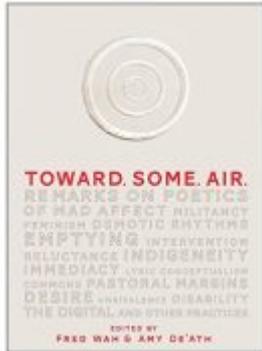


Conflicting Immediacies: Reading Toward. Some. Air.

written by Aaron Boothby | May 13, 2016



Toward. Some. Air.: Remarks on Poetics, edited by Fred Wah and Amy De'ATH
The Banff Centre, 2015

250 pages – [Banff Centre](#) / [Amazon](#)

What I'd like to do is listen as a way toward comprehending in avoidance of belief in total comprehension. *Toward. Some. Air.* contains resonances and dissonances, encounters with pluralities of text by authors working with various poetics in English. I don't want to encircle them. I don't want to pull a thread through, puncturing to form orders and assigned categories. With tentative gestures I want a thinking with.

Reading this anthology edited by Fred Wah and Amy De'ath is to enter a whorl, a constellation (patterns repeat in water, stars, and words) of voices registering their concerns in varied ways. For poetry, yes, but also race, gender, land, silence, the non-human, noises, marginal spaces and meetings. It's a kind of anglophone (situated within a diversity of languages which compose North American literature and beyond it) diaspora where voices are detached from national arenas and without lands easily called home. They're defined by the vibrating relations between them, not by an undifferentiated we. To read them is to encounter more a conversation across this distance, across the possibilities of and for poetry, than an assembly of isolated voices. To write with them asks for a similar entanglement of voices, a disruption of my wanting to encompass them.

"So I wanted to shake loose, who is the 'we' when we speak" (Dionne Brand). The word moves on a hinge of familiarity: unlatch it. What I do know about the ground where I stand? The ones around me, their cares and utterances, may be in common or not but are not mine. How could I speak for them? *We* always says to someone you do not belong.

To be from our here is to be "born in a country that is a collective and purposeful creation of forgetting, obsolescent, obliterating" (Christine Stewart). An erasing *we* appears like a negative image, a way to pretend

contrary forms of bodies, concerns, voices, did not previously exist. That “vibratory force...buried in the body, stirred around in the stomach, passed through the liver and pumped through the heart” (Larissa Lai) is dangerous. Perhaps a remembering we is formed when two bodies read the same words and feel in them an echo.

Some of the voices pose silence as a way of hearing. “Silence registers in poetry” (Daphne Marlatt) as an audible denoting a lack. When some body is present but goes unheard doesn’t a question begin? They speak to varieties of silence, “the silence around the embodied experience of identities that do not conform to colonial categories,” those who “might say something / different unusual unbelievable” (Reg Johanson). Or a speaker of a long poem named “Silence, a mixed-race white/Indigenous woman” who does not resemble but “is the crack in the colonial system” (Johanson, on Annharte).

A poet naming a speaker Silence addresses a concern by refusing to let the vibrations of history cease. Voice and breath inform world while the word is electric. It’s how “the clouds were mimetically charged with music / and claimed that every variegated spine / of the Americas is a kind of portent / for the glitterfist of updating to be happy” (Liz Howard). What’s *glitterfist*? A new word, or frequency: I listen until I can hear it.

An erasing we produces forgotten s/places no longer able to be heard which retain the ability to speak. “The underbridge, *kâhasinîskâk*, place of stones, and stories, buffalo trail, a dense growth of trees and brush, remnants of a shanty town, holes from the coal mines, cow bones from the abattoir...the resonant matter of this place” (Stewart). Haunted places are layered by wakes of voices and violence. Under the bridge in Edmonton, ~~Canada~~ zhaaganaashiiwaki an erased place remains as residue.

In another voice a girls’ city appears as a ghost image against all existing cities by and for men: “they have never had a city of their own; the girls have no ruins; they have no histories to forget; there is no language whose words they must unlearn” (Anne Boyer).

How can we come to hear the residual voices of a place no longer permitted to exist, a place never permitted to exist, *the resonant matter*?

In the collision with these sounds “a reader can assemble the constellations of meaning for herself” (Hoa Nguyen). Perhaps the meaning is not as they’ve been told, or wishes. “Even our arrangements move in relation / / to the troubled pleasures of the first instance” (Fred Moten). A temporary unit forms and when talking’s done we falls away. With you I’m at the threshold of encounter and there’s a we that’s not erasing.

Or how, arriving out of a story, we stretches to (re)include the non-human. What’s the poetic concern of vulture and polished stone? “Human agency matters but only in relation to other forces, which it can never control absolutely” (Lai). Their own manners of speaking are transmitted as voices in the texts. An I is situated among many, “I write among diverse co-inhabitants (there goes that coyote loping down the railway cut), within a linear depth of history and memory, a lateral sweep of the surround” (Marlatt). An extra-

human we collides with another when “we encounter layers of sound, meetings of lives; dog, jogger, stone, water, card, bird, two men” (Stewart).

