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Author(s): Jonathan P. Eburne and Andrew Epstein

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INTRODUCTION: POETRY GAMES

Jonathan P. Eburne and Andrew Epstein

A hundred years ago, the French avant-garde poet Blaise Cendrars proclaimed that “la poésie est en jeu.”¹ Although the line declares that “poetry is at stake,” Cendrars also suggests a poem is a kind of game (“jeu”), a form of play. The idea that poetry and play are intimately connected has a very long history, but this linkage moves to the forefront during the twentieth century, as the use of word games, constraints, chance methods, generative processes, performative projects, collaborative writing, hoaxes, and other project-based or playful compositional practices become central tools for a wide range of avant-garde writers and artists. What is at stake in such practices, in such ludic approaches to poetic composition, and why are they so much with us today?

Indeed, such “poetry games” seem to be everywhere in recent years. The notion of poetry as a game or project—in which the writer devises an idea, concept, or set of procedures or practices that help generate the work—has become central to contemporary poetry. Such is the case not only for poets associated with self-styled experimental movements, such as conceptual poetry and Flarf, but also for a broad range of poets across the field as a whole. Although many of these poets and movements often brandish avant-garde credentials, they also draw from a repertoire of formal techniques that often seem at odds with the radical aesthetic and political claims of avant-gardism: prescribed logics, algorithmic sequences, crypto-positivist language-games, and alphanumerical code. The technological horizon for what we might call “ludopoetics” is, on the one hand, digital: “with the rise of the Web, writing has met its photography,” writes Kenneth Goldsmith in his preface to Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing.² Digital technology has, in other words, both satisfied and exhausted the demands of the print medium, charging contemporary writing with new
tasks, and new responsibilities, in order to sustain the art form. By this logic, its experimentalism is technologically mandated as well as digitally mediated. On the other hand, though, procedural poetry also calls to mind a long history of experimental composition whose priorities are less digital than logical, analog, mechanical, or participatory: its “technological” interfaces extend from anagrams and acrostics to parlor games and collective or even unconscious composition strategies. Bearing in mind both sets of historical conditions, the articles in this special issue explore the recent flowering of project-oriented and procedural poetics in twentieth- and twenty-first-century writing across a range of time periods, traditions, movements, and linguistic traditions: they examine some of the forces driving this trend, analyze some of its most important and exemplary works, and investigate its far-reaching implications, both for poetry and for cultural production as a whole.

Despite its ubiquity throughout the history of the genre, the idea of poetry as play is far from the only, or even the dominant, way poetry has traditionally been defined and conceived, especially in the period since romanticism. In fact, ludopoesis stands in opposition to a deeply ingrained set of attitudes about the way poems are created, disseminated, and read: first, that poetry is the fruit of powerful inspiration (often of divine origin and provided by the muse). Second, that poetry is the creation of an individual genius of extraordinary sensitivity and insight and linguistic gifts, even if the poems themselves are documentary or testimonial in nature. And third, that it is a genre of the highest seriousness and moral purpose, usually opposed to frivolity and triviality except in its most vernacular incarnations: poetry for children, light verse, occasional rhymes, song lyrics. In contrast, the idea of ludopoesis or poetry-as-play insists that poetic inspiration and language can be generated by various procedures, arbitrary constraints, and artificial means, or even by chance. Far from issuing Athena-like from the brain of a solitary genius, moreover, poetry can grow out of collaboration, competition, and social exchange, or through the interaction of a writer with other sources, by means of the appropriation and recycling of existing materials. The work of poetic creation, in this light, extends to the curatorial: the work of sorting, filtering, and arranging. Needless to say, this view requires a dramatic rethinking of the nature of originality, authorship, and creativity, insofar as it calls for a constructivist, rather than expressivist, model of poetry. To view poetry as a form of play thus means that poetry need not be somber or treated with the utmost reverence, but can be born out of and produce the kind of pleasure, mirth, delight, and inconsequentiality we associate with the playing of games. Proponents of this outlook tend to feel, as Gertrude Stein does, that “in the midst of writing there is merriment.”

