Nicholas Bradley

Huckleberries and HEPA Filters

Talking Place with Fred Wah

Fred Wah and I spoke for about ninety minutes on a Thursday morning in early October of 2020. He was at home on Kootenay Lake, while I was in Victoria. We talked via Zoom—par for the course in the time of COVID-19. I had intended to focus on Wah's most recent collection of poems, an expanded edition of *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, and on questions of improvisation and complexity that it raises. The first *Music at the Heart of Thinking* was published in 1987. Another volume of Wah's improvisations, *Alley Alley Home Free*, followed in 1992. The new edition of *Music at the Heart of Thinking* (2020) includes the poems from the two earlier books, both of which are now out of print, and adds to the sequence. We did eventually discuss *Music at the Heart of Thinking* at some length. But because we shared a video connection, I could look through Wah's window at a large tree and a slight haze. I was a little distracted. My own office window showed that we were in for another day of smoke from the forest fires south of the border. From my email correspondence with Wah, I knew roughly where he was, but not exactly, and I blurted out a basic question: "Where are you?" So we got to talking place.

In 2015, Talonbooks published *Scree*, a compilation of Wah's poetry of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.[1] That long book was a revelation to me. I had read most of his early volumes at one point or another, and I recognized the regional attachment signalled by the titles of *Lardeau* (1965), *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.* (1975), and *Limestone Lakes Utaniki* (1989).[2] Yet perusing the same poems as they are assembled in *Scree* granted me a heightened

understanding of his connection to a particular geography, and therefore to a particular history as well. The sheer extent of the book makes a powerful impression: it is over six hundred pages long. In a body of work that spans nearly sixty years, Wah has made a distinctive contribution to the literature, including the environmental literature, of BC.

He is moreover a major figure in Asian Canadian literature and contemporary poetry, and for many readers of this journal, Wah and his writing will require no introduction.[3] Wah was born in 1939 in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, and spent his childhood in Nelson, BC. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, he studied music and English at UBC, where he was one of the young writers responsible for the poetry newsletter *Tish*, which quickly became part of CanLit legend.[4] After further studies at the University of New Mexico and SUNY Buffalo, he began his teaching career at Selkirk College in Castlegar, BC, and later taught at the University of Calgary. As his remarks here indicate, these early experiences were formative, and seem to come quickly to mind. Wah has written some two dozen books. *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (1985) won the Governor General's Award for poetry; *Diamond Grill* (1996), a staple of university classrooms, is perhaps his most widely read work. He was Canada's fifth Parliamentary Poet Laureate (2011-2013), and in 2013 he was appointed an Officer of the Order of Canada.

The conversation below is transcribed from the recorded video, and slightly condensed and lightly edited for clarity. Editorial interventions appear in brackets, and ellipses indicate trailings off.

Our Zoom session started with small talk about the strangeness of the medium. Fred then asked if I was teaching online, and I described my courses, one of which concerned the literature of mountains and mountaineering—which is where this transcription begins.

FRED WAH: So would you do [Gary] Snyder?

NICHOLAS BRADLEY: Yes, absolutely. *Danger on Peaks*, and some of the poems in *Riprap* . . .

FW: Right.

NB: From my point of view in Victoria, he's almost a local, so I try to sneak him in when I can.

FW: Good for you.

NB: Well, thank you for agreeing to do this interview. I really appreciate it.

FW: Well, you're welcome.

NB: And I wanted to say, first off, congratulations on the new book [*Music at the Heart of Thinking*]. I've been working my way through it—

FW: No need to do that—'cause it *is* work!

NB: It is and it isn't. It is hard, though. In one of your notes in the back of the book, you say that "You're not intended to 'get it.'"[5] I tried to take that to heart, and not to worry about it too much. To experience the poetry . . .

FW: I guess when I say that you're not meant to get it, I'm trying to dissuade the reader from expecting a kind of transparent meaning to be available to them. Most readerly expectations are to not have to spend too much time with all these words, to kind of get through it, maybe enjoy it, or figure it out or whatever. It's all based on improvisation. I don't want the improvisation to be halted or stopped, the way I don't want thought to be stopped.

NB: Let me ask, where are you?

