

"mother/father things I am also":
Fred(,) Wah, *Breathin' His Name with
a Sigh*

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Like Nicole Brossard, Fred Wah sees "writing as a way of using the body" (Brossard, *Aerial Letter*, 91). Even those unfamiliar with all of Fred's¹ writing will recognize, in the title of an early book, *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*, a reciprocity between physicality ("Breathin'"), language ("Name"), and identity ("My Name"). How these categories come together "with a sigh" depends on one's reading of the sigh. Is it a sigh of relief? Of resignation? Of passion?

The three poems from *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* excerpted for this book associate mother, father, and the name "Wah" with very different kinds of sighs. The poems beginning "mother / somewhere" and "mmmmmm / hm" both insist that readers engage the literal sighs of the physical body—breath coming out of the lungs—to make them sensible. Reading these two poems means giving breath to the words, putting, for example, the letters "mmmmmm" and "w_____h" into the mouth and pushing them out. But reading this writing is an intellectual as well as a physical pleasure. For example, the repetition of the sound of the word "her" in the "mother" poem makes connections between the body speaking, the words written, and a woman desired.

Watch what happens when I add the letter *h*—which, in its absence from many of the words, signifies the breath it takes to say them—to make explicit the tonal and semantic connections: "mot[h]er / somew[h]ere / rememb[h]er / whoev[h]er / forev[h]er / to fly ov[h]er / love her / pleases her / . . . / remove her / mutt[h]er / . . . / cleav[h]er / . . . / because of her / rememb[h]er / her." Why then did *Breathin'* generate, for Fred, the content signified by the first, much less physically demanding, much more conventionally lyric poem beginning "my father hurt-"²

Asked in a 1987 interview with Lola Lemire Tostevin why he is preoccupied with "finding the father" when so many "women writers have tried to displace the authority of the father and restore the influence of their mothers," Fred Wah said he "really doesn't know except . . . my father died and my mother is still alive" (3). In an essay which confronts questions of father, origin, and language—"Which at first seems to be a going back for origins"—Fred Wah argues that while the "notion of 'origins'" may be the "imposition of a male point of view," he is really more interested in "the actualization of the writing than in the reasons for it" (379). Further, he argues, the "break-up of a dictionary definition into alternatives," the dissonance and fracture of so much women's writing, "may be indicative of strong need for alternatives . . . Men are at some of these same frontiers in writing, perhaps for different reasons" (379).

The "actualization of writing," the necessary connection between the body writing and the body of writing, is a connection Fred has insisted on since he learned it from his teacher and literary father, Charles Olson, who said, as early as 1950, that verse must "put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings" (526). Daphne Marlatt, also a student of Olson's, extends his metaphors to include the bodies of women who write: "like the mother's body, language is larger than us and carries us along with it. if we are poets we spend our lives discovering not just what we have to say but what language is saying as it carries us with it. in etymology we discover a history of verbal relations (a family tree, if you will) that has preceded us and given us the world we live in. the given, the immediately presented, as a birth—a given name a given world" ("musing with mothertongue," *Touch to My Tongue*: 46-7).³

Wah's *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* offers its readers a "given name a given world," as perceived by a lost child seeking mother and father:

for
I forgot
memory
remembered
signs/ words
a genetics
carrying the deer
dance carrying
the tree
& other forms around
something else thinking too
from somewhere in my body
carrying
the other for
ever and ever.

But the world in which the child, this "left over thing," tells a life story, a body story, a bio-graph, is one in which the father, the man who breathes, dies; while the mother, the body of language, is always alive: "languaging a feeling inside the surface feeling out the breadth of my mother/father things I am also left over thing put together calendar's event world the children's things and wind last night/biography."

