

LOUIS CABRI / “the coursing of staged crafts”¹: on poetry with Roy Miki

LOUIS CABRI: The second time I came across the words “prepoetic” and “prepoetics” was in 1998 in Lytle Shaw and Emilie Clark’s magazine, *Shark*, from New York City. Issue #1 is devoted to what they call the prepoetic. They’re thinking of poetry’s lateral relations with and to other “fields,” wanting to draw those fields back into the orbit of poetry—“not to evoke a study autonomous from and prior to poetics, but to highlight poetry’s various relations to its fields of possibility and potentiality,” as Lytle puts it.

ROY MIKI: Wow, by bringing up the notion of “prepoetics,” you’re taking me back—decades back—to my dissertation in the late 70s which became the 1983 book *The Prepoetics of William Carlos Williams: Kora in Hell*. The term was not indexed, I have to confess, because at the time I wasn’t aware that it had a lineage that needed to be acknowledged.

LC: The sole antecedent I can find for the notion of a prepoetics is in your book on *Kora in Hell* and that one *not* far fetched. The *Shark* issue overlooks it.

RM: I like your oblique invocation of the opening line of Williams’s preface to *Kora* where he probes what its composition has meant for him, and what connections poetry has, we might even say, “to its fields of possibility or potentiality.” What I recall is that as a graduate student working on US modernist poetry I was fascinated by the processes Williams enacted as a writer. When he initially set out to write, as a daily exercise, a series of improvisations without reflecting on what he was doing, he was able to enter the condition of a personal and literary crisis at a time “his self was being slaughtered” (158), to cite the provocative phrase from his autobiography. In this crisis the question he faced was how to mediate the dynamics of creative form as exploration and revelation and move beyond the trap of imposition and control, at least as he understood it at the time.

1 Roy Miki, *Mannequin Rising*, 39.

LC: It seems, then, prepoetics, for you, connects to subjectivity and to agential transformation. You also write how prepoetics is that “through which perception becomes active in a space the mind, as yet, has *not* mapped out” (111), in my emphasis.

RM: Yes, the dynamics of subjectivity and transformation through the act of writing were important preoccupations for Williams. Maybe some context here is helpful. When I started research for my dissertation, I had a grand plan to track the development of Williams’s poetics, thinking mostly of the distances he covered from *Kora in Hell*, a breakthrough text, to something like “The Desert Music,” which I loved as a brilliant accomplishment. But what struck me as crucial about *Kora*—and this has remained with me—is how he negotiated the experience of crisis through the act of writing. It was an improvisational act that opened up a new poetics, one he would explore pretty well the rest of his writing life. In a sense this would make *Kora* a sort of ur-text for Williams, which is perhaps another way of thinking about the term prepoetics.

LC: Following your thinking, one could say that even the text of *Kora* itself includes an ur-text, those “improvisations” around which is staged and enacted a sort of genetic criticism on itself. Your book describes the compositional layers or processes in great detail.

RM: It’s a long time ago, but I still remember walking around with the City Lights edition of *Kora* in my pocket, anxious about what I could write about the first line of the first improvisation, “Fools have big wombs” (9). Finally, perhaps following Williams’s lead vis-à-vis his writing crisis, I began by reading that line, and to structure the dissertation, I attempted to account for the different phases of Williams’s composition of *Kora*.

The text of *Kora* was such a revelation for him because it came together in such an unusual unfolding or backward process. From the first set of improvisations came the italicized sections, and then the design and questions of layout, the use of breakages, numbering—all this structuring going on through a somewhat chaotic yet compositionally viable process. Then other elements came to him, such as the introduction where he grappled with the aesthetic and intellectual implications of what he had written, and the title, *Kora in Hell*, as well as the cover

with the stylized drawing of an ovum circled by spermatozoa, and Stuart Davis's print that he chose to use as a frontispiece.

It seemed to me that *Kora* was not so much "the" poetics of William Carlos Williams but rather what necessitated a poetics to follow. The book after *Kora* is *The Great American Novel*, a zany text that he couldn't have written before. *Kora*, in effect, had told him, Oh, you can now do that kind of writing. Then comes the beautiful *Spring & All*, more refinement of *Kora*, where he is able to say, Okay, I can work with improvisational prose, but the gain is that he comes on a new kind of line—a much cleaner and dynamic poetic line that discloses the emptiness of the spaces around words. But the additional gain is that *Kora* opened up much more intimate ties between the materiality of language and the organic conditions that limit the daily life of the human body.