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This does not mean, however, that all poetry games revert to frivolity. In fact, the articles in this special issue explore the profound ethical and political resonances of ludopoetics, as well as their formal and epistemological effects. From the first, the playful methods of poetry games have often been directed toward serious ends. For example, the formal calculations and numerical sequences that mark the history of procedural poetry, with its volvelles, acrostics, and geomancy patterns, bear the aspirational charge of innumerable folk beliefs and mystical traditions, from Kabbalistic and Sufi poetry to the enigmatic Chiffren of Georg Trakl and the Aztec-inspired poetry wheels of Octavio Paz. In search of—or in place of—divine inspiration, such poetic systems might be said to calculate whatever mystical or metaphysical properties they seek according to structured laws of order or chance which, in turn, bear out revelatory implications only through a secondary, divinatory, process of interpretation. Extending through the varieties of metaphysical poetry of the Reformation, and well into the Enlightenment, such mystical forms of impersonal calculation find their complement in the parlor games and collective experiments of the romantic poets and symbolists alike, reaching their modern peak in the experimental sound systems of Futurism and the spiritually charged transreason of Velimir Khlebnikov's Zaum. During the mid-1920s, the surrealists devised their well-known parlor game of cadavre exquis (exquisite corpse), the collaborative formation of composite sentences, during a period of intensive political commitment. The post-Holocaust collage work of Herta Müller, or the hollowed-out formal language of Paul Celan suggest, too, that such procedural “games” often bear the full weight of historical erasure and loss, in addition to the capacity for transcendence and joy.

The purpose, the affective range, and the historical contingency of poetic play are as elastic as the poetic medium itself. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, one of the foundational theorists on the cultural function and meaning of play and games, would concur. In his landmark study Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Human Culture (1938) Huizinga declares that “all poetry is born of play” and argues that “poesis, in fact, is a play-function.” From its origins, Huizinga contends, poetry has been an inherently ludic form: “Poetry, in its original culture-making capacity, is born in and as play—sacred play, no doubt, but always, even in its sanctity, verging on gay abandon, mirth and jollity” (122). Huizinga offers this general definition of play:

It is an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules, freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility. The play-mood is one of
rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exhaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow. (132)

This explanation of play is closely linked—in fact nearly identical—to Huizinga’s conception of poetry: “Now it can hardly be denied that these qualities are also proper to poetic creation. In fact, the definition of play we have just given might serve as a definition of poetry” (132).

Surely Huizinga is right to insist on a deep and abiding link between the poetic impulse and play. However, rather than limiting ourselves to his useful but incomplete definition of play, we use the phrase “poetry game” in this collection of articles to refer, broadly, to any poetic practice that stresses or exhibits the genre’s special, enduring relationship to the ludic. With a similar eye to the implicit yet “freely accepted” rules of play, Ludwig Wittgenstein modeled his ideas about the relational function of linguistic rules on the way children play games: that is, Sprachspiel (language games) demonstrate that language operates according to a set of immanent contextual conventions exercised during its use, rather than as an isolated essential capacity for referentiality. Contemporary with Wittgenstein’s language-games, the rise of game theory in applied mathematics after World War II sought similarly to codify a set of immanent rules within economic behavior; as epitomized by John von Neumann’s and Oskar Morgenstern’s 1953 Theory of Games and Economic Behavior, game theory defined “rational behavior” and rational choice in quantifiable terms, modeling as “games” the strategic procedures for total sets of variables and participants in any complex social problem. Game theory’s combinatorial mathematics for calculating rational strategic choice extends, in poetry games, to the virtual quantification of the “author function,” wherein the “rational” choices of the creative subject become quantifiable, programmable, even digital. Under the umbrella of “poetry games” fall a whole host of activities and strategies that poets have used to generate and inspire their work, including poetry as social game, contest, or collaborative exercise, poetry that relies on the appropriation and even theft of existing language and found materials, poetry derived from constraints, procedures, and chance operations, and poetry conceived of as an exploratory activity that can, in some cases, move beyond the page into the realm of the performative or experiential.

