

# OPEN LETTER

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WANTING IT OTHER/WISE:

RACE, SEXUALITIES, BODIES, TEXTS (PART I)





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Ninth Series, Number 2, Spring 1995

Wanting it Other/Wise:  
Race, Sexualities, Bodies, Texts

Guest-edited by Susan Rudy Dorscht

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Even at  
my  
fiercest,  
the basis  
is a mis-  
appre-  
hension of  
the  
source's  
source  
—so  
where am  
I taken? I  
should be  
able to  
read the  
menace of

my intention. But I am ideological historical  
& alive despite an horizontal and verbal  
agency and all screams that ensue. (21)  
—Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, *Redactive*  
(Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1990)

Growing up in a Chinese  
restaurant is ethnic  
When first the word was out  
it might shut down  
I had to ask where will  
Main Street Indians go?  
[. . .]

One time this guy said Poon  
Tang to us girls  
We ran home scared  
because we didn't know  
Chinese. (34)

—Marie Annharte Baker,  
*Being on the Moon*  
(Winlaw, B.C.: Polestar  
Press, 1990)

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# Poetics of the Potent

Fred Wah

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All that is literature seeks to communicate power; all that is not literature, to communicate knowledge.

—De Quincey, *Letters to a Young Man*

When I write down my thoughts, they do not escape me. This action reminds me of my strength which at every moment I forget. I learn as I link my thoughts together. But I am only moving towards the realization of one thing: the contradiction between my mind and nothingness.

—Wittgenstein (see Clarke 154)

Apparently he was not acquainted with *Three lives*, in which Stein used the verbal impotence of her characters, combined with a similarly restricted narrative idiom, to create a poetics of impotence... —Jayne L. Walker<sup>1</sup>

•  
Nearly every time I type the title of this paper, 'The Poetics of the Potent,' my left middle-finger flicks out from some secret synaptic desire and types an 'e' before the 't' in 'Potent.' POET-TENT. I enjoy the slip and always correct it. But the almost-deliberate embodiment of 'poet' with 'potent' seems, though obvious, inviting.

I feel invited, in fact, by my friend George Bowering who wrote, recently, a short piece called 'The Power is There' in which he says he is 'told that Fred Wah somewhere said that the poet is a "technician of the potent".' I'm intrigued by Bowering's discussion of the imputed phrase and by the possibilities to extend my own thinking about poetics. He aligns the phrase, 'technician of the potent', with Jerome Rothenberg's 'Technician of the Sacred,' Keats' 'negative capability,' William Carlos Williams' improvisational prose, and Charles Olson's 'objectism.' He says:

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<sup>1</sup> In reference to Samuel Beckett, *Gertrude Stein: From Three Lives to Tender Buttons* (Amherst, Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1984).



Whereas the idea of the sacred is left to human choice, the potent resides in the material and energy particles that might give themselves up to the poem. Not to the poet, but to the poem. The poet, too, should be giving himself up to the poem. That is the mystical application of Olson's 'objectism.' The potent might be apprehended to be in things you can image. I prefer to imagine its place to be in the language itself, in the phonemes we poets must become experts in. (101)

Or, as Olson would also say, 'the minute, truthful, and particular.'

•  
The writers I'm interested in have always written from an aesthetic and political position of departure, displacement, de-colonization, deterritorialization, and so forth. Space, for most of them, has been the problematics of the blank, white page. It has not meant, as it has for some Canadian writers, the desire to substitute for a British or American colonization, the nationalistic self-colonization of John A. MacDonald. The word-world space of poetry and fiction is interested, as George Oppen has observed, in the legislation of an unacknowledged world. This 'other' space continually generates strategies and tactics of resistance and intervention. The poetics of the potent is one of a number of approaches to this discourse.