LC: Would you go so far as to use the term "prepoetic" in relation to your own writing and thinking?

RM: The prepoetic could be applied to things I'm interested in right now, especially around body affectivity. For me, prepoetics, if we did use it today, would have to do with understanding certain kinds of contingencies through which the possibility of writing occurs.

LC: Here you raise possibly a third and maybe all-encompassing way you are thinking about the prepoetic: as reflexive attention to "the conditions necessary for writing at all," to borrow a phrase—to borrow more than a phrase?—by Ann Rosalind Jones (qtd. in Schweik 89).

RM: Well, what you identify as a third way could make some sense in relation to my own personal history of Japanese Canadian internment, but it may be misleading to dwell on the "conditions necessary for writing." What Williams discovered in writing *Kora* is that writing can emerge in any circumstance. The notion of improvisation encourages the writer to begin with what is at hand, and especially so when enacted in conditions of crisis, which embodies—interestingly, in the medical terms that Dr. Williams would have understood—that turning point for a disease, or perhaps dis/ease is more appropriate, when the organism will either fail or succeed in regaining its health.

What is more immediate, or what has been more immediate for me, as someone who writes poems, is the kind of awareness brought to bear on language as a medium of power and representation. As a kid growing up in Winnipeg, the familial shades of internment based on outright racialization—of being “of the Japanese race,” in the government’s discourse—confirmed language’s power to identify and represent bodies, despite whatever self-reflexive consciousness these bodies had or have as living beings.

I recall being struck during research on internment by the use of “as if” in one of the orders-in-council used to define Japanese Canadians. They were to be treated “as if” they were Enemy Aliens, and as such, they had no right of appeal. What an awesome power the state has to impose a discursive representation even when it does not conform to actualities, i.e. that as “Canadians,” those who were being interned, according to its own democratic values, should not be considered Enemy Aliens.

When we see this power operating in restricted terms, we also become conscious of the power of language, in my case, the English language, to produce dominant forms of social and cultural values and assumptions, and these values and assumptions produce complications as well as contradictions in poetic acts.

LC: Could Jones’s phrase “the conditions necessary for writing at all” take into account your context of how the prepoetic ties to contingencies of improvisation and also mean that improvisation may be the necessary condition for writing to happen at all sometimes? That it may allow for the unspoken and even the unsayable to emerge? I like how you remind us (*In Flux* 163) that in Fred Wah’s essay, “Half-Bred Poetics,” the improvisatory act exists inside the moment of contact between different languages, cultures, histories. Critical awareness of such conditions and moments lead us to your own concerns for specifically the powers of representational language to dominate a subject and his-or-her body to the point of inducing crisis.

RM: Yes, as a procedure, a way of negotiating the limits of language, improvisation offers a potent means of allowing for unspoken or unsayable material to emerge. In the case of Wah, and I share this concern, this compositional method has been tied up in historical trajectories of racism and alienation. These are

factors necessitating an introspective approach, on the one hand, to the language forms that have been internalized as the boundaries of dominant representations and, on the other, to the exploration of alternate language forms, i.e. poetic forms, that do not only expose those boundaries but also transform their social and personal consequences in acts of liberation.

For me, the effort has been to engage with the limits of language formations, which, in moments, may resist or even exceed the prescriptive quality of naturalized assumptions, so as to reveal the texture of differences that are not subsumed by the end goal of meaning.

LC: Setting the prepoetic in relation to body affectivity reminds me of your Transparency Machine Event Series presentation, the handout of which cites Judith Butler describing different theoretical routes (Christopher Bollas's, Jean LaPlanche's) to a hypothesis that the other precedes and constitutes the subject (ego and all) through a collective "primary impingement":

In the moment in which I say 'I', I am not only citing the pronomial place of the 'I' in language, but at once attesting to and taking distance from a primary impingement, a primary way in which I am, prior to acquiring an 'I', a being who has been touched . . . (Butler 69 qtd. in Miki, "Who Me?" n.p.)

Are primary impingements of this sort, which are different modes of trauma, what you're encompassing by "body affectivity"? In that case, prepoetic body affectivity could take any form in language—any sequence of phonemes might awaken it—and not even phonemes, a bang of the door.

