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"I Admit the Industry of It": Fred Wah's Counterlogistical Poem

In the early 1970s, the poet Fred Wah returned from SUNY Buffalo, where he had completed graduate studies, to the Kootenays of British Columbia, where he had grown up and occasionally worked as a timber cruiser.[1] Having joined the English faculty at Selkirk College, Wah continued his editorial work with *Scree* (1971–1972), a poetry magazine based out of South Slocan that published numerous figures associated with Black Mountain College and *Tish* (1961–1963), the poetry newsletter he cofounded with Daphne Marlatt, George Bowering, and Frank Davey (among others) at the University of British Columbia. Wah's move back to the Kootenays would appear to reaffirm the frontier relations that epitomize Canadian culture: as British Columbian lumber heads south, American university degrees head north. Conversely, Wah's writing and editorial projects from this period see this rural region

1. Discussing his first few poetry books, Wah recalls, "I had written primarily to senses of geography and landscape, a long poem called *Mountain* and a book called *Lardeau* that had a lot to do with timber cruising and firefighting and place (the mountains of southeastern British Columbia where I grew up)" (*Faking It* 19).

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enmeshed within the transnational circuits so instrumental to postwar small-press poetry.

The two books that Wah published in 1972, *Tree* and *Among*, try to make sense of this double situation. Before examining the former, I want to begin with a short arboreal poem from the latter. Consider "Up That Hill & Into the Trees":

you bastard
and don't stop—

run
a turn is a trunk
the bark the coat of
a stem that I am
a sapling it is
into brush into
needles my eyes
the head in the green
of its branches
the rough it is
rough to the face
my bark is hit
hair in the pitch
stick in the crotch
scrape against bark

(151)

Delivered in densely packed lines shorn of most punctuation, the poem's stiletto-like structure and suggestion of rapid movement is countervailed by its images of heavily wooded terrain, where clothes and skin are torn by needles and bark. This is not a pastoral landscape that effortlessly recedes into the distance but a site of practical, if abrasive, experience. Wah portrays land as a point of contact between the social and the ecological, the speaker and the forest, not a synthesis but a moving set of relations that the poem's quick syntactic turns constantly recalibrate, "the bark the coat of / a stem that I am / a sapling." However, the parenthetical remark that concludes the poem abruptly swaps forestland for infrastructure:

(a ship
sails by with a face

and a flag
I want to be the flag
up there
and a moon
in a dark and tossing sea
let me be the tossing
no I'll be the road
over the hill and out of sight)

(152)

The poem's strictly terrestrial setting now joins a broader network of amphibious trade routes, with the paradigmatic image of global transport, the ship, running parallel with the classic referent of postwar modernization, the road. Wah produces an articulatory map of the timberland that concentrates on what Henri Lefebvre would term "its structure and its horizon," that is, the forest's integration with an extended web of relations across space and time (18). The poem depicts a biophysical here and now that is entangled with the concrete yet far-flung infrastructures that undergird globalization. Wah considers how timber frontiers are "profoundly *relational* entities" as well as "*situational* achievements that must be constantly performed and maintained in the face of their material connections with the outside world," to borrow from Thomas Hendriks (13). More precisely, with its allusion to transnational infrastructure simultaneously encroaching on and shooting out from the forest interior, the poem can be read as an early cultural response to the fusion of frontier zone and postwar *logistics*, the latter representing the "entire network of infrastructures, technologies, spaces, workers, and violence that makes the circulation of stuff possible," as Deborah Cowen writes (1).

In this article, I argue that contemporary theories of logistics offer a new way of reading how poetic texts map and mediate the ensembles of infrastructure, labor, and resources. My argument centers on what I term the "counterlogistical poem" and its development within the commodity frontiers of western Canada. That said, the textual strategies I sketch in this article are by no means unique to Wah's writing from this period. For instance, Marlatt's *Vancouver Poems* (1972) and Bowering's *George, Vancouver: A Discovery Poem* similarly grapple with the exploratory projects, imperial networks,

uneven built environments, and logistical circuits that have repeatedly reconstituted this contemporary port city: "O Empire's furthest outpost cradled / by inland sea the ships go down to," as Marlatt writes, "Outside, cars eat at the city's lungs, mills / chew away at the source" (18, 25).[2] As Stephen Morton argues, "In their focus on the immediate environment of Vancouver, [the *Tish* poets] were also concerned with Vancouver's historical place in an older global project of colonial settlement, race-labour, and imperial trade" (129). With *Tree*, however, I want to offer a theory of the counterlogistical poem that focuses not on the port city per se but on the extractive landscapes and labor situated on the peripheries (both spatial and conceptual) of capitalist circulation. Where most commentaries on logistical aesthetics cleave to circulation's industrial behemoths and infrastructural appendages (e.g., ports, pipelines, shipping containers), my theorization of the counterlogistical poem instead follows Rafico Ruiz's avowal that "the often forgotten rural is the de facto ground of networks of trade, transportation, and communication" (19). At the heart of this article, then, lies a provocation: What happens when we think about logistics' cultural forms not from the perspective of the shipping container or the port but from the margins of the world economy, the frontier? If logistics concerns the movement of *stuff*, where does stuff come from?