**poti:** lord; power. Skr. *patih*: master. *padishah.shah.pasha*. *Prajapati*: Lord of creation. Gk. *poseidon*: master of earth; god of earthquakes and the sea. *despot*: first master of the house;...*posse*; be able. *potent*, *potentate*, *ignopotent*, *impotent*, *prepotent*, *omnipotent*, *plenipotential*. *ventripotent*, as a glutton. *potential*, *power*, *powerful*; *possible*, *possibly*; *possession*. Fr, *puissant*. *posse comitatus*: power of the country, legal phrase empowering a sheriff to appoint deputies, especially in the American 'Wild West,' to corral frontier 'bad men' (cattle rustlers and horse thieves); the group thus appointed was called a *posse*. (Shipley)

Perhaps it is possible to deflect the gendered value of the term, male potency and power, an underlying 'Lordness,' to a more useful and equally consequential aspect, that of the implicit ethic hinted at above. We probably should shift to what Bowering says is one of his 'favourite theoretical words here: potential' (101). The feminist recognition of empowerment—power *in* rather than power *over*. The writers I'm interested in foregrounding here, for example, would defend against Roland Barthes' attack on poetic fragmentation and particularization of the word (Olson's 'objectism') as 'a Pandora's box from which fly out all the potentialities of language' (48)—'a language,' Barthes worries, 'in which a violent drive towards autonomy destroys any ethical scope' (50-51).



Barthes might be justly concerned that, as he says, 'the verbal urge here aims at modifying Nature' (51) if only he were to read Québécois poet Nicole Brossard's *The Aerial Letter* where she intentions that 'In writing, I can foil all the laws of nature and I can transgress all rules, including those of grammar' (139). But Barthes should recognize the articulation here of a certain poetic ethic, part of an Eth-Ethos-Ethnic-Ethic I discussed in an earlier paper on 'A Poetics of Ethnicity' where I tried to show that 'To write (or live) ethnically is also to write (or live) ethically, in pursuit of right value, right place, (and) otherness' (8). The posture of 'otherness' that Brossard assumes is so frequently misinterpreted, as with Barthes. A more acute alignment for an ethical otherness might be Novalis' sense of an antithetical crossing over, mutuality and complementarity.

Nature will be moral—if it, through genuine love of art—gives itself over to art—does what art wills—: art, if through genuine love of nature—lives for nature and works according to it. Both must do this simultaneously and of their own free choice—for their own sake—and of necessary choice for the sake of the other. They must meet the other in themselves and themselves in the other. (#1742, 28; Novalis 28)

•  
In her novel, *Picture Theory*, Nicole Brossard wishes to construct a three-dimensional language, a hologram of potential resemblances and memory. For her, this is a bodied and lesbian utopia:

the transparency of utopian silk/self (in my universe, Utopia would be a fiction from which would be born the generic body of the thinking woman). I would not have to make another woman be born from a first woman. I would have in mind only the idea that she might be the woman through whom everything could happen. In writing it, I would have everything for imagining an abstract woman who would slip into my text, carrying the fiction so far that from afar, this woman participant in words, must be seen coming, virtual to infinity, form-elle in every dimension of understanding, method and memory. I would not have to invent her in the fiction. The fiction would be the finishing line of the thought. (147-148)

In other words, the possibility must be written. Writing holds the potent. She says, in *The Aerial Letter*:

I know that writing is memory, power of presence, and proposition...For in writing I become *everything*...a process of mental



construction which enables me to synthesize that which in life—real life—must be portioned out to fiction and to reality. In writing, I can foil all the laws of nature and I can transgress all rules, including those of grammar. I know that to write is to bring oneself into being; it is like *determining what exists and what does not*, it is like *determining reality*. (139)

Or, as Bowering says in 'The Power is There':

What is potent? Or where is the potency (the potential)? It is in the possible combinations and recombination of the basic materials of our language. We can perpetrate fusion at room temperature. God made us happen with a few words. We are the enactment of those words. We too can speak. As poets we should be careful of what we think we create.

That is to say, the technician should never get the idea that he is the source of power. He is vouchsafed the privilege of channelling it, from wherever it was proceeding when it came to him, to wherever he can direct it with care. (101-102)

That 'care' that Bowering recognizes is Novalis' 'love.'

• In an essay entitled 'Corps D'Ecriture/Rituels D'Ecriture,' Nicole Brossard draws no lines between the political, the aesthetic, and the spiritual. What interests Brossard in writing is the 'circulation of energy' (7) through the body which is then 'filtered by language' (8). This energy is part of, for her, a trajectory into ritual. She talks of the rituals, for women, of 'trembling, shocks, sliding, breathing' (13):

I am using the metaphor of ritual to describe what seems recurrent to me in the psychological and linguistic gestures that are ours when, as women, feminists or lesbians, we have to confront censure, anger, but also that joyous enthusiasm that overcomes us when we manage to identify the inner certitudes that inhabit us. (10)

