



West Coast

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

West Coast Line is pleased to offer two works by the late bpNichol. " 'IM: mortality play" was found amongst his papers and is the initial—and only—section of *The Martyrology, Book (10)*₁₀. This end is accompanied by very early poems, belonging to the "prehistory" of this long poem, which are located in the bpNichol Papers at Simon Fraser University. These have been chosen and edited by Irene Niechoda. Our deep appreciation to Ellie Nichol, Executor of the bpNichol Estate, for kindly giving us permission to publish both works. We hope that future issues will continue to offer unpublished material by Nichol. This issue also highlights the writing of Timothy Findley. The gathering was suggested by Peter Buitenhuis, and includes a new story by Findley, an interview and review by Buitenhuis, and a critical essay by Catherine Hunter.

•

Art Facts by bpNichol is now available from Chax Press and *Gifts*, the seventh volume of *The Martyrology*, is forthcoming this fall from Coach House Press Lola Lemire Tostevin's poems are part of a larger work-in-process. Her most recent book *'Sophie* is available from Coach House Press Fred Wah's beautifully designed *Limestone Lakes Utaniki* was co-published by The Press at Pilot Bay and Red Deer College Press Judith Copithorne lives in Vancouver. Her selection of poems and visual concrete is taken from a work-in-process George Bowering's new novel, *Harry's Fragments*, is forthcoming this fall from Coach House Press Steve McCaffery's latest book, *The Black Debt*, is available from Nightwood Editions. He is working on the collected writings of TRG [Toronto Research Group] to be published by Talonbooks next year. His selection is part of a forthcoming work, *Theory of Sediment* Henry Tsang is a young Vancouver artist. His "Memorandum" is part of an exhibit of Asian Canadian artists, "Yellow Peril Re-considered," presently touring Canada Erin Mouré lives in Montreal. Her latest book of poems, *WCW (West South West)*, was published by Véhicule Press Irene Niechoda's *A Sourcery for Books 1 and 2 of The Martyrology* is forthcoming from ECW Press Pamela Banting lives in Edmonton where she is just completing her PhD dissertation. Her essay on Fred Wah is part of a book-length study of his work Fernando Aguiar sends his concrete poems from Lisbon, Portugal Catherine Hunter is working on a PhD dissertation on Timothy Findley at the University of Victoria. Her book of poems, *Necessary Crimes*, is available from Blizzard Press Peter Buitenhuis' study of propaganda, *The Great War of Words*, is available from UBC Press Timothy Findley

sends us his story from Cannington, Ontario. *Stones*, a collection of stories published by Viking, is reviewed in this issue Ralph Maud is co-editor (with Walford Davies) of Dylan Thomas' *Collected Poems 1934-1953* available from J.M. Dent & Sons Rita Wong has just moved from Calgary to Japan for a year's study Christos Dikeakos is a Vancouver artist who designed the ready-made collage on the front cover for this issue. The site of urban transposed trees (wooden telephone poles) is a major concern of a work in process, "Tree Picture."

RM

August 19, 1990

FRED WAH

Dead in My Tracks: Wildcat Creek Uta

SATURDAY, JULY 29/89

Oh golden, Golden morning!

West of Golden we leave the trans-Canada and drive north about 60 k up Blaeberry River past Doubt Hill. From the chopper site we can see south to Howes Pass, a long sweep of valley brilliant in a pillowed mid-summer heat-haze. An hour's spent wrapping the cars and trucks in chicken wire (old paranoid alpine parking-lot visions of the imaginary porker chewing our tires and rad hoses). Camp's just west, a ten-minute bezier curve, swirl, and plop up Wildcat Creek, on a west slope facing east to the continental divide ridgeline of the BC/Alberta boundary.

Ringed by glaciers as usual.

Ayesha, Baker, Parapet.

While we set up camp during the afternoon I'm in a global mode, you know, the simultaneity of the world, going on right now. Paris. Kyoto. Beijing.

