



Ilha do Desterro: A Journal of English
Language, Literatures in English and
Cultural Studies

E-ISSN: 2175-8026

ilhadodesterro@gmail.com

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina
Brasil

Wah, Fred

FROM C TO C: A PREPOSITIONAL POETICS

Ilha do Desterro: A Journal of English Language, Literatures in English and Cultural
Studies, núm. 56, enero-junio, 2009, pp. 51-72

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina
Florianópolis, Brasil

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=478348694004>

- How to cite
- Complete issue
- More information about this article
- Journal's homepage in redalyc.org

redalyc.org

Scientific Information System

Network of Scientific Journals from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal

Non-profit academic project, developed under the open access initiative

FROM C TO C: A PREPOSITIONAL POETICS¹

Fred Wah

University of Calgary

Abstract

"From Sea to Sea" is an *imago mundi* that has defined Canada's national consciousness from "the last spike" to the present. It has served to hegemonically override a range of prepositional possibilities that poetry and poetics in our time has used to relocate a citizen imagination. This talk is a critical and poetical reading of some of the most dynamic prepositions in this cultural lexicon that might help locate a more situational discourse of public selves and relationships.

Keywords: prepositional poetics, cultural lexicon, "sea" and "c" (letter and musical chord).

"From Sea to Sea" is an *imago mundi* that has defined Canada's national consciousness from "the last spike" to the present. It has served to hegemonically override a range of prepositional possibilities that poetry and poetics in our time has used to relocate a citizen imagination. In much the same way Fernando Pessoa played out 'Portugalization' by reciting the heteronymic constituents of nation, Canadians have been forced to perform themselves through a metaphor of nationhood

Ilha do Desterro	Florianópolis	nº 56	p. 051-072	jan./jun. 2009
------------------	---------------	-------	------------	----------------

signed by coercive mottos, coats of arms, flags, animals, and other symbols. This poetic essay seeks to eke out a cultural lexicon that might usefully help locate a different national and transnational discourse by relying, not on the abstract patriotism framed by two or three oceans, but by going to the minute, truthful, and particular initiated by those two prepositions in the motto, "from" and "to."

I propose that the prepositions clinging to the *imago mundi* of Canada's motto (and, implicitly, slogan), "From Sea to Sea," are truer testimony to the experiential condition of that biblical saying than the national imaginary (the 'Canadaization') it usually represents to its citizens and the world. I titled this talk "From c to c" using the little "c" not only as a tongue-in-cheek displacement of the proprietary magnitude of such a spatial appropriation, but also as a means to shape a more pertinent hearing of *et dominabitur a mari usque ad mare* ("He shall have dominion also from sea to sea" – King James version) to open the phrase to the more spatial relationship that the metaphor of an "octave" might offer.

The official claim, of course, is "From Sea to Sea TO SEA," a somewhat more extensive land claim than the original apple of John A. MacDonald's eye and a seminal frame for the notion of this Canadian nation. The dominant chord in this grammatical "key" is the nominal, the expropriating SEAside nouns. I'd like to apply what I called in an earlier essay a "molecular poetics" ("Loose Change") to the composition and expose a scalar imagination that seems more amenable to chord changes, shifts, and structural development. That is, I'd like to problematize that dominating chord by improvising around some of the prepositional and adverbial particularities to generate a more substantive *imago mundi*, one that honours the functional, the material, and the dynamic, those opaque little words that, in fact, must perform the scale necessary to hear the full octave.

I know there are some mixed metaphors here but I am speaking, primarily, from a mixed, i.e. hybridized, position (informed by many years of trying to articulate my own mixed racialization). My interest in what I've called "alienethnic poetics," "half-bred poetics," and

"hyphenated poetics" have helped me pay attention to some of the background noise in language that is frequently made transparent by the tyranny of form and ideology. So it seems natural, given this motto, to recognize that the prepositions in "From Sea to Sea" might also be read as locating a time and space outside and between what is signified on the surface. Prepositions, and other little tool-words like adverbs and conjunctions, are a kind of grammatical GPS (Global Positioning System). We've even tried to rule on their "betweenness" function: "Never end a sentence with a preposition." But where's that rule at? They are usually just the static behind big ideas.