FW: Right out here is Kootenay Lake. We live in a place on Kootenay Lake, the northeast shore, and it's an old family property of my wife's. We've lived here off and on for the last fifty years, and we built a cabin and a small home, and our children come and visit us, and our grandchildren come and visit us every summer, and swim, hike, and so forth. I grew up in the Kootenays, and fortunately, when I was looking for a job after graduate school, one of the first jobs that came along was Selkirk College in Castlegar—and this was in 1967, and the BC college system was just opening, it just started, and Selkirk College was the first college outside of Vancouver. And I got hired there, and so we returned. Both my wife and I are from Nelson, and we returned to the Kootenays, and I had never intended to—you know, when you're in graduate school, it's just a big open ocean, you don't know what might pop up. So we've been back here since 1967, other than forays at the University of Calgary, and now we live in Vancouver for part of the year, for half the year, and we still maintain this as our "root" place.[6]

NB: Right, I often see biographical notes that say you divide your time between there and Vancouver, and I've been curious about how much time you spend outside the city.[7] It sounds like a fair bit.

FW: Well, probably anywhere between three and a half to five months up here,

but this year because of this COVID situation, we decided to hunker down here a little longer. Usually we're back in Vancouver by now, but we're going to stick it through until the snow flies, I think, which is probably in a few weeks.

NB: How has the smoke from the fires been up there?

FW: Oh, it was horrible, as it was down the coast a little while ago. Yeah, that was pretty bad. But we've had forest fires up here quite badly, off and on, over the last ten to fifteen years. A couple of years ago I bought a HEPA filter and we put it in the house, so the house has great quality air inside, but going outside you have to wear an N95 mask with the forest fires. And that smoke from the States is starting to come in again today up here, so we have a haze, and they're warning us that it might return.

NB: It's the same here. They're saying it's not going to be as bad as it was the first time around. But we had a red sun this morning. Do you remember experiencing anything like this when you were a kid?

FW: No, and as a teenager I worked in the bush in summers, I worked on a fire suppression crew, and I worked as a timber cruiser, so we were around [fires]. But they never got that big, and I can't remember the skies being—that experience of a week and a half of intense smoke, I can't remember anything like that.

NB: Under normal circumstances, do you still get out walking, hiking, into the mountains? Is that part of your poetic practice now in the way it used to be?

FW: It's slowed down a lot, partly because of my body. I'm getting on, and my wife has had some hip trouble. We try to do a couple of hikes every summer with the family, camping trips and so forth, but this past summer we didn't. We got kind of sidelined with this virus business and juggling that with our family's time. So I get out walking pretty much every day, but I have to do a lot of work around *this* place, working outside, fixing the water system, things like that. I put a lot of physical energy into the place, but—anyway, yeah, I wish I could get out into the mountains more. I go huckleberry picking—that's about it!

NB: Because the start of your poetic career is tied to Vancouver and *Tish*, I tend to think of you as a Vancouver poet. But reading *Scree* gave me a richer sense of how so much of your writing comes out of the Kootenays. As Jeff Derksen writes in his introduction, "a continuity that runs through *Scree* . . . is the concept of place" (8).

FW: When I got into poetry in the late fifties, early sixties, in Vancouver, the *Tish* people that I was associated with weren't from Vancouver. I think maybe Jamie [Reid], yeah, I guess Jamie was from Vancouver, [and] Dave Dawson. UBC at that time, because it was the only university other than UVic in the province—and I think even in Victoria it was still the Normal School, the teachers' school—UBC was quite a wonderful place in the sense of it being a provincial university, because students were from all over the province. And all over the Northwest, a lot of American students too. The whole sense of geography wasn't *Vancouver*. In fact, we had this little thing in *Tish* with the "downtown poets," John Newlove and Gerry Gilbert, people who weren't out at the university, and *they* were the Vancouver poets, in a way, and we were [from elsewhere]—[George] Bowering, very Okanagan, and Frank Davey from Abbotsford, and me from the Kootenays.[8]

And then of course *Tish* ran for a couple of years, and then I went to Albuquerque for graduate school, and then to Buffalo, New York, for three or four years. The whole sense of place, the whole sense of the mountains, the water, the sense of the *geo* was very nostalgic for me. I just couldn't stop thinking of mountains and water and green. We left Albuquerque partly because I just couldn't stand the dryness there. I had to get back up north to some wetter climate. Anyway, place became a kind of necessity to hang on to because of the geographical distance I was from *this* place. So it became a nostalgic thing at first, but then, of course, returning here in the late sixties, and being back in this place, and actually getting into hiking and skiing—I was never a serious mountain climber, but backcountry stuff became a much more common thing, and the whole Kootenay ambience of rural small towns sort of took over, as a kind of prime attention.