The special link between poetry and the ludic that Huizinga highlights can be traced as far back as the classical period, if not all the way to the earliest origins of verse itself. Ancient Greek poets, especially Alexandrian poets of the Hellenistic period, developed puzzle- and gamelike forms of
wordplay, including the acrostic and the abecedarian, and arranged their work on the basis of elaborate numerical patterns derived from numerology. Antiquity even saw the emergence of appropriation and collage as poetic tactics, with the development of the cento, a form that calls for poets to create collages of lines taken entirely from earlier poems: most famously, later Greek poets would often mine Homer for lines that would constitute new poems, and Roman poets would do the same with the works of Virgil.

The ancient Romans even used the words *ludere* (to play) and *ludus* (play, game) in connection with poetry, a link of special importance to the bold “neoteric” poets of the Roman Republic, such as Catullus, who emulated the playful spirit and tactics of Alexandrian poets like Callimachus. To take a well-known example, Catullus’s poem #50 recounts, with delight, the poetry games he had played the day before with his close friend and fellow poet, in which they had improvised and traded off lines of naughty verse for hours:

Hesterno, Licini, die otiosi
multum lusimus in meis tabellis,
ut convenerat esse delicatos:
scribens versiculos uterque nostrum
ludebat numero modo hoc modo illoc,
reddens mutua per iocum atque vinum.
Atque illinc abii tuo lepore
incensus, Licini, facetisique,
ut nec me miserum cibus iuvaret
nec somnus tegeret quiete ocellos

(Just yesterday, Licinius, at leisure,
we played around for hours with my tablets
writing erotic verse as we’d agreed to,
each of us taking turns at improvising
line after line in meter after meter,
adjuncts to wine & witty conversation.
And when I left you, I was so on fire
with all your brilliant & ironic humor
that after dinner I was still excited,
and sleep refused to touch my eyes with quiet)

Exuberantly declaring the deep pleasure to be found in treating poetry as play, Catullus testifies to the collaborative, social, and ludic nature of verse.
The fascination with poetry as a game and form of social exchange persists throughout the global evolution of poetry across a broad swath of cultures and traditions. Consider, for instance, the tradition of linked verse, or renga, in Japan, as well as the poetic contests and other games that flourished during the medieval period among French troubadours and Italian vernacular poets; especially notable is a form of playing-the-dozens called “flyting,” which was practiced in a number of European cultures, often in contests in which poets would trade insults and invective before an audience. Playful poetic practices abounded during the medieval period—whether in Chaucer writing an abecedarian, in Dante basing the Commedia on intricate numerological structures, or in the form of late medieval puys, or poetic competitions, in which a group of poets would take a poetic line and each would compete to write a better chanson, say, or ballade, using that line as either a starting point or a refrain.

Such proclivities thrived during the Renaissance as well. For example, the Rhétoriqueurs, a group of leading poets and intellectuals in Renaissance France, devoted themselves to composing anagram poems, abecedarians, and riddling puzzle forms like the “rime retrograde,” which calls for one to read lines forward and then backward, in order for the piece’s meanings to become evident. The emergence of macaronic verse written by poets like John Skelton (which mixed together multiple languages and indulged in bilingual wordplay) speaks to the ludic impulse’s presence in Renaissance Europe, as does the vogue for writing anagrammatic, palindromic, and shaped poems (as can be seen in the work of Giovanni Boccaccio, Clément Marot, George Herbert, Thomas Watson, Mary Fage, and John Donne). Pattern poetry and word games were all the rage in the Renaissance, leading to the emergence of forms like the rhopallic, where each word or line is longer than the previous one by a letter or syllable, as in Richard Crashaw’s “Wishes to His Supposed Mistress.” Baroque “difficulty” might be generalized, too, according to its fascination with games and gamelike procedures, from the labyrinths and perspectival inversions of Athanasius Kircher, Robert Fludd, and Andrew Marvell to the innumerable mysticisms of the Reformation. The intersections between poetic composition and occult traditions such as alchemy and Kabbalistic numerology fueled much of the experimental energy of the romantics and later symbolists, culminating, we might say, in the séance poetry of Yeats and Lady Gregory, as well as the work of the early surrealists.