The preposition "from" that opens the motto is the site of a "constructive tension," a paradox of intention and coercion. The intention, of course, is that "From Sea to Sea" would make a PLACE where its citizens would be free from the departures, separations, avoidances, and differences of those "source" nations FROM which its citizens originated. But the coercion in our motto is using FROM in a negative and confining role. If you say you are FROM Canada, no, where are you from, really from. (Just broke the rule again!) So that, in a very real sense, to be from Canada is to also not be from Canada. The tension invoked by this paradox continues to generate a prepositional reality that forces the citizen self to constantly juggle public attention.

I come from the sea, across the sea, just across from here, from another place, far from here, and from what I've been told the ships sailed from Norway, Spain, China, in other words from Nations, from which the "we" thought it should become a Nation too, as if "it" was from some form of dictation, from on high, say, like from Psalm 72:8, from which Nation is translated from Dominion, Rule, Kingdom and from other potentials for coercion analysis, like "The immigration officer blocked the citizen from returning to her own country," so the preposition "from" can team up with barrier verbs, if you ban *X from doing Y* then Y did not happen, and that kind of

thinking is useful when they want to keep people away from here, like refugees from different places who are always suspect from the colour of their skin, and “from” is also useful for collecting taxes and for taking away from the citizen her rights, and if you are from “there” you are not “here,” so try to keep from shaking and don’t stop yourself from running away, from here to kingdom come!

The preposition “to” underlines a very nominal role in that it’s like an arrow to place and name. This prepositional “to” is very minute and cellular in its particularity, in its use of specificity. The connection here to “story” (history) and “histology” (the study of cells) is dynamic and attractive to the poetic imagination.

To his parents he wrote that he went to the Philippines. Too far away they thought. Too good a lie to pass up, to hide from too much family. But really he went to Victoria on Hong Kong island and then to Victoria on Vancouver Island. Islands are too small for big ideas. Then right away to Vancouver to work as a cook on the spur lines that shuttled out to a lot of small towns on the prairies. Too flat. After five years he went back to China to get a wife but when he returned to Canada the Head Tax was too much to bring his family to Swift Current. Too difficult. Too cold. Too white. Then he got married to a white woman, to the cashier in his cafe and for a few years they moved to Medicine Hat but that was too small so they returned to Speedy Creek and stayed there through the depression and the war. Too sad. Too poor. While after WW1 her parents moved to Göteborg and took the boat to Halifax and then to Saskatchewan to her Grandfather’s farm. But by the time she was in school they had moved to Swift Current to the middle of that mass of Pleistocene sediment plate wedge arrow sky beak horizon and that’s where they met and then moved to Trail and then to Nelson where I met you and then

we were on the move too, but always come back to where we are, or 'sposed to be, Bonavista to Vancouver Island, Arctic Circle to the Great Lakes waters, this land to you and me.

The homophone of "to" is *too* attractive to resist; a lovely slip of one letter's sound and attention to modify and open up another space. Not the "too" as "more" but the "too" as "part of, also" inclusive. So, this adverbial-adjectival shift seems useful in how it might suggest another kind of location: ALSO. Not a prepositional but an adverbial; but still positional, the way I use it in a piece called "Me, Too" as a post-positional locator.



In February 2004 I was at the Walter Philips Gallery in Banff looking at a show of Roy Kiyooka's photos, videos, and soundscapes titled *Accidental Tourist*, a show that foregrounded for me the "diaristic" in his art. Many of his photo-text projects resonate with the *utanikki*, the poetic diary. Walking around the show, I accidentally pass *between* one of the slide projectors and the carousel of images projected on the wall. My shadow is cast *into* the image on the wall and I have the strange sensation that old friend and artist Roy Kiyooka is taking a posthumous

photo of ME, framed in a familiar landscape, from within the darkness of a stairwell on Hastings Street in Vancouver around 1979.

That little adverbial “accident” in experiencing Kiyooka’s show by seeing myself BETWEEN the projector’s light and Kiyooka’s photograph opened up the positionality of hybridity that has become so important to any articulation of race, ethnicity and culture. How to occupy that site of “betweenness” without dramatizing and privileging the polarities of dominance and homogeneity is the problem I keep trying to answer in my writing. The poem ends by pointing to the hyphen, the *trait d’union*, as a specific cipher to hang onto.

ME TOO feels like some small cry from way back when. My own too facile digital photos now insert a self into the “pre-emptive silences” of a past that reiterates an amongness, a betweenness, that has always been that ME.