• I did a piece on poetics for the Long-liners Conference on the Canadian Long Poem at York University in 1984. I called it 'Making Strange Poetics' because I was interested in highlighting a compositional stance expressed in Viktor Shklovsky's 'ostranenie' (12) and John Keats' 'negative capability' (103), particularly that sense of a 'drunken' writing with indeterminate syntax, a kind of jazz improvisation. I was concerned



then, and still am, with the unpredictable nature of distortion and surprise. I noted in that essay, particularly with reference to the composition of Robert Kroetsch's *Field Notes*, the force and impulse in the resistance to closure or desire to continue: 'By placing these seemingly complete and 'contained' poems as part of an open-ended continuing poem, Kroetsch is providing a continuity for a larger, more intangible structure...and thus allowing the various compositional processes of eight separate poems to cohere in a potentiality they had otherwise abrogated in their previous publications' (215). The strategy of the long poem is by now an old attention, yet, a continuing one. A recent issue of *Open Letter* (7/5, Summer 1989) focuses still on the long poem, and in an essay on Lionel Kearns' long poem *Convergences*, Lianne Moyes discusses the dynamics of intertextuality Kearns' employs in that poem and cites Julia Kristeva on Bakhtin: 'Everything means, is understood, as part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the *potential* of conditioning others [*The Dialogic Imagination* 426]' (15-16; italics mine). I am also interested to read Moyes' fingering of Foucault's phrase, 'the density of discourse' because that seems to paradigm or rime well enough with what Charles Olson called 'intensivity' (80). The intensification of layering, like composting, generates a useful heat, indeed nutrition, a proprioceptive muscling in tropism. I also find useful the overlap between Moyes' recognition of the long poem as a lyric genre and my own sense that the prosodic matrix of the short lyric (syllable, line, and cadence) gains the quality of imminence (read potential) in the long poem (219).

A couple of years ago I restated and extended (much as I am doing here) that earlier paper into one I called 'Making Stranger Poetics.' I wanted to take up Charles Bernstein's notion of 'poetics as a sort of *applied poetic*, in the sense that engineering is a form of applied mathematics' (151). A variety of leads appeared: krinopoeia, or ficto-criticism, and the proprioceptive gapping of the mind-body split into the alignment of much contemporary writing (particularly feminist) into the literal body structure equals writing structure and the energy proposed by the physical. Among other things, I was led to a 'trans=geo=ethno=poetics' and briefly touched on aspects of the potent in translation, place, and ethnicity. Daphne Marlatt, for example, in a note on her process of translating a poem by Lola Tostevin:

in translating a poem that so intensively works the language it seems already a translation of that original struggle between intent and language drift, the translation (becomes) process embeds metatranslation while the target language not wanting to



replace/consume the resonance of the source language oscillates in potential conversation with it. (19)

The same terms keep reappearing, the position of the potent.

•

The next step for me was to fish out the applied poetics in so-called multicultural ethnic writing in Canada. I tried out the term 'alienethnic' to reflect at least one of the ethnic stances in the use of strategies of duplicity, deflection, displacement, disorientation, decentering, and so forth. I intended to substantiate negative capability and estrangement by highlighting certain ethnic writers' interest in deterritorialization, confusion, antithesis, polarity and opposition. This poetics of opposition is seen as a necessary implement in art by such writers as Jamelie Ismail, Himani Bannerji, Myrna Kostash, Kristjana Gunnars, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Roy Miki, Marie Annharte Baker, and many others. But the important connection here is with value. *Ethnic* and *ethic* share the same root, *eth*, *ethos*—place, home, what one returns to. This moral exegesis matters very much in a poetics of the potent: if the poet isn't careful we might have to form a posse.

•

Steve McCaffery locates this positioning of the writer further, as a political model of economy that includes a parallel positioning of the reader:

The writing proposed is less the exclusive code of the author, theologically transmitted *down* to a reader recipient than a productive field which a reader can enter to mobilize significations. Proposed then is a shift from sign consumption to sign production and siting of meaning in a productive engagement with writing's indeterminacies. The texts will reveal little in the way of phenomenological description—they are what they can be and they demand a productive stance. Language Writing involves a fundamental repudiation of the socially defined functions of author and reader as the productive and consumptive poles respectively of a commodital axis. The main thrust of the work is hence political rather than aesthetic, away from the manufacture of formal objects towards a frontal assault on the steady categories of author and reader, offering instead the writer-reader function as a compound, fluid relationship of two interchangeable agencies within the sign production and sign circulation. (*North of Intention* 14-15)

A politics of the potent, then. So all those images of an ethos, a city, a

shining El Dorado, are grounded, as Bowering locates potency, 'in the possible combinations and recombination of the basic materials of our language' (101). And what is, ostensibly, Rothenberg's reason for rototilling the primitive and aboriginal into contemporary writing.

