



CENTER FOR
ART + THOUGHT

Andy Fitch. "Ronoldo Wilson with Andy Fitch." *The Conversant* July 2013.

Over the summer, Andy Fitch has interviewed 60 poets about their latest books. Ugly Duckling Presse will publish these collected interviews in 2013. This interview focuses on Ronaldo Wilson's forthcoming book Farther Traveler: Poetry, Prose, Other (Counterpath Press) and took place on July 19th. Transcribed by Maia Spotts.

Andy Fitch: I wonder how you would place this book on a trajectory from *Narrative of the Life of the Brown Boy and the White Man*, to *Poems of the Black Object*, to *Farther Traveler*. Does "farther" in the current title imply an extension of preceding projects? Does this book's diverse compendium of forms derive from a deliberately hybrid construction? Does it collect divergent pieces? Does it theorize, in some way, the collection?

Ronaldo Wilson: *Farther Traveler's* definitely in conversation with the previous books, because doubling elements inform its creation. I wrote *Narrative of the Life of the Brown Boy* and *Poems of the Black Object* around the same time. In both, I'd worked through larger questions of form and daily practice. There were various interruptions, completing the poems while writing a dissertation, and living in New York, forces not necessarily in opposition to the poems, but distractions that fed them. So *Farther Traveler* provides the double to writing those books. Then doubling against *Farther Traveler* is a newer poetry project called *Lucy 72*, a series of persona poems in long-lined couplets that languish through ideas about race and representation. Lucy's body is sometimes white, black, male, skinny, fat, substance, landscape, texture. I'm interested in persona poems as embodied (sometimes disembodied) avatars, figures or configurations of the self. *Farther Traveler* presents a catalogue of different experiences via assorted media, whether poems, paintings, essays, poetic statements, or figuring out my relationship to received and invented forms. And because I spent several years moving between New York, Massachusetts, and California, I wrote much of the work on trains, ferries, planes. This constant motion even found its way into my most productive and fertile arena, dream space. Plus I've been practicing Bikram yoga most every day for these same years, so focus, strength has influenced the book's scope through these doublings of content, event and activity. Right now, I'm not settled on its title, *Farther Traveler* which I picked up at a family reunion. I'd travelled from Massachusetts to Oakland, where I received the "Farther Traveler" award.

AF: From the airline?

RW: From folks at the family reunion, people I can't recall ever meeting before that day. I won a Safeway gift certificate as reward for being the *farther traveler*, written on the envelope that held the card. It just kind of stuck. But the title stands for an entire process of traveling, through many manuscripts and many locations. Not always someplace fancy, sometimes just visiting my parents in Sacramento or staying with my partner on Long Island. I travel more professionally now, as a poet, which feels different, though the title has many separate offshoots. Still constant traveling informs the book's trajectories. I made videos while driving from MA to NY that have found their way into a small film project with the same title. I do sound recordings while jogging. I'm sure that this desire to create on the move came from living in New York so long, and feeling the endless need to finish work. My wheels were always spinning and with this book I tried to capture that.

AF: Just a bit more on the title. You present yourself as a traveler moving physically, conceptually, thematically through genre. And you've mentioned your relationship to received form, to expectations for what a poetic collection could be. But I'm curious, with *Farther Traveler* I do hear "Father Traveler," and "Fellow Traveler." You've got these filial relations, these love and companionable relationships. Does "farther" somehow bridge those, move in the wake of or beyond those?

RW: You're helping me get more behind that title, which has much to do with my father. I've been thinking about a poem in *Narrative*, "The Brown Boy's Black Father Loses It," which is based on a dream where my father goes crazy, strips, masturbates, and shits all over the place. This dream came to me well before doctors diagnosed him with dementia. Actually, at that family reunion he did his own kind of crazy. He'd just had his operation for prostate cancer and kept walking around the reunion with his catheter bag out. He wore his urine pouch on his thigh, and didn't even care. While trying to cope with all that embarrassment, I also wanted to track my love, and my curiosity about his sense of freedom (tied to loss). He'll now say, "Oh Ronaldo, it's like I'm walking through a new place...every day feels totally different, like I live in a dream." That's kind of how I want to live, despite loss, or because of it, with that sort of freedom that forms another undercurrent for this book. In a sense I try to theorize what freedom means, what it means to attain this mobility, which sometimes can feel dangerous. The more free, the more emotionally sound, the more under attack you are, especially as, say, a black person in the U.S., walking slowly through the airport, or deliberating, thoughtfully, about your order at a restaurant—there's still, in my experience, always an assault on your time, your body, your freedom. So here I've tried to map a space that contends with these forces through traveling, moving toward freedom, expectation, perhaps even fate.