Caught the shadow
puppet
of my former self
not all there
accidental (not
occidental)
tourist
an old story

Between Us an I calls out to include my self in the light and to stayright there (don’t move) before it is claimed by the shudder of repetition: “both” lie “recumbent” in a “me” that “riddles [our] solicitudes.”

Me too, then
three, then four
more than
another some
one else
on Hastings Street

on Hasting's
trait
d'Union.

(from "Me Too!", *Sentenced to Light*, Talonbooks, 2008:69)

This is useful segue to another poetic essay called "Count Me In: Writing Public Selves" (unpublished presentation for conference of the same title, Vancouver, 2007, and part of "Discount Me In" published in *is a door*, Talonbooks 2009) to, perhaps, illuminate this site of "betweeness," as a dialectic that is constitutive and generative in its recognition of a kind of "ambiguity of agency" (Butler, 129) confronted within the creative and the critical, the social and the political.

Some of the fodder for this piece is provided by two recent essays on poetics that posit conceptual approaches to the notion of "the linguistic turn" or "the turn to language." Michael Davidson's essay "The Dream of a Public Language: Modernity, Manifesto, and the Citizen Subject," in a recent issue of *Xcp: Cross Cultural Poetics*, questions both the linguistic turn "that locates identity within a common language" (the example he uses is Adrienne Rich's *Dream of a Common Language*, that thematizes the problem of identity and agency) and the linguistic turn of language poetics that configures the social "within the matrix of signifying systems." Instead, Davidson suggests instances of "public language" that offer "tentative intervention[s] into the power grid": "The spaces of global amalgamation and production offer the possibility of a public language that speaks not only across borders but on the border, not through the author but through authors produced in acts of reading and interpretation" (86).

Jeff Derksen's introduction to a recent issue of *West Coast Line*, N. 51, edited by him, "Poetry and the Long Neoliberal Moment" offers further pertinent and useful readings on the question of the "linguistic turn" in cultural theory and its implications for globalization and poetics. Like Davidson, he argues for a turn to language that designates "the site of intervention," a "poetics [that] points to the gap between the language and promises of neoliberalism (...) a poetics that reaches

down to the sign as a contested and productive arena and a poetics that reaches up to grasp the vectors of contradictions and the global-local logics that define neoliberalism" (9).

I've used their essays to get at, to get back at some hunches I have about "betweenness," the hyphen as a site of intervention, the gap as a space in which to generate the news and contest the manipulation of power and information by the state. I used the title of that conference, too, to improvise around notions of identity and location. I'd like to foreground a few of the poems that morphed out of that title.

Count (1947*)

[1947 was also the year that the Chinese Exclusion Act was lifted. While this was a major step, it didn't mean the gates were wide open for Chinese immigrants. At first, it was really only the wives of Canadian citizens and unmarried children under the age of 18 who were added to the list of admissible Chinese immigrants. It wasn't until 1967 that Chinese immigrants were admitted under the same criteria as people of other origin.

Prior to 1947, the right to vote federally had been denied to all Asians in Canada, which included Chinese-, Japanese- and Indian- (South Asian) Canadians. Both Chinese- and Indian-Canadians were allowed to vote by 1947. And by 1948, Japanese-Canadians had the right to vote in federal elections.]

So in that census, I could finally be "counted in."

Trust me, I was somewhere
else. In 1947 I don't think
I was counted. I must have
been Chinese. From the summit
of myself I was on the other side,
part of an exclusion act. Wonder

if the census counted my mother
as another Swedish ghost, my half
self already paying down the social
insurance number so hard to remember.
Just look it up, again and again
the numbers get jammed, the lock
tumbled into the Family Universe Index.
I didn't know where I was
always ending up somewhere else,
floated over Saskatchewan west with the vote
a British Columbian Subject still living
outside of the state, unaccountable since
birth.

I keep looking for a signifier
to cling to. These days iteration
might not find me home except
it's late and I want to play
my part post-immigration, the shadows
of numbers to include the click-clack
of Mah-jong above Pender, casinos
of NAFTA still bussing the loot
24 hours a day to International
Village. Global count a digital Olympics
so you can trust me I'm
usually somewhere else the census catches
up and so does the vote
to be counted and be caught.

