

# Sussex Research

## Experimentalism by contact

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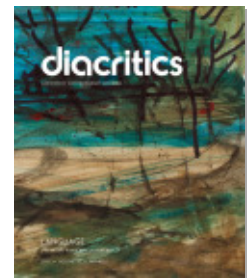
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# **EXPERIMENTALISM BY CONTACT**

NATALIA CECIRE

Writing that reveals a high type of discovery is literature.

—William Carlos Williams and Robert McAlmon, editorial note, *Contact*, 1921<sup>1</sup>

Contact

It's the secret

It's the moment

When everything happens

—Introductory sequence, 3–2–1 *Contact*, 1983–86<sup>2</sup>

In 1989, four poets of the variety that came to be called “Language” traveled to Leningrad for an international conference on culture and poetics, bringing these writers—so influenced by the Russian avant-garde of an earlier moment—into direct personal contact with the Russian avant-garde’s Cold War–era successors. In *Leningrad*, the book that they wrote collaboratively about the experience, Ron Silliman explicitly frames the conference in world-historical and, specifically, Cold War terms: it occurs “during that brief window in world history between the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing and the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Eastern bloc,” and although the conference is conceived as “international,” Lyn Hejinian observes that “the French were right in saying that the conference was more a dialogue between Russians and Americans.”<sup>3</sup> Ever aware of their own situatedness in history, the Language writers sought to effect a cultural encounter outside the terms of a state ideology that they saw as fully complicit with mass atrocity, most notably in Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> As Hejinian would later put it in “Barbarism,” her unfaithful reflection on Theodor Adorno’s most infamous comment, “the word ‘barbarism,’ as it comes to us from the Greek *barbaros*, means ‘foreign’—that is, ‘not speaking the same language’ . . .—and such is precisely the task of poetry: *not to speak the same language as Auschwitz*. Poetry after Auschwitz must indeed be barbarian; it must be foreign to the cultures that produce atrocities.”<sup>5</sup> In this rewriting of Russian formalist *ostranenie*, Hejinian stakes out an ethics and politics of language with explicit geopolitical resonances in a historical present of which she is keenly aware.

My inquiry here has to do with US “experimental writing”—not every text that has ever been called experimental, nor every text that is indebted to scientific thinking (a notion that, as I will discuss below, is very fraught), but rather, the tessitura or general center of what contemporary writers and critics usually mean by the term—for instance, when Charles Altieri writes about “poets trained in the experimental or ‘innovative’ tradition,” or when Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue use the word in the subtitle of their essay collection *We Who Love to Be Astonished*.<sup>6</sup> It is a term that perhaps lacks a meaning, but has very definite uses all the same.<sup>7</sup> What makes it “American,” despite clear debts to Russian, and other, literary history? Why did it emerge as a descriptive term, as Paul Stephens has argued, not in the period with which it is most associated—the early twentieth century—but rather the 1980s?<sup>8</sup> How can we account for its simultaneous durability, in aggregating a fairly well-established set of critical expectations, and its tendency to dissolve, give way, or expand infinitely upon scrutiny? The aims of this essay are trifold.

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First, I wish to show how Language writing in the 1980s, and indeed a broader critical practice of self-rehistoricization in that moment, helped to discover-invent the early twentieth century as the canonical scene of literary experimentalism. Second, I wish to offer, through what Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have called “epistemic virtues,” a rubric for understanding experimentalism that can capture its potentialities without altogether falling for its rhetorics.<sup>9</sup> And finally, I wish to illustrate how epistemic virtues operate in literary experimentalism through an example, that of William Carlos Williams and what he persisted in calling “contact.” In this, I will be crucially concerned with questions of time: historicization, periodization, recovery, temporal folding, and primitivism; for in re-narrating a “usable past” of (primarily US) literary experimentalism, the Language writers sought to puncture the time of liberal empire, setting up relays of historical resonance whose echoes now emerge as a periodization problem for experimentalism.

#### >> BARBARISM

As Silliman’s self-historicization—placing the Leningrad conference between the events at Tiananmen Square and the Berlin Wall—attests, Language writing’s sense of its own historicity is explicitly a sense of what Benedict Anderson identified as the simultaneity of homogeneous, empty time—the time of nation and the time of empire.<sup>10</sup> Things are happening “at the same time,” so that Language’s sense of the simultaneity of homogeneous, empty time emerges in what Sianne Ngai has intriguingly called its “paranoid” sensitivity to “bad timing”: “why is it that at the same time . . . ?”<sup>11</sup> Thus, for instance, Tom Mandel observes of the programmer Bob Frankston that “while we were creating ‘Language poetry’ he was writing Visicalc,” the popular spreadsheet software released in 1983.<sup>12</sup> This sense of simultaneity, that while this happens, that happens too, and that these events may be causally connected *but they also may not*, pervades Language writing.<sup>13</sup> Ted Pearson would retrospectively note that

the period in question [the early days of Language poetry] began at the end of the postwar “economic miracle” and at the onset of a long and devastating recession, deepened by the astronomic debt and social misery that resulted from the pursuit of imperial ambition, if not yet, as is now clear, overtly global hegemony—a pursuit that barely paused to reload when Saigon “fell.” . . .

*Not coincidentally, it was also the moment when the nation’s “unlimited drift/to the right” emerged from conservative think tanks and fundamentalist pulpits.*<sup>14</sup>

Not coincidentally, but not altogether causally either. Thus Language’s self-historicization projects a deep formal inhabitation of the structures of empire’s time, and a regretful awareness that “bad timing” is, so to speak, the way time works now.<sup>15</sup> Language writers understood themselves to be in and of US empire even as they opposed it.

Structurally as well as thematically, then, Language writers repeatedly turned their attention to the relationship between language and US imperialism. Mediating that relationship was a key third term, knowledge: “Does poetry have any knowledge, and if so,

what?” Barrett Watten asks in *Leningrad*.<sup>16</sup> For these writers, knowledge and its verifiability were deeply at issue in any question of language’s right relation to the world, in ways that were profoundly politically consequential. Elsewhere in *Leningrad*, Watten positions Language writing against state propaganda, understood as embodying a false relation between language and world and, thus, an epistemological travesty. “While the [American] liberal press has been cranking out one or another of [two official] versions of the Soviet state for the last forty years,” he writes, “poets and other artists have quietly been investigating, by means of identification with the modern art and literature of the Soviet 1920s, ways to avoid either of these (by necessity incomplete) totalizations.”<sup>17</sup> Such “investigating” on the writers’ part attacked the massive state knowledge-production infrastructures that inaugurated the age of big science, as well as defense strategy, CIA-funded American and area studies, and the Study of Culture at a Distance project, led by Margaret Mead and conducted at Columbia University in the 1950s—the knowledge-producing order that Paul Erickson, Judy L. Klein, Lorraine Daston, Rebecca Lemov, Thomas Sturm, and Michael D. Gordin have recently termed “Cold War rationality.”<sup>18</sup> Tellingly, in Watten’s account, such resistance was not only a matter of knowledge, but one that looked to epistemological models from the 1920s as resources. This would become a recurring move in Language’s poetic and critical practice.