AF: The book does provide parallels in terms of the pursuit of freedom, the drag of memory, perhaps the liberatory potential of memory loss and the idea of moving into an embodied present. I wonder if we could construct further parallels to your career. Because we both did our Ph.D. at the CUNY Grad Center, for example, I have any number of localized questions about whether a “Pornographic Imagination” class of Wayne Koestenbaum’s, a Proust class of Eve Sedgwick’s, found their way into this volume. I’ll stick to the broader topic which...

RW: Yeah, totally.

AF: We could discuss that, but I’d wanted to ask about this parallel between your father’s situation and your own. *Farther Traveler* raises the question (it obviously does so deliberately) why, several years and volumes after graduate school, your dissertation process still compels extensive rumination. You cite Cathy Caruth on the relationship among trauma, repetition, narrative—the need for the traumatized subject continually to replay, retell, finally rewrite the traumatic experience as a digestible one. Did grad school prompt a similar trauma?

RW: That’s really important, and makes me think about rituals, about what one returns to, invents, articulates, rearticulates. I’d entered the Grad Center to diversify my reading palate to become a better poet. I didn’t think much about getting a job. My classmates’ stellar presentations baffled me, because I still was focused on developing as a poet. It all felt so physical, that Ph.D. It involved much commuting, carrying many books, heavy ones, especially the artists’ books and museum catalogues. I read a lot on trains. And I did my coursework at the Grace building, on 42nd Street, and loved walking around Bryant Park, the Public Library, Times Square, up through Grand Central Station, Penn Station. I would work, cruise, hang out. All the while I stuck with Eve, Wayne, and Meena Alexander, who eventually would advise my dissertation. I also studied with Michele Wallace. I took their courses obsessively and exclusively. Perhaps this helped to evade the trauma, because I felt so much openness and elasticity in their seminars. *Farther Traveler*’s drawings and watercolors came out of Eve’s “How to Do Things with Words and Other Materials,” which featured a studio workshop component. These works helped me to develop ideas about lynching and time and approximation to violence through visual art. I thought, let me just sit and meditate by drawing and painting for extended periods. I’d never before had the patience. Now I work on long conceptual sound recordings, sometimes an hour or more of non-stop freestyle rap, association, drift. I’ll make them running, driving, walking, sitting in cafés, or even doing yoga. I suppose what I learned from my G.C. teachers was not to make the knowledge this sort of recognizable commodity, but to practice close study and attention (in part by negotiating its release). Maybe this relates to trauma and the need for repetition that Caruth describes, but it also has to do with ritual and discipline—a necessary tool when working through ideas, so that they can fly off into the unknown. This opens up and complicates the idea of one’s expertise as say an African-Americanist, a cultural critic, which I have studied to become, but once you get named an

expert it's like, oh my gosh. What pressure! Poetry helps to constantly spin out freely from under that, to let my work find its way into the world through various means and media.

AF: I'd asked about what seemed a traumatic cycle. But it sounds more as if, as with your yoga, this book traces a bodily practice of working through complicated motivations and choosing who you want to be going forward. Traumatic elements don't seem there as much.

RW: It's vexed, right? Recently I was talking about reiterative violence, which also stands basically at the center of my critical book project, examining how a writer like Gwendolyn Brooks or a visual artist like Ellen Gallagher contends with reiterative violence—through what modes or articulations, whether it be abstraction, modes of selfhood, self-representation? Of course there's the underlying or maybe ever-present traumatic relation to lived experience. But there's also a need to master trauma's form and to shape it. That's where the mediation and perhaps critical distancing comes in. Sure, it's traumatizing. Sure, it's embodied and horrific. Still how do I take this trauma and not necessarily make it beautiful, but at least patterned so I can test its sonic relationships and visual qualities as aesthetic form? Though even then trauma always remains and resonates, which makes the writing difficult, especially if the work makes one unrecognizable, because you're not the usual one lamenting, mourning. You're not producing this sorrowful song. You feel some kind of remove. That definitely came from working with folks like Wayne or Meena. There's real elegance amid the conversations they have with such very difficult and complicated realities.

