

*Edited by*  
Robin Silbergleid &  
Kristina Quynn

Reading  
& Writing  
Experimental  
Texts

*Critical  
Innovations*



# Reading and Writing Experimental Texts

Robin Silbergleid · Kristina Quynn  
Editors

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Critical Innovations

palgrave  
macmillan

*Editors*

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ISBN 978-3-319-58361-7      ISBN 978-3-319-58362-4 (eBook)  
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58362-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017943481

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature  
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG  
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*for our friend "A"*  
*and all those scholars who feel isolated and who*  
*long for innovative critical conversations*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would not have come about without the intellectual friendships and collaborations that have supported our innovative critical work. We would like to thank Judith Roof, who gave us both permission and, perhaps more importantly, encouragement to take intellectual risks and to take seriously the possibilities afforded by critical play. We also want to thank Melissa Fore, who endured many conversations about the status of this project, for her friendship and support. We thank each of our contributors, for vibrant discussion on the page and off. May this be merely the first of many joint endeavors.

This work was also made possible by the support of Michigan State University's HARP and CAL-URI research grants, and by Halli Beauprey, for her questions and her eye. And by the reliable care of Eastminster Child Development Center, which made writing while mothering possible.

Material from *The WunderCabinet* in Chap. 6 appears courtesy of Barbara Hodgson, Claudia Cohen, and Heavenly Monkey. Thanks, too, to the Special Collections at Michigan State University libraries, where this material is housed.

The professional support of colleagues and programs is matched by our intellectually savvy and delightfully playful families, Hayden, Hannah, Sydney, Spencer, and Bill. Here's to apple picking, inspiring conversations, and long-distance group hugs.

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## Contributors

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# LIST OF FIGURES

**“In the Soul of the Sidereal World” Mining Barbara  
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PART I

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## Critical Contexts

# Critical Play: An Introduction

*Kristina Quynn and Robin Silbergleid*

This project began, as so many do, as a series of casual conversations between friends and colleagues, in which we talked about the state of criticism in the twenty-first century and bemoaned the lack of innovative scholarship that we felt the writers we most deeply engaged deserved. Scholarship that is embodied and intimate, infused with passion and wonder, awestruck and ethical all at once. Scholarship that takes real intellectual, aesthetic, personal, and even political risks. Scholarship that meets innovative texts on their own terms. It wasn't just that we wanted to write differently—although we did, and do—but that we felt that doing work on the texts we so love—books by Carole Maso, Kristjana Gunnars, Kathy Acker, Lidia Yuknavitch, Marguerite Duras, to name a few—seemed to warrant or invite or demand a different approach from the one most literary critics used and prescribed.

We kept talking, sharing models of innovative criticism, working through different histories and critical contexts. These conversations, held in coffee

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shops and over the phone and email, transformed into shared Dropbox documents and dialogic essays moving back and forth across the page and the country, and, eventually, a call for papers, a gathering of like-minded writers, and the beginnings of a book. Given the centrality of conversation to our process, coupled with a distrust of the argumentative forms of academic work so often modeled in monographs and even edited collections, we have scripted this introduction as a “critical play,” one that details the process, difficulties, and happy accidents of putting this work together, which is, in the end, all that an introduction can ever really do.

## CHARACTERS

**K:** *a junior scholar*

**R:** *a more senior scholar*

## ACT I. BACKGROUND/BEGINNINGS

*Scene: College-town café, a teahouse called Wanderer’s. The tables are wooden and scarred from years of service, or new and industrial restaurant standard issue, or low-to-the-ground heavy 1980s style, flanked by cozy leather library chairs. Sitting on two of the wooden, metal, or leather chairs—chairs don’t really matter—are two women talking. About children, mothers, siblings, friends, academe, writing, criticism, theory, close reading, conferences, French feminism, Carole Maso, Kristjana Gunnars, Virginia Woolf, graduate school, committee work, job market, tenure drama. Sometimes they share a scone or brownie on a plate. They fix ponytails and tap pens. They smile and laugh.*

*This is work. This is personal. The conversation is critical.*

**K:** So...since we last talked, I’ve been on a tear looking for models of creative criticism—and I don’t remember what rabbit hole I had gone down, but I came across Oscar Wilde’s “Critic as Artist”—do you know it?

**R:** [*shaking her head*] No, I don’t think so.

**K:** You have *got* to read it. It’s this wild (ha!) conversation between Gilbert and Earnest—a Platonic dialogue but set in later-nineteenth-century London. Full of wordplay that is so charmingly Wilde.