I know that Tom Wayman and myself have given talks around the Koots here several times on the poetics of place, and he feels himself to be a "place poet" as well . . . I don't know what that means, a "place poet." It means ways to pay attention to place as a serious, almost spiritual, element in my life.

And in terms of poetics—I don't know how to jibe these two, except that it happens—I worked with Charles Olson in Buffalo for a couple of years. And Charles had this sense of place in Gloucester [Massachusetts], *The Maximus Poems*, and trying to reify America, reify the literal place that he was from . . .[9] So I kind of approach place on a poetic level through an Olsonian awareness or sensibility. And then also Snyder and [Lew] Welch,

people like that, were very important poets to me. I think probably the first time I thought I could take poetry seriously was reading Snyder's poem "Riprap." And I had just done a summer of riprapping! "Wow! Here's a poet talking about what I do! Gee, he does that too!" And it's a great poem, this poem "Riprap."[10]

So wanting to explore how the geography, how the physicality of place, the materiality of place, could become language, could enact itself in language, became a—well, it became my mode. I wanted to move into that, so a lot of those early pieces in *Scree*, the early books, *Tree* [1972], *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.*, they're attempts to ground a language that is responsive to the place the language is in, in a sense. But also, I was really interested in trying to find—because I've always approached poetry as improvisation, as music, as a kind of composition—I wanted to find ways that the language itself could come from the place.

A lot of my interest in rhythm, in the way language moves through a poem, was primarily physical, and it still is. Even *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, the improvisation I'm thinking about there is very specifically "blowing my trumpet," trying to do an ad lib, toking up enough breath to do a long phrase. That's why the prose poem, the asyntactic prose poem, became so interesting to me—how can I overrun the sentence and move past those limitations? Place and the physicality of place—and also, I would think, in the later work, not *theory* of place, but trying to contextualize it intellectually too—has become fairly important. So you're doing your course on mountain literature. I would love to get into that! I've never been a serious mountaineer, but I've read some of that stuff too, and continue to read accounts and journals. At one point, because of working with Olson at Buffalo, I really got into some of the fur trading journals, [George] Simpson and so forth. That kind of blew things open for me in terms of the North and Canada, and helped me figure out a Canada that I felt more sympathetic to, more than any other sense of the place as a *national* place.

NB: Did Olson have a sense of where you were from, any sense of the Interior?

FW: Well, I met him, he came out to Vancouver in '63, and his sense of Vancouver, I think, or his sense of *me* in Vancouver, was simply "I'm West Coast," "I'm Vancouver-San Francisco axis."[11] I took two courses from him, and one of the papers (if you want to call it a paper) I did was a long poem called *Mountain* [published in 1967]. I wouldn't say he *liked* it or

anything, that's not how he responded to poetry, but he was engaged by it. His imagination of what I was talking about was—I don't know what it was. He had never been here. I don't even know if he'd seen the West, or the Cascadia, that we're familiar with. He was sympathetic to the whole sense that a knowledge of place, or a concern of place, is one of the primary contexts open to a writer. And certainly [that was part of] his work on Gloucester and his community, trying to work through that historical sense, the Greek mythological transplant into North America . . . "I take space to be a fact"—as an American.[12] His whole concern with trying to flesh out this national thing, this American thing, was of interest to me. I had never thought of Canada in that sense, that *Canada* was a place. I still wonder!

I've always been a localist. The *local* is what I've been mostly interested in. A little bit James Reaney-ish too, I guess, that sense of paying attention to *literally* where you are.[13] But I was fascinated by Olson—his book *Call Me Ishmael* [1947], about Melville, and how he tries to take on America that way. I haven't tried to do that with Canada! There's just all kinds of thinking that goes on around it. The whole sense of the imagination—[Robin] Blaser's Image-Nation, and what that is.[14] I know it's there. In terms of a language, I'm more engaged with language as literal. It's not referential necessarily, or only referential, but actual. I don't know . . . I'm all over the place with this!

