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Fred Wah's Poetry and the Recuperation of Experimental Texts

Andy Weaver

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Article abstract

Fred Wah challenges the binary opposition implicit in the postmodern idea that, as experimental texts expose and explode the artificiality of accepted norms, they are soon recuperated into the mainstream. Wah's theory of synchronous foreignicity privileges neither the reified/modern nor the vital/postmodern; by inclusively pairing the conventional and the radical, it places both author and reader in the "and" or the "hyphen" between binaries. Wah does not identify with any one ethnic group, enabling him to draw from multiple perspectives. His sequence "Music at the Heart of Thinking" exemplifies his notion of synchronous foreignicity. The formal changes defamiliarize the familiar in order to break down reified thoughts and perception without obliterating them. The text itself is both old and new, modern and postmodern, conventional and radical, provoking the reader to an evolution, rather than revolution, in thought.

Synchronous Foreignicity:
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the Recuperation of Experimental Texts

ANDY WEAVER

> "synchronous foreignicity" …: the ability to remain within an ambivalence without succumbing to the pull of any single culture (resolution, cadence, closure).
>
> — Fred Wah, "Half-Bred Poetics" 83

FRED WAH'S POETRY offers a series of challenges to the canon of contemporary Canadian literature; perhaps most puzzling is the challenge of what to do with a writer whose body of work is more than strong enough to be included in the canon but who, at the same time, criticizes the very concept of canon. Should the critics ignore Wah's challenges to the system and grant him canonicity, thereby recuperating his critical challenges by making him part of the system and thus complicit? Or should they allow Wah's formally experimental poetry to remain outside the canon, and thereby deny him the stature he deserves as a writer of the first rank?

Luckily, Wah's writings point the way to a new way of envisioning the relationship between the canon and formally experimental, challenging texts. Through his notion of synchronous foreignicity, Wah exposes and dismantles the binary thinking underlying the notion of recuperation, a notion that plagues formally experimental writing by implying that any formally experimental text that has been canonized must have been complicit with the dominant system all along. Wah's work argues that we do not have to live in the *or* of experimental or conventional, avant-garde or mainstream, radical or conservative. Too often, critics and theorists, intentionally or not, uphold the binary thinking that supports these oppositions. Consequently, they argue that on Monday a text is cutting edge, but on

Tuesday it is passé — without ever explaining exactly what has changed. The tendency to see texts as moving over time from experimental to conventional is an example of rigid, unexamined binary thinking. The call to dismiss or lessen the importance of binary thinking is, of course, by no means new, but critics have generally overlooked the role it plays in the recuperation of formally experimental texts. I would like to suggest, through a focus on Wah's formally experimental poetry and critical writings, that critics must continually open up the notion of the recuperation of experimental texts to new ways of thinking. Wah's notion of "synchronous foreignicity," which he best displays in his ongoing sequence of poems "Music at the Heart of Thinking,"[1] exposes and dismantles the binary thinking put forward in the debate surrounding the recuperation of experimental or avant-garde texts. Wah's work offers a paradigm that abandons the notion of recuperation, with its progression from margin to centre, and with its implicit reification of both the text and the reading and authorial subjects, in favour of a point of view that sees experimental texts as constantly blurring the boundary between reified and vital, recuperated and marginal.

1.

In spite of their obvious differences, theorists who view the recuperation of formally experimental texts as positive, as well as those who view it as negative, both implicitly believe there is a period of time when an experimental text exists outside of the mainstream, in a marginal zone from which the text is eventually grabbed, pulled, or pushed into the centre. Consequently, the notion of recuperation rests on a belief in binary oppositions, although the theorists rarely, if ever, acknowledge this. However, by looking at the work of two representative theorists, Jean-François Lyotard (for whom recuperation is positive) and Paul Mann (for whom recuperation is negative), we can see that a common faith in binary oppositions underlies even their divergent notions of recuperation.