RM: It's interesting that you mention a door bang. It reminds me of that physical gesture in Wah's *Diamond Grill*, the writer's foot kicking the swinging doors which becomes a body affect that shifts registers in the text, back and forth, as the writer moves between the somatic sources of his memory and the metaphoric frames that structure his present writing processes.

A simple example, for me, might be the way the Japanese word *gakko*, school, makes its appearance in *There* (55). On one level, as a reader, you might say that I remember some Japanese. But for me, that word, as highly somatic, resonates

only in the deepest sense of what I recall as my grandmother's voice. If I were into straight autobiography, I might take that word and unravel it, and I do minimally by providing a discursive receptacle for it, *sugu gakko iku*, but I choose not to take the process further.

Sometimes I will pull up fragments of memory and construct partial narratives in order to get me into a different space where I come upon the limits of autobiography as such—and push the language out into more of a social world where my immediate consciousness can be made more apparent.

My understanding is that the social world, the way we operate in it, is constituted not on suppression so much as on the making-invisible, the making-unaware, of the somatic dimensions of our experiences. I appreciate Jacques Rancière's explanation of the way that dominant or normalized perceptions shape the parameters of what comes to representation and what does not. He uses the phrase "partition of the sensible" to talk about the constitution of these perceptions, and partition, he says, is "understood in the double sense of the word: on the one hand, as that which separates and excludes; on the other, as that which allows participation" (36). Such a process accounts for the power of what-goes-without-saying, that is, the power of transparency that produces the "sense" of normative assumptions.

LC: Is that a poetry credo emerging in a couple pages of *In Flux* where you step out of your critic's role and explicitly write "as a poet" (*In Flux* 203)? It starts for me with "somatic markers" that when articulated in language, "we associate," you say, "with the becoming of subjectivity" (203).

RM: Your question is not an easy one for me to unravel. You're citing from an essay on Rita Wong where I focus on the body as a living organism. The body generates a complex of affects in our daily lives, and these often go unnoticed because it is treated as an object to be appropriated, glaringly so in violent confrontations, rather than as a complex life network of somatic processes.

I'm approaching some very tricky areas of poetic thought here, but as a poet my understanding is that the normalized discursive frames through which the world makes sense to us, as well as for us—in other words, again, what-goes-without-saying—are enabled in the exclusion of somatic contingencies, including the finitude of organic processes. In our corporate capitalist culture of commodities

the body becomes the target of so many discursive operations from seemingly benign advertising to the extreme violence of warfare, and in between these the huge corporate interest in biotechnological knowledge.

Language plays a crucial yet mostly transparent role in sustaining the normalization of dominant representations, but when language is rendered opaque or made otherwise non-transparent as a channel of communication, for instance in poetic texts, we begin to apprehend the processes of becoming that have the potential not only to expose the limits of normalization but to transform them, we hope progressively, so that they are more inclusive than they were before.

Here I'm talking about the creative process in general, but in some instances the "becoming of subjectivity" emerges in a more shared sense when dominant representations are seemingly spontaneously exceeded or undermined by what is then a newly identified group. The term "redress," for instance, constituted a Japanese Canadian group in creating a movement to seek justice for the past injustices related to mass uprooting, dispossession, and internment. Perhaps this is a way of thinking about the current Idle No More movement that has emerged through the coalitional action of young aboriginal activists who are motivated by the words Idle No More. By responding to the call for action in the phrase they have exposed the dominant representations of aboriginality as extensions of a colonial system with a history as long as the Canadian state's existence. But then again, the shift from writing a poem to a social movement may be too far-fetched a move.

LC: What fascinates me is that for you it seems "the becoming of subjectivity" takes shape on a collective horizon. A body's somatic processes and language's role in normalizing dominant representations are both inscribed by a collective horizon. Your poetry is contextually singular for how it appears to constitutively disavow "the becoming of subjectivity" as an individual horizon articulated by way of autobiographical conventions (not least of representations of memory). Does writing poetry that "attends to the ethical call of otherness" (*In Flux* 204) involve discovering writing processes and techniques that help to disclose how the seemingly private, individual horizon of one's own somatic markers—stored in the "chambers of pre" (*Random Access File* 78), let's say, or in "chamber voices" (*Mannequin Rising* 107)—have been constituted through a social, collective horizon hidden

from consciousness? As a corollary, does what you call “creative critical reading” for “the politics of differential relations” (*In Flux* 251) require of a critic to engage with “the becoming of subjectivity” in poetry on a collective horizon of the poem?