Me (1892)

[In my thinking through writing I've tried to shift the Me as ego and self outside the self. "Until she calls me chink I'm not one." This offers

a site of uncertain ambivalence, the name's usually what we go by but is also so complicated by that Althusserian notion of "interpellation"]

Charlie Chim Chong Say
 Wong Liung Chung John
 no Jim he says first to remember
 Henry and his dad walking down
 Granville Street first heard of Ghengis
 Khan you remember that'd make the
 grandfather a son called Kwan Foo-lee
 that is Jim says you know
 Kuan Yü of epic San Kuo
 I tell Doctor Aung not Mah
 my dad was really Soon.

Remember nothing immigration man
 across the table you may sit
 and make the name a mind
 a stamp upon these disappearing
 slanted eyes no Charlie left to Chan
 the movie or the memory find
 your name is my name our name
 left-over slash of bones alone
 left-over commander front-to-back
 after sign in Chinatown slowly
 call again he spell me off
 he sigh him as a middle name
 official smile hey you
 who me

In (1923*)

* re the "Chinese Exclusion Act" see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_Canadian

In Hum
humiliation
Hum however
Hum heavy birthday
Dominion Hum
Except/Accept
Hum libre, liberalize
Hum heafy head tax
Hum go back
where you came from
Hum the acts
Hum immigration
Hum exclusion
Hum citizenship
Hum enemy alien
Hum Komagatamaru
Hum subject British
Hum citizen white
no yellow Hum
cheap labour
Hum husbands and fathers
Hum ex and ex
taboo the tea girl
in your cafe
Hum however again
However waves and waves
Hum horde
Hum yellow peril

Hum white sugar
Hum white blue-collar
but include within the hum in "in"
the shout of "out"!

Selves (15th C)

(This is a turn to language so maybe we might use another measure of length, thinking of the "long" neoliberal moment, the shift in the value of long vowels, the Great Vowel Shift.)

Selves is a plural noun dormant within the outside though it
is not a pronoun so when / chatter *we* don't get colder

it tricks language into an intense recitation of / *we* / *we* / *we*
as a way to keep warm around the pockmarked tongues of
other selves

a translation of winter that comes after winter

left holding the math of multiple history

just like Lorca's ghosts the frogs of south America are wide
awake

see, this is how difficult post-hibernation gets when plurality
reveals its linguistic DNA, when the Great Vowels shift and
all the pronouns splash into the pond like single green
needles

shiver under the perfect presence of after

The colon in the title, between "Count Me In" and "Writing Public
Selves" acts almost prepositionally; if we look closely we might find
some way to disperse the dominance of polarity around the hyphen.

Between You and Me There is an I (2007)

Between two stools
The hyphen lies
The eggs and the nest
The blind and the fold
The hinge of the city
The door and the jamb
The map and its edges
The wars I've not fought
The life and its lease
The rope but which end
The brink and disaster
The bank and the laughter
The spike below Chinaman's Peak
That spot where the two rails meet

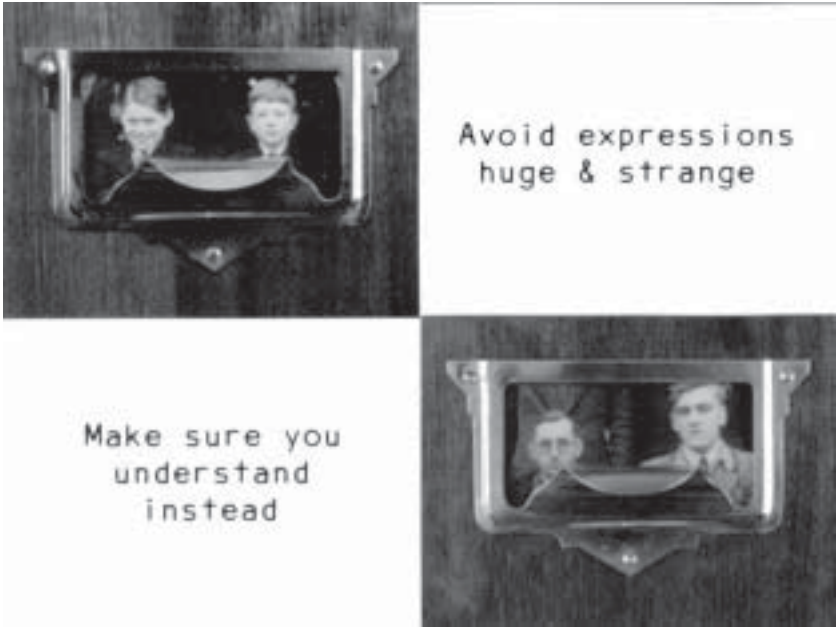
From between two stools
Hear the silence rise
The smoke 'round your neck
The tongue and the dash
The cat and the cradle
The dog dead in the creek
The slash and the burn
The shadows of NAFTA
The head and the tax
Rock bluff and river
The laundry its mark
The height and the trestle
Cata and strophe
Not caboose but what's after