The counterlogistical poem responds, both formally and critically, to the frontier's imbrication with the postwar logistics revolution, whereby capital accumulation becomes increasingly reliant on instituting new methods of circulation, distribution, storage, and trade. Advancing the poetics of place theorized by figures such as Charles Olson, I propose that Wah's counterlogistical poem in *Tree*

2. More recently, representative examples of what I call the counterlogistical poem include Cecily Nicholson's *From the Poplars* and Mercedes Eng's *Mercenary English*. Written during a period that saw Vancouver's urban fabric dramatically reshaped by aggressive pipeline expansion, inner-city property development, and the emergence of "brand new logistics facilities for port-related business," as Nicholson describes it (80), *From the Poplars* and *Mercenary English* magnify the recursive rounds of frontier-making and infrastructural reordering involved in the city's uneven urbanization and ongoing occupation of unceded *xʷməθkʷəy̓əm* (Musqueam), *Sḵwx̱wú7mesh* (Squamish), and *səlilwətaɬ* (Tsleil-Waututh) lands. For a closer analysis of Eng's counterlogistical poetics, see Tucker-Abramson and Weselowski.

deploys strategies of textual mapping and direct address to depict the global circuits of energy, labor, and capital in ways that challenge the representational regime that imagines those circuits as being both frictionless and depopulated. With mapping, I am primarily interested in how Wah uses thick description and disjunction to locate his immediate experience of the timber frontier within the rapidly extending spatial fabrics of the postwar commodity chain. *Tree* produces less a fully realized flowchart of global logistics than a relief map of the latter's physical reconfiguration of rural British Columbia. In this sense, Wah demystifies the spatial imaginaries that characterize logistics: *Tree* connects capital's visions of abstract seam space and unimpeded flows to the realities of extraction, depletion, exhaustion, and violence that propel frontier movements.

Yet *Tree*'s encounter with logistics is not felt solely at the level of the spatial. As Charmaine Chua notes, the dominance of the logistics revolution "did not happen simply because of business innovations and technological optimization" but was the result of "conservative political victories that generated the terrain on which logistics companies would flourish, including the disintegration of labor law, the undermining of working-class power, and the growth of a free trade regime that became extremely beneficial to the fast flow of retail commodities across global space" (1453). Consequently, I consider poetic address a key feature of the counterlogistical poem as it seeks to register the effects of global logistics at the qualitative levels of social experience and intersubjective relations. At its most traditional, poetic address refers to the rhetorical strategies with which a poem speaks to or summons a particular reader, listener, hearer, or recipient. In Jonathan Culler's analysis of lyric apostrophe—a mode of poetic speech directed at a silent or absent figure—address mainly serves as an emotional "intensifier" whose tilt toward the unresponsive or inert constitutes "encounters with the world as relations between subjects" (138, 141).[3] More broadly, William Waters suggests that poetic address invokes not merely the speakers and hearers of a

3. Extending Culler's argument, Anahid Nersessian more recently asserts that the task of Romantic apostrophe is to make "the nature of minimal modes of existence maximally present and intense, to find the threshold of what is hardly there and color it as vividly as possible" (132).

given poem but "the entire communicative context that such a work projects" (6). Building on these insights, I examine how Wah uses address to rematerialize the rural communities and socioecological webs embedded within apparently empty resource landscapes and logistical corridors. Written from the softwood forests of peripheral British Columbia, *Tree*'s poetic address grasps the conflictual experience of logistics—itself characterized by the insertion of new commodity flows and consumer patterns into scenes of raw material extraction and precarious rural labor—within the very speech acts and communicative situations of frontier poetry. Whether directed at loggers, logging companies, peers or poets, Wah's modes of address foreground the social relations of the frontier, particularly as they are destabilized by the rapid introduction of financial mechanisms and logistical infrastructures. Taken together, poetic mapping and poetic address allow Wah's counterlogistical poem to mediate between the spatial and social, as well as operational and concrete, forms that shape the logistics of frontier-making.

The counterlogistical poem is poetic in the Marxist sense, defined as "*poiesis*—as contest over world-making" in Jeff Diamanti and Mark Simpson's formulation (7). Relatedly, I propose that the counterlogistical poem recognizes logistics as crucial to the reproduction of rural poetic communities and frontier life more broadly. Wah recasts logistics not simply as the transportation of goods but as a material force that determines huge swaths of capitalist life (e.g., going to work, buying food, moving to new cities) along with how small-press poetry is written and distributed.

In *Tree*, Wah foremost locates timber work within the mediating processes of production and circulation. His engagement with frontier infrastructure stresses how these physical sites and spatial relations—logging camps, clearcuts, roads—represent the meeting points between new modes of supply chain capitalism and older forms of colonial dispossession. Contemporary theories of logistics place Wah's rural poetry within a global context of colonial and capitalist environment-making. More specifically, *Tree* maps the expansion of logistics from the peripheries of the world economy, taking the perspective of labor and resource extraction to address the scarring modes of accumulation that underlie infrastructural dreams of modernization and logistical fantasies of control.

"A Complex Spatiality at Once National, Urban, Imperial, and Mobile"

Logistics is a business science concerned with the movement of "stuff," to use Cowen's shorthand, particularly when that stuff is disaggregated across logging camps, computer processors, oil rigs, delivery vans, strip mines, factories, railroads, ports, depots, big-box stores, highways, and households. As this spatial laundry list implies, logistical flows require concrete spaces alongside an enormous cast of workers, from truckers and warehouse runners to data scientists and operations managers. Though it may aspire to pliable circulatory networks, the accelerated movement of stuff is underpinned by violent practices of deterritorialization and confinement. The marriage of military tactics and urban redevelopment exemplifies this dynamic, as when Marshal Thomas Bugeaud, the leader of the French forces in Algeria in 1840, described how he demolished whole neighborhoods and their connecting routes to break the Algerian guerilla forces in his *La Guerre des Rues et des Maison*. Georges-Eugène Haussmann used a similar template for bulldozing Paris's congested streets to facilitate the rapid deployment of security forces (Cowen 190). Earlier still, experiments in logistics took place "with the first great movement of commodities, the ones that could speak," as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten observe: "[Logistics] was founded in the Atlantic slave trade" (92).