RM: I’m not sure how you understand the term “collective” vis-à-vis the writing of poetry.

The notion of “collective,” it seems to me, is troublesome because it can imply that we are dealing with a fixed entity, a group for instance, that is defined according to certain prescribed characteristics. For me, this collective could be tied to “Japanese Canadian,” but even this term, which has been applied to my work, is never stable but always shifting and open to change. It functions more as a frame whose potentialities change according to the specific contexts of its invocation—and not as a solid referent for a demarked group. This, I think, helps explain why the becoming of subjectivity gets knotted, even rendered contradictory, when assumptions around minoritization and racialization come into play, which is also to say, when certain marked subjects are read as the other within a social assemblage.

The stakes are different when the body is marked in such a way, as say Japanese Canadian bodies were during the period of uprooting and internment, and still are, though in relation to different instances of representation—instances that could include Asian Canadian, another floating signifier, but one that circulates at an even greater level of generalization.

I have tried to address the subjective consequences of identity as problematic in my prose work, for example, in *Broken Entries*, *Redress*, and *In Flux*. But in my poetry, with some exceptions, I’ve more or less allowed myself more freedom to explore the somatic effects of subjectivity as they play out in language forms.

Yet in saying so much to question the term “collective,” there is some truth to your query about the “collective horizon” of the poem. Minority writers who either accept the term or have the term thrust on them are formed in the tension between the same and the different, and the different is understood in relation to the horizon of a “group” that is constantly shifting in accordance with imposed limits and creative efforts towards liberation from these limits.

The tension can take on interesting configurations when a writer's consciousness harbours the residue of a childhood language that has been marginalized by the dominance of English.

LC: There is often an almost seamless move from aesthetics to politics, answering the one in terms of the other, in your writing—which makes it compelling. Aesthetic terms for how the life and line of poetry is constituted through social, collective movements (even if sometimes composed just of poets, regardless of backgrounds) are not raised in your response even to me here, for instance. Instead, the becoming of subjectivity through collectivity is addressed by way of examples drawn from the political (“Japanese Canadian” as signifier; the Japanese Canadian Redress Movement; the Idle No More movement).

Similarly, the view of language you’ve articulated—critiquing “normalized discursive frames through which the world makes sense to us” by way of “the limits of language formations”—strikes me as being, in broad aesthetic terms, a reworked blending of key poetics statements, made in the 1970s through the 80s, by Language poets, with recent cognitive theories of embodiment folded into them. Instead of offering these or other aesthetic terms, the power of language to control, impose, shape is theorized into political terms in your comments and with hardly a reference to the aesthetic.

Is this because you think it frivolous to restrict the aesthetic to purely poetic terms (for example: a poetry credo)? Would the aesthetic be, then, for you rooted in the bodily sensorium (in some sense), and not exclusively in the literary domain of theoretical and historical lineages for specific poetic practices? If so, such a view of the aesthetic would resonate with Rancière’s reenvisioning of aesthetics. Further, is the switch from aesthetics to politics because for you the aesthetic is intricately interrelated to and complexly determined by the political in ways that are never self-evident and require insistent critical investigation by setting the aesthetic—before it has even “set”—in relation to the political? Is there some other element of language that affects the relationship—and the ratio—for you between the aesthetic and the political in your poetry and in your writing and thinking about poetry?

RM: Your comments and questions are difficult ones for me to address, and this may very well be the result of my not having reconciled, in an explicit enough manner, what you see as the aesthetic and the political.

In my own experience as a writer, the approach to the political has been developed either through an involvement with a social and/or cultural movement, such as the redress movement for Japanese Canadians or the anti-racist literary movement for the Writers' Union of Canada, or through the aesthetics effects of creative forms such as poetry.

In the former, I have drawn from critiques of dominant language forms and worked to expose their containment and management of historical traumas and racialization and hopefully to change existing conditions. Such work, I believe, will be effective to the extent that it enters into a negotiation with these forms to infuse them with elements of transformation, and for this reason its effectiveness, while considerable in some instances, is mediated by the ability of the state to adjust its discourses to accommodate challenges to it.

This is why in my book on redress I drew on the notion of the gift to conceptualize the exchange that occurred in the redress agreement signed by the National Association of Japanese Canadians and the federal government on September 22, 1988. In receiving the gift of redress from the government for the trauma of the 1940s, the Japanese Canadians who were identified in the agreement gave the gift of their un-redressed history of injustices to the Canadian nation. Or as we might phrase it in other words, by aligning the language of redress with the dominant language of citizenship and human rights, Japanese Canadians achieved the aim of their social justice movement.