My Borders Are Altitude

and silent

**a pawprint's cosine
with climate from the lake to the treeline
all crumbly under foot at the edges
cruddy summer snow melt
soft wet twig and bough-sprung alpine fir
but more than this**

height

**is my pepper
(China don't
do it.)**

Now

**(broken breaths contour intervals at the next 100 feet and then the
sky-remembered night on the plateau above the Saskatchewan
Qu'appelle oh stars what solitude your blue line and flight or weight
the inverse holds me shoulder-to-shoulder my clouds as alpine
meadows Newton would have cut yet minds find bandwidth in this
topos-parabola chaos around the earth house**

Here's this
 stone under heathered turf
 back bent as I dig and ruffle sacrum
 drawn to the music
 a slow and daily pelvic tilt of elevation
 is this numbered boundary nowhere, I'm
 close to 7000 here, maybe I'll just do the horse
 borders such thin thoughts (apple-eyes)
 yesterday's Tiananmen
 a power-line buzz along my spine, my legs
 go up and down
 heart a little heavy
 for the people

SUNDAY, JULY 30

We hike east across the valley toward Mistaya Mountain, as far as a scree slope on the south side of a grano-diorite carbuncle so massive we're left only to semi-circumnavigate the heel of.

Each rock vectors through the eyes to the height of the stomach and stops me, dazzles, dead in my tracks. Such singular surfaces are impossible to avoid. Eyes tumble click, stop and stare, stop and stare at pink molten sunset rivers of limestone, sawtooth schist embedded. But at this rate the hike's all history, pleistocene.

No animals, no print, no scat. (Goat tracks? Too faint now to be sure.)
 No sky-mirrored glacial swimming holes today.
 No fresh water. Heather very dry. The bees buzz. Butterflies.
 Doze in the sun at the bottom of a scree slope waiting for the other

deaths in China's humid night so far away
 maybe that's the simplest equation
 for the headwaters
 and now the sun decreases
 the friction. The fingers
 of my right hand trace
 a band of quartz. My eyes sink
 under the brim
 far away
 not so far away.

MONDAY, THE 31ST

Today we climb the same side of the valley as yesterday. But now we've taken a keep-more-to-the-left route to a neck or col between Alberta and BC, under Mistaya. Lunch beside a snowpatch lake.

**when deconstructing rock
hold back the crude and the harsh
or take "reality" for simple target's sake
the sun
a country as large as China
is only another scheme for hunger and competition
another centered project tunneling earth
my father's fingers poked wet into the mud of a rice paddy
rumours, the same large-spun sky here
in the thin air and during the long winter
quartz grows with the sparkle of a bridge
every stone on this mountain clicks
some old biotic tumbler locked
unlocked**

After-lunch drowsiness sets in under the warmth of the sun; no birds sing; not so far away the glacier rivers roar in the July heat.

**shale shard weep shard shale weep shale weep shard shale weep shale
weep shard shard weep shale shard weep shale weep weep shhh**

Those rocks this morning on the way up appeared full of signs and messages. So I walked around in a meander and kind of grilled each striated spot for information, news of the conglomerate earth.

or

ee

ent

How wonderful to be able to go right for the source. The day feels real hard-core.

The others' words around me buzz and fall like horseflies.

Alberta looks busy from this side; Jasper/Banff another of those new equations to satisfy hunger. Ice-blue sky-line jet-tracked.

ent

re. Pren

eur. Prende

I look at the wooden handle of an ice ax stuck in the snow: "When making an ax handle," the pattern is occasionally too far off. Somewhere else.

**snow pond fed by two large drifts vectored off of moraine.
no real fish.
the Beijing hotline surfaces as jet track reminder
through the high blue air
then sinks at news of the killings.
deep, like a floating thermostat.
deep, like a disappearing hook.
baited.**

TUESDAY, AUGUST 1

I didn't sleep very well last night because I had to get up as breakfast helper this morning—fretted about the alarm on my wrist-watch being loud enough and so now mid-afternoon, sit on a slope above what the camp's come to call "crystal gardens" on the cool (windy) side of a grassy knoll tired and lulled by the rush of waterfall across the valley and above this alleyway that led us here full of crystals dangled and hidden for years we poke under little rock ledges.

Quiet here. Light breeze to keep the horseflies down. I glass across a valley to a slope, for yesterday's tracks, but they've melted out. Pan back to a blurry knoll of purple yellow red pink and white on green with songs (I Don't Want a Sickle) I can't get out of my head and there're the others, after-lunch sprawl on the heather, Pauline reading in her flower book.

Small thunderstorm coming around Trapper Peak should force us down the hill, while on this beared-over gopher-searching mountainside I linger, stopped, can't keep my eyes off the rocks and surfaces surging to not so much arrest myself in all this "otherness" as greedily scour the dripping quartz for crystal jewels for my daughters. Something lucky, something old.

