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# Experimental Tendencies and the Tradition of Experimental Poetics

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*The Limits of Fabrication: Materials Science, Materialist Poetics* by Nathan Brown. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017. Pp. 312. \$40.00 hardcover.

In the tradition of avant-garde poetry, interrogation of the relation between form and material has often been the staging ground for experimentation. While in actual practice this has meant experimentation on both sides of that equation, there has been a definite critical tendency to favor experimentation with form as the more important cutting edge. This tendency has placed the drive for experimentation on some uncertain footing at times—see the difficulty that much of the leftist avant-garde went through in resolving the formal influence of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot despite their conservative or outright fascist politics. More recently, there is something of a critical movement to reorient experimental writing in ways that grapple with the political and social histories of the more conservative strains of the avant-garde. With a fervor that suggests that this reorientation was significantly overdue, calls to own up to this heritage exploded on the poetry world in the wake of Kenneth Goldsmith's 2015 performance of his ill-conceived conceptual poem "The Body of Michael Brown," the reaction to which ranged from an intensification of questions about the critical valorization of conceptual writing to outright calls for the expulsion of conceptualism and other sorts of formalist experimentation from the poetry community for their

inadequate commitment to antiracist and anti-imperialist politics.<sup>1</sup>

This is an important part of the context within which we receive Nathan Brown's *The Limits of Fabrication: Materials Science, Materialist Poetics*. To the extent that Brown's book represents a vigorous and thorough articulation of just how valuable formalist experimentation is for the criticality of poetic work, especially by reminding us that poetic experimentation stems from *the relation* between form and material, the book is an important contribution to the conversation. On the other hand, what would be most valuable at this stage is an attempt to bring a critical discussion of poetic experimentation into greater contact with questions of the politics of experimental writing as a set of social and institutional structures, and on that front, Brown's book leaves us with work to do.

The basic conceit of *The Limits of Fabrication* is Brown's proposal that "we approach materials science and materialist poetics as *branches of materials research and fabrication*" (10). Brown asks us to conceptualize the two as engaged in the same kind of activity: the fabrication of matter through the manipulation of material at a more fundamental level. For materials science, fabrication refers to the making of matter at the nanoscale, for example, by the manipulation of individual atoms, where the properties of the

material that scientists encounter are different from the properties of matter that we experience at the more familiar macroscale level. For poetics, the payoff has to do with the specific way this gets us thinking about poetry as a formal activity of making. If we understand that materials science deals with direct manipulation of fundamental particles at a level at which the properties of what we ordinarily call matter do not apply, Brown suggests that we can think of the materials of writing as bearing a similar relation to things such as meaning and, especially, image. Poetics as materials research and fabrication, then, is a way of understanding poetics as "a material problem of formal construction" (10), prior to, or at least at a more fundamental level than, words, phrases, ideas, and so on.

Brown is adept at describing materials science processes for the nonspecialist reader, and in the first chapter, he gives us an exciting tour through some of the achievements of this cutting-edge field. Brown enlists this science to argue that while some branches of speculative philosophy have endeavored to broaden our functional definition of what sorts of living entities are considered important, the distinction that underlies that problem, between inert or inorganic material and life—between "living being" and mere "physical being," in Heideggerian terms—has

remained undertheorized. At the nanoscale of fabrication, nonliving material behaves in ways that are indistinguishable from the behavior of organic material, so we have to “rethink the categorial determinations through which we have distinguished living being from physical being” (49).

This way of thinking physical being opens the door for what Brown aims, in his second chapter, to be a significant rereading of the work of the poet Charles Olson. While Olson is usually regarded for the importance of his concept of Projective Verse, Brown specifically calls our attention to what Olson called Objectism. Olson’s poetics has traditionally been understood as a “theory of poetic form as constitutively bound to a theory of the organism, the biological body, and indeed ‘life’” (59). Against this, Brown emphasizes Olson’s claim that “man is himself an object” (59), arguing that the claim points the way toward an understanding of reality that is not predicated on distinctions between organic and inorganic being. This entails that Olson’s poetics of objects in field, where poetry, like all matter, is the “*composition* of materials through relational processes” (69), is a poetics that places the material of reality in systems of relation prior to the point at which any concern about what is living and physical being arises. Brown works this point against Marjorie

