A Voice to the Voiceless,
or Littering in the Woods

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For decades, British Columbian poets have sought to communicate with the natural world through language manipulation and, in rarer cases, nature manipulation. Fred Wah's series of pictograph poetry from his 1975 collection, *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.*, and the more recent 2009 collaborative project, *Decomp*, by Stephen Collis and Jordan Scott, are two experiments which endeavour to approach nature through objective communication. While the motive behind these two projects is similar, Fred Wah comes closer in his work to the essence of the natural world because he expects no response in return from it, and writes only about his personal relationship with it. In comparison to Wah's aesthetical approach, Collis and Scott's *Decomp* project loses sight of its goal by forcing an interaction with nature, and their imposition on nature in turn legitimizes Wah's more unbiased effort.

The "essence" of nature, mentioned above, has long perplexed British Columbian poets. Emily Carr was perhaps the first to acknowledge the problematic implications of approaching the subject through art as a medium: "What's the good of trying to write? It's all the unwordable things one wants to write about, just as it's all the unformable things one wants to paint—essence" (165). Carr's identification of essence as "unwordable" and "unformable" brings to light a plethora of artistic paradoxes: how does one express through language something that has no language? How does an artist truthfully capture something that is inherently without form? These are the primary concerns that Wah's pictograph poetry and Collis and Scott's *Decomp* project deal with. Surely, it is the natural yearning of any artist to extract or apply meaning to the physical world; however, when dealing with the "essence" of nature, the impossibility of such an endeavour is the

first thing that an artist must understand. Wah, Collis, and Scott realize that traditional conventions of lyric poetry are unsuitable for their respective works, and yet their approaches to a similar objective are markedly different.

In his article "Dumb Talk: Echoes of the Indigenous Voice in the Literature of British Columbia," Laurie Ricou praises Wah's approach to these poems, writing that,

> Wah is honest to the indigenous origin to these drawings: they are in all likelihood the visual representation of compact, yet resonant, shamanistic picture-songs. But he is honest, too, to his own cultural and verbal heritage, so that he is like a shaman, learning, or creating a new language. (45)

I would hesitate to agree with Ricou in stating that Wah is "creating a new language" with these poems. Wah's poetry is not merely a "translation"; that is, it does not seek a literal restatement of pictograms, but rather seeks to mirror these mute paintings with language as we know it, ultimately creating out of something ancient, a product that is entirely new. Wah envisions his poetry in *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.* as "transcreations," a word that he borrows from Coleridge, and uses in the book's preface. Transcreation is a fitting term, as Wah's poems are rooted in something outside of themselves; they are by-products of previous artwork. Given the nature of pictograms, Wah's method in writing about them is a suitable one. In his book, *North of Intention*, Steve McCaffery says of pictograms,

> The system organizes its information within a non-linear space, employing the minimum of denotation, as a consequence of which a contemporary "reader" must function more as the producer than consumer of the messages, reading onto the grams semantic responses, judgements, misprisions and analyses. (33)

McCaffery's observation underlines the interactive relationship a

"reader" unavoidably has with pictograms. A pictogram is neither monosemous or polysemous by nature, but contains whatever meaning or messages its observer ascribes to it. This ambiguity can extend to the question of whether or not pictograms express a language in their own right, which is clearly a question that is central to Wah.

Whatever it is that an observer, or "reader," sees in a pictogram's image, what is certain is its universality, as it necessarily transcends spoken dialect. A twenty-first century observer of an ancient pictogram would likely see in its image something that its creator had no notion of. Wah is aware of this universality, and attempts to mimic it in his poems. His poems are not only thematic mirrors of pictograms, but in some cases structural mirrors as well. By presenting a pictogram on the left page and text on the right, Wah offers a "verbal" counterpart to the non-verbal images:

Turtle   Baby
canoe   portage (12)

The poem's four words offer the possibility of multi-directional readings including horizontal, vertical, or diagonal, with no direction producing more meaning than another, or being "correct." While each word represents a figure from the pictogram, the relationship between the figures is equivocal; whether or not the turtle is relative to the canoe, or the canoe to the baby, is for the reader's imagination, just as an observer of a pictogram sees in it what they will. The indetermination of pictograms is a challenge; it is a puzzle which Wah suggests has no correct or incorrect solution, only unique solutions depending on the observer.