Hand-held Pictostone

**from above Wildcat rockscape of old Renaissance bullet hole or navel
with tracks going out the sides a type of Malthusian linear function
along the aisles of a Saturday afternoon matinee forever pocked with
edge and gouged embedded pebble from distant beach a cracked and
weathered map of textured tilt propellor hummed out from omphalic
sedimentary lint enough to tell story's history warped high enough in
the diurnal headlines from Beijing and Shanghai so that a geologist**

**imagining fake fish in a fake lake scrapes around the edges for
shrapnel but me I think in my own mittened photos of the life look out
of and far away from these threads through the hole to continue the
prospect beyond impact of landing very hard and fast and past the
anima button.**

New moon tonight.

WEDNESDAY

A wet day. Drizzle started last night after days of heat. The snow-line is about 8500 feet this morning. Very cool all day, off and on rain and sleet, some hail. And no respite tonight so now I sit/lie in our tent at 9 p.m. still light enough to write. I've put on my toque and gloves. No thought. Just body.

A few of us walked up the valley on the other side of Wildcat Creek and crossed many feeder creeks and the glacier river at the head of the valley. I had to take off my pants and boots once. The water came up to just above the knees. Memoried on and off all day crossing Toby moraine years ago with my brother and Loki and how that crossing, just below the crotch, had rejuvenated bruised ligaments. This time my feet remain ice all day.

All these rocks. Constant mirror and presence in my eyes. More rocks than grains of sand in the whole world, I bet someone. Intricate pattern, surface, keeps stopping boot in pitch for eye to zoom. Sometimes I stop and try translating.

**Scale of shale
jamb stone**

**Say that the face-lines travel,
time on the move.**

**When the square is empty
there is nothing to catch the eye.**

**Now this place, this tent
on the outside of a non-scaled phenomenon.**

**We'll see, Fred, he says
how was that language, to himself, the tree.**

— the hillsides going by each day.
“with uncountable broken arms and legs floating...”

This ocean is a series of depths;
fields fold under, you can see them.

By forcing them into the centre of the square
the indelible occupies the heart until next time.

These “basins of attraction”
these grains, these fractal editions.

Night swoops very low
just a reminder.

THURSDAY, 8/3/89

This morning I sit in the tent writing and try to place the play in this place. The world today feels all stage. Nothing moves. A set set. There are the huge mist hackles clinging to the mountains, but no history. Far-off uprising's silence just feels sad now.

Imagine a headvalley surrounded by six glaciers.
Creeks bleed everywhere, one into another.
For three days the sun is quite hot. Then for three days it rains and the snowline comes down to 8500 feet.
At night now some creeks disappear.
A cowbird flits among the rocks in a creek.
One day the cowbird follows some hikers down the valley to a waterfall.
Far down the valley a chainsaw whines.
The bird waits for stragglers, swoops from tree to tree.
Raindrops like crystals sparkle as they fall from the fir boughs.
Suddenly, the bird disappears.
That night some of the creeks disappear.
Winter.

AUGUST 4/89, FRIDAY

This last day we hike up to the col between Peto and Mistaya but get caught in a cold mist/fog. Just behind the gauze the oval of the sun teases. The cover didn't break so we didn't go further than the snow field. We

spend the rest of the day circumnavigating the head of the valley and several glacial lips up and down and home and that's eight and a half hours to a spaghetti dinner and the sky lifting to a blue evening.

Now nearly 9 o'clock and the mosquitoes, after days of rain, are up for it.

Out of the corner of my eye more rocks. And out an ear I hear a few birds sing their particular song, not solitary: the creek rush and gurgle down to the valley below. In a corner of my mind is tomorrow's two and half hour hike out to the trailhead and then the long drive home.

clear stingin' peaks

rock green moss

campion

surface

inked

same shards here

within the square

a "percolation

network"

five lines,

five soldiers a line

***duende* stone**

thano-stone

The Undersigned:

Ethnicity and Signature-Effects in Fred Wah's Poetry

When Fred Wah's grandfather landed in Canada from China he, like all other Chinese immigrants (with the exception of certain categories of Chinese deemed "desirable" by the government of Canada—diplomats, tourists, students, and "men of science"), was subject under the Chinese Immigration Act to a head tax. The head tax was a fee ranging in amount from ten dollars in 1886 to five hundred dollars in 1904 and afterwards, escalating in direct proportion to racist hostilities on the part of the largely British immigrants previously settled in Canada. Of all the immigrant groups seeking a new life in Canada, only the Chinese had to pay a head tax—a fee for permission to settle here (Chan 10). Chinese head tax certificates, such as the one which would have been issued to Wah's grandfather, contained the following information: the immigrant's name, age, point and date of departure, point and date of entry into Canada, and, of course, the amount of tax paid. At the bottom right of the document was the signature of the Controller of Chinese immigration and a photograph of the immigrant. Nowhere on the certificate was there a space for the man's own signature, and his name, which was filled in by an immigration official and not by himself, was automatically and doubly translated—into the Western phonetic alphabet and into the English language.¹

