FRED WAH’S GRAMMATOLOGICAL PRACTICE

by

PAMELA BANTING

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

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for my parents,
Vera Mae Banting (Davy)
and
Sinclair Bradley Banting
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Introduction

Fred Wah has produced eleven books of poetry since 1965. His most recent, Waiting for Saskatchewan, won the Governor-General's Award for Poetry for 1985. He has been an editor of a number of literary magazines: Tish, Sum, Niagara Frontier Review, Magazine of Further Studies, Scree, Open Letter, and Writing, as well as the electronic magazine and database Swift Current. By virtue of his position for several years as teacher and co-ordinator for the School of Writing at the David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, B.C., he has also had a considerable influence upon many younger writers. But his work has not yet received the critical attention it deserves. No doubt this is due, in part, to the resistance of his work to traditional interpretive methods.

Wah began writing in the early 1960s within the context of the poetic milieu created in Vancouver in those years by the writings and the personal appearances of such poets as Charles Olson and Robert Creeley. These two poets were powerful influences for many poets who are now in their forties and fifties, perhaps especially so for the poets who originally came together around Tish magazine in Vancouver in 1961-63. Wah was not only one of the founding members of Tish, and its printer, but after graduating in 1962 from the University of British Columbia with a B.A. in music and English, he did graduate work in the United States first with Creeley and then with both Creeley and Olson, and the
masters' marks traverse the disciple's work, even in the most literal sense. For example, the inside of the cover of Wah's book *Earth* bears fragmented notes attributed to Olson, and Olson's name appears on the lower right-hand corner of the inner back cover of the book.

Wah's poetry, like much contemporary writing, seeks what George Quasha calls "a strategic incursion into uninterpretable terrain" (Quasha 496). Deliberately difficult, his kinetic poetry disarms the reader into relinquishing her desire for interpretation. The title of the paper Wah presented at the Long-liners Conference on the Canadian Long Poem at York University in 1984 was "Making Strange Poetics," and he opened the paper with the following quotation from Viktor Shklovsky on the purpose and technique of art:

> And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important* (Shklovsky 12).¹

In his paper, Wah stressed that the poetic of making strange
the familiar is not a new one, that it has been named variously negative capability, deconstruction, non-narrative, indeterminacy, non-referentiality, and so on. He also acknowledged several influences, among them Creeley's attack on inherited line structures, Olson's break from the rigid left margin, and the jazz model (Wah is a trumpet player), which allowed him as a beginning poet to "recognize" the poetic of defamiliarization and adapt it to the telling of his own story ("Making Strange Poetics" 213-14).

Wah is fascinated by the process of perception. More precisely, he is fascinated with the act of recording perception and with how that recording, in the poetic act, is itself involved in perception and proprioception. As he moves from his earliest discrete lyric poems through the long poem in what are presently his middle books to the recent poetic diaries, he simultaneously passes from an investigation of the speech model to the written model and its proprioceptive potential. *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.* is the pivotal book in this development. In the chapters that follow, I propose to trace Wah's poetic development in terms of his work with the composition models of speech and writing.

The title of this thesis, "Fred Wah's Grammatological Practice," reflects both my subject matter and my critical approach. "Grammatology" is the word Jacques Derrida has adopted to denote the science of writing that operates to
deconstruct the logocentric privileging of speech over writing and that postulates a theory of language in which speech is set into a more balanced relation with nonphonetic elements. A grammatological practice is a mode of writing not representative of nor subordinate or superior to speech but rather in which the hierarchy of speech over writing is collapsed. It is my contention that Fred Wah—like many contemporary Canadian poets, including Robert Kroetsch, George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt, Nicole Brossard, bpNichol, Robin Blaser, and others, and American poets, such as Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, and Gertrude Stein—is engaged in a grammatological practice to engender a writing based not upon expressive or mimetic codes of language but upon, among other things, the effects of dialogism, polyphony, intertextuality, the slippage of proper names into common nouns, the anti-book book, and a doctrine of signatures.

Thus, the first chapter examines some of Charles Olson's ideas on the composition models of speech and writing as they are put forth in two of his major essays, "Projective Verse" (which he wrote and refined in almost daily correspondence with Robert Creeley) (Paul 34; Butterick n.1, 159) and "Human Universe." This discussion of Olson briefly sketches the theoretical position out of which Wah's poetry first emerged. Chapter Two is a reading of Wah's first five books, Lardeau, Mountain, Tree, Among, and Earth, and the poet's oral response to the textuality of the world.
Chapter Three focuses on Pictograms from the Interior of B.C. and the complex, sustained dialogue with and between speech and writing which coalesces with that book. The fourth chapter explores Wah's research into the issues of form and content as he continues his dialogue with the phonetic, ideographic and pictographic elements of writing in Breathin' My Name with a Sigh, Owners Manual, Grasp the Sparrow's Tail and Waiting for Saskatchewan. Finally, the conclusion extrapolates beyond the books to other aspects of Wah's writing career, namely, his editing, his public performances and his interest in electronic communications, and their implications for his grammatological practice.
CHAPTER ONE: Reoralization and further textualization

Without writing, words as such have no visual presence, even when the objects they represent are visual. They are sounds. You might 'call' them back—'recall' them. But there is nowhere to 'look' for them. They have no focus and no trace (a visual metaphor, showing dependency on writing), not even a trajectory. They are occurrences [sic], events (Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 31).

Charles Olson was one of several then avant-garde poets who visited Vancouver in the early sixties and whose enthusiasm, encouragement, talk, and writing became extremely important in the intellectual and poetic development of a number of very young poets who subsequently became identified as or with the Tish group. The now legendary Poetry Conference held at the University of British Columbia in July 1963 was the primary catalyst for a torrent of writing activity which still shows no signs of abating: several of the former Tishites are among the most interesting and prolific writers, editors and critics in Canada today.

Although Wah studied with each of Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley and Charles Olson, Olson was and for the most part still remains the most powerful influence upon him. Today, of all three, it is still Olson by far whom he most readily refers to when asked to discuss in depth the origins, technique or stance of his own work. Having been teasingly accused of failing to "kill his father," Wah is ambivalent about invoking Olson in this way. However, his own style and poetics have evolved a considerable distance from Olson's. Acknowledging one's influences is very different from failing to move beyond them. Wah himself has
characterized his relationship to Olson's legacy as follows: "I'm not trying to be like Olson, but I'm such an Olsonite in my roots that I can refer to him because I know his poetry" (Banting). In this chapter I will briefly outline Olson's position with regard to the composition models of speech and writing as it emerges in two of his seminal essays.

In "Projective Verse," his landmark essay on poetics, Charles Olson announced a reaction against poetry based on writing and called for a revitalization of the poetic act through a return to the speech model. For Olson "that verse which print bred" had become inert, and he wished to incite a poetry susceptible to the "possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings." He associated the written model with introspective poetry, "what you might call the private-soul-at-any-public-wall" type of poetry, and for him introspection was based on a derivative and outworn metaphysic:

Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his
advantages, particularly at that moment that he achieves an humilitas sufficient to make him of use. It comes to this: the use of a man, by himself and thus by others, lies in how he conceives his relation to nature, that force to which he owes his somewhat small existence. If he sprawl, he shall find little to sing but himself, and shall sing, nature has such paradoxical ways, by way of artificial forms outside himself. But if he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share. And by an inverse law his shapes will make their own way. It is in this sense that the projective act, which is the artist’s act in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than the man (Olson, "Projective Verse" 156).

Olson’s protest was against rhetorical devices, inherited verse forms and a process of consolidation and atrophy in poetry. It was not a protest against writing as such. However, his overall stance in "Projective Verse" was phenomenological and therefore situated, despite his desire to be rid of "the lyrical interference of the individual as ego," within the logic of identity and all the other attendant biases of the logocentric position. Vincent Descombes in Modern French Philosophy describes the "haemorrhage of subjectivity" inherent in the
phenomenologist's position:

Ultimately, the contradiction of French phenomenology lay in its effort to dispute 'objective thinking', which had been responsible for antitheses of the kind, 'soul and body', while attempting to do so by means of a return to an authentic cogito. . . . In choosing to remain 'within the Cartesian perspective of philosophies of consciousness', phenomenology is incontestably idealist. It has merely refined the correlation between the thing reduced to object and thought reduced to consciousness. . . . Phenomenology is thus imprisoned within the 'closure of representation' (as Derrida calls it), inasmuch as it retains the principle of the subject. . . . 'Subject' . . . is the name given to a be-ing whose identity is sufficiently stable for it to bear, in every sense of the word (sustain, serve as a foundation for, withstand), change or modification. The subject remains the same, while accidental qualities are altered. Since Descartes, the most subjective of all subjects is the one which is certain of its identity, the ego of ego cogito (76).

The phenomenologist declares the subject surpassed when it has merely disguised or hidden itself in other forms of subjectivity. Olson's proposal of the "proprioceptive" self as the basis for composition--the emphasis on the physiology of the body, its interiority and sensations--was an attempt
to replace the 'I think' with 'I perceive.' But then he found himself in the position of having to invent the intermediary of "projective" verse as a way to get outside this interiority, a way to slip the figure of identity in through the back door. For the phenomenologist, this dialectic between inner and outer is very problematical. There still persists the ultimate trespass between subject and object, between subject and predicate, between the 'I' and the 'perceive,' and the phenomenologist must still beg forgiveness for these trespasses, if only so as to be able to hear the sound of his own voice reaffirming his being in the world.

Jacques Derrida describes this phenomenon of the split subject in some detail in one of his essays in Writing and Difference:

As soon as I speak, the words I have found (as soon as they are words) no longer belong to me, are originally repeated . . . . I must first hear myself. In soliloquy as in dialogue, to speak is to hear oneself. As soon as I am heard, as soon as I hear myself, the I who hears itself, who hears me, becomes the I who speaks and takes speech from the I who thinks that he speaks and is heard in his own name; and becomes the I who takes speech without ever cutting off the I who thinks that he speaks. . . . Henceforth, what is called the speaking subject is no longer the person himself, or the person alone, who speaks. The speaking
subject discovers his irreducible secondarity, his origin that is always already eluded; for the origin is always already eluded on the basis of an organized field of speech in which the speaking subject vainly seeks a place that is always missing ("La Parole Soufflée" 177-78).

In fact, not even speech itself supports the illusion of identity, though the phenomenologist has an investment in maintaining that it does. For Olson, if identity were truly surpassed and distinctions such as inner and outer dissolved, then there would be no need for projection. In other words, Olson erased "the 'subject' and his soul" from the position, as he saw it, between man "as a creature of nature" and the world of objects and substituted in its place the problematical "projective verse."

Olson can be seen engaged in such bridge-building in statements like "a poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader" ("Projective Verse" 148) and "the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE" ("Projective Verse" 151), and others, where form is indeed never more than an extension of content, as Olson's breathy syntax attempts to heave itself across the binary gap. Olson, like all phenomenologists, has trouble dealing with the issue of language itself. For him, language is breath, breathing, perceptions moving immediately and directly to further perceptions. It is bits
and parts of language—syllables, questions of form and content, energy in a field, line, rhetorical figures. He necessarily privileges speech because "(speech is the 'solid' of verse, is the secret of a poem's energy), because, now, a poem has, by speech, solidity, everything in it can now be treated as solids, objects, things" ("Projective Verse" 152). Speech is a solidity, a ground, a presence, a bridge, between inside and outside. And speech gives the illusion of preserving identity and origin in a way that writing destroys: "What we have suffered from, is manuscript, press, the removal of verse from its producer and its reproducer, the voice, a removal by one, by two removes from its place of origin and its destination" ("Projective Verse" 153).

