

Towards. Some. Air.

eds. Amy De'Ath & Fred Wah
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REVIEWED BY NICH MALONE

Towards. Some. Air., edited by Fred Wah and Amy De'Ath, concerns itself with the space of the writer as much as the space of the poem—looking at where these spaces interact, inform, and embody each other within poetic practice. As expected, the scope of the project is expansive, moving within concerns of embodiment, colonialism, political possibility, collective subjectivity, form, and discourse. Nevertheless, the anthology holds together with an ascension of *here*, “crossing generational, geographical, and theoretical borders,” a turn not to or away from aesthetics or non-aesthetics but lingerings of interconnection, of meditation—or, the breath that surrounds meditation, encapsulating it in action, in being. To quote Peter Jaeger from the contextual introduction:

This anthology is not about legitimating a certain poetic stance or being prescriptive, but about considering the results of a particular set of developments in Anglo-American poetic practice, especially as they are placed in proximal relation to each other.

In this way, *Towards. Some. Air.* resists what I've come to expect from anthologies—prewritten, marketable, self-contained essays written by Wikipedia-able influentials under some shared asocial dream of occupying as many academic syllabi as possible. But, maybe resists isn't the correct word. It is, after all, extremely open about the fact that it is an anthology—much of the foreword and contextual essay focus on the limitations inherent in the anthology form, and not just in that “please don't hit me” sort of way, but in the way that is aware of the ground, bookshelves, coffee tables, etc. that the 343-page, perfect-bound copywritten purviews will inevitably

occupy. The editors acknowledge that the anthology form is limited by its very existence and that they cannot operate outside of the present conditions of capitalist cultural production. This brings me to a crucial moment of the anthology, from De'Ath:

For all its differences, the work collected here is also testament to a widespread interest in the relation between poetry and social change, or between poetry and revolution, even as the latter may involve an assertion that poetry cannot do the same work as a gathering of bodies at a protest or a riot.

Anthologies, obviously, don't march through the streets, they don't work with the NLG if you're kettled by the police, they don't feed your pets, or make sure you don't get fired, or wait to pick you up from jail, or hand you a bottle of champagne liberated from the clutches of a local Smart & Final. Anthologies don't even drink champagne. During a protest or riot, an anthology's immediate significance might strictly be in how easily it can be thrown through the glass of the many structural borders within we exist.

But literature does, nonetheless, play an important—if not undeniable—roll for those engaged in social struggle. As Juliana Spahr says, “literature and all art forms have often been seen as a crucial part of decolonization movements by the people who are involved in them.” This anthology comes out during a lively conversation about literary activism and that term's potential for meaning. Spahr goes on to say that there is no longer a clear movement one can be a movement poet for and the feeling of nostalgia for “that moment when poetry has a closeness with various political things that are happening.” The closest thing to a predominant school or movement in recent years—or, maybe just the closest according to those I follow on social media—has been that of conceptualism and alt lit, which also happen to be two terms that cannot be mentioned these days without immediately thinking about misogyny or racism. Even more so, many contemporary writers seem to be cautious of or taking a step away from the overall poetry

community that surrounds the present moment as an almost suffocating climate, much as Andrea Brady describes Denise Riley's departures from poetry due to the hostilities of the experimental British poetic community.

All of this comes with the chief claim of the anthology: that "poetry still operates as a powerful and convincing critique of the social," which I find, for both better and for worse, extremely persuasive and compelling in the present moment. There seems to be a collective moving away from a poetics that regurgitates corporate consumerism and commerce into new lumps of now even less likable versions of corporate consumerism and commerce that I guess "says stuff" by somehow being detached from itself, or doubly itself, as some awe-inspired moment of hell world. Instead, there is a leaning into an incorporation of practice, ritual, existence—everything that goes into writing that isn't readily fixed into its physical representation, moments of intervention and connection—not necessarily of a given but of a potential moving towards.