NB: What you're saying about the local makes me think about what it means to be writing in English in this place. Has your sense of being local changed in recent years as Indigenous concerns have become a larger part of provincial and national conversations?

FW: Oh, very much so. Since the mid- to late seventies, which for me was a real major turn in terms of addressing race. But then also in the late eighties, taking some of that and working and trying to inject it into the Writers' Union of Canada, which was an extremely white organization. I was one of the first members of the Racial Minority Writers' Committee, and we got working for a few years.[15] Our committee was myself and Daniel David Moses and Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, two Indigenous writers, and that's how we started.

Lately, in the last ten years or so, Indigeneity has become a very, very strong thing. An instance of it is when I worked on my project *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.*, which is about Native rock paintings, and the need

I felt to find out what the Indigenous occupants of the Kootenays had to say about living here. Well, as it turned out, a lot of the anthropologists had ignored the Sinixt and the Ktunaxa locally, so we didn't have any journals or documentation, so I started looking for that. In fact, my very first sabbatical (though colleges didn't really have sabbaticals—my first leave from the college) was based on a project where I wanted to locate some of this material. I said, "There must be some material around." And there wasn't. And all I could locate, or the thing that really turned me on, was a book called *Pictographs in the Interior of British Columbia* [1968], by John Corner.[16] John was the provincial apiarist at the time, lived in Vernon. I met him a few times. And it was a stunning little book of beautiful drawings of the rock paintings. And we have a number of rock paintings, they're all over the province. That became a kind of document of Indigenous past for me.

Anyway, I went ahead with my poetic project, this transcreative attempt, playing or responding to these images in my own way, as a kind of translation project in the larger sense, an Erín Moure-ish sense of playing around with things. But then I remember feeling, in the early nineties, starting to feel guilty about that. Like, what was I doing? Did I step on someone's toes by doing this? And so I asked some of my Indigenous writer friends about that, and they said no, no, as long as you've done it with respect, it seems to be OK. But even putting it [*Pictograms*] in *Scree*, I hesitated. At the same time, in a sense, it's historical, it's for me, [but] it's not something I would do the same way now. And the poems are not meant to represent Indigenous sensibilities at all.

And then being in Alberta for fifteen years—although I was only there for seven or eight months each year—being more exposed to the treaties, Treaty 6, Treaty 7, around Edmonton and Calgary. And then, more recently, talking a lot with my friend Christine Stewart. She's done a lot of working with Indigenous writers, young writers, in Edmonton. She's given me a lot of ideas. I've been reading a lot too—a lot of the cultural theory around Indigeneity and Indigenous writing. I think it's exciting.

NB: I think you can see some of these changes in perspective in *beholden* (2018), your collaboration with Rita Wong.[17] *beholden* is obviously a poem of place, but I don't think you could have written it in 1983, say. It strikes me as a very of-the-moment encounter with place and the politics of the river—environmental politics, national and international politics, but

also Indigenous politics. Your part of the poem and Rita Wong's part both introduce the complexities of the place without trying to resolve them. Does that make sense?

FW: Yeah. There is no resolution, I think. Certainly not from poets!

I've known Rita for many years. She was a student of mine at U of C, and I've paid very close attention to her writing and her intellectual astuteness, particularly around Indigeneity. She's been very engaged as an activist, environmentally, and also with the Indigenous community. So working with her on the Columbia project was really very useful to me. It was an educational thing. Rita did most of the work! In terms of ferreting out information about the socio-political background of current Indigenous involvement in the Columbia. But I also am quite involved, at least locally, with the Columbia basin, because I live here part of the year, so I know a lot of the players involved in the Columbia River Treaty, people who are concerned about that. So the politics, and also because of the present level of Indigenous awareness or Indigenous desire, in terms of return of the salmon, return of the land, correcting those damned mistakes.[18]

I guess the poem, or the event of the poem, was really for both of us an exploration of how we could bring language to this idea, the idea of the river, not so much the river as a poem, but what's going on when we focus on the river in terms of language. Well, we both have a fairly similar kind of language bag to bring to it. I wouldn't say that our poetry is the same, but we both have an awareness of language and what it can do. Rita wrote her poem totally separate from me. We weren't sharing our writing as we were going along. When we were actually designing it, putting it all together with Nick Conbere, the designer, the resonance of the two lines frequently surprised me. But then we're fairly similar kinds of people in some ways. Rita's much more of an activist than I am. She's got a lot of youth and energy. And as we were working on that, her obsession was Site C. She's worked very hard on, and spends a lot of time still, fighting Site C, and the pipeline, and so forth.[19]

Tell me if I'm talking too much!