•

The fist of punctuation.

The potency of the period operates within a system of containment and closure sometimes viewed as a violent act within public discourse (Philips 46). Steve McCaffery's

### **THE.** (Philips 47)

The potency of the period operates as a signal of silent reflection that clings to the referent as in the title to Ian Hamilton Finlay's magazine:

*Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.*

Or as the empty shell of a bullet just fired, the bullet just fired, the extensions of possible suffix in John Clarke's magazine:

### **Intent.**

Implosive potency, in fact, of all kinds. McCaffery again:

a spell.  
a sphere.  
a star.

a table,  
a taste,  
a tautology  
a telegram;  
a tendency;  
a tension;  
the microscope:  
some milk :  
a mistake :  
if i say, but  
if he says  
we might be  
alluding

this, and. this...and. this.



(Evoba 78-79)

Even the inhalation of the proprioceptive comma. Gertrude Stein has observed that 'commas were unnecessary, the sense should be intrinsic and not have to be explained by commas and otherwise commas were only a sign that one should pause and take breath' (Burke 43).

Think of the potency carried by the large-scale political and social improvisation in eastern Europe right now. Trouble, unless a distinct and correct processing of the subjective is realized. Yet this is the double of improvisation—to do it right. Or it falls apart. William Carlos Williams' *Kora in Hell* is only one of the first texts this century to take on a condition of composition that explores the paradox of unpredictable freedom and objectified and formal intention. Jazz. Layers of free-flowering *ab libis* over set chord progressions. Play whatever you feel like but let's all come together for the cadence. The potency in improvisation lies in the attention drawn to the minute and particular, the moment-by-moment, instant-by-instant, event—what gets it there and where it might go from there. Yet underlying are the syntagmatic and paradigmatic frames confronted and tested, squeezed, to yield the unexpected, the surprise. 'All intended' as I said in my own improvisations, *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, 'to bump 'what is' into focus' (Jacket copy).

Roy Miki, who wrote his dissertation on *Kora in Hell*, is a good recent example of a writer who makes accurate use of improvisational technique for the lyric. In his first book of poetry, *Saving Face*, he works through an overlay of blues and a tone-leading of syllabic particularity. Miki is a Japanese-Canadian who grew up in the awful WW2 relocation of the Japanese and who worked hard for the redress to his community. These poems are not so much sad. Troubled maybe. But beyond tragedy, frustration, protest, the bitter daily taste of the race race the most minimal words do well up, sometimes a lament, sometimes from far back the hint of a little shout, sometimes a sombre moan of recognition, naming, placing. This poetry feels its world and sings from it; not much deflection from the senses to some other self-conscious lyricism. So the image of 'stone,' say, is as it is right there in the poem, most present and heard. As well 'cloud,' 'river,' 'rain,' 'sky,' 'wind.' So much what comes out of the mouth in that solitary looking up from the pit of the stomach and you are confronted with the simple particulars of the weather. Poem as weather report. Minute, truthful and particular—a kind of blues residue of what, finally, matters.

the whole web  
of intricate family ties

spun off with no beginning or end  
more than a matter of time

Or the 'hollow/pain' becomes

all hallow pain  
that can't be renewed  
by a drive down the street.

The poems are full of body ghosts that just seem to rise to the surface and beyond their own narratives, however, because the instants of improvisation must move on past the periphery of the lyric (and that's what makes these poems so much more interesting than what usually tried to pass itself off as lyric). The coalescence of thought and language is particularly potent in the attention paid to the bare particulars and the possibilities of improvisation therein. Listen here to the conflux of Miki's particular ethnic content with a language that moves forward with morphophonic care.

settle meant?

