

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

***Listening Up, Writing Down, and Looking Beyond: Interfaces of the Oral, Written, and Visual*, edited by Susan Gingell and Wendy Roy (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2012)**

*Listening Up, Writing Down, and Looking Beyond: Interfaces of the Oral, Written, and Visual* is a collection of seventeen essays on the oral and visual in poetry which is rich in depth, scope, and style. It is both an excellent teaching and academic resource and a celebration of the genre- and border-crossing nature of poetry and poetics. *Listening Up, Writing Down, and Looking Beyond* extends beyond the book form: the essay collection was born from Susan Gingell's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Grant, and a Canada Council and Saskatchewan Arts Board-funded international conference and poetry festival held in 2008. The book also has a companion website, with video and audio resources which illustrate and expand the concerns of the collected essays: <http://drc.usask.ca/projects/oral>.

An important precursor to the conference, the poetry festival, and to this collection, is Marshall McLuhan and Victor Papanek's *Verbi-Voco-Visual Explorations* (1967). As with McLuhan and Papanek's study, *Listening Up, Writing Down, and Looking Beyond* seeks to effect a movement away from strictly visual-centric modes of engaging with the literary arts. But *Listening Up, Writing Down, and Looking Beyond* moves beyond even the polemic of *Verbi-Visuo-Vocal Explorations*. Rather than a primacy of the vocalic in poetics, it seeks a renewed understanding of the various manifestations of orality (Gingell and Roy coin this 'oral+') in poetry as heard and seen alongside the visual and textual, including the different voices of a variety of oral literature practitioners, from poets to storytellers, in the collection. They diagnose 'a broad and sustained turn to the oral+ in both artistic practices and scholarly disciplines' (22). Through this turn to the oral+, the volume also explores questions of performance and performativity in terms of embodied oral and verbal culture, in an extension of McLuhan and Pasternak's quest to move away from monolithically visuo-centric methods of engaging with literature in general and poetry in particular.

The comprehensive introduction compliments the ambition of the collection, its related events, and companion website. Entitled 'Opening the Door to Transdisciplinary, Multimodal Communication', the introduction opens at once colloquially and also with a highly literary style: 'word up, dear reader' This introduction is also a lively exhortation, 'an urging and an invitation (r.s.v.p.)' for a renewed exchange on the subject of the vocal and oral side of poetry's crafting and its effects, extending the conference and poetry festival's aim to 'foster opportunities for collaboration' (<https://ocs.usask.ca/ocs/index.php/theoral/theoral08/index>). The volume sets out to find 'open spaces within academic environments and scholarly discourses in which orally centred or related ways of making and transmitting knowledges can be affirmed and validated in expanded ways, so that the definition of what constitutes expert work can be enlarged' (15).

In order to aid this enlargement of the field, *Listening Up, Writing Down, and Looking Beyond*'s ambitions are truly transdisciplinary. Adding to the pedagogical value and to the accessibility of the volume, Gingell and Roy's introduction provides an in-depth glossary of 'key terms'. These terms, much like the ordering of the volume itself, are clustered into thematic sections: *orature / orality; performance / speech / sound; audience / storytelling; text / textualized orature / orality; audience / storytelling*. The terms and their definitions do not bound the theoretical angle or the broad scope of the volume. Rather, they provide a navigation aid for the introduction and the essays that ensue, widening the 'conversational circle' of the book through the 'shared vocabulary'

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(15) thus established. I will not even begin to try to summarise the seventeen essays in the volume here, as they are as diverse in their scope and style as they are in their approaches. Suffice it to say, their scope spans the globe (from North America, through Britain, to South Africa, Haiti, and Australasia), history (from ancient Indigenous tales, through sixteenth century Ireland, to the present), genre (from the ballad form, to the aisling, to slam poetry), and style (strictly academic, through storytelling, to poetics, cultural studies, and even the visual arts).

Thus, although it is difficult to tease apart all of the connected elements of *Listening Up, Writing Down, and Looking Beyond*, it also feels somewhat like a false archaeology even to attempt to do so. Indeed, Gingell and Roy, in the introduction to the volume, reference Jacques Attali in calling for a certain ‘theoretical indiscipline’<sup>1</sup> to be integral to our approaches in poetry and poetics, from both critical and creative perspectives, and in the academy and beyond. In its wide collection of contributors – academics in literary, social, and cultural studies, poets of all sorts, oral storytellers, writers of fiction and non-fiction, and media artists – and their wide range of interests and insights, make sure that *Listening Up, Writing Down, and Looking Beyond* does what many academic-instigated studies of poetry profess to do but never quite accomplish, which is to bridge the creative and the critical in its content and its readership, and to do so with a scope as multidisciplinary and as global as possible.

**Heather H. Yeung**

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Trans Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 6.