With the dawning of the modernist avant-garde, the linkage between poetry and play came to be more explicitly pronounced, as such practices as collage, appropriation, and collaboration became absolutely central. In the
late nineteenth century, Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* (*A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*) initiated a deep fascination with the role of chance in poetic composition that would flower in the twentieth century, especially with the aleatory poetics of Dada and Surrealism, which saw the poet Tristan Tzara cutting up newspapers and drawing words and phrases out of a bag as a way of challenging authorial control and the primacy of the ego. The obsessively detailed objects and machines of Raymond Roussel’s writings, which he later revealed to be the textual product of pure wordplay in *Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres* (*How I Wrote Certain of My Books*), were inspirational to artists such as Marcel Duchamp, as well as to Guillaume Apollinaire and the surrealists, not to mention later generations of procedural poets, from the Oulipo group to John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch. The surrealists, too, celebrated chance encounters, advocated automatic writing, explored the possibilities of poetry writing as a collective game (as in the famous “exquisite corpse”), and developed countless other aleatory, experimental, and ludic methods for mining the unconscious and sidestepping the censorious ego. Particularly active on this front was the surrealist group of Bucharest, whose poet–artists, including Gherasim Luca, Dolfi Trost, and Gellu Naum, invented literally dozens of aleatory compositional methods and games.

Radical new strategies of appropriation and found language became central to anglophone modernist poetry, most famously in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, and the work of William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore. Gertrude Stein relished the materiality of language and took playful experimentation with sound and sense to a compositional extreme, and Joyce’s *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* are driven by intricate forms of linguistic play, punning, and multilingual wordplay. Langston Hughes structures the poems in *Ask Your Mama!* around the dozens, the African American vernacular game of traded insults, which later becomes a structuring motif in hip-hop. Louis Zukofsky radically subverted conventional methods of translation by exploring “homophonic translation” in his controversial rendering of Catullus (see Horáček, this issue), and John Cage notoriously introduced chance methods to the composition of music and poetry, including the flipping of coins to determine the pitch and ordering of notes.

The avant-garde “new American poetry” that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s was even more fully invested in the idea of poetry as play and game than were many of the strains of modernist compositional play that preceded it. Inspired in part by Cage, Jackson Mac Low employed chance operations (e.g., using dice or playing cards) to select words and phrases
for his poems as a means of avoiding the limitations of conscious authorial intention. The New York School of poets cherished collaboration of all sorts and saw it as essential component of art and of literary community. They also experimented with a wide range of playful, language-driven projects, including the appropriation of found language, homophonic translation, and the use of extreme constraints and chance operations: for example, Ashbery and Koch collaborated on a sestina in which every line had "to contain the name of a flower, a tree, a fruit, a game, a famous old lady, as well as the word ‘bathtub’"; in addition, "all the end-words are pieces of office furniture." Frank O’Hara wrote a rather nonsensical poem in French that was tacitly composed from idiomatic phrases he lifted out of a French–English dictionary and put together in alphabetical order.

