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## Review

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## REVIEW

# Book Reviews

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Lila Matsumoto reviews *Toward. Some. Air.: Remarks on Poetics*, edited by Fred Wah and Amy De'Ath (2015); Shalini Sengupta reviews *For the Future: Poems & Essays in Honour of J.H. Prynne on the Occasion of his 80th Birthday*, edited by Ian Brinton (2016).

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*Toward. Some. Air.: Remarks on Poetics* by Fred Wah and Amy De'Ath (eds.), Banff: Banff Centre Press, 343 pp., 2015

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*Toward. Some. Air.* was published over three years ago, but the purview of its concern – the correspondence between poetry and ethical query – is as compelling now as it was when the anthology first came out. Recently I attended *Poetry Emergency*, a two-day festival of workshops, discussions, and performances in Manchester addressing the political remit of poetry. One memorable discussion concerned poetry's historical, current, and future involvement in anti-fascist action. Gatherings and conversations like this are becoming increasingly visible and vocal in the UK (even for someone as social media-inept as myself). The research group Race and Poetry and Poetics in the UK and The 87 Press, committed to publishing experimental literature by writers from neurodiverse, queer, and minority ethnic communities, are just two examples of collectives that are explicitly taking action against the capitalist and oppressive structures upon which we build our lives and our art. *Toward. Some. Air.* is a key text in the endeavour *towards* a radical poetics of attentiveness.

The anthology is remarkable for its multivalency: collected together here are essays, conversations, artist statements, poems, translations, and manifestoes regarding language's potential for political intervention and solidarity, written by a diverse range of contemporary practitioners and critics based in Canada, United States, and the United Kingdom (and other places besides). The book has an unusually long subtitle which indicates the ambitious remit necessary to explore the multiple nodes of politically committed Anglophone poetics (the subtitle is, in full: *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*). How to bring together and draw correlative lines between multifarious activities, concepts, and

movements without losing the nuance and particular charge of each? The anthology successfully manages this feat, shedding light on inspiring work and invoking action in equal measure.

The pleasure of this anthology is its diversity and the threads offered up by the individual texts, so that we as readers may make meaningful connections ourselves. Poetic practices and thought are easily and often siloed or self-ghettoised, concerned as we are with our particular turf of priority and activity. The anthology's perspicacity lies in the editors' adjacent or proximal positioning of subject positions held by individuals and networks. The decision to compile such a diverse anthology is not only enriching for readers but necessary if we seek to collectively interrogate oppressive structures and ideologies. As Peter Jaeger notes in the contextual essay to the anthology, 'differences among [literary groupings and] categories seem to have been subordinated to an overarching concern with our current ecological, economic, and related social crises' (p. 2).

To this end, the conversations and interviews in the anthology communicate most potently the collective dynamism (and shared biological need) signalled in the anthology's title: *Toward some air*. The vital project of sharing ideas is very much alive in the conversation pieces, demonstrating the pliability and malleability of thought before it is calcified into theory, before it enters the annals of academe. Stand-out pieces are interviews between Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm and Rita Wong ('I Want What You Just Said'); Michael Davidson and Nicole Markotić ('Talking Disability Poetics'), Hoa Nguyen and Dale Smith ('Joining Spirits'), and Sean Bonney and Stephen Collis ('We Are An Other: Poetry, Commons, Subjectivity').

The anthology opens with Anne Boyer's poem 'The Girls' City', a clear-eyed, livid telling of the situation, now: 'The men's city is strongly built, made of property and force and women [...] The men's home is a city of men and the people who are not men who do things for them and who never have a city called *ours*' (p. 11). This poem is a powerful piece to begin the anthology because it is at once particular in its account of iniquity ('Girls are born into a no place in particular that is owned by men') and at the same time creates a moral panorama in which

girls are all beings (human and non-human) who have been rendered powerless by total, unmitigated violence. The poem explicitly connects the project of power to the project of language; girls are ciphers who 'have never had a city of their own [...] they have no histories to forget; there is no language whose words they must unlearn; the girls have no orations trailing off their lips' (p. 11). As Larissa Lai reminds us in her essay 'An Ontology and Practice for Incomplete Futures': 'Humans are encultured in language. It structures the way we perceive reality' (p. 56).