Breathin' My Name with a Sigh offers a family romance involving the child and both father and mother, which recent thinking in feminist psychoanalysis can give us a way to understand. Jessica Benjamin argues that "psychoanalysis has shifted its focus since Freud, aiming its sights toward ever earlier phases of development in childhood and infancy" (11). The effect of this reorientation, she says, is to give the mother-child relationship an importance in psychic development "rivaling the oedipal triangle," causing a shift from "oedipal to preoedipal—that is, from father to mother" (11). Attention to the mother-child bond leads to a theory of self constructed on the basis of shared recognition between

(m)other and child: "to experience recognition in the fullest, most joyful way, entails the paradox that 'you' who are 'mine' are also different, new, outside of me" (15). Compare, for example, the son's complete identification with his father in the "my father hurt-" poem ("that look on his face / appears now on mine") and the joyful, sensual difference his relation with his mother makes in "mother / somewhere" ("remember you flying over me mommy / outside a moist loss").

To identify with the mother is to "touch & float," to be both next to and out of her body. As a result, "mother" is not a "content" in the same way "father" is at all. The oedipal son, "who cannot bear his wish to unseat his father, because its fulfillment would deprive him of the authority who protects him, the ideal that gives him life" (Benjamin, 142), is more often and more recognizably figured in *Breathin'* because the son's wish has been fulfilled, his father is dead: "Father, when you died you left me / with my own death . . . I know now / I'd better find that double edge between you / and your father so that the synchronous axe / keeps splitting whatever this is the weight of / I'm left holding." The poems in *Breathin'* try to hold, in language, "whatever this is," to participate in both the oedipal and the pre-oedipal struggles, move toward both father and mother, knowing we carry "the other for / ever / and ever." In so doing they come to a new knowledge—very much like that identified by Benjamin—that identification can be accomplished in relation to both father and mother:

my breathing as I look at your picture of a line which gives way at the centre and falls into the valley breathless then below the surface you've worked on I hold the cool silence and fullness there especially the emptiness the motion of falling into the middle outside it is the gully that runs from the orchard down past the house in your picture my breath then my mind finds solace.

The words "Father, when you died you left me / with my own death" can be read to suggest that when "fatherness" becomes ambiguous—the "sister" is figured as having "'got' his eyes . . . you [sister] are left / with your own fatherness"—the child's process of identification involves more than the oedipal threat of castration.

In the following poem, the child moves to a place of water—the mother's place, of wa(h)t(h)er—to celebrate his difference, his fatherness, without fear:

breathing in the water so much a breath
to make a time times so simple rhythm
early snow mountain peaks body hair finger-
nails the death past 54 measure know
nothing rotten smell histories it like
layers of froth the scarlet letters parts
of our genitals my breathing in the pool
lengths stretched father's parts out.

These poems seek a way to breathe, and so to live in language, otherwise. As Jeff Derksen says of Wah's poetry in a quite different context, his is "A projective

verse that has reciprocity—what is projected from the subject is also projected back. That is the value of movement" (164).

For example, the "Sigh" of the title signifies a reciprocal and paradoxical naming of oneself in recognition of both the burden of one's given name and the relief of knowing who one is, knowing what—and that—one is called something by someone. This ambivalent "sigh" signifies both resignation and re-signing, even re-signature. Wah both signs and resigns his name, on both the cover and the third last page of the book, by giving us a new mark, the upside-down "e," the "schwa," the "uh" sound which is "the phonetic symbol for the unstressed mid-central vowel . . . the vowel of Fred Wah's name" (Scobie, 151). The voice breathing his name with a sigh, figured as "the cry of a newborn baby: waaaaahhh!" (Scobie, 151), finds a way to breathe by assuming and yet resisting the name of the father, the burden of his name, "him / thinking me / ahead of him / myself." As a result, the voices constructed in these poems do not invoke the singular authority of a man speaking to you; these poems breathe with you.

