

escape and they were what kept me. Sustainability, renewable resource, ecology were just words.

Although Alma stops short of “crewcutting the roots,” a practice that makes planting easier but decreases the trees’ chances of survival, she admits her own complicity with the treeplanting industry. Like Harasymchuk’s Dingo, Alma acknowledges but does not rationalize her own failings, and thus invites identification.

Haunting and sensual, Kuitenbrouwer’s novel merits re-reading for its well-phrased wisdom as well as for a fuller appreciation of its structural intricacy. Like a compelling action film, Harasymchuk’s novel calls to be absorbed in as close to one sitting as possible. Finally, despite the distance that Sapergia creates between her protagonist and the reader, *Dry*’s dystopia of global drought and planetary ownership prompts serious reflection.

Re: Composing Biotexts

Joanne Saul

Writing the Roaming Subject: The Biotext in Canadian Literature. U of Toronto P \$45.00

Fred Wah

Diamond Grill. NeWest \$19.95

Reviewed by Guy Beauregard

The term *biotext*, introduced by George Bowering in the late 1980s, has taken on a critical life of its own. As Sally Chivers recently observed, the popularity of the term has leapt forward since it appeared prominently in the Acknowledgements of the first edition of Fred Wah’s *Diamond Grill* (1996), where Wah referred to the biotext as “an innately cumulative performance.” The two books under review—Joanne Saul’s scholarly study of “the biotext in Canadian literature” and a tenth anniversary edition of Fred Wah’s celebrated *Diamond Grill*—revisit this term from readerly and writerly

perspectives. If, as Wah noted, the biotext is “innately cumulative,” what is at stake in revisiting this term now?

Joanne Saul’s *Writing the Roaming Subject* attempts to answer this question by providing a systematic introduction to the biotext and its potential significance in the field of Canadian literary studies. Saul explains that she uses the term because of the way it “captures the tension . . . between the ‘bio’ (with an emphasis on the ‘life’: including the family, relationships, and genealogy) and the ‘text’ (the site where these fragments are articulated in writing).” The Introduction and first chapter map out the genealogy of the term, its relation to the project of theorizing life writing in Canada, and its critical potential to “bring to the surface the power relations that constitute any notion of belonging.” Particularly valuable here is the way Saul links the biotexts she investigates with “the challenge to genre” that had been put forward by the Canadian long poem. In this respect, Saul builds upon and extends the argument she put forward in a 2001 essay published in *Biography* where she situated the biotext in the context of debates concerning “the contestatory long poem of the 1970s.” Saul contends that the biotext, like the long poem, “demands a reader who does not just consume some prefigured meaning (or the subject) from the text, but is also an active participant in constructing the text’s meaning.”

The main argument put forward in *Writing the Roaming Subject* is that the term biotext can function “as a way of theorizing the writing of displacement in Canada”—a line of argument about which I have more to say below—and “as a tool for thinking through” four texts: Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*, Daphne Marlatt’s *Ghost Works*, Roy Kiyooka’s *Mothertalk*, and Fred Wah’s *Diamond Grill*. Because the principal outline of this argument had already appeared in print in Saul’s 2001 essay, readers may find the

individual chapters dedicated to reading these four texts to be the book's most valuable critical contribution. And of these individual chapters, Saul's acute discussion of Kiyooka's *Mothertalk* and the convoluted and controversial process surrounding its publication deserve particular critical attention. Saul's original contribution here is to track the various stages in the production and publication of *Mothertalk*, returning to Roy Kiyooka's manuscripts, which, as Saul observes, "clearly demonstrate a different kind of project in process" than the posthumously published version edited by Daphne Marlatt. Readers of *Canadian Literature* who recall Susanna Egan's and Gabriele Helms' critical essay on this topic published in the pages of this journal in 1999 will note that Saul, while investigating the same set of manuscripts as Egan and Helms, arrives at a markedly different conclusion: that "the manuscripts of *Mothertalk* provide an important example of a biotext that develops the concerns Kiyooka explores in his long poems." While Saul states unequivocally that the published version of *Mothertalk* "does not capture the process of cultural recovery at work in Kiyooka's manuscripts," she nevertheless elegantly observes that "[t]he layering of voices and the various fragments of the [published] text allow for glimpses into the possibility of another text—a biotext—lurking in the margins."

Writing the Roaming Subject suggests that the "complex poetics of displacement" in the texts by Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah "disrupt settled categories both of the whole self and of the whole nation." Yet while the individual readings it puts forward convincingly support this position—and persuasively underline that "[t]he biotext has the ability to open up the space of writing as a space of creative potential"—readers may nevertheless wonder how this generalized notion of "displacement" can account for the varied colonial and

postcolonial histories represented in these texts (cutting across colonial Ceylon, British Malaya, China, Japan, and Canada). In this respect, readers may sense that the notion of "roaming" foregrounded in the title of the book and used by Saul to sew together her book's critical project sits uneasily alongside the various histories of restriction, forced movement, and incarceration starkly represented in these texts. So while Saul suggests that "[r]eading the 'roaming subject' in Canadian literature challenges us to rethink conventional boundaries of cultural and political identity," readers may also productively use this opportunity to stop and rethink the ethical stakes involved in reading these colonial and postcolonial histories—in Canada and elsewhere—as they become visible through figures that do not "roam."

In light of these concerns, NeWest's decision to reissue Fred Wah's magnificent *Diamond Grill* in a new tenth anniversary edition should be warmly welcomed. The new edition—which follows three print runs of the first edition, and which appears in the press' Landmark Edition series dedicated to reissuing literary texts by western Canadian authors—faithfully reproduces the 132 short sections that appeared in the first edition, retaining the same pagination, and adds a generous Afterword by Wah (who revisits with teacherly warmth *Diamond Grill's* compositional genealogy) and a list of additional references (which includes references to key scholarly articles and an interview focusing on Wah's text). While it is difficult to imagine readers who would be unhappy with the continued circulation of *Diamond Grill* and the addition of these helpful new materials, it seems unfortunate that the reissued text reproduces the typos that appeared in the first edition and—in the Afterword and the list of additional references—adds additional typos too. Given *Diamond Grill's* astonishing compositional precision, the reprinted

manuscript deserved greater care at the copyediting and production stage.

Revisiting *Diamond Grill* ten years after its initial publication nevertheless remains a rich readerly experience. One textual detail that remains imprinted on my mind as I revisit Wah's text is a scene representing the discovery, 30 years after the figure of Fred Wah Sr. passed away, of a box of IOUs stored in a cedar chest: a box containing an unpaid IOU in the amount of two hundred dollars signed by "Tom Greenbuck" in 1953. What could the discovery of this textual marker of an *unpaid debt* signify in the aftermath of the history of the Chinese head tax and the exclusion of Chinese immigrants to Canada? And what could this textual marker of an *unpaid debt* signify following the Canadian federal government's apology and its announcement on 22 June 2006 of a non-negotiated redress settlement for living head tax payers or their living spouses—an announcement that was made just before the publication of this new edition of Wah's text? In light of these developments, the work performed by *Diamond Grill* remains cumulative and sharply resonant and unsettled: a teaching text that forcefully conjoins the *bio* and the *text* and the ethical stakes involved in their recomposition.

Chaucer's Dreams

Susan Schibanoff

Chaucer's Queer Poetics: Rereading the Dream Trio. U of Toronto P \$75.00

Reviewed by Stephen Guy-Bray

As Susan Schibanoff points out in this interesting new book, Chaucer's three dream poems have usually been read for what they can tell us about the *Canterbury Tales*. That is, critics have tended to turn Chaucer's literary career into a strongly teleological narrative. Part of this narrative is the idea that Chaucer was originally in thrall to

French literary models—models seen as artificial, inauthentic, and feminine—but that he eventually freed himself and became the virile, natural, and English poet we love today, and on whom so much of our literary history depends. While this idea may seem outmoded now, Schibanoff demonstrates that even some of the most recent and highly regarded Chaucerians today still produce versions of the escape narrative in their work.

Schibanoff's thesis is that the dream poems deserve study in their own right and that rather than show Chaucer's subservience to the literary models popular at the beginning of his poetic career they display his sophisticated negotiations with the literary theory of his day. This thesis is reflected in the book's organization. After the pleasingly polemical introduction, Schibanoff divides her book into three parts, one on each of the three dream poems. Each part consists of a chapter on what she sees as the intellectual and literary contexts for the poem and then a reading of the poem itself. There is also a brief conclusion, which is both a summary of her own discussion and an indication of where the discussion could go.

In her analyses of the poems, Schibanoff focuses on those aspects of them which we could now call queer; her interest is particularly in the narrators. She makes valuable comments about the ways in which Chaucer formulates and positions his narrators, paying careful attention, for instance, to the allusion to Ganymede in the *House of Fame*. Schibanoff's argument is that the queer figures we can see in these three poems are not dead ends, as the prevailing narrative of Chaucer's career would have us believe, but rather important parts of his poetic self-presentation. One of the advantages of Schibanoff's view of Chaucer is that it makes the early poems an essential part of his career rather than more or less failed attempts at becoming a great English poet, which is how they have typically been seen.