The "undersigned," then, is the subject whose signature does not in fact appear on the document and whose subjectivity is indicated instead by a photograph, a representation of his physical body. After all, what the Dominion of Canada was interested in was his body and the labour which it might extract from it and convert into capital, not to mention the revenue raised from the head tax itself. The undersigned is the insufficiently signed (paradoxically, in this case, since the ideogrammic characters of Chinese are usually viewed as constituting an excess of signs when compared to the minimalist, phonetic alphabet of the West). He, the undersigned, is the one whose personal and cultural signs are repressed or erased in order that the signs of production (though not reproduction—the Chinese men were not allowed to bring their wives to Canada) may circulate rapidly and without interference. As an "ethnic" writer, Fred Wah is engaged in a poetics of translation. This emblem of the unname/renaming staged at the entrance to Canada's "interior" is offered as a device for focussing discussion on the interlingual, intralingual and intersemiotic translations

enacted in Wah's writing and as a means of grounding and contextualizing the interplay between ethnicity and signature.

From the very beginning of his poetic career, Wah has never written out of the subject position that we might call, variously, the traditional lyric, humanist, Cartesian, or unitary self. His first five books—*Lardeau*, *Mountain*, *Tree*, *Among*, and *Earth*—present an open, proprioceptive² consciousness as an alternative to the shielded consciousness of this logocentric self. His proprioceptive writing makes a radical incision in the logocentric "interior" to allow present locality to "contaminate" its protected body. Wah's texts, which initiate a dialogue between speech and writing, reoralizing the written and textualizing the spoken, will not reverberate in the hollow echo chamber of this imaginary interior volume and thus do not support self-presence. The ear that hears these texts, whether the reader's or the poet's own ear, is not the unitary receptacle of the self but rather the ear of a subject that is always already at least double by virtue of its investment in the economies of both speech and writing. Although these five books are all written out of place, this doubled subject cannot be easily located, as Wah writes in *Tree*:

this is a hard language to work out
the images keep interrupting the talking
trees keep being pictures of themselves
my words keep meaning pictures
of words meaning tree
and its not easy
to find myself in the picture

By disappearing as oral event but at the same time persisting as a written mark Wah's poetry deconstructs the metaphysic of internal and external, self and other.

In several of Wah's later books—*Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.*, *Owners Manual*, *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*, *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail*, and *Waiting for Saskatchewan*—the variable of place is no longer sufficient to generate the text. Geography alone cannot totally account for "heartography" (a term Wah uses in his essay on the lyric poetry of Sharon Thesen, "Subjective as Objective" 4). In *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.*, for example, Wah explores the dialogue between pictographic image and phonetic word, contextualizing himself at the margins of writing and speech. The "I" in this book is little more than the subject of the intransitive verb "to write." Place is the scene of writing, and the self of the reader or writer is not the personal self but rather the self which engages in the dialogical play of the processes of reoralization and further textualization.³

In the four books which immediately follow *Pictograms* Wah returns

to a literal geography, but this geography is the site of absence, the abandoned place of his birth. "Home is where the story is," as he says ("To Locate" 111), but in *Owners Manual*, *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*, *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail*, and *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, what the story is about begins to incorporate both a local habitation (absent) and a name (under erasure).

In these later texts, especially *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*, Wah begins to play with his patronymic as a generative device. The sound of his name, Wah, becomes the sound of the breath and the source of a literal inspiration:

mmmmmm
 hm
 mmmmmmm
 hm
 yuhh Yeh Yeh
 thuh moon
 huh^h wu wu
 unh unh nguh
 w_____h
 w_____h
 (Breathin')

Breath is the mediator between outside and inside and, in Wah's case at least, between the world outside, even the air, and identity. The name is both the life, the life breath, and the means by which one can "send signs forward." The name is the actual sound of breathing, that divided moment on the lip of speech. In this sense, the sign is no more than a sigh. It is the instant prior to entering the linguistic system.

But the sigh is also a sign. Sig(h)n. Or, as Steven Scobie remarks, "the identification of breath and name is the book's starting point, its original si(g)(h)n" (60). The name is a mark. It leaves a trace. It is a writing on the iterable surface of time:

your name is my name
 our name is bones
 bones alone names
 left-over slowly
 to send signs forward
 found out needed
 knowing names
 parts family imprint
 left shape all over

us within it
name signed
me name
as our name
added-up knowns
become truths
said-again things
left over after
sedimentary hard
embedded rock to tell

(*Breathin'*)

The name is like bones, residue left over after death, the internal made external.⁴ Names and bones are traces that can be read. They tell a story in a variety of glyphs and scripts.