NB: No, not at all. You've mentioned Rita Wong and Christine Stewart. You're in dialogue with Christine Stewart toward the end of *Music at the Heart of Thinking* [Improvisations 162-69]. And you're in dialogue with a lot of other poets, and writers of various kinds, all the way through the book . . .

FW: Well, that's primarily what the book is—a way to respond to other texts. And art, and music, and so forth.

Christine's recent project was a book called *Treaty 6 Deixis* [2018]. It was kind of an eye-opener for me to try to get into what she was doing with that. So we talk a lot about it. She's picked up ways of working with language and syntax and grammar from working with Indigenous people up in Alberta. Her attention has been to try to come to, in a respectful way, some way of incorporating aspects of their knowledge. She wrote a beautiful essay for us in this book that Amy De'Ath and I edited, *Toward. Some. Air* [2015]. Christine had this wonderful essay, a combination of poetry and essay writing, that responds to this question of working within an Indigenous environment, and how to pay attention to that [see Stewart, "Treaty Six"]. And then her own book, *Treaty 6 Deixis*, which Talon published last year, gets at that whole thing. So I was interested in what she came up with. One of the most exciting things that Christine clued me in to was this notion of listening. This shut-up-and-listen type of thing. Listening as an act, as a mode of being present, not just to other voices, but to what's going on in the language, or what's possible in the language. Listening, of course, fits right into the whole notion of improvisation. One major aspect of the act of improvisation is listening to the possibilities of where one could go. Because nothing's predictable, so you have to listen, to yourself, and to other possibilities.

NB: Maybe you could tell me, since you just mentioned Talonbooks, what it's been like, with *Scree* and *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, going back to poetry that you first published a long time ago and bringing it out again in a new form.

FW: Well, *Scree* was a project of Kevin Williams, the publisher at Talonbooks. I think Phyllis Webb's *Peacock Blue* is the first in the series. It's a reflection of those earlier Talon books from around 1980, which were a series of books that Karl Siegler published. George Bowering, Frank Davey, Roy Kiyooka, Daphne Marlatt, myself, and a few others.[20] Collected volumes. At the time, for us writers, for our generation of writers, the whole notion of collections wasn't really that popular, wasn't a form that was happening that much. It is *now*. *Scree* becomes part of that idea of collecting some of these "older" poets.

Jeff Derksen was my editor for *Scree*, and he collated all the work in more or less a chronological way [see Derksen 4-6]. He asked questions, and talked about it. And I've always re-done, always re-presented, reprinted older stuff. A lot of *Waiting for Saskatchewan* [1985] was in other books before it. Not so much just to reuse old material, but using book composition as a way of framing, for myself and whoever might be interested, forms of writing. It's like you said, you looked at *Scree* and you got a bigger sense that place is an important aspect of what goes on for me. Well, I think that's true if you look at just about any one of those books, but it doesn't necessarily stand out as much as it does in *Scree*.

And with *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, the first two books came out of a publishing world where—those were smaller books and they went out of print fairly quickly, and so they weren't part of a discourse.

So Karl Siegler had proposed in the nineties, soon after Red Deer College Press went under and he bought the rights to their inventory, he said, "Oh, we should bring out, we should reprint *Music at the Heart of Thinking* and *Alley Alley Home Free*," the two volumes that I had published. So when Kevin Williams took over Talonbooks from Karl [in 2008], Kevin kept pushing that too. He said, "Oh, yeah, we're going to do this, we're going to put this together," and I said, "Well, I haven't finished writing it! I'm still writing stuff!"

So that's gone on for a long time. I don't write as much as I used to, so there wasn't another seventy pieces or so to add to it. In one sense, it's rather disappointing to get this old stuff together with the new stuff, and shape it—because I didn't rewrite things specifically, although I corrected spelling errors or some punctuation, and maybe changed some lines to pay more attention to the kind of rhythm I wanted. For me it's there [the book] as a kind of document of a project.