Listen to the tentative, questioning, uncertain voice of the speaker constructed in these lines: "It's April and I feel the water running / but I don't know how to count on it / or where." Or, in another poem, "What else was there outside in the dark but night / which has always been and is an answer / trick presence to the daylight you've seen / every day you'd think, eh?, and not / simply everything over and over again forever and ever, right?" In the absence of the father, binary oppositions like outside and inside, dark and light, day and night are, like language, like mother, "trick presences(s)." What "you've seen / every day" is not "what you'd think, eh?" In the absence of the father, the son tries to assert, in a poem whose typography suggests both a chant and a scream, his lineage: "IN THE ARMS OF MY FATHER / SKY / IN THE ARMS / MOTHER NIGHT / IN THE ARMS OF US ALL / OF US OUR HOLDING / IN THE ARMS / SHE WALKS / HE HOLDS / MY FAMILY."

Consider again the "my father hurt-" and "mother / somewhere" poems. The father is "hurt- / ing at the table / sitting hurting," the mother is "somewhere . . . flying over me." The poem addressed to the father is written from the position of a child who is also an adult, who watches and also remembers watching his father hurting "deep inside," who finds on his face the "look on his [father's] face." In the poem addressed to the mother, a much younger, less articulate child speaks and questions: "[do you] remember you flying over me mommy [?]" But she is "flying over" a "me" who remains part of her, in the "heart / core," "corrine," inside her core so fully, that "outside" is "a moist loss." The linguistic slippages—from "caress" to "close" to "careless"; from "remember" to "remove her" to "because of her"—also suggest the pre-oedipal, semiotic space of the mother. The poem moves from the word "mother" to the words "mutter / mummy / maybe" suggesting, both semantically and linguistically, what Benjamin calls an "open space": "in these moments . . . the infant can explore himself and his surroundings, can experience his own initiative and distinguish it from the other's action" (41). This poem, which repeats obsessively the word "her"—a word both signifying and included in the word "mother"—suggests the child

playing with words can explore himself and his place while he is in her place, or rather "our place": "Can't get it / or at least it's hard to hold on / until I think of her return, look / up behind our place into the field." In the columnal movement of the poem and the river-like, even vaginal, space it occupies on the page, the reader too seeks meaning in a process which is very much "touch & float."

Writing is a way of using the body—the mother's body, language—in *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*: "love her / pleases her / caress / close." The world constructed here can be known only through thinking, writing, and touching "it": "I still have a name 'breathin' / it with a sigh." The body reading—Fred's, yours, mine—embodies the breath assumed both because of and without the father. In reading, we participate in this mothering, we reciprocate, we breathe the poems with sighs of pleasure and angst. In reading we say and sigh "wahn, wahn," participate in the family/name and the threat of silence, of both breathing out and being out of breath. The others against and for whom the poems speak and are spoken also breathe the name of the poet—Wah—with sighs (and signs) of relief, resignation, passion because, for this tentative male voice, "I" can speak only when "you" breathe my name: "thru the mist of a memory, you wander back to me, breathing my name with a sigh" (from the 1930s pop song "Deep Purple").

As Nicole Brossard's *These Our Mothers* did for the notion of the patriarchal mother, *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* does for "the [patriarchal] father"; it exposes the oppressive limitations of that role. The poet obsessed with thinking of and through his father's death is nonetheless restless with the limits of his position as father: "that look on his face / appears now on mine / my children / my food / their food / my father / their father / me mine / the father." Figured as hurt, inaccessible and silent, the father is both who he is and who he is against: a fatherhood ahead of, behind, and in him. The father is (in) breath, speaks the speaker, and yet the son inevitably breathes his father's name as he breathes his own name with a sigh. If the father is the breath in the name he may indeed be "nothing": "catch up to the breath / breathing somewhere / the air // as it comes out ahead of me / wahn, wahn." The one speaking is radically othered in and by a sigh/sign which is also a cry—wahn wahn. Yet "Wah" is, these poems insist, only a word, dependent on and made aural by breath. Like all language, it is apart from the one who speaks it. As the poet breathes his name with a sigh he acknowledges the limits of the concept of the father which he desires, resists, and finally celebrates his failure to appropriate: "I would just breathe / but away from me. Out. Give it all / back."

