

Booker T. Washington. The modernist and African American protest traditions through which Washington's work is typically viewed fail to recognize his "complexly gendered pedagogy" and his "pragmatist/realist negotiations between humanitarianism and complicity" (101). Brilliantly parsing Washington's rhetorical strategies, Morgan shows how Washington uses a domestic discourse about charity and civilizing progress to protect Tuskegee (114) and a masculinist imperialist rhetoric to promote African American citizenship. Morgan's compelling rereading of Washington's "Atlanta Exposition Address" elucidates how his pragmatic-realist understanding of complicity catalyzes social reform, sparking his insistent call "to educate whites into complicity with African Americans" (126) and his utopian hope about substantiating an ethics of interracial interdependence and "absolute justice" (132).

The epilogue to *Questionable Charity* suggests realism's contemporary relevance, given its "complex democratic style of post-idealist ethical and social analysis" (184). In developing Morgan's suggestion, Hames-García's *Fugitive Thought* aims to secure realism's place in ongoing attempts to foster ethical citizenship in "a world of uncertain foundations and real problems."

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***Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy.* By Marjorie Perloff. Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press. 2004. xxxiv, 307 pp. Cloth, \$65.00; paper, \$29.95.**

***The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics.* By Barrett Watten. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press. 2003. xxxii, 430 pp. Cloth, \$70.00; paper, \$27.95.**

Marjorie Perloff has achieved primary visibility as a critic, educator, and editor and is a major player on the institutional level, but in *Differentials* she does not display the consolidating critical habits that often accompany power and prestige. Her interests form something like an avant-garde canon. Unlike Peter Bürger's once-only thesis, her avant-garde is ongoing, open-ended, and tilted toward the contemporary. *Differentials* shows the uncommon breadth typical of her work: she reads French, German, and English closely; discusses a range of modernists, from conservative to innovative (Eliot, Williams, Duchamp, Wittgenstein, Beckett, Eugene Jolas); and reads established innovative poets (Susan Howe, Rae Armantrout, Tom Raworth) as well as emergent artists (Carolyn Bergvall, Christian Bök). In different chapters, she moves from Eliot's metrics to the concrete and visual poetry of Haroldo du Campos and Ronald Johnson, and to Bergvall's performance work. She is frankly partisan, arguing for the superiority of Armantrout's poetry to Jorie Graham's. But while Perloff has garnered notoriety for promoting Language writing, she's supporting something wider: she finds a kind of ongoing "futurist moment," to quote a prior title, in work ranging from World War I to the present. It is this

continuity rather than any thorough conceptual scaffolding that structures *Differentials*.

Perloff ranges easily between formalist and historicist approaches, but she is more interested in the specificities of what she reads than in marshaling works as evidence for critical constructions. She presents her subjects amid an abundance of linguistic, cultural, and historical knowledge and is always up on the criticism, both academic and extra-academic; but at bottom, a passionate enthusiasm drives her work. In a telling aside in the final essay, she admits she is “in love with the twentieth century . . . whose first half gave us so many extraordinary poets and artists and composers and architects and dancers . . . and whose second half, if less dazzling, is fascinating for its working out of the problems the early century produced” (259). While this could be read as damning the present with faint praise, in practice Perloff treats the work of contemporary artists with the same informed energy that she would bring to Duchamp or Beckett. Is the same something happening when we read Bergvall or Stein, Bök or Pound? On the larger level, Perloff asks such a question continuously, in MLA talks, in presidential addresses, and most lately in *Differentials*. Yes, of course, there is modernism, and here is the postmodern; but when Perloff looks closely, there is no crucial divide: both are equally alive. Perloff is widely visible, and the visible is usually taken for granted, but we should keep in mind the unusual breadth of her repertoire and how crucial it is for those with a stake in present-tense art.

The ambitions of Barrett Watten’s criticism are, like Perloff’s, large. Both want to promote the perception of an ongoing avant-garde, but Perloff writes from the perspective of reception while Watten’s focus in *The Constructivist Moment* is on production. His history as a poet and editor in the coalescence of Language writing is notable throughout the book, and his discussions of the Language School, as he refers to it, are highly interested. He presents Language writing as a site of multiple authorship, where formal experiments are collated via group feedback. He argues carefully but strenuously against claims made for “the material text,” or “the reader making the meaning,” or the liberatory qualities of the nonstandard. He sees such celebrations as fitting into “the familiar Hegelian logic of opposition and recuperation” [xxxix]—found recently in Paul Mann’s scheme of “the theory-death of the avant-garde.”

But while Watten’s point of view is that of avant-garde practitioner, *The Constructivist Moment* hardly looks like the work of a poet-critic, and Language writing is only a part of its concerns. Watten is writing poetics, but he is also addressing, with remarkable fluency, a wider set of academic audiences, in cultural studies, comparative literature, theory, and the visual arts. The disciplinary languages at Watten’s command often seem exotic to each another, which can give his translations across discipline, medium, and chronology the power of surprising connection and new illumination. His continual display of energetic thinking across unusual distances can make for difficulty as

well. There is more sustained, closely argued theory here than poets are used to reading, while theorists are confronted with materials “out of their field,” as the familiar refrain has it, such as Watten’s wide-ranging, sophisticated discussion of poetry (Coleridge, the Russian Futurists, Olson, Zukofsky, Lyn Hejinian, Jean Day) as well as of music and art. Take the trajectory outlined in the book’s eponymous chapter: “The Constructivist Moment: From El Lisitzky to Detroit Techno.” What seems at first, in Watten’s words, “the most unlikely comparison possible” allows for a consideration of “a radical modernism trapped within the productivist lifeworld,” a juxtaposition of Soviet modernism with American postmodernism and of the USSR in the 1930s with Detroit in the 1990s, and finally a meditation on the status of the example in cultural studies. Such knowledgeable acrobatics are typical. In one chapter, we find Coleridge’s regulation of poetic diction, Zukofsky’s satirical appropriation of Odgen and Richard’s Basic English, and Jackson Mac Low’s procedural poetics; in another, Stein and Fordism. The poetry is not here to decorate the theoretical points, and vice versa. The chapter “Negative Examples: Theories of Negativity in the Avant-Garde” reads Language poet Robert Grenier’s handwritten work via the accounts of negation in Žižek, Heidegger, and Foucault, simultaneously arguing for the constitutive role that the avant-garde played in the thinking of all three. It is typical of Watten’s expansiveness that he ends the chapter with the relation of the art of AIDS activist David Wojnarowicz to Foucault’s senses of discursive formation and limit situation. Ultimately art, theory, and history are equally implicated in “the constructivist moment.” By that term Watten intends a new dispensation for the avant-garde, whose instances of negation and disruption he sees as deeply imbricated in history. *The Constructivist Moment* will initiate a number of new conversations.

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***The Fluid Text: A Theory of Revisioning and Editing for Book and Screen.* By John Bryant. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press. 2002. x, 198 pp. Cloth, \$55.50; paper, \$20.95.**

***Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries.* By Loss Pequeño Glazier. Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press. 2002. xii, 213 pp. Cloth, \$60.00; paper, \$24.95.**

***Writing Machines.* By N. Katherine Hayles. With designer Anne Burdick. Cambridge: MIT Press. 2002. 144 pp. Paper, \$17.95.**

***Cognitive Fictions.* By Joseph Tabbi. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press. 2002. xxvii, 166 pp. Paper, \$17.95.**

John Bryant’s *The Fluid Text* appears in the aftermath of two decades of intense theoretical conversation in the fields of bibliography and textual studies.