In Canada, the history of British and French colonization similarly appears as state power mediated by transportation infrastructure: "The logistics of trans-Atlantic oceanic travel and the domestic fur trade define the early colonial era," as Cam Scott writes, "and the violence of occupation increases with the expediency of its means" (2021). Since the 1970s, the Canadian state's intensive search for oil, and the implementation of pipeline logistics to circulate it, has forged "a partial but real shift toward recognition and marketization in the colonial relation between the Canadian state and Indigenous peoples" (Kipfer 482). Construed thus, the logistics of the frontier is inseparable from "the history and experience of *dispossession*," to borrow from Glen Sean Coulthard. This experience of dispossession produces "the dominant background structure shaping the

character of the historical relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state" (13). With its origins in the dual obliteration and expansion of urban space coupled with the dehumanizing logic of racial capital, logistics is nothing if not colonial spatial relations.

Keeping this broad historical perspective in mind, logistics is also a periodizing term that describes the major shifts in capitalist accumulation strategies since the 1970s. With the abrupt end of Fordist levels of economic growth in the late 1960s, manufacturing firms sought to restore profitability by capitalizing on technological innovations in information management, storage, and transport (especially containerization) (Chua 1444–45). More simply, logistical capitalism attempts to reengineer economic growth around faster circulation rather than increased productivity. This transformation can be seen radically reworking capital's global space economy in tandem with its practices of labor exploitation. The highly permutable supply chains of logistics "make it possible for capital to seek out the lowest wages anywhere in the world and to play proletarians off of each other," as Jasper Bernes writes (186). Logistical respatialization further inaugurates what Cowen describes as the full integration of "urban space into managed networks of goods circulation underpinning both trade and warfare" (193). Logistics ultimately produces "a complex spatiality at once national, urban, imperial, and mobile," cohering disparate aspects of urban dissolution, labor discipline, and commodity culture into an unevenly integrated process of colonization that toggles between resource frontier and imperial core (12).

The aesthetic strategies that both compel and represent logistics are dominated by visual practice. Similar to what James Scott terms "high modernism," the art of logistics "tends to see rational order in remarkably visual aesthetic terms. . . . an efficient, rationally organized city, village, or farm was a city that *looked* regimented and orderly in a geometrical sense" (4). In many ways, advancing from the planned cities that tantalized the high modernist imaginary, logistical aesthetics turns to the spatial—particularly the urban and the infrastructural—to construct a vision of seamless integration and, by extension, control. As the work of contemporary artists such as Edward Burtynsky and Andreas Gursky shows, logistical aesthetics often concentrate on one or two signature tropes: the shipping container, "that modular metonym for global capital as

a whole," as Alberto Toscano anatomizes it, and the "depopulated landscape of megastructures," whether in the form of port city or petroleum pipeline. This fixation on circulation's physical instruments often privileges aesthetic qualities of "*isomorphy, modularity, abstraction, indifference*" (Toscano). Sam McBean further argues that logistical artworks mired in fantasies of "connection, seamlessness, and flow" often erase "the materiality of circulation (the planes, the shipping containers), and with them, the histories of coloniality and racial capitalism that have mapped the world" (3381, 3380). These visions of containers and industrial megastructures truncate the planetary tableau of extraction sites, sacrifice zones, infrastructural works, and commodity chains that compose logistical environments. In addition, aesthetic overinvestment in the built environments of circulation tends to expunge people, and specifically labor, from our cognitive maps, as though logistics named the autonomous (and ahistorical) flow of stuff across space without recognizing the social relations baked into the production and movement of commodities, energy, and capital. For shipping companies and manufacturing firms alike, the built environment is not created in the image of circulation per se but is itself a spatial practice through which the social world is dramatically reordered.

Insofar as logistics seeks to "lubricate, flatten, connect, and smooth out the irregularities of capitalist operations," as Chua argues, "a critical Marxian reading seeks to uncover the effects of such fantasies of control" (1445). In the same vein, this reading forefronts counterlogistical ways of seeing, the production of cultural objects and hermeneutic strategies that recognize, oppose, and reimagine logistics across space and time. If we are to take seriously the argument that logistics transforms "the ways in which we consume, produce, and circulate daily means of life, from clothes and technology to the food we eat," as Chua asserts (1444), looking beyond its paradigmatic images means not simply detecting the knock-on effects of logistics across a broader range of cultural phenomena but also discovering aesthetic forms that actively combat its representational regime.

Bearing the material imprint of transnational infrastructure, manual labor, and recurrent ecological devastation, the forests that

suffuse Wah's rural poetry provide a strong counterweight to the seamless urban spaces that exemplify logistics. Moreover, the timber frontier provides a locus for examining not so much the extensive reach of logistical capitalism as its long and developmentally uneven history. Built atop the demise of the fur trade in the mid-nineteenth century, the forest industry in British Columbia sought to capitalize on the enormous need for timber in Europe and North America amid the Industrial Revolution (Innis 250). In the first half of the twentieth century, the timber industry in British Columbia rose to global superiority, with some of the largest corporations in the world running integrated logging, sawmilling, and pulp and paper operations in the province while shipping products to worldwide markets (Bradbury 404). Throughout the 1970s, however, extractive capital increasingly invested in "the development of technologies to utilize tree species hitherto unsuitable for pulping and construction, and superior to softwoods in growth time and overall management costs" (Marchak, "For Whom" 4). These innovations allowed investment firms and multinational logging companies to rework the spatial relations of the timber trade, a shift that would reinforce western Canada's dependency on core capitalist markets while also ultimately weakening its position within what Michael Williams calls "the global forest" (xvii). If British Columbian lumber was a fixture of the world economy from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, the 1970s would see the province's forest industry struggle to compete with eucalyptus trees, kenaf, and sugar bagasse in New Zealand, Australia, Indonesia, and Thailand (Marchak, "For Whom" 5).