And yet, here’s what I think is the takeaway for us: according to Wilde, criticism and literature are interwoven, not separate, forms. Even better,



he stages his argument as a play—a dialogue between two friends. The “Critic as Artist” is clever and presents a piece of criticism on criticism as an artistic piece—delightfully performative. Useful, I think.

R: Absolutely—I’ll add it to the list.

K: Yes, check it out. Good fun.

[*K pauses and takes a sip of her tea.*]

But this is what I really wanted to talk to you about. You know A in the grad program?

R: Yes, of course. Haven’t seen her in a while. I feel like she’s at that point, midway through the diss. process when doctoral students seem to disappear.

K: Exactly. I bumped into her on my way across campus just now, and we started talking. She was telling me about the troubles she’s having, working with modernist women’s writing, specifically Woolf and Stein. She said the very process of writing her chapters seems to undo everything Woolf’s and Stein’s work does. So I recommended “Critic as Artist” to her as a delightful read and potential critical model. Happy to pass it along.

And, just like you are looking at me now, her eyes lit up and we started having an animated conversation about new ways she might rearrange her chapters according to alphabets and objects...

Then she stopped, took a deep breath, and sighed, “My committee would never allow me to play about like that.” She went from enthusiastic to resigned so quickly, I swear, I caught my breath. All I could do was give her a big hug. Then I said a quick “bye” so I might get here to meet you. I actually wonder if she will finish the dissertation.

R: That’s really awful. She’s absolutely brilliant.

[*Here, a long pause while R. pours another cup of tea from the small pot and gathers her thoughts.*]

This is the fundamental difficulty in doing innovative work, I think. Work that transgresses and crosses disciplinary boundaries, even within English departments. I know of too many students in similar situations.

I know we've talked about this before, but really, how many times in my career I have been grateful to those who let me take risks?

K: I know some of what you're doing now, obviously. Was that true even when you were a student?

R: Yeah, luckily. I remember talking to a professor as I applied to graduate school, recognizing that I had to *choose*. MFA in writing or PhD in literature. But I lucked into a program set up to accommodate both, which I did, moving back and forth between writing poetry for workshop and criticism on contemporary "experimental" fiction in my lit courses. And now, on the other side of things—tenured, how is that even possible?!—still shuttling between.

[*R pauses, looks thoughtfully into the cup she holds.*]

But I know I was lucky. Other writers, not so much. What about our mutual friend B who was clobbered in her comps and dropped out? That is the other possibility, yes? And perhaps that's why the word *anxiety* has so often come up in our conversations. The real material risks involved in the production of this hybrid scholarship—not being taken seriously as a scholar, not finding a publisher, not graduating, not being reappointed or getting tenure.

K: I know, I know. Like you, I lucked into working with a few supportive professors. But even then, writing my dissertation on figures of mobility in contemporary women's experimental writing, I waged my own critical rebellion. Remember that? Instead of summarizing Anne Enright's non-linear novel *What Are You Like?* and Ali Smith's equally complex novel *Like*, I produced a kind of "anti-summary." That started the ball rolling, but up to that point I had felt stuck, and even then it took a while to work through the process in a way that seemed accurate...careful. That sort of writing was so new to me.

[*K pauses, smiles at R. R looks up from her tea.*]

And, you know, that final chapter, the experimental, "holographic" one aligned with Nicole Brossard's *Picture Theory*, I wouldn't have ventured it without J's guidance or your intellectual encouragement. Friendship, too. I am ever grateful.

R: Thank you. That means a lot. Support is important; however, I am still struggling to finish this book on Maso, you know? Not because I am anxious about it, per se, but because intellectually, aesthetically, I haven't yet figured out how to do her books justice. I keep saying that if I did a "straight" monograph I would have finished it a long time ago; I'm not really joking. Innovative criticism is hard work—to make it engaged and text- (rather than self-) centered. To find the right mode of discourse for each chapter. What's that quote from Stephen Benson and Clare Connors again? "While creative criticism can be playful—and while we, too, play a little in our introduction—the stakes are high."<sup>1</sup>

It came way too close for me. [*She shakes her head.*] Essentially, you know, I went up for tenure twice. Instead of being read as *both* critic and writer, the administration read me as neither and had trouble finding the "right" reviewers for my file. If you don't fit neatly into the traditional-dissertation-turned-traditional-monograph box, they don't know what to do with you. Now I feel like I need to pay it forward.