Boyer's poem connects on one level to a statement in Jaeger's essay that calls attention to the 'intensely patriarchal space in the British experimental poetry community [in the first decade of the twenty-first century]' (p. 4). Jaeger's point is important because this is an anthology about the relationship between political thought and formally innovative poetics, the latter which has been built on traditions in which women have been systematically denied access or side-lined, whether by design or by inattentiveness. As Sean Bonney says in conversation with Stephen Collis: 'It is easy to deny subjectivity when yours is the dominant. There's no need to assert it because it permeates the entire atmosphere of social reality' (p. 284). Jaeger continues,

True, there were a few notable exceptions of feminist writers working in London at the time [in the 1990s], but for the most part the poetry world here remained out of touch with the vital insights and poetic practices of feminist writers working in North America. (p. 4)

The necessity to look beyond one's shores for inspiration, instigation, and action informs the ethics of *Toward. Some. Air*. Like the anthology *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally*, edited by Romana Huk and which came out in 2003, the book seeks to open new dialogues across geographies, in full acknowledgment of the myopia which can result when one culture speaks only to itself.

A few prominent motifs emerge in this anthology. The theme of listening as political tool, for example, is deeply affecting. The concept of such listening demonstrates how ideas can be deployed in being attentive to (rather than speaking for) the experiences and hurt of subjects who cannot or have been denied expression. Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm states:

Not understanding and being able to 'read' silence is the cause of a great deal of misunderstanding, conflict, frustration, and exploitation. It's a form of dominance and fear-based aggression that is perpetuated against Others, those who must be 'conquered' and exploited: Indigenous peoples, the land, waters, other beings, rocks and stones, even space. In reality, everyone, every being, every thing, is speaking to us, telling the story of its existence, asserting its place, seeking communion and acknowledging relationship. (p. 26)

The excavation of silence in this anthology is invigorating and timely, challenging the privileged, orthodox conceptualisations of silence as pure and aesthetic.

The most powerful pieces in the anthology demonstrate attentiveness to specificity of place, whether that is a geographical location or the locale of a poetic text. Notable for this are Christine Stewart's thought-provoking essay 'Treaty Six from Under Mill Creek Bridge', that forwards listening in colonized places as political strategy; Amy De'Ath's cogent reading of Cathy Wagner's poem 'My New Job'; and Lisa Robertson's stimulating and lexically acrobatic close encounter with Peter Culley's poem *Hammertown*.

Robertson's engagement with Culley's work deftly correlates close reading (or as she calls it, close listening) of a text to political or politicised thinking, positioning linguistic style as a matrix for critique *and* celebration. Reading and listening attentively are for Robertson ethical tools, and specifically in Culley's long poem she hears a 'style, replete with figures [...] irony, end-rhyme, homage [that] performs a political query, where politics is the province of shared or competing subjectivities' (p. 84). Culley's long-cuts, ambiguous references, mock-pastoral diction, and hyperbole are sensually and intellectually invigorating for Robertson; she notes that '[l]anguage is

the charged site of the ongoing struggle between markets and communities [...] The poem is a place where language's historicity is seized for the duration necessary to inflect the voice with the full potential of its desire' (p. 91).