Aside from the fleeting aspect of the redress settlement, the more long-term aspect, perhaps its most politically efficacious aspect, is its precedent-setting power. No matter how quickly the redress movement will be forgotten—and inevitably it will be—others who experience injustices similar to what Japanese Canadians experienced during the 1940s will always have some justification to use the example of Japanese Canadian redress to seek redress for what befell them.

Now, to speculate on the connection of the political as a critical movement to challenge and change the social language of domination and marginalization to the political as it relates to the poem, what comes to mind is an anecdote.

When immersed in redress, I found it difficult to write poems with any consistency of effort. The language of redress, at least the struggle to come to articulation in this language, which involved many Japanese Canadians, assumed considerable power in my consciousness, becoming at times all consuming. It seemed that my life had been taken over by endless committee and community meetings all over Canada, as well as meetings with all sorts of news media reporters, politicians, and bureaucrats.

The pressure to inhabit the language of redress often led to a sense of personal exhaustion and the threat of speechlessness, as if I might become no more than a talking mannequin for the movement. I got to cherish the privacy of the durational space of flights between cities, and the relief it offered. Without much forethought, I began to keep a notebook to jot down lines that came to me, simply as a way of being released from the more determined language of my work in the movement. I allowed my consciousness to wander in words and lines that seemingly issued from its somatic conditions—though, of course, at the time I wouldn't have theorized it as I'm doing now. It was only after the redress agreement that I returned to a number of the notebook pieces and re-read them as poems. Many of the poems written on the plane became part of *Saving Face*.

LC: “[R]eleased from . . . more determined language”: is that unalienated labour? Is this disposition toward writing also that of the New Left’s “early Marx” for whom (to paraphrase the 1844 manuscripts) the senses were theoreticians in their own praxis? In this anecdote about how determinate (political) language-use and indeterminate (aesthetic) language-use shaped differing writing practices, you juxtapose the redress movement with your first book—perhaps because their activities occurred over the same time period. Most of your most recent poetry book, *Mannequin Rising*, also appears to be written on the go, in between destinations, on planes, trains, in various temporary states such as tourist. I find this to be the case with the intervening poetry books as well. It’s not as if your poetry doesn’t enact the political. Despite the evident turmoil your poems express, would you call the outcome of this trajectory for the aesthetic—from *Saving Face* through to and including *Mannequin Rising*—a kind of cosmopolitanism, ultimately a wary, savvy truce-making with commodity form takeover? I think of the lines in the

opening poem of the sequence “Viral Travels to Tokyo”: “restless sojourners bent / on global migration to forge mobile identities” (*Mannequin* 75).

RM: Yes, the poems and the movement, I came to learn, offered different language registers, and this in a way prompted me to continue writing poems after the settlement.

In helping to shape what we called a redress language to give voice to Japanese Canadians, I became more intent on exploring how the constraints of dominant discourses—constraints we had to negotiate—were manifest in forms of creative writing, my own included.

LC: Can you elaborate a bit on that last point—on how dominant discourse constraints manifest in your poems or did manifest in poem-drafts?

RM: It’s not all that complicated. As I got totally wrapped up in the redress movement, my life seemed to be at the mercy of the movement, so much so that I often yearned for more private moments to think outside of its noisy language, which is why the quiet time on plane flights was magnified in my consciousness. Instead of rehearsing that language, by jotting down thinking—in lines of poetry—going on outside of its parameters, I was able to experience some relief from its constraints. The lines were more attentive to somatic rhythms, open syntax, semantic play, and the ‘i’ was more unpredictable, pliable, multiply inflected.

It’s also interesting to note, which I have done elsewhere, that in the period between the redress settlement (1988) and the publication of *Saving Face* (1991), the Cold War was ending and with this shift came more porosity in the boundaries of nation-based identities. It was a shift that became evident to me as I worked on my next book, *Random Access File*, especially so in the sequence written in Japan called “Market Rinse.” Here I felt that identities under the pressure of cultural globalization, as well as the rapidly ascending power of digital technologies, had become dispersed, uncertain, and always contingent in their relations with others and with the places that situated them.