[*R clasps her hands and leans forward, somewhat conspiratorially.*]

Really. What do you think? We can create a professionally recognized space for such critical play.

[*K leans forward, nodding in agreement, her posture aligned with R's.*]

K: Let's do it! Let's put it "out there" that we need a safe space for alternative critical work.

What about us writing something together? An essay? A conference panel? We could see who else would like to play critically.

\*

## CRITICAL INTERMISSION

As this play-ful introduction performs, we have struggled (productively) to explore the contours of innovative criticism and, in this way, come to define it. What we're attempting seems both obvious and necessary, and yet inherently disruptive to pedagogical, disciplinary, and publishing models that continue to pervade the corporate university. What is at stake in the production of literary criticism that looks otherwise? Indeed,

is this project literary criticism, or creative writing? Why does the answer to that question continue to matter?

On a practical level, many of the essays included in this volume might be understood as “creative” or “literary nonfiction,” which is now commonly taught as a “fourth genre” in many creative writing programs. Such writing is often conceived as nonfiction prose that makes use of the literary elements of fiction and poetry, ranging from the very intimate approach of memoir to personal essay and research-based literary journalism, such as Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*. Significantly, creative nonfiction developed as an academic discipline at the same historical moment (broadly conceived) that personal or autobiographical criticism developed on the “scholarly” side of English departments, in the 1980s and 1990s. However, considering the troubled relationship between “scholars” and “creative writers” in many institutional contexts, and given our major focus here on the text rather than the experiences of the writer, we’d like to maintain the distinction between creative and critical work. Indeed, the director of graduate studies at the program Robin attended once described her as having “duel” degrees (MFA in poetry and PhD in literature); what was probably a simple typo is an instructive slip. In too many departments, scholars and writers take oppositional rather than collaborative stances. In too many publication venues, writing is seen as either/or, rather than both/and. What happens when you work in the spaces between?

Written by literary scholars on literary texts, our collection *Reading and Writing Experimental Texts: Critical Innovations* is intended to be read as criticism—that is, to advance, interrogate, and contribute to literary studies as a field of inquiry. Although our modes are creative, our focus remains centrally on the text being discussed, not the production of original work. Not surprisingly, however, many of the submissions (and ultimately contributors) to this volume publish on both sides of the academic divide, as do many of the writers/thinkers we take as models. Yet, as the innovative critical pieces and accompanying “anti-abstracts” testify, such work is not without real risk. The impetus for this volume, then, is twofold: (1) the firm belief that current critical models fail to adequately account for the work of “experimental” writers who work against or between genres, and (2) the understanding that when such intimate, aligned, and responsible work is undertaken on these writers, it has historically lacked a clearly delineated, supportive market. This collection is a humble beginning in addressing these issues.

(Readers can find additional details on the “Creative Nonfiction and the Academic Divide” in accompanying PLAYBILL, a “Who’s Who” and “What’s What” informing this *Critical Play*.)

## ACT II. RESEARCH/READING

*Scene: About a year has passed. The women sit at desks on opposite sides of the stage space—one left, one right. They are typing on laptops. They face each other. The center of the stage is empty but for a large projection screen. Books by and about Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, Jane Gallop, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous—the books that have led these women here—surround R and K as they sit at their respective desks. R sits with her infant son. His swing sits to the side of her desk. R rocks it gently to keep him quiet. At K’s feet are U-Haul boxes she uses like an ottoman, feet propped up as she writes. R is wrapping up maternity leave, K has moved cross-country. They have decided to put an essay collection together. They have laid the groundwork—a panel on “Critical Experiments” at the Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900, one on “Reading as Interplay” at M/MLA—and conducted subsequent research into modes of performative and innovative criticism.*

*After a moment, an email is projected on the screen; a voice-over reading of the email exchange in each women’s voice soon follows.*

From: R

Sent: Thursday, August 15, 20\*\* 10:34 AM

To: K

Subject: Search for Performative Criticism

I keep going back to the library, looking for something I must have missed, doing the same looping searches on electronic resources. It’s the same handful of books and articles: Jane Tompkins and the Duke folks and 1980s reader response theory, the feminist criticism that was so important to me as an undergrad and through grad school—Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s *The Pink Guitar*, Elizabeth Meese’s *(Sem)Erotics*, that Marianna Torgovnick piece on “Experimental Criticism” (I think that was from *ADE*, yes?), the work that Diane Freedman did in *Intimate Critique*, as a collection of autobiographically-driven criticism.