Perloff’s placement of Olson on a continuum with Robert Lowell, Denise Levertov, Robert Duncan, and Allen Ginsberg, “as progenitors of ‘the natural look’” (69). For these poets, form is in opposition to the organic experience of life, such that the challenge of poetry is always one of dealing with how organic experience strains against the strictures of poetic form. This opposition is incompatible with Brown’s reading of Olson, as Olson’s poetry stages a field within which objects sit in relation to each other, with form arising from the way these relations play out. The openness of form that Olson’s poetics calls for is not because poems fail to contain a level of organic experience too large for their frame but because each poem is instantaneous and unique to the specific relations from which it is composed.

The relation between materials and matter or form that Brown uses these two chapters to articulate pays off most smoothly in his third chapter, covering Ronald Johnson’s long poem *ARK*. Composed over the course of about twenty years from the 1970s to the 1990s, Brown argues that *ARK* succeeds because of Johnson’s conception of the poem as an architecture. Brown explicates Buckminster Fuller’s theory of design in order to demonstrate how his ideas directed Johnson’s building of his poem. Fuller’s geodesic domes were triumphs of architecture through careful attention to

the “tension between patterns and materials” (99). Fuller’s insight about design is that it is all about the pattern, and materials simply flesh it out. The form of *ARK*—99 sections, each section composed of a series of short lines, often arranged in tercets—here functions as a pattern within which the material Johnson finds for the poem is laid. The most significant payoff in this chapter is Brown’s argument that *ARK* is the sort of poem we should understand as a nature poem—not a poem *about* nature, or a poem that helps us imagine nature, but a poem arranged in such a way that the materials self-organize into a pattern. The poem itself is in this way a natural thing, which blows up the whole construction of questions such as the adequacy of inorganic forms to capture the formlessness of natural organic experience.

The political potential of a poetics that operates this way comes out most strongly in Brown’s reading of Caroline Bergvall’s turn-of-the-twenty-first-century *Goan Atom* in his fourth chapter. Brown articulates the ways *Goan Atom* experiments with the various materials that come to constitute language and poetic matter. In doing so, Bergvall’s project functions by means of embracing an awareness of the body as one site in the fabrication of subjectivity, or, as Brown puts it, “bodies, machines, and inscribed marks are all

organizations of parts that can be reorganized” (194). Arranging his discussion of Bergvall as a potential consequence of thinking about the nature poem in the way suggested by his reading of *ARK*, Brown understands Bergvall’s poetics to be a queer feminist “investigation of bodies as *differentially configured collectivities of objects*,” rather than bodies as essentially predetermined types of one category or another (197). Brown’s reading suggests that Bergvall’s work fabricates a poetic subject engaged in subjectivization through manipulation of disintegrated and redistributed parts of language. In this reading, Bergvall’s feminist and queer poetics would short-circuit any potential relapse of queer or feminist poetics into a homonormative reification of stable bodies and identities, even as it is grounded in contact with bodies and their relation to performative articulation. Usefully, this way of understanding Bergvall’s poetics bridges the gap between biological matter and performativity, as the relation between physical material (such as genetics) and biological matter (bodies) and the relation between the material of writing and the subject of language are understood to be unfolding in the same plane of reality, rather than trying to figure them as imperfect reflections of each other.

If the alignment of Brown’s critical project with the queer feminist project of Bergvall demonstrates

some of the potential of Brown's basic conceit, his investigation of Christian Bök's *Crystallography* presents us with a potential pitfall. After elucidating how science has come to understand crystal formations as arising from molecules self-organizing into crystalline matter, Brown argues that the various lattices that Bök constructs from letters and words make visible for us "the physical substratum of meaning already making and unmaking itself" (161). Bök, as Brown reads him, "attempts an evasion of those habitual patterns of usage restricting cognitive access to the vast and inconceivable sentience of language," by "*bracketing* the organic enunciation of poetic 'voice' through a kind of crystallographic ventriloquy, an asubjective/inorganic articulation of mineralinguistic structure" (160). The upshot is a way of conceiving the poetic subject as a function of the materials of language and their autonomous structures. The problem, as I see it, is that in Bök's project we have a poetic subject that is thought to be only properly engaged with the reality of its construction if the writer performs a process of ascetically restricting him- or herself from anything with a whiff of what we conventionally think of as subjectivity. It is a kind of purification of poetic language from the supposedly illusory experiential subject. Brown's reading of Bök suggests that there are properties