`me ant'

a state meant

mean mea me

only words

some one sd

words'll only

get us there

to here ere er

re dress

decked out

h eir

air

err

the future(w)ring

the present (w)ro(ugh)t

the past (w)rung

•  
Another significant aspect of a poetics of the potent would be the re-reading and re-writing strategies generated in the ethnic and feminist rejections of assimilation, the bargaining for a position of the potent in



the reterritorialization of inherited literary forms and language. Daphne Marlatt's most recent book, *Salvage*, is another fine example of her untiring attention to the nitty-gritty of language writing. The dust-jacket blurb establishes her intentions re these 'RE' poetics right at the start.

From Steveston on the Fraser River, to Vancouver's East End Chinatown, to the discovery of the community of women writers drawn together by language, she *re-traces* her steps through time, over space, and across cultures. Part poem, part fiction, part autobiography, the book *re-reads* and *re-envisions* (her) earlier writings in light of her feminist experiences of the late 80's and in doing so salvages them.

'These are littoral poems, shoreline poems...' she says in the forward to the book.

They began as a project to salvage what I thought of as 'failed' poems. But the entire book attempts to salvage the wreckage of language so freighted with phallogentric values it must be subverted and re-shaped, as Virginia Woolf said of the sentence, for a woman's use.

The writing is a 'righting' R-I-G-H-T. Again, the ethics in such poetics envisages a politics. One of the sections in the book, a series of poems she calls 'Park (your) dream,' maps out a polis of paradise and skid-row:

paradise

the movement is backward  
back to hyde park  
and pan (peter even

enclosed  
eden, experience  
there in the form of a  
drunk  
(what does he bring?  
what other  
ways to seem

free, and so close in to hell  
she said, a wraith, a wrath to us

he can only be  
perfectly trusting  
curled on the ground  
in the open, fast

asleep

'you ever seen a woman  
do that? she'd never be left  
alone'

(only  
sifting the  
streets for her  
imaginary  
soul  
(watchful  
what lies  
there

to make it, take it, break it  
anger in the form of iron  
filings rose

whatever's left

*we are likely to find ourselves  
pondering suchness as the  
essence of bourgeois  
memorabilia — L.H.*

clarity and a  
magnetic tongue, the lyric  
transpose

syntax of old alleys, old  
passageways of *Pairi-daeza*

climbing the walls even  
to get over it. (53-55)

•  
Though this poetics of the potent is full of power, that power does not reside in a position of authority and imposition. Rather, the dynamics shifts through a range of play and invention in order to continually posit possibility, unpredictability, 'negative capability,' and, dramatically, necessity. In one of the maze-glyph cartoons of 'Scriptures: Lost Sequence' from bpNichol's *Book(s)* 7 &, we find expressed a fundamental compulsion addressed to one of the main protagonists of *The Martyrology*, 'st reat':

oh my eyes are falling below the levels i speak to you on  
and i have come here to some sort of crossing i would  
understand the better saint reat were you here to guide me



but you are not here and taunt me across the impossible distances of my syntax telling me i am without hope of reaching you as tho to try even were an impossibility an impossibility does not exist saint reat no only you are the sometimes impossible dream of my your of my passing years you are the words that will not flow from me but become lost in the wake of the passing of your passion or my passion for you and are discarded there fall like nothing else into the traps of you metaphors and similes you will not believe me that i see below all the levels...oh saint reat i cannot be still but must follow you forever down whatever road you would lead me and i know you will lead me can i but find the language there. (n.p.)

And looking for the right language is, essentially, the fuel for *The Martyrology*. 'What is necessary in order to understand to a TOTAL ASSAULT' we read on one page of collaged type. The aggression is more a compulsive propulsion, an explosion forth into language (and Life and Death and Memory and Family, anything that might provide a lead to the next move, the next passage/way. What I find engaging in such writing is the spectrum of potentiality, of energy and the attention and openness to an intelligence. And I mean by that term the verb, 'to intellect,' because resident here is the movement of intellection, discovery, choice, and chance. Consequently this 'continuing' poem gathers to itself an accumulation of energy, a substantial mass palpable by its continually moving parts, a book composition that gains the potency and potentiality of a hypertext of reading.

In order, even, to intervent the tyranny of the conventionally published book space, another type of colonized space for writers, Nichol includes five unbound poems which he directs the reader to interleave at random among the pages of the bound volume. Thus the eye and heart can chance upon one of these free-floating texts and the poignancy of particularity of the words of his dying days hits with atom-like spinal impact:

sacrum

say  
the whole thing ends

say  
you're frightened  
of the whole thing  
ending

say  
cheese  
  
say n't  
  
n't ready  
  
n't ready to die

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