But Charles Olson's poetics is not founded upon a simple opposition between speech and writing. Although he sees language as an instrument of presence (in "Human Universe" he faults the ancient Greeks for declaring "all speculation as enclosed in the 'UNIVERSE of discourse' ") (162), he also makes a number of statements which suggest that he does see language as a self-referential system, a system of signs predicated not upon sameness but difference. For example, he writes:

> every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we
call the objects of reality; and that these elements are to be seen as creating the tensions of a poem just as totally as do those other objects create what we know as the world ("Projective Verse" 152).

Furthermore, he praises the invention of the typewriter for the machine's ability to precisely notate the oral reading of a poem, to provide "a script to its vocalization" ("Projective Verse" 154). He traces the source of decadence in contemporary verse to the survival, in print, of oral memory devices and rhetorical mnemonic aids "after the oral necessities were ended" (155), and rejoices that the ear can now be freed by script to discover language's other resources. He notes, paradoxically, that in order to restore these other resources, such as "tongue" or "shout," as he names them, "several of us got back to hieroglyphs or to ideograms to right the balance" ("Human Universe" 162). No, Olson's quarrel is not with the act of writing and its inevitable distancing of the self from the world. Rather, the distinction he makes in his most significant essays is between "language as the act of the instant and language as the act of thought about the instant" (162). His struggle is against the reductive tendencies of logic, quantification and classification, which are writing effects, of course, as Walter J. Ong and others have noted. What Olson argues for is a kind of dialogue between speech and writing which will revivify poetry by opening up new areas of language and consciousness.
George Quasha places Olson's poetics within the context of what he sees as a general project in American poetry and poetics of "reoralization and further textualization." Quasha agrees that "Olson is not arguing for speech over text but for a return to certain immediate energies and modalities of attention that the history of discourse has diminished. He offers a strategy to 'right the balance' " (Quasha 487). In a conversation with Quasha, Robert Kelly, a poet whose work Quasha links with Olson's, offers the term "mouth-writing." For Kelly the problem is how to " 'write down the mouth.' " Writing on the page is " 'the index and printout of what one's mouth is doing' " (quoted in Quasha 501).

The appeal of the oral model, then, lies not in its privileging of being but rather in its potential for erasing a single author as the sole origin of (and author-ity over) a given text and in its ability to take the reader "to the root of composition itself, where the generalizing intelligence is shunned, altered, or supplanted" (Quasha 488). Processual poetry or projective poetry is self-referential--metapoetry or parapoetry as Quasha calls it. Quasha marks this strategy of reoralization of the written as the beginnings of postmodernist poetics. He lists the salient characteristics of postmodern poetics as follows: self-awareness, uncertainty as practice, altered states of discourse, the difficulty and uninterpretability of the text, processual and open alignment, and
reoralization/further textualization (Quasha 494). We will return to these elements later in discussion of Fred Wah's work.
CHAPTER TWO: Voice and trace

Such a "work of enigma" is "poised between sense and nonsense"; it is "a revelation which is equally a re-veiling" (Marjorie Perloff, quoting Roger Cardinal, 29).

In Fred Wah's first five books, he begins, like Charles Olson, from speech, the push of the breath, and the local place. Commencing with his first book, Lardeau, and continuing through all his subsequent books, the self in Wah's poetry is more intimately tied to place than to any other variable. Geography, home, heart, roots, and family are very important to him as the constituents of place.

The first sixteen poems in Lardeau are discrete lyric poems on various subjects--love, remembered experiences, art, work, the anecdotal and popular histories of place. In these poems, Wah, "contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force" (Olson, "Projective Verse" 156), assumes a proprioceptive stance. "In the Afternoon, Sunday" is a particularly good example:

Glance at its white
not
at its birch bark

where are
the bare grey branches branching
against the spring snow
which is melting

to where they
glance white
in grey bare
air, are dancing
on the hillside
a hill you look up
at the birches in March
which fill
the west side of the mountain
white
or part of a mountain
is part white
and the sun
not part white
at all.

To see this
is like a mud road
to pull over to
step out on the dirty snow, move
back from you
stop
smile
click
with the sun behind me
as close as I can plot
behind the clouds.

The picture comes out
most white, with a face
somewhere, I
remember the grey
but the trees
are not there.

In the process of recording its perceptions of the natural world, the poet's perceiving consciousness breaks open sentence structure. Perceptions are recorded, revised and re-revised. In this process, the poem becomes as much a detour through language as through the physical world. The drive of the sentence toward closure is delayed, forced to detour over "a mud road/ to pull over to/ step out on the dirty snow." The people in the poem, traditionally the centers of consciousness, the speaker and a second person, are under erasure. They are really only present as pronouns and only insofar as they have taken into themselves the surrounding environment. But when the photograph is
developed, the trees have disappeared and the face of the second person has co-opted the framed space.

Another poem from the first section of the book Lardeau, "Acrobat on a Ball," also deals with the stasis imposed by the act of framing and by art. Although acrobats, balls and horses are things noted for their motion (Bowering 18), nothing moves in Picasso's painting of a boy balanced on a ball. Wah supplies the absent details because "behind the last hill is not there"

though a man runs
down a mountain path
which ends
when he steps into
a dark forest

the tall trees hide
where he runs on to
& sway in the wind

when the moon begins
by then
the man is not there

though the moon moves
behind the last hill
& the stillness is too

Whereas formerly in the painting, everything was caught in eternal stasis, now everything is moving, even the stillness. Notice that Wah sets things in motion by temporarily adding another human figure, but the figure which he adds is not one simply cut out of his imagination to match the painting. Rather he adds himself, with his own mountain paths and dark forest, as the proprioceptive consciousness which allows the artwork to come to life again. Against the principles of framing, unity and balance
(the acrobatic trick), Wah proposes an imagination never divorced from the poet's own local core, an aesthetic based on actual kinetic motion, blur, erasure, disjunction, revision, delay, breakage, receptivity, and the possibilities of language. Wah suggests that language, conceived of as a temporal art, allows for greater possibilities of expression than language as a spatial construct. The implication is not that the visual arts are more static-prone than poetry or prose, but that the traditional aesthetic common to both is based upon a humanistic perspective where control is paramount and the visual sense dominant.

In what is probably his earliest published statement of poetics, from the first issue of Tish in 1961, Wah wrote, echoing Olson in both content and style:

The origin of the poem is an action (interaction, reaction) between the poet and the actual living forces in our environment (objects, human behavior, facts and events). There is that percussive and reverberating energy released from a cathexis of the poet on contemporary reality--a merging of himself with his natural surroundings, aiming at establishing a connection between language and reality. And this alliance, this new equilibrium set up, is the energy of musical release which is the poem, be it good or bad.

Here is the poem as an energy preserving object. It must preserve the instants of the poet's own dance
with his environment—the melodies, rhythms, and structures found in unique contact with environment and response (Davey, Tish 23).

If the goal of "In the Afternoon, Sunday" and other short poems in the first half of Lardeau is to create "a connection between language and reality" within the lyric poem as "an energy preserving object," then that of the second half of the book, the title section, is to experiment with the potential of the long poem to connect word and world. Each of the poems in the title section is a discrete unit and separately titled, but the sustained meditation on place which they form is actually a long poem. (The final poem in the series is subsequently expanded to become Wah's second book, Mountain, discussed below, which is also a long poem). This section takes its name from a mountain in the Kootenays where the Wahs live. The title of the poem is also the name of the home place, the poet's literal address. Or, to put it another way, the poet's address (where he lives and receives his mail) is the subject of his address (the action between the poet and his environment). Writing is co-respondence (not a mimetic correspondence)—dialogue—between language and reality.

As English professor, editor, patron, and mentor, Warren Tallman was a vital catalyst of the writing scene in Vancouver in the early sixties. In his very helpful essay on the Tish poets and their precursors, Tallman writes: "in the proprioceptive sentence self becomes the subject, the
writing becomes all verb, and the object is life, to LIVE. . . The proprioceptive artist is reaching toward a mode of writing, modes, forms, which will let life take place" (Tallman 179). The poet "bodies" himself forth via speech, the breath of life, and via the actual time-space occasion. In this sense, writing becomes notation for, to use Wah's terms, the "cathexis of the poet on contemporary reality" (Davey, Tish 23). The poet becomes an amanuensis of his or her own life events, ideas or images, and writing is "somehow 'among' these images and events, participating as long or often as the energy lasts or recurs" (Tallman 182).

Hence the Tish poets' preoccupation with the serial or long poem, which passes from episode to episode, occasion to occasion. Life is writing. "Life shall be art in order that the art shall be life" (Tallman 206). Paradoxically, Tallman sees the act of writing as both no more than the notation of a life and as all of life: "to be as fully alive as one can manage by way of sight, hearing, thinking, feeling, speaking--that is, writing" (194). Writing is both subservient to speech and that which subsumes speech.

Wah's second book, Mountain, a short long poem, is an accumulation of perceptions and language around mountain as both object and place. There is no single, centered ego in this poem. The I is present in many physical sites on and around mountain, in addressing other beings, in time, and in its own desire. But the I is not everywhere in a transcendental sense. There is a strong sense of presence,
but it is dispersed throughout the language of the poem. Apostrophe is a prominent structural and generative device: "O Mountain that has come over me in these years of fiery desire/ burns on your sides your many crotches rocked/ and treed in silence from the winds." Wah addresses mountain, creek and birds as Other, but not in the traditional sense of Other as that which is simply outside oneself. For him these are significant Others, with "which" or "whom" (language betrays its prejudices) he has discourse. Thus there is an unstated, though implicit, suggestion in this book that what usually is subsumed under the name of nature has a language of its own, and the poet in speaking does not speak in its stead. Hence, in *Mountain* there is no description as such, but address, apostrophe, exclamation, an invitation to discourse, even prayer:

```
O creek song flow always an utter pure of coolness
spring from the rocks
sing in the hot thirst my sticky tongue
my jaw catch below the bridge
Yes my jaw for your waters hangs
catch of water soothe the sweat
sweet cold on teeth in flow and eddy
in swirl my gut it fills and bloats with fluid
Mountain.
```

The poet speaks of "fluid mountain" in his mouth and gut. His jaw opens to receive mountain in a gesture of communion in which the sacrament is both mountain itself, its waters, and language. Language enters the poet's body from the place, the object. To which he returns language in his poems as he opens his mouth in the circular 0 of his address.
Wah's use of the exclamatory O situates the articulating subject on the borderline between speech and writing. As Smaro Kamboureli writes, in her article "Fred Wah: A Poetry of Dialogue":

"O" as an exclamation articulates both the body's awakening and the mind's initial step toward a realization. It occurs at the threshold of signification, on the interface of speech and writing. "O" is pure voice, yet it is also a letter, a word. For the tongue, at that moment's surprise, gives to the voice the shape of a letter, drawing within the cave of the mouth a form that reminds us that both the eye and the ear work together (49).