During the eighties when I started it [*Music at the Heart of Thinking*], I worked a lot with bpNichol. We taught together for several summers at Red Deer College, in the summer school of writing, and we talked a lot about the long poem, which was the primary attention of Canadian poets in the eighties. I remember the year he died, in 1988, we were teaching at Red Deer College, and Beep said, "Do you realize, hardly anyone's doing long poems anymore? I'm doing *The Martyrology*, you're doing this *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, and Robert Kroetsch is doing *Field Notes*, but everyone seems to be leaving it." I didn't actually ever think of

Music at the Heart of Thinking as a long poem, but it kept engaging certain improvisational methods. I guess he saw it that way, and I sort of agreed with that. I could think of it as a kind of project. I don't know if it is a long poem. It's kind of a long poem project. And, of course, the major aspect of the long poem for me is that it resists closure, resists ending. In that sense, it's a little bit like the serial poem. It takes on this character of seriality, and although it doesn't have the focus of a serial poem, it has a sense of longevity.

Actually, as I was finishing off the manuscript, I got this book by Stan Dragland [*The Difficult* (2019)]. Stan's a wonderful reader and old friend, always been very supportive of what I do. So I was reading his book on "the difficult," and he does some really interesting stuff in there. And he starts talking about *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, and I used one of his quotes as a blurb.[21] And I love that sense of the "terrieresque." "The terrier sinks her teeth in, never lets go." So here was a reader who was willing to take on that notion of the difficult. As most readers will see when they read this stuff, "Oh, this is difficult stuff," it's not really that easy to read through. I found that really sustaining, Stan's attention to that kind of writing as being quote-unquote worthwhile, worth paying attention to.

And I really got back into [William Carlos] Williams' *Kora in Hell* [1920] again, which has always been a very grounded book, basic book, for my practice of improvisation. What he did in *Kora in Hell* and *Spring and All* [1923] has been really quite important to me . . .

NB: How does improvisation actually work for you when it comes to writing? I understand it as a concept or metaphor. But what does it mean when you sit down to write?

FW: Basically, one word follows another. Or one syllable follows another.

One method, literal method, of improvisation for me has been what Robert Duncan called—I think he called it, it may have been someone else—the tone leading of vowels. I remember, as a young poet, hearing Duncan lecture when he was at UBC, talking about that whole notion of how phonetic rhyming, or the repetition of vowel sounds, could be tracked, and he showed this with particular poems, like "So much depends upon a red wheel barrow," and how some of those vowels are actually very, very rhythmically strict.[22] I was *fascinated* by that. And then working with [Robert] Creeley around about the same time, maybe a little later, Creeley

talked about the whole notion of stitching. That the words can get stitched together.[23]

I turned that into a pedagogical device in my creative writing classes, where I'd tell students, look, if you get stuck, you get stopped, just go back a few stitches, go back and pick up a stitch. Go back and get in a vowel, or a consonant. Go back and pick up something that you just had, and bring it forward. That sense of improvisation, of listening to yourself, listening to what you're doing, so that you can keep doing it. 'Cause I don't want to end. I have to have the material there to take the next step. It's not all random. If you're playing music, you have to follow the chord structure. Or you don't *have* to, but that's basically the grounding of improvisation, the chord structure, unless you're Anthony Braxton and you're just blowing all over the place. Anyway, things like that are literal. In the prose poem, I'm very attracted to that notion of the sentence as a syntactic unit, and the tyranny of the sentence in most of our writing, and in a lot of our thinking, becomes a little overriding sometimes. I was interested in the prose poem as a way of interventing the sentence as a device that stops thought, that stops language.

In terms of composition, where to make that leap from one group of words to the next group of words and how to get there—I find fascinating. A lot of it's based on sound and rhythm.

So it's literal, the improvisation is literal. It's also, in a sense, theoretical. As a young trumpet player, in high school, I loved finding out that, gee, you don't have to follow the notes. You can do what you want! I moved right from music into writing poetry with that same sensibility.

NB: So then how do you know when an improvisation is ready to make its way into the world and find readers?

FW: It depends on rhythm. In other words, you're saying, when is it finished?

NB: Yeah.

FW: I guess when I run out of breath. But there's also this whole sense, once again from music, of cadence. So not so much a logical, syntactic close, but a kind of rhythmic close, so the language plays out to the end, at the end. It lands there. And in my own mind, when I'm doing this, subconsciously or way back there, there's going to be someone else—the sax section's going to pick up, or something else is going to pick up from there. In other words, the piece isn't over, just my solo is. And some of the pieces end in the middle, end floating, but I'm always looking for that way to land. Cadence

is a way to land rhythmically and phonologically. Sometimes semiologically. Questions of repetition are very important in any kind of composition.