The avant-garde movement known as Language poetry, which emerged in the wake of the new American poetry in the 1970s, was likewise committed to the use of elaborate procedural methods to generate poetry, as a means of avoiding conventional lyric subjectivity—especially by designing predetermined systems that involve the counting of sentences, repetition of units, and gradual expansion to structure poems. One of the most famous examples is Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life* (1980), an experimental long poem that plays with the conventions of autobiography both in its content and its form: in its first edition, the poem consisted of thirty-seven prose sections, each featuring thirty-seven sentences to correspond with Hejinian’s age when she wrote the book. Seven years later she expanded the work so that it consisted of forty-five sections, each one now forty-five sentences long, to correspond once more with her age. Another well-known example can be found in the ambitious procedural poetics of Ron Silliman—to compose his long prose poem *Tjanting* (1981), Silliman used the Fibonacci sequence (in which each number is found by adding together the two numbers before it—0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, etc.) to dictate how many sentences would appear in each paragraph of the poem. The resulting poem, which begins with very short paragraphs that quickly balloon to extreme lengths, can be seen as a descendant of the Renaissance rhopalic, with its ever-expanding form.

Perhaps the apotheosis of the post–World War II interest in writing as play can be found in the "Ouvroir de littérature potentielle," known as the Oulipo. This largely French movement was devoted to the idea that mathematical patterns and other constraints could be used to generate fresh and innovative literary works. In the 1963 essay "Potential Literature," Raymond Queneau declared that the Oulipo wished "to propose new ‘structures’ to writers, mathematical in nature, or to invent new artificial or mechanical procedures that will contribute to literary activity: props for inspiration as
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It were, or rather, in a way, aids for creativity."¹⁵ Some of the best-known procedures associated with the Oulipo include the game “n + 7,” which calls for a writer to take an existing piece of writing and replace each of the source text’s nouns with the noun appearing seven nouns away in the dictionary; another is the lipogram, an ancient constraint-based form resurrected by the Oulipo, in which the author must refrain from using one or more letters (usually a vowel). The most famous lipogrammatic work is Georges Perec’s novel La disparition (1969), a three-hundred-page book the author composed without using single “e” (translated, remarkably, into English by Gilbert Adair as A Void).¹⁶

The tactics pioneered by these earlier avant-garde movements seem pervasive today: from the machine aesthetics of Fluxus and Dada to the constraints of Oulipo; from the radical formalisms of imagists, Russian formalists, and minimalists to the collective practices of Surrealism and the proceduralism of conceptual art. The Fluxus movement’s “fusion of Spike Jones, Vaudeville, gag, children’s games and Duchamp” might be said to epitomize the “art–amusement” of contemporary poetry and visual art alike, whether positively or pejoratively.¹⁷ Indeed, discussions about the tactics and legacies of Dada and Duchamp, Guy Debord and the Situationists, Sol LeWitt and conceptualism, abound in contemporary poetry circles, as do terms such as the flaneur, the dérive, the readymade, détournement, psychogeography, collage, cannibalism, and appropriation. Furthermore, it is not hard to spot, in various corners of contemporary culture, signs of the historical avant-garde’s desire to trouble the boundaries between art and life, to identify art with acts, gestures, and performances, and to incorporate the material art object into the field of lived experience. In fact, we seem to find ourselves in an “age of the project”: a cultural moment that finds not only writers and artists, but also so-called ordinary people, engaging in a wide variety of experiments, often using new media and digital technologies, that establish strict conditions and rules, undertake a set of tasks or actions, and record, document, and circulate their results. Such project-oriented inclinations can be seen in phenomena such as the recent vogue for photo-a-day projects, which call for an individual to take a self-portrait each day for a particular length of time and then stitch the images together into a time-lapse video.

Within the world of poetry, this trend is most readily apparent in two self-styled avant-garde poetic movements that emerged in the late 1990s and have generated heated controversy and extensive discussion among poets and scholars of contemporary poetry over the past decade: “conceptual writing” (spearheaded by the energetic poet Kenneth Goldsmith) and “Flarf” (a movement that creates poems by collaging together found language
gathered from the Web), both of which can be seen as contemporary extensions of methods inaugurated by the historical avant-garde, but from the other side of the digital revolution.