In one text every word of English is written in italics to denote its foreignness to here. How to write the coyote, who is not foreign? A voice says, “*the land here can't hear English as well as it can Cree*” (Stewart). In acknowledgement here I form each use of we as estranged from certainty.

“Are you writing it or is it writing you?” (Sina Queyras). I'd like to not need to know and hesitate at the gesture of solving.

“Once I utter something it is – it shapes the air that follows, right. It shapes the world that follows” (Brand). What follows inhabits a wake; writing takes place in the turbulent noise of the wake, and so “writing...seems to be a listening: listening in the echo-chamber...hearing other altering, alt/erring, even errant” (Marlatt). Mishearing and missed rememberings. What forms out of them?

“After this sentence rain will fall” / “At the end of this sentence, rain will begin” (Brand remembering a line by Derek Walcott / the line as written by Walcott).

An edge appears between a poetics of listening and one of production. “A poetics of listening as listening – in the dark and in our unknowing, humbly and attentive to the land” (Stewart), to those who inhabit it. The texts and their voices are not instructional, but they do ask, they do say. When I write, do I want to assign, or hear?

In a definite way the words I read are felt in my body; this becomes their locale. “One of poetry's unique values is that it brings readers into words encountered as localized experience” (Dale Smith). The encounter breathes and each letter assumes its priority. “I saw that she often dwelt...at the level of the letter” (Nguyen). “Add “l” (hear ‘elle’) to “word” and you get a world of difference mediated by language” (Marlatt). Work at this level of attentiveness requires both openness and sensitivity. Each letter pulses.

Another question, “what have we, as poets, let happen?” (Juliana Spahr). Another context: the field of academic labour where “part of my poetic labour is dependent on a situation that exploits cheap labour” (Catherine Wagner). Even in the imaginative act of believing yourself to work alone there are supportive structures. Does the we of poetic labour include non-poetic labours which support us? It does, but must it?

The same voice reminds “there is so clearly not a movement anymore that one can be a movement poet for” (Spahr). One is encouraged to participate in something named poetry, an erasing we where political intrusions are often discouraged. What were poets listening to while things arrived into this form they've taken. What were, what is, what will we speak over.

“Between love and saving, / / love and waiting, love and / singing what can't / / be sung or said” (Moten) there's an accounting for the silenced that allows silences their speech, toward a way where certain things may be spoken

of. "Our prosperity zhagendaagozi / a glimmering clusterfuck dryad / felled into the horizon" (Howard). A place in which to "to write / to quarrel with ourselves and others / to eat and sing / to launch forth new ideas / to comfort the sphincter" (CAConrad).

What's buried in the body, stirred around in the stomach? How to comfort it. In another text a history of disruptive bodies has been recorded as policed bodies in a series of files. "These files compose an index of fear" (Kaia Sand). The method of encounter, a composition of hearing, is printing file to metal. "So I write with a sledgehammer, but the text is steel-formed and precise, set on index cards in a drawer built by Garrick Imatani" (Sand) "...in her absolute attention to her locale" (Nguyen). The word is struck.

I'd like to let the voices intrude, entangle and surprise, not be louder than they are but to create a clamour. Some insist more than others. An open text pulses and shifts in form depending on how it's held. It's held like this.

Listening, I approach on their own terms. Writing a reading takes the form of a seismograph mapping vibrating relations. What's the residue which remains of hearing?

Notes: All cited texts are found in the anthology *Toward. Some. Air.*, edited by Fred Wah and Amy De'Ath, Banff Centre Press. 2015. In order of first reference they are as follows: Dionne Brand and Nicole Brossard, 'The Political Pronoun'; Christine Stewart, 'Treaty Six from Under Mill Creek Bridge'; Larissa Lai, 'An Ontology and Practice for Incomplete Futures'; Daphne Marlatt, 'Immediacies of Writing, in brief'; Reg Johanson, "'What's Wrong With Being a Free-Ranging Person": Indentity/Violence in Annharte's Syntax of Category and Exception'; Liz Howard, 'from NORTH NORD GIWEDIN'; Anne Boyer, 'The Girls' City'; Hoa Nguyen and Dale Smith, 'Joining Spirits'; Fred Moten, 'sweet nancy wilson saved frank ramsay'; Sina Queyras, 'Lyric Conceptualism: a Manifesto'; Dale Smith, 'Poetry and the Commencement of Culture'; Juliana Spahr and Amy De'Ath, 'Poetry and Closeness'; Catherine Wagner, 'YIELD. WHO. WILL.'; CAConrad, 'Preternatural Conversations'; Kaia Sand, 'She Had Her Own Reason for Participating'. The wording "s/places" I learned in an essay by Keguro Macharia.