

Public Poetics: A Contribution to the Field

Bart Vautour, Erin Wunker, Travis. V. Mason, and Christl Verduyn, eds. *Public Poetics: Critical Issues in Canadian Poetry and Poetics*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier UP, 2015. x + 366 pp.

A collection that takes on “critical issues in Canadian poetry and poetics”—as this volume’s subtitle suggests—clearly attempts to frame a big picture, a wide view. *Public Poetics* points the reader toward a variegated landscape of contemporary Canadian poetic practice that strikes this reader as boldly-coloured but over-seeded: everything from cyber quarrels, blogs, radio broadcasts, and human microphones to individual poetic studies, rewritings of traditional genres, tensions around gender, race, class, pain, and neoliberalism, and the politics of civic activism and global belonging. Although a number of solid, thought-provoking articles here deserve broad circulation (more on this below), they are forced to fit into an editorially-described “contemporary mash-up” that is apparently “purposeful and . . . curated” (333) but which comes across as awkward and even, at times, perplexing. Part of the problem, I suspect, proceeds from the ways in which the collection attempts to acknowledge its congenial communal roots in the Sackville, New Brunswick 2012 “Public Poetics” conference from which the essays proceeded. Conferences have their own surprising and generative ebbings and flowings, but these indeterminate and expansive qualities are essentially impossible to reproduce in a published proceedings. From a thematic point of view, the book also lacks a consistent and disciplined focus on the “poetics” aspect of its title (as has been observed by Frank Davey in his blog review). Careful structure, paired with attentive editorial guidance and an incisive Introduction, would have made this interesting volume more successful.

Public Poetics has five sections: its fifteen essays constitute “three overlapping sites” where “poetics and politics meet” (14)—“The Contemporary Field,” “The Embedded Field,” and “Expanding the Field”—and ten poems constitute two sections that seem intended to provide poetic relief between the essay groupings (“Poetry I” and Poetry “II”). The essay sections do not easily distinguish themselves from each other as, for example, do the sections in Neal McLeod’s *Indigenous Poetics in Canada* (2014) which divide into “Poetics of Memory,” “Poetics of Place,” “Poetics of Performance,” and “Poetics of Medicine.” Given that the stated pur-

pose of *Public Poetics* is to highlight “discourses that occur outside of well-worn formats” (3), better organization of the contributions, and/or more clearly-defined categories, would augment that purpose. The inclusion of poetry is puzzling for two reasons. First, none of the essays ever acknowledges that poetry, even though half of the poems are by essayists themselves (Sina Queyras, Tanis McDonald, Amanda Jernigan, Kevin McNeilly, and Erin Moure). This doubling-up is clearly by design, yet the Introduction makes no link between the essayists and their poetry other than to describe the poems as part of the “collaborative crosstalk” that the Sackville conference generated through its literary performances (18). In a collection addressing poetics, this would seem to be a missed editorial opportunity. For example, Kevin McNeilly’s theoretically intricate essay on “...Gillian Jerome, Brad Cran, and the Lyric in Public” and his pared-down poem, “Hungry” (which begins by asserting that “Where some kinds of people come from, you need to learn / another way to talk” [219]) provide a study in contrasts that could be usefully explored. Second, and more disappointing, is the absence of poems from essayist El Jones, the black slam poet who is thanked in both the Acknowledgements and the Introduction for her conference performances, and whose disturbing must-read essay, “The Threat of Black Art, or, On Being Unofficially Banned in Canada,” reveals her experience of shocking systemic racism, including seemingly “accidental” slights and the irony of “be[ing] present as a token who is not even allowed to advocate for tokenism” (46). Why is this woman’s poetry silently omitted? Attentive editing could have fixed this, and addressed the several typos in the book, including the unfortunate one on page 39 in which “public” loses its “l.”

Readers look to the Introduction of a collection of essays for a laying out of the field of inquiry and a guide to how the particular collected essays fit into that field. This Introduction’s historical/contextual background ranges widely, and its representation of the collected essays—an uneven rendering—feels like a second thought rather than a primary purpose. What takes up most critical space in the Introduction is a strangely-charted meandering from “At the Mermaid Inn” to Sina Queyras’ blog/website, *Lemon Hound*. The rationale of beginning with “At the Mermaid Inn” because it was “a conscious attempt to bring poetics into public discourse around nation and culture” sounds reasonable enough (6), but things get sidetracked, or even high-jacked, by the figure of W.W. Campbell, to whom (on very thin ice) is attributed the essence of “public poetics” as the editors wish to define it in this book (9)—this against Archibald Lampman’s supposed “multiple missteps in the short-lived [At the Mermaid Inn]