Well beyond the confines of these two movements, however, a wide range of writers have recently embarked on an array of experiments driven by constraints, procedures, and predetermined rules: for example, writing a poem a day for a year (David Lehman), making a series of poems from what’s left when one erases large portions of the works of Emily Dickinson (Janet Holmes), writing a series of sixty-sentence works based on a set of sixty-minute walks in New York City, one sentence per minute (Andy Fitch), writing in a notebook for five minutes, every hour on the hour, for two days, and then publishing the transcript (Steve Benson), writing a long documentary prose poem that exhaustively lists the detritus found in Dumpsters and gutters along the Bowery in New York City (Brenda Coultas), hiring a private eye to follow you for a certain period of time, and then compiling the investigator’s notes about your daily activities into a “Conceptual Self-Portrait” (David Buuck), and so on. Even one of the most celebrated young novelists of our moment, Jonathan Safran Foer, recently published a “project” work of his own, in which he took a novel by Bruno Schulz and literally removed chunks of the text (carving into the page and leaving spaces where the omissions are), creating his own narrative by process of erasure.

Clearly such works grow out of, and respond to, the rich, long history we have sketched above, one that stretches from the poetry games and ludic forms of the distant past to their apotheosis in the modernist avant-garde, Dada, Surrealism, Situationism, Oulipo, Fluxus, conceptual art, the New York school, and Language poetry. As the range of examples indicates, it seems safe to say that in recent years a variety of tactics of linguistic and experiential play associated with the avant-garde have spread and even gone mainstream.

But why? Why has a fascination with literature as project, play, and conceptual game reemerged with such force right now? To what extent have particular historical, political, and material conditions encouraged the renewed exploration of such practices and strategies? Are poetry games merely reactions to new technologies and historical conditions for imaginative production, or do they display the creative, disruptive potential of project-based work? When poets fashion works out of language appropriated directly from contemporary culture, including its more debased corners, or when they employ various forms of what Judith Goldman refers to as
“radical mimesis” to present the inequities, deprivations, and absurdities of contemporary capitalist culture, are they successfully enacting a resistant or politically efficacious aesthetics or are such works best thought of as merely symptomatic of, or even complicit with, the systems they would critique?19

The papers in this special issue address these complex questions in various ways. Taken together, the contributions suggest that the recent resurgence of poetry as a form of play can be seen as a new, historically specific, and technologically driven response to contemporary culture—a reaction to a period of rapid and dislocating cultural, political, and social transformations. Although today’s poetry games belong on a continuum with the millennia of playful poetics traced above, an appropriative text that mines the Internet and uses the alphabet for structure, or a multilingual punning work by an Asian American poet writing in 2005, have a different purpose and cultural valence than, say, an ancient abecedarian or a Renaissance palindrome; such recent works respond in different, and quite distinctive, ways to the politics, culture, and art of their time. As suggested earlier, a number of the articles in this special issue insist that contemporary poetry games are far more than simply frivolous or playful for the sake of merriment alone. They argue that writers turn to conceptual and playful methods of composition because of their liberating potential, though not merely for the pleasures of aesthetic play but also for the purposes of cultural critique—as a method of resisting ideological forces, challenging conventional language use, and questioning and exposing political and social structures, including the workings of globalization, racism, and neoliberal capitalism. Such texts, these papers argue, can have a variety of effects—for example, some function as “philosophical toys that . . . dethron[e] . . . subjectivity” (Stefans), while others use “conceptual methods to ask what it means to have an identity, and to relate to people, in a transnational, increasingly digital, world” (Rettberg). As Tara Fickle puts it in her article included here, poetry games can demonstrate that “aesthetic play, broadly defined, might be one means of developing what Sedgwick has dubbed ‘reparative knowledge practices.’”