In his foundational 1983 essay "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" Lyotard argues that "capitalism inherently possesses the power to derealize familiar objects, social roles, and institutions to such a degree that the so-called realistic representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery, as an occasion for suffering rather than for satisfaction" (40). It is important to note that Lyotard believes

that derealization is an *inherent* aspect of capitalist society; for him, realism and the reality it attempts to capture are fundamentally fleeting, constantly receding from those who try to define them. More importantly, this derealization affects artists on a basic level; Lyotard states that

> If they do not wish to become supporters (of minor importance at that) of what exists, the painter and novelist must refuse to lend themselves to such therapeutic uses [as realism]. They must question the rules of the art of painting or of narrative as they have learned and received them from their predecessors. Soon those rules must appear to them as a means to deceive, to seduce, and to reassure, which makes it impossible for them to be 'true'. (41)

Although Lyotard does not specifically refer to poetry, his thoughts directly relate to it: all artists/poets who choose to question the rules of art/ poetry are really questioning the rules of reified reality. Lyotard calls these artists/poets postmodern, but they might also be described as formally experimental. These postmodern artists refuse the "correct rules," by which Lyotard means that they refuse to support and propagate the culturally agreed upon rules of realism; these artists, through the formal experimentations they explore in their work, attempt to expose realism as nothing more than the presentation of previously (and likely unconsciously) agreed upon, reified codes. As Lyotard puts it,

> A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*. (46)

Experimental/postmodern artists want to deconstruct and destroy what they believe to be outdated, artificial realism and put in place a series of new, unreified, uncodified forms that better portray the experience of reality. However, because what we take to be reality is constantly being exposed as a constructed facade, new realities, new *artificial* realities, always arise to dominance, supplanting the old realities. Because this process, for Lyotard, is a series of inevitable revolutions, the process is necessarily binary: an experimental text is first postmodern; as such, it is free, unruly, and unruled; it reveals the artificial, fixed codes of the older, reified (modernist) reality.[2]

However, each experimental text will inevitably become fixed in place — that is, the codes it introduces will become (presumably through direct or indirect public education) naturalized and realistic (which is what Lyotard means when he states, "The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*").

For Lyotard, then, it is only a matter of time before each experimental text becomes reified — people will determine and fix the experimental codes. At the heart of Lyotard's formula of recuperation is an unstated assumption that experimental texts, when they first appear, exist in a state of aesthetic freedom; over time, they are symbolically and aesthetically recuperated by the centre and so become useful in describing a reified reality. This is the basic binary that critics generally use when dealing with an experimental text: it is either vital, or it is reified. Of course, Lyotard in no way views this process as negative; to him, it is merely the inevitable process of the arts under capitalism. The implicit argument is that experimental texts, by creating the codes by which they will eventually be judged, perform a valuable role in educating the public and in driving society forward.

Critics who do not view recuperation as positive also support this binary of experimental texts existing in either an unreified or a reified state. In his book *The Theory Death of the Avant-Garde*, Paul Mann argues that the dominant culture will inevitably recuperate any text that attempts to discursively engage with it; the result is that formally experimental arts (which in Mann's analysis is represented by various avant-garde movements) always unwittingly bring about their own recuperation: "Other cultures do not bother to recuperate their margins: they just eradicate them or wall them out. But in late capitalism the margin is not ostracized; it is discursively engaged. The fatality of recuperation proceeds not from any laws of nature but from dialectical engagement, the (never altogether conscious) commitment by any artist or movement to discursive exchange" (15). Where Lyotard views recuperation as positive, Mann sees nothing but doom and gloom:

> The new is destroyed by its own velocity …. The alchemy that Les Levine identified as lead-time dwindles to nothing. The vanguard finds itself in the absurd position of trying to catch up to the army it was supposed to be leading…. The assimilation of the new accelerates through the zero point: lead-time is inverted to lag-time and recuperation becomes precuperation. New art is now impossible because the

category of the new no longer exists…. The new is no longer theorizable and therefore no longer possible. (71-72)

Mann's notion of the new that is "no longer possible" is similar to Lyotard's notion of the postmodern; both concepts are mental spaces that exist outside of the accepted, reified codes of meaning, and so texts created from this space revolutionize our notions of reality. Both concepts are also set in binary opposition to what we consider to be conventional reality; however, the problem for Mann is that artists can no longer access this new space because capitalism has done away with the lead-time that the unreified margin needs to exist.

