is a door
by Fred Wah

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Although Isadora Duncan’s dancing was very intense and may have created a storm of controversy while she erected the scaffolding for such artists as Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham (no relation) to create the edifice which became known as contemporary, or modern, dance, this book is not inspired by her. Rather, it was inspired by 2002’s Hurricane Isadora, which rattled the Yucatán Peninsula. Shortly thereafter, Wah visited and saw Isadora’s force in the rubble-strewn beaches and streets.

What began with Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth has led to a proliferation of terms and confusion. Do we talk about post-colonial literature or postcolonial literature or multicultural literature? Is there a difference? Apparently so – even between post-colonial and postcolonial. The one term that bridges these divides is “diaspora.” Not knowing how Wah might see himself within this maze – although there is probably ample evidence for situating Wah as an elder statesman in both fields – the safest would be to situate him within the diaspora. Being the child of a half-Chinese father and a Swedish mother, that term would account for both aspects of his lineage. He has written poetry that could fall into either camp. His early poems, about his early experiences growing up in the Kootenays, incorporate Aboriginal motifs. He has written about his experiences with racism and about his mixed ancestral heritage.

The preceding discussion may seem somewhat esoteric were it not for the fact that these are the issues which Wah addresses in the four parts of is a door.

The first part is subtitled “Isadora Blue.” This is Wah’s encounter with the devastation caused by Hurricane Isidora. “Sheet Music,” which he dedicated to Charles Bernstein, indicates the intensity of his response to what he’s seen and how deeply it affected him personally:

latch onto the nexus while claiming the crux
of the squall. The positive also equals
the page. Ok, I’ll take the floor, a
blendable family, double-U-Ay-Aych
aching. Positively, adverb or not
could be more than the accent outside
immigration – who
cares if it does? (14)

Note the rhetorical manner by which he breaks lines – “accent outside / immigration” and the sleight-of-hand contained in the trick “The positive also equals / the page.” where the lingering question remains – Is the positive white?, the break after “equals” an affirmation of inequality. Note also the ending of this poem:

The downburst blows away, the scene
affirmative by the day. Word’s out
what I need to do is mess around
with Mister In-Between. (15)

These four lines are edgy with intention. “Mr. In-Between” is the title of a Bing Crosby song. Wah is/was a jazz trumpeter. He is also the product of two cultures who doesn’t rest easily in either one. In Wah’s hands, words become double-barrelled. Does “downburst” refer to the rains or the rain of largesse that never quite reaches the indigenous as it trickles down through the numerous hands above?

The second part, Ethnogy Journal, contains “Sunday Morning Dark”:

buddhite minding the hoot
colouring into the long night
sudden travelling in transmission
flack shift
next thought
last (39)

The lines “next thought / last” recalls to mind Ginsberg’s mantra “first thought / best thought.”

Wah’s relating to the plight of the indigenous invests the third section, Discount Me In. “tOOl fOOd 1” begins “The connection of handle / To blood is obvious / Pass the tensile
nouveau screw” (75). We wonder what is buried beneath the abstraction of these words. Meaning is never made clear but merges into the “stew” at the end:

   Cup it and cap it
   Mark it with “OO”
   Stuff it in the drawer
   As a history of stew

Finally, we reach the last section, Hinge – a word that has echoed through each of the preceding sections. Wah is at his best in “Abdijection,” a word that not only captures Julia Kristeva’s “abjection,” a “turning away,” but swerves to avoid “dejection” and others. Exhibiting his debt to Robert Creeley, he writes

   communal consonants
   hum of the core semiotic
   “we” that feels the archive
   behind the wheel

   tread of tire or foot
   black rubber shadow
   mimics the emperor’s
   overcoat and hat

   the mud of British
   Columbia’s spring
   epic breakup hollow
   board walking

   doesn’t mean a thing
   even as complete thought
   parks itself in a circle
   to predict the predicate

   “I can’t understand it
   if you don’t feel like talking.”
Empty, or run on empty?
Race, or bet on raceway? (85-6)

This is a brilliant pyrotechnic of poetic creation. Moving from socialism or Marxism through a recasting of Duke Ellington (“doesn’t mean a thing”) and then descending into race, he creates a column of rhetorical splendour highlighted by the mid-point “mud of British / Columbia”.

The poem “Loki Sniffs the Floods” ties Wah’s life to that of those he encountered in the Yucatán Peninsula, a tie that gave rise to the emotion and impressions of this book.

John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for Malahat Review, Arc, Antigonish Review, Fiddlehead and The Danforth Review, in the U.S. for Quarterly Conversations, Rain Taxi, Rattle, Big Bridge and Galatea Revisits, and in Australia for Jacket.

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