Really, the only recent thing is that Gerry Brenner book on *Performative Criticism*. I have to say, I am so grateful for it, and yet want it to do much more than it does; this, of course, is an argument for the production of our own volume. For him, performative criticism is aligned closely with performance in a dramatic sense. I think, too, of other creative modes and approaches, ones that are “performative” in a traditional Austin-and-Searle way: that they enact what they describe.

Hope unpacking is going swiftly and smoothly.... Remember a mirror broken is just a mirror broken.

Miss you and our Tuesday teas! Hi to kiddo and the partner.

R

From: K

Sent: Thursday, August 15, 20\*\* 2:45 PM

To: R

Subject: Re: Search for Performative Criticism

Yes, Brenner's *Performative Criticism* reminds me that literary criticism, as a genre and practice, can be wonderfully playful and encouraging. YET... when I think of literary criticism as a scholarly discipline—with its professional and publishing imperatives—his work remains conventional, privileging distance in the critic's relationship to a text of study and, dare I say, "his" own writing practice and style... Reminds me: I came across a collection of creative/critical writing *Chloroform* from SUNY Buffalo Press in the mid-90s. I was perusing the books-to-share table on campus, and there it was!! Free! It's creative writers writing on critical topics but not quite textually engaged or Austin-and-Searle performative in the way we've been looking for—perhaps more akin to Brenner's work. Still, how lucky a find is that? I'll see if I can find a copy for you.

Hugs to you and kids,

K

From: R

Sent: Friday, August 16, 20\*\* 9:38 AM

To: K

Subject: Re: Search for Performative Criticism

Great! I'd love to see a copy of *Chloroform*. I think, too, about other work done at Buffalo—their *Poetics of Criticism*, for instance. It's perfect, yes? And still true, twenty years later. Yet how hard did we have to hunt to find these pieces—happenstance, in the end, that we came upon them—even with access to major research libraries?

Let's see what else we can dig up in the next couple of weeks...

R

From: K

Sent: Tuesday, August 20, 20\*\* 1:13 PM

To: R

Subject: Re: Search for Performative Criticism

I couldn't find even a call number for *Chloroform* when I did a quick search on ILL to see how it's classified in Library of Congress Subjects. It's actually not "classified." Or is that "classifiable"? Either way it slips through.

K

### CRITICAL INTERMISSION

As suggested above, *Reading and Writing Experimental Texts: Critical Innovations* contributes to a conversation happening in small ways in myriad contexts by both so-called creative writers and literary critics. Beginning with work in the late 1980s and 1990s, pieces such as Rachel DuPlessis's *The Pink Guitar*, Elizabeth Meese's (*Sem*)*Erotics*, and Juliana Spahr's *Spiderwasp* provide innovative approaches to literary response that combine attention to language with a scholarly urgency. J.C. Hallman's anthology *The Story About the Story: Great Writers Explore Great Literature* brings together pieces by writers talking about literature, largely in personal ways. Book-length works such as Carole Maso's *Break Every Rule*, Kristjana Gunnars's *The Rose Garden*, and, most recently, Maureen McLane's *My Poets* similarly offer creative readings of literary texts. Of all these models, Gerry Brenner's 2004 collection *Performative Criticism: Experiments in Reader Response* most closely aligns with our project, in its exploration of alternative approaches; inviting future critics to "venture into composing better and quite different examples of performative criticism," Brenner reminds us that "there is pleasure in the task and challenge to make literary criticism an eventful experience."<sup>2</sup>

Yet partly due to its hybrid approach, innovative criticism easily slips through the cracks of traditional library searches. Some of the most exciting work has been published by small presses, or is essentially self-published, making it difficult to locate. We'd thus like to highlight the (somewhat unwieldy, at more than 300 pages!) tome *A Poetics of Criticism*, published in 1994, by writers from the SUNY Buffalo program. We cannot state any better this central quote from their introduction,

and find it still applicable a critical generation later: “Although the rise of cultural studies in the late eighties and early nineties teased at allowing a new articulation of criticism within the academy, not much has changed in terms of the possible forms of criticism [. . .] At the very least, contemporary literary culture needs to recognize other forms of writing as critical and to grant them some measure of authority in literary institutions.”<sup>3</sup>

This project accepts the challenge posed by these earlier scholars. We only hope to do them justice, to situate innovative criticism more squarely in ongoing disciplinary conversations and, ultimately, to make it more readily accessible to a broader audience of contemporary readers, writers, and scholars. (It should not be so difficult to find these books!)