Mountain writes itself on Wah's tongue, and it is in the process of uttering (outering) this writing that it becomes speech. At the same time, the split subject of speech—which is not identical even unto itself, and whose words are not its own, as Derrida explains¹—merges in part with the phenomena of the world. It is in this way that Wah re-embeds discourse in the world of events.

But there are as many "eyes" as "O's" in Mountain. Although sight has primarily distancing, framing and motion-stopping effects, yet "seeing is the first gesture of the movement toward inscription, the graphic exposure of signs that tells the story of the identity of things and of the poet" (Kamboureli 47). Kamboureli delineates Wah's antihumanism and his largely non-referential use of language.

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as the factors which enable him to discover the textuality of the world or what she calls "the alphabet of things" (46). That is, because his language is non-referential, it does not operate as a window on the world; it prevents him from being "a mere beholder of the spectacle of the world" (59). On the contrary, Wah writes himself into the dramatic narrative inherent in the textuality of the world.\(^2\)

But if Wah initiates a dialogue between his own scriptive responses and the alphabet of things, it is not a silent dialogue. Kamboureli notes that "his 'delight' in making inner" is not accomplished solely through the eye. He moves from the labyrinth of the world to the labyrinth of the ear" (48). After quoting excerpts from Mountain and Among, she continues:

In both examples, the word is present in the world not only as a scriptum but also as sound and speech. As Wah says, "The collisions of sound implicate a rhythm, the actual sound of coin when counting" [Davey, Tish 83]. Sound is directly related to the thing, and speech is equally related to the process of perception and its articulation. . . . In Wah's writing there is no conflict between the eye and the image/scriptive response it generates and the ear that records the sounding of the world (48).

In Wah's poetic, speech and writing participate equally in the processes of perception and recording. This is not to insinuate, however, that the differences between voice and
trace are dissolved or ignored by Wah. Nor, as we shall see, does it mean that his writing is in some sense "uncontaminated" by these differences, pure.

The first poem of Among begins as follows: "The delight of making inner/ an outer world for me." In this book and in Tree, both published in 1972, as well as in Earth (1974), Wah zeroes in closer on the bridge, gate, or "shore" between language and reality, inner and outer. The epigraph to Among is "Hey Dad/The Shore/Oh Dad/The Shore", and the title of the book itself points to this site of the inbetween. Warren Tallman writes, of Tree: "Tree, one of the most beautiful poems to emerge from the west, is also one of the most consciously proprioceptive, celebrating a literal affinity with trees-in-himself in a speech so deeply musical that it sways tree thoughts, presences and impulses into the words" (200).

The front cover of Tree is a photograph of Wah among trees in the forest. On the title page is a drawing of the poet and a tree, and Wah's legs encased in bell-bottom or flare-leg trousers are drawn to resemble the trunk of a tree. Among, a Coach House book, is a beautiful example of that press's uniformly excellent book design. The cover is composed of two layers, an under layer with a photograph of trees in a forest which wraps around continuously from front to back, and an over layer with the identical image printed on thin translucent paper. Each page in the book is printed with the same forest image, which moves slightly in position
from page to page. The reader is reminded that books, after all, are written on "leaves" of paper which announce not only the messages of language but also the death of a tree. Even the word "book" is cognate with "beech" as in beech tree. The image of the forest is also one of "trees clasped by terrified letters, the wood wounded by poetic incision" (Derrida, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," Writing and Difference 72). For Wah, a book is not only a publication of his work, but an object, or signifier, itself. 3

These two books, especially Among, border on becoming metonymies for trees, rather than, conversely, the concept of the book proposing nature as metaphor of its own closure and completeness. The metonymical book is part of a tree; it does not substitute for and refer to the natural world as a totality. As Jacques Derrida writes, in his chapter "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing":

The idea of the book is the idea of a totality, finite or infinite, of the signifier; this totality of the signifier cannot be a totality, unless a totality constituted by the signified preexists it, supervises its inscriptions and its signs, and is independent of it in its ideality. The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing (Of Grammatology 18). Wah dismantles the traditional mechanism of the book by producing a book which does not refer beyond itself to a
grid of meaning, a totality of signifieds which supervises its inscriptions. His books are part of the natural world. For him, the world and the book are equally physical, textual. It is worth noting in this regard that, with the obvious exception of his selected volumes, Wah almost always publishes his books out of the place in which they were written. It would be possible to read backward from the publication data for most of his books to find out where he was located during the time of their composition.

The final poem in Tree gives an almost direct statement of Wah's "image/ascriptive" orientation to language. He writes:

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

Reference is elusive because for him both spoken and written words verge on dissolving into images of themselves rather than pointing to signified objects. Wah's characteristic response to any language is to the word as graphic, as thing. As he says in "Mrs. Richard's Grey Cat," "I'm not making that referential, I'm not saying that that's referring out, to something outside in the world, in the image, but that it operates in my mind as image because I see what's going on in my response to it" (Wah 62).

Walter J. Ong argues that it is writing and the psychic interiorization of the alphabet that develops in a
chirographic culture which allows words to be conceived as things:

Writing makes 'words' appear similar to things because we think of words as the visible marks signaling words to decoders: we can see and touch such inscribed 'words' in texts and books. Written words are residue. Oral tradition has no such residue or deposit (Orality and Literacy 11).

As a citizen of chirographic, typographic and now even electronic culture, Wah sees words as physical objects. In order to move rapidly from one perception to another or to lengthen a perception, as he often does in his work, he is utterly dependent upon writing: "Without a writing system, breaking up thought—that is, analysis—is a high-risk procedure" (Ong, Orality and Literacy 319).

When he moves to the radical disruption of syntax and established thought patterns in the prose poem, as he begins increasingly to do with his fifth book, Earth, Wah's writing becomes in effect a dialogue between speech and writing. He depends upon writing to perform the kind of thought loops which he does and to move as fast as he does, while at the same time he explores the possibilities of reoralizing these written units. He uses the measure of the breath to notate the graphic arrangement of the words on the page. He writes a text which both persists as trace and disappears as spoken event, thereby re-embedding itself in the structure of events. Marjorie Perloff, quoting from an essay by Roger
Cardinal on the poetry of indeterminacy, the kind of poetry which is interested in the play of the surface as opposed to the meanings below the surface, writes: "Such a 'work of enigma' is 'poised between sense and nonsense'; it is 'a revelation which is equally a re-veiling' " (29). In his work, Wah refuses to contemplate or reveal nature, even from a phenomenological perspective; instead he contextualizes himself and his books as part of its operation. If "reoralization" is the phase of grammatology Wah practices in his first five books, then "further textualization" is the phase he initiates with his sixth.
CHAPTER THREE: The poet as theor(h)et(or)ician

As the single-word titles of his first five books—Lardeau, Mountain, Tree, Among and Earth—suggest, Fred Wah names but does not attempt to describe the world in language. George Bowering remarks that a glance at some of Wah's book titles reminds the reader that "here is a poet who responds to the particulars of his ground with an eye to the singularity of each, without any semiological distancing that would be signalled by a 'definite' article" (10-11). Or, as Smaro Kamboureli observes, "Nature predominates in all of [these titles] not as a setting awaiting description but as the natural surrounding in which Wah's presence is embedded in the presence of things" (46). As poet, Wah acts as a medium for the intermingling of the materiality of language and the things of the world. His desire is to re-embed discourse in the world of events. As Wah himself has said: "The language seems very much at home. I don't need a referential language going on" (Nichol, "Transcreation" 45).

Description presupposes a number of givens alien to Wah's poetic. For example, description assumes an exclusively referential use of language. To employ description presupposes that the perceiving subject has a kind of glass partition between himself and reality. This partition is the signifier, the word, which is thought to provide him with a clear view of nature, reality and the Other as signifieds. The unified subject maintains a steadfast belief in his own irreducible self-presence as it
is manifested in speech. The priorizing of the voice represents, in Frank Lentricchia's words, the triumph of "the ideality of meaning" over "the fallen corporeality" of writing. Writing is derogated as the mere transcription of the spoken word. This metaphysics of presence, or logocentrism as it is also called, tries to protect the ideality of meaning by "inventing a residence for ideality--the interior of a consciousness shielded from all exterior contamination" (Lentricchia 177).

In his first five books, Wah explored the potential of a "reoralized" speech model to break through the shielded boundaries of the logocentric, egocentric self and to deliberately "contaminate" this interior firstly by penetrating it with phenomena from outside it and secondly by positing an alternate interior. Instead of the interior of consciousness, Wah proposes the "interior" of the proprioceptive body. With the publication of Pictograms from the Interior of B.C., he shifts from an attack on the interior of the logocentric self (his own and the reader's) to an exploration of speech and writing insofar as they construct his sense of place and of self. The sense of place, the interior of B.C., is now not just the poet's home ground and the subject of his spoken address, as it was in the previous books; this geography is also the site of writing. Locality is the scene of writing. Or, as Wah says, "Home is where the story is" ("To Locate" 111). It is in Pictograms that Wah is most clearly engaged in practising
the twin strategies of reoralization and further
textualization. With this book Wah initiates "a perceptual
descent into the graph" (McCaffery 92).

It must be noted at this point that the terms
"pictograph" and "pictogram" are used interchangeably in
histories of writing and in the Oxford Concise Dictionary.
For purposes of clarity I shall refer to the visual
inscriptions, including in Pictograms from the Interior of
B.C. the reproductions of John Corner's drawings, as
"pictographs" and Wah's verbal responses as "pictograms."
Within quotations from other sources, the terminology may
vary.

No doubt part of the original draw of the pictographs
for Wah was related to their perceptual connection with the
objects they are meant to depict. Pictography is a system
of writing which is not arbitrarily linked through sound
with the world but instead bears a direct and in some cases
nearly universal perceptual relation with things and events.
Most experts consider pictographs as pre-writing or embryo-
writing, in other words, not "true" writing. The
definitions of pictography in several books on the history
of writing bear traces of the scorn of phono- and
ethnocentrism, and the subject is often quickly dispatched.

In a book the title of which immediately indicates his
stake in the metaphysics of presence, Walter J. Ong
describes some of the differences, as he sees them, between
"true" writing and pictography. He lumps pictographs in the
same category as stone monuments, property marks and totem designs:

These and similar steps, insofar as they are not merely magical, serve as aide-mémoires. They encode little. The information storage remains almost entirely in the heads of those who use such creations, which are much more triggers than storage devices. . . . True scripts go beyond the earlier aide-mémoire devices. A script is an organized system of writing, not an assortment of more or less isolated signs, and a system which in one way or another undertakes rather to represent concepts themselves directly than merely to picture sensible objects around which concepts may play (The Presence of the Word 35-36).