With new mechanisms of extractive and financial infrastructure grafted onto preexisting sites of dispossession, the frontier relations of British Columbia do not solely mediate the province's peripheral inclusion in the world system. They also shape and are shaped by the material and operational forms of logistical capitalism. Wah's depiction of the timber frontier, as I show, is a sensitive if neglected site from which to register the structural changes in settler colonial spatiality after logistics not because it restates the above history but because it grapples with the transformation of entire ways of seeing as well as prevailing modes of life.

"I Try to Be the Place"

The poetics of place practiced by Wah and the *Tish* poets at large drew its aesthetic coordinates most heavily from Olson, whose essay "Projective Verse" (1950) represents this textual mode's key explanatory document. Drawing on the theories and techniques of fieldwork, local history, and social geography, Olson radically reformulated the methods of poetic writing, forefronting embodied perception—"proprioception," in his vocabulary—as it responds to the immediate environment. He stresses "the *kinetics* of the thing" and urges writers to "get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can" (*Collected Prose* 240). At once situated and centrifugal, Olson's proposal is a mediational one, cohering sensorium and surrounding terrain without allowing the poem to reify or freeze these relations. "Place" thus designates a crucial anchor for Olson's project, serving as the physical rather than metaphorical basis from which one speaks. The poetics of place, then, can be read bifocally: it is a perspective from which to investigate the material and the experiential while locating them within a totality of relations.

Compared with the period of economic boom that underlies Olson's theory, the crisis-response and logistics-driven remaking of the Canadian timber frontier in the 1970s appears less certain about the stability of place as a poetic category. In *Tree*, Wah repeatedly frames the poetics of place as a textual problem. Toward the book's conclusion, he muses:

> This is a hard language to work out
> the images keep interupting [*sic*] the talking
> trees keep being pictures of themselves
> my words keep meaning pictures
> of words meaning tree
> and its not easy
> to find myself in the picture.
>
> (125)

Wah's semiotic play, no doubt riffing on Ferdinand de Saussure, can be read as a return to basics (words, pictures, the self) that ultimately complicates rather than clarifies how poetic language speaks to its

immediate environment. Wah suggests that the poetics of place is not simply an act of spatial representation emanating from the poet. Instead, "what is projected from the subject is also projected back," as Jeff Derksen neatly puts it (164). Construed thus, Wah's poetry engages not with epistemic capture but with, by his own admission, "not knowing, indeterminacy, silence, distortion," or what Anahid Nersessian would call "*nescience*" (*Faking It* 24). It is "not easy / to find myself in the picture" because the relations that make such identifications possible are always in flux and must be continually produced.

The short poem "Note" offers something like a compass for navigating this new spatial situation:

> I try to be the place,
> Tilt my gaze as
> tree-face
> Cedar-head
> sunshine(?)
> (104)

Distinguishing *being* the place from being *in* the place, Wah elides the distance between speaker-subject and geographical surround. In doing so, he constructs a kind of compound figure or human-tree hybrid that hinges on one of his signature textual strategies, the hyphen, "that marked (or unmarked) space that both binds and divides" (*Faking It* 72).[4] "Though the hyphen is in the middle," Wah continues, "it is not in the centre. It is a property marker, a boundary post, a borderland, a bastard, a railroad" (73). For Wah, the hyphen is a textual infrastructure defined by its marginality but a marginality that is mobile, propulsive. To engage the hyphen at this microaesthetic level is to focus "less on infrastructure as a material form and more on infrastructure as a process that allows something to happen," to borrow from Harry Pitt Scott (139). In "Note," the hyphen alerts us to the contiguity between speaker and place; Wah then raises a vista toward which this sense of locatedness tilts and in which it

4. In his proprioceptive autobiography or "biotext" *Diamond Grill*, Wah explicitly connects the hyphen to his Asian Canadian identity and the experience of racialization in postwar Canada more broadly.

is subsumed, a literal horizon that is made radically open and tentatively foreclosed by the poem's parenthetical question mark.

Peppered with questions, hyphens, and tensions, Wah's counterlogistical poem investigates how the commodity chain recasts the frontier not as a metaphorical edge but as a productive unit. More specifically, by placing a question mark after the poetics of place, Wah contemplates the fusion of frontier and logistics by way of their antagonism toward each other. For Wah, the counterlogistical poem emerges from the coexistence of incommensurable historical realities taking hold in Vancouver's resource hinterlands, staging a conflict between not just different kinds of space but competing modes of spatial representation. Consequently, textual mapping and poetic address identify complementary mechanisms with which the counterlogistical poem mediates the colonial processes of environment-making and social reordering that have defined the transformation of capital accumulation since mid-century. In *Tree*, this poetic form's portrayal of frontier infrastructure, resource extraction, and the labor of circulation attempts to reconnoiter the postwar logistical landscape in ways that obstruct its vision of unimpeded flow. The proposal to "be the place," then, calls into question how one relates biophysically and socially to this new spatiality.