The more explicit foray into the exigencies of local/global interactions—which perhaps signals a cosmopolitical turn—came in *Surrender*, a book that more consciously set out to explore, in both formal and thematic ways, the immediacy of

global flows through the consciousness of an “i” nurtured under the minoritarian signs of Japanese Canadian as an identity formation.

You are right that I continued to write a number of poems while in transit—though I still enjoyed composing in site-specific contexts. Such movement through the spaces of local sites seemed to coincide with the transnational experience of global processes.

I’ve continued to explore the effects and affects of commodity culture in the book you mention, *Mannequin Rising*.

LC: I’d love to ask about this narrative sequencing through which you’re historically situating—and dividing—your work, that is, as a move from identity politics to capitalist critique. For now though, but in that regard, I’d like to ask about the poem “Vestigial.”

Commoditisation prevails in *Mannequin Rising* over other concerns, and in an unprecedented way in your poetry so far, I find. Many poets in the counter-traditions that inform your poetry have tried and try to face in their writing the intractable dilemmas of monopoly capital’s simultaneous expansion and concentration in the deepest nooks and crannies of everyday life. How does language get in there? Today it’s not too much of an exaggeration to wonder whether capital might not be the first to discover (even create?) that “complex life network of somatic processes” you prize, before the poet does—and some poets today have relinquished the task of articulating the bodily sensorium. But “Vestigial” in particular has not relinquished the task, has not obeyed (to quote another poem) “the injunction / to forget where the word rises” (35); rather, “Vestigial” counterposes commodity form and body affectivity. Can you speak to the counterposing work of this poem?

RM: I think you’re right in ascribing to capitalist forces the capacity to tap into the bodily sensorium in producing commodities that serve its flows and desires. This is perhaps made apparent in the compulsions and pleasures that have formed—and are forming at a rapid pace—in the immersive power of mobile technology and its cultural discourses. The convergence of cell phones, cameras (both still and video), the internet, and proliferations of apps in so-called smart devices has generated a cornucopia of new frontiers for capitalist expansion.

The crux of mobile culture resides, I think, in the intimacy it creates with the living body within a network of other living beings—and in this closeness mobile commodities can enable access to somatic flows in its consumers. It's not surprising, then, the emergence of software that can measure blood pressure, heart rates, and other elements of the body's organic conditions at any given time of the day. Just imagine what corporate interests can do with all this intimate information about its consumers. Everything about mobile culture hinges on surfaces that are faddish, new, and glamorous, always changing, and neural rhythms that are deep down in the body's livingness. It's also not surprising that we're seeing users exhibiting obsessive-compulsive behaviour including addiction to information flows.

The poem you mention, "Vestigial," was initially drafted while I toured Taiwan with a group—Fred Wah, Larissa Lai, Rita Wong, Glen Lowry, and Garry Gottfriedson—and gave a series of readings and talks about contemporary Canadian literature. Taiwan was a fascinating place to visit. As a super capitalist region and a major player in the world production of computers and all kinds of electronic devices, it is deeply hooked into the global network of capital production in its relations with mobile technology.

But it's also a place with a very painful history in its precarious negotiations with various imperial powers, primarily the US, Japan, and China. The most troublesome event in social memory is 228, shorthand for the date February 28, 1947. It marks the beginning of a massacre, when an estimated 30,000 Taiwanese intellectuals and activists who challenged the authority of the KMT (Kuomintang) regime of Chiang Kai-Shek were brutally killed. Following the massacre, martial law was imposed to silence any mention of it, and this lasted until the late 1980s, at which point a movement to remember 228 was formed, gained momentum, and eventually prevailed. As a form of commemoration, the government created a museum in Taipei's Peace Park to portray the history of 228. A group of us visited the museum and were fortunate to have the services of a guide who was very thorough and forthright in explaining the legacy of trauma.

"Vestigial" carries residues of thinking about the conjunction of commodity capitalism and Taiwan's traumatic history. I first jotted down some lines in my notebook during a bus ride—which I accidentally left on the seat. The following day, I started another poem, only this one began with a reference to the lost

notebook. But as it turned out, Rita was able to communicate with the owners of the bus company about the lost notebook, and they returned it to me. That became the occasion for another beginning. It got me thinking, I suppose, about the fragility and contingent nature of memory and all the variables that go into the representation of historical events, as well as the unpredictable situations in which the experience of trauma will be mediated and remembered.