In general, Ong tends to use very short uncomplicated sentences when he refers to pictography, whereas as soon as he turns to the subject of "true writing" his sentences lengthen out and become more complex, as if in imitation of the apparently more convoluted forms of thought accessible with the advent of writing. In Orality and Literacy Ong describes how true writing depends upon the establishment of a fixed code, which pictography lacks:

Pictographic communication such as found among early Native American Indians and many others did not develop into a true script because the code remained too unfixed. Pictographic representations of several objects served as a kind of allegorical memorandum for
parties who were dealing with certain restricted subjects which helped determine in advance how these particular pictures related to each other. But often, even then, the meaning intended did not come entirely clear (86).

David Diringer concedes some additional ground to pictography, namely, that it is not "restricted to the recording of single, disconnected images, but is capable of representing the sequential stages or ideas of a simple narrative." He also mentions that pictograms can be expressed orally in any language without alteration of their content, since the images do not represent any specific sounds (21).

This combination of the characteristics of pictographs—on the one hand, their direct perceptual correlation with the objects and events they are intended to depict and, on the other hand, their existence as floating signifiers independent of any specific system of phonetic reproduction—would have had a strong appeal for a poet such as Wah. The actual presence of the pictographs in his locality would have been another attraction for him. In a conversation with bp Nichol, Wah describes how he had decided that during a sabbatical he would translate some Interior Salish texts but found that such texts did not exist. In the meantime he had been looking at John Corner's book, Pictographs (Indian Rock Paintings) in the Interior of British Columbia, and, he remarks, "there was this lovely sense of a very clear
graphic, graphicness, going on" (Nichol, "Transcreation" 35). He realized that "this is what I have to work with" (36), so he decided instead to translate the pictographs. But this objective, he claims, was thwarted by the lack of any existing substantial code. Further analyzing the stimulus of Corner's book, Wah then realized that he was responding not to rock paintings themselves but to Corner's book of drawings from rock paintings. His response was activated not on the level of the signified but of the signifier. Text called out to text.

Hey! It Looks like you got a couple ways in there and a face, me no face.
Show me how you do it and I'll come too. (7)

It was Wah's tendency to think in images, the act of looking, which was the generative impulse behind his own book. His image-response becomes the double of Corner's image-response, which is in turn the double of the responses of the natives who "themselves disavowed any knowledge or information other than the fact they said they were here when they got here, which couldn't be true. I mean the paintings would not have lasted that long" (Nichol, "Transcreation" 37). The origin and originality of Wah's pictograms are deferred just as the origin of the pictographs themselves is concealed and even erased. Hence
Wah selects the term "transcreation" rather than "translation" to name the process of their generation, their birth, as poems.¹

It is important to realize the significance of the act of looking in Wah's transcreative, poetic process. It is the visual transcription not of speech but of actual objects and occurrences that pictographs notate. In Wah's first five books he attempted to notate not primary objects and occurrences but the event of his perceiving of them. In Pictograms he moves to a different plane of activity: in this book he is notating the event of his responding to a notation. One set of signs attracts another set, and the poet situates himself so as to record the crosscurrents of this attraction. Wah has the feeling that "language, no matter how you're using it, in all of its aspects, carries with it all of itself. And though we may be aware of any one point, in this case of paying attention to the minimal reference or paying attention to the production, to actually producing something ourselves, that everything else is going on at the same time" (Wah, "Mrs. Richard's Grey Cat" 58).

But his notative response to a notation still remains grounded at the level of the sign itself. Wah's emphasis on looking in the two interviews with bp Nichol and with Steve McCaffery makes it clear that even his written response, though coded in phonetic language, is also primarily visual:

Glyphs become very interesting to me. . . . And of course I'm very very curious about the ideogram and
pictograph and I don't know enough about them. I want to know more about them. OK, so it's looking, and the transcreation I think, for me, has been looking and then language and then the formation of language but always after looking at these things (Nichol, "Transcreation" 49).

One of the pictograms is especially mimetic of this visualizing process. Wah remarks about his notation of it that "the letters, the phonology, breaks up nearly in the same way the pictograph itself breaks up which was very satisfying imagewise" (Nichol, "Transcreation" 37).

In Kamboureli's terms, "Wah's reading becomes a graphic event" (52). Paradoxically, the pictogram which most clearly looks like its co-responding pictograph does so when the i's/eyes are removed. Or, to put it another way, when the visual is obscured metaphor presents itself and metonymy is displaced.

In a very interesting discussion with Steve McCaffery about the politics of the referent, conducted not long after the publication of Pictograms, Wah repeatedly insists that language for him is essentially a visual experience. He says: "Well I do, I think in pictures, in images and, though
language doesn't elude me in its non-imagic possibilities, basically that's what's happening for me" (Wah, "Mrs. Richard's Grey Cat" 61). Later in the same discussion he modifies his statement somewhat: "I guess I'm talking about image as not only concrete things you see outside yourself and outside of language but as the idea carried in language...

one of my immediate reactions to any kind of language is the 'ideo', 'video', seeing" (62).

The frequency, complexity and even occasionally apparent contradictory nature of Wah's insistence upon the act of looking reminds me that "to look at" is the etymological root of the word "theory." The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language traces "theory" as deriving from the Late Latin theoria, from Greek, contemplation, theory, from theoros, spectator, from theastai, to observe, from thea, a viewing. Our word "theater" also derives from the same root. In "Theoria," the second chapter of his recent Applied Grammatology, Gregory L. Ulmer quotes Martin Heidegger on the meaning of the word "theory." Ulmer writes:

[Heidegger] explains that "theory" stems from the Greek Theorein, which grew out of the coalescing of thea and horao. "Thea (cf. Theatre) is the outward look, the aspect, in which something shows itself. Plato names this aspect in which what presences shows what it is, eidos. To have seen this aspect, eidenai, is to know." And the second root, horao, means "to look at something
attentively, to look it over, to view it closely."
When translated into Latin and German, theoria became contemplatio, which emphasizes, besides passivity, the sense of "to partition something off into a separate sector and enclose it therein . . . " (32).

Walter J. Ong is convinced that by Plato's time in history chirographic consciousness had so established itself in the ancient world that Plato was able to conceive of ideas, the look of things, as the "'really real.'" According to Ong:

Spoken words are events, engaged in time and indeed in the present. Plato's ideas were the polar opposite: not events at all, but motionless "objective" existence, impersonal, and out of time. Forming the ultimate base of all knowledge, they implied that intellectual knowledge was like sight . . .

Basically, the Greek word idea means the look of a thing. It comes from the same root as the Latin video (I see), which yields the English "vision" and its cognates. The ideas were thus in a covert sense like abstract pictures . . . (Ong, The Presence of the Word 34-35).

In this context, Wah's work can be seen as a continuation of Charles Olson's project to find a way of writing that does not continue to "partition reality at any point, in any way" (Olson, "Human Universe" 164). Wah takes to heart Olson's warning that "[Plato's] world of Ideas, of forms as
extricable from content, is as much and as dangerous an issue as are logic and classification, and they need to be seen as such if we are to get on to some alternative to the whole Greek system" ("Human Universe" 163).

At this point we are now in a position to "re-view" Wah's characteristic image-response, his response to John Corner's transcribed pictographs and the meaning of the word "transcreation." Ong's statement about Plato's ideas as being "in a covert sense like abstract pictures" takes us back to Wah's statements about his immediate reaction to any kind of language being to form a picture or image in his mind. The actual effect of Wah's work as seen in this light is to add, almost as if through a kind of veiled catachresis, to the meaning of the word "theory," which has become generally reduced in our time to signify only the process of abstract reasoning divorced from the act of seeing or looking. In his first few books, he concentrated on the proprioception of seeing and of the speech act. In Pictograms he turns his gaze to writing itself--the gram as both the materiality of language and as the locus in which theorizing becomes increasingly possible. In Pictograms he is theorizing that there are other kinds of thought besides those which we commonly acknowledge as theory or rationality. Wah's practice is grammatological.
The feathers of my mind increase
as I reach for the choices
chance for what else
other than what I knew (know)
another talks to me (I think)
something (things) to see
(6).

Although Wah claims that no translations of the
pictographs could be found (Nichol, "Transcreation" 36) so
that he was forced to perform what he calls
"transcreations," this is not entirely true. John Corner's
book does include the anthropologist James Teit's dictionary
of fifty-two pictographs along with some twenty additional
entries appended by Corner himself (Kamboureli 52). This is
not to suggest that Wah is ingenuous in his claim, but
rather that perhaps a certain willful "blindness" inserted
itself as a mark of Wah's resistance to the act of
translation. Those elements of a text which are not
reducible to meaning are those which are of course lost in
translation. The first clue we have of Wah's refusal to
translate is his emphasis, already mentioned, on the
significance of the fact that it is Corner's drawings of the
pictographs which he is responding to, not rock paintings.
Wah declines to read through Corner's drawings to the
signifieds of the paintings just as he refuses to see the
presence of a code that would allow the act of translation
to take place. He also emphasizes that in the process of
composition he would select from the panels only certain
figures; he did not try to create a narrative that would
encompass all the elements of the pictograph. He says that as soon as he had selected out of a panel a few particular figures he would "then get away from that as fast as I could because when I stop to think about it something else is going to happen and I want to stop at that point, i.e. this isn't a meditative process, or a contemplative one, it's very much a time thing" (Nichol, "Transcreation" 36-37).

Wah does not allow space for contemplation, which, as we recall, "emphasizes, besides passivity, the sense of 'to partition something off into a separate sector and enclose it therein'" (Ulmer 32). He does not allow his theory to spatialize itself; rather he insists on remaining within the temporal. He saw himself during composition as a mediator for a "trans" process that was coming over to him (Nichol, "Transcreation" 38).

This "trans" includes looking and language, and also narrative. Wah's own personal story, his life, comes in as part of what is being transcreated (Nichol, "Transcreation" 39). In the following example, his father comes into the pictogram:

Northeast
(from family, a few friends)
I turned
since I had accompanied my father
that far
what was in the world around here became larger
some part of it
then all of it

(17).

And in the next pictogram Wah's playing trumpet in a jazz band known as the Kampus Kings comes in:

How does the jazz go?
Autumn moon a bit drunk
in the tree-tops with Wind (north) & Pacific cloud banks
about 1959 not quite
jamming it but from here
to the coast one big
triple high C and wetter
than a duck's ass just
a sliver of a harvest moon.

(15).

Narrative is important to Wah, as we shall see in more detail later, but he is wary of it at the same time. In an interview in Writing magazine he says:

I find that I'm not comfortable moving too far into that [narrative line]. I'm more attracted to the poem as an activity that informs me about what's going on in language, in my life, in my perceptions. As a poet one way to get into narrative without going into a prose fiction is through the long poem (45).