And once again it's a little bit like picking up a stitch. Picking up a stitch is just like repeating a sound . . . I don't know what question I was answering there!

NB: I think I was asking how you know when you're finished a poem that is, in a sense, unfinished.

FW: Yeah, I don't know . . . It's basically rhythmic, I think. And a lot of it has to do with repetition.

NB: What are you working on now?

FW: Look, I'm feeling quite old. I shouldn't say I'm feeling old—I *am* old. I don't write as much as I used to. Putting together *Music at the Heart of Thinking* took a lot of time and energy, and the *beholden* book was part of a larger project that Rita and I were involved in with some other artists.[24] So I'm doing a lot of these types of things, just Zoom stuff, virtual readings. We don't travel around and launch books anymore, which is fine by me. I enjoy the respite from the literary world, in a certain sense. I'm working on a project with Nick Conbere. He's the artist in *beholden*, he teaches at Emily Carr [University of Art and Design], and we're doing a public art project for Vancouver where we're doing a poster for twenty-nine transit stops. Vancouver has this public art thing where they invite artists to propose different projects, so Nick's doing a drawing. We're focusing on roots and trees, and I have to write a text. We're not quite sure how we're going to do this yet. So we're in the middle of that project.

I'm also up in the air in terms of writing. I'm getting—not so much tired of books, but I want to pay more attention to *writing as an act* rather than to publishing. There's so much focus these days on the publishing world, on the public world of writing. The other day I got this note from Talon saying CBC mentioned my book as one of thirty-seven books of poetry to pay attention to this fall. Thirty-seven! The number of poetry books that are published each year, it's just astounding. And the intention—I think unfortunately—of a lot of young writers is to engage with this public world of prizes and launches and getting their book out there—and I say "unfortunately" because it seems to involve a certain indiscretion towards the writing process. I mean, that's old-fashioned, I guess. I don't know—blah, blah, blah!

NOTES

1 *Scree* is one of several such collections published by Talonbooks. The series, which gathers the works of poets of the *Tish* era, includes Phyllis Webb's *Peacock Blue* (2014), Daphne Marlatt's *Intertidal* (2017), George Bowering's *Taking Measures* (2019), and Gladys Hindmarch's *Wanting Everything* (2020). Roy Miki's *Flow* (2018) also belongs to the series, although his poetry stands apart in terms of chronology.

2 The community of Lardeau lies on the northwest side of Kootenay Lake, on Highway 31. The Limestone Lakes area is in what since 1995 has been Height of the Rockies Provincial Park. The Japanese term is spelled with only one *k* in the title of Wah's book. Elsewhere he uses the conventional spelling *utanikki* (see *Music* [2020] 252). The word refers to a "poetic journal" (252).

3 For "contemporary" I could substitute "avant-garde," "experimental," or "innovative"; each term is appropriate but ultimately unsatisfactory. On the relations between the categories "avant-garde" and "Asian Canadian" as they pertain to Wah, see Yu. For a helpful list of earlier published interviews with Wah, see Wah, *Scree* 618-19.

4 Only fifteen years after *Tish* began, C. H. Gervais wrote that "[i]n a very real sense the amateurish-looking mimeographed magazine became a vehicle for probably the most cohesive writing movement in Canada" (7).

5 "I know this is not an easy poetry to read; it wasn't easy to write. You're not intended to 'get it'" (*Music* [2020] 258).

6 Wah and Pauline Butling have been married since 1962. Selkirk College was founded in 1966. Wah taught at the University of Calgary from 1989 to 2003.

7 Biographical notes: see, e.g., Wah, *Music* [2020] 266; Wong and Wah 152.

8 Reid was born in Timmins, Ontario, but spent his later childhood in Vancouver. Dawson was from Burnaby. Bowering was born in Penticton and grew up in Oliver. The Provincial Normal School in Victoria was absorbed by Victoria College in 1956. Originally affiliated with McGill University, the College was at that time attached to UBC. The University of Victoria was established as an independent institution in 1963.