In an article on men as comrades in the feminist movement, bell hooks speaks of the anger, pain, and uncertainty many men feel in patriarchy: "Men are not exploited or oppressed by sexism, but there are ways in which they suffer as a result of it. This suffering should not be ignored" (72).⁴ More importantly, "we need to hear" from men who are "striving to create different and oppositional visions of masculinity. Their experience is the concrete practice that may influence others" (*Yearning*, 77). Wah's long poem *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh*

documents and asks its readers to participate in such an experience of otherness within and against conventional masculinity. The 32 lines that begin

Breathe dust like you breathe wind so strong in your face little grains of dirt which pock around the cheeks peddling against a dust-storm coming down a street to the edge of town in Swift Current Saskatchewan or the air walked out into the fields across from Granny Erickson's house . . .

and end (without a syntactic pause)

later in the summer play anywhere someone's coal bin settled into my nose and the oiliness of it on the skin I rode down the hill outside the house on Victoria on a coal shovel I hit a rock and had the wind knocked out of me I was dying and couldn't even tell anyone as they walked by but stood and waved my arms and flailed the message without air.

enact the male child's experience of breathlessness, of being out of breath, of wanting and being unable to breathe and so to speak. The reader who performs this text experiences the difficulty breathing that the poem speaks of. "The father" may be so far inside that the one speaking flails "the message without air" (and, as Stephen Scobie points out, without *heir* [150]). But by breathing him out, breathing his name with a sigh, writing and reading the poem, entering into a relation of reciprocity, the father can be renewed, reconfigured, regrown, may even become his own mother: "next spring / I'll go out to the garden / and with a stick / plant myself / and eat me in the fall." This book constructs poems which are easier to breathe in: "Poem lightens the lungs Diana says meaning / birds which fly away into the air disappear / words end up relief of carrier message also."

This relationship, based on reciprocity between child and parent, body and language, text and reader, is particularly evident in Wah's love poems, included in his latest book, *So Far* (1991). At its Calgary launch, Fred said that his love poems are for his family, Pauline Butling, Jenefer and Erika Wah, all of whom have been so often textualized in his work that Fred considers them "a unit of composition."⁵ By constructing a love poem that addresses a group, Wah's family romance offers a complex notion of the bonds of love. In "Five Ones for P," the loved one is, like breath, like the desired but absent mother/father, like the name "Wah," "out there." But the "you" is also right there, "More the body, everything / you've touched / tongue and shoulder / shoulders / dancing too." The "I" can "keep watching" her "out there" and be "out there with you." "You" are both what "I know," and what "I keep watching." Out there is here. The breath is breathed. You are mine but also different, new, outside of me (Benjamin, 15).

Near the end of the launch, Fred warned that the poems he had read so far were "uncommonly sensical" ("or did I say sensitive," he said when I asked his permission to cite those words), and launched into some of the less accessible, less lyrical, more opaque pieces for which, since *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, he has become notorious. More like *So Far* than like *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* is an uncommonly sensical book

in that it challenges common sense in its refiguring of the father's name. Like Brossard, Fred makes "use of writing in order to rediscover the obvious" (149). In doing so, the poems investigate the problem of configuring identity on the basis of the oedipal relation alone. Instead, the book positions the male speaker between two marks of signature which both are and are not the father's, which may, in fact, be signs of the mother's comfort which he has made his own. The schwa on the cover and the schwa on the third last page of the book can be read as soothing words from the writing, embodied poet—Fred—to himself as text: shh-wah, shh-wah.⁶ No longer signified simply as disembodied language, mother is part of the one who speaks. No longer dead, father is named by and signified through the breath it takes to say "Wah." In the comfort found in the "mother/father things I am also" is the breath, the music, the son(g), of the last poem, which follows the last schwa of the book:

I swing
and talk back
sound that's right

I take the breath
through throat
and hold it
in the stomach
hit the fingers
on the horn

blow the jazz
that's where it goes.