"The Plan of a Tree"

Mapping designates a baseline strategy by which Wah's counterlogistical poem negotiates spatial relations. That *Tree* regularly appropriates the visual cues of logistics to depict the timber frontier's mobile position within the commodity chain, however, proposes a more dialectical approach to spatial relations than direct replication. As Wah writes,

> the plan of a tree
> a system, squares
> circles, rectangles
> angles, all round
> spaces, roads, ways
> centres, the plan
> of a tree
> spread out
>
> (115)

The "plan" of a tree, Wah suggests, above all refers to its movement across space and takes the form of a list, one that toggles between total assemblage ("a system") and individual infrastructures ("roads, ways"). With its primary shapes and blueprint simplicity, the poem offers a vision of land emptied of people and transformed into a web of circuits and flows, what Cowen refers to as "gateway and corridor cartographies" (62) and what Stephen Shapiro terms "logistical boundaries" (34). These theorists highlight the spatial texture of logistics: bereft of sharp corners, logistics aspires to serialized networks and thus space-times that are not so much compressed as disaggregated, "more pointillist than grid-like in its cartography," as Dara Orenstein suggests (650). However, because logistics is not solely geography that has been rendered subordinate to long-distance transportation infrastructure but entails the wholesale implantation of capital's operational, legal, managerial, and commodity forms, the spatial representation tasked with depicting its geometries of colonial power and uneven exchange must contend with the fact that these relations "cannot easily be mapped on two- or even three-dimensional surfaces," as Shapiro avers (34). Wah's poem reproduces not a map of logistics per se but a particular way of seeing; he tarries with the abstract spaces that suffuse the logistical imaginary and its dreams of control. The poem is less a representation than a description of logistics' visuality, emphasizing the ensemble or, as *Tree* would have it, string of hyphenated and enjambed sites by which the logistical chain wheels around the globe.

The gateways and corridors that permeate "the plan of a tree" serve as a foil for the industrial logging that appears in the protest poem "Hamill's Last Stand." The poem was first published in Gladys McLeod's edited anthology of the same name (1972), which featured works by students and faculty at Selkirk College. The anthology was assembled in response to the provincial government's refusal to confer ecological reserve status to Hamill Creek due to conflicts over mineral claims and the amount of valuable mature timber in the area (Clayton 104). "Our concern is tree-murder," Wah writes, "harvest / of the forest (she's worried / they call it 'timber') timber sale A04292" (96). For Wah, substituting heterogeneous tree species for serialized sales codes represents in miniature a decisive transformation of an entire socioecological fabric.

Faced with British Columbia's variegated forests, capital seals over ecological difference by stretching a single commodity—timber—across the whole terrain. Moreover, the use of serial numbers for timber sales alludes to the new technologies and distribution strategies associated with resource logistics, where timber harvesting is increasingly computerized and orchestrated by the immediate flow of information between resource hinterland and managerial center, as dependent on data banks as it is on chain saws.

Financializing timber, however abstract it may seem, connects to the demolition of socioecological relations on the ground:

> left on the smouldering hillsides
> and silting the creeks
> maybe a new crop another lifetime, no care
> for the names Hemlock, Balsam, Spruce
> undone words from our own mouths
>
> (96)

Wah paints a landscape akin to a polluted battlefield and gestures toward the temporal asymmetry between timber cultivation, which can take upward of four hundred years, and the average lifespan of private investors and timber merchants, to whom this poem appears to be initially addressed. "Hamill's Last Stand" proceeds to dilate our field of vision in a spatial sense, "cubic feet seven million two hundred / and thirty-eight / thousand Cedar, Larch, White Bark Pine, / trunk roots" (97). As a terraforming project, the scope of industrial logging is colossal: producing timber in this way not only sees trees as quantums of data within a disaggregated network of production and trade but also reworks the very reproductive cycles on which forest ecologies depend. Wah points to a concrete site from which stuff comes and more specifically brings into focus the play of forces that determines timber's transformation into a mobile commodity.

Tree locates itself within what Wilma Dunaway terms a "capitalist agroecosystem," or areas where precapitalist complexity undergoes processes of "rationalization, homogenization, and a radical simplification of the natural environment" (367). Along similar lines, Wah's braiding together of capital's intensive and extensive processes of appropriation—where the receipts of "timber sale A04292"

are "left on the smouldering hillsides"—dovetails with what Neil Smith theorizes as "the real subsumption of nature": "While capital has always circulated through nature," be that in agricultural production or successive waves of colonization, "the real subsumption of nature not only intensifies this circulation but transforms it from an incidental effect of capital accumulation to an intended strategy" (28–29). For Smith, the real subsumption of nature is defined not exclusively by capital's outgoing search for new resource landscapes but by the reordering of socioecological relations itself, often through the development of technologies (e.g., strip mining, genetic modification) that allow greater expanses and volumes of cheap energy and raw materials to enter circulation.

The frontier is where these processes of subsumption are firmly felt and lived. In Wah's proprioceptive rendering, the juxtaposition of automated sale code and tremendous forest denudation brings into relief how capitalist abstraction serves as an aggressively material form of environment-making, one that further rubs up against sensory experience and poetic writing: "strip it, all the growth / for structure wood / core of our eyes to see and say it" (97). More simply, "Hamill's Last Stand" addresses a specific type of rural workspace. The timberland defined "only by 'profit,'" as Wah writes (97), represents what Niblett describes as a "commodity frontier," or "spaces on the outer edges of the global economy dedicated to the production of primary commodities" (43). Crucially, the commodity frontier designates not just a physical site but also a spatial process. Per Niblett: "Once a particular frontier is exhausted, new sites must be found in order to secure fresh streams of nature's bounty—hence the pivotal role of frontier movements in the geographical expansion of the world-system" (44). In a nice dialectical twist, the commodity frontier refers to situated resource peripheries and to environment-making practices. Further, it enacts real forms of subsumption and social reordering insofar as commodity frontiers are "sites in which processes of subject formation (such as the racialization or gendering of labor) occur in markedly overt or violent fashion—not least because they are frequently to be found in regions subject to imperialist domination" (3).