AF: Well I love *Farther Traveler's* fluid citational practice. Your quasi-lyric musings point toward arguments raised by Samuel Delaney, Sonia Sanchez, Adrian Piper. Can you talk about critical, theoretical or scholarly potentialities that lurk amid lyric discourse? Who impresses you most by how they integrate intertextual, interdisciplinary inquiry into their poetics? Is there a pointed formal or theoretical agenda motivating your own casual-seeming quotes throughout this book?

RW: Thank you! I love that phrase "casual-seeming." Before the Grad Center I'd worked on my M.A. in NYU's Creative Writing Program, where I took Ngugi wa Thiong'o's "Prison Performance Narratives" course. My first grad school presentation, on the poet Dennis Brutus, was terrifying. I didn't even know how to approach the material or the process. I couldn't sleep at all the night before, because I kept re-reading the poems. I started writing about light, since I'd see these bright flashes when I tried to close my eyes. I thought I'd focus on moments of light, luminosity, flashing in Brutus' poems. But the next day I spoke for what seemed five or six minutes then stopped and said, "I can't go on. I'm exhausted. I haven't slept." Then Ngugi said, "Now I understand your secret!" And I just loved it because I'd reached a point of utter exhaustion, yet knew my ramblings had produced something valuable. I knew I had done all of this work. I just hadn't known how to track it. I couldn't adopt the

language with which my classmates worked. These were American Studies and Performance Studies students who'd been accepted to the seminar. They had this densely theoretical manner in entering the text, but I'd always wondered, instinctively, what's the casual way into this material? How could I ease into argument in a tone most truthful to the poetic voice I'm developing? Similar stances still inform my work. I've grown to trust that my mind can become in sync from thinking things through a number of times. I've learned to ask, what's the freest way into the analysis? Because not to figure out your maximum, native potential with our work seems crazy-making and death-inducing.

AF: Just to illustrate how all of this relates to the book, how you'll ease your way into argument, could we discuss your use of the autobiographical? *Farther Traveler* gives frequent reference, we've said, to academic job-market frustrations. It provides flitting testimony of an "I" wrecking its mom's Porsche, perhaps her Mercedes. Either of those tonalities risks seeming self-involved. But of course part can be read as documentary record, parts as staged scenes of confession, parts as camp fantasy. Do you expect readers to make such distinctions? Does it matter? In terms of easing into an argument here, you'll seem to present a polyvalent, polyvocal mode of subjecthood, yet never say so deliberately.

RW: You're right. Self-involvement seems crucial when trying to reconstruct the self! Here multiple conversations happen in terms of class dynamics and thinking about my mother. She came to the U.S. from the Philippines when she married my father. The occupying Japanese government killed both of her parents. That vague sense I have comes from my dad, since she won't discuss any of it with us. I'm slowly gaining the courage to ask her myself, but the book offers what I knew thus far. She'd trained in the Philippines as a journalist. She also obtained a nursing degree, and for a time worked in a leper colony. But when my mom came to the U.S., she couldn't continue as a journalist or a nurse. No records. So she had to go back to school to re-train as a nurse's assistant. She did some other things, studied stenography, ceramics. I'm just thinking about class play within the Filipino community. Also in the Black community. What does it mean to boast or show, to maneuver outside of one's class designation, something always in process and greatly contested? My brother, sister and I grew up to understand that we were poor. But we'd always had many things. My parents (and extended family) helped us finish college. My mother, later in life, drives these super fancy cars: Porsche, BMW, and Mercedes, all at the same time at some points! But still she works as a nurse's assistant at the same hospital since the 80's. Class identification appears more or less fixed within graduate school, or among faculty at most major universities. Most folks' lineages are legible within the same upper-class brackets. And it's pretty clear that most times people of color, or queer, have to perform this kind of elite drag in these contexts. We do usually look fabulous! That goes on in this book too. What is passing? How does passing function on a day-to-day level amidst class and race slippages, triangulations, whether they be real, performances, or dreams? Dreams both as in the subconscious and as aspiration. Also what to do with the gift of time? What does it mean to be able to ruminate? Everything in the book is somewhat autobiographical. Here's a hard fact: my brother bought the

Porsche, used, when he got his first job, still living at home, then my mom bought it from him. The engine of this beautiful red vintage 1980 Porsche 928 just burst into flames one day, while I drove it.