A brief consideration of the cybernetic moment of Cold War rationality reveals why resistance to state imperialism through language, and specifically poetry, seemed particularly apt. Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer (also writing in the 1980s) influentially described experimental science as a “language-game” and a “form of life,” borrowing Ludwig Wittgenstein’s terms to illustrate the continuities between discursive and empirical “moves” in the work of the seventeenth-century natural philosopher Robert Boyle.<sup>19</sup> The “language-game” is a particularly congenial frame for understanding Cold War rationality, and indeed, Wittgenstein is a philosophical tributary to that current of midcentury thought.<sup>20</sup> In her 1987 essay “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals,” Carol Cohn describes her experience of a year’s immersion in a nuclear strategy center run by “defense intellectuals,” “civilians who move in and out of government, working sometimes as administrative officials or consultants, sometimes at universities and think tanks,” and who “create the theory that informs and legitimates American nuclear strategic practice.”<sup>21</sup> Though she never specifically uses the Wittgensteinian term, Cohn argues that the world of Cold War nuclear strategy is very much a language-game, in the sense that Wittgenstein proposes: the sum of its potential legible moves, which might include not only utterances but also gestures, calculations, and devastating mass destruction, constitutes a “form of life.” Cohn documents how the language of expertise among defense intellectuals constitutes a closed ecosystem of intelligibility, one that centralizes weapons. “In technostrategic discourse,” Cohn writes, “the reference point is not white men, it is not human beings at all; it is the weapons themselves.” This means that “it is not only impossible to talk about humans in this language, it also becomes in some sense illegitimate to ask the paradigm to reflect human concerns.”<sup>22</sup> As Erickson et al. argue,

What was distinctive about Cold War rationality was the expansion of the domain of rationality at the expense of that of reason, asserting its claims in the loftiest realms of political decision making and scientific method—and sometimes not only in competition with but in downright opposition to reason, reasonableness, and common sense.<sup>23</sup>

Cohn's analysis suggests that if language is not exactly *the problem*—for, in fact, she will explicitly argue that language per se is not the issue—then it is at least symptomatic of a problem.<sup>24</sup> “*Learning to speak* the language,” she writes, “reveals something about how thinking can become more abstract, more focused on parts disembedded from their context, more attentive to the survival of weapons than the survival of human beings.”<sup>25</sup>

Picking up again Ngai's observation that Language's temporality of simultaneity has a “paranoid” valence, the language-oriented nature of resistance becomes clearer. After all, as Timothy Melley has argued, Cold War paranoia centers not on sinister agents but on paths of communication; knowledge itself emerges as essentially linguistic and, often, hermetically formalist.<sup>26</sup> Hejinian extends this line of thinking in “Barbarism,” aiming through language to reintroduce contact with the outside world—empiricism—to Cold War rationality. “The emphasis on language in our writing,” Hejinian writes, “can be explained by our sense of urgency of the need to address and, if possible, to redress social

fraud,” since, as she adds, “fraud produces atrocity.”<sup>27</sup> This imperative in Language writing is well documented, as is the fact that it arises from the writers' sense of a tight coupling between linguistic fraud and state-sanctioned atrocity, as outlined by theorists like Adorno and Benjamin. “The pervasive hypocrisy of the 1950s and 1960s was operating in several strategic forms,” Hejinian specifies: “as outright lies (e.g., ‘Everybody is happy in Alabama’), as deceptive metaphors (as in that depicting Vietnam as an upended domino liable to fall to Communism . . .), and, finally, in the more subtle form of a complete failure to examine political language and indeed any language at all, thus establishing the pre-

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tense that language is ‘natural.’”<sup>28</sup> All of these “strategic forms” are linguistic. But Hejinian's choice of words—“strategic forms”—points toward the Cold War context in which this language is embedded, for strategic forms are the substance not only of the language that conduces to atrocity but also the language-game of Cold War rationality.

This, I would argue, is one reason that Language writing so heavily preoccupied itself with *knowledge and knowledge-production* in its dual poetic and critical projects. It sought to produce an “experimental” writing that was genuinely productive of

knowledge, yet “alien” to the state-sanctioned, knowledge-producing language, and language-game, of defense strategy. A primarily American trajectory of experimental writing was canonized and popularized within the historical context of a late Cold War and post-Vietnam attempt to develop a poetics whose epistemological strength could meaningfully counter the epistemological dominance of state rationality in its various institutional manifestations. Thus, for example, a group of Language writers argued in 1988 that “beginning with Stein and Zukofsky, and significantly reinforced by the examples of the abstract poems of Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery and the aleatorical texts of Jackson MacLow [sic] in the fifties, there has been a continuity of experimental work that foregrounds its status as written language.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in “Barbarism,” Hejinian identifies an “experimental tradition in American poetry, with sources in Pound’s imagism and Stein’s realism” characterized by “an impassioned regard for and address to the world” and an “aesthetic discovery [that] is congruent with social discovery.”<sup>30</sup> The use of “experimental” to indicate something like its current usage was not an invention of the 1980s, of course, with casual instances appearing across the 1930s and ’40s. James Laughlin, the publisher of *New Directions*, for example, introduced *Spearhead: 10 Years’ Experimental Writing in America* (1947), with a familiar account of the term “experimental” as defined in the negative, against those who are “content to work within the technical limits current as conventional tradition.”<sup>31</sup> And as Eva Díaz has recently explained, “experimental” was also a powerful (if often incoherent) transdisciplinary trope at Black Mountain College.<sup>32</sup> Yet the concept blooms and takes on new and more specific connotations in Language writing from the 1970s, which in turn, as Andrew Epstein has outlined, powerfully shaped academic discourses from the early 1980s on.<sup>33</sup> The production of this “continuity” in the extensive critical writings of the period helped to consolidate a provisional canon of American experimentalism whose center of gravity lay in the early twentieth century.<sup>34</sup>

A powerful source of current conventions around US experimentalism can thus be located in Language’s self-conscious engagement with knowledge-production as a mode of intervening in liberal empire. I offer this double periodization as an alternative to the strategies advanced by many others attempting to grasp the period quandaries of the experimental.<sup>35</sup> The experimental as a literary-historical category often seems to demand a Whig history, somewhat on the model of the history of poetic inventions about which Ezra Pound once fantasized, and which Pound explicitly warrants by analogy with the sciences: a linear progression of “innovations” beginning with Francis Bacon (as Matias Viegner suggests) or, alternatively, with the word “experiment” in William Wordsworth’s 1801 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, or with Émile Zola’s use of the term in the 1880s.<sup>36</sup> The desirability of such accounts (and the seeming imperative to generate them) is already prompted by experimentalism’s associations with the sciences, and the continued prevalence of just such linear accounts of scientific knowledge. As Ken Alder has recently put it, “science, in the prevailing view, still designates that form of natural knowledge that winnows truth from error to produce a state-of-the-art summation of all and only those prior discoveries that possess current value,” and, “in this sense . . .



swallows its own past.”<sup>37</sup> But this model of the sciences itself belongs to specific historical discourses, as I will discuss below; moreover, it does a bad job of accounting for the work that the experimental generally does in contemporary criticism.

That experimentalism’s parameters have in many ways been set in response to an epistemological struggle fairly specific to the post-Vietnam, late Cold War moment does not render it a nonsense category; I wish to emphasize that in addition to having an agenda specific to their moment, the Language writers are also very good critics. As a term, “experimental” does meaningful critical work in aggregating a generalized set of formal and historical expectations. Through the critical work of creative writers in the later twentieth century these expectations have come to be anchored in an early twentieth-century canon affiliated with, but neither identical with nor limited to, high modernism.<sup>38</sup> This is a provisional and unstable canon, but certain authors appear in it repeatedly, especially Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Louis Zukofsky.

To put it another way, “experimental writing,” as a critical category, is a white recovery project. With this framing, I wish to deliberately set up a parallel and contrast with contemporaneous recovery projects of the late Cold War, especially among black, Chicano, and feminist writers and scholars. In recanonizing an “oppositional” version of a (tacitly but universally white) modernism that they, with reason, believed to have been suppressed by dominant Cold War discourses, Language writers also allowed what they

saw as experimentalism’s more fundamental purchase on the political to take precedence over the specific politics of embodied, and especially racial, categories.<sup>39</sup> As Dorothy Wang has argued, experimental and racialized poetics are often treated as mutually exclusive propositions, on the assumption that the former must reject “identity” while the other must embrace it, resulting in what Harryette Mullen has termed an “aesthetic apartheid.”<sup>40</sup> A closer examination of experimentalism’s stakes reveals that this is not simply a matter of “excluding” writers of color—as Wang, Mullen, and others observe, especially since the 1990s, Language and post-Language writers have made an effort to “include” some writers of color, albeit often on the unspoken condition that their