Crucial to *Tree*'s critical stance here is how it argues for the proximity between commodity frontiers and logistical space while reasserting

their qualitative differences. Wah places logistics' smooth visuality in tension with the rasping landscape of the clearcut, not to separate these spaces out but rather to emphasize their dual roles within capital's combined and uneven development. Wah draws attention to how logistical infrastructures penetrate the frontier through, for example, the humble serial code and the transnational financial and technological networks that underlie it. Conversely, the poem points to capitalization and exhaustion as preconditions for frontier movements and logistical expansion more broadly.

As capital's search for cheap energy/labor either extends into new lifeworlds or deepens into previously colonized ones, logistics becomes crucial to the organizational flow of commodities, workers, infrastructures, and technology between colonial frontier and imperial core. Forests are overcut and hastily replanted until new bundles of timberland can, or must, be appropriated elsewhere. "Hamill's Last Stand" takes the perspective of labor to render that "elsewhere" concrete. In the Olson-inflected third section of the poem, Wah writes:

> I admit the industry of it, hot
> summer work, sweat and mosquitoes
> in the headband of the hardhat, chain-oil,
> whine of the diesel among the spruce
> ehrrrrrehrrr of the saw
>
> (98)[5]

In contrast to the spectacular image of destruction that dominates Wah's initial portrayal of resource extraction, this section centers on industrial logging as a labor process. The poem evokes the sensory experience of timber work—its mixture of bodily function, machinery, and nonhuman natures—and explicitly highlights the different energy sources that cohere this relationship. Punctuated by the snarl of carbon, "ehrrrrrehrrr of the saw," the timber frontier is closer to a factory than a forest. In this, Wah both intuits and broadcasts in an original way the connections between energy and logistics. As Diamanti and Simpson argue, where capitalist

5. To my ear, the poem recalls the opening lines of Olson's "Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]": "I come back to the geography of it" (*Maximus Poems* 184).

industrialization, powered by coal, took the urban factory for its primary nexus and entailed the "industrial *concentration*" of production, petroleum instead compels capital's "industrial *dispersion*" and the emergence of "the hidden factory," or the entire "aggregation of offshored labour coordinated by legal and electronic protocols and procedures—the software and hardware of the global economy—all of which . . . is an enormous heap of dead labour hardened into everything from processors to shipping containers" (4, 7). Dispersion dictates where things are and where they are going. So too does dispersion name the supreme spatial form of logistics, its intended strategy and representational problematic, simultaneously stretching capitalist production across the globe while shunting so much of it out of sight, into the frontier.

If visuality is out of the question, Wah experiments with a combinatory aesthetic repertoire that links the palpable "sweat and mosquitoes / in the headband of the hardhat" to the intangible "ehrrrrrehrrr of the saw." Think of the "whine of the diesel" as petroleum's echo that radiates from the cross section of the tree. Situated and centrifugal, biophysical but mediated, the poem can be read as sounding out the carbon channeled into the fuel-burning machines and infrastructures of industrial logging that power postwar and contemporary logistics at large. The poem moves away from visual landscapes to onomatopoetic noise, a formal countermove and way of recognizing the industrial dispersion of capital, which takes sensory experience as its basis.

As the poem continues, timber labor draws into focus another mosaic of commodified landscapes shooting out from the frontier:

> I admit
> the hi-baller works for a new pickup
> each year, weekends in town
> I admit his skill, I admit that he makes
> a life of his own from it, with a grip
> on the throttle lever, admit it
>
> (98–99)

The recurrence of "I admit" has shifted emphasis from testimony to address, or from Wah's work experience to that of the "hi-baller," whose aspirations toward star commodity ownership also map the

spatial relations of timber, with "weekends in town" evoking the metropolitan pole to *Tree*'s urban-rural axis. Heartland and hinterland are connected here by the flows of labor and commodities, with workers from the core being sent to the periphery to fell trees that are then consumed and circulated by the city. Meanwhile, imperial exports and technology transform the frontier into an increasingly urban space. Oil and finance teem in the background of this dual process, yet Wah's foregrounding of labor—his address to the particularities of timber work and workers—brings into view a whole way of life shaped by the logistics of the frontier and its braiding together of resource industry and commodity culture.

"I Don't Want Any of This Tree Poetry / Shit from You"

Counterlogistical mapping takes social relations rather than space as its reference point. As *Tree* demonstrates again and again, Wah's cartographic practice is at all points situated in experience; his representations of frontier movements and logistical complexes are always indexed to the forms of life they circumscribe, enable, sequester, sustain, and exploit. Not only does Wah bring the commodity frontier and logistical space into the same textual frame, he cross-examines their respective ways of seeing and how they are mediated by labor and energy. Mapping therefore only names one of two formal strategies whereby the counterlogistical poem describes social reality, the other being "poetic address." Poetic address is a materialist practice, one that establishes dispositions and counterdispositions toward concrete figures, places, processes, and conditions, both socializing and producing relationships to space. Dispositions are not solely emotional responses but also social energies held in potentia. To this effect, poetic address is part of the counterlogistical poem's broader impetus to reinsert labor into our cognitive maps of global capital.