If one believes in an unrecuperated zone of creative freedom, then once a text is removed from that zone (for someone like Lyotard) or if the text fails to access that zone (for Mann), then that text is out of fashion, out of date, and hopelessly complicit with what it tries to critique; as Mann puts it, "The death of the avant-garde is precisely a matter of recuperation… . Recuperation is the syntax of cultural discourse, its elementary prepositional form. It is the spectacle of the internalization of margins, the revelation of the effective complicity of opposition" (14-15). According to this view, the experimental text that exists outside of the unreified zone has somehow fallen from grace. The text in its vital, marginal phase takes on the role of the perfect Other to its society; it is a radical alterity that allows the reading community to redefine itself against this same alterity. The recuperation of the text removes this alterity and the once-Other text becomes an example of sameness and conventionality, of recognizable reality as the reading community perceives it. Mann goes so far as to argue that any attempt at oppositionality — any attempt to create a text that challenges the accepted codes of reality — is itself always already recuperated. Consequently, he views experimental artists as unwitting accomplices of the dominant order:

> The culture industry uses its vanguard to remap the foreign as a margin, a site comprehensible only in relation to itself. Elsewhere becomes colony, an arena of overproduction and underdevelopment for an imperial appetite that can assimilate and reproduce nearly every sort of exotica…. This process is so blatant that it becomes difficult even to speak of exogenous zones: the last colonial resource expropriated by the market is the idea of the foreign itself. (79)

This type of thinking, driven by Mann's belief in an unreified zone of

oppositionality that artists and society as a whole can no longer access, leaves no room for any form of truly oppositional or ideologically challenging arts.

Both Lyotard and Mann, despite their differences, exist in the *or*, in the binary of vital *or* reified, postmodern *or* modernist, new *or* old, margin *or* centre. Moreover, this emphasis on the binary nature of experimental texts also implicitly refers to the reading community; those theorists who support the binary implicitly view the subjectivity of the reader as necessarily created progressively, since the reader reaches for the unrecuperated experimental text in order to recreate herself and then constantly abandons that text as outdated once she perceives it to be recuperated. A recuperated text maintains people's interest only for what light it can shed on an outdated, reified reality believed in by outdated, reified subjects who must either upgrade to the latest postmodern/new text or else be viewed as stuck in the past.

2.

If theorists such as Lyotard and Mann exist in the *or* and believe that readers must situate themselves there as well, Fred Wah's work exists in the *and*, in the place of combination rather than exclusion, and offers readers the chance to situate themselves there. Specifically, Wah locates this mental space of inclusion in the hyphen: as he states in "Interview with Ashok Mathur," his "interest [is] in keeping the hyphen hyphenated" (97). Wah recognizes that there is nothing *inherently* open about the space of the hyphen, and that it is a space that is often reified and brought into the mainstream; however, he also sees the hyphen as a place of intersection, where mainstream and margin can meet and potentially coexist, as he notes later in the interview: "I try hard in *Diamond Grill*, to foreground the dynamics of the hyphen itself, since, because of that marker, I've never felt comfortable claiming either the Chinese part or the Canadian part [of his ancestry]" (99-100). Wah, as the son of a part-Chinese father and a part-Scandinavian mother, locates his idea of the hyphen along lines of ethnicity; quite simply, his interest in the hyphen is the result of Wah never feeling like he is truly part of any ethnic group: he feels he is too white to be accepted as Chinese, too Chinese to be accepted as white, too foreign to be thought of as truly Canadian, too Canadian to be thought of as a foreigner. Yet, instead of looking at this situation as

a place of alienation, Wah finds it to be a place of freedom; he can assume the role of insider and outsider in relation to any or all of the subject positions just mentioned, depending on what he wishes. Living in the hyphen allows him to see the fixed codes of subjectivity that define each community, which, in turn, further convinces him of the importance of refusing himself insider status in any of the groups.