AF: I've read somewhere you describing your mom's life. So in the book I assumed that was all made up.

RW: I like to make some of it up, especially in *Poems of the Black Object*, but often I'll take from the very real. That's what's so strange. I've often organized my life around fantasies, a kind of fantasy life. All I did that summer the car exploded was practice yoga, read, drive the Porsche around, and write. It really was this unreal life. I'm influenced by some conceptual artists, by what it means to make your life reflect and respond to the work. I'll often disengage from modes of normalcy which inhibit my relationship to daily life's extremes. I remember what Lorraine Hansberry discussed, the idea of being "poised for inclusion." Think of civil rights and pre-civil rights black people in the U.S., the whole decorum these folks had to present. There's perhaps in this...some tension in the notion of what "uppity" means, what it means to be poised, to have poise, which gets tied to a kind of elegance that often ends up under attack. I've tried to track that in my work. Fitness interests me. Fine things interest me. Low culture still interests me as I dip in and out of it. So what are new ways in which class gets marked? What does a black poet look like today? Or an Asian poet? Or queer poet? I'm not blind to the abundance of conventional readings that emphasize simple identity formations. But I embrace the uppity, even the realm of the narcissist—a title I've flirted with for an upcoming book. My identities always feel very fluid: black, gay, queer, yogi, teacher, runner, poet. This manifests in the work naturally, but also becomes a site for critical engagement, a site for pushing the self beyond what remains troubling, what remains hard to mark.

AF: In terms of being unapologetic, of assembling an identity that doesn't conform to reductive expectations, I hope that for contemporary readers, if this book raises taboos, it's not in terms of sexual scenes you'll describe. That what shocks is the diversity of autobiographical subject positions you'll take on simultaneously. That you don't have to be limited to any one. Still I'm curious how you envision those rhetorical vectors coming together, in terms of the reader's vantage on your book. I love the scenes of the "I" at the porn theater, descending towards this grey, hetero couple vicariously fucking on the cinema floor. I picture this cramped but capacious house of desire, that cinema, how it serves as a projection of this book's identity.

RW: I don't know if that particular scene projects the overall book's identity, but I see what you mean, since there's a sincere attempt to map the most truthful desire I could capture. At that moment (you hit it right on the head), I took the opportunity to witness that love from very much a "found" vantage point. How does one get so lucky? I've learned from Sam Delaney that these spaces (in porno theaters in

particular) remain valuable because they'll engender possibility for an expression of human experience that doesn't need to be vilified, destroyed, canceled, removed, erased but instead, explored. I like being a visitor to that moment. That's what I most seek in my work. That kind of older, greying couple: it just was inspiring to see this level of protection happening amid all the other visitors, voyeurs, players. But also, I wanted to express an inability to trespass their desire for one another. All I could do was report it. The way one takes a photo of a beautiful flower, or an approaching bee. How do you bring that moment into representational discourse without upsetting the scene? Or maybe I was the bee! Because there's also, on the other hand, sadness and frustration at not being the object of desire. I'll never be that person, her. I'll never get what she has—though maybe that's part of the tension, that you can't invade every psychic experience. The other side of manifest destiny. This respect that maybe comes from knowing your own borders or limitations. What you said about a cramped but capacious space, that's the point where both "I" and the speaker can begin to analyze "us" and make some poetic sense of what's happening. And that, for me, is a turn on.

AF: On this point of how one brings certain reflections, tonalities, certain experiences into representational discourse, could we talk about the diptych format of "Forms"? What dialectics of a racial imaginary get depicted in this fusion of elided lyrics with expressionist, evocative scenes of lynching and more abstracted lacerations? What about the lyric/image combination for these particular topics interests you?