Notes

¹For the sake of my argument, I am deliberately attaching different signifieds to the signifiers "Fred Wah," "Fred," and "Wah" in order to identify the differences within Fred Wah, including, but not limited to, the following: the words "Fred Wah" which appear on book covers and in interviews with and in articles by and about him; the word "Fred" which signifies my friend and colleague at the University of Calgary; and the word "Wah" which figures in *Breathin'*. It is interesting that although Fred's father's name was also Fred Wah, he does not play at all with the name "Fred." He laughed when I suggested he try some kind of feminizing of Fred as text in the word "(f.)read."

²Fred Wah speaks of the relation between *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* and *Waiting for Saskatchewan* in "A Prefatory Note" to *Waiting for Saskatchewan*: "Some of the poems from *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* . . . are included in this book to give some shape to the range of forms a particular content ("father") from that long poem

some new ones, some revised ones—is Part I of *Waiting for Saskatchewan*. *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* also appeared in two Coach House Press Manuscript Editions (1978, 1979). The Talonbooks edition, 1981, is referred to as a "third draft." All references to *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* in this paper are to the (frustratingly) unpaginated Talonbooks edition.

³Fred Wah's admiration for Marlatt is well known. See, for example, his introduction to Marlatt's selected writing, *Net Work*, in which he describes her as "one of the most acute writing intelligences of her generation" (7).

⁴hooks is speaking particularly of Black men but analyzing the place of men of other racial origins, including White men and men, like Fred Wah, of mixed racial origin, can also be useful to feminist thinking.

⁵Conversation with Fred, 18 Nov. 1991. Used with permission. I thank both Fred and Pauline Butling for many useful conversations about the issues *Breathin'* raises.

⁶Stephen Scobie agrees with Ann Mandel when she writes, in a review, that "fortunately for readers, the poet has not taken this (shh-wah) as a sign for silence" (Scobie, 151; Mandel, 152). Although I read the signifier "schwa" differently, it was Scobie's work that drew the shh-wah of schwa to my attention.

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Meaning in Numbers: Wilfred Watson's *Gramsci x 3*

Lorraine Weir

"Number grid poetry" Wilfred Watson labels his verse form, describing it on the flyleaf to *I begin with counting* in comparison with "traditional metrical verse" which

counts syllables. Number grid verse counts words. The structural unit of traditional metrical verse is the "line." The structural unit of number grid verse is the "number grid." The number grid, like the line of traditional verse, can be varied endlessly.¹

To take from that book an example of the basic form, the first nine lines of "after the snow fell" are as follows:

november	1	twenty-sixth			
nineteenth	2	seventy-seven			
at	3	0937			
			hours	4	after
the	5	night's			
			snow	6	absalom
trapped	7	in			
			the	8	choke
9		cherry			

Here syntax is regular and the single grid is constructed for one voice, a lyrical haiku with a rather Cubist appearance. The grid arranges seventeen words on a framework which uses the numbers one to nine and invokes Watson's compositional rules stipulating the basic grid function, the attribution of two "slots" to each numeral except nine, which has only one "slot," and the positioning of a word in each "slot." In addition, Watson specifies the repetition of as many grids as desired to compose a poem, and includes the possibility of constructing poems for up to five voices by using grids in corresponding numbers.

Several years later, in *Gramsci x 3*, Watson experiments with more complex grids, raising more interesting possibilities. For example, in the Epilogue to "Gramsci 1," Tatiana Schucht, Gramsci's sister-in-law, reads a letter which she has written to his nieces, Edmea and Teresina:

Tatiana,	1	to
and	2	Teresina
Edmea,	3	sad
Your	4	greetings.
uncle	5	Nino
died	6	Gramsci
a	7	month
today,	8	ago

