***Experimental: American Literature and the Aesthetics of Knowledge.* Natalia Cecire. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019. Pp. 293 (cloth).**

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The "Coda" to Natalia Cecire's recent study describes the practice of "experimental poetry criticism bingo," playfully suggesting that critical accounts of texts deemed "experimental" sometimes seem to fall back on a handful of generalizations: "the text foregrounds the materiality of language, it disrupts traditional syntax or traditional associations, it's self-canceling, it draws attention to language as a process," and so on (188). Cecire does not doubt that texts can exhibit these qualities; rather, she is pointing to the relative lack of explanatory power "experimental" has when it is applied to literature. As someone who has made liberal use of these and other generalizations, I can recommend Cecire's book for its theoretically sophisticated elaboration of how the term "experimental" has been used in twentieth-century literary criticism, and for its insights into why this term is often singularly unhelpful.

Part of Cecire's argument is that treating "experimental" as a formalist category elides the term's historical character, adding that when critics appeal to an "experimental tradition" they are participating in a particular version of literary history. Specifically, Cecire says that the meaning of "experimental" in literary criticism has been powerfully shaped by Language poetry: "Out of the 1970s, a concerted and largely successful rewriting of twentieth-century literary history" took place, canonizing a "continuous 'experimental tradition' running from Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and imagism through Objectivism [to] Black Mountain and the New York School." Such a rewriting "sought out the features of modernism best suited to serve as antecedents to post-Vietnam concerns" (6-8). This may overstate how much the diverse group of individuals referred to as the Language poets had in common poetically or politically, as Alex Houen suggests in *Powers of Possibility: Experimental American Writing since the 1960s* (2011). Nonetheless, understanding "experimental" as part of a constructed lineage is valuable because it explains why, for its seeming capaciousness, this term has come to be most associated with some writers and canons and not others.

Cecire's insistence that "experimental writing" has a "periodizable" trajectory leads her back to modernism, with the bulk of the book being an argument about

why modernism's engagement with scientific knowledge practices should be considered central to its discursive history (3). "Experimental writing as we now understand it does not *do experiments* (follow a method) but rather *performs epistemic virtues*" (23, emphasis in original), the latter defined as a "set of principles by which knowledge can be secured" at a given historical moment (73). Cecire identifies flash, objectivity, precision, and contact as the epistemic virtues shared by literary modernism and the social and biological sciences of the same period. "Flash" describes the ability to represent information partially but comprehensively, associated with Pound's "luminous detail," Stephen Crane's war sketches, Jacob Riis's flash-powder photography, and *fin-de-siècle* US Census visualizations. Cecire associates objectivity with Gertrude Stein's earliest fiction, as shaped by her training at the Harvard Psychological Laboratory between 1893 and 1897. Precision is explored as a defining feature of Marianne Moore's poetry, in relation to the practice of holotyping in natural history. Finally, Cecire reads William Carlos Williams's "contactual poetics" in light of the rise of fieldwork anthropology and the theme of first contact in Ursula Le Guin's science fiction (168). Cecire's uncommonly wide-ranging study concludes with an analysis of Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) and a call for criticism to investigate alternatives to experimentalism's historically "white poetics" (34).

What I most enjoyed in Cecire's book were its contributions to "that tired old study called aesthetics," as Fredric Jameson memorably put it in his dust-jacket praise for Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012). Cecire's subtitle is *American Literature and the Aesthetics of Knowledge*, and her appeal to aesthetics enables a better understanding of "why 'experimental' means 'good,' when it does mean good (which it often does)" (viii). Frank Sibley long ago explained that there is no inherent reason why any term should be positively valenced when applied to art, and that determinations of value (such as what counts as "good") can only be supported by the exercise of taste. Cecire agrees that there are no general criteria capable of determining whether an artwork is "good," but at the same time she would oppose any appeal to taste as ideological. Cecire proposes that "experimental" has often meant "good" in literary criticism because of its association with "good" in other discourses of modernity, namely, epistemological goodness, particularly in the knowledge-securing practices of the sciences, and political goodness, for example in Language poetry's reconstitution of an oppositional modernism after the Vietnam War.

An endnote to the Marianne Moore chapter suggests that a worthwhile project would be to treat literary criticism as a history of epistemic virtues and vices, the latter especially: "The history of literary criticism is filled with accusations of epistemic vices: being 'ahistorical,' being 'positivist,' etc." (229, n. 67). In regard to Cecire's book, some readers may find the book's conceptual expansiveness a vice, or its thoroughness wearying (forty-seven pages of endnotes are included), but these are minor complaints about what is a pleasingly polemical example of contemporary literary criticism.