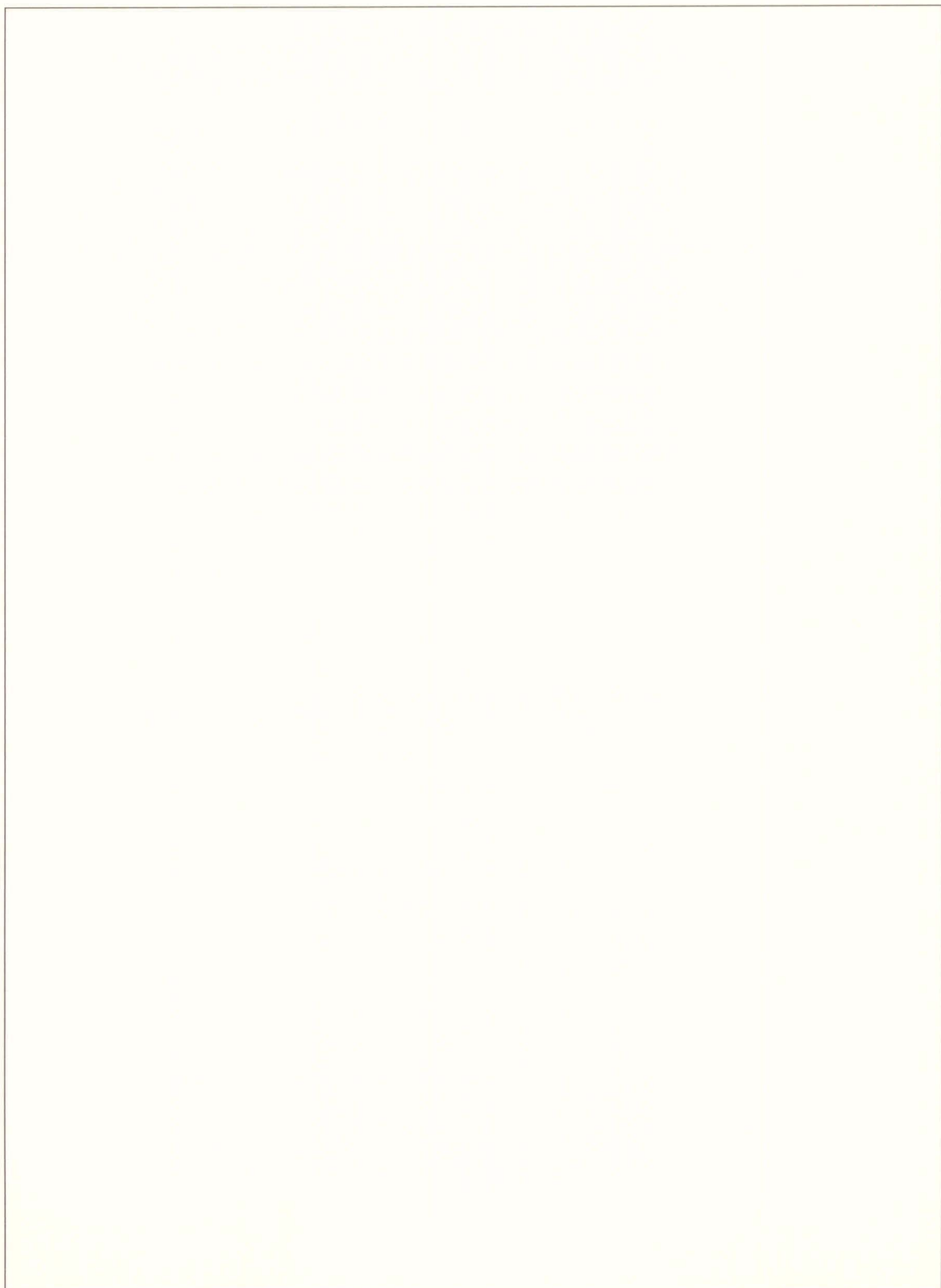


Roger Farr / “SURPRISE, UNPREDICTABILITY, AND IMPROVISATION”: An Interview with Fred Wah

Fred Wah is an acclaimed writer of poetry, fiction, and cultural criticism. Born in Saskatchewan, he grew up in the Kootenays. During the 60s, Wah was a founding editor of the poetry newsletter *TISH* at UBC, later doing graduate work at SUNY Buffalo. In the 80s, he founded the Kootenay School of Writing at David Thompson University in Nelson, BC, and with Frank Davey, he founded *SwiftCurrent*, the first online literary magazine. His recent books include *Diamond Grill*, a biofiction about growing up in a small-town Chinese-Canadian café; *Faking It: Poetics and Hybridity*, a collection of critical writing that won the Gabrielle Roy Prize for writing on Canadian literature; and a chapbook, *Isadora Blue*. Along with his partner Pauline Butling, Wah's work was recently the subject of two special issues of *Open Letter*, “Fred Wah: Alley Alley Home Free.” An influential figure in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Calgary for many years, Wah is now retired and resides in Vancouver, where he continues to write, teach, collaborate, and organize.

In the Spring of 2006, Wah was *The Capilano Review* Writer-in-Residence at Capilano College. During this time he gave a public reading, met with writers, visited classes, and presented his essay-poem “Pop Goes the 'Hood: Writing and Reading the Neighborhood,” which was followed by a panel discussion with Ryan Knighton, Aurelea Mahood, and Stan Persky.