Narrative for Wah is not the recuperation of the past. Rather it is what is presently going on "in language, in my life, in my perceptions." When the word "I" is used in a pictogram, it refers to a figure in the pictograph but "it's also, the figure becomes me," Wah says. "It's a drama" (Nichol, "Transcreation" 41). Narrative is the dramatic dialogue Wah carries on with himself in the act of writing.
This definition of narrative as the dialogue the poet carries on with himself in the act of writing relates to Wah's use of the middle voice. He was introduced to the concept of the middle voice in Charles Olson's graduate classes. In "GRAMMAR--a 'book' " Olson wrote that in the middle voice the subject is represented as acting: on himself, for himself or on something belonging to himself (Additional Prose 29). The middle voice does not occur in English, but it does in Greek. I shall let Smaro Kamboureli describe it: "it is, as its name suggests, neither active nor passive. The action of the verb returns to the grammatical subject that performs the action. That is, the acting subject and the object affected by the action are the same person or the same thing" (58). Because English does not have the middle voice, Wah attempts to create its effects through the manipulation of temporality. He says:

My sense is . . . that it has to do with tense, it has to do with time, middle voice has to do with time. My sense of searching for a middle voice has been working between a kind of gerundial, participial thing, and a pronoun. Like I could say, 'I floating': rather than 'I float' which is too direct. A condition . . . 'I floating' . . . if I could state that. I work towards that. So I was aware of that [in Pictograms] but I was aware of that in Earth (Nichol, "Transcreation" 48-49).

It is in part the use of a kind of synthetic middle voice which produces in the pictograms the double reference
of the "I" as both Wah and a pictographic figure. In addition to the use of gerunds and participles, Wah's use of subjunctive and imperative constructions, as well as his use of apostrophe, questions, exclamations, lists, and onomatopoeic words are also incremental in creating the impression of the middle voice. In the following pictogram, a synthetic middle voice is achieved through recording a kind of inner dialogue (action performed for oneself) and through onomatopoeic effects:

On my way to get a pail of water
which way
down by the creek
down by the dark
and in the trees the night
buhdum, buhdum
bdum bdum bdum

(4).
The time of the poem is the time of the composition of the poem. The incident of utterance is the moment of poiesis. Event and writing are coincidental.

Even in its personal subjective sense, the pictogrammatic I/eye is not a place where the reader can find Wah as a stored-up subject unquestioningly restored. If the eye is that with which one applies, as Wah says, "a tactics of syntax to any picture you look at" (Nichol, "Transcreation" 49), then the "I" is, following Emile Benveniste, nothing other than " 'the person who utter the
present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance 'I' (quoted in Barthes, "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" 139). In the following pictogram, one of the figures in the panel and Wah merge in the instant of the "I":

I walked into a battle
with the forest
I tried on the buffalo-horn headdress
things happened to me
visions and pictures
two or three signs

I pushed one way
and I pushed another way

size gave dance to me
the deer showed me form

the larval, it
opens up

(23).

Both addresser and addressee are identical or, in temporal terms, simultaneous. The action of the verbs returns to the grammatical subject that performs the action. In this sense, Wah's synthetic middle voice is performative. That
is, the statements in the above pictogram accomplish the acts to which they refer. It is in this performative sense that Wah's identification with figures in the pictographs constitutes, as he says, a drama (Nichol, "Transcreation" 41).

Roland Barthes contends that the present state of the verb "to write" is exactly middle voice. According to Barthes, in the case of the middle voice, "the subject affects himself in acting; he always remains inside the action, even if an object is involved. The middle voice does not, therefore, exclude transitivity" ("To Write" 142). At least for the poststructuralist writer, "to write" "is to effect writing in being affected oneself; it is to leave the writer . . . inside the writing, not as a psychological subject . . . but as the agent of the action" (142).

Barthes's strategy in proposing this model of the writing subject, he says, is to "substitute the instance of discourse for the instance of reality" (144). It is in this sense of the middle voice and of writing, then, that Wah's grammatological practice underwrites the dialogical play between pictogram and pictograph, incorporating both the poet and the figure in the pictograph, both the spoken and the written subject(s), both reoralization and further textualization. This double discourse of Wah's grammatology is dramatic and performative, not expressive or demonstrative. In other words, one could say that the desire in Wah's poetic practice is to move "theory" and
"theater" closer to their common etymological root.

So far we have been discussing Wah's role as a mediator who does not meditate: he does not maintain a stable position in discourse. He actively looks at things but does not partition reality into separate sectors and then passively contemplate it. His personal self is used as a vehicle for a knowledge practice and is not explored for its own sake. Nor are his image-responses to objects and events so much as to language itself. He refuses translation, which operates primarily at the level of the signified, but embraces transcreation, which functions at the level of the signifier.\(^3\) For him, narrative is the dialogue he carries on with himself in the act of writing. Narrative is the story of the story. His approach is theoretical, in the sense established above. The point where these statements converge and how they relate to the dialogue between speech and writing can be located in Wah's model of composition.

In a review of *Considering How Exaggerated Music Is*, poems by Leslie Scalapino, a writer whose work he admires a great deal, Wah observes:

She tries to write partly the way someone would talk but also the way someone would think so the writing is like a record of the actual occurrence (and concurrence) of language and thinking where the syntax isn't formal and preset but natural. . . . The syntax moves very quickly so that the sweep of thinking and

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saying is amazingly particular. She is able to focus on words and thoughts as particles in motion; we don't stop at any point with some glib comprehension but keep adding up, figuring out (9).

Scalapino's work is similar to Wah's but she does not disrupt syntax to anywhere near the extent that he does. Wah praises one sequence in Scalapino's book as "a wonderful illustration of the revolutionary aspect of the larger uses of paradigmatic thought-suffixes; large chunks of mind-rhyme generating further and further prehension" (9).

Writing partly the way someone would talk but also the way someone would think so the writing is like a record of the actual occurrence and concurrence of language and thinking is precisely the activity which I have chosen to call Wah's theoretical method. This technique is evident throughout all of his work but one of the best illustrations may be taken from his series on notation written for one of several special issues of *Open Letter* on the topic of notation. The pieces in this series are a particularly clear example of this technique because the context of their publication dictates that they are supposed to be theoretical. The lack of distinction between Wah's overtly theoretical work and his creative work collapses the distinction itself. "Music at the Heart of Thinking" is the title of the series:

Getting to hear the language rather than see it in French over my head fingers want to touch the sight of
the letter oral tactile thing hunger in another
glue the wolf's ear to make it up before it happens
to hear it somewhere in my body before the lips touch
the mouthpiece intelligence like that gets carried in
the language by itself the cow simply eats the whole
field I have to practice to get it right and blow
anyway (38).

This particular "mht" happens to point to the difference
between aural/oral and written language as well as to the
phenomenon of "inner speech." Inner speech is another term
for the combined activity that Wah's and Scalapino's double
writing or recording is based on.

Inner speech is a phenomenon investigated by Russian
psychologists and linguists and is a concept which is
absolutely crucial to discussion of Wah's work and therefore
deserves to be treated at some length. One of the best
descriptions of inner speech is that provided by A. N.
Sokolov in the Introduction to his book *Inner Speech and
Thought*. He writes:

In psychology, the term "inner speech" usually
signifies soundless, mental speech, arising at the
instant we think about something, plan or solve
problems in our mind, recall books read or
conversations heard, read and write silently. In all
such instances, we think and remember with the aid of
words which we articulate to ourselves. Inner speech
is nothing but speech to oneself, or concealed
verbalization, which is instrumental in the logical processing of sensory data, in their realization and comprehension within a definite system of concepts and judgments. . . .

. . . however, . . . despite its specificity (soundlessness and fragmentariness), inner speech, far from being an independent entity, is a secondary phenomenon derived from external speech--auditory perception of the speech of other persons and active mastery of all the forms of the spoken and written word. Seen from this viewpoint, inner speech represents a psychological transformation of external speech, its "internal projection," arising at first as a repetition (echo) of the speech being uttered and heard, but becoming later its increasingly abbreviated reproduction in the form of verbal designs, schemes, and semantic complexes operating not unlike "quanta" of thought. From these psychological descriptions, inner speech emerges as a rather intricate phenomenon, where thought and language are bound in a single, indissoluble complex acting as the speech mechanism of thinking (1).

Inner speech is often invoked in film reception theory to account for the way in which the viewer processes the otherwise separate shots of films. Film theorists suggest that inner speech flows into the hiatus between the individual shots to tell the story of the story. Inner
speech, as Sokolov points out, incorporates both speech and writing, as well as graphic images. Its vocabulary frequently acquires "a very individual, subjective significance and is complemented by graphic images" (3). Furthermore, though silent, inner speech has a somatic, proprioceptive component.

L.S. Vygotsky, whose book *Thought and Language* has also been very instrumental in the diffusion of the information about inner speech into critical theory, underlines that "inner speech is not the interior aspect of external speech" but rather is a function in itself. According to Vygotsky, "While in external speech thought is embodied in words, in inner speech words die as they bring forth thought" (149). "The relation of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a continual movement back and forth from thought to word and from word to thought" (125). He places the syntax of inner speech at the opposite end of the spectrum from that of written speech, with oral speech occupying the middle ground. Each is a separate linguistic function and the grammar of thought differs in each (98-99).

Wah credits his reading of Ernest Fenollosa\(^4\) for relieving him of the notion that a sentence must be a complete thought ("Making Strange Poetics" 214). Wah does not reject the sentence per se, but he does set aside the concept of the complete thought. For him the possibilities lie in the notation of inner speech, because such notation allows him to be "standing and watching the writing"
writing." This is the title of a short piece by him on the writing of Nicole Brossard, where he says: "I love it because the activity of the mind in that stance is unpredictable and full of revelation. The speed of the mind, the text of the mind in motion, a life full of signs and information about a life full of signs and information."

And inner speech also allows access to the proprioceptive cavities of the body. Wah admires how in Brossard "the physical, muscular, sensual, sexual impetus for much of her writing becomes the very surface of the language. . . . the physical, sensate images are part of a physical (proprioceptive) movement of the words." He sees her as also working with what I have called a synthetic middle voice: "It is most evident in A Book where verbless, subjectless, and objectless 'sentences' collage snapshot scenarios of the 'strange' process that goes on between word and world." It is significant that Wah also points to Brossard's use of the eye to achieve this synthetic middle voice: "The syntax is constructed with the 'eye' at the center which slows down the mind's habit of skipping too quickly ahead of the language (for the sake of story)." We are reminded of Wah's own picto-ideo-phonographic writing.5

I would argue that much of Wah's work consists of the notation of inner speech, and examples could be drawn from any of his books, but perhaps one of the least obscure examples of the traces of inner speech in Pictograms from the Interior of B.C. is the pictogram, already quoted, which

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begins "How does the jazz go?" where, as bp Nichol remarks with this particular text there's an obvious interpenetration of the two things, . . . it's not a sort of one to one it's actually a flow back and forth between the two [pictograph and pictogram]. It almost goes line for line, almost, not quite, but there's that feeling of going one to the other in the line structure (Nichol, "Transcreation" 39).

In another example, the osprey, which is a "very important personal bird" for Wah (Nichol, "Transcreation" 48), comes into the pictogram. Wah comments: "So I don't know if that's [the figure in the pictograph] an Osprey. I'm not saying that the Lilooet Indians knew that that's the Osprey. I don't feel it matters" (Nichol, "Transcreation" 48). In one and the same movement, inner speech gathers up both Wah's immediate responses to the pictograph and memories from his own personal life story. The flow is an alternative, fluttering, processual event.