The result of this refusal of insider status is Wah's notion of synchronous foreignicity, which he defines as "the ability to remain within an ambivalence without succumbing to the pull of any single culture (resolution, cadence, closure)" ("Half-Bred" 83). Synchronous foreignicity, then, depends on what I would call synchronous oppositi-onality, an ability to place oneself in conscious opposition to all of the various groups (racial, religious, social, economic, national, etc.) that constantly try to claim an individual as a member. Although Wah roots his ideas on the importance of the hyphen and of synchronous foreignicity in his ethnicity, he is careful to argue that these ideas are also applicable to and usable by writers who are not of minority or mixed-race ethnicities: "The ethnopoetics toolbox isn't ever only 'ethnic,' at least in the sense of racial. These tools are shared by writers who are marginalized, invisible, experimental, political, and in need of any tool that might imagine a culture that could recognize an alien identity and construct a common language of the other" ("A Poetics" 66). Consequently, there is an implicit tie between the oppositionality of synchronous foreignicity and the fluidity of all subjectivities: "This principle of synchronous foreignicity, … of embracing antithesis, polarity, confusion, and opposition as the day-to-day household harmony, is a necessary implement in art that looks for new organizing principles, new narratives" ("A Poetics" 61). Just as this type of art searches for new formal organizing principles (which will open up even more realms of possibility, more sites of multiplicity — more sites of *and* — and therefore help to displace the dominance of binary thinking), so it invites the author and reader to realign their subjectivities according to new organizing principles and thus further engage with more sites of multiplicity.

In spite of his emphasis on synchronous foreignicity, it might be tempting at first to argue that Wah merely offers what Mann would describe as a falsely new type of poetics, or something similar to Lyotard's notion of a postmodern text. Indeed, Wah is concerned with providing the semantic ruptures that new or postmodern writers desire to create. For example, Wah states that "To write is to move. Dispersal of a presumed

and constructed world. To get back, home (unmarking history so memory can re-cite and re-situate)" and that "To write in poetry is to move past the comfort of a ruled discourse; in order, to move on, beyond order, the complete thought spills over to an excess and residue of language in which my 'marked body' dissolves into unsure relationships — remarked" ("Strangle" 18, 20). This notion of moving past ruled discourse is, of course, quite similar to Lyotard's definition of the postmodern; it also seems to argue for the importance of progressive growth. However, what sets Wah's project apart from what Lyotard and Mann describe is his emphasis on the use of *estrangement* as a writing tool, a notion Wah borrows from Victor Shklovsky:

> This notion of 'making strange' is an old one but it has gained currency recently via the oft-quoted 1917 statement by the Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky:
>
> *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 ....*
>
> I use 'estrangement' in consideration of the compositional tactic of nonclosure (particularly the sentence and the cadence) in both short and long poems. ("Strang(l)ed" 24-25)

Estrangement, though it works to defamiliarize the familiar, still depends on the reader being able to partially recognize the usually familiar object that lurks in the reader's mental background — estrangement works to shed new light on familiar objects, not to make those objects unrecognizable; as a result, Wah's work remains fundamentally tied to the conventional in a way that the radical ruptures both Lyotard and Mann call for are not. Wah goes on to state that "In order to prolong the moment [of estrangement], and the perceptions available in the delay, the movement, the expectation of movement, must be disturbed and fragmented" ("Strang(l)ed" 30). For Wah, fragmentation is necessary to allow for the mental pause or space needed to break down reified thoughts and perceptions. However, unlike the unreified, unrecuperated, completely new texts that Lyotard and Mann desire, Wah emphasizes that the fruitful pause is only a slight fracture, not a jarring stop; Wah compares this pause to tapping the brakes/"breaks' while driving a car: "Viktor Shklovsky suggests that this arresting of the

movement is for the sake of continuity and that this, in fact, constitutes a definition of poetry …. Just tap the breaks [*sic*] lightly, my father warned when he was teaching me to drive, or else you'll lock them and screech to a complete stop, slide into an oncoming car or ditch, wear them out" ("Strang(l)ed" 31-32). For Wah, the completely new, radical, or Other text, the text that attempts a complete break with what has come before it, is not interesting; instead, he champions the text that is both new *and* old, Other *and* self, challenging *and* upholding. Where the theorists who support binary thinking want to see revolutions (which society will inevitably recuperate because the disjunctions are too large or fundamental to remain as disjunctions), Wah offers an evolution.[3] Robert Budde, in his article "After Postcoloni- alism: Migrant Lines and the Politics of Form in Fred Wah, M. Nourbese Philip, and Roy Miki," comments that Wah's "Poetic 'making strange' loads itself up with political fuel, not a trick or tired insider joke but civil disobedience in the dialect. The word in motion dodges the risk of being pinned to a static backdrop, a police line-up, and gets lost in a crowd" (290). It is important to also realize that Wah's making strange relies as much on the conventional as on the radical. Wah's poetics operates on a principle of slight disjunction, on the vital and the reified coexisting in the same text: "Though the poetics of the potent is full of power, that power does not reside in a position of authority and imposition. Rather, the dynamics shift through a range of play and invention in order to continually posit possibility, unpredictability, negative capability, and, dramatically, necessity" ("Poetics" 205).