Which is really just a reiteration of:

How voice the silent dash? Say blindfold, hinge, thorn, spike, rope, slash. Tight as a knot in binder-twine. Faint hope. Legally bound (not just the feet), "Exclusion Act," head tax, railway car to an internment camp, non-status outskirts of town nomad other side of tracks no track. Mi-nus mark, not equal sign. A shadow, a fragile particle of ash, a residue of ghost bone down the creek without abridge for the elusive unacknowledged "im" of migratory tongue some cheek to trespass kick the gate the door the either/or, the lottery and the laundry mark, the double mirror, the link between. How float this sign, this agent of the stand-in. Caboose it loose and let it go, it's "Not in Service" anymore.

("Half-Bred Poetics" in *Faking It*: 94-95)

But this "loose change," these little words, is not so much the locus of value as a conscious intervention into the realm of the possible. Social consciousness operates within iteration, sequence, and continuity, not the isolated image, in this case, of the nominal frame "Sea to Sea." The phrase "Know Your Place" that John Havelde and I chose as the title for a 2003 collaboration synthesizes the image / text response to a cluster of ideas, such as Blake's "Songs of Innocence" response to "containment" ("And priests in black gowns were walking their rounds, / And binding with briars my joys and desires.") or Maurice Blanchot's note on betweenness ("Nonunifying words which would accept not to be a gateway or bridge (*pont*), which do not "pontificate," words able to cross both sides of the abyss without filling it in and without reuniting the sides (without reference to unity." Our project intends to linguistically and imagistically prick the cachets of containment and betweenness.



The project has had several installations over the past six years, due mostly to John Havelda's use of it in Europe. One of the "events" of "Know Your Place" was the production of a limited edition boxed set of cards in 2007. Each card has on one side the image of a pair of faces from a school photo, as seen in the card-catalogue drawer handles in the installation, and on the other some text solicited at the initial installation in 2003 that in some "tongue-in-cheek" way responds to the Blake and Blanchot quote above. The text and photos thus engage the dynamics of a systematic chance operation and the poetics of non-intentional composition (see Jackson MacLow, John Cage, et al). In other words, identity and location, in this case, play as chance signifiers and break through, momentarily, the containment and bondage of the nominal. The texts and the photos offer the compositional opportunity of error, accident, slipping and sliding, tropisms unmediated by an "irritable reaching after fact and reason."

The leakage of the preposition into the world of adjective and adverb engages a similar dynamic. In other words, one way to generate a social consciousness of value is to acknowledge the iteration and continuity of sequence more available to the preposition than the noun.

o navegante
é un treballador

on avenue Can&Cannot
he untroubled the door

on Vancouver Island on business
but in Canada in the business

of difference aboard
the Komegatamaru

a board in the bush
excluding the tariffs

including First Nations
until they give up

until Nunavut throats
sing alongside the anthem

along the Rideau Canal
near museums of power

near the Blasted Pine
but outside the group

born inside the Jaw of a Moose
as the artist of Forget Saskatchewan

as for me and my house
along (read across) the CPR tracks

along (read across) the border we swarm
like bees to honey

like the loon on the Looney
behind the Queen's hairdo

behind the Head Tax's pigtails
despite cries for Redress

despite the warmth of the fur
save the seals and the beaver

save for Hockey Night in Canada
on top of the world

but under the tarsands
before the Olympics

versus onto the steroids
past the Canada Goose

beyond the shit on the lawn
beneath whose Crown is the land

just opposite the CN Tower
across the Great Divide

home&less – my love's embodiment

Sometimes "From Sea to Sea" could be the same sea. As I'm constructing this presentation in Lisbon I find certain "beacons," as my friend and fellow-poet Erin Mouré would characterize those points (or *ponts*), in Fernando Pessoa's *Mensagem* (*Message*). For a few weeks