This leads us to one of the most important aspects of inner speech for our purposes, namely, its inherent dialogism. The units of inner speech combine and permutate like the "alternating lines of a dialogue." They join and alternate "not according to the laws of grammar or logic but according to the laws of evaluative (emotive) correspondence, dialogical deployment, etc., in close dependence on the historical conditions of the social situation and the whole pragmatic run of life" (Vološinov
Smaro Kamboureli's essay on Wah's poetry has already outlined its dialogical play in terms of the "conversation" between pictograph and pictogram, and between the processes of reading and writing. There are several other dialogues going on within the pictograms themselves, namely, the dialogues inherent in inner speech between thought and language, and between speech and writing, and the proprioceptive dialogue between the body and its experiences. And of course each of these dialogues is in turn carried over into the dialogue between pictogram and pictograph.

It must be clearly understood here that inner speech is not the expression of internal experiences; rather it is inner experience itself. "Experience exists even for the person undergoing it only in the material of signs" (Vološinov 28). There is no translation from inner to outer. The body produces its own signs in the form of "any organic activity or process: breathing, blood circulation, movements of the body, articulation, inner speech, mimetic motions, reactions to external stimuli . . . and so forth" (Vološinov 28). In the next chapter, on Wah's poetic diaries, we will read additional intricacies of the dialogical workings of inner speech.

For Fred Wah, just as experience is its own expression, noesis and poiesis are simultaneous. Theory, which derives from writing, and rhetoric, born in speech, are collapsed into one another.
CHAPTER FOUR: Wah's rebus signature

The key to the production of the text is the author's proper name: the proper name is the permeable membrane (the tympan, the hymen, allowing contamination between the inside and outside) (Gregory L. Ulmer, Applied Grammatology 63).

So. So. So. Ah--to have a name like Wah when the deep purple falls. (Phyllis Webb, from "Sunday Water: Thirteen Anti Ghazals," The Vision Tree: Selected Poems 146)

Fred Wah's first five books present an open, proprioceptive consciousness as an alternative to the shielded consciousness of the logocentric self. His proprioceptive writing makes a radical incision in this logocentric interior to allow present locality to "contaminate" its protected body. His texts, which initiate a dialogue between speech and writing, reoralizing the written and textualizing the spoken, will not reverberate in the hollow echo chamber of the logocentric self and thus do not support self-presence. The ear that hears these texts, whether the reader's or the poet's own ear, is not the unitary receptacle of the self but rather the ear of a subject that is always already at least double by virtue of its investment in the economies of both speech and writing. Although these books--Lardeau, Mountain, Tree, Among, and Earth--are all written out of place, this doubled subject cannot be easily located, as Wah writes in Tree:
this is a hard language to work out
the images keep interrupting the talking
trees keep being pictures of themselves
my words keep meaning pictures
of words meaning tree
and its not easy
to find myself in the picture

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

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

In the books since Pictograms Wah returns to a literal
geography but this geography is the site of absence, the
abandoned place of his birth. "Home is where the story is,"
as he says ("To Locate" 111), but in these most recent books what the story is about begins to incorporate both a local habitation (absent) and a name (under erasure).

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

```
mmm  
hm  
mmm  
hm  
yuhh Yeh Yeh  
thuh moon  
huh h wu wu  
unh unh nguh  
w_______h  
w_______h
```

(*Breathin'*

Breath is the mediator between outside and inside and, in Wah's case at least, between the world outside, even the air, and identity. The name is both the life, the life breath, and the means by which one can "send signs forward." The name is the actual sound of breathing, that divided moment on the lip of speech. In this sense, the sign is no more than a sigh. It is the instant prior to entering the signifying system.)
But the sigh is also a sign. Sig(h)n. Or, as Steven Scobie remarks, "the identification of breath and name is the book's starting point, its original si(g)(h)n" (26). The name is a mark; it leaves a trace; it is a writing on the surface of time:

your name is my name
our name is bones
bones alone names
left-over slowly
to send signs forward
found out needed
knowing names
parts family imprint
left shape all over
us within it
name signed
me name
as our name
added-up knowns
become truths
said-again things
left over after
sedimentary hard
embedded rock to tell

(Breathin')

The name is like bones, residue left over after death, the internal made external. It is a trace that can be read.
The name tells a story. The story for Fred Wah is a mystery plot "within which I carry further into the World through blond and blue-eyed progeny father's fathers clan-name Wah from Canton east across the bridges" (Breathin').

Both the front cover of *Breathin'* My Name with a Sigh and the penultimate poem in the book consist simply of a large schwa. The schwa is the linguistic symbol of the upside-down 'e' which represents an indeterminate sound in many unstressed syllables or, in some phonological systems, a phoneme representing the mid-central vowel whether stressed or unstressed. Scobie points out that the word "schwa" derives from the Hebrew "schewa," an indistinct vowel sound that, like all the vowels in the Hebrew language, was not written. "It is not a letter but the absence of a letter" (Scobie 29). Wah has adopted the schwa, the name of which rhymes with his name, as his sign, or perhaps as a paraph to his signature. When Wah signs his name and stamps his paraph in red ink beside it, as he did on the colophon page of my copy of *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail*, the effect is something like that of a Chinese ideograph.

Thus Wah's playing with his patronymic reveals the picto-ideo-phonographic powers hidden in the name.¹ That is, in the first place, the schwa is a pictographic drawing of the dangers encountered in turning the name into a thing. Just as the schwa borders on silence and absence, so the name, the proper noun, threatens to become a common noun: "wa ter/ otter/ [ahʰ]." In a second sense, the Wah/schwa

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identification suggests that the name borders on becoming an ideogram, perhaps an ideogram for silence. Thirdly, along its phonographic axis, the name gathers to itself the beginnings of all speech, the cry of a baby (wah) and the sound of the breath (wah). [Not to mention the wah-wah-wah of a jazz trumpet in whatever key signature you like.] In Breathin' My Name with a Sigh Wah begins to research his name as a picto-ideo-phonographic reservoir and as a way of finding himself "in the picture."

This picto-ideo-phonographic writing is a grammatological strategy which gravitates toward a kind of writing not based on the logocentric model, not predicated on the hierarchization of speech over writing, toward, for example, the writing of China. Unlike the phonetic writing of the West, Chinese ideogrammatic writing does not reduce the voice to itself. Ideograms are not notations for specific sounds; the various Chinese spoken languages use the same ideograms. Thus ideogrammatic writing developed outside of logocentrism (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 90-91). Picto-ideo-phonographic writing is a way of imagining "the organized cohabitation, within the same graphic code, of figurative, symbolic, abstract, and phonetic elements" (Ulmer 6). It attempts to excise the view of writing as external to speech and speech as external to thought. In Chapter Three, I described how Wah's transcription of inner speech, his writing down of this blend of speech and writing, participated in his general grammatology. The
tripartite script of his picto-ideo-phonographic writing which mimes the inscriptions of non-Western cultures is another phase of his grammatological practice. Wah's story, "within which I carry further into the World through blond and blue-eyed progeny father's fathers clan-name Wah from Canton east across the bridges" (Breathin'), is the narrative of the quest for the (name of the) father and for a grammatological practice. For him, the name of the father is also the name of this other writing.

However, of course, the name of the father, like all proper names, is untranslatable. A proper name is pure reference, an empty signifier, a signifier which resists translation into any other signifier. And Wah's name is doubly untranslatable because his name is or was Chinese: its Chinese characters have been expropriated by the English alphabet. Wah himself can only approach his name in the language of its expropriation: "wah water/ wah water."

when I will be water
was suh
in the distance
ihh-zuh ihh-zuh
water
did you hear me
wa ter
wa ter
otter
\[ ah^h \]
The ideogrammatic name/signature which had been phoneticized into English is re-ideogrammatized as it is raised, along with its paraph the schwa, into the body of the text. Within the text, this oscillation continues as the signature finds breath and is re-phoneticized, reoralized. In its re-phoneticized form, it becomes contaminated with meaning and therefore translatable as it moves from proper to common noun.²

This transformation of the signature into the common noun and its dissemination into the text constitutes another grammatological stroke. That is, the idealization of nomination is reversed, and the relation between word and thing is upset:

The rebus signature, the metonymic or anagrammatic signature is the condition of possibility and impossibility, the double bind of the signature event. As if the thing (or the common name of a thing) should absorb the proper, drink it and retain it in order to keep it. But at the same time, holding it, drinking it, absorbing it, it is as if it (or its name) lost or sullied the proper name (Derrida, quoted in Ulmer 20-21).³

The transformation of one's name into a thing or name of a thing fundamentally alters the grammar of inside and outside and violates the integrity of the logocentric self and, in textual terms, of the book. Autographing the text from the inside, attempting to "frame from the inside" (Culler 193),
creates a radical dispersal of the author's authority. The author forfeits his copyright. Neither the name nor the book is any longer his property. The name no longer properly refers to the author of the book, nor does the book refer beyond itself to a totality of signifieds: "Writing has frequently been treated as a process of appropriation, by which the author signs or signs for a world, making it his vision or his thing; but effects of signature, traces of the proper name/signature in the text, produce a disappropriation while they appropriate. The proper name becomes improprietary" (Culler 192). The author loses his metaphorical correspondence with his book, and both author and book become metonymies within the body of the text itself. The text drinks them both in.

For Wah, the book is not a metaphysical container. The published text of Breathin' My Name with a Sigh is the third draft of a manuscript which also appeared in two other versions as part of Coach House Press Manuscript Editions in 1978 and 1979. As Wah writes in the Preface, "the book is a 'draft,' since each incision (the beachwood, bookwood, and so runes, etc.) changes the whole thing it is a part of. To select out a pattern of things having to do with any of it has to do with all of it." The third draft of Breathin' My Name with a Sigh continues to perpetuate itself in Grasp the Sparrow's Tail: A Poetic Diary and Waiting for Saskatchewan. In the Preface to Waiting for Saskatchewan Wah notes that some of the poems from Breathin' are included in the present
book "to give some shape to the range of forms [the long poem, the utanikki, the prose poem, and the haibun] a particular content ('father') from that long poem has generated." Just as the name of the father generates the drafts of *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*, so successive images of the father generate *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail*. The oscillation within *Breathin'* between ideogram and phonogram is repeated between and among these books. Wah's grammatological practice transgresses the boundaries of the book.

It is significant that just as the titles of *Lardeau, Mountain, Tree, Among*, and *Earth* all refer to "the natural surrounding in which Wah's presence is embedded in the presence of things" (Kamboureli 46), by contrast the titles of two of his four most recent books--*Owners Manual* and *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail: A Poetic Diary*--refer not to nature but to the book. *Owners Manual*, a short book of just eighteen poems, is a continuation of *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.*, without accompanying pictographs, published six years after *Pictograms*. The poems are a series of how-to instructions: "How to Read a Map," "How to Hunt," "How to Go South," "What to Do When You Get There," "How to Clean Up in Spring and Fall," and so on. They are at the same time spiritual guidelines (Douglas Barbour calls them "koans") and notations on the proprioceptive body.

"How to Be Something," for example, instructs
Dream about it
get the head back
into the body into
remembering
skin imprint of shape
into inside
and look at yourself
saying "mmmm"
remember
don't move
let yourself be caught
catch yourself
move
very fast
as fast as you can
as you can.