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racialization be effaced.<sup>41</sup> Rather, as Anthony Reed has pointed out, the logic of inclusion simply “made room for female and nonwhite writers without questioning why nonwhite, nonmale writers had not been more involved in the first place.”<sup>42</sup> Doubling back on the century to produce an all white experimental “usable past,” Language writers

laid claim to an epistemological purchase on the real to rival that of the military-industrial complex's Big Science. In doing so, they invested hope in a range of epistemological orders that had historically tended to understand people of color primarily as objects of study, rather than as (in Bob Perelman's words) the "engaged, oppositional intellectual" who needed recovering.<sup>43</sup> This helps to explain why, as Stefania Heim has observed in a recent *Boston Review* roundtable co-edited with Wang, despite "Mullen's decades-old description" of the problem—not to mention a substantial and growing scholarship on contemporary writing by people of color—experimentalism's default to whiteness remains painfully live.<sup>44</sup> Far from naturalizing a trajectory of white "scientific" experimentalism, I wish to reveal how it came to be produced, often through the valorization of scientific ideals that are deeply ethically compromised, especially on racial grounds. In other words, the production of an "experimental" canon with significant resonances in the sciences is frequently implicitly racist, not least because the sciences that serve as touchstones are historically implicitly racist. Especially insofar as literary experimentalism, through its conceptualization as knowledge-production, is often explicitly positioned as a source of ethical and political virtue, I wish to place pressure on the history of those virtues, to honor their stakes and intentions while disclosing their limitations.

"Experimental," when applied to US writing, means many things, but tends to aggregate a relatively (but only relatively!) stable set of critical expectations, including formal disjuncture, a sense of political or ethical commitment, and an association, but not strict identification, with the experimental sciences.<sup>45</sup> Some of the expectations around experimentalism embody tensions if not outright contradictions, which it is part of my task to attempt to explain. For example, experimentalism has a very vexed relationship to historicization: it is repeatedly associated with the early twentieth-century, and is often used interchangeably with "avant-garde," but "experimental" is also the word to which we turn when we want to *avoid* confining ourselves to the early twentieth century. In part, this registers the way that "experimental" sometimes operates as an honorific: to say that a work, of *whatever* period, is not experimental can easily be construed as an insult.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, while experimentalism is often thought to reside in form, there is no particular set of forms that can guarantee that a work will be received as experimental, which registers the necessity of an account of experimentalism that can accommodate enormous formal diversity. To explain these expectations further, I wish to turn to the aforementioned historical center of gravity, the early twentieth century, to examine what it meant to be experimental.

## >> EXPERIMENTALISM

At the turn of the twentieth century, written engagement with problems of knowledge and scientific knowledge took place in dialogue with the proliferation, consolidation, and institutionalization of new scientific domains, and with the reconfigurations of "method" that they both required and propagated.<sup>47</sup> A new popular understanding of the nature of science—as an animating force abstractable from its articulation in particular

acts or social settings—underwrote a conviction that all domains of experience could be improved by a renewed commitment to knowledge, and that “scientific” methods—whatever that meant—were the best way to enact that commitment.

Broad public assent to the abstraction of scientific method was a historical phenomenon that made it possible to construe new specific acts and discourses as experimental. Some of these practices, like psychology, would maintain an association with the experimental over the decades, while others, like Montessori education, would not. In none of the new domains of the late nineteenth century’s science boom was a single, standard “method” applied; rather, the abstraction of method—sometimes a radical abstraction to an experimental “spirit” or “sentiment”—opened experimentalism up to multifarious instantiation.

Though the notion of an abstractable method has (much-claimed) roots in Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum*, it became popular in the great age of popular science, the nineteenth century.<sup>48</sup> Aggressive efforts to promote and popularize science in the nineteenth century relied significantly on a rhetoric of “method.” As Richard Yeo, writing of British popularizers such as John Herschel, William Whewell, and the British Association for the Advancement of Science, has observed, “the distinction between the content and method of science has been a significant element in the cultural legitimization of the scientific enterprise.”<sup>49</sup> The centrality of method as a defining feature of scientificity, and of experimentalism in particular, is a historical and quite intentional phenomenon. “At various levels of debate,” Yeo continues,

scientific method was represented as *accessible*, *single*, and *transferable*. These three characterizations respectively claimed that the method of science could be understood and practised by a large number of people; that there was a single method common to all branches of science; and that this method could be extrapolated from natural science to other subjects.<sup>50</sup>

As John Rudolph has documented, such popularization efforts met with exceptional success in the United States, where the teaching of scientific experiment came to be seen as a pedagogical necessity.<sup>51</sup> As high school enrollments soared, the burdensome teaching of specific techniques gave way to what the Italian educator Maria Montessori, proposing her “experimental pedagogy,” called a “scientific spirit” residing in the “mind and heart.” Thus the entomologist Stephen Alfred Forbes argued in 1904 that “scientific method” was “not the mere use of tools of any sort, however complicated and valuable; not the manipulation of apparatus, or any form of mechanical operation on anything,” but rather a “*mental method*, and the study of this method is a study of the action of the scientific mind while engaged in the pursuit of scientific truth.”<sup>52</sup> This popular understanding of “the scientific method” came to be codified in and widely propagated by the philosopher and educator John Dewey’s description of a five-step scientific reasoning process in his 1910 textbook for teachers, *How We Think*.<sup>53</sup>

The abstraction of method rendered science’s terrain—whatever “science” was—infinite, in principle. Thus in his widely read 1892 treatise *The Grammar of Science*, the influential statistician and eugenicist Karl Pearson asserted that “the field of science is

unlimited; its material is endless, every group of natural phenomena, every phase of social life, every stage of past or present development is material for science.”<sup>54</sup> Moreover, “every phase,” for Pearson, included aesthetic domains: aesthetic experience rested upon epistemological satisfaction:

Does not the beauty of the artist’s work lie for us in the accuracy with which his symbols resume innumerable facts of our past emotional experience? . . . If this account of the aesthetic judgment be at all a true one, the reader will have remarked how exactly parallel it is to the scientific judgment.<sup>55</sup>

Pearson argued, in other words, for an aesthetics of knowledge: knowledge was aesthetically satisfying, and aesthetic satisfaction depended on a work’s reliability as knowledge.

In the context of these rhetorics, experimental writing gained an air of desirability and, indeed, inevitability. For this is the rhetorical tack that Zola took in his polemical 1889 essay “The Experimental Novel.”<sup>56</sup> Borrowing from an 1865 work by the physiologist Claude Bernard—somewhat beyond Bernard’s own expectations or intentions—Zola represented the advent of an experimental literature as the natural extension of a progression that was already happening in the sciences, beginning with the canonically experimental sciences (the physical sciences) and extending thereafter to the sciences of life (such as Bernard’s experimental medicine), the new social sciences, and finally—triumphantly—the experimental novel.<sup>57</sup> “From that point, we move into the domain that, until now, belonged to philosophy and literature; it will be the sciences’ decisive conquest of the hypotheses of the philosophers and writers,” Zola wrote. “We have experimental chemistry and physics; we will have [Bernard’s] experimental physiology; still further on, we will have the experimental novel.”<sup>58</sup>

The new yet uncertain reach of scientific authority made experimentalism a status to which any knowledge-producing enterprise might aspire. Yet for precisely that reason, existing scientific practices were challenged to accommodate new and recalcitrant objects of study, and it was far from clear what an experimental medicine—much less an experimental novel—might look like in the decades when both came to seem profoundly desirable. These conditions pose a challenge to the expectation that what is experimental about experimental writing will be locatable at science’s most canonical sites: the well-established, the clearly (rather than marginally) experimental, the physical, the professional, the masculine, the safely non-pseudo.<sup>59</sup> On the contrary, what was generative for experimentalism seems to have been epistemological volatility, the need or desire for meaningful verification precisely where it was rendered inherently problematic by recalcitrant objects (such as “culture”) and historically pre- or unprofessional knowing subjects (such as women, servants, the “public,” people of color, amateurs, and, of course, poets).<sup>60</sup>