Close reading and close listening can therefore be figured as political action inasmuch that these tactics resist, or are in opposition to, the capitalist priority of use-value (in the context of poetry, use-value could equate to something like 'surface reading'). Nicole Markotić and Michael Davidson's conversation 'Talking Disability Poetics' is salient in this anthology for thinking through how 'difficulty' in contemporary poetry can disrupt the machinery of consumerism. Davidson states:

[P]oetry can be the opposite of [the] production model, in that poetry can throw a linguistic wrench into the assembly line. Poetry, in fabulous ways, disables production. This poetic idea of 'access' insists on notions of inclusion and exclusion. So where might the poem – as literary prosthetic – transport readers, as it defamiliarizes? (pp. 79–80)

Another central concern in this anthology is how poetry *specifically* can contribute to change. What is the relationship between formal linguistic innovation, cultural critique, and political action? In her conversation with Amy De'Ath, Juliana Spahr likens poetry to a 'dog barking at the riot police. So not the riot, but beside the riot'. This idea, that poetry is an integral adjunct to politics, rather than generating political change itself, is echoed by Sean Bonney in his conversation with Stephen Collis: 'It's not a question of whether poetry by itself can change anything, obviously it can't, but rather what it is that poetry specifically can contribute to already-existing radical projects and theoretical advances' (p. 288). It can be argued that this anthology operates along this logic also: as Erín Moure suggests on its back cover, the book is a 'tool [...] your own map and gyroscope, your book of recipes for utopia'.

One of the triumphs of this anthology is its refusal to exult movements or works which have traditionally been heralded as key moments or touchstones of innovative poetics whether British Poetry Revivalist, Flarf, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, or Conceptual poetry (there are some delicious moments of critique of the last

in particular). The anthology is adamantly not interested in cemented ideas; in fact there is a commitment to un-finishedness, whether in Larissa Lai's essay 'An Ontology and Practice for Incomplete Futures' or in Maria Damon's 'Knowledge as Practice', where she writes:

[My] reluctance to limit poetry is connected to what I value as raw, rough, unfinished potential, the urgent stutter of the asemic or the semi-articulate, the emergent, the in-between one thing and another, the transitional and the trapped, the DIY that is also UDIY (undo it yourself). (p. 297)

The inchoateness of radical thought is evident in the diverse forms of writing collected here.

At less than 400 pages, the anthology is notably short for a project of its scope. This sense of brevity would be my only criticism of the anthology: many of the pieces seem unduly truncated or brief; this is most noticeable in the conversation pieces which draw away just as the dialogue becomes more knotty and compelling. I think of Jerome Rothenberg et al.'s multi-volume *Poems for the Millennium* anthologies: there is so much potential for *Towards. Some. Air.* to have additional volumes. As an introduction to contemporary and long-standing concepts and to current and emerging writers' and collectives' work, the collection is nonetheless invaluable. It is a live wire, an instrument that works by proximity and activation. I myself have used excerpts in my university teaching; however there is much to be gained from reading the anthology in its entirety, so that synergies, correspondences, and debates may emerge.



*For the Future: Poems & Essays in Honour of J.H. Prynne on the Occasion of his 80th Birthday* by Ian Brinton (ed.), Bristol: Shearsman Books, 241 pp., 2016

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Intended as a festschrift for the late-modernist British poet J.H. Prynne, Ian Brinton's edited collection, *For the Future: Poems & Essays in Honour of J.H. Prynne on the Occasion of his 80th Birthday*, also has the considerable merit of tracing the contours, evolution, and circulation of poetry, poetics, and theory that were developed in Cambridge in the latter half of the twentieth century. The collected essays feature many of the vocal theorists of the Cambridge School<sup>1</sup> as well as poets who practice the 'Cambridge' variety of difficulty, such as Iain Sinclair, John Wilkinson, and Peter Riley. Brinton's collection is a useful reminder of an important effort on a similar scale, namely, the volume of *Certain Prose of the English Intelligencer*, which is a recent compendium of contributions to the semi-private worksheet *The English Intelligencer*. The tone of *For the Future* continually veers between anecdotal and academic, and even though it sets out to reflect on Jeremy Prynne in his multiple capacities of poet, collaborator, tutor, and friend, (an objective it meets almost entirely) it also indicates the Cambridge School's interest in engaging with the cognitive value of their poetry. The significance of this book therefore does not merely arise from the fact that it is a masterful survey of Prynne's teaching practices and poetic production, his commitment to a certain ideal of craftsmanship that resists competitive commerce, and the specific forms of exchange and circulation that had governed poetic production in Cambridge in the 1960s and 70s. It is also a rare glimpse into the Cambridge School's extensive forays into philosophy, botany, history, anthropology, and the sciences. Read individually, each essay foregrounds specific aspects of Prynne's poetic form and language. Read together, they draw attention to the formation of dispersed and changing poetic communities in Cambridge around 1970 – incipient