In a recent interview with me, Wah reluctantly
discussed Owners Manual:

So these [poems] were like instructions. After I
realized that those were all instructional things, I
decided I would not include the pictographs because the
poems themselves were less dependent upon them, or not
so much a transcreation anymore. They were still
transcreative, but I didn't want the trans aspect of
that to be there. I mean I realized after I published
that Pictogram book that that was in a sense a
distraction, or not a distraction, but that people
really got involved in the pictographs as part of the
poem or as how I was dealing with the poem. And I was
interested to note that when you take that away, they
deal with the poem in a different way? A totally
different way. So I took them away. And it's true.
People have no problem reading that book or having me
read the book to them. They never ask me about
pictographs, they never talk about any rock paintings.
At the same time, I could include the rock paintings, and it would be a different book. It would be a different collection. So it's not there and that's what it is and it could be this other. I have the combination. (Laughter.) I know which poems belong to which pictographs somewhere hidden away. I kind of hoped people would forget about that (Banting 17).

In the same interview Wah remarks that he sees Owners Manual as not quite a book because "it's not a form" (17). The effect of Owners Manual, however, is as a kind of anti-book book. It functions simultaneously to extend and to limit the preceding Pictograms of which it is a continuation. The publication of Owners Manual surgically opens the covers of the earlier book, stretching its boundaries, while at the same time suturing them shut. Just as he disseminates his own signature throughout the body of his text in Breathin' My Name with a Sigh, Wah the hermetic poet (more or less shamelessly) steals from his own prior text and then conceals the evidence! Both these actions operate as part of the grammatological project to "break with the investiture of the book" (Ulmer 13).

Furthermore, even though the source pictographs are suppressed, Owners Manual, like Pictograms, engages in a dialogical exchange between writing and speech. In Pictograms this dialogue is enacted between the pictographs and the phonographs or poems. In Owners Manual the poems themselves are also phonographic; their ontology is speech.
based. But the thread which links them to one another (the instructional pattern and the idea of the owner's manual) places them within the written economy. As Walter J. Ong reminds us:

An oral culture likewise has nothing corresponding to how-to-do-it manuals for the trades (such manuals in fact are extremely rare and always crude even in chirographic cultures, coming into effective existence only after print has been considerably interiorized). .. Primary oral culture is little concerned with preserving knowledge of skills as an abstract, self-subsistent corpus (Orality and Literacy 43).

As a text, Owners Manual is a rewrite (but not a revision or re-vision) of Pictograms, its nonidentical twin. For Wah, certain threads or nodes of content generate not separate, self-contained books but ongoing, self-generating texts, or writing. He does not write a contained narrative, with an opening and a closure. In fact, Wah strongly objects to traditional narrative: "The act of writing a narrative I find intolerable. Or the act of even thinking of writing a narrative I find intolerable, because that doesn't seem true. It doesn't seem like anything's a line. My experience of anything is that a line is nothing more than a series of dots" (Banting 15). Or, as Roy Miki observed at the Long-Liners Conference: "Whereas with Fred Wah, for instance, the book becomes a container and there's no other thing to do but break the container and take the covers off,
literally, so you've got drafts--you know, like wind" ("The Lang Poem," discussion 85).

Wah's most beautiful book is the hand-set and hand-sewn Grasp the Sparrow's Tail with its deep indigo cover. In this book too Wah reverses the phoneticization process. In a time when so many books are computer-typeset, Wah chooses to have his China-Japan diary produced by hand and privately printed in Japan, Japan being both the locale out of which it is written as well as a culture based on the ideogram. With this oriental setting, it is only appropriate that it is not the phonetic letters of the father's name but rather his image, his ideo, which informs the book.

The book opens with the dedication "for my Father and his family," followed by a poem about the father in his Diamond Grill restaurant in Canada. "You never did the 'horse' like I do now," the poem begins, announcing a difference between father and son. Son Wah practices tai chi--the "horse" and "grasp the sparrow's tail" are two tai chi forms. The poem is about the son's memories of his father, how he walked and carried himself, and it closes with the recollection "and then you died dancing." These recollected memories of the father are juxtaposed against the subsequent "appearances" by Wah's dead father during the son's trip to China and Japan.

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

July 28
In Vancouver just before trip to China and talk of ways
the writing could get done. J's birthday.

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

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

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

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

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

Roland Barthes's description of the experience of the Occidental in the Orient seems accurately to portray Wah's experience as well. In "Without Words" Barthes writes:

The murmuring mass of an unknown language constitutes a delicious protection, envelops the foreigner . . . in an auditory film which halts at his ears all the alienations of the mother tongue . . . . The unknown language, of which I nonetheless grasp the respiration, the emotive aeration, in a word the pure significance, forms around me, as I move, a faint vertigo, sweeping me into its artificial emptiness, which is consummated only for me: I live in the interstice, delivered from any fulfilled meaning. . . .
Now it happens that in this country (Japan) the empire of signifiers is so immense, so in excess of speech, that the exchange of signs remains of a fascinating richness, mobility, and subtlety, despite the opacity of the language, sometimes even as a consequence of that opacity. . . . It is not the voice . . . which communicates . . . , but the whole body . . . which sustains with you a sort of babble that the perfect domination of the codes strips of all regressive, infantile character. To make a date (by gestures, drawings on paper, proper names) may take an hour, but during that hour, for a message which would be abolished in an instant if it were to be spoken . . . it is the other's body which has been known, savoured, received, and which has displayed . . . its own narrative, its own text (Empire of Signs 9-10).

According to Barthes, for the foreigner there is an immense surplus of signifiers in the ideogrammatic culture, which overwhelms the economy of speech and phoneticization. He or she is enwrapped in the double-valued writing of an "auditory film." He is profoundly aware of sensual significance, not intellectual meaning, the body, not the voice. Wah's poetic record of his travels in the Orient is strikingly similar. For him too the experience is of a carnival of scripts. It is in these scripts that he "sees" his father.

That is, once he is delivered from the "alienations of
the mother tongue" into the scriptural carnival that is the
text of China, Wah encounters his father everywhere. "One
morning you were doing tai-chi in a park in Hong Kong."
"I saw you riding your bicycle in a large crowd of bicycles
moving into town from the outskirts." "I caught a glimpse
of you through a window in a roadside eatery gesturing to
someone across from you with your chopsticks." The most
poignant sighting takes place at the Bhuddist caves near
Datong:

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

The repetition of the word "brushed" here is critical. In
addressing his father Wah has stressed that "what always
gives you away is your haircut, your walk, or the flash in
your eyes." "It was always your black crew-cut hair which
most stood out." "You wore a white sleeveless undershirt
and khaki shorts and your brush-cut was shorter than usual,
probably because of the extreme heat and humidity." The
recognition scene is always precipitated by the father's
signature brush-cut. Moreover, the calligraphic writing
instrument is also a brush. So when Wah's father "brushes"
him, the stroke is simultaneously a physical caress and an
act of writing. The son in the act of writing the Canton
poem writes the father, but the father brushes the son into
the poem as well. The baby boy that the man is carrying
could have been, is, Wah himself. Wah's double quest for
his father and for a grammatical practice is inscribed by this single deliberate brush.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Waiting for Saskatchewan is to Breathin' My Name with a Sigh and Grasp the Sparrow's Tail what Owners Manual is to Pictograms from the Interior of B.C. It is a book that lifts the covers off the previous book(s) and opens them up to penetration by additional content. In his preface to
Waiting for Saskatchewan Wah mentions the reprinting of Grasp the Sparrow's Tail, the earlier version of which was privately printed and distributed, and notes that some of the poems from Breathin' My Name with a Sigh "are included in this book to give some shape to the range of forms a particular content ('father') from that long poem has generated." The range of forms includes the long poem, the utanikki, the prose poem, and the haibun.

However, the two previous texts are not simply reprinted. Rather they are selected from, revised slightly and previously unpublished and unwritten material is added. Wah describes the editing process for Waiting for Saskatchewan as a way of including the confusion he says he feels about the issue of form:

So that was another necessity for including that section [from Breathin' My Name with a Sigh] in this book: to say this book, this long poem, is still going on. At least into this other book. And I also wanted to, in a sense, throw up the confusion that I feel about form. . . . I don't know what I'm writing. . . . You know, a couple of years ago I was worried about the long poem. Am I writing the long poem, or am I just writing a bunch of short poems? Or what am I writing? And I don't care, I don't care. I love series, I love things that go on, that generate more, but I guess I'm not as anxious now to look for a container that would hold them all (Banting 15-16).
The actual grammatological effect of this book, however, is its capitulation to content as the main generative device. Wah's aversion to the artificially coercive powers of narrative has already been noted above. For him, what is sacrificed in narrative-driven writing and generally through concern for formal matters is attention to what he calls the simple and bare particulars. As he says in Grasp the Sparrow's Tail, "There is all this tangibility to my life here, things I can touch base with." "I think to try to get to the particular, the minute, underneath the lushness of the ornamental, the specific (therefore simple?), rediscover 'decoration' as useful, function." Wah detailed the "dangerous" tendencies of narrative in his essay "Making Strange Poetics":

But as soon as the poem moves outside itself, away from the prolonged perception of the compositional process, towards habitualization as in predictable repetition or towards the strong narrative cadence of "story" for instance, the poem begins to end. . . . [The poet] must constantly battle with the tendency of narrative to extend. The danger . . . is that it will extend outside the poem into a referential grid which is conclusive (215, 217).

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

At first glance Waiting for Saskatchewan appears to be a collection or selection of Wah's recent and new material, but in fact it exists in a more complex relation than this to the other texts. In a collected text the previous books become versions, prefaces almost, to the later collected text which apparently completes and fulfills them. (Wah's actual Selected Poems includes all his previous books, except the two most recent, which were not yet written when the Selected was assembled.) Waiting for Saskatchewan, on the other hand, includes all of Grasp the Sparrow's Tail slightly revised (there is no selection) plus some of the previous material from Breathin' My Name with a Sigh together with considerable new material from that same book or long poem. The other two sections, "Elite" and "This Dendrite Map: Father/Mother Haibun," which comprise nearly half the book, are completely new material.

Waiting for Saskatchewan, then, is a supplementary text.9 Ostensibly, this book is a plenitude which gives "some shape to the range of forms a particular content ('father') from that long poem has generated."

Paradoxically, however, once the incisions are made in the previous texts in order to open them up to completion, it
becomes impossible to stitch them shut again. Their covers fall away and out of the wound emerges a series of new series, which extend not only forward into *Waiting for Saskatchewan* but backwards into the previous texts as well. The attempt to provide an overall form or "container" for a diversity of forms simply releases additional forms. The sheer multiplication of these hybrid, grafted forms becomes itself the book's content, thus inverting the traditional form-content hierarchy of the logocentric book. As Derrida observes, "The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing. It is the encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against the disruption of writing, against its aphoristic energy, and . . . against difference in general" (*Of Grammatology* 18). Breaking with the investiture of the book is the great stake of grammatological practice, and with *Waiting for Saskatchewan* Wah has produced a book which radically resists its own bookness.

In producing this anti-book book Wah has successfully followed through the process he set in motion with *Breathin My Name with a Sigh* when he transferred his signature from the title page to the inside of the text. The permeable membrane of his proper name, which allows contamination between the inside and the outside of the text, between subject and author, and between content and form, ultimately dismantles the mechanisms of the book as such. For him, in
Breathin' and his subsequent "signature texts," finding the emotional "relief" of "exotic identity" (Waiting for Saskatchewan 62) is also to find a relationship to the geographical relief of home and to the black and white relief of the written surface of the page.