Wah's work exposes the false binary at the heart of the principle of linear progress that views experimental texts as either vital or recuperated. By choosing to incorporate both halves of the binary in his work, Wah dismisses the notion that formally experimental texts are ever truly Other or ever truly reified. He implicitly dismisses the unrecuperated zone of pure alterity as both impossible and unproductive. Moreover, Wah's poetics have important ramifications for the reading subject. For Lyotard and Mann, the reader is also caught up in the binary (an experimental text is either unknown or known, vital or reified, and it is constantly moving from the former half of the binary to the latter). Those theorists invested in the notion of the binary, then, view subjectivity as a series of discrete static moments that are clearly demarcated and distinguishable from one another; moreover, they seem to believe that each subsequent point is a progression from an earlier point to a fixed and unavoidable end. For Wah, subjectiv-

ity, like texts, is not necessarily progressive; it can be productively regressive, for instance. Moreover, Wah views subjectivity not as a series of discrete static moments, but as a constellation of gentle, fluid continuums, where the individual is constantly in dialogic communication with both earlier and later versions of herself: these continuums work in many directions at once, and so something that might be reified in one situation or context can be vital in another. This refers to the reading subject as well — the reader is not forced into a one-way path of growth. Things can be both reified and vital, depending on what the reader feels at that moment, according to what group or ideology she or he uses as a lens through which to read the text at that moment.

3.

Wah's sequence "Music at the Heart of Thinking" is perhaps the best example of his use of synchronous foreignicity. "Music" undoes binary thinking with every turn of the page. For example, the sequence is an on-going project, spilling over the two books (thus far) in which it appears; it is, on one hand, open-ended, unfinished, and untotalizable, yet, on the other hand, because it is concerned with process and not with an end goal, it is also always complete at every stage.[4] The title itself shows Wah's refusal of binaries, as it combines rhythm, emotion, and thought, explicitly dismissing the too often accepted split between mind and heart, a point to which Wah explicitly draws the reader's attention with the first line of poetry in the sequence: "Don't think thinking without heart no such separation within the acting body" (*Music* 1). Moreover, Wah states in the preface to the sequence that the poems are "responses to texts by Steve Rodefer, Gerry Hill, Michel Gay, George Bowering, Robert Kroetsch, Lionel Kearns, Nicole Brossard, Frank Davey, Dave McFadden, Steve McCaffery, Roy Kiyooka, and Phyllis Webb" and that dozens of the poems respond to texts by bpNichol (*Music* Preface; see Notes), and he emphasizes this responsive nature later in the sequence through the titles of the pieces, such as "Music at the Heart of Thinking Eighty-Something (after Christine Stewart)" and "Music at the Heart of Thinking Eighty-Six (EXITS AND ENTRANCES THROUGH RUSH-DIE'S SENTENCE(S))." The emphasis on response blurs one of the fundamental boundaries of subjectivity, that of personal, singular authorship; by foregrounding the dialogic relationship between his poems and the texts of other writers, Wah implicitly argues

against the self/Other binary, replacing it with a much more fluid, permeable border that allows, again, for the inclusive possibilities of the hyphenated hyphen — the poems are examples of the interplay between self and Other in a mental space that could be labelled self-Other. All of these denials of binaries argue against the notion of purity, against the safe distinctions that purity both relies on and promotes; the "Music" sequence undoes the fixed, impermeable boundaries that underlie binary thinking.

Another important example of Wah's use of synchronous foreignicity is his denial of racial boundaries. In the "Preface" to *Music*, he explains how the idea for the sequence first came to him:

> The notion underlying *Music at the Heart of Thinking* comes from a Chinese movie I saw in Japan several years ago. It was a martial arts film about the Shao Lin monks in China. One of the monks would practice his tai chi while drunk so he could learn how to be imbalanced in the execution of his moves without falling over. In real battle his opponents were confused by his unpredictability. I've tried to use the same method in these pieces, *sans* booze of course. (n.pag.)