(Readers and audience members can find additional details “On History of Experimental Criticism” in accompanying PLAYBILL)

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From: K

Sent: Thursday, August 22, 20\*\* 2:29 PM

To: R

Subject: Re: Search for Performative Criticism

I agree. I’m trying to get the pulse of what’s out there on new modes of criticism, and while there’s little that seems to be doing what we have been increasingly talking about as performative or enacted criticism—criticism that in some way takes its cues from the particular text it engages—there is a broader conversation happening about the nature of literary criticism, for sure. I’m thinking for example of the &Now Festival, which is dedicated to offering a space for creative and critical writers, professors, and publishers who are interested in “the possibilities of form and the limits of language and other literary modes” to share their experimentations and projects.” Also, there’s that Lindsey Waters’s piece on “Literary Aesthetics—The Very Idea” and Bruno Latour’s essay “Why Has Criticism Run Out of Steam?” And, think of the title of that recent issue of *English Language Notes*: “After Critique.” Together they raise questions like: Has literary criticism gone post-theory? Is criticism in literary studies and the humanities undone and in crisis?

This is turning out to be both depressing and full of potential, dare I say, critically exciting?!

K

(Readers and audience members can find additional details “On &Now Festival” and “On the ‘Crisis’ in the Humanities” in accompanying PLAYBILL)



From: R  
 Sent: Monday, August 26, 20\*\* 9:07 AM  
 To: K  
 Subject: Re: Search for Performative Criticism

Yes. What work is there for the literary scholar if we are “post”? I wish there was better language to talk about all this. Lidia Yuknavitch has a great quote on this problem in her *Chronology of Water*: “‘Experimental’ sounds dumb, and ‘Innovative’ sounds strangely snooty.”<sup>4</sup> She prefers “weird.” I’d say “engaged” or “performative” or “affective.” All these terms feel inadequate. Yet we need something capacious enough to cover a range of these sorts of projects. In the end, perhaps “critical innovations” is the best we can do. I like thinking of the double meaning of “critical”—that this is imperative, necessary work—and also criticism in a disciplinary sense. But we need to think more clearly about what that means, not making “traditional” scholarship into some kind of straw-man argument. It has its place, after all. Indeed, it got us both here. Innovative work should not be oppositional to literary criticism but a legitimate means of doing critical practice.

R

From: K  
 Sent: Monday, August 26, 20\*\* 2:36 PM  
 To: R  
 Subject: Re: Search for Performative Criticism

I wonder if what we’re talking about and keep running up against here is a need to reframe the “text” and to theorize something like “the textual fallacy”? We keep moving through questions of textual engagement and the dynamic simultaneity of critical reading and textual meaning. It’s a kind of reader-centered impulse, but hopefully without the historical baggage of reader response theory. Something to chew on...

K

From: R  
 Sent: Tuesday, August 27, 20\*\* 10:14 AM  
 To: K  
 Subject: Re: Search for Performative Criticism

Yes, that’s exactly right. It’s a fallacy to think that an “objective” reading of the text is possible. That the text can exist in any kind of singular fashion. That a reading of a text could possibly exist without a reader. As

Maso says, “One thousand and one things change the meaning of a text on any given reading.” Why can’t we have a critical model that takes all that into consideration instead of pretending it doesn’t exist?

R

From: K

Sent: Friday, August 30, 20\*\* 3:14 PM

To: R

Subject: Re: Search for Performative Criticism

Love Maso’s take. She reminds me that critical, textual work is personal, particular, engaged, and often uncertain—attuned to a dynamic of intimacy, of exchange, and perhaps of vulnerability. I’ve drafted a copy of the CFP for *Critical Innovations* to send to UPenn. It’s attached. Feel free to edit.

K

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### CRITICAL INTERMISSION

Central to *Critical Innovations* is thus the simultaneous recognition of the centrality of the reader’s role in the production of meaning and the vitality and significance of close reading in the truest, most intimate sense. We recognize that each text invites, even requires, a distinct critical approach, that criticism is not one-size-fits-all. We recognize that so-called experimental texts might be discounted and left out of the conversation because we don’t yet have adequate—indeed, critically responsible—methods to talk about them. What can’t we say—really? What can’t we think—within the confines of dominant critical approaches?