In the following interview, conducted on May 17th, 2006 in his home in Strathcona, Wah answers questions about ecopoetics, the influence of Charles Olson, defamiliarization, linguistics, poetry's social and political agency, his collaborative practice, avant garde writing in China, and the Kootenay School of Writing.



I thought we might begin with Pictograms from the Interior of BC (1975), which was my first contact with your work. These early works seem concerned with what today might be called “ecopoetics.” Is that correct? Later I learned that this was something of a pivotal book for you.

My early work is certainly permeated with a sense of place or earth, land or whatever and yes, I guess that’s been up until pretty much *Breathing My Name With a Sigh* (1981). The first twenty years of my writing were focussed on *place* – growing up in the interior, working in the mountains, working in the forest, so yes, then, *Pictograms* was not so much a culmination – it’s hard to say why it was a change or pivotal place.

You mentioned somewhere – I can’t remember where off the top of my head – that this was the first time that your family enters your work, and fuses with what I see as a strong ecological sensibility, whereas your earlier work is often engaged with a largely non-human landscape. But then you mentioned “cousins” and your father. So it seems that Pictograms acts as a point of conjunction from the predominantly natural – nature being the non-human landscape – to a more social terrain.

That’s true, and in a sense, although I didn’t know it at the time when I was working on *Pictograms*, that word “cousins” was sort of rubbing around in the back somewhere, so in a sense, it was a kind of ambience of time where a lot of stuff about race and the bio all became possible. I didn’t so much leave place as discover this new territory, in a sense, of poetic or intellectual territory that up till *Breathing My Name With a Sigh*, I hadn’t really cottoned on to. But there’s a whole bunch of things that come into that and part of it is that it ties in with Olson, because I did a little thing called *Earth* (1974) for the Curriculum for the Study of the Soul, which was Olson’s curriculum. Jack Clark and other Institute people had picked this up and Olson assigned me earth – you know, “Wah does earth,” “Blaser does Blake” – he had this line-up of people.

That’s pretty daunting – “you take earth”!

I kind of crumbled under it and really blanked out for about three years. (Laughter)
These hard little turds finally came out!

Is the ecological still something that you consider? Are you still interested in that?

Oh yes, very much. I still do some stuff on that. I haven't done much in the last ten years, but it's still there because we live part of the year in the Kootenays. "Eco" wasn't around, or "eco-poetics." Talking to you in 2006, and talking to younger writers, frequently I find it difficult and sometimes frustrating to try to explain myself, or try to position myself in the context of your sense of the recent history of poetry or writing. I came to the possibility of writing about place through Snyder in a poem that Cid Corman published called "Riprap." It's a little poem about laying stones, and I had done that ... and I thought "Geeze! This guy can actually write a poem about something I had actually done!"

But in a sense, all of my writing has come out of *locating*, come out of a resistance to the mainstream and this ambivalent position I felt myself in as a kid – part Chinese and part white – in a very different society from the one we live in now: a racist, small town place, trying to find ways to work out of that. So that's what *TISH* really saw: here were these kids not from Vancouver but from outside Vancouver – a class-based group of people looking for ways to resist the so-called "mainstream." And there was no mainstream "Canadian." The mainstream was stuff we'd get in high school poetry books – Wordsworth, Eliot if we were lucky, but just British/European sensibility. So the American – that really opened up in the late 50s early 60s. And Snyder's writing about working on fire lookouts, which I had done, I thought "Wow! This is great! I can write about what I do!" (Laughter) So I did. I turned to writing about what I did, and happily, in many ways, the poetics around then reinforced the possibility of doing that: including things like projective verse and Creeley's sense of language being immediate, and so a lot of that opened up. I know that for you and a lot of your contemporaries, you see Olson as phallogocentric, as you said in your email. I mean of course, it's true that, intellectually, you look back, and there it is. Coming at it from the other end, for me, it was all new territory.

I was introduced to Olson more or less at the same time as language poetry, so critiques are there immediately. But what's interesting is how you've recast Olson's poetics through race and hybridity. Which of Olson's concepts did you find richest for that work?

I studied Olson and Creeley and read all those people in the 60s, but I read a lot of other people too and by the 70s I knew Olson and the Black Mountain people backwards. And I also knew the Language writers during the 70s – *Open Letter* and all the

Canadian stuff – so there was a huge range of possibilities poetically. And the “race writers,” if you like to call them, the whole race-writing thing had to find a poetic discourse that would work, and feminist poetics had just happened right then, re-territorializing, re-claiming, finding a language that some of that could operate in.

But I guess a big term for me, and one that McCaffery and I argued endlessly about – and he would shudder at this term – was “proprioception,” which was a term that I heard first from Olson. And of course Warren Tallman picked it up and he elaborated on it in a more literary way. But that sense of *placing* – it’s just a stupid little thing like the breath line. I mean there was the breath and body... ok, that makes sense, and poetry up to then had been silent, so in 1960 – oral poetry? Whoohoo! I mean read out loud! And paying attention to the breath, to the breath, the body... and of course the naiveté of doing that without the benefit of the theoretical discourse of thirty years later. It was naïve at the same time as informative. And I certainly understand the intellectual problems with that humanistic positioning and centering of the body, and the “I”, and I understand the problems – discursive problems, at least, if not social ones. But that’s been fun to work through too, and how to work through the whole question of race. In the early 80s, I remember Bowering saying “Oh come on, are you on that race band wagon? You’re not Chinese!” He’d known me for 20 years and had never registered any of that kind of concern – my concern. I probably hadn’t registered a lot of it myself – I’d been pushing it aside.