in Lisbon I've brought with me Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet* and Erin's translation of *O Guardador de Rebanhos (Sheep's Vigil)* and her variations on the Galician-Portuguese *cancioneiros*, *O Cadoiro*. Translation as a compositional tool has been used in a variety of ways by many of my mentors and contemporaries. Erin Mouré sometimes calls her work in this "Trans(e)lations." I've used Coleridge's term "transcreation" for some of my writing within the TRANS-. So, in the context of "From Sea to Sea," I naturally found my way to Pessoa's *Mensagem*, a collection of poems that Helder Macedo distinguishes as "the poet's dramatization of self through the metaphor of nationhood." Though Pessoa's patriotic tribute to Portugal is steeped in an *imago mundi* similar and connected to Canada's heraldry, I've found the diction and syntactic turns used by the translator Jonathan Griffin usefully provocative in opening the syllabic doors to my own *tropisms* vis-à-vis the symbolism of mottos, nations, and citizens. The following poems tilt and bastardize the Portuguese, it's true, but language is also memory.

Turn Left Wing Albuquerque

You are the key, the prize too
 But your eyes are tired from staring away from the sea
 You can't see the trees for the destiny
 Think about it, death's not a question
 You're so fast you're looking at the back of your head
 That would be one meaning of *subcontinent*
 Turn down that road and don't step on the grass
 So be it, under your tread
 Trade Empire for another wing but don't bet on it
 And don't fly away angry

Person Dom

Midnight, can't sleep, so writing you this letter.
 In which I plant my love

Person 1

quest or guest
shadow or meadow
emblem or blaming
fog or hour
myth or message
sphingical or chilling effect
her stare or hysterical
heteronym or British Columbia
fatal or fade out
agonize or Greek eyes
persuade or pout
crest or wave
shield or shyed
pretending or defending
motto or lotto
ocean or ocean

Ode to Castles Out

The rope is just the ribbon of desire
The oriental accident just fits a better country
Rampant told the Lion and the Unicorn
To go out on a limb and hold

A coat of arms out at the elbows
A river out of wandering
At first it is a useful coat
 out of sun, snow, rain, and prairie wind
As tidy as England's ponds and fashion
Among us roasting maple leaves and thistles

It fits, coming from the sulphur of Saskatchewan
Out west, the end of earth

The face that stares,
that multi-coloured coat of envy.

Epitaph

Here is the lie:
the shore is always small and changing
The Captain of Contain. Drunk, in awe.
Don't be afraid; we're mesmerized to sameness.
The last one picked is highest in the tree.
The preposition is "about."

9. (about to be)

About to be a runner
About to be a manner
About to play the clarinet
About to be a lover

About to be alone
About a sack of bones
About that smoke around your neck
About to be unknown

(from "Articulations," *Sentenced to Light*:110)

Note

1. Paper presented at "From Sea to Sea," a conference on Canada at the University of Lisbon, 18-20 November, 2009.

References

- Buttler, Judith. *Excitable Speech*. New York and Londong: Routledge, 1997.
- Davidson, Michael. "The Dream of a Public Language: Modernity, Manifesto, and the Citizen Subject." *Xcp: Cross Cultural Poetics*. Ed. Mark Nowak. 17 (2007): 72-88.
- Derksen, Jeff. Introduction. "Poetry and the Long Neoliberal Moment." *West Coast Line* 51: 40: 3(2006):4-11.
- Macedo, Helder. Introduction. *Mensagem/Message*. Trans. Jonathan Griffin. London: The Menard Press, 1992.
- Moure, Eirin. *Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person*, a transelation of Alberto Caeiro/ Fernando Pessoa's *O Guardador de Rebanhos*. Toronto: Anansi, 2001
- Moure, Erin. *O Cadoiro*. Toronto: Anansi, 2007.
- Pessoa, Fernando. *Mensagem/Message*. Trans. Jonathan Griffin. London: The Menard Press, 1992.
- _____. *The Book of Disquiet*. Trans. Richard Zenith. London: Penguin, 2001.
- Wah, Fred. "Articulations." *Sentenced to Light*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2008. 97-156.
- _____. "Me In." *Is a door*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2009. 61-82.
- _____. "Poetics." *Faking It: Poetics and Hybridity*. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2000. 94-95.
- _____. "Loose Change." *Faking It: Poetics and Hybridity*. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2000. 238-259.
- _____. "Me Too!" *Sentenced to Light*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2008. 65-70.
- _____. *Place*. Ed. Fred Wah and John Havelda. Porto: Corrida Edições, 2007.