In this regard, our project here picks up in some ways from the earlier “reader response theories” of the 1980s and 1990s. Such criticism, its champion Jane Tompkins suggests, operates in opposition to the affective fallacy notoriously outlined by Wimsatt and Beardsley; that is, the “effects” of a piece of writing on a reader, rather than being irrelevant, “are essential to any accurate description of its meaning, since that meaning has no effective existence outside of its realization in the mind of a reader.”<sup>5</sup> While we would suggest that the affective fallacy is still a useful critical caveat—the effects of a poem on a reader are not the same as an interpretation of it and should not be confused with it—there are times

that literature’s “effects” are critical in terms of discussion of a text, as in the work of Maso, Gunnars, and some of the other innovative writers we take up here. That is, against a purely formalist analysis, consideration of the reader—“authors’ attitudes toward their readers, the kinds of readers various texts seem to imply, the role actual readers play in the determination of literary meaning, the relation of reading conventions to textual interpretation”—is a vital part of literary study as we see it.<sup>6</sup> We particularly appreciate Michael Bérubé’s point that reader response criticism “serves especially well as a means of reading the avant-garde or experimental (‘norm-breaking’) narrative works of the past one hundred and fifty years.”<sup>7</sup> With a focus on the reader in mind, the questions that undergird literary study necessarily change: “If meaning is no longer a property of the text but a product of the reader’s activity the question to answer is not ‘what do poems mean?’ or even ‘what do poems do?’ but ‘how do readers make meaning?’”<sup>8</sup> Against a model of literary study that tries to become a science, one of the central tenets of this project is that criticism is not, cannot, be “objective.” Such work by Tompkins and others lays an important foundation for our project, which seeks to both theorize and model innovative criticism within the specific context of innovative, or genre-bending, literary texts. It is this context, we contend, that makes innovative scholarship *critical* to the study of literary texts. We thus feature here a group of essays that, as our friend and contributor Amy Nolan says, “write from the heart, from the guts.” Essays that are intimate and confessional, questioning of authority, unabashed. Provocative. Intelligent. Engaged.

(Readers and audience members can find additional details “On Reader Response Theory” in accompanying PLAYBILL.)

### ACT III. COLLECTING/EDITING/WRITING

*The stage remains split into two distinct scenes. K is stage left, R is stage right. K sits in an overstuffed chair. A laptop rests on the armrest to her right; a notebook and pen to her left. She dials R’s number and leans back comfortably. When the phone rings, R has her laptop open and file folders spread on the table. She gets up, walks around the house, straightening up as K talks. At first the conversation is personal—her daughter, her partner, the shift from full-time to adjunct employment—and always the conversation shifts. A pause and a turn. R goes back to the table, to the texts. They begin what they have come to think of as the work portion of the dialogue.*

R: Reading abstracts for pieces that are supposed to be on innovative work is such a strange thing, you know? Their overly formal, I-have-an-argument quality seems at odds with what they claim their experimental pieces will be doing. Some of these seem exactly on the mark: playful, personal, innovative, rigorous, text-centered all at once. But so much of what we were sent in response to the initial CFP seems to be about an innovative text *or* to take an innovative—largely autobiographical—approach. But rarely both at the same time, which is really what we wanted.

That is our “argument” after all—that innovative texts benefit from innovative critical practice. While there is no doubt that it might be instructive to discuss any text (including those we might call traditional, yes?) through performative means, it becomes *vital* to work on experimental (mostly, though not exclusively, those that are “postmodern”) in innovative ways. What can’t be said about Maso, Gunnars, and others because of the very critical models that have been privileged in the field? To write singular argument-driven essays on texts that refuse closure and require multiplicity. So while there might be other angles to consider—using experimental writing as an inventive pedagogical strategy, say—that’s really not the driving force of what we’ve imagined; that’s someone else’s project. A follow-up. A next step.

K: I know, and I have been pleased and amazed with the number of submissions we received from graduate students. I didn’t expect that. The trend as far as we mapped it before the CFP has been for scholars who are tenured and settled in their professions (with multiple book publications behind them) to be the risk-takers who finally branch out to experimental forms in their work. I am not sure how exactly to account for this, except to note that there’s clearly an interest for this type of work and not many publication venues to recognize it.