communities with no declarations of group identity – within which Jeremy Prynne seems to have functioned as exemplar and peer.

The form of the festschrift that Brinton employs is also a powerful reminder of an alternate gift economy that operates outside the strictures of the market economy, and usefully summarises the specific forms of exchange that governed much of the poetic production in Cambridge in the small-press moment. Ian Brinton's 'Introduction: A Handout for the Future' opens his collection, and valuably draws attention to the issue of poetic dedications: 'when the second expanded edition of the *Poems* appeared from Bloodaxe in 2005 it bore the dedication "For Edward Dorn his brilliant luminous shade"' (p. 8). Brinton's brief discussion on poetic dedications generates a meditation on poetry as reciprocal exchange, or perhaps as gift, which can then be used as a lens to track the circulation of Prynne's poetry within networks of informal readership in Cambridge. In locating the torque of Prynne's experimental poetry in a parallel gift economy, Brinton opens the space to grapple with issues of labour, trust and value, and their relation to poetic production.

As a book-object, *For the Future* – with its beautiful cover designed by Ian Friend – foregrounds the ontics of composition and the labour of consummate craftsmanship, while also establishing a constitutive relationship with the tradition of poetic production it describes. It draws attention to a tradition of small-press and 'samizdat' publication of which several of the collection's contributors remain a part of, such as Nigel Wheale, Peter Riley, Anthony Barnett, Rod Mengham, and Ian Brinton himself. Similarly, most of Prynne's books were as carefully made as possible (at times, within the constraints of self-publication) with the poet himself in charge of the seal-print or the brushwork.<sup>2</sup> Harry Gilonis' useful essay 'Prynne's Stone Lake' draws attention to such non-mechanised modes of textual production. He notes,

our publication ['Jie ban mi Shi Hu', published by Peter Riley's Poetical Histories] continues to be unusual beneath the calligraphy; the paper itself atypical, unbleached, off-white. This, combined with Prynne's personal seal-imprint – placed on each copy, in the canonical cinnabar-colorer ink – produces an object wholly unlike any mass-market poetry publication. (p. 63)

Gilonis' essay also reminds us, though it does not explicitly discuss it, of the mode of scribal penmanship that Prynne retains in some of his poems. The very quality of the 'atypical' hand- cranked, cyclostyle page that Gilonis' essay mentions suggests a movement away from the glare of commerce and towards the notion that there is positive virtue in taking control of the processes of poetic production: a notion that informed the poetry and poetics of many of the contributors listed in the collection.

Gilonis' essay enters into a productive dialogue with Anthony Barnett's 'And You Too', which also engages with the materiality of print production, specifically the production of Prynne's *Poems*. Barnett describes how 'correspondence between us began when I wrote Jeremy asking if I could print "Of Sanguine Fire", a copy of the typescript had been sent to me by Peter Riley' (p. 59). The allure of the book-object being passed from hand to hand is a powerful moment as it engages with networks of informal readership, the poem as craft, and reveals crucial moments of the segue of the poem-as-object from the rough to the final version. These are all issues that inform the production of Prynne's poetry, and much of the poetry that was produced in England in the 1970s and 80s by small presses. Nigel Wheale's essay 'Madrigalian/ brightness' forms a commanding account of the issues of form and content in Prynne's poetry, and how they might be constitutive of each other: 'I happened to be there and then, so I read them [*Kitchen Poems*, *Brass*, and *The White Stones*] in the original formats, often beautiful book-objects, where the meaning of the text has come to be instinct within their forms' (p. 116).