This is, I would suggest, the historical substrate of the many attempts to link experimental writing to experimental science—not a set of acts or methods, in the end, but a set of values. This has two important consequences. First, experimental writing’s ambivalent tether to the early twentieth century can be explained by the fact that the early twentieth

century is the historical period in which scientific knowledge most fully begins to assert itself as independent of historical period. Second, the early twentieth-century abstraction of method means that we should not seek experimentalism in “experiments” *per se*, but rather in the attachments and epistemological orientations that animate method, and the practices in which they are borne out, in what Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have called “epistemic virtues.”<sup>61</sup> For Daston and Galison, epistemic virtues capture the double epistemological-ethical function of scientific desiderata, most notably objectivity, in their 2007 book of the same name, but, as I explore elsewhere, others as well: flash, precision, and contact. Epistemic virtues are animating principles that serve to guarantee the validity of knowledge-production, and, in that role, have both epistemological and ethical valences. Thus, as Daston and Galison write, “Epistemic virtues are virtues properly so-called: they are norms that are internalized and enforced by appeal to ethical values, as well as to pragmatic efficacy in securing knowledge.”<sup>62</sup> Vigilance in a scientist, for example, means not missing anything (an epistemological good); it also means a certain kind of intellectual and bodily discipline in the scientist herself: the ability to stay awake, pay attention, notice details (an ethical good, in the Foucauldian sense of *ethos*). A clear articulation of contemporary experimental investment in epistemic virtues is Joan Retallack’s notion of the “poethical wager,” which explicitly names “the sciences” as a model for ethical poetic “swerves.”<sup>63</sup> But Hejinian’s notion of a poetics against “fraud” equally, if less overtly, collapses ethical and epistemological registers.<sup>64</sup> The centrality of epistemic virtues in the history of experimental writing helps to explain the ethical virtue so often attributed to experimental writing in the last few decades.<sup>65</sup> Importantly, those ethics are often assumed to align with other, socially generated ethical codes, but often do not, as we will see with Williams.

As Daston and Galison point out, epistemic virtues need not be consistent with one another; indeed, in many cases they compete. For example, “objectivity” and “contact” operate in ways that are nearly at odds: objectivity attempts, as much as possible, to

maintain a distinction between knowledge “itself” and the person who engages in knowledge-production, whereas contact cultivates knowledge by proximity, immersion, and participation. Yet both seek to guarantee knowledge. The potential for significant conflict between epistemic virtues reflects the tension between diverse knowledge-making practices and the consolidation of a unified notion of science. Single epistemic virtues (say, objectivity)

The expectation that virtues in general will be mutually compatible means that different epistemic virtues are often treated as being in agreement (these practices are all “scientific”) even when they are not.

can animate diverse methods; thus, for instance, prioritizing a spiritual disposition over specific methods allowed Montessori to assert the specificity of “the intimate relationship between the observer and the individual to be observed [i.e., between the teacher and the student]; a relationship which does not exist between the student of zoology or

botany and that form of nature which he studies.”<sup>66</sup> Epistemic virtues make it possible to understand diverse practices, including literary practices, as scientific. Moreover, the expectation that virtues in general will be mutually compatible means that different epistemic virtues are often treated as being in agreement (these practices are all “scientific”) even when they are not. Such elisions, already presupposed by constructing a unified science, allow us to understand writers as epistemologically and stylistically distinct as Pound and Stein as similarly exemplarily “experimental,” and thus help to explain the wide diversity of literary forms that can be understood as experimental.<sup>67</sup> Scientific and literary practices in the early twentieth century realized epistemic virtues in different ways, seeking not so much to perform experiments as to establish provisional yet robust modes of verification in places where they were by definition hard to come by.

#### >> CONTACT AND FIRST CONTACT

For the remainder of this essay, I wish to briefly examine one particular epistemic virtue, contact, as it appears in both Boasian anthropology and in the writing of William Carlos Williams. In 1921, W. C. Blum, writing in *The Dial*, ribbed Williams about “this modest quality of realness” about his poetry, “which he attributes to ‘contact’ with the good Jersey dirt.”<sup>68</sup> *The Dial* could joke about this because Williams was famously obsessed with the idea of “contact” as a principle of the local, in an instance of what Michael North, borrowing a line from Marianne Moore, has called “plain American.”<sup>69</sup> In the inaugural issue of his journal *Contact*, which he launched with Robert McAlmon in 1920, for instance, Williams called for an insistence on “the essential contact between words and the locality that breeds them, in this case America.”<sup>70</sup>

Around the same time, anthropology, the scientific study of culture, instituted fieldwork as its most cherished professional norm. Though there are many candidates for the “first” academic fieldworker—and the development of professional norms around fieldwork was gradual—the historian of anthropology George Stocking suggests that “the emergent ‘moment’ of the archetypal fieldworker is the decade or so following World War I.”<sup>71</sup> Fieldwork was experimental without doing experiments, and contact made this possible. “Those who went out from the university into the field in the 1920s,” Stocking argues,

were confident that they were doing ethnography in a different, more efficient, more reliable, more “scientific” way than the travellers, missionaries, and government officials whom they were pushing to the margins of the discipline. Expressed in the metaphor of the ethnographic field as a “laboratory,” in which a distinctive method was employed to test previously assumed comparative (or merely culturally traditional) generalizations about human behavior, this disciplinary self-image was projected with considerable success outward to the surrounding social sciences, and even beyond to the general intellectual and literate public.<sup>72</sup>

The metaphor of the laboratory produced contact with a locality as an epistemological guarantee: to know a culture was to go there. Ever since James Clifford opened *The*



*Predicament of Culture* with a reading of “To Elsie,” it has been almost a cliché to read Williams through anthropology, but unlike Clifford, I am not interested in reading Williams as a kind of fieldworker.<sup>73</sup> Rather, I am interested in the way that contact operates as an epistemic virtue across ethnographic and poetic practices. For what at first seems like a principle of pure simplicity, a dyadic relation of proximity between language and land, is soon revealed as highly temporally layered.

Contact emerged in Williams’s writings as a guarantor of knowledge within a poetics whose modernity was explicitly bound up in knowledge-production: “at the beginning of a movement,” he wrote in *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, “when a new form is set, the chief poems are created. It is not novelty, though of necessity the great must [be] the new, it is the increase of knowledge that is the deciding point.”<sup>74</sup> The language of beginnings, here, is as important as the language of knowledge-production: I wish to suggest that

Although it was sometimes expressed as a relation of pure simplicity, contact continually reenacts scenes of “discovery” that embody temporal and spatial tension. Contact is both perpetually new and a way of accessing a distant past; it is both “local” and defined by travel to a distant location.

contact operates as a principle of *discovery*, in its multiple valences as knowledge-production, as first contact (as in the “discovery” of the Americas), and as an origin story for a “plain American” literary form that favors metonymy (a relation, again, of contact) over metaphor. Although it was sometimes expressed as a relation of pure simplicity, contact continually reenacts scenes of “discovery” that embody temporal and spatial tension. Contact is both perpetually new and a way of accessing a distant past; it is both “local” and defined by travel to a distant location. Thus Williams’s *In the American Grain* (1925) stages

and restages the “discovery” of America, beginning with the earliest Viking settlements and moving through Columbus, Cortés, Ponce de León, de Soto, and so on, stretching into the mid-nineteenth century and producing a long and palimpsestic sequence of scenes of contact. Even American slavery is perversely staged as an episode of arrival and discovery: “these were just men of a certain mettle who came to America in ships, like the rest.”<sup>75</sup>

As Mary Louise Pratt has pointed out, ethnographic fieldwork in the early twentieth century conventionally defined itself against the “unscientific” contact of explorers, travel writers, and missionaries. At the same time, however, the narration of ethnographic contact has often recapitulated the literary tropes of narratives of first contact; thus, Pratt notes, Raymond Firth’s *We, the Tikopia* (1936) closely echoes what she calls “the classic Polynesian arrival scene . . . commonplace in the literature of the South Sea explorations of Cook, Bougainville and others in the 1760s and ’70s.”<sup>76</sup> As Pratt continues,

Firth reproduces in a remarkably straightforward way a utopian scene of first contact that acquired mythic status in the eighteenth century, and continues with us today in the popular

mythology of the South Sea paradise. . . . Far from being taken for a suspicious alien, the European visitor is welcomed as a messiah by a trusting populace ready to do his or her bidding.<sup>77</sup>

For Pratt, the persistence of literary tropes of first contact in classic ethnographies is a sign of the unscientific subjectivity that the professional fieldworker must live with (as part of the participant-observer method) but suppress in the writing of the monograph.<sup>78</sup> The legacies of colonialism, exoticist travel writing, and proselytization are to be disavowed, yet insofar as those legacies are disavowed, the fieldworker is constrained to represent ethnographic contact as *first* contact—first, in that preceding episodes of contact do not “count.” Pratt’s account helps to illuminate the dimension of constraint or disavowal in ethnographic contact of the 1920s and ’30s. Breaking with a prescientific legacy, professional fieldwork was forced to “make it new”—that is, make contact anew, make ethnographic contact into first contact, as if in ignorance or repudiation of preceding scenes of cultural interface.

