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Book Review: Poets Talk: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch, Daphne Marlatt, Erin Moure, Dionne Brand, Marie Annharte Baker, Jeff Derksen, and Fred Wah

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Poets Talk: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch, Daphne Marlatt, Erin Mouré, Dionne Brand, Marie Annharte Baker, Jeff Derksen, and Fred Wah. By Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005. xvii + 197 pp. Photographs, works cited, index. \$34.95 paper.

Reading *Poets Talk* is like overhearing an interesting conversation in a café: you eat up the discussion, but you also want to jump in and ask your own questions. The poets would be fascinating tablemates: diverse in terms of sexuality and race, they are united by how they understand language's relation to social power structures, and how they challenge the "rules" of language to subvert or expose other, often implicit, social rules. They're also united by what I'll call, not condescendingly, generationality: they're established writers with long personal and political histories. The result is a collection of interviews that are engaged and illuminating, but also marked with a nostalgia that in some cases creates the impression of a poetic energy located in the past.

Editors Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy suggest in their introduction that “this poetry is important because it unsettles habits of thought and perception, because it pushes language, because it offers points of ignition and resistance within and against the social order.” Their aim is partially to illuminate the social engagement of these authors, which may be obvious in some cases from the poetry itself (as with Annharte’s) but which may require a little more explanation on the part of other writers (as with Derksen). The editors establish the social origins of these poets’ concerns, tracing the various writers’ involvements with political and literary groups. As such, the collection usefully counters the popular image of the poet as a figure working in romantic isolation: the work of these writers is rooted in the social and continues to both reproduce and question that space.

In one sense, this book is an odd project. The politics of these writers involve destabilizing the subject, to the point that Mouré, for example, publishes under three different versions of her name. As she tells Butling, “Like everyone, I don’t like people trying to solidify me.” In their focus on writers’ personal histories, these interviews at times seem to be relocating poetic origins in the individual. At the same time, though, many readers will find such guidance useful, as these discussions provide a way into writing that some may find relatively intimidating. Would such a collection be useful if these seven writers were writing traditional lyric poems? And why—or why not? The tension between interview format and poetic practice allows worthwhile questions to be asked.

One quibble with the book’s content: this volume is a companion to the poetry but, except for brief discussions, contains few examples of the writing itself. Readers may need to read these interviews alongside copies of the poets’ work in order to see how the concepts treated in the interviews are translated into actual poems.

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