As this gathering of articles demonstrates, poetry games continue to use novel and memorable means to raise powerful questions about some of the most basic and enduring cultural and literary preoccupations. The issue is bookended by two comprehensive surveys of contemporary poetics; it begins with Rachel Galvin’s study of “poetic cannibalism,” which discusses the stakes and history of literary reuse in the poetry of the Americas, and closes with Brian Kim Stefans’s revisionist taxonomy of the “terrible
engines” of conceptual poetry, focusing on the philosophical possibilities of recent compositional strategies as mechanisms for generating new kinds of thought. The heart of this “Poetry Games” issue consists of four articles that substantively challenge the notions of “unoriginal genius” (Perloff) and “uncreative writing” (Goldsmith) that have come to dominate the critical vocabulary for approaching the gamelike strategies and impersonal procedures of contemporary poetics; they propose alternative histories, hermeneutics, and theoretical frameworks for assessing such work. All six articles argue, moreover, that despite the compelling suggestion that the Internet forms the historical condition for contemporary experimental poetry—a technological advent as revolutionary for literature as the rise of photography was for the visual arts—the study of poetry games reveals a variety of genealogies for “ludopoetics,” as well as a proliferation of aesthetic, political, and epistemological investments. Like the Internet itself, we might say, the history of poetry games is itself recombinatory and multiply determined.

Galvin’s article, “Poetry Is Theft,” outlines a compelling hemispheric body of modern and contemporary poetry that cites, rewrites, and names other poetry as a means for accreting and “digesting” cultural capital across geographical, temporal, and political divides. Tacitly rewriting Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters*, and focusing on the recombinatory poetics of the trans-American hemisphere, Galvin offers a new way of thinking about literary relation and appropriation that she calls “cultural cannibalism,” a model in which “later texts absorb, devour, or even radically re-author earlier works.” Galvin asserts that this radical, cannibalistic rewriting of literary tradition is inseparable from a “critique of sociohistorical matrices of power.” Works of cultural cannibalism, from the *Manifesto Antropófago* (Cannibal Manifesto) of Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade to the “poetics of relation” of Martiniquan poet Édouard Glissant, to recent work by Terrance Hayes, Olive Senior, Mónica de la Torre, M. NourbeSe Philip, and others, are deeply vested with the political intensity of decolonization. Plundering the resources of tradition, cutting up and radically remixing a wide variety of sources, these poets “imagine the cannibal as a figure of resistance to the colonial matrix of power, with its accompanying regime of language and capitalist consumption.” Indeed, the legacy of colonial encounter is as much part of the technological matrix of recombinatory poetics in the Americas, Galvin argues, as the Internet; in place of a critical tendency to valorize the selection and filtration of poetic data as the sphere of “unoriginal genius,” cannibal poetics at once dehierarchizes the original/copy distinction and evacuates the authenticity and epistemological priority of origins to which scholars of contemporary poetics often ascribe the author functions of conceptual writing.
The next article in the collection likewise approaches the poetic reuse of “readymade” language from the perspective of postcoloniality and transnationalism, in this case studying the effects of Google search-based composition strategies. Eric Rettberg’s paper focuses on Ara Shirinyan’s 2008 poem *Your Country Is Great: Afghanistan–Guyana*, which consists entirely of anonymous phrases gleaned from the Web about how “great” various countries are. Rettberg’s article thus moves into comic territory, grounded on the hypothetical landscape of imaginary travel made possible by the Internet. Here, the “poetics of relation” whose political history Galvin emphasizes becomes ironically foreclosed in the empty praise of found Internet tourist evaluation. As Rettberg argues, Shirinyan employs new technologies (cutting and pasting language directly from the Web’s vast archive) as a literary device in part to demonstrate that “the virtual world of digital culture can hold a revealing mirror to what it is to live in the real world today.” Examining the poetic residue of what Goldsmith has called the “deadening effects of globalization on language,” Rettberg insists that despite