This is to say, the context of this anthology isn't purely in the transaction of purchase—it isn't in the collecting of a conversation that has long since built a criteria that the reader now can look into like some sort of party favor or memento—a sort of thought as after-thought, some monument you feel the need to learn the name of. This collection doesn't lean towards a conclusion—a speaking for—but attempts to stay aligned with movement, poetry's moments of intervention, i.e. this is not an anthology of yet another border, yet another selling of terminology that is marketed to make the poetic economy feel new again, collectively alienated by a new elite, a new top charts to crowd our social media, and an always remaining slightly outside of whatever dominant inner circle's celebrity. The context of the anthology is in poetry's discourse—poetry's communication, and what lingers both on and outside of the page as a sort of timeliness. The anthology situates itself in the space of space; as De'Ath puts it in her Forward: "dialogue by proximity but also to suggest a looking-outwards; not so much towards other individual poets but towards other poetics and ways of being in the world."

The social in which this anthology dwells is the inescapable situation under late capitalism that creates a deep-rooted sense of alienation from ourselves, our communities, our loved ones, and the production process. Much of this anthology concerns itself with poetry's relation and entanglement with production. Nicole Markotić and Michael Davidson discuss how poetry has the capacity to disable production and self-reliance, calling for more collaborative forms of reading and writing. This call for collaboration isn't simply a call for reader participation but one that also concerns writer and practice. Kaia Sand adds, "reading is a social encounter, one's words taken in by another, words themselves socially made. Every time each of us uses language we set it into motion," and that "an important piece of my process is showing up, returning to the archival research reading room day after day, requesting files." A motion similar to what Eileen Myles describes as the "intervention of all the parts of our body while we write," and Spahr's description of her poetry as *under the influence* of her political involvement and not the other way around, or as a substitute for—"not the riot, but beside the riot."

Jaeger's contextual essay states "poetic activism is sometimes foregrounded in these essays through the figure of silence." When I think of silence I think of breath, I think of a situating, I think of what Markotić describes as "the body *in* language" and Rita Wong's assertion that "words need to be related to actions, relationships, life." Poetry's activism isn't in being the political pamphlet's But-Now-With-Line-Breaks edition. As Sean Booney says, "I'm interested in a poetry that wants to step outside of the poetry room" and I think that this is an important distinction from being interested in a social change that wants to step *into* the poetry room—in the sense of what is being moved towards and the preexisting borders of the room. Catherine Wagner, for example, talks about that monetization of poetic labor, especially in relation to academia. It seems almost impossible, at times, to run into a poet who hasn't had formal training at a university or who isn't in the process of entering the university or always living slightly outside of those walls. And, of course, I doubt the overall reader population of this

anthology will break trend. It is, after all, an anthology. Here is where the subtitle seems most relevant:

Remarks on Poetics of Mad Affect Militancy Feminism Demotic Rhythms Emptying Intervention Reluctance Indigeneity Immediacy Lyric Conceptualism Common Pastoral Margins Desire Ambivalence Disability The Digital and Other Practices

Remarks stems from the French verb *remarquer*—to note again. The action of this collection is in this reentering—this reiterating of a space that symbolizes our movement. Whereas anthology, from Greek *anthologia*, is a noun—a space already built, with the movement past—where the structural place-ness of space overpowers the motion of possibility. No commas—the body of the words and the space between them take precedence over their assumed linear correlation. Instead, the list exists as one mass amongst itself, unleashed and between. To quote, again, Wong:

Rather than seeing poetry, like ecology, become a casualty of colonial and capitalist systems that steal the earth's inheritance from future generations, I feel it is our kinship — with each other, with all beings, with the lands, waters, and air — that will help make a future-in-common where poetry lives as part of our guts and grace.

Where this collection of remarks is taking us is indeterminate. Neither the editors nor the contributors are attempting to represent a road map for success or a proper way of engaging with poetry. The anthology, rightfully, ends with CAConrad's "Preternatural Conversations," where the poetry is under the influence of the poet *in* body. Where practice is a conversation between the experiences of the writer and the experience of the page, exercising the space of where these bodies *in* bodies make connections. To end on a quote by Jeff Derksen and the concept of militant sincerity: "Sincerity, shorn of its attachments to authenticity, and unleashed from a singular subject, can be a political force between social subjects. That is, politic." The between—this is where poetry's silence resides.