column” (8) and an absolute silence about D.C. Scott’s many humourously ironic commentaries on writing and readers throughout those same installments. In order to bridge the gap between “At the Mermaid Inn” and *Lemon Hound*, the reader is exhorted to “jump ahead,” “fast-forward,” “move through,” “move past,” “give a nod to,” “move on,” and “move all the way to” Sina Queyras (10-12), which both minimizes the journey and overemphasizes the importance of the final destination. Much of what should have appeared in the Introduction—including a situating of “poetics” as a critical lens and a more concise reflection on the contributions of the essayists—comes at the very end of the book, in “Note bene; or notes toward a poetics of work” (333-39). Over all, one might be best advised to follow Frank Davey’s suggestion regarding the Introduction, “reading it last so as not to be misled” (“*Public Poetics*,” par. 3).

Several notable essays introduce the reader to avant-garde work in the field. Heather Milne’s “Writing the Body Politic: Feminist Poetics in the Twenty-First Century” delivers an excellent overview of particular works by Rita Wong, Rachel Zolf, and Sina Queyras, using multiple frameworks by which to examine “a shared and ongoing conversation regarding the relationships between gender, technology, late capitalism, and globalization” (67). Connections between, and differentiations among, the writers are effectively realized in synopses such as the following: “Both let go of the humanist subject; Wong through a poetic becoming world, and Zolf through a poetic becoming machine. Wong infects and mutates language. Zolf gleans dirty, discarded devalued fragments of language. Wong’s poetics are grounded in ecologies, Zolf’s in economies...” (71). Geordie Miller takes as his starting point poet laureate Dionne Brand’s refusal to participate in a Toronto city council’s 2012 Poetry City Challenge—an invitation unsubtly ironic from a council that was “systematically dismantling the spaces that make literacy possible” (160)—as a way to explore how formal features “harmoniz[e] poetics and activism” (161) in Brand’s politically-inflected *Ossuaries* (“To the Bone: The Instrumental Activism of Dionne Brand’s *Ossuaries*”). Emily Ballantyne charts one poet’s response to the housing crisis in Vancouver in “Rearticulate, Renovate, *Rebuild*: Sachiko Murakami’s Architectural Poetics of Community,” arguing that in her 2011 collection, *Rebuild*, and in her interactive companion website, Project Rebuild, Murakami’s politicized poetics disrupt the hegemonic notion of single authorship by allowing any number of writers to “renovate” the website’s four original poetic prompts—effectively “renting out” the poems and thereby “creating a neighbourhood of poems” that ultimately “defers the finality of ownership by constantly leaving space for new par-

ticipants” (188, 189). Andrea Hasenbank’s “Formal Protest: Reconsidering the Poetics of Canadian Pamphleteering” pushes the notion of collective authorship further by considering the fascinating and little-known subject of Depression-era pamphlets released by the CLDL (Canadian Labour Defense League) as a “class-based reclaiming of public speech” and “a lawyering of the language of protest” in the 1930s (238). In “The Public Reading: Call for a New Paradigm,” Erin Moure and Karis Shearer propose a much-needed expansion of the Canada Council’s funding regime for poetry readings, critiquing an outdated valorization of the notion of authorial intention and the cult of the author and proposing instead that critics and poets alike do more to conceptualize and enact the public reading not only as what Charles Bernstein calls “a public tuning” of poetry (quoted on 278) but also as a compositional art form in and of itself. In my own teaching experience, I can vouch for the transformative power of Ottawa’s “Messaggio Galore” sound poetry project, curated by j.w. curry—painstakingly rehearsed, embodied live performances that stay with students/audiences for years, yet are all but ignored in the larger cultural context.

What is implicit rather than explicit in this collection is that poetry and poetics (from the same Greek root: *poiein*, “to make”) are interdependent and productive of change. As British critic Robert Sheppard puts it, “The making can change the poetics; the poetics can change the making” (“The Necessity of Poetics,” par. 21). *Public Poetics*, despite certain limitations, contributes to that change-making process in contemporary Canadian poetry. Several of the essays bear out Johan De Wit’s contention that “A poetics is always related to and embedded in a poethics” (“A Response,” par. 10), which is perhaps a useful direction for further self-reflexive study, opening out into multiple constituencies and readerships not yet represented in Canadian scholarship. “One reason to make your poetics public,” says Sheppard, “is to test it, to build a community of writers, or of risk” (par. 37). Let the testing, building, and risk-taking continue.

Works Cited

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