Have you gone back to Olson’s work to look at race there? How does he configure race in his work?

He doesn’t. I mean, somebody did a book – was it Michael Davidson maybe? – I’m not sure, but somebody did an analysis of American poets’ “race quotient,” if you like, and Olson came out near the top, compared to other people like Bukowski (laughter) or ...

Bukowski came out at degree zero?

I went to school in the States. I was in Buffalo. It was black. Well, Olson and the Black Mountain poets were pretty open to black artists, black writers – although Leroi Jones and Ed Dorn had a big falling-out over race. But Olson and I didn’t talk about race. I have a little piece in *Diamond Grill* where I talk about Olson. He always called me “War,” a New England thing: “Wahr you should go to war” ... “Let’s nuke those Chinks!” During the Vietnam War, right? But that wasn’t so much race as it was just kind of... I don’t know, really – what to call it? This kind of Americanism that Creeley

and Olson exuded, so many, particularly of those mid-century Americans... I mean, Olson's whole point was *America*. He wanted to bring America into attention, right? Sort of like Williams, like Pound-Williams-Olson. That whole thing. I find it a bit much.

Aggressive?

Aggressive, and dismissive of other nations, or other places. But it's not "racist." I never thought that Olson was racist. He would be very open. At the same time all of those guys were pretty sexist too, you know based in some sense of a male – white, American male – image. They all came out of that pre-70s change, I think. So it wasn't race, it was this kind of ultra-nationalism that shook me, and I couldn't wait to get out of the States because of that! At the same time I understood and kind of went along with it. It's like, how do you claim jazz if you're a white musician in the States, and you have to, because it's part of you. I have a book here that I want to pass on to you, by Jack Clark. I don't know if you know Jack Clark's work.

Not really.

Jack was a very close friend – an absolute wholesome disciple and took it all in. A lot of it was very patronizing, but intellectually fascinating. I mean Olson opened my eyes to mythology in a way that just blew me away. Not that I know a lot about mythology, but that sense of being able to read European mythology without getting a burr up my ass – "fucking Europeans," you know? (Laughter) Here we go again. I think that so-called "ecopoetics" is related to Olson, because Olson was *place*. And his poem, when he was here in Vancouver in '63 – one of the Vancouver sessions – "Place and Names" – it just blew me away. I mean this is a very difficult poem, but Olson and Duncan – I guess Duncan a bit more – talking about this stuff... yeah, I thought, I live in a *place*! I guess I always felt guilty that I didn't live in the world out there, you know? Toronto or New York... So that was a big relief, not just for myself, but for many other people.

But regarding your question about Olson – some of the things that are most important to me about him – his poetry was fascinating and I was very interested in his compositional method in *Maximus* – life-long, historical, place-oriented – and his language, how he jumped around in the language, and no-one else was doing that then. But it was pieces like "Proprioception" that were most important to me, and "Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn" – that incredible, kind of simple scholarship of "do one thing" and everything else will come in, and notions like that. And pieces

like “Poetry and Truth” – I thought they were pretty brilliant at the time – poetry and truth? – I had never thought about bringing ethics into poetry.

You also mention in one of your “Strangle” essays in Faking It (2000) that you inherited a certain oppositional stance, or “resistance,” from Olson. One particular idea you talk about in that context is “estrangement.” You conclude the essay “Strangle One” by writing “ostranenie is a compositional stance.” What did you mean by that?

Well I guess in a simple way for me it’s Keats’ notion of “negative capability” – the ability to recognize mysteries, doubts, and uncertainties. So just that practice of looking at things *askance* – looking at things with eyes half closed, or half open, to try to find a different detail or a different profile of things, and being open to it. Not being right, but looking for “our disgraces are our graces” – Olson said something like that – you know, the mis-step as the possible way to do it. I’ve always liked that in language. I’ve always liked that about the poetic line, of the structure of language, how you can jump the track. I love that in prose poetry: jumping the sentence and jumping the phrase and jumping the expectation that printed language places before you.

In some places in that essay you seem to have reservations about estrangement as well. I’m interested in this in terms of the politics of avant-garde writing and the role of defamiliarization and estrangement there. Are you concerned about the old adage about “limiting your audience” by using high-degrees of defamiliarization?

I guess that leads into the notion of the difficult in poetry. It’s interesting. You mentioned that you thought I had reservations about it. I don’t know that I do. I mean I guess we all do. We make choices about clarity and difficulty and playfulness and development somehow in compositional practice.

You quote Simon Watney: “the devices of ostranenie [became] reified... they became vulnerable both to that modernist aestheticism which values the innovative purely in stylistic terms for its own sake and also to the totalitarian elements within the Romantic vision which would seek to iron out all human differences in the name of Art, the Proletariat, Truth or whatever. Thus making strange ceased to respond to the demands of specific historical situations, and collapsed into stylization” (Watney qtd. in Wah 36-37). Basically, making strange for the sake of making strange. And you respond by saying, “yeah, but this is still an important compositional stance.”

But when you introduce that other perspective, that critique, I heard you saying that there's a debate here, that there are limitations to this device.

