

Poetics, In Every Air

Amy De'Ath and Fred Wah, editors.

Toward. Some. Air.: Remarks on Poetics of Mad Affect, Militancy, Feminism, Demotic Rhythms, Emptying, Intervention, Reluctance, Indigeneity, Immediacy, Lyric Conceptualism, Commons, Pastoral Margins, Desire, Ambivalence, Disability, The Digital, and Other Practices. Banff Centre Press, \$21.95.

Reviewed by Michael Nardone

Poetics exists in an ambiguous state amid the networks and institutions of North American critical and creative practices. On one hand, the term signifies a long arc of study from Aristotle to structuralism, in which the poetician is one who deciphers the narratological and syntactical elements of literary production, creating taxonomies of work, or one who examines the abstract and general structures embedded within works and the means by which aspects of those structures are made legible. Hence, we have definitions that claim poetics to be a “scientific” and “systematic study of literature as literature,”¹ or a questioning of “the properties of that particular discourse that is literary discourse.”² On the other hand, poetics is “something altogether more changeable, porous, and unpredictable,” as Brian Reed writes with particular regard to its usage in the 21st century, “namely, the compositional principles that poets themselves discover and apply during the writing process.”³ These divergent interpretations of poetics are perpetuated in institutional settings – in English departments where the term is often utilized, wrongly, so as to be synonymous with the hermeneutic excavation of a particular body of work, and in creative writing programs where “poetics” is habitually employed so as to connote any extended consideration of poems as unique aesthetic objects. At the core of this sustained ambiguity is the issue of how to teach the subject: What are the sites and modes of poetics? How to situate it amid an expanded terrain of aesthetic and social engagements? What are proper resources?

In Amy De'Ath and Fred Wah's edited volume *Toward. Some. Air.*, we have, at last, an ideal primer on poetics, a collection of writings that addresses the most consequential aspects of contemporary literary production. Grounded by a feminist and decolonial perspective, *Toward. Some. Air.* moves through an array of approaches and concerns for writing: articulations of subjectivity, identity, and collectivity; indigenous, diasporic, and settler-colonial positionalities; the politics of the utterance, of the pronoun, of various systems of meaning-making; practices of listening; labour and affect; digital milieus, publishing, and performance. "The positions articulated in this anthology are vastly different," De'Ath writes in the foreword, "crossing generational, geographical, and theoretical borders" shaping an overall editorial approach that aims "to encourage dialogue by proximity but also to suggest a looking-outwards; not so much to other individual poets but toward other poetics and ways of being in the world." *Toward. Some. Air.* writes outside the confines of a singular aesthetic movement, and demonstrates how poets – through works, in practice – confront current ecological, economic and related social crises. The collection's process of anthologization is not confined by nationalist or nation-centered terms of inclusion, though most of the book's contributors do reside in Canada, the United Kingdom or the United States. The divergent sites, materials, and subject positions from which the contributors write further deepens Peter Jaeger's description of the book as being "polyvocal," meaning that it takes up a range of generic forms: "poetry, translation, dialogue and interview, artist's statement, critical essay, theoretical burlesque, collaboration, and personal anecdote." This is to say that *Toward. Some. Air.* is an exceptional articulation of Reed's sense of poetics as an engagement with the activity of composition, while accentuating the formalist sense of poetics as an organization of modes and contents.

The breadth of writing in *Toward. Some. Air.* makes it remarkable contribution to the field of poetics, as well as a useful, if not necessary, collection for classes on contemporary poetry and literary theory. The close readings – Lisa Robertson’s essay on the politics of style in the work of recently deceased poet Peter Culley; Reg Johanson’s commentary on identity, violence, and syntax in the works of Annharte; José Estaban Muñoz’s response to Fred Moten’s “the gramsci monument”; Andrea Brady’s immersion into Denise Riley’s lyric practice; and De’Ath’s own dialectical reading of Catherine Wagner’s “My New Job” – are exemplary instances of how poets engage the work of their peers. Poem-manifestos, such as Anne Boyer’s “The Girl’s City” and Liz Howard’s poem “~~NORTH NORD~~ GIWEDIN,” meld with provocative statements on practice – Caroline Bergvall’s “Points and Lines”; Sina Queyras’s “Lyric Conceptualism”; and Larissa Lai’s “An Ontology and Practice for Incomplete Futures.” Finally, the dialogues – between Dionne Brand and Nicole Brossard; Rita Wong and Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm; Stephen Collis and Sean Bonney – further illustrate the book’s overall depiction of poetic practice as a commitment to listening to and responding to the embodied social experience and aesthetic perspectives of others.

¹ Hrushovski, Benjamin. 1976. "Poetics, Criticism, Science" *PTL—A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature*, I: iii-xxxv.

² Todorov, Tzvetan. 1981. *Introduction to Poetics*. Trans. Richard Howard. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

³ Reed, Brian. 2004. "Poetics, Western" in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th edition, ed. Roland Greene et al. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1058-64.