Put more simply, if mapping probes *where* you speak, poetic address interrogates for *whom*. Consider *Tree*'s opener, "Don't Cut Me Down":

> I don't want any of this tree poetry
> shit from you. You don't know what a
> fuckin tree is. If ya think its only

> in yer head yer full a shit. Trees is
> trees and the only thing they're good
> for is lumber so don't give me any crap
> about them bein sumpin else.
>
> (89)

With its irascible tone and phonetic spelling, the poem ventriloquizes the voice of a logger and puts it in contradistinction to that ostensibly idle pastime, "tree poetry / shit." Like the noise of oil above, Wah's emphasis on diction, on sounding language out, stages a conflict between the verbal and the textual and how they index not just class positions but differing aesthetic projects. As far as the logger is concerned, "tree poetry" and its underlying suggestion that trees are something other than "lumber" is a pleasing prospect that willfully denies the material conditions of timber labor if not the process of rural commodity production in toto. Trees are not symbolic raw material for poetry "in yer head," as the logger asserts. They are real sites of resource extraction on which entire livelihoods are based. For the logger, "tree poetry" names a specific relationship to the frontier: writers have the leisure time to portray these landscapes from afar rather than work within them.

What motivates the logger's criticism? One source of this ire is the precarity that defines timber work. In comparison to more territorially bounded forms of resource extraction such as mining, logging is "an inherently mobile and relatively ephemeral activity," as Hendriks observes (15). For British Columbia's timber frontier in particular, the dynamics of "changing world demand and increasing world production combined, paradoxically," as Marchak writes, "with decreasing supplies means that a dependent region such as British Columbia is exceedingly vulnerable to abrupt and prolonged economic depression," most immediately characterized by recurrent layoffs in the forestry sector (*Green Gold* 14). Though increasingly woven into the commodity chain by novel forms of financial exchange and data flow, the timber frontier's exposure to economic crisis lays bare the brittleness of logistical capitalism and the force with which it destabilizes rural lifeworlds. The bile of "Don't Cut Me Down" translates this precarity and spatial instability into a structure of feeling, one that is not isolated to the poem's worker-subject but instead limns the social form of the timber frontier more

widely. The poem offers, in other words, a counterdisposition to that of landscape writing. With its in-mixing of umbrage and humor, Wah's spatial representation is rooted in social conflict, replacing idealization with argument. Land comes into view as a set of relationships that are antagonistic, unsettled, and asymmetrical.

If not tree poetry, what does the logger want? As the poem's second half continues to grouse:

> Fer chrys
> sake you think the rest of us don't
> know sweet fuck all compared to you.
> Well you don't know nuthin till ya go
> out there and bust yer back on em.
> Settin chokers'd break yer ass so fast
> ya wouldn't even wanna look at a
> goddamned tree let alone write about
> em. Then ya'd know what a tree wuz,
> steda yappin about it.
>
> (89)

To "know what a / fuckin tree is" requires that you "go / out there"—the logger's own metonym for the frontier—"and bust yer back on em." Wah's slippery figure of address, focused on a "you" that could also be a "me," ties labor and poetry together yet leaves a space between them. "Don't Cut Me Down" is neither a put-down nor self-deprecation. You can in fact learn a lot about a tree by cutting it down; there are probably things you can learn by cutting a tree that you cannot by writing a poem, and Wah encourages us to meditate on that gap. The job named here is equally significant: "Settin chokers," which involves tying cables by hand to felled logs that are then attached to a skidder (a cross between a tractor and bulldozer) or skyline (akin to a zip line) that transports the lumber to a central area where they will be loaded onto trucks and sent further down the commodity chain. So while setting chokers may exemplify the physicality of timber harvesting—what Raymond Williams would call "hard marginal labour" (189)—it is neither the extractive moment par excellence (that designation probably goes to chopping the tree down) nor the image conventionally associated with frontier logistics, such as logging trucks barreling down the highway. Rather, the

logger highlights an intermediary process, one that still requires living labor operating in concert with machinery, a form of physical work surrounded by increasingly automated aspects of resource extraction. Consequently, the poem suggests that logging is curved around a *changing*, or modernizing, relationship to land, to which the speaker's attachment to backbreaking exertion is a kind of nostalgic reflex. The logger anachronistically frames proprioception as a mark of legitimacy the same moment that living labor becomes displaced following the expansion of logistical capitalism into the postwar timber frontier.

Insomuch as the poem "discloses the local labour required to produce globally exported commodities such as lumber," as Morton asserts (138), I would add that "Don't Cut Me Down" offers a ground-level analysis of the tension that defines the social experience of the commodity frontier's incorporation with global logistics, an antagonism the poem refuses to reconcile. Wah locates rural British Columbia within the capitalist world system not by retracing the commodity chain but by attending to class conflict. Poetic address here is anathema to the cartographic visions that dominate logistics, offering instead an interrogation of subject positionality through the twinned categories of labor and land, thereby allowing Wah to contemplate who speaks from the frontier and to whom.

Strikingly, then, the text immediately following "Don't Cut Me Down" appears to exemplify the "tree poetry" that Wah's logger is so critical toward:

> Tree of colored textured brain
> bathed in twisted neural headlights
> twined trunk of cedar bark all shaggy
> woman man tree
> underpits which root me to the image
> like a root is
> moving through the darkness of the soil
> nerves and soul (like baling wire
>
> (90)

Wah's references to "cedar bark," "nerves," "neural headlights," and "baling wire" shift from analogy to ontology, from incidental

resemblance between trees and bodily organs to the full-blown figuration of a human-tree-machine hybrid.[6] Similar to the composite "tree-face" and "Cedar-head" evoked in "Note," this poem's peculiar provisioning of human bodies with metal and wood represents the construction of a threshold figure, a sensorium trying to "be the place." So too does Wah's hyphenated figure, or "unidentified freakish object," in the irrealist parlance of the Warwick Research Collective (17), register the cross-linkage of peripheral lifeworld and colonial spatial relations that dominates the subjective character of capital's combined and uneven development. We might also consider this personification of industrial logging an attempt to give figuration to the socioecological itself and its particular cocktail of labor, ecosystem, and resource extraction in the frontier.