Well, it becomes facile. I think I picked up on Watney because of his discussion of photography, and I agree with him. I agree that stylistically it can become too facile. Both of us know this from teaching – you propose a way to do something, and the student runs off. I guess I mean it more as a compositional stance, as one of many compositional stances that one can take in writing. For example, in your own work, you've taken a formal stance toward the sonnet as an ingredient, or as an element, that occupies our attention. And many other writers have too. But it's not all you're gonna do! (Laughter)

I hope not.

So sometimes you might propose to a group of students, "Well, let's write a sonnet." I don't think the purpose of your current project is just to produce sonnets.

No. In parts of SURPLUS I have something I want to argue, and it seemed that it just wasn't possible to do that when formal estrangement was taken to the nth degree. It's a problem. I'm interested in how other people negotiate that.

I think you use it. I think you use these observations or these senses being there with the language and you use them as elements to work through. And I think making strange or playing around with the language of perception in that way is something that anyone can do, but to make that "the" objective ... I don't want to make it the objective, that's why I say it's a compositional stance. It's not an objective. That's why I agree with Watney. When it becomes stylized – I mean Jackson Pollock can produce a Jackson Pollock, but so can any number of other gorillas and it's not going to be a Jackson Pollock – somehow it doesn't quite work. That's a kind of simple thing, and it may be why I don't so much *resist* estrangement – it's just there. It was and has been, I think, a very useful notification, if you like, or a tension for all of us in the last 50 years, to pick that up out of Russian Formalism. But for me, it came via Warren Tallman in Poetry 406, reading this letter by John Keats, who mentions "negative capability" – 1836 or something like that!

“Being in uncertainties.”

Yeah. And without Coledridge’s “reaching after fact and reason.” Wow! This guy’s really onto something! And I remember trying that out with Creeley, and Creeley helping a lot. He was a great reader of Keats and Coleridge and could talk a lot about them and he helped a lot in terms of trying to figure through that negative capability. Of course it fits perfectly with the kind of North American sensibility of free form, improvisation, jazz. My compositional roots are in jazz. I studied music, and that’s what I come to language with: the sense of surprise, unpredictability, and improvisation.

Speaking of language, could you tell me about Henry Lee Smith Junior?

One of the big things that happened to us at UBC in the late 50s early 60s was a guy named Ron Baker. He ended up becoming Head of the English Department at Simon Fraser. He was the first Head of the English Department there, and he’s the guy who hired Ralph Maud and Lionel Kearns. Ron Baker taught Linguistics at UBC, and he turned us – Bowering, Kearns, myself and Frank Davey, everybody – on to linguistics.

Formal linguistics?

Yes. And this was all just totally new stuff. And Baker was actually quite open to the whole poetry scene around UBC in the early 60s so he kind of played along with our interest in the breath line – what is a breath line, linguistically, and the whole notion of phonemes and morphemes. Lionel Kearns got really into it, and did that “Stacked Verse” thing. He influenced us all. Anyway, he turned me on to Henry Lee Smith and George Trager, linguists who happened to be teaching at the State University of New York at Buffalo. They had published this little book on phonetics. That was just fascinating. I went to Albuquerque for my first year of graduate work with Creeley hoping to study linguistics because New Mexico was supposed to be hot on doing work around Hopi and Navajo and stuff like that, but their linguist was away that year so you couldn’t take a course in linguistics! (Laughter) And then when I went to Buffalo on this poetry fellowship thing, as a poet, there I am with Henry Lee Smith Junior, who teaches linguistics. I went to him the very first day and said “I’m a poet. I’m fascinated by what you’re doing. Can I study linguistics with you?” “Oh yeah, yeah, come on in he said ...” I worked with him for about three years on linguistics. Hard bloody stuff!

Were many people doing that, working with descriptive linguistics and poetry?

No, not too many people were doing that. I was the only one from the group at Buffalo who was doing that. But Creeley was a great help too, because Creeley had read a lot of the American descriptive linguists and was up on it. And Duncan, he was into it. He had read the stuff. At that time it was all kind of new, this “science of linguistics,” this science of language – not necessarily an anthropological approach. Of course, later came the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis – the anthropological stuff all got very interesting and all tied in with the mythology that Olson was doing. It’s all very connected. I remember when I got my first teaching gig at Selkirk College, that’s what I taught: linguistics. I did my degree in linguistics and literature. It was a combination degree, so I taught first- and second-year. They had linguistics courses that transferred to UBC at the time.

I guess linguistic approaches to poetry – critical approaches, that is – I guess it’s really different for a poet to study linguistics, and then to read their own work through that frame. But the linguistic approach to studying poetry has fallen into disrepute because of its association with New Critical formalism. But it didn’t have to be – there are ways of using linguistics in socially relevant ways.

Well linguistics itself, linguistics as a discipline within the institutions, changed during the 60s and early 70s into deep structure and Jakobson’s and Chomsky’s work, so there was a wider range of possibilities there. I remember my very first so-called sabbatical at Selkirk College in 1973. We went down to Berkeley because I wanted to upgrade some linguistics courses, and I sat in on Robyn Lakoff’s linguistics class at Berkeley, and her husband George Lakoff was also a linguist. He was the more interesting of the two, because he got into metaphor, and so that got interesting in terms of the social aspect of language. But I was, right up until the late 70s, pretty hot on linguistics. In fact, *Pictograms* was my proposal for my sabbatical. I was going to translate some Lake Salish stories. I proposed that to the College and they accepted it and when I went to do the research I discovered there were no Lake Salish texts! (Loud laughter)

Had they given you the money already?