Both the front cover of *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* and the penultimate poem in the book consist simply of a large schwa. The schwa is the linguistic symbol of the upside-down 'e' which represents an indeterminate sound in many unstressed syllables or, in some phonological systems, a phoneme representing the mid-central vowel whether stressed or unstressed. Scobie points out that the word "schwa" derives from the Hebrew "schewa," an indistinct vowel sound that, like all the vowels in the Hebrew language, was not written. "It is not a letter but the absence of a letter" (Scobie 62). Wah has adopted the schwa, the name of which rhymes with his name, as his sign, or perhaps as a paraph to his signature. When Wah signs his name and stamps his paraph in red ink beside it, as he did on the colophon page of my copy of *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail*, the effect is something like that of a Chinese ideograph.

Thus Wah's playing with his patronymic reveals the picto-ideo-phonographic powers hidden in the name.⁵ That is, in the first place, the schwa is a pictographic drawing of the dangers encountered in turning the name into a thing. Just as the schwa borders on silence and absence, so the name, the proper noun, threatens to become a common noun: "wa ter/ otter/ [ah^h]." In a second sense, the Wah/schwa identification suggests that the name borders on becoming an ideogram, perhaps an ideogram for silence. Thirdly, along its phonographic axis, the name gathers to itself the beginnings of all speech, the cry of a baby (wah) and the sound of the breath (wah). Not to mention the wah-wah-wah of a jazz trumpet in whatever key signature you like. In *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* Wah begins to research his name as a picto-ideo-phonographic reservoir and as a way of finding himself "in the picture."

This picto-ideo-phonographic writing is a grammatological strategy

which gravitates toward a kind of writing not based on the logocentric model, not predicated on the hierarchization of speech over writing, toward, for example, the writing of China. Unlike the phonetic writing of the West, Chinese ideogrammic writing does not reduce the voice to itself. Ideograms are not simply notations for specific sounds (though some characters do bear phonological instructions); the various Chinese spoken languages use the same ideograms. As Derrida suggests, ideogrammic writing developed outside of logocentrism (*Of Grammatology* 90-1). Picto-ideo-phonographic writing, therefore, is a way of imagining “the organized cohabitation, within the same graphic code, of figurative, symbolic, abstract, and phonetic elements” (Ulmer 6). It attempts to excise the view of writing as external to speech and speech as external to thought. In “Fred Wah: Poet as Theor(h)et(or)ician” I described how Wah’s transcription of inner speech, his writing down of this blend of speech and writing, participates in his general grammatology.⁶ The tripartite script of his picto-ideo-phonographic writing, which mimes the inscriptions of non-Western cultures, is another component of his grammatological practice. Wah’s story, “within which I carry further into the World through blond and blue-eyed progeny father’s fathers clan-name Wah from Canton east across the bridges” (*Breathin’*), is the narrative of the quest for the (name of the) father and for a grammatological practice. For him, the name of the father is also the name of this other writing.

However, of course, the actual name of the father, like all proper names, is ultimately untranslatable. A proper name is pure reference, an empty signifier, a signifier which resists translation into any other signifier. Wah’s name is doubly untranslatable because his name is or was Chinese: its Chinese characters have been expropriated by the English alphabet in the scene described at the beginning of this paper. Even Wah himself can only approach his name in the language of its expropriation: “wah water/ wah water.”

when I will be water
 was suh
 in the distance
 ihh-zuh ihh-zuh
 water
 did you hear me
 wa ter
 wa ter
 otter
 [ah^h]

The ideogrammic name/signature which had been phoneticized into

English is re-ideogrammatized as it is raised, along with its paraph the schwa, into the body of the text. Within the text, this oscillation continues as the signature finds breath and is re-phoneticized, reoralized. In its re-phoneticized form, it becomes contaminated with meaning and therefore translatable as it moves from proper to common noun.⁷ Translation cures translation. Translation heals the wounds inflicted by the original translation staged at the border between two countries and which constantly re-enacts itself in the quotidian details of the verbal, cultural, historical, geographical, and spiritual elements of the immigrant's life.⁸