RW: Why the diptychs with the images? Well, they are tricky visual pieces/poems. It might help to know about the context for this work. I drew a lot of those paintings and did the watercolors at a residency at Djerassi, surrounded by giant redwoods, mist, in the Santa Cruz mountains. I don't know how, but I'd managed to get out of New York during spring, away from my fellowship at the CUNY School of Law. So there was this psychic split happening between my hectic New York work life and my leisured, bucolic life at the colony. Those drawings also helped me to negotiate writing the dissertation prospectus. The poems became important because they tried to make sense of all this weird stuff that happens at colonies as a black body in a white space (a common theme of mine). These various elements felt charged as I began to map out my focus on lynching photos, drawing, writing poems, exploring race, selfhood—all reminding me of Baldwin's "Stranger in the Village."

AF: The colony felt like Switzerland?

RW: I've never been to Switzerland, but take from Baldwin's essay his formulations of self-representation. I thought of how to map the differences between direct attacks and micro aggressions. At Djerassi, I'd run through redwoods just after examining the lynching photography. I'd immerse myself in this fantastic realm of color, mostly green. I had brought to the colony basic art supplies,

inexpensive watercolors, simple black writing pens with which I like to illustrate. Nothing fancy. My room was small and rustic, and I had all this time to work with a limited but focused palate. Some mornings I would walk into the forest where I looked for geckos, listened to the rain, sat on a tree stump taking in the experience of reading (across the experience of letting images build). Perhaps these processes became the formative fields for the lyric/image space you mentioned. Later I tried to capture something of these dimensions in a talk at St. Mark's Poetry Project, a piece called "Hand-Eye Coordinates." I screened the watercolors and read the diptychs, between which I played tennis against a wall, describing the mechanics of my stroke. I even served a few balls into the audience. I was investigating what happens when muscle memory takes over the imagination. How are my fine motor skills connected to my poetic ear? Maybe the diptychs' two sides resemble those of a tennis court. One side, then the net, then the other. Tennis is a game of boxes, just figuring how to hit and move to this spot or that. At the colony I wrote for several hours each morning. Then I would draw in the afternoon. Each day just felt staggered in such a way that "Form" came together from what had been built and represented.

AF: Right in terms of representational drive (which I understand gets complicated here), I'm curious about **Farther Traveler's** "Poetics" pieces. In terms of a poet's occasional production, I'll think first of Frank O'Hara's occasional pieces—as willful rejection of performing some serious, solitary, self-contained personhood. And I love the playful constructions you provide, such as "Poetics Statement in The Great American Grille." At the same time, you do seem interested in communicating pointed ideas concerning race, gender, sexuality—more directly here than in your poems. Do you see the "Poetics" pieces as complementing, as categorically different from your poems? Do you make no such distinction?

RW: I see these "Poetics" pieces as part of the stride, like an adjustment in the pace of a long run, places where I open into an extended sprint. Or it's like coming up for air, between butterfly strokes. How does one negotiate being seen? What is the nature of visibility? How can you attack, via critique, in public space? How do you retreat? When do you listen? How should you speak about this process of writing? Over the past few years various people had requested my poetic statements for different publications and talks. I thought, why not use these as occasions to pursue questions about race, gender, and sexuality in a direct, essayistic manner, then publish them all together? Why not present a series of symmetrical excursions through all these different possibilities? In this sense, the pieces might suggest linked poems, but maybe more as conjoined essays that get linked. Again, I'm still as interested in play as in anything else. So how do you recognize and represent freedom in forms that expand beyond the poem, pushing further and further, but still wrestling with the same questions?

AF: Part of what I appreciate about the “Poetics” pieces is that there are, as you say, many of them. They seem statements about identity but none is the statement of identity. There’s a propositional nature.