Yah! But I happily discovered John Corner’s *Pictographs in the Interior of British Columbia* and thought, well, those are the only texts they’ve got, and got into that.

[Pauline Butling enters] In a way I think linguistics was important not just for you, but for everybody at UBC. [PB]

At UBC, yes. But I was the only one who went on with it. [FW]

Daphne went on and studied translation. It was such an eye-opener. We all had to take Ron Baker's linguistics of Anglo-Saxon as part of the MA program, and Ron Baker's class in structural linguistics was just fabulous in terms of that whole approach to language. We had to read Saussure in French, but he synthesized it for us. [PB]

I saw your mention of Smith, and other linguists, and I thought that was really interesting because the period has been described, culturally, as "the turn to language," and here are all these linguists quietly in the background...

And anthropologists. [PB]

... teachers whose work hasn't really been written into the history in the way that other figures' work has.

I think it's because people came at it in such a different way. But the language thing in the Berkeley area had a lot to do with the Lakoffs, for example, and Spicer was a linguist too. Ron Baker, who was head of English at Simon Fraser, tried to hire Spicer, but he died. So linguistics is a really interesting thread through all that... [PB]

I have another question that's linked to linguistics and the turn to language, and estrangement, which Reg Johanson and I raised in our review of Poets' Talk. One of the things I was really struck by when I was reading the interviews collected there, was how many writers describe the interface between poetry and politics along lines of consciousness or cognition. Estrangement kept coming up over and over again, in various ways. It was very pronounced in the interview with Erin Moure. In your interview Fred, you touched on it a little bit when you talked about the way you came to consciousness at a certain point in the 70s around race and those possibilities. But I was interested because in a lot of the interviews, interviews that span several generations of writers, the link between writing and politics is usually articulated through consciousness. I started to wonder if that was the edge, or limit, of poetry's political agency? Or is there a way of talking about poetry's political agency that doesn't rely on consciousness, on psychology? Not that it's

bad, of course. But it does seem like just one particular discourse or approach. So, is there such a thing as poetic politics that's not rooted in consciousness?

Say it in a different way. I'm not sure I know what you mean.

When writers read linguistics, they often start to adapt various linguistic strategies, such as defamiliarization. But defamiliarization is used specifically to extend perception, to extend consciousness, to reconfigure objects in the mind. It seems that when people talk about how poetry has political agency, it's always in terms of consciousness, or cognition. Moure talks literally about brain synapses and various effects that linguistic devices have on consciousness (Butling and Rudy 59-60). It's really fascinating stuff, but it struck me that perhaps we had no way of talking about the political possibilities of poetry outside of a certain model of consciousness. Does poetry have any political role to play other than causing "effects" "on" readers, other than changing perception? Sorry, it's a very abstract question...

I sense that it is. I'm just trying to get my head around it. Let me just change the term a little bit. I've always been rather uncomfortable with the term "the political." In poetry, it seems a little loose. So maybe *social* effects? Or as Louis Cabri articulated to me, "the social poem." Once I realize that the poem can be a social event, or has that possibility, and I start asking myself how can it do that, or what are the best ways for it to be that, to be social, then of course that's consciousness – that's once again a kind of attention that starts to occupy the poem. So I don't know that it can be done. I guess if it's unconscious, or if consciousness is not part of that positioning of yourself in relation to the political or the social, then it becomes [long pause] ... almost surreptitious.

One of the most fascinating debates I ever heard was at the David Thompson University Centre around 1981 or '82. We set up a conference there called "Writing and Revolution," and invited a whole bunch of people, and we had a panel with Margaret Randall, Nicole Brossard, Stan Persky, and maybe Brian Fawcett. But the two most interesting people were Margaret Randall and Nicole Brossard. Randall had just been working in Guatemala and had collected all these stories by Guatemalan women and was publishing them. Her point was that these women needed to be empowered to tell their stories, and we needed to hear their stories, which is true. But in the other sense the stories were all very simplistic, and predictable, both in their content and in the writing itself.

The narrative frames existed prior to the writing of the stories.

Yes. And for Margaret Randall, understandably, that was the only way she could see of translating or getting their stories out there, making them accessible. Then Brossard comes in. Well, she disagreed with that approach as a feminist, and her point was “For me, I have to change the language before I can enter. I have to change the language to make it more mine.” So there were two kinds of – not necessarily oppositional but two very divergent points of view about how to “get in,” you might say. I don’t know if using the word “consciousness” is right, but how do you get your consciousness up front? How do you make it apparent? How do you make it *there*? Aesthetically, I sympathize more with Brossard’s approach than with the idea that if it’s political, then it has to be “a political poem.” Somebody talked once about Gary Geddes being the most political poet in Canada because he had written some “political poems,” because he had written a book about some political topic or subject, so he was therefore “a political poet.” In a sense that’s fair enough. If you’re writing poems about politics, about the world in that way, then I guess they are political poems. But for me a political or a social poem is a poem that tries to engage those sensibilities with a language, and with some possibility of generating more – I was going to say “awareness,” but maybe the word consciousness really ruffles me – I guess I’ve never known what it is ... I had morphine in the hospital yesterday and I felt pretty light-headed! (Laughter)

It’s hard to have consciousness of something other than consciousness. It’s just something I’ve been interested in, that I’ve noticed. I started to wonder if poetics, since the 60s, was kind of a branch or tendril of psychology (perhaps this is reductive), because it constantly comes back to questions of consciousness or awareness and this is especially pronounced with identity politics, or identity theory. Take someone like Fanon, a key figure in that, who was a Lacanian psychoanalyst. Often when people are talking about identity in theoretical terms, or in terms of their writing, it’s in terms of consciousness, subjectivity, and recognition. So it struck me that the discourse of psychology and perhaps cognitive science was very, very powerful. But it’s only one particular discourse. I’ve been trying to think of other ways of configuring the social effects of poetry, I suppose, in ways that don’t always come back to consciousness, to the mind.