Wah, a Canadian by birth, the son of a part-Chinese father and a part-Scandinavian mother, draws freely from both the Eastern and Western tradition; this is nothing unique for North American poets, of course, except that Wah can claim the Eastern tradition as a birthright. It must be noted, however, that Wah's choice of texts to "translate" are all Western; in a sense, then, the poems of "Music" are the product of both Eastern and Western traditions, formally blended together to the extent that the traditions are impossible to separate. This blending of Eastern and Western appears most obviously in "Music" numbers 31-33. Each of these pieces contains a large prose section followed by a haiku. Number 31 serves as a representative piece:

> Talking he said like a foreigner would get you snake-eyed commentary or a tongue for booze in fact understand cowboys and Indians as the one to immolate because that's supposed to be childish sensoryness thinking on the horse or bicycle mind's eye world is forever you know really still carving the bows and arrows out of vine maple in the gulley it's all running shoes out of the mouth whip stock for slather and the whole earth "noping" some image of themselves one lifetime so Kiyooka says to Bowering twinkle.
> (TIGHT WORLD, TIGHT LIFE. STREET.

CREEK. BARRETT BOYS' APPLE FIGHTS
BALL GLOVES WARM FROM SUN.) (*Music* 31)

Here again, the text denies a fundamental aspect of binary subjectivity, as it prods the reader to view the text as the product of literary miscegenation. The content specifically draws the reader's attention to linguistic foreignness, "talking he said like a foreigner," as well as one of the traditional North American racial binaries, cowboys and Indians. However, Wah quickly dismisses this binary as the one to "immolate" (which is perhaps also a pun on emulate/imitate, which is, of course, what children unwittingly learn by playing the game of cowboys and Indians). This linguistic slipperiness is, according to Jeff Derksen, a major tool that Wah uses to keep the reading subject open to possibilities:

> The polyvalent sign that proliferates in Wah's poetry is a micro-gesture toward the complexities of a plural identity, of a hyphenated (Chinese-Canadian) and hybrid subjectivity …. Language is the defamiliarizing, estranging, and 'dis-orienting' tool that, through its own hybridity and plurality, enables differentiated subjectivities to articulate multiple positions" (74-75).

Finally, Wah ends the prose section with the pairing of Roy Kiyooka and George Bowering, a pairing which I view as an example of a friendship that transgresses racial binaries (Kiyooka is a Canadian writer of Japanese descent, Bowering is a Canadian writer of Anglo-Saxon descent) and as such is also an example of an inclusive pairing (as opposed to an exclusive binary). It is also possible that Kiyooka and Bowering represent the Eastern and Western traditions that Wah commingles in his own writing. Moreover, the text presents the formal element that is specifically Eastern, the haiku, as neither more nor less enlightened than the prose passage, the element that I would consider more Western. Formally as well, the text offers an example of an inclusive pairing, a text that is both Eastern and Western. Most importantly, because of Wah's refusal to create the fixed binary, both traditions coexist in the piece without either one being privileged as progressive or privileged as a conduit into a lost, unreified past. Neither tradition is Other; neither tradition is self. All of these textual aspects subtly prod the reader to partially inhabit multiple traditions and subject positions at the same time, which brings about synchronous foreignicity.

Continuing on from the pieces mentioned above, Wah abandons the prose paragraph/haiku form as quickly as he adopted it. With number

34, lineated free verse reappears, as the piece offers a fairly conventional lyric investigation of language and creativity; number 35 brings back the prose paragraph, but this time it is conventionally punctuated and the haiku does not appear; number 36 comes very close to "new sentence" language writing, as in it Wah paratactically strings together a series of disconnected sentences without any logical connection between them:

> I don't understand brute body and the institutions.
> To exercise my faculty of synthesis, care for the new procedure w/ precision.
> I wait for you and wait outside this occurrence of discourse.
> The other authority here is the dailyness.
> Certain people and others with names from the sea.
> Alternate routes on the continent traverse the horizon.
> Advance the impression there is an avalanche ahead.
> Release all the other lakes, the glacier is no great illusion.
> There are three dimensions that the body appropriates.
> One memory of the search for the perfect formula.
> Another voyage (the sky is like a fiery rose).
> Observe you are not so obscure, but think of Italian. (*Music* 36)