There’s something scary, risky to what we are proposing—a bucking of authority, a jumping ahead for junior scholars who have perhaps not proven their worthiness to writing outside-of-the-box yet.

R: You can’t be Picasso without knowing how to draw, right? But even this framing “proven their worthiness”... how easily we can get caught up in that language too. I think it’s imperative that we include work by students, by independent scholars, by adjuncts, precisely because they

don't have the institution, writ large, backing them. The haunting story that Melissa Hidalgo tells of being denied reappointment *for doing her job* is absolutely critical.

K: I agree. Drawing outside of the lines is deceptively easy and often appears to be something it is not. Its out-of-shape, informal characteristics also points to the ways we rely on the meshed institutions of academe and scholarly publishing as well as the conventions of traditional scholarship—distanced tone, persona of the authority or expert—to define and legitimize our acts of “criticism.” It's a risky thing to write an essay *otherwise*—a critical re-visioning that forces the reader to inquire further and that does not work to explain “meaning.” Both its content and its structure queries “who knows” and who has the right to interpret, to create meaning, and to write about or to speak out what a “text means.”

R: Yes, and in that vein, I think your piece on Gunnars engages exactly the kind of issues we're talking about. Engages them and *performs* them beautifully. And this essay, and the others we've talked about including, when they do their work, they do not avoid or obfuscate “critical thinking” or “intellectual rigor” but go about it in a different—a vital and exciting—way. While some of our contributors are “creative writers” it's important to me that they are scholars too—and I don't mean based on credentials—who has MFA, who has PhD—but on approach to the text. That this work is in the end about making these innovative primary texts better understood through innovative/experimental methods. Stephanie Glazier's work on Lidia Yuknavitch, for instance.

K: Agreed. Common to all of the pieces we've decided to include in the collection is a substantial engagement with the text and issues of textuality. So many of these essays take as their subject matter literary works that are themselves metafictional or self-conscious about their status as texts; that self-reflexiveness is instrumental in rethinking the practice of criticism itself. Right now, I am thinking of the submission from Judith Roof, Philomena Bradford, Melissa Bailar, and Aaren Pastor—it is a performance piece written for a literature and culture conference space and it gives “voice” to work of Duras, Brossard, and other writers of the self-reflexive mode. It performs the hybrid creative/critical moves those texts already do. I think new forms still require close reading and demand a studious, scholarly approach—only now the conventional elbow patches and tweed are optional!

R: I think too about how hard we looked to include different kinds of writers—big-name scholars, grad students, adjuncts, independent scholars, women and men, writers of color, etc.—and yet in the end what we have is almost exclusively women writers writing mostly about women writers. Is that something we need to account for? It was not a choice in any deliberate way, and yet where did this begin for us but thinking about feminist “experimental” writers? Perhaps that is not coincidental after all. After all, so much of feminist criticism, especially the poststructuralist sort, has to do with the recognition that specificity matters—Adrienne Rich’s argument in “The Politics of Location”—that there is no universal position from which to speak. So many of our contributors consider the body and the bodily, if not also broader, issues of identity and place. These are in many ways the questions raised by our feminist foremothers of the 1980s.

K: Ahhhh, even your word choice—“need to account for”—is interesting. Again, we so easily fall into the discourses that justify our profession and critical labor and writings. I do wonder if this were a collection of innovative criticism on Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, James Baldwin, or J.M. Coetzee if we would feel the need to account for all male contributors, for instance? It’s a tired line—I know—but we’re still not that many years out of such unfortunate controversies as what followed the publication of the *Field Day Anthology*, which included hardly any Irish women writers and included no Irish women critics or editors in its production.

In our case, the feminist or women-oriented concentration of the collection was unintended and unexpected, for sure. To be fair, we do include several essays that engage writing and art by men: Smorul’s piece on Mark Doty, the “Take 12” piece includes Samuel Beckett’s *Play*. And we did query male scholars who work primarily on male writing in experimental, performative ways—they either didn’t respond or weren’t interested. So while a nod to feminist criticism is undoubtedly important, I’m not sure we want to take the risk of essentialism here—to suggest, for example, that innovative criticism is somehow equivalent to “*l’écriture féminine*.” I’m not sure what that affords us, though I am also reluctant to ignore the coincidence. More of a correlation than a causation in a strict sense.

R: Yes, I think I know what you mean. And yet to play “devil’s advocate” here, it seems more than merely coincidental that the collection returns, insistently, to the work of feminist critics who pushed us to think