Well the term in linguistics that I was introduced to with Henry Lee Smith Junior – I won’t get into the linguistics thing – but one end of his tripartite linguistics model, which is associated with an anthropological model of language, is simply *acoustics* – physical acoustics. And at the other end is what he called “cosmology and attention.”

In other words, our world of meaning and the construction of meaning in our world has to do with what linguists are calling cosmology and attention – or world view and attention – what you pay attention to. Of course, we only attend to what we attend to, and what we don't, we don't know. I've always felt a little more at ease with *attention*, in the sense that it's what I'm looking at. "Consciousness" has been more amorphous. So in a social or political poem it might be, even to the simplistic way of thinking of it, "a topic."

I did a piece last year on the neighbourhood, "Pop Goes the 'hood," where I wanted to take on, in a poem, certain senses of this notion of "neighbourhood" that were flying around in our papers and our city. I don't know if it was a successful piece or not. It's a poetic essay. I chose a form, I chose a way to try to get into it, but it occupied my attention for months, and I don't think it's a poem that's just sort of "about" the neighbourhood; I think it's a poem that also exercises a little bit of language, and it's a more accessible poem than the others, because it was more intentionally, in a sense, social. But when Louis [Cabri] talks about the social poem, he would look at a poem by Zukofsky or Oppen and talk about why it is social in the context of literary history and whether the position of that writer, an American Jew, is trying to operate through this maze of linguistic expectations. So his sense of the social – I'm probably skewing Louis' very intelligent analysis of the social poem – is that it's an engaging and complicated thing that isn't simply "about" the social or "about" the political. It's not topical. The writers who I'm most interested in are writers who try to pay attention to that possibility of the poem. When I teach creative writing sometimes I say, "Well, it's a nice poem, but can it make a better world?" (Laughter) Why bother writing poetry unless you're going to make a better world with it? Not totally tongue in cheek. It's provocative. And I don't think any of us think that Watten or Silliman or any of the so-called social poets of the 70s and 80s came up with any answers. I waited after 9/11 for those guys to say something. I looked, I watched, I waited – nada. Not a peep. Other people were talking, and then it turns out that people like Juliana Spahr and Fanny Howe and Jennifer Moxley, some of the women writers: they were the ones who were the first to respond with a political and social consciousness.

That's interesting... I also noticed in Poets' Talk that many of the writers of colour, in particular Marie Baker and Dionne Brand, talked about their writing specifically in the context of how it related to various social movements. Marie Baker talked about how her writing was linked to Red Power, for example. I thought it was interesting that there you see a direct link to a political

struggle occurring outside of the literary sphere. It seems that it is often writers of colour who are articulating that connection, that poetry is linked to actual social movements.

Yes. But I think you've got to realize that someone like Marie, she's really put there. We put her there: "You be our aboriginal interesting writer." And of course she responded. That is a social context that is very important to her and that's what she's writing on. But in a sense, I think we pigeon-hole writing that way. Dionne is an interesting case in point. She's very much a spokesperson for a political sensibility – a more social political sensibility – black, racially-based responsibility. At the same time, she goes and makes a film about Adrienne Rich. Not a poet I've paid a lot of attention to, though she's a fine poet, a good writer and is politically aware as an American woman writer, but other American women writers are also politically aware. So with Dionne, is not just *that*. And I think if Marie had more of an opportunity she would be seen as more than that, more than "a race writer," or "a native writer."

In Faking It you wrote a piece on Chinese avant-garde poetry, and did an interview with Leung Ping-Kwan. I think it was from the mid-90s. Are you still in touch with people there?

No, not really, I didn't keep in touch with many of them. I did for a couple of years, but that passed. That was a project I got involved with in the early- to mid-90s. There was a lot of attention being paid in American poetry magazines to translating the new avant garde in China, the "Originals," Language poets from Nanjing and Suzhou. It was actually, I think, a conference – maybe the Blaser conference – where there was a poetry table set up. I saw a book there about the Originals. I bought it, and was fascinated by it, partly because Jeremy Prynne, whom I know, was involved with this, and I'd known Jeremy had been going to China in the summer and spending a great deal of time there. I was pretty fascinated by this project, and also the claim that they had this group called the language poets. At the same time I had met and talked with Yunte Huang in Buffalo. He was a graduate student who now teaches in California. Yunte had been talking about an orientalist approach to translating the Chinese poets. What the Americans were translating, what the impact of translating these Chinese poets was, was to deliver a kind of revolutionary, anti-communist message, to reify the American sense that there are revolutionaries in China. So I got a grant to go to China and spend a month interviewing these poets, meeting with them and talking with them. But it didn't continue much past that. It was primarily around the sense of how we in North America appropriate or assimilate others for our own uses – to placate

our own sense of the world. So it was translation I was into. I'm not a translator, but I was interested in the process of how some of these translations occurred. For example, I don't know if you know that book *The Originals*, or the guy who did most of the translations – Jeff Twitchell. As it turns out, the Chinese helped him with the translation. He did the cribs. He worked with their stuff and turned it into available English. Fair enough, but he didn't translate them. It was kind of a weird process. And then Hank Lazer and Charles Bernstein and James Sherry went over to China and went to Nanjing & Suzhou. Yunte had arranged this and they did readings around the Yangtze and then there was this publication and translating that into Chinese, this kind of back and forth thing between the Americans and these Chinese writers. But most of these writers, post-cultural revolution writers, were actually quite concerned with this politically and aesthetically.