This double move—the “making new” of ethnographic contact by a disavowal that cites the previous contact being disavowed—discloses the temporal complexity of ethnographic contact in the early twentieth century. This complexity does not, I wish to emphasize, disqualify or debunk contact as an epistemic virtue; on the contrary, it shows that contact is disciplinary and disciplining. In seeing for oneself, one also brackets that which one has not seen. Moreover, contact’s doubleness as always both original and repetition helps us to see why classical ethnography comports so well with what Rosalind Krauss has called the “modernist myth” of originality.<sup>79</sup>

#### >> BARBARISM AND PRIMITIVISM

That a “contact” with epistemological and aesthetic stakes is a feature of Williams’s poetics is hardly disputable; after all, Williams not only claimed it repeatedly but also named a journal *Contact*—twice.<sup>80</sup> Nor is it very controversial to suggest that anthropology, in its classical moment of professionalization, adopted contact (via fieldwork) as its primary epistemological guarantee. In order to draw out the explanatory power of contact as an epistemic virtue, I wish to show how it operates as part of one of Williams’s most troubling features, his frequent embrace of a violent primitivism. In doing so, I wish to put some pressure on the epistemic virtue in the sense that Daston and Galison propose, i.e., that it carries an ethical charge, as in Hejinian’s recuperation of “barbarism” as an epistemological and political commitment.<sup>81</sup> But as Williams’s uses of contact reveal, the epistemic virtue makes its mode of commitment to knowledge into a virtue rather than regulating knowledge according to any outside ethical norm.

“[O] meager times, so fat in everything imaginable! imagine the New World that rises to our windows,” Williams writes in his 1923 prose-verse hybrid *Spring and All*:

Tomorrow we the people of the United States are going to Europe armed to kill every man, woman and child in the area west of the Carpathian Mountains (also east) sparing none. Imagine the sensation it will cause. First we shall kill them and then they, us. But we are



careful to spare the Spanish bulls, the birds, rabbits, small deer and of course—the Russians. For the Russians we shall build a bridge from edge to edge of the Atlantic—having first been at pains to slaughter all Canadians and Mexicans on this side. Then, oh then, the great feature will take place.

Never mind; the great event may not exist, so there is no need to speak further of it. Kill! kill! the English, the Irish, the French, the Germans, the Italians and the rest: friends or enemies, it makes no difference, kill them all. The bridge is to be blown up when all Russia is upon it. . . .

This is something never before attempted. None to remain; nothing but the lower vertebrates, the mollusks, insects, and plants. Then at last will the world be made anew.<sup>82</sup>

From “New World” to “world . . . made anew,” the ironized fantasy of total destruction that Williams sets up early in *Spring and All* is framed in explicitly national terms, recapitulating the horrors of the Great War in euphoric language that cheerfully acknowledges the fantasized new world as “a perfect plagiarism,” as well as somehow genuinely new. “In fact now,” he writes ironically, “for the first time, everything IS new. Now at last the perfect effect is being witlessly discovered. The terms ‘veracity’ ‘actuality’ ‘real’ ‘natural’ ‘sincere’ are being discussed at length, every word in the discussion being evolved from an identical discussion which took place the day before yesterday.”<sup>83</sup> This “new world” is also a “New World,” a palimpsestic site of contact remade as first contact.

Williams’s version of the “new,” rooted in “‘veracity’ ‘actuality’ ‘real,’” likewise stakes an epistemological claim in its performance of contact, and in doing so enacts not only an experimental epistemic virtue but also a familiar trope of modernism.<sup>84</sup> Yet the violence on which it is predicated suggests something closer to a colloquial, and deeply colonial, sense of barbarism than to the literalized and recuperated version that Hejinian will later propose. As Michael Taussig puts it, the “convenient term of reference, ‘barbarism,’ does double service, registering horror and disgust at this application of power, while at the same time ratifying one of that power’s most essential images, that of the barbaric—the savage, the brute, and so forth. In condemning violence as savage, I endorse the very notion of the savage.”<sup>85</sup> For Taussig, it is this “very notion of the savage” that creates the conditions for colonial violence, insofar as it is a condition that is first projected, then *mimicked* in the form of genocide. Here, Williams fantasizes a universal violence among “civilized” (or “modern”) nations (the conditions of the Great War), but that very violence, locating its point of origin in a “New World,” mimics an imagined “savagery,” in what Taussig calls the “colonial mirror of production”: “the mimicry by the colonizer of the savagery imputed to the savage.”<sup>86</sup>

Modern warfare thus enacts the same primitivist temporality—what Johannes Fabian identified (in anthropology) as a “denial of coevalness,” or what Dipesh Chakrabarty has named “historicism”—that stages the repeated effacement and reinstatement of first contact.<sup>87</sup> It is in obedience to the same logic that Williams’s imagined destruction results in the recapitulation of a developmental sequence: “Through the orderly sequences of unmentionable time EVOLUTION HAS REPEATED ITSELF FROM THE

BEGINNING.”<sup>88</sup> The enabling violence of *Spring and All* provides the fresh canvas for art by making a “new world” of an already peopled one.

Unlike Language’s avowed “barbarism,” then, Williams’s enactment of contact is explicitly primitivist. For instance, when Williams re-launched *Contact* in 1932 (the new volume 1 thus restaging *Contact* as, so to speak, first *Contact*), he declared on the cover that “Contact will attempt to cut a trail through the American jungle without the use of a European compass.” This announced a program of discovery that peculiarly places the poet in the position of both discoverer and discovered, both native (“without the use of a European compass”) and colonizer (“to cut a trail through the American jungle”). There is no extricating contact from primitivism, and that primitivism is both aesthetic and epistemological. To effect contact with “the good Jersey dirt” and to speak “plain American” (“without the use of a European compass”) is to embrace a simplicity enabled only by a primitivism’s deep temporal complexity. Thus in the famous lines from the first poem in *Spring and All*, from which Paul Mariani quotes the title of his Williams biography, the fantasy of indigeneity again rests on a more complex citation of an effaced first contact:

They enter the new world naked,  
cold, uncertain of all  
save that they enter. All about them  
the cold, familiar wind—

Now the grass, tomorrow  
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf

One by one objects are defined—  
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of  
entrance—Still, the profound change  
has come upon them: rooted they  
grip down and begin to awaken<sup>89</sup>

The plants that grow “by the road to the contagious hospital” “enter the new world,” a citation of the American New World of only a few pages before, as if colonizing. Yet they also enter familiarly, where the wind is “familiar,” by being born into it, “naked.” The stepwise emergence of forms in the poem marks out a linear temporality that echoes the line of the road: “now,” “tomorrow,” “one by one.” This seriality of emergence shows the logic of contact at work, as one item follows as if organically from the next. Moreover, this orderly sequence suggests the possibility of pure elementary forms, observable as they emerge. Despite the book’s repeated announcements that “THE WORLD IS NEW,” this poem also declares its own disavowed precedents, not only Eliot’s “roots that clutch” but also the day-by-day emergence of forms in the book of Genesis. Both “rooted” and “grip[ping] down,” the plants are neither quite native nor invasive, but somehow both, offered in a “plain American” that is at the same time a linguistic discovery.<sup>90</sup> In this,

contact is the interface of what Anne Cheng has identified as modernism/primitivism's "second skin": "primitive" nudity, insofar as it is *worn* as modernist plain style, also serves as a form of "civilized" clothedness or (by the same stroke) "primitive" adornment.<sup>91</sup>

