradictions. The implications of this analysis extend beyond the immediate text. By demonstrating how postmodern theory, especially Lyotard's critique of metanarratives, applies meaningfully to digital and diasporic poetic works, this study invites a broader rethinking of literary theory's scope. It encourages scholars to expand their analytical frameworks to include multimedia, interactive, and non-linear texts, particularly those emerging from marginalised cultural contexts. Future research could explore how other digital literary projects engage with postmodern aesthetics or how digital forms represent other diasporic communities (e.g., South Asian, Middle Eastern, and African diasporas) in different national contexts. Comparative analyses could also deepen understanding of how digital literature participates in global debates on race, identity, and belonging. Additionally, examining user interaction as a co-creative act in digital texts may further illuminate how postmodern subjectivity is constructed and dispersed across media platforms.

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