Just as the *name* of the father generates the drafts of *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*, so successive *images* of the father generate *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail*. The oscillation within *Breathin'* between ideogram and phonogram repeats itself, therefore, between these two books. In *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail* too Wah overturns or reverses the rule of phoneticization. He chooses to have this China-Japan diary produced by hand and privately printed in Japan, Japan being both the locale out of which it is written as well as a culture based on the ideogram. With this oriental setting, it is only appropriate that it is not the phonetic letters of the father's name but rather his image, his *ideo*, which informs the book. The book opens with the dedication "for my Father and his family," followed by a poem about the father in his Diamond Grill restaurant in Canada. "You never did the 'horse' like I do now," the poem begins, announcing a difference between father and son. Son Wah practices tai chi—the "horse" and "grasp the sparrow's tail" are two tai chi forms.⁹ The poem is about the son's memories of his father, how he walked and carried himself, and it closes with the recollection "and then you died dancing." These recollected memories of the father are juxtaposed against recurrent "appearances" by Wah's dead father during the son's trip to China and Japan.

Grasp the Sparrow's Tail is modelled on the form of the Japanese poetic diary or *utanikki*. The distinguishing marks of the *utanikki*—its blend of poetry and prose, its concern with time, its rejection of the necessity for entries to be daily, and the artistic reconstitution or fictionalization of fact¹⁰—are all present in Wah's record of his journey to his ancestral homeland. The pages on the left-hand side are dated, chronological journal entries, printed in italics. The pages on the right, printed in bold face type, are poetic prose "transcreations"¹¹ of the journal entries. Here are the first paired entries:

July 28

In Vancouver just before trip to China and talk of ways the writing could get done. J's birthday.

Her a daughter's birthday think China book out linked to poetry
each day something new apparent each word capable of total
Chinese character baggage really gain sight of word's imprint to
pose itself as action on the world in the context of the journey
somewhere get ready for the Canton poem.

Grasp the Sparrow's Tail is a book about imprints and writing: the imprint of father on son, the imprint of language on the world and the world on language, and the effects of the filial inscription, the Canton poem, on the debt to the father for the gift of the name.

In this book Wah's double-valued writing, simultaneously ideographic and phonetic, reduces names to initials. His travelling companions are his wife P and daughters J and E. On the left page, he makes a note to himself to "*keep the ears open for possibilities*," while on the right he reduces the name, the proper noun, past the common noun (which is still within the phonetic economy) to an initial, a written trace, and instructs himself to *picture* "how to staccato Japanese." He plays with English syntax in order to try to think ideogrammically: "*This syntax, have to reverse the English to fit, like*":

Tokyo
windy is
wind out in the ryokan courtyard
all night noise in the trees is.

When he walks around the city with his Sony Nude earplugs in "stereo surface to skin technology," he sees pictograms in restaurant windows, "*plastic food in the windows image for each meal*." He watches a painter doing calligraphy.¹² Wah has lost the family information his mother gave him "*so I can't check out actual connections still here in Canton*." In the absence of this information, and due to the radical language barrier, for Fred Wah China and Japan are "empires of signs."

Like Roland Barthes's description of the experience of the Occidental in the Orient as enveloped in an "auditory film which halts at his ears all the alienations of the mother tongue" and reactivates the semiotic and libidinal energies of the body (*Empire of Signs* 9),¹³ for Wah too the Orient is a carnival of scripts, gestures, names, and the body of the Other. It is in these scripts that he "sees" his father. That is, once he is delivered from the referentiality of English, his mother tongue, into the scriptural carnival that is the text of China, Wah encounters his father everywhere. "One morning you were doing tai-chi in a park in Hong Kong." "I saw you riding your bicycle in a large crowd of bicycles moving into town from the outskirts." "I caught a glimpse of you through a window in a roadside eatery gesturing

to someone across from you with your chopsticks." The most poignant sighting takes place at the Bhuddist caves near Datong:

I was about to leave and on a path alongside a wall you brushed me. Yes, brushed. I could see it was intentional and our eyes met for an instant as you turned and glanced over the head of the baby boy you were carrying. Though you didn't say anything your face still talked to me.

The repetition of the word "brushed" here is critical. In addressing his father Wah has stressed that "what always gives you away is your haircut, your walk, or the flash in your eyes." "It was always your black crew-cut hair which most stood out." "You wore a white sleeveless undershirt and khaki shorts and your brush-cut was shorter than usual, probably because of the extreme heat and humidity." The recognition scene is always precipitated by the father's signature brush-cut. Moreover, as we know, the calligraphic writing instrument is also a brush. So within the context of the poem, when Wah's father "brushes" him, the stroke is simultaneously a physical caress and an act of writing. The son in the act of writing the Canton poem writes the father, but the father "brushes" the son into the poem as well. The baby boy that the man is carrying could have been, is, Wah himself. Wah's double quest for his father and for a writing practice that will not alienate him from his ethnicity is inscribed by this single deliberate brush.

Prior to this climactic event, the father was the content of the poem ("So *what have I got going besides this 'father' list*") and the son the writer, the controlling agent of the writing process. In the following passage, father and son become equal terms both in the content and in the writing of the poem:

As you sit in the warmth of the August morning sun and write this you have attracted a large crowd of Chinese who stop to watch the language flow out onto the paper. You look up at them and ask them in English if they would like to write something on your paper but they simply smile and ignore you. They are interested in the writing and comment to one another and point to the actual incisions you make on the paper, the calligraphy of the foreign letters cutting also into their minds as they recognize something of themselves there.

The traditional form of the book collapses as its content (father) literally takes up the pen (or brush) and writes itself. The *name* of the father, and the poet's own signature, in *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* becomes in *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail* the *image* of the father, which in turn becomes

the image of the act of writing itself.

In the same movement, the inscription of the Canton poem becomes "calligraphy." The phonetic English alphabet becomes ideogrammic as it is actually read over the writers' shoulders by Chinese readers. For the Chinese, the "foreign letters" of the phonetic alphabet would not signify speech but silence, a pure graph. Furthermore, the doubled writing subject that combines father and son and problematizes the pronoun "you" deflates phoneticization, which cannot function with such a doubled subject. The subject of phoneticization affirms its unitary borders through hearing itself speak.

Thus Wah's writing collapses the distinction between form and content. Writing for him has its own exigencies completely independent of the modalities associated with speech:

...I find the writing very relaxing, dialogue set up with mind. Try old-fashioned pen nib and ink supplied in room—stop to go to the inkwell to get more ink with thought of schooldays memory synapse which allows the mind to gather the cloud head of thinking residue and push it out, every strand. The writing during the day has no form or direction except for Father notes. I've been reading Engle's [sic] edition of Mao's poems, good with lots of background notes, so have that floating around as I look, and look.

The writing has "no form or direction." The act of writing is not a simple transcription of thought but a "dialogue set up with mind." It is engaged with the material properties of paper and "pen nib and ink." What interests Wah about his own writing act is the same thing that interests him as he watches the Chinese calligrapher at work: "*I like the actualization of the intent which was not an intent but an inclination a 'tropos' which got paid attention to.*" In the book which follows *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail*, this writing without form or direction explodes into several different forms.

In *Waiting for Saskatchewan* the traditional roles of form and content are blurred and even reversed. The father content generates the "threads" or "nodes" that make the book a cohesive structure, while the accumulation of different forms provides the book's actual content. By working to forestall the intrusion of a manipulative narrative line, the diversity of the *utanikki*, the prose poem, and the *haibun* become part of the compositional present that is the poem's content.

By producing this anti-book book Wah has successfully followed through the process he set in motion with *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* when he transferred his signature from the title page to the inside of the text. The permeable membrane of his proper name, which allows contamination between the inside and the outside of the text, between

subject and author, and between content and form, ultimately dismantles the mechanisms of the book as such. For him, in *Breathin'* and his subsequent "signature texts," finding the emotional "relief" of "exotic identity" (*Waiting for Saskatchewan* 62) is also to find a relationship to the geographical relief of home and to the black and white relief of the written surface of the page.

In the context of these processes of contamination and dialogical exchange, however, Wah's name is not neutralized or absorbed. It remains a picto-ideo-phonographic rebus which in disseminating itself throughout the text recuperates some of the losses incurred both in its original translation into English and in the "paraph-raising"¹⁴ operation itself. Derrida describes the net gain possible in this recuperative strategy:

By disseminating or losing my own name, I make it more and more intrusive; I occupy the whole site, and as a result my name gains more ground. The more I lose, the more I gain by conceiving my proper name as the common noun....The dissemination of a proper name is, in fact, a way of seizing the language, putting it to one's own use, instating its law. (*The Ear of the Other* 76-7)

In his most recent texts Fred Wah seizes all three aspects of language—pictographic, ideographic, and phonetic—and puts them to use in the joint name of father and son (and grandfather). If language is the element within which one acquires a sense of self and if, through the imposition of another language, this process is blocked such that one can only exist for the Other and not for oneself, then it is through translation that this split self is healed. Or, as Eli Mandel asked in "The Ethnic Voice in Canadian Writing," "Could it be, then, that speaking another's tongue we cannot be ourselves, that the search for the lost self begins when we have been translated into another and will not end until there has been translation, transformation once again?" (276). It is in the poetry of Fred Wah that the missing signature of Quon Wah is inscribed. The undersigned, then, is also the one who signs *after*, the one who, even before his or her birth, enters into a shadow contract with the ancestors which, at least in some measure, supercedes that other contract entered into in the bad faith of mistranslation. The terms of that shadow contract stipulate that s/he, the undersigned, will translate.