Despite key differences, then, the "barbarism" of *Spring and All* is also akin to the barbarism that Hejinian espouses in her essay, insofar as it relies on an epistemic virtue—contact—that aims to produce what Hejinian calls an "aesthetic discovery [that] is congruent with social discovery," not hermetically formal but *in contact with* a culture.<sup>92</sup> Both experimentalisms see linguistic alienness (in English!) as a site of "discovery," even if they operate on different terms, in different historical circumstances, and to different ends. This kinship thus also reveals how Language writing's tendency toward a temporality of simultaneity is a natural counterpart to contact's temporality of primitivism: whereas what is supposedly primitive is cast into pastness (as in Fabian's "denial of coevalness"), contemporaneity—as Williams's imagined killing spree suggests—is conferred by a relation of war. Importantly, the state-funded, early Cold War "culture at a distance" anthropology project headed by Margaret Mead, whose primary methodological challenge was the *impossibility* of the kind of contact called for in ethnographic fieldwork, was called the "Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures" group—contemporary, as opposed to primitive. The warrant for studying such cultures, as well as the necessity of studying them "at a distance," was war.<sup>93</sup>

Contact's palimpsests would thus take on new forms after 1945. As Mimi Thi Nguyen, writing of the aftermath of the Vietnam War, has pointed out, primitivist address was reconfigured as what she calls "the gift of freedom," something that is liberal empire's to bestow and which, following Jacques Derrida's theorization of the gift, always incurs an extended and unpayable debt. Importantly, the gift of freedom is typically bestowed through war, avowed or otherwise. If succeeding iterations of empire produce the other as temporally past, then the gift of freedom marks liberal empire's right "to set and speed up the timetable," as Nguyen puts it. Thus, she argues, "the invitation to coevality also imposes violence . . . through the intervention (a war, or development) that rescues history for those peoples stalled or suspended in time."<sup>94</sup>

Given these transformations and continuities, there is some historical irony in the way that Language writing sought a usable past in an experimental literature whose epistemological strength could counter the language-games of state violence. In particular, in addition to critical work that theorized and canonized American experimentalism, Language writers in the 1980s made their own attempts at contact, though not ethnographic, with one of the very cultures taken up by Mead's group at Columbia, that of Russia. These manifested in serious efforts of translation, collaboration with Soviet poets, and the visits to the Soviet Union that I mentioned at the beginning of this essay.

Like their anthropologist contemporaries whose "literary turn" led to the intensive self-scrutiny of *Writing Culture* and related work, Language writers sought to construe their own encounters with the Cold War "other" reflexively.<sup>95</sup> *Leningrad* is framed as a provisional, reflexive mini-ethnography; as Hejinian introduces the volume: "This collaboration is about that week, about juxtaposition, happenstance, double vision, vistas,

and a flow of observations and expectations kept in suspense.”<sup>96</sup> Hejinian opens the volume by presenting the encounter as one with knowledge at stake, writing, “I’ve been back since, but I don’t know any more.” Or, as Watten names the epistemological hope invested in contact: “there is a history of cultural figures that have developed from the Cold War for the dilemma of Us/Them, and these figures have left residual traces that must be renegotiated when faced with the real Soviet Union. To do so is to confront the fantasy and dread occasioned by such denial with *real knowledge*.”<sup>97</sup> Seeing for oneself—contact—is an epistemic virtue that dispels fantasy and state propaganda. Yet this is also an encounter in which knowledge is gathered by “juxtaposition, happenstance, double vision,” and, in “this collaboration,” through writing itself. Thus, in the book’s introductory section, all of the authors reflect on what the Russian avant-garde has meant to their poetics—famously, a great deal—and all of them introduce this engagement by historically situating it against Vietnam, the Cold War, or both.<sup>98</sup>

These gestures both self-historicize and, at the same time, repeatedly stage the authors’ awareness of at least some of the limitations entailed by their visit to the Soviet Union, deliberately effacing their authority in the process. Watten, for one, reflects on *Leningrad* as “a first moment in this as-yet-undetermined genre” of “accounts of the ‘opening’ of the Soviet Union,” a genre that he places in parallel with the “substantial literature—often written along romantic, nineteenth-century travel narrative lines—of the reencounter of China by the west in the 1970s.” Aiming to deflect any hint of a conquering Robinson Crusoe-like subject in this qualified first contact, Watten argues that the Soviet case “will necessitate other and more difficult figures for interpretation than those of a Third World-oriented neocolonialist fantasy.” Hejinian, likewise, qualifies her own relation to Russian literature and avows her own situatedness in an American literature “contextualized by the social and political life of the time.” “I myself,” she writes, “had a fantastic rather than a comprehensive relationship with the works of someone like Velimir Khlebnikov . . . because I had no Russian context for understanding the scale and intentions (and hence the meaning) of his work.”<sup>99</sup>

Such gestures suggest that Language’s investment in contact as an epistemic virtue is a critical one that imagines writers “inside as well as outside the histories of contact on which they follow,” as Pratt puts it.<sup>100</sup> The Cold War ethics of contact are already different from, even if also heir to, those of contact in the “classical” age of ethnography, the 1920s. Effacing authorial identity emerges here as a feature of the epistemic virtue of contact for the Language writers. Pratt describes how, in *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (1981), Mar-

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jorie Shostak produces an arrival scene that almost brutally renounces the production of ethnographic contact as first contact, her informants gushing about the last ethnographers who came through and the gifts of “Western commodities” that the ethnographers gave them. “It is an awful scene, a real return of the repressed,” Pratt writes, and for the authors of *Leningrad*, something like this renunciation is important enough to be staged repeatedly, both in the introduction and across the text.<sup>101</sup> As Davidson frames the doubleness of encounter, “the city is given to us as part of the collective unconscious of a generation growing up during the Cold War. By the time we step off the plane, we have, to some extent, already arrived.”<sup>102</sup>

The necessity of reflexivity is evident, in *Leningrad*, in the ways that the poetic language-game of experimentalism is severely tested by contact with Leningrad itself. Like Hejinian, Silliman writes of his fascination and identification with avant-gardist Russian poetry and scholarship, only to affirm the strain that the visit to Leningrad places on that identification. “When, in 1982, the first issue of *Poetics Journal* published Richard Sheldon’s translation of Shklovsky’s ‘Plotless Literature,’ I read it . . . as though the text were speaking of my own poetry directly,” Silliman writes, situating his visit in a history that includes both attachment and a dependence on translation. “This, however,” he adds, “is not the Marxism of which Leningrad poets speak, nor with which Russians have had to contend for more than seventy years.”<sup>103</sup> Many of the writers that the Language poets meet have distanced themselves from the Russian historical avant-garde, “largely because it is perceived by them, in the end, to have served the state,” as Watten puts it.<sup>104</sup> The Language poets’ Russian-derived aesthetic tools for resisting the totalizing logic of the Cold War have less utility in the actual Russia. This necessitates what Watten calls an “ethics of partial knowledge” made available, not quite by the Russian avant-garde, but by a contemporary rereading of it, “available if one cares to read it in that tradition of Russian literature inaugurated by Shklovsky.”<sup>105</sup> Responding to political necessity means reinterpreting the historical avant-garde’s legacy—an act of “white recovery,” as I have suggested—in order to make its historically situated knowledge-production available to a new political situation. As Davidson puts it, “the [Russian] formalist generation’s aesthetic motivation becomes our generation’s critical goal.”<sup>106</sup> In *Leningrad*, this tension between the Language writers’ faith in the political purchase of their experimental poetics and their apprehension of their Soviet counterparts’ skepticism—both of which arise from a commitment to contact—is never resolved, only held in reflexive suspension.