B: Lately I’ve watched all this terrible reality television. I’ve considered how black people get cast and represented—just the levels of fierce, compelling rage and anger repeated with no outlet. I’ve wondered what does it mean to aspire to this as a primary, or maybe the only possible mode of being? So the poetics statements constantly shift, driven by such inquiries. But I suppose, given the nature of the form, and maybe the discourse of stereotype, the statements also stay constantly stable. Perhaps some tension gets released between the two states. The piece I wrote for Claudia Rankine’s *Race and the Creative Imagination* got inspired after a performance with the Black Took Collective at Pomona College. Winding down after dinner, I pull out to pick up some pastries in Glendale, which results in police profiling and stopping me. I kept it together and more or less avoided physical harm, but wonder how I would have survived the event without all my friends (Tisa Bryant, Duriel E. Harris, Dawn Lundy Martin), who were at the house waiting for me, so that we actually could discuss what happened, sharing our overlapping experiences. Funny thing is the other day, as I drove back alone from a small retreat in the Berkshires attended by some of these same poets, I got pulled over for not making a lane change. Tisa stayed on the line while I spoke my way out of the jam. I kept my phone on in the car. I’m not sure I’d done this on purpose, but it’s too difficult to bear that suffering alone, and I refuse to let it settle into my body. When these moments happen I think, OK, here’s a performance in which I will engage. Perhaps this came from working with Meena and Eve, thinking about performativity, language, keeping very attentive to the way one moves, survives in the world, what’s at stake, who’s valuable. Those remain powerful lessons.

AF: In terms of performativity I’ve got one more question—about the cat poems. In the manuscript version these come last. And with this section’s long, 18th century title, borrowed from Erica Hunt, here seem to be distilled your Brechtian inclinations. He says true intellectual inquiry is to think in other’s heads while others think in your head. That works great in these Ally poems, this camp-inflected elegy for a neighbor cat, which resonates with a wide array of related experiments. I thought of Dickinson’s unidirectional master letters. Letters never going to get a response. Or if you’ve seen Chris Marker’s epistolary tapestry *Sans Soleil*. Or interspecies interests of Christopher Smart, Virginia Woolf’s *Flush*, David Trinidad’s “Every Night, Byron!” Those were just the first to come up. There’s way too much to cover. Still what became most compelling for me (and this goes back to what you’ve said about the heavy burden not directly confronted in your work, though certainly there all the time): amid all the fun of the Ally section, there’s this fantasy about talking to the dead. That dismal, prospectless prospect underwrites even this most fun project.

RW: These poems came from a need to get outside familiar modes which distanced myself from subjects directly at hand. This experience of losing a cat, and friend, felt moving, sad, strange, and I just wanted the poems to capture it. I remembered reading a Sharon Olds interview about poetry allowing her to be sentimental, totally sentimental. Here was one of those moments where this animal came into my life and became symbolic for so much beyond ours. So much began to surface dealing with sexual desire, cruising, addiction, the nature of love in my primary relationship—all these autobiographical aspects flooded into one signifier, a black cat, Ally. I'd had this very specific relationship of real mourning, moving so much between the dead and the living. The poems, of course, also provide projections of my mourning the great loss of the father I used to know.

AF: That's what I mean.

RW: Then they also track leaving the East Coast for California. Though the poems seem sentimental, overly so, they reveal a capacity for multiple ranges. Without them, the book feels informed mostly by its theoretical templates and its sense of the propositional that you named earlier, but the Ally poems become its tail, a cat's tail, swaying. Muscle, mind, bone? Something happens I can't control in those poems. I don't even know how they occurred. They happened so quickly. In the middle of drafting this book's final version, Ally died. I had to catalogue or experience that or else I'd carry this mourning in my body. There'd been something so powerful about spending time with her, long days alone writing, but she was there. I'd never been with an animal like that. And for some reason because I do believe, as an athlete (one who learned tennis by mastering fine motor skills), that over time muscle memory takes over. I just tried to write from this difficult experience of losing her, very loosely and naturally, letting the muscles take over through the letters. Cat feeling? Maybe. There was something so new, for me, trying to feel through the experience of that encounter.

Ronaldo V. Wilson is the author of *Narrative of the Life of the Brown Boy and the White Man* (University of Pittsburgh, 2008), winner of the 2007 Cave Canem Poetry Prize, and *Poems of the Black Object* (Futurepoem Books, 2009), winner of the Thom Gunn Award and the Asian American Literary Award in Poetry in 2010. Co-founder of the Black Took Collective, Wilson is also a Visiting Assistant Professor of Poetry, Fiction and Literature in the Literature Department of the University of California, Santa Cruz. His latest book, *Farther Traveler: Poetry, Prose, Other*, is forthcoming from Counterpath Press in 2012.