its reduction of living global cultures to the inanity and anti-cosmopolitanism of Internet-speak, Shirinyan’s book is a text meant to be read and enjoyed. Rettberg thus offers a broader argument about the humor of conceptual poetry and Flarf, and its effects and goals. *Your Country Is Great* stages imaginary cross-cultural encounters as a laughable dead end, its humor accentuating the demands and responsibilities of readers toward the knowability (or unknowability) of other countries in an increasingly globalized and digitally mediated world. Sidestepping the more obvious reading of Shirinyan’s book that would view it as a critique of the provinciality and close-mindedness of Internet commentary, Rettberg instead demonstrates how *Your Country is Great* impels readers to recognize both the poet’s and our own complicity in the forces of globalization and neocolonialism. By recycling Internet prose, Shirinyan provokes an uncomfortable laughter that opens up a kind of mise en abyme of cultural positioning between allegedly “ignorant” writers of anonymous Internet-speak, the neutral apparatus of its selection, and the allegedly knowing writer and readers of its poetic reformulation. It may be silly to claim to know Fiji from a banana milkshake or Aruba from a Marriott, Rettberg tells us, but it is likewise a bit presumptuous to claim to know Trinidad from a poem, or India from a novel. Rettberg’s study of the linguistic residue of “dead-end” cross-cultural encounters finds its polemical counterpart in Tara Fickle’s “English Before Engrish: Asian American Poetry’s Unruly Tongue” which studies how recent Asian American experimental poetry takes up the implicit or presumed hybridity of ethnic writing. Such poetry, she argues, plays on the lexical particularities and excesses of ethnic
“difference” as a way to induce “identity crises” of language that explode the flattening identitarianism of critical practices toward ethnic literature. Studying works by four contemporary poets working in “hybrid,” even pidginized, English—Jonathan Stalling, John Yau, Brian Kim Stefans, and Mark Nakada—Fickle’s article discusses how the Wittgensteinian poetics of negotiating standardized linguistic and poetic assumptions invites semantic excess rather than epistemic closure or racial overdetermination. Rather than embracing the “freeplay” of identitarian belonging as a fluid and indeterminate condition, in other words, the arrangements of poetic data in the work of these poets subject the logic of Asian Americanness to the formal logic of game theory, by which choice, freedom, and constraint are at once formalized and rendered legible for the sake of more “rational” decision making. Unlike other recent critics who view the turn to playful linguistic experimentation in contemporary Asian American poetry as an embrace of freeplay meant to “tell a story of fragmented or hybridized ethnic identity,” Fickle argues that this ludic impulse is driven by a desire to show “that what has been done should in fact be redone, rather than undone, in novel and unexpected ways.” As Fickle demonstrates, these experimental writers deploy a variety of “poetry games”—often involving translation, cross-racial encounter, and constraint-based play—in order to ventilate, as well as reimagine, rigid linguistic and cultural systems that tend to marginalize racialized identities and languages.

The next article in the collection zeroes in on a foundational case study of the kind of translational play Fickle discusses. Josef Horáček’s “Pedantry and Play: The Zukofsky Catullus” takes on Louis and Celia Zukofsky’s homophonous translation procedure in their Catullus (1969). Privileging the Zukofskys’ faithful attention to the “sound, rhythm, and syntax” of Catullus’s Latin verse over the Western tradition of literal and idiomatic translation, the Zukofsky Catullus inaugurates a poetic procedure that systematically attends to the synesthetic, “visceral” possibilities of homophonous play. The homophonic translation thus also dovetails with the Wittgensteinian turn away from linguistic referentiality toward immanent, if intuitive, sets of conventions whose functions play out analogously to the rules of play in childhood games. Yet as Horáček argues, the methodical character of the Zukofsky translation—in attending to the precise syntax and even definitions of Catullus’s Latin, as the manuscript of their work demonstrates—suggests a new form of “literalness” that maintains a referential relationship between Latin and English texts, on the order of the sensory: the musicality of spoken language and the interactive “surface” of wordplay and accidental meanings on the page. The Zukofsky Catullus is, as Horáček suggests, echoing Rettