

Making a Difference

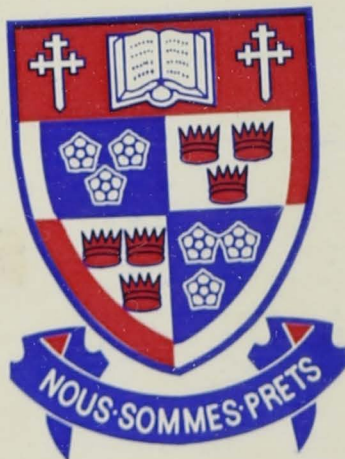
Canadian Multicultural Literature



Edited by Smaro Kamboureli



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Edited by Smaro Kamboureli

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FRED WAH



(b. 1939)

The author of seventeen volumes of poetry including *Selected Poems: Loki is Buried at Smoky Creek* (1980), Wah was one of the founding editors of the avant-garde poetry newsletter *Tish* while a student at the University of British Columbia in the 1960s. Since then he has been at the forefront of poetic innovation in Canada, a poet writing out of a profound sense of place and, under the influence of Charles Olson's projective verse theory, of breath and movement.

Wah was born in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, but grew up in the West Kootenay region of British Columbia. Following his studies in music and English literature at the University of British Columbia, he pursued graduate studies in literature and linguistics at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, where he was editor of *Sum* magazine. He received an M.A. (1967) from the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he was co-editor of *The Niagara Frontier Review* and *The Magazine of Further Studies*. He returned to the Kootenays in the late 1960s and from there he edited *Scree*. The founding coordinator of the writing program at David Thompson University Centre, he taught at Selkirk College until moving to Calgary, where he is professor of creative writing and poetics at the University of Calgary.

'Much of the impetus of my writing,' Fred Wah says, 'comes from the hyphen in "half-bred" poetics—Half-bred poetics as a game of reaction from within the egg-yolk of my own cultural ambivalence (white on the outside, yellow on the inside).' The self-reflexiveness and the

complex texture of his writing make for demanding reading. As Wah remarks, 'I've tried to make language operate as a non-aligned and unpredictable material, not so much intentionally difficult as simply needing a little complication—A little complication for me has always been how to create enough camouflage so that the grand intentions of meaning don't get to name me before I do—Before I do any writing I always stop whatever I'm doing—Whatever I'm doing might make a difference—Make a difference.'

Some of his early publications include *Lardeau* (1965), *Mountain* (1967), *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.* (1975) and *Breathin' My Name With a Sigh* (1981), which includes 'waiting for saskatchewan', the first poem in the selection that follows. His book, *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (1985), won the Governor General's Award in 1986, and includes 'Father/Mother Haibun #4.' Wah explains *haibun* as 'short prose written from a haiku sensibility and, in this case, concluded by an informal haiku line'. More recently, Wah has published *Music at the Heart of Thinking* (1987), selections from which also appear here, *So Far* (1991), which was awarded the Stephan G. Stephanson Prize in 1992, *Alley Alley Home Free* (1992), and *Snaf* (1993). Wah is presently working on a collection of essays on ethno-poetics and has finished what he calls a 'biotext', a prose narrative that deals with racial anger and traces, through many detours and elliptical movements, his personal history.

Waiting for saskatchewan

and the origins grandparents countries places converged
europe asia railroads carpenters nailed grain elevators
Swift Current my grandmother in her house
he built on the street
and him his cafés namely the 'Elite' on Centre
looked straight ahead Saskatchewan points to it
Erickson Wah Trimble houses train station tracks
arrowed into downtown fine clay dirt prairies wind waiting

for Saskatchewan to appear for me again over the edge
 horses led to the huge sky the weight and colour of it
 over the mountains as if the mass owed me such appearance
 against the hard edge of it sits on my forehead
 as the most political place I know these places these strips
 laid beyond horizon for eyesight the city so I won't have to go
 near it as origin town flatness appears later in my stomach why
 why on earth would they land in such a place
 mass of pleistocene
 sediment plate wedge
 arrow sky beak horizon still waiting for that
 I want it back, wait in this snowblown winter night
 for that latitude of itself its own largeness
 my body to get complete
 it still owes me, it does

FATHER/MOTHER HAIBUN #4

Your pen wrote Chinese and your name in a smooth swoop
 with flourish and style, I can hardly read my own tight
 scrawl, could you write anything else, I know you could
 read, nose in the air and lick your finger to turn the large
 newspaper page pensively in the last seat of those half-
 circle arborite counters in the Diamond Grill, your glass
 case bulging your shirt pocket with that expensive pen,
 always a favourite thing to handle the way you treated it
 like jewellery, actually it was a matched pen and pencil set,
 Shaeffer maybe (something to do with Calgary here), heavy,
 silver, black, gold nib, the precision I wanted also in things,
 that time I conned you into paying for a fountain pen I
 had my eye on in Benwell's stationery store four dollars
 and twenty cents Mom was mad but you understood such
 desires in your cheeks relaxed when you worked signing
 checks and doing the books in the back room of the café
 late at night or how the pen worked perfectly with your
 quick body as you'd flourish off a check during a busy
 noon-hour rush the sun and noise of the town and the café
 flashing.

**High muck-a-muck's gold-toothed clicks ink mark red green
 on lottery blotting paper, 8-spot (click, click)**

FROM *MUSIC AT THE HEART OF THINKING*

2

PREACT THE MIND AHEAD OF THE WRITING BUT STOP TO
 think notation of the mind ahead of the writing
 pretell the 'hunt' message doesn't run like the
 wind simile makes it the belief of the wild
 imagination or trees or animals too to preface up
 the head ahead but notice the body as a drum-
 mer preacts the hands to do to do insistent so it
 can come out tah dah at every point simply the
 mind at work won't do or the body minding
 itself thinking (which is why the drum's cedar)
 get it right or get it wrong just strike from the
 body falling back thoughts felt behind to the
 notes sometimes gives it shape or thought as
 body too my drum tah dum

10

NOW I GET TO HEAR THE LANGUAGE RATHER THAN
 only see it in French over my head fingers want
 to touch the sight of the letter oral tactile
 fragment hunger in another language the wolf's
 ear to make it up before it happens to hear it
 somewhere inside my body before the lips
 touch the mouthpiece or fingertip valves as soft
 as silk intelligence like that gets carried in the
 language by itself the cow simply eats the
 whole field I have to practise to get it right and
 blow away anyway

50

Going through the language of time.
 Chronometrics. Horologicals. A book of years.

I like the water in it. And the footprints.
 That movement. As you look for words
 'sans intermission'.

52

tongue mist lip boat brown gull hill town bed
 stone shadow crow tooth rain boat flood ham-
 mer star gill shadow skin hammer mouth town
 mist hill rock brown bed bird tongue snow creek
 lip crow circle brown lip wave boat shadow city
 light hill sky mouth talk snow gull hammer fog
 moon wet grey stone boat bed mist skin gill
 word flood crow tongue river mouth star brown
 lip night flood sail wave sky tooth rock red bird
 shadow stone snow city blue hammer bed hill
 crow tongue

55

Map of streets stream of dreams
 map of creeks street of cream, fragments
 and imago imprint, geomance a glyph,
 a place on earth, under, or from it.

Name's broken letters maybe
 words your body made.
 Idiot bridges to parts of our selves still lost
 in the palindrome.

A found chain on the coffeetable,
 Some Scapes as a bookmark
 to automobile between 3 and 6;
 flex, flux, flooding, fl-

(∅ Creekscape: Looking Upstream)

Fred Was. Fred War. Fred Wan. Fred Way.
 Fred Wash. Fred Wag. Fred Roy. Fred What.

Creek water hits rock with hollow sound.

Making a Difference

Canadian Multicultural Literature

Edited by Smaro Kamboureli

A landmark anthology, *Making a Difference* offers a wide range of writing styles in fiction and poetry, with a focus on Native and immigrant experiences, ethnic ancestry, and the complex spectrum of cultural differences. It begins with the first ethnic authors who wrote ethnic literature in English, and includes established and new voices that have made a difference to our understanding of Canadian identity.

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SMARO KAMBOURELI is an Associate Professor in the Department of English of the University of Victoria. She is the author of *in the second person* and *On the Edge of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem*, and co-editor of *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*.

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