In *Leningrad*, systematic repudiations of authorial identity, both uttered and performed, emerge as the mark of epistemic virtue in general and as a way of countering the state’s language game of agonistic alterity in particular. The book’s nonlinear coauthorship, Watten argues, “reinforce[s] the dilemma of the subject” generated by Cold War rhetorics that made identification with the Soviet “enemy” appear as the only alternative to total assent to state knowledge, as well as “comment[ing] on other more . . . authoritative ways of voicing the difference between our world and that of the Soviet Union.”<sup>107</sup> These literary strategies, what Davidson calls “art’s ability to intervene *in*, not simply *on*, the rhetoric of power,” are thus proposed as the simultaneously epistemological and

political means of experimentalism.<sup>108</sup> Yet even if the methods are quite different, the experimentalism at work in this particular articulation of Language poetics also looks startlingly similar to some of the ideals of the defense strategists: an effort to eliminate subjective selfhood, even to counterintuitive ends, in order to arrive at a better account of reality. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Language poetry is just another version of Cold War defense strategy; they have very different ends. Rather, I wish to point out that both are engaged in the construction of subjectivity-effacing language-games aimed at the production of knowledge, and that they share key premises about what producing knowledge might entail.

Indeed, in their self-historicization, the Language writers concede this, pointing over and over to the structural inescapability of state rhetorics of global alterity. The “paranoid” simultaneity of this historical consciousness is evident in the authors’ recurring identification with a “generation” (with Silliman identifying himself, “like Arkadii Dragomoshchenko,” as “a ‘victory baby’ of the Second World War”).<sup>109</sup> In *Leningrad*, homogeneous, empty time becomes the commonality that structures experiences, and analyses, of alterity. One unintended but powerful consequence of the political purchase attributed to experimentalism is the already discussed tendency to treat the effacement of authorial subjectivity, understood as an epistemic virtue, as *more fundamentally political* than racially conscious work by writers of color.<sup>110</sup> We can see how this logic operates at the level of language, especially when epistemic virtues are at stake, as well as—in retrospect—that logic’s fragility, which it shared with the hermetic rationalities of state violence that were its cue and counterpart. Experimental writing—including its resistance to historicization—is a product of its (double) times, manifesting formally but signifying historically. Reading experimentalism historically allows us to appreciate the powerful scope of its intellectual and political ambitions as well as to apprehend—now that “innovation”

is unambiguously the byword of power—the ways in which its responsiveness to state violence was always in part a complicity.<sup>111</sup> This is a complicity in which all professional scholarship continues to share, universally but not at all trivially, because epistemic virtues have a history of being conflated with virtue in general. Indeed, I have not aimed in this essay to explain why experimental writing has not succeeded in thwarting state violence; this seems obvious at a time when state violence by way of police, permanent drone warfare, and the prison-industrial complex seem only to be on the rise. Rather, I’ve hoped to illuminate the context in which it seemed plausible that it might—a context that still has much to teach us about our changing hopes for literature.

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# Notes

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1 Editorial note to Marianne Moore, “Those Various Scalpels” and “In the Days of Prismatic Color.”

2 3-2-1 *Contact* aired on the Public Broadcasting Service from 1980–88.

3 Davidson et al., *Leningrad*, 8, 54.

4 On this self-historicization, see also Perelman et al., *The Grand Piano*.

5 Hejinian, “Barbarism,” 325–26. The Adorno line being referenced is “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” 35).

6 Altieri, “What Theory Can Learn from New Directions in Contemporary American Poetry,” 65; Hinton and Hogue, *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women’s Writing and Performance Poetics*.

7 In particular, although numerous critics have shown how writers like Edgar Allan Poe or William Wordsworth are not only indebted to scientific thought but have also convincingly demonstrated that debt’s manifestations in literary form, “experimental,” as it is commonly used, almost never refers to Poe or Wordsworth or to the forms that distinguish their

writing. See, e.g., Paul Grimstad, *Experience and Experimental Writing*; Noel Jackson, *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry*; and Robert Mitchell, *Experimental Life*. Moreover, romanticism is especially notable as the literary strain *against* which many self-identified experimental writers have explicitly, if not always entirely fairly, positioned themselves. For an incisive discussion of this experimental rejection of romanticism, see Gillian White, *Lyric Shame*, 5, 217–19.

8 Stephens, “What Do We Mean by ‘Literary Experimentalism?’,” 146.

9 Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 39.

10 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 24–26. Contra Language’s stated aesthetic affiliations, Anderson identifies this temporality as essentially novelistic, perhaps explaining why Language’s version of national simultaneity is experienced in “paranoid” rather than naturalized terms.

11 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 303–4.

12 Perelman et al., *The Grand Piano*, 2:45.

13 Indeed, acausality, in the refusal of the syllogism, is a central principle of what Silliman theorized as “the new sentence” (Silliman, *The New Sentence*, 79).

14 Perelman et al., *The Grand Piano*, 2:21–22; emphasis added.

15 On paranoia as a Cold War phenomenon, see Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*.

16 Silliman will go on to deflate this question with the observation that “Only knowledge could find the [Lyn Hejinian’s missing] luggage” (Davidson et al., *Leningrad*, 42, 48).

17 Ibid., 27–28.

18 Erickson et al., *How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind: The Strange Career of Cold War Rationality*. Ruth Benedict was another formative influence on



the Study of Culture at a Distance project, but died only one year after its predecessor, the Research in Contemporary Cultures project, had begun. Métraux, “The Study of Culture at a Distance,” 367, 370.

19 Shapin and Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, 22.

20 Even in discussing experiment in a romantic context, Rob Mitchell will borrow Wittgenstein’s concomitant term, the “form of life” (Mitchell, *Experimental Life*, 4).

21 Cohn, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals,” 687–88.

22 Ibid., 711–12.

23 Erickson et al., *How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind*, 2.

24 Cohn, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals,” 714–15. Cohn writes that “the issues of language have now become somewhat less vivid and central to me. Some of the questions raised by the experiences described here remain important, while others have faded and been superseded by new questions” (715). Yet as noted above, this bracketing of the importance of language seems to be in the service of emphasizing the *form of life* that the language-game makes or makes possible.

25 Ibid., 715.

26 Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*, 2.

27 Hejinian, “Barbarism,” 325.

28 Ibid., 323–24.

29 Silliman et al., “Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry,” 268.

30 Hejinian, “Barbarism,” 322.

31 Laughlin, *Spearhead: 10 Years’ Experimental Writing in America*, 10.

32 Díaz, *The Experimenters*, 3.

33 Epstein, “Verse vs. Verse,” 48. See also Gillian White’s discussion of some of the ways in which Language’s acceptance by academia shaped critical discourse in *Lyric Shame*, 216–17. Google Books Ngram Viewer, though by no means a definitive corpus, shows a clear upward swing around 1970 on the search terms “experimental writing, experimental literature, experimental poetry, experimental fiction.” One confounding variable here is that, especially in the 1930s, “experimental writing” is often used to describe writing associated with lab experiments—the writing of lab reports and scientific papers, etc.

34 Language-affiliated writers’ canonizing work included both criticism about the experimental canon and editions of earlier experimental writers’ work. For criticism, see e.g., Bernstein, “Stein’s Identity”; Hejinian, “Two Stein Talks”; Perelman, *The Trouble with Genius*; Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, 15; Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*; Watten, *The Constructivist Moment*; Davidson et al., “Reading Stein.” Two notable editions, among several, are Stein, *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, edited and introduced by Joan Retallack; and Zukofsky, *Selected Poems*, edited by Charles Bernstein for the explicitly canonizing Library of America series.

35 Other historicizations of the experimental include Drucker, “Experimental Writing (or Poetry Lab)”; Stephens, “What Do We Mean by ‘Literary Experimentalism?’”; Viegner, “Experimental Writing: Negation or Potentiality?”

36 Pound, “How to Read,” 17; Viegner, “Experimental Writing: Negation or Potentiality?,” 73; Zola, *Le roman expérimental*; Hejinian, “Two Stein Talks,” 87.