Alongside the care to represent the community involved in the production and circulation of Prynne's poetry, the book also indicates the Cambridge School's own interest in theorising the principles of their poetry, even though the circulation of meta-textual material in Cambridge circles has been more discrete than their American counterpart. Not only do the essays unpack the multifarious thematic threads in Prynne's poetry, they also help construct a body of theoretical discussion, which is perhaps a mark of how ambitious the book is as an intellectual project. A suite of poems by John James, Rod Mengham, Simon Smith, Elaine Feinstein, and D.S. Marriott follow Ian Brinton's introduction, and either respond to Prynne's poetry (such as Simon Smith's 'Discourse on some lines from *News of Warring Clans*')

or are dedicated to Prynne (such as Gavin Selerie's 'Line of What Make or Sort'), which re-iterate the status of the book as a gift. What might be, then, the reader's placement in poetry that is specifically intended for someone else? Selerie's poem provokes meditation on attendant issues of 'looking' and 'possession' in poetry. Michael Haslam's essay 'Prynne's Gold-Mine' centres its attention on the nascence of thinking that emerges in and as linguistic artefact: 'I think I thought I wanted to encounter Thought, by which I mean, to be in the presence of thinking being thought, and it often wasn't there [...] the music of thought that I took, and take, to be poetry itself' (p. 43). Not only does his essay foreground how the different axes of creative expression might interpenetrate and inter-illuminate each other, it also indicates, crucially, the expansion of poetry into thought, which is a concept favourable not only to Prynne and younger poets of the Cambridge School, but also to poets on the other side of the Atlantic, such as Steve McCaffery and Charles Bernstein of the Language School. Haslam's essay, with its careful reading of diction in Prynne's poetry, also sharpens the scope of a philological reading of Prynne's poetry, the only sustained exploration of which finds expression in Keston Sutherland's doctoral thesis. Michael Grant's 'Burnt Norton' shifts its focus on language and its relation to space, or the processes of spatialisation within the orthographical field of experimental poetry. Grant's reading of the fragment in Prynne's poetry also usefully contributes to the modal revivification of waste in experimental poetry, or the exploration of waste as a content-rich phenomenon rather than a limitation for art.

The tone of sharp, brittle intelligence in Grant's essay forms a stark contrast to the warm ebullience of the essays that follow, namely Ian Friend and Richard Humphreys' 'A Bash in the Tunnel', John Wilkinson's 'I Staircase' and John Hall's 'Learning from Prynne'. In matters of tone, Ian Friend's essay maintains a highly evolved balance between anecdotal and academic, and culminates in a detailed exploration of *The Oval Window*. To read Wilkinson's essay is also to discern a delightful and continual shift in tenses, or a shuffling of time in the construction of a memoir. John Hall's essay traces the genealogies of influence that have shaped Prynne's work, and compacts an entire tradition of reading poetry in terms of necessity and efficacy, or what poetry can make happen. There is also a strong interest in his essay in the

forms of knowledge that only poetry can shape, or an interest in how to re-fashion knowledge-processes within the ambit of the poem. Peter Larkin's essay returns to the trope of space within lyric poetry, or the metaphors of habitation in the body of a lyric poem: 'in singing a home out, lyric renders home as beside itself' (p. 62). Larkin's essay also enfolds issues of botanical subjectivity and language, music and its relation to lyric poetry, and the gift in lyric poetry.

