

Power and the Public

Joel Deshayé. *The Metaphor of Celebrity: Canadian Poetry and the Public, 1955-1980*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. 264 pp.

In *The Metaphor of Celebrity: Canadian Poetry and the Public 1955-1980*, Joel Deshayé puts four iconic Canadian poets under the spotlight by examining them through the lens of their own self-constructed and/or self-acknowledged celebrity. Beginning with the “*enfant terrible*” of Canadian poetry, Irving Layton, Deshayé’s book compiles a genealogy linking Layton to Leonard Cohen to Michael Ondaatje and finally to Gwendolyn MacEwan. *The Metaphor of Celebrity* brings together these poets under one overarching frame not only to demonstrate their influence on each other but also to highlight the common thread between them: their own focus on celebrity in their art. In doing so, Deshayé attempts to unpack the mystique that is celebrity itself in our culture, a valuable venture in this era of reality television and celebrities who are famous simply for being famous. He shows how complex celebrity culture is in general by emphasizing the metaphor at the heart of celebrity: “*privacy is publicity*” (see page 17 for example, original italics). His argument is that this conundrum leads to an identity crisis for the celebrities as they attempt to wrest their sense of self back from the public or audience who appears to know them. Most compelling about this argument is his explanation that “the metaphor of celebrity ensures that power eventually reverts to the public” (23). Celebrity may seem like a powerful and compelling position, but clearly it is not that simple. Deshayé also suggests the problematic masculinity of celebrity that rests along side a “pretence of grandeur or religious significance” (21).

After exploring the foundation of his argument in the chapter, “The Metaphor of Celebrity,” Deshayé then traces the historical context in “The Era of Celebrity of Canadian Poetry,” arguing that the period of 1955-1980 saw an unprecedented upswing in the public’s interest in Canadian poets, one that has never been matched. Deshayé justifies his pairing of the very famous Layton and Cohen to the lesser-known (particularly at that time) Ondaatje and MacEwan by explaining that he focused on poets who discussed their celebrity in their poems. Thus, more popular poets, such as Margaret Atwood and Al Purdy, do not form part of his analysis. His next eight chapters explore the commentary on celebrity in the poems of the four selected poets. Layton courted and exploited his celebrity until he became a bit of a self-parody. Indeed, Deshayé suggests that had Layton concentrated more on his art and less on his celebrity, he might have writ-

ten better poetry (90). Cohen, Deshayé explains, adopts a “feminine masochism” in order to balance the identity crisis that celebrity created. In becoming as famous as he did, Cohen depicts himself as enslaved to the public in his poetry. When he turns to Ondaatje, Deshayé becomes the most convincing and erudite. He constructs more of an argument than he did with the other two poets or with MacEwan. His thesis in this chapter is dazzlingly clear and strongly supported: “ultimately, [Ondaatje] suggests that celebrities are disciplined by the public when their sexual orientations or racial identities do not reflect social norms” (135). Deshayé furthers this focus to a degree when he looks at MacEwan’s gender as problematizing the masculinist foundation of celebrity poets. As he is writing a chronology, however, he points out that MacEwan also happened to appear on the scene as the possibilities for celebrity were waning, and her response to it was thus doubly critical.

Deshayé’s conclusion, in which he discusses contemporary poets who woo fame such as Wendy Morton, is fascinating. Indeed, his book encourages the reader to continually make links to our present outrageous celebrity culture and the impact this must have on the individual behind what Deshayé calls “grandstanding” or the standing in for someone grander that the celebrity enacts (15).

For all that is fascinating and worthwhile about this book—the exploration of celebrity culture, the history of this poetic moment, the influence these authors had on each other—I found myself wanting more. Exactly why is the metaphor of celebrity so important to identify? Much of each chapter was descriptive in nature, demonstrating what the poet had to say about celebrity. What is the overall significance of celebrity then? Is it only an example of how “the public” enforces its normative ways on the non-normative artist? Is celebrity only bad? Deshayé addresses this last question quite briefly in his conclusion when he discusses how contemporary poets are using social media and technology to promote themselves.

Not only did I hunger for a more explicit and overarching argument to hook the metaphor of celebrity into, but I wanted it to be theorized more completely. Deshayé makes reference to multiple theorists, from Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Benedict Anderson, Judith Butler, Jacques Lacan, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and many others, but I often felt that they were often glancing references. I would have preferred a more focused and sustained theoretical exploration of celebrity. Finally, and this may sound extraordinarily petty, but the word “aforementioned” appears far too many times. One time is too many, but this jargonistic word appears on every

second to fifth page. I would have hoped a copy editor might have edited it out.

Perhaps that final petty comment of mine is somehow also a metaphor. If the criticism I offer centres on one word, then perhaps that is, in fact, fairly high praise. This book is a very interesting book to read, and scholars of Layton, Cohen, Ondaatje, and MacEwan will have a fresh perspective on them. Moreover, academics interested in celebrity culture in general will find this a helpful guide to digging into an analysis of that culture. It is probably worth noting that *The Metaphor of Celebrity* is not targeted towards general audiences, grounded as it is in academic language, which leads one to think about the quest for celebrity, or lack thereof, in scholarly circles.

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