While in Taiwan, I was struck by the historical conjunctions of dates between the redress settlement and the movement to remember 228, both in the late 80s, a time when we in Canada were moving towards transnational cultural conditions. I was also struck by the continuing reluctance of those whose families who were directly affected by 228 to speak about the event—a vivid reminder that the legacy of trauma lingers in the present.

So a number of contexts and layers of history and memory, all surfacing in the moment of composition, are juxtaposed and interlaced in the poetic process. The poem also includes the surfacing of a childhood memory—of the Selkirk Manitoba asylum where I saw, from my bike on the highway, the strained faces of those incarcerated in the windows. The sight haunted me in my growing up years in Winnipeg. The pedagogical social threat went something like, if you don't behave yourself you'll end up in Selkirk. There are also the figures of the betel nut women in Taiwan, scantily dressed and enclosed in glass cage-like huts along the highway, who sell betel nuts to guys who chew on these nuts and apparently often get addicted to its affects. I dedicated the poem to Fred because, over the years, we have shared so much in our personal and writing lives, and here we were travelling in Taiwan as part of a group.

LC: Roy, isn't it like you had two mother tongues, the first erased by the second? This loss of a mother tongue complicates your poetry's relation within and to the frame of a "minor literature"—"that which a minority constructs within a major language" (16)—expounded by Deleuze and Guattari. Their example is Kafka who as member of a Jewish minority in Prague wrote in the dominant High German, not in the subordinate Czech spoken by the majority, let alone the Yiddish-influenced German he knew at home or the Hebrew he would learn. Another example they give is African American English as minority instance of what can be done within and to a major language. Their other examples are Beckett and

Joyce. That is, in their examples, the minority mother tongue is alive. For you, it is ghosted.

RM: I used to think that their essay on minor literature was relevant for my own work and the work of minority writers in Canada. I cite it in an early essay I wrote on Asian Canadian literature called “Asiancy,” which goes back to the early 90s, a time when the notion of “deterritorialization” seemed appropriate as an Asian Canadian writing strategy.

The urgency of minority discourses in the identity politics I experienced during the 80s and 90s subsided, at least for me, in the mid-to-late 90s, roughly the period during which I wrote many of the poems in *Surrender*.

I returned to the essay recently while thinking about the ways in which Roy Kiyooka’s poetic language (his *inglish*, as he referred to English) may have been affected by Japanese as his childhood mother tongue. I liked what Deleuze and Guattari say about Kafka, as a Czech minority, writing in German: that his works “oppose a purely intensive usage of language to all symbolic or even significant or simply signifying usages of it” (19). Applied to Kiyooka’s *inglish*, the intensive emphasizes the material elements of language—the syllable, for instance—as prior to the ordinary signifying uses of language.

But what you say—and I like your term—about the ghosted nature of Japanese as a mother tongue for me prompts me to think again of its ripple effects in a kind of somatic memory that I sense at times while writing—though not always. And that memory could be of a trace of sounds, or of rhythmic gestures, or of words. I don’t think my experience of this ghosted language is all that unique in Canadian poetry. I’m sure there are loads of poets whose mother tongue was not English but who can now think and write only in English. It would be fascinating and very revealing I’m sure to hear them talk about the traces of that mother tongue in their writing.

LC: You’ve developed a lightly-punctuated poetic syntax that seriously wobbles conventional norms of word relation between and within clause and phrase, and because these poems are rarely “concrete,” their phrasings rarely literal, often appropriating fragments from theoretical discourses and suffusing them with lively atmospherics, a reader becomes attentive to the micro level of

syntactico-grammatical retunings, detunings, untunings. I'm wondering if you might comment on what is for me such a notable aesthetic feature of your poetry.

RM: I like a statement made by Donna Haraway, "Grammar is politics by other means" (3). As a regulatory system that enables the construction of determinate meanings and simultaneously the sharing of those meanings, grammar is instrumental in the normalization process that we associate with language as communication. But grammar also functions as a model for the humanist appropriation of nature in the service of technologies that re-present embodied beings as an extension of human-centred frames of reference.

Contrary to what is often assumed, the disruption or even the eschewal of grammatical relations in poetic performances of language does not lead to mere cacophony, though it may appear that way to some readers. But then again, mere cacophony could also produce a compelling poem!

Imagining the limits of grammar has been important for me as a poet, and at times, though not always, I've seen these limits as complicit with dominant perceptions that have produced so-called marginalized subjects—subjects who have been placed and often dis-placed in social categories that assume a given structure of differences.