of a writing subject that are not entirely defined by the writing subject, that there are ways to affect and constitute the subject other than direct representation of the organic voice, and that any insistence on the primacy of the organic voice as the driver of poetic writing is functionally a prohibition against some of those weirder and more potentially critical possibilities of poetry. But to jump from this insight to an idea that the organic voice is something that the properly experimental poet must abandon is just to mirror the prohibition, not to undo it.

Shooting past a more careful consideration of the politics behind Bök's project points to a shortcoming that arises from Brown's framing of these poetic projects so extensively alongside the technological innovations of materials science. Brown is explicit that he wants to direct his project's "attention to experimental poetry—specifically, to a tradition of materialist poetics committed to pushing the formal boundaries of poetic making" (12). But, for the most part, the poetic projects that Brown writes about are treated as engaging in a tendency toward experimentation rather than treated as participating in and speaking to a tradition of poetic experimentation. Poetry that foregrounds its poetics is also making a critical intervention in an articulated tradition of poetry, but using the framework Brown establishes here, the extent to which the

specific politics of these interventions can be understood on their own terms is somewhat obscured. Instead, the drive of poetic experimentation is treated as the same drive as that of technological innovation, so experimentation becomes an end in itself. In order to fully understand the significance of, for example, the politics that Bergvall's poetry opens up, we have to understand how her work is engaged with a social, institutional, and political tradition of experimental poetics. Similarly, the way a poetics that operates under a serious prescription against an aspect of poetry that is declared old-fashioned and therefore valueless—the way Bök's project treats the idea of the organic poetic voice, for example—has been seen in practice to sometimes simply reinscribe the terms by which white male gatekeepers of experimental poetry justify their status. Bergvall's is a good example of an explicitly avant-garde project that pushes on those politics. But that Bök's project refrains from explicitly pronouncing its politics means we should be all the more rigorous in asking after his work's relation to the macro world of the social, rather than falling back on the claim of experimentation for the sake of a scientifically framed search for innovation.

The final chapter of Brown's book, which presents a rigorous and thoroughly compelling reading of Shanxing Wang's 2005 *Mad*

*Science in Imperial City*, could potentially perform work of that sort. Wang was a Chinese scientist who worked in China until sometime after he was involved in the protests at Tiananmen Square, after which he emigrated to America, where he eventually switched professions and took up poetry writing. Brown gives us something of an origin myth in which Wang encountered a committed Poundian poetry instructor who told him, because of his use of abstract language instead of the image, "Poetry is not for you" (230). A Chinese American writer encountering a poetic establishment that attempts to force him to follow traditional poetic modes and forms—to learn how to write like the white Anglophone writers of the avant-garde establishment—provides an example of exactly how questions of form and tradition are used to racially police the kind of poetry we value. That Wang carves out a path for himself within the social structure of the poetry world by engaging in an experimental poetics project would make his poetry a good site for a critical project that insists on the importance of understanding avant-garde poetics as at once a tradition and a tendency. Instead, Brown's reading of *Mad Science*, for all its virtues, frames the resistance and criticism that Wang encountered to his writing as a matter of an old-fashioned

establishment incapable of recognizing the new frontiers of materials research that his work represents. From this position, the next step would be to more thoroughly reconstruct the terms by which we can understand how Wang's writing—and the writing of the other poets whom Brown takes up—sits in relation to the ongoing tradition of avant-garde and experimental poetry.

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#### NOTE

1. This whole episode is recent enough that it is still largely unresolved, and so I hesitate to point to any specific account of it as in any way definitive. However, CAConrad's solicitation of responses from a number of practicing poets, posted at the Poetry Foundation's *Harriet* blog, gives some sense of the range of reactions and the ideas involved: "Kenneth Goldsmith Says He Is an Outlaw," June 2015, [www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/06/kenneth-goldsmith-says-he-is-an-outlaw](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/06/kenneth-goldsmith-says-he-is-an-outlaw).