These prose sentences provide a hint to the overall sequence: they circle around the same themes (language, identity, movement, place, landscape, etc.), but do so without any logical progression; likewise, the text leaves the reader to fill in the connective tissue between these sentences, since conventional logic is not enough. The sequence as a whole works in the same fashion, as the pieces change form and subject matter abruptly, without any apparent reason, thus avoiding any formal pattern throughout the rest of the sequence. The result is a sequence that refuses the reification of its own formal choices; what some people could view as a lack of formal cohesion is really, I would argue, the result of Wah's conscious decision to avoid accepting the series' own formal codes of meaning-making as "real" or natural. The text is, consequently, both new *and* old, Wah's *and* also other writers', postmodern *and* modern. It exists in the boundary, both comfortably and uncomfortably, never certain of its path but never anxious of it either. There are pieces that are quite easy to understand, such as number 53, which is both plain-spoken and straightforward; in it, the lyric *I* is quite comforting, as the reader can easily relate to the feeling that she or he is being talked to by the author:

> God, how awfully large it is to sit here

lost on this log
without the im as you say from mortality

But no extremis in this breeze for me. Things
such as this bark I cling to
deer chased by coyote.

Look, I don't want to appropriate his "words,
goddamit, words" or her "continent."

But I've lied, muse's
golden mouthed righteousness.
I was where I was
but I didn't know where the others were.

These are muddy waters: the abandoned
messages released,
our daughters, chickadees already in January. (*Music* 53)

However, there are also pieces that are extremely difficult to understand
logically — for example, number 53 is immediately preceded by one of the
most opaque pieces in the entire sequence, where there is no authorial *I*, no
punctuation, no grammar, and no sentence structure whatsoever:

tongue mist lip boat brown gull hill town bed stone shadow crow
tooth rain boat flood hammer star gill shadow skin hammer mouth
town mist hill rock brown bed bird tongue snow creek lip crow cir-
cle brown lip wave boat shadow city light hill sky mouth talk snow
gull hammer fog moon wet grey stone boat bed mist skin gill work
flood crow tongue river mouth star brown lip night flood sail wave
sky tooth rock bed bird shadow stone snow city blue hammer bed hill
crow tongue (*Music* 52)

The sharp juxtaposition of two such formally different pieces draws the
reader's attention to the range of forms in the sequence; it also suggests
how Wah uses these formal changes to "tap the breaks" in order to bring
about the slight fractures that allow for estrangement to occur. The se-
quence works to constantly reinvent itself by refusing to fall into recur-
rent patterns. In his article "Rhetoric and Poetry and Fred Wah," Ed
Dyck offers a particularly apt description of Wah's poetic practices:

If Bach is known today as a composer of canons, in his own time he was
reviled for breaking the rules of canon. The point is that he knew the
tradition intimately and enlarged it significantly. Fred Wah writes lyric

poems in a radical rather than a conventional sense. Employing one of the oldest topoi known to poets, the topos that is the foundation of the lyric, (poetry, music), Wah substitutes the contemporary idiom of jazz to obtain a topos of both form and content in *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, illustrating precisely how the tradition can be made new. (198)

The result of Wah's concern to write poetry that is both conventional and experimental at the same time is that "Music" as a whole is both understandable and impenetrable, vital and reified, progressive and regressive, Lyotard's postmodern and modern text, and Mann's radically new and complicitly old text. Dyck comments that "Music" shows that "*dis-order* is unthinkable without *order*, on which it depends to establish itself as different and new" (199). Or, as Wah describes it in the prose poem that introduces *Alley Alley Home Free*, the second collection of the "Music" sequence in book form,

> A text is a place where a labyrinth of continually revealing meanings are available, a place that offers more possibility than we can be sure we know, sometimes more than we want to know. It isn't a container, static and apparent. Rather, it is noisy, frequently illegible. Reading into meaning starts with a questioning glance, a seemingly obvious doubloon on a mast. The multiplicity can be read, should be read, even performed. But then again, perhaps meaning is intransitive and unreadable, only meant to be made. No sooner do we name meaning than it dissipates. As a sure thing, it eludes us. It arouses us to attempt an understanding, to interpret. But this is usually unsatisfying since whatever direction we approach from only leads us to suspect there is no one direction. No single meaning is the right one because no "right ones" stand still long enough to get caught. But because we do not know does not mean that we are lost. Something that is strangely familiar, not quite what we expect, but familiar, is present. That quick little gasp in the daydream, a sudden sigh of recognition, a little sock of baby breath. ("One Makes (the) Difference," *Alley* n.pag.)