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

Derrida describes the net gain possible in this recuperative strategy:

By disseminating or losing my own name, I make it more and more intrusive; I occupy the whole site, and as a result my name gains more ground. The more I lose, the more I gain by conceiving my proper name as the common noun . . . . The dissemination of a proper name is, in fact, a way of seizing the language, putting it to one's own use, instating its law (The Ear of the Other 76-77).

In his most recent texts Fred Wah's grammatological practice is to seize all aspects of the language--pictographic, ideographic and phonetic--and put them to use in the joint name of father and son.
Conclusion

Fred Wah's poetry is the main forum for his grammatological practice, of course, but it is not the only one. Other aspects of his writing career also chart an ongoing preoccupation with the composition models of speech and writing and play an important role as components of his grammatological operations. For example, it is worth recalling that Wah's career was launched with the startup of Tish magazine. He was not only one of the founding editors of Tish but also assumed the responsibilities of printer. From the very beginning of his career he was directly involved not only with the intellectual but also with the physical production of texts, with the direct imprinting of words on paper without the mediation, at least in this phase of production, of the voice. That is, Wah's job as printer was to convert the Charles Olson-influenced breath-unit poem into the printed, typographic poem.

Secondly, when he publicly presents his work, especially the prose poems, he does not read according to syntactic patterns, line breaks or even rhythmic cadences so much as to the measure of the breath. He takes a deep breath and reads very rapidly, pausing only very slightly when all the air has been pushed out of his lungs to take another deep breath. He does not read according to natural speech rhythms; instead, his oral performance mimes the rapid eye movement of silent reading. He uses the breath, the vehicle of speech, as a notation for the written form of
the poem.

Alternatively, one could say that if Wah's writing is, as I have argued in Chapter Three, a kind of transcription of otherwise silent inner speech (which is actually a combination of graphic images, writing and speech), then his oral-written performance (which has also on occasion included projected audio-visual images) is similarly pictoideo-phonographic. Thus Wah's performances are an integral and critical component of his grammatology.

In 1983, twenty years after the cessation of the original Tish magazine, Wah bought an Apple II computer and together with Frank Davey, the other founding editor of Tish, began to set up the electronic magazine and database known as Swift Current. Wah and Davey have moved past (though not abandoned) oral, chirographic and typographic thinking to electronic thinking and writing operations. Now Wah and Davey, or any other Swift Current subscribers, can "talk" (their term) to one another as often as they like via their computer terminals, modems and telephones, thereby further textualizing the oral, or in a radically new fashion reoralizing the written, by typing their instantly transmitted messages and conversations. As Walter J. Ong suggests, "the electronic transformation of verbal expression has both deepened the commitment of the word to space initiated by writing and intensified by print and has brought consciousness to a new age of secondary orality" (Orality and Literacy 135).
It must be emphasized, however, that Wah's poetic development has not moved on a linear track from oral to written and finally to electronic forms of expression. As I have demonstrated, he has always been interested in the cross-fertilization and hybridization of the different modes of thinking possible under oral, chirographic, typographic, and now electronic means of communication in order that new forms of thought and poetry can emerge. Furthermore, Wah's grammatological practice does not consist in simply privileging another form of expression over speech. Its motive is rather to set speech into a less dominant position in relation to the nonphonetic elements of language. He is interested in the new forms of thinking, perception and relationships with the world that become possible in the dialogical exchange among these different elements of language that are continually shaping our minds. For him, the book is a complex metonymical diagram of one's relations with the world. For Fred Wah the book is a tree, a family tree, a genealogical table, and a restaurant table in the Elite Cafe in Swift Current, Saskatchewan.
NOTES

Introduction

1 In Wah's paper, reprinted in Open Letter, Shklovsky's emphasis of the last sentence has been omitted or deleted. Although Shklovsky is more overtly concerned with aesthetics (Olson would never say that "the object is not important"), the basic similarity between Shklovsky's statement and some of Olson's in his most influential essays on poetry and perception is striking.

2 'Proprioception' pertains to the stimuli produced and perceived within an organism. Olson incorporated the idea of proprioception, as he defined it, "SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES" (Olson, "Proprioception" 182), into his poetics. I refer the reader to his essay.

3 The overall pattern of Wah's work is a passage from the lyric to the long poem to a questioning of the issue of form itself. But none of these phases in his work is exclusive of any other. See particularly Chapter Four of this thesis.

Chapter One

1 Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Margaret Avison, Philip Whalen, Allen Ginsberg, and Robin Blaser were the other avant-garde poets. Fred Wah, Frank Davey, Daphne Marlatt, George Bowering, Jamie Reid, and Gladys Hindmarch were editors or associates of Tish magazine.

2 See "On History," in Olson, Muthologos 1-19, a transcript of a discussion between Olson and several of his fellow luminaries at the 1963 conference.

Chapter Two

1 See the quotation from Derrida in Chapter One, pp. 10-11.

2 The issue of the poet's situation of himself as articulating subject in relation to language and reality is a central one in this thesis. But see especially Chapter Three for further amplification of what Wah calls this "dramatic" contextualization of himself.

3 Seven of Wah's eleven books are unpaginated. The absence of pagination serves to underscore the notion that the book is a physical and not a metaphysical object. The
suspension of page numbers at least partially erases the ideas a) that there is a "right reading" of the book, b) that this right reading proceeds in a linear fashion from front to back, and c) that the book is a precious (copyrighted) container for a totality of signifieds which will be lost if the reader violates these rules for reading. Moreover, Wah's attention to the covers of his books implies that they are not to be viewed merely as part of the "apparatus" of the book, but rather that the covers are as much a part of the total composition as the poems.

Furthermore, on occasion, in his oral readings Wah has supplemented (in the Derridean sense) his voice with images projected on the wall behind him from a slide projector (Nichol, "Transcreation" 51). He was also one of the first poets in Canada to buy a personal computer. And he is co-founder and editor of Swift Current, an electronic literary magazine and database. For Wah the boundaries (covers) of the book extend far out into physical space.

Chapter Three

1 In "Transcreation," the interview with bp Nichol, Wah uses the term "translation" in its simplest, most literal sense in order to more clearly define by contrast what he calls the process of transcreation. The poems in Pictograms, he says, range from literal translations to very loose and tangential connections between the pictograph and the corresponding poem. The transcreations deliberately deviate from and improvise upon the pictographs with no intentions of fidelity to the "original." Furthermore, he emphasizes that he is responding not to the actual rock paintings but to John Corner's drawings of the paintings. My use of the term "translation" throughout the chapter follows Wah's usage and is not to be confused with the much more intricate sense of text translation.

2 "Now that enters into the next body of writing that I'm working on [Breathin' My Name with a Sigh]. The father, family, the father overlaps . . ." (Wah, in Nichol, "Transcreation" 44). Not only does Wah's own father enter the transcreated pictogram, but another of Wah's manuscripts filters in as well.

Please note that the pictographs reproduced on pages forty-two and forty-six are one-half their original size in Pictograms from the Interior of B.C. All other reproductions are the same size as the originals.

3 Another example of Wah's preference for working with signifiers rather than signifieds can be found in his paralinguistic or homolinguistic translations of Nicole Brossard's work. He writes "I have found her writing lends itself to that because it is primarily language (and therefore body) oriented. That is, one can feel more
literally the actual life in the language without necessarily knowing the full range of reference involved" ("Standing and Watching the Writing Writing"). It is interesting to note that in the paragraph immediately preceding this statement Wah draws attention to Brossard's use of the middle voice.

4 Fenollosa wrote the influential essay, "The Chinese Written Character As a Medium for Poetry," which Ezra Pound edited and published. I would suggest that given his own Oriental heritage and the poetic tradition out of which he developed Fenollosa's essay might have been particularly important for Wah. Wah's Pictograms could be read in part as a response to Fenollosa's essay, an analysis of the pictograph as a medium for poetry. See also Chapter Four of this thesis on Wah's meditations on his Chinese name.

5 Picto-ideo-phonographic writing is a double- or triple-valued writing, simultaneously graphic and rhetorical, non-verbal and verbal, which restores speech to a more balanced relation with such nonphonetic elements as the pictograph and the ideograph. This writing practice mimes the picto-ideo-phonographic inscriptions of non-logocentric cultures in order to subvert the metaphysics of logocentrism. For amplification about picto-ideo-phonographic writing, see Derrida, Of Grammatology 87-93 and Ulmer 98-100.

I use the term here to encapsulate Wah's interest not only in the phonetic but also the tactile, sensual and visual elements of writing. Chapter Four contains a fuller discussion of the picto-ideo-phonographic component of Wah's grammatological practice.

Chapter Four

1 See note 5 above.

It has been established that the need to record the proper name was the primary stimulus behind the development of the phonetic alphabet. The names of foreign kings or gods were inscribed on ancient obelisk cartouches with ideographs assigned phonetic value. It is through the decipherment of these proper names that scholars have been able to unlock the codes of hieroglyphic scripts. The proper name, then, is the key to both the history and the theory of writing, and the story of writing is associated with the themes of identity (the name), death, praise, and the fortuitous play of sense (Ulmer 17-18). Jacques Derrida sees the "transformation of one's name, a rebus, into a thing or name of a thing" as "the great stake of literary discourse" (quoted in Culler 192).

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

3 The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines "rebus" as an enigmatic representation of name, word, etc., by pictures etc. suggesting its syllables; (Her.) device suggesting name of its bearer.

4 I am relying here upon the distinction between "book" and "text." The book is dependent upon the idea that a unified totality of signifieds preexists a totality of signifiers, "supervises its inscription and its signs, and is independent of it in its ideality" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 18). The book is associated with ideas of origin, center, linearity, binary opposition, and so on. The book is predicated upon the same kind of thinking which valorizes speech over writing. The text, on the other hand, is writerly. It is that which attempts to subvert these ideas and propose another way of thinking altogether. Verbal productions that are engaged in the science of writing known as grammatology are "texts." However, both books and texts can manifest themselves in the form of the bound object commonly known as the book.


6 It must be noted in this connection that it is not contradictory that this grammatological operation is and will continue to be carried out within the pages of books, for just as writing has no originary point so the book has no end (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 86).

7 Miki is talking about how the long poem as genre transgresses the boundaries of the book. When the long poem acquires a history of its own, he says, it moves outside the control of the poet and the book. The long poem informs the poet not the book. Unfortunately, a discussion of the long poem as grammatological strategy is outside the scope of this thesis.

8 See Ann Munton's essay on "The Long Poem as Poetic Diary," especially pages 97-98. See also Earl Miner's *Japanese Poetic Diaries*.

9 A logic of the supplement is in operation, Jonathan Culler says, when "something characterized as marginal with respect to a plenitude . . . is identified as a substitute for that plenitude or as something which can supplement or complete it." It then becomes clear that "the supposed original plenitude is inhabited from the outset by difference, which is both a division and deferral of plenitude" (Sturrock 168).
I borrow this term from Stephen Scobie's essay.
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