9 Two volumes of *The Maximus Poems* appeared during Olson's lifetime. A third was issued posthumously in 1975. A complete edition of *The Maximus Poems* was published in 1983.

10 "Riprap" is the final poem in Snyder's book of the same name, first published by Cid Corman's Origin Press in 1959 and reissued in various editions. "Riprap" was also included in *The New American Poetry* (1960), a bellwether anthology (see Allen); that appearance gave the poem a wide circulation. Snyder glosses "riprap" as "a cobble of stone laid on steep, slick rock to make a trail for horses in the mountains" (1). From *Music at the Heart of Thinking*: "I'd thought he'd riprapped that wall of the page or my mind / with mountains creeks trees and gravel years ago" (*Music* [2020] 104).

11 From *Music at the Heart of Thinking*: "in '63 . . . Olson walked out to the cliffs at Point Grey oceanward falling west to 'placeless place'" (*Music* [2020] 38).

12 From Olson's *Call Me Ishmael* (1947): "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy" (11).

13 In terms of geography and poetic style, Reaney (1926-2008), whose locale was southwestern Ontario, might seem to have little connection to Wah. But I take Wah's somewhat unexpected reference to Reaney as a reminder that an extreme attention to

the local, as a literary strategy or shared ethos, can link otherwise disparate and dispersed authors (see Derksen 3, 8).

14 Blaser's *Collected Poems* (2006) includes twenty-six poems in the "Image-Nation" series. The coinage suggests a community of poets, whether living or dead. As Wah suggests here, the term is also a near-homophone of "imagination."

15 For more on the history of this committee, see Margery Fee's "The Trickster Moment, Cultural Appropriation, and the Liberal Imagination in Canada," first published in Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra's collection *Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations* (2010) and reprinted in Reder and Morra's *Learn, Teach, Challenge: Approaching Indigenous Literatures* (2016).

16 The full title of Corner's book is *Pictographs (Indian Rock Paintings) in the Interior of British Columbia*. Wah acknowledges Corner's book in *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.* (see Wah, *Scree* 308).

17 *beholden: a poem as long as the river* is a poem in two voices that responds to the Columbia River. As it was originally published, the handwritten text "flows" over 137 pages alongside a map of the Columbia designed by Nick Conbere. The two strands of the poem, Wong's and Wah's, periodically cross each other and the river, remaining separate but speaking to each other in various ways. A note in the book indicates that "the poem, represented along a 114-foot banner of the entire Columbia River, has been exhibited as part of a number of gallery presentations displayed in the Pacific Northwest."

18 Wah chuckled at the pun. I had to type one word or the other, but "damned" and "dammed" are equally apt.

19 The Site C Dam on the Peace River, and the Trans Mountain Pipeline that runs across BC from Alberta. In August 2018, Wong was arrested at the Westridge Marine Terminal in Burnaby. A year later, she was sentenced to twenty-eight days of incarceration, which she served at the Alouette Correctional Centre for Women in Maple Ridge, BC; she was released for good behaviour after eighteen days.

20 On the current Talonbooks series, see Note 1. The earlier books to which Wah refers include bill bissett's *Beyond Even Faithful Legends* (1980), Bowering's *Particular Accidents* (1980), Davey's *The Arches* (1980), Marlatt's *Net Work* (1980), bpNichol's *As Elected* (1980), his own *Loki Is Buried at Smoky Creek* (1980), and Webb's *The Vision Tree* (1982).

21 The relevant passage as it appears on the back cover of *Music at the Heart of Thinking*: "The probes are unorthodox and dense . . . exciting to the reader Stuart Pierson calls 'terrieresque.' (The terrier sinks her teeth in, never lets go.)"

22 Duncan used the phrase "tone leading of vowels" frequently, including in his lectures on Olson. See, e.g., Duncan 104, 168. The phrase is originally that of Ezra Pound (see Duncan 201). "So much depends . . ." is untitled poem XXII in Williams' *Spring and All* (see Williams, *Imaginations* 138).

23 Weaving and sewing are ancient metaphors for poetry as well as modern. *Rhapsody* is linked etymologically to both poetry and stitching. See Butterick: "Olson writes in a letter to Robert Creeley, 25 October 1950: 'How to sew (rhapsode: . . . meant, to sew together!)'" (102).

24 "other artists": see Wong and Wah [v], 149.

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