They rejected the "Language" label, didn't they?

Well, not really. They didn't really know what it was. In fact the writers I met in Nanjing and Suzhou had never seen the book. I came down on Jeremy and the guy who printed the bloody thing and Jeremy sort of apologized. I still don't know if they ever got a copy of the book. I had my copy and I wasn't going to leave my copy with them! (Laughter) They were excited to be published in English, but they'd never seen it. So it's that kind of appropriation that I found very objectionable.

What constitutes "the avant garde" in China, from your experience, and how does such writing circulate, in terms of cultural networks?

Well in China, many of the poets are quite international. We don't get that sense here, particularly in Canada, but Yu Jian, a poet in south-western China, is sort of an Allen Ginsberg; he doesn't write like Ginsberg – I mean a Whitmanesque, oratorical kind of writer. He travels through Europe and South America, gets invited around, publishes in magazines all over the world and is translated; he's pretty well out there and available. And there are less well-known poets in Shanghai and a few of them have gotten in trouble. They're not part of the official Federation of Chinese Writers. They wouldn't allow these upstarts in. These are writers who, because they are more international, are more aware of what's going on globally, in terms of other "revolutionary voices." But those Chinese writers have been, since the end of the cultural revolution, in a really difficult position, trying to work out how they are going to be, quote/

unquote, “Chinese Poets,” and what do they want to use as Chinese poets. There’s huge, immense history – literary history – to draw on, and at the same time they’ve been trying to westernize. Frequently T.S. Eliot is as far as they would have read of the 20th century. And then a few of them who made contact with Hank and Charles and myself published in a few magazines, got picked up by some American magazines.

When I saw the Originals book I thought it seemed strange to export this poetics to China. Imagine if a book turned up in Canada where a certain group of writers were described in some term that was developed in China for literary historical reasons. That exchange is pretty problematic.

Most of the poets in that language book were pretty interesting in the sense that they had a professor at Nanjing University, Zhang Ziquing, a wonderful guy, who had done a lot of work on North American poetry, had written a lot on it in Chinese, and had introduced a lot of western poetry to many young Chinese people. So these were poets who were like his students who had gotten into it and met this guy Jeff Twitchell who was teaching there. He introduced them to some British poets. Jeremy Prynne still goes to China and talks to these people. Somebody was telling me that Jeremy can now speak Mandarin pretty fluently. So he goes and talks to them. I think that’s wonderful. At the same time, why? He doesn’t translate or reproduce them. That whole concern with picking up other cultural baggage and repositioning it, I find it problematic. It’s usually because the writers want some representation from that culture, they want to satisfy their own understanding or the world, or frequently, with poetry, it’s “gee! This is pure poetry!” It doesn’t have to be social, it doesn’t have to be political, it can just be nice little lakes and mists and bridges.

You’ve done a lot of collaborations with visual artists, and I was curious to hear about those – how you initiate them, and what the process looks like.

That’s been going on now for fifteen years. Other than things like *Diamond Grill* (1996) or *Faking It*, most of the work I’ve done is collaborative, like the project I’m working on now for Talon. It started in Calgary with people asking me to collaborate with art projects, partly because Pauline was teaching at the Alberta College of Art, and also because the artists in Calgary are a little more open to hearing poetry than around here, it seems. So I got asked to do a couple of things and – someone’s always come to me and said “Would you be interested in doing this?” And I’ve found it

fascinating. I loved the one I did with Bev Tosh – a series of 50 paintings. Here was a painter whom I'd never met and she phoned me and said "I've read some of your writing and I really like it and I've been doing these paintings and I need text. Would you come and have a look?" I'm not an artist, but I got really interested in what she was doing and the story behind them, and the problems of working with the human figure, how to work with this problematic form. What engaged me was first of all the actual material. Like how do you get text onto an 11 inch by 3 foot piece of Tyvek? I became fascinated by the materiality of working with the paintings. And then I did a thing a few years ago with some photographers in Mexico. What I was interested in there was the practice – what was going on. "Ok, you're making a photograph. How do you make a photograph? How do you reproduce it? How do you print it?" What are the elements that they're going through? A lot of talk, I loved the talk. Henry Tsang and I did this thing for "Pop Goes the 'hood," because Miko Hoffman of the Powell Street Festival invited us to and we agreed to it. We talked for hours and hours and hours, and it had nothing to do with the final project. Finally, about a month before, it was like "God, what are we going to do?" (Laughter) And we got something together and I worked with Henry and was fascinated by how he worked in video and learned a lot about that.