Essays by Matthew Hall, Anthony Mellors, Michael Tencer, and Peter Hughes follow in quick succession, and centre their attention on the issue of influence as well as 'the global movement of Prynne's work' (p. 141). Matthew Hall's 'On Opening *Acrylic Tips*' is not just a perceptive reading of a lesser-known body of Prynne's work, it is also the only essay in the collection that engages with accounts of colonisation, contemporary land usage, and the 'patterns of colonial and argotic usage' (p. 131) that form the fretwork of *Acrylic Tips*. We are given a sharpened reading of the history of poetic language: '*Acrylic Tips* represents and utilises an Australian English loaded with the complexities and connotations of colonisation' (p. 134). Not only does the essay form a fine template for exploring the socio-historical operations of language, it also traces the transatlantic genealogies of influence that have shaped Prynne's poetry. I was fascinated by the parallels Hall draws between Prynne's *Acrylic Tips* and John Kinsella's 'Oxidia:Go' that was published in *Quid 17* and bears an account of a trip taken by both the poets to Country Peak and Yenyenning. The essay reminds me of (though it seems reluctant to explicitly discuss it) much of Prynne's preoccupations since the 1960s, such as his interest in continental drift theory (partly to aid Charles Olson's *Maximus* project), and his efforts to create a vital transatlantic alliance with the American Black Mountain School. Anthony Mellors' 'Wynsum Wong', similarly, captures the Olsonian import of Prynne's early poetics. His exploration of humanist themes, such as love, however does not fully capture the singularity or the inclusive wholeness that the word 'love' (p. 147) has acquired in Prynne's corpus. Peter Hughes' 'On first reading Prynne' is perhaps the only essay in the collection that engages with the concept of difficulty as it operates in Prynne's poetry, and as it mediates the reader's relationship with poetry that makes specific demands on its

reader. He makes an important distinction regarding Prynne's model of difficulty: 'It includes us. The poem ['Marzipan', 1987] is nearly thirty years old but more relevant than ever' (p. 180). Ian Brinton's essay '*Brass* nearly off' appears near the end of this collection, and opens with a discussion of Andrew Crozier's Ferry Press, which forms an interesting contrast to the rough mode of hand-production that accompanied much of poetry produced by the small presses in Cambridge around the 1960s. Ferry Press opted for beautiful, high-quality production value, with every edition designed differently, and aligned itself to the ambitious format of Prynne's *Brass*.<sup>3</sup> In tracing the publication history of *Brass*, Brinton's essay forms a fitting framework that reviews and encapsulates the issues that form the pith of this volume.

The book suffers slightly for not including a clearer metric for its various exclusions or inclusions: for instance, it features only one female contributor (out of twenty-eight), is overwhelmingly white, includes very few poets of the younger generation of the Cambridge School, and leaves out important figures like Denise Riley. However, the breadth of issues that Brinton's collection brings to the fore re-iterates the book's status as a rich and complex literary project. What lies at the heart of this collection is a textual movement that radiates outwards as well as runs inwards to its roots: the essays both attend to the minute and subtle complexities of Prynne's poetic form, as well as enlarge their scale to include the material practices of reading, writing, and the labour of poetic production, dissemination, and circulation. It is this delightful and continuous shift of scale, this constant vouching for the ephemerality of form and limit, that makes Brinton's collection at once an engaging and evocative read.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This, however, is a contested term. Nandini Ramesh Shankar in 'Complicity and Cambridge Poetry' writes: '[D]espite its claims to non-existence, more than one generation of a 'Cambridge School' appears to exist. J.H. Prynne is undoubtedly the most famous and influential poet in this group, but there are a number of others who worked or are working at a similar pitch of intensity, including Andrew Crozier, Douglas Oliver, Peter Riley, R.F. Langley, Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Wendy Mulford, Denise Riley, Tony Lopez, John Wilkinson, and Keston Sutherland – to offer a multigenerational and partial listing', *Textual Practice*, 31.4 (2017), 805–21 (p. 817).

<sup>2</sup> Nigel Wheale in "infernal methods – A Memorable Fancy" (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> I'm grateful to Nigel Wheale for providing me with much of the information on small-presses and poetic production in England during the 1960s and 70s.

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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