But of more immediacy for this interview, the "elsewhere" of the grammatical regulation of discourse offers the potential to open up poetic spaces where language is more open to fluid linguistic energies, for instance, to a redistribution of functions in statements, to semantic instability and plurality, to a-grammatical patterns and relationships, to the indeterminate play of sound, syntax, and image, and so on, which can be expanded to encompass all the material elements that make up a language, including the alphabet, which bpNichol often took as the primary ground of his poetics.

It's also possible to inhabit grammatical forms in a critical way to make us aware of elements of our existence that are foreclosed in order for these forms to function transparently. Is, then, the becoming of language in the poetic act the language of becoming? Many readers may be very sceptical in the face of such a question, but for poets I believe it's a worthwhile consideration.

LC: As a reader, I become attentive not only to the *micro* level of syntactico-grammatical movements between words.

Two long sequences in *Mannequin Rising* develop *macro* and *meta* aspects of narrative by introducing variants on the literary device of the persona. None is a person per se, however. One figures as mannequins, that live, as do most of us, under the “tyranny of the commodity” (47), whose liberation is imagined in anthropomorphically identificatory ways, in “Scoping (also pronounced ‘Shopping’) in Kits” (*Mannequin* 9–50). The other is called Viral, a “freewheeling / mediation” (41) embodying sensationalizable group-mind fears and apprehensions (in short, Viral is a kind of collective self-consciousness, a “unanim,” Jules Romains would say), and who does things like visit the Yasukuni Shrine museum, in “Viral Travels to Tokyo” (73–100).

I can’t recall any personae-like figures in your previous poems. What has led you in this direction, toward narrative, do you think?

RM: I’m not sure there is, for me in any case, a direct way to provide an answer. You mention words from two of the three longer sequences in *Mannequin Rising*. All these sequences present poems alongside photo-collages that have woven into their spaces the figures of mannequins in various shop windows—in Kitsilano, on Granville Island, and in Tokyo. The Kitsilano sequence was the first of the three, but except for “Viral Travels to Tokyo,” in the order of composition the photo-collages began prior to the poems.

For a long time, as I thought about the possibility of making photo-collages, I walked around Kitsilano, where I lived then, taking photos and experimenting with Photoshop techniques. That was more or less a wordless time, a time that I struggled to mediate the power of images without worrying about poetic language. Watching the ways the figures of mannequins were transformed by shifting visual contexts, I think they started to invoke in me, as perhaps a kind of witness, potential stories of the moment of hyper-consumerism the mannequins embodied as representatives (in the double sense of portraying and speaking for) of the desire of consumers (i.e. all of us).

However, I never wanted to construct the mannequins consistently as personae, even though here and there the poems do move in and out of that possibility. When I eventually began writing the poems, I didn’t write “about” the

photo-collages but allowed my consciousness to roam as much as possible in an attempt to inhabit the affective spaces of consumer culture while at the same time trying to disclose a critical consciousness of the implications of these spaces.

This process, I think, opened up the interplay of different voices and discursive enactments that included a number of narrative moments. In the sequence on Granville Island with its history of colonization and appropriation of indigenous lands, the drift towards narrative was strong. The same with the Tokyo sequences, begun at the moment I landed in Tokyo, when the H1N1 scare had just entered Japan's territory. With all the attention being paid to "viral" as a trope in the language of consumer culture, an actual viral threat brought into play all the defence and medical resources of Japan, invoking once more the xenophobia of the past with its mobilization of a collective consciousness. That moment seemed to call for a poem! So Viral immediately took on the aura of a collective force that had figural presence. But I don't develop this figure into a persona throughout the poem sequence that follows. Although Canada is much more heterogeneous than Japan, one direction of exploration in the sequences on Kitsilano and Granville Island is that commodity culture, despite all the hype around individual tastes and choices, also produces collective affects in consumers who, in buying into that culture, become themselves the effects of its production.

LC: There's a mannequin in the trace remnants memorialized in the Hiroshima museum that is visited by or upon the speaker in Roy Kiyooka's "Wheels": "tall glass cases with pallid '40s mannikins / attired in somebody's ashen clothes / (click)" (168). Is this the translated seed, in a way, of *Mannequin Rising*?

RM: I didn't think of that at the time, but that's a great question for us to end on.

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