I love the collaborations. Since I've been working on this new manuscript for Talon, that's pretty much all that I've done. Since *So Far* (1991), I haven't done a lot of other work. I'm interested particularly in the notion of image, image/text. I've always been interested in that. When I got the Governor General's Award in the mid-80s – it was 5,000 bucks – I said to Pauline "We're gonna blow this town. We're going away – we're going to Paris." I'd always wanted to go to Paris. I didn't know there was a tax on the Award! But anyway we went to Paris for three months and it was wonderful. I decided that in order to handle the art in Paris I was going to limit myself to art that had image text. So each week I would scout out what galleries, what shows had image text, and those were the ones that I would spend my time going to. Fascinating. I loved it.

I wanted to ask you one last question, about the Kootenay School of Writing. When Mark Nowak was in town recently, we had a reading group based on his essay "Neoliberalism, Collective Action, and the American MFA Industry." At the end of the essay, he calls on writers to adopt a kind of two-step program, or platform, and he uses KSW as an example of this. The first step – and again this has to do with effective resistance to neo-liberalism as it manifests within culture – is that writers have to organize themselves autonomously from various "bureaucratic, institutional frameworks" (23) including academia and official cultural institutions. So that's

the first step – de-linking “the writers’ workshop.” The second step is to “rearticulate” the writer’s workshop to “the rank and file” and to “popular struggles” – his terms. We talked a bit about it. People there, mostly KSW collective members, seemed to think that KSW had partially succeeded in the first step, the de-linking, but had completely failed in the second one, ie., re-linking the organization to local or popular struggles. So I was curious – you’ve recently re-joined the collective. You were there at the very beginning, left to teach at Calgary, then came back and are now working with the collective again. What do you think about the KSW’s current role? Do you see it functioning in Mark’s terms? What does it offer, do you think, as a politically engaged cultural organization?

Well, Mark’s idealism vis-à-vis the struggle against neo-liberalism is admirable. But I don’t think KSW has succeeded in either of those steps! (Laughter) Since I’ve been in the collective, we’ve always struggled with “how do we get the money?” We’re always going to the city, the province, the Canada Council to bring in the money, so it’s very institutionalized. In a sense, we’ve been a little bit lazy in investigating ways out of that. And in the second regard of relinking... [pause] well, there was a fight within KSW ...

Really? A fight at KSW? (Laughter)

I wasn’t around. I was up in the Koots or in Calgary. Basically there was a fight around race. Certain members of the collective thought there should be more engagement with race. I think this was in the late 80s, when there was a strong sense of “let’s deal with this race thing,” so some collective members thought that they should engage more with the racial community in Vancouver, while others didn’t. There was a bit of a break over that. Since I’ve been back, three years now, and from my observations over the years, I’d say no, KSW hasn’t really engaged anything other than trying to work out some possibilities for its own membership, which is fair enough.

What’s the problem, do you think? Do the contingencies of keeping the place running, having to get money, etc., impose constraints on the organization?

They’re not serious constraints, they’re just part of where we are complicit in working within that system of arts grants, just as anyone else is. Fair enough. That’s what’s there. I’ve got no problem with that. I’m a citizen, I live in this country – I think that’s fair enough. I do agree that it’s been good that we’ve been successful in not aligning

ourselves with another institution, though we have become an institution of our own, so people might view KSW rather idealistically.

When I was active on the collective, it seemed we were perceived as simply carrying out the poetics of a previous group, that KSW was simply protecting a space for language poetry in the city, and that, it seemed to me, was part of the reason KSW has been unable to attract writers of colour, or people in general who are not associated with language poetry, to the collective.

There was also the Work Writing and the Language Writing split in 83/84. That was pretty definite. The groups went their separate ways. And the race thing never got dealt with. There have been some opportunities recently around the new Woodward's space, where we could have collaborated more with some of the First Nations arts groups here, but we didn't really pick up the ball on that one either. I'm not knocking the collective. People do what they can. I think it's been a bit of a mess this last year with the lack of our own space. KSW has been a wonderful thing for a certain segment of white, avant-garde writers interested in language poetry, and that's about it. And it's been good for those of us who are interested in that writing here, in that we've been able to maintain ties with people, and there's a sense that we are a literal institution here, a literal *place*. Which is good. We have the possibility of a library. It's frustrating, as you know, as a collective member, that things move so slowly and there are so many great possibilities one could try to do with this, but we never really settle down to discussing the ideological stuff. We never really debate or argue it. It goes along with certain assumptions and I think that's unfortunate. I wish we as a larger community could say "We would like this to operate to the benefit of certain social and political awarenesses." Frankly, the so-called race writers, whoever they are, they are all doing their thing, and they see KSW as being fairly elitist, which it is.

But it does have something useful to offer.

Well it does in the sense that people like Wayne or Rita or Roy or myself, we're all interested in other things too, but if KSW really wanted to be more of a social organization, we could consciously talk about that. It might be interesting for the collective to take on a project each year. A literal social project, and I don't mean just a race project, but a social project. I mean we're in the downtown eastside and we kind of pride ourselves on being on the edge – but what do we do? Hardly any of us live here and hardly any of us have anything to do with the issues around that. Aaron Vidaver was

one of the few people who did. He got involved with the Woodsquat, got off the collective and into that.

There's no doubt that KSW has, quote unquote, made a name for itself. We're known, and there are like-minded people all over North America, usually white, language-oriented writers, who know about us, and that's good, and we're the only ones in town doing that, and I think we should continue to keep up those connections. Those are important connections to all of us, but we also need to be even more conscious of the possibilities of difference and otherness.

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