Notes

1. It should also be remembered that often during immigration procedures the Chinese were forced on the spot to adopt an English name from a list provided by officials. Wah's own grandfather became "James." I wish to thank Fred Wah and Pauline Butling for sharing with me pertinent details concerning the Wah family's history. For further information about

the Chinese head tax see Con et al. and Chan.

2. In its dictionary definition "proprioception" refers to the stimuli produced and perceived within an organism. American poet Charles Olson imported the idea of proprioception, as he defined it, "SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES," into his poetics of objectism or projective verse. Although Olson begins from the physiological notion, he uses this word to displace the humanist "'subject' and his soul" from its dominion over all the rest of nature and to advocate a poetics that will contribute to such an ontologic and epistemic shift. Fred Wah did graduate work with Olson in Buffalo in the early 1960s and has incorporated aspects of Olson's poetics into his own poetry.

3. I borrow the term "reoralization and further textualization" from George Quasha's essay.

4. Equally the external made internal. In the case of the translated or mistranslated name, the external sign is repressed, internalized, concealed somewhere in the cavities of the body.

5. Picto-ideo-phonographic writing is a double- or triple-valued writing, simultaneously graphic and rhetorical, non-verbal and verbal, which restores speech to a more balanced relation with such nonphonetic elements as the pictograph and the ideograph. This writing practice mimes the picto-ideo-phonographic inscriptions of non-Western cultures in order to subvert the metaphysics of logocentrism. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 87-93.

6. *Open Letter* 6th ser. 7 (1987): 5-20.

7. Some of the phonetic associations of Wah's name are translinguistic: the cry of a baby, the sound of the breath.

8. Here I am borrowing Joseph Pivato's list of several forms of translation that, in his words, connect diverse linguistic environments (63). Pivato shares my contention that the ethnic writer is always translating, although, with the exception of the passage just mentioned, in his article he focusses exclusively upon interlingual translation while I include interlingual, intralingual, and intersemiotic translation.

9. Fred Wah does "the horse"; he practices the Oriental forms of tai chi. His grandfather gambled and played the horses, winning enough money to return to China from Canada in 1897, fathering one child and adopting another before coming back to Canada to remain permanently in 1906. His substantial winnings from gambling earned him the (English) nickname "Lucky Jim."

10. See Ann Munton (especially 97-8).

11. Wah uses the term "transcreation" to describe the process of composition for *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.* See "Transcreation," the interview with Fred Wah, Pauline Butling, and bpNichol.

12. This ideogrammic writing is composed as a hand-eye relation rather than a voice-ear relation. See Chiang Yee, 13-4.

13. In "Without Words" Barthes writes:

The murmuring mass of an unknown language constitutes a delicious protection, envelops the foreigner...in an auditory film which halts at his ears all the alienations of the mother tongue....The unknown language, of which I nonetheless grasp the respiration, the emotive aeration, in a word the pure significance, forms around me, as I move, a faint vertigo, sweeping me into its artificial emptiness, which is consummated only for me: I live in the interstice, delivered from any fulfilled meaning....

Now it happens that in this country (Japan) the empire of signifiers is so immense, so in excess of speech, that the exchange of signs remains of a fascinating richness, mobility, and subtlety, despite the opacity of the language, sometimes even as a consequence of that opacity....It is not the voice...which communicates..., but the whole body...which sustains with

you a sort of babble that the perfect domination of the codes strips of all regressive, infantile character. To make a date (by gestures, drawings on paper, proper names) may take an hour, but during that hour, for a message which would be abolished in an instant if it were to be spoken..., it is the other's body which has been known, savoured, received, and which has displayed...its own narrative, its own text. (*Empire of Signs* 9-10)

According to Barthes, for the foreigner there is an immense surplus of signifiers in the ideogrammic culture, which overwhelms the economy of speech and phoneticization. He or she is enwrapped in the double-valued writing of an "auditory film." He is profoundly aware of sensual significance, not intellectual meaning, the body, not the voice. Wah's poetic record of his travels in the Orient is strikingly similar.

14. I borrow this term from Stephen Scobie's article.

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