Stephen Collis and Jordan Scott's *Decomp* project is a bizarre inversion of Fred Wah's philosophy about exploring cohesions between language and nature. Rather than write about nature, the poets' aim is to have nature itself respond to literature. For the project, Collis and Scott planted ten copies of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in different forested areas around British Columbia. A year later, they returned to each spot to see what nature had

to "say" about the text. Collis explains the ethos of the project in a CBC interview: "Rather than write about nature, let's give a book to nature and see what it would do with it. What would its response be to all the poets' annoying talk and discussion and troping and philosophizing about what nature means" (Collis and Scott). In the same interview, Collis inadvertently, albeit effectively, identifies exactly what it is that makes *Decomp* ignoble: "We're proceeding like amateur scientists or amateur biologists or archeologists or something, so we find this data and we ask, 'what sense can we make of this?'" (Collis and Scott). The data which Collis mentions is merely the result of a human manipulation of the natural world. It is the assumption that nature has something to consciously input that brings the entire experiment dangerously close to the realms of superstition. While Wah's poetry is a response to personal observations, *Decomp* is a one-sided conversation.

Due to this inherent fallacy, *Decomp*'s meaning lies only in how Collis and Scott choose to interpret their results. Nature has not produced anything tangible in *Decomp*; it has not written words to make up poetry, but has only provided the inspiration for Collis and Scott to do so. It is mainly this fallacy alone which separates the legitimacy between Wah's observational experiment and Collis and Scott's belief in (super)natural intervention, namely their expectations of nature as a participant in composition. One of the poems resulting from the experiment is made up of words that merged together from different pages of *The Origin of Species* as a result of the book's exposure, making the poem an interesting example of a found text:

> nature
> when the
> form
> ever
> is
> so
> clearly the inside
> plan who read (9 – 16)

After Collis reads the poem aloud on CBC, the interviewer remarks that she gets the impression of a "message coming from another world" (Collis and Scott), to which Collis and Scott both concur. This poem is arguably the most relevant by-product of *Decomp*, or at least the one most aligned with Collis and Scott's goal, since it is the only one in which nature "responded" (the other components inspired by their discoveries are a creative prose piece called "Location, zone." and another poem "Code, translations."). The structure of the found text harkens to Wah's poems, many of which take on the form of lists, rather than a sequential linearity, as if each line or word represents an impromptu thought inspired by the image:

> Lost
>
> amidst Caloplaca
>
> and rising
>
> as a bubble
>
> from earth to sky (27)

Even glancing at the shape of the poem brings to mind a floating object, reinforcing Wah's attempt to mimic image with language. The structure of Collis and Scott's found text poem is effective for the same reason. Its sparsity and use of enjambment not only reinforces its ambiguity, but employs a degradation of language, suggesting that language as we know it is incapable of truly exploring nature. Wah poignantly tackles the same issue in the briefest poem of his collection:

> nvs ble
>
> tr ck (25)

Here, Wah deliberately decomposes written language, not just for the sake of irony (given the pictogram the poem is concerned with), but more importantly, to emphasize the distinct possibility that perhaps language is ultimately inferior and is intrinsically unable to describe or mirror the natural world. It is this very notion of language's inadequacy that Carr struggled with in her artistic vision, and which the poets discussed here continue to struggle with.

Unlike Collis and Scott, Wah does not give a voice to nature so much as he interprets the silence which nature resounds. As a result, there is a definite honesty, as Ricou points out, in Wah's poems. He does not force a voice upon nature, as Collis and Scott do, but instead engages it in a form of silent communication; that is, he attempts to connect with it on universal grounds. In the case of *Decomp*, it is difficult not to come to the conclusion that Scott and Collis have forgotten that books are for reading, not littering, and there are far less pretentious ways to test their vulnerability. Wah's noble understanding and aesthetical approach to the subject undermines Collis and Scott's ill-conceived plot to record a voice where there is none.

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