For all that is confusing and alien in the sequence, then, there is also much that is reassuring and familiar; for everything that frustrates our desire for meaning there is also much that makes meaning (in fact, there are many different types of meaning-making throughout the sequence). The sequence, through its reliance on synchronous foreignicity, manages to be both Other and self by providing both estrangement and familiarity. The

result is that the sequence exposes the binary thinking that views experimental texts as either recuperated or vital as nothing more than a reified set of opinions on the nature of experimental writing.

Fred Wah's poetry, through its mixture of responding to, jumping off from, and borrowing from other texts, as well as its use of different writing styles and forms, reveals how a poem can be simultaneously experimental *and* mainstream, recuperated *and* resistant. The dialogic nature of synchronous foreignicity, which simultaneously both claims and denies multiple subject positions, refuses any firm definition of the speaking subject as well as any absolute definition of the text. These refusals also deny the reifications necessary to recuperate the text in any conclusive manner, which suggests that a text can move back and forth between the marginal zone and the recuperated zone (thus disproving the *a priori* status of the marginal zone). Consequently, Wah's poetry helps to explode the binary oppositions that critics still too often unwittingly support rather than question.

NOTES

[1] In the interest of clarity, I will identify the complete sequence of poems (which includes poems in the books *Music at the Heart of Thinking* and *Alley Alley Home Free* as well as uncollected pieces that have appeared thus far only in journals) by placing the title in quotation marks.

[2] As Lyotard puts it, postmodernism "is undoubtedly a part of the modern …. A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (44).

[3] Indeed, there is a profound similarity between Wah's notion of synchronous foreignicity and Robert Duncan's call, in his essay "The Homosexual in Society," for homosexuals to eschew the "homosexual cults" (48); instead of joining such marginal groups, Duncan argues that

> What I think can be asserted as a starting point is that only one devotion can
> be held by a human being seeking a creative life and expression, and that is
> a devotion to human freedom, toward the liberation of human love, human
> conflicts, human aspirations. To do this one must disown all the special
> groups (nations, churches, sexes, races) that would claim allegiance …. The
> old fears, the old specialties will be there, mocking and tempting; the old
> protective associations will be there, offering for a surrender of one's human-
> ity congratulation upon one's special nature and value. (47-48)

Wah's notion of synchronous foreignicity itself is not unique; he is working within (and promoting and continuing on) an established continuum of writers unsatisfied with revolutionary binaries.

[4] Charlene Diehl-Jones notes that Wah's resistance of textual borders extends beyond just the "Music" sequence. As she states, "Wah's works quite literally resist the clear demarcation of even book covers: *Alley Alley Home Free* pursues the project of *Music at the Heart of Thinking*; *Waiting for Saskatchewan* recollects and reconfigures work from *Breathin' My*

Name with a Sigh, placing it in contact with *Grasp the Sparrow's Tail* (also published separately) and two unpublished segments, 'Elite' and 'This Dendrite Map'" (140). Moreover, even though I have chosen the "Music" sequence as the best example of Wah's resistance to borders, there is a growing body of critical work on Wah tracking his resistances in different arenas. For example, Diehl-Jones argues that Wah's work, due to the foregrounding of his biography, "strenuously resists the distinction we have learned to make between art and life" (140); likewise, Susan Rudy Dorscht argues for a resistance of binaries in Wah's *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*: "In the absence of the father, binary oppositions like outside and inside, dark and light, day and night are, like language, like mother, 'trick presence(s)'" (219). Consequently, though I have chosen "Music" as the best example of Wah's refusal of binaries, most of Wah's poetic work since at least the early 1980s has shown a similar stance.

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