37 Alder, “The History of Science as Oxymoron,” 89.

38 For example, Wallace Stevens is conventionally read as “high modernist,” but rarely as “experimental.”



- 39 Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists*, 139, 147, 157. On Language's tendency to appropriate minoritarian discourses, see especially Timothy Yu, "Ron Silliman: The Ethnicization of the Avant-Garde," in *Race and the Avant-Garde*, 38–72.
- 40 Wang, *Thinking Its Presence*, 32; Mullen, "Poetry and Identity," 31. A frequently cited example of this assumption appears in Silliman, "Poetry and the Politics of the Subject," 63.
- 41 Wang, *Thinking Its Presence*, 32; Mullen, "Poetry and Identity," 28.
- 42 Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing*, 217n15.
- 43 Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, 12.
- 44 Heim, "Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde." Some examples of this scholarship include Gladman and Singleton, "Expanding the Repertoire: Continuity and Change in African-American Writing"; Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement*; Moten, *In the Break*; Reed, *Freedom Time*; Shockley, *Renegade Poetics*; Wang, *Thinking Its Presence*; Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde*.
- 45 Wang, critiquing this expectation of formal disjuncture, explicitly identifies it as "High Modernist," again suggesting affinities with the early twentieth century (*Thinking Its Presence*, 119).
- 46 As Mitchell puts it, the term "experimental" is often "less denotation than approbation" (*Experimental Life*, 15). Like Mitchell, I wish to avoid this fallacy; additionally, I will hope to at least partially explain it.
- 47 See, for example, M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*; Noel Jackson, *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry*; Joanna Picciotto, *Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England*.
- 48 Rudolph, "Epistemology for the Masses," 345.
- 49 Yeo, "Scientific Method and the Rhetoric of Science in Britain, 1830–1917," 259, 262. Such characterizations looked back to Baconian induction as an intellectual resource, including the suggestion that a single inductive method could be equally applied to political and moral problems.
- 50 Ibid., 262.
- 51 Rudolph, "Epistemology for the Masses," 346.
- 52 Forbes, "The Teaching of the Scientific Method," 880–81, quoted in Rudolph, "Epistemology for the Masses," 365–66.
- 53 Rudolph, "Epistemology for the Masses," 366.
- 54 Pearson, *The Grammar of Science*, 12.
- 55 Ibid., 35.
- 56 Zola's essays should not be taken as reliable indicators of his thought, of course. The Goncourt brothers, in particular, reported in their journal that Zola himself disclaimed his theoretical writings as "just so much charlatanism to puff my books." Puff his books they did, however, in the process becoming one of the most famous early statements on literary experimentalism (Edmond de Goncourt and Jules de Goncourt, *Pages from the Goncourt Journal*, 229).
- 57 Bernard, *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*.
- 58 Zola, "Le roman expérimental," 34; my translation.
- 59 There is a significant literature placing modernist writing in particular in relation to the work of established scientists, usually scientists still recognized as such today (not having become "pseudo" in the intervening period), often physical scientists, and almost always professional scientists. See for example Daniel Albright, *Quantum Poetics*; Ian Bell, *Critic as Scientist*; Steven Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation*. On the hypercanonicity of the physical sciences, see e.g., Ernst Mayr's observation, "I must have some six or seven volumes on my shelves which claim to deal with

the ‘philosophy of science’ but all of them actually deal only with the physical sciences” (Mayr, *The Growth of Biological Thought*, 32–33).

60 On the epistemological vitality of popular and less canonical science at the turn of the twentieth century, see Katherine Pandora, “Popular Science in National and Transnational Perspective.”

61 Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 39.

62 Ibid., 40.

63 Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 3.

64 Hejinian, “Barbarism,” 325.

65 Joan Retallack’s *The Poethical Wager* is perhaps the most fully elaborated version of such claims.

66 Montessori, *The Montessori Method*, 12. Montessori’s work was known in the United States, both through the 1912 translation of *The Montessori Method* and through a 1911 series of features in *McClure’s Magazine*.

67 A proper accounting of these distinctions would be well beyond the scope of this essay, but to name a few obvious differences: Pound embraces visuality (“phanopoeia”) and incorporates historical materials into his poems, while Stein evokes the visual only to frustrate it (Melanctha’s “pale yellow” is not actually a color, but rather a racial category) and rarely alludes to historical materials.

68 Blum, “American Letter,” 566, quoted in Green, “*The Comedian as the Letter C*, Carlos, and *Contact*,” 263.

69 North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 127.

70 Williams, “Further Announcement,” 10.

71 Stocking, “The Ethnographic Sensibility of the 1920s and the Dualism of the Anthropological Tradition,” 281. As the literature covered in this essay suggests, the designation of “first” is by its nature vexed.

See Annette Kolodny, *In Search of First Contact*, chapter 6, “The Phantom of First Contact,” 256–79.

72 Stocking, “The Ethnographic Sensibility of the 1920s and the Dualism of the Anthropological Tradition,” 281.

73 Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 6.

74 Williams, *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, 75.

75 Williams, *In the American Grain*, 208.

76 Pratt, “Fieldwork in Common Places,” 35.

77 Ibid., 36.

78 Ibid., 44.

79 See Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*.

80 Williams cofounded *Contact* with Robert McAlmon in 1920, allowed it to lapse in 1924, and renewed it in 1932 with McAlmon and Nathanael West as associate editors.

81 For an almost entirely orthogonal approach to “barbarism,” see Wang, *Thinking Its Presence*, 118–19. Wang reads irony and barbarism as conjoined modes, in *resistance* to (white) experimental poetic conventions, and to Language conventions in particular.

82 Williams, *Spring and All*, 4–6.

83 Ibid., 9.

84 As Fredric Jameson has argued, realism is always an epistemological claim disguised as an aesthetic one, though Jameson sees these two impulses as ultimately incompatible and mutually destructive. See Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, 217.

85 Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 65.

86 Taussig will add that this dialectical dynamic is “identical to the mimetic structure of attribution and counter-attribution that Horkheimer and Adorno

single out when they discuss . . . the blow-up within modern European civilization itself, as orchestrated by anti-Semitism" (ibid., 66).

87 Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 30; Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 7.

88 Williams, *Spring and All*, 8. While Williams dubs this "evolution," the fact that it repeats in a "perfect plagiarism" subordinates the element of contingency in Darwinian evolution and aligns this temporality with a more deterministic developmentalism.

89 Ibid., 12; Mariani, *William Carlos Williams*.

90 Williams, *Spring and All*, 13.

91 Cheng, *Second Skin*.

92 Hejinian, "Barbarism," 322.

93 Métraux, "The Study of Culture at a Distance," 363.

94 Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*, 17.

95 Significantly, I think—significantly because they, too, were engaged in a renegotiation of an early twentieth-century legacy of knowledge-production—the Writing Culture anthropologists, and especially George Marcus, also used the language of "experimental writing" to describe their work. See, e.g., Marcus and Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*; Marcus, "Experimental Forms for the Expression of Norms in the Ethnography of the Contemporary"; Marcus, "Ethnography Two Decades after Writing Culture."

96 Davidson et al., *Leningrad*, 7–8.

97 Ibid., 24; my emphasis.

98 Davidson et al., *Leningrad*, 2, 10, 17, 21. On the Dragomoshchenko–Hejinian collaborations, see especially chapters 2 and 3 of Edmond, *A Common Strangeness*.

99 Davidson et al., *Leningrad*, 22–23, 2–3.

100 Pratt, "Fieldwork in Common Places," 49.

101 Ibid., 44.

102 Davidson et al., *Leningrad*, 17. Hejinian had, of course, already visited in 1983.

103 Ibid., 12.

104 Ibid., 29.

105 Ibid., 28.

106 Ibid., 21.

107 Ibid., 26.

108 Ibid., 21.

109 Ibid., 10. Davidson similarly places himself in a "generation growing up during the Cold War" (17); Watten ambivalently writes that "it is hard to give up the universality of one's account of oneself as having been formed by the circumstances of birth in a particular time and place, the American 1950s and 1960s" (21).

110 Wang, *Thinking Its Presence*, 32.

111 On this complicity, see Hejinian, "En Face."

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