There is yet another frame within which Wah's "woman man tree" coiled by baling wiring can be situated. As a figure that knots together labor and land, the human-arboreal hybrids that appear in *Tree* can be seen registering what Iyko Day theorizes as settler colonial capitalism's triangulation of "symbolic positions that include the Native, the alien, and the settler" (23). While settler colonialism is generally perceived as a confrontation between settlers and Indigenous peoples, territories and resources, Day stresses that this colonial regime further entails the implantation of alien labor. In the context of British Columbia, "Asians represented an alien labor force that mixed with Indigenous land to transform it into white property and capital" (31).[7] In this light, the hybrid bodies that appear in *Tree* can be read as the figuration of alien labor on Indigenous land. Wah's socioecological entities not only speak to logistical space and commodity frontiers as combined historical realities but also provide a perspective from which to view settler colonial

6. Though, as Daegan Miller points out, "we share crowns, eyes, limbs, trunks, hearts, and crotches with our arboreal kin; the cypress even has knees" (1128).

7. Asian labor and Indigenous dispossession were fundamental components of the infrastructural megaprojects associated with Canadian national unity, most famously the Canadian Pacific Railway, which "employed thousands of Chinese railroad workers recruited from the United States, who tunneled through the most treacherous sections of British Columbia's Fraser Canyon" (Day 88). On completion of the railway, the Canadian government swiftly imposed anti-Asian border controls in the form of the Chinese Head Tax, a prohibitively expensive pay-to-enter scheme intended to halt migration.

capitalism's cycles of theft, subsumption, and exhaustion. Logging the timber frontier, like "being the place," means occupying stolen land; the logistics of frontier-making thereby comes into definition as a specific form of colonial settlement, one that both sharpens British Columbia's position in the capitalist world system and refers, as Wah's emphasis on proprioception shows, to forms of embodiment defined by displacement, marginality, and violence.

"It's 4:30 and That's About It"

Departing from the bibliographic conventions that typify Anglo-American poetry, *Tree* ends not with an acknowledgments page but with a "Biography":

> It started between Mike and I just after I moved out to South Slocan from Buffalo. Then Stan started listening to them when he came up from Vancouver. Last fall Derryll said he and Michael would like to print them on their new press up in Argenta. So a week ago Gladys and Lars arrived at South Slocan and so did Derryll and Shirley. Derryll said he was ready to print, so.
>
> (126)

Wah provides an overview of small-press poetry publishing's labor landscape, highlighting the interlocutors and printers—the social relations—involved in the production of *Tree*. "Biography" discards one of poetry's more pernicious illusions, that of the lone artist, while underscoring how rural poetic communities are often "contingent upon infrastructural access to the university and upon resources associated with moneyed institutions," as Marty Cain maintains (157). Poised between semi-peripheral Vancouver and the institutional center of Buffalo, Wah infers the poets and paper that suffuse small-press publishing's transnational circuits, documenting a veritable logistics of frontier poetry. In doing so, *Tree* posits that frontier zones are social spaces rather than remote backwaters, characterized as much by their dependence on metropolitan imports and markets as they are by their ability to function as sites of poetic-making.

Unlike the countermoves discussed above, "Biography" bears testimony to logistics as both dominant arrangement of colonial

spatial relations and, ultimately, condition of possibility. This same recognition separates Wah's counterlogistical poem from the logistical aesthetics of so much contemporary cultural practice. Having remapped logistical space from the perspective of the frontier and bodied forth its settler colonial triangle of subject formation, "Biography" argues for *Tree*'s nearness to rather than insulation from the colonial present. Wah apprehends that not only do the poem's formal strategies develop in response to logistics' spatial mediations but the reproduction of frontier life is entirely enmeshed with capital's life-sustaining infrastructures.

Not accidentally, then, "Biography" concludes with an image of rural domestic space: "The house is full and the sun's coming out over the head of Kootenay Lake. It's 4:30 and that's about it." It is dated "April 28, 1972" (126). *Tree*'s counterlogistical map terminates at the household, and its closing address points to the calendar. This twofold gesture not only restages the relationship between global logistics and daily existence but also revivifies the questions of periodization this article began with. "The 1970s mark a moment when the very notion of historical progression is thrown into disarray as the economy stagnates and resource extraction reaches its limits," as Jean Tremblay and Andrew Strombeck aver. "The economic shocks of the 1970s and concurrent attacks on the welfare state constricted the institutions of artistic production and circulation," living conditions that these theorists suggest have plateaued if not worsened since this time (3, 4). To draw a similar line from the long 1970s to the present, "Biography" asks us to consider our own conditions of poetic production, their instantiations in space and time as well as their proximity to and friction with colonial infrastructure and capitalist logistics. Wah's conclusion is as much a map of the transnational links that hold experimental poetry together as it is an address to practical communities over ideal ones. "Biography" thereby meditates on how to make these social relations visible and viable in the present. More generally, Wah addresses ambient crisis rather than its spectacular rupture, staging domestic space not as a site of respite but as one of holding contradiction in common, insisting that the counterlogistical poem be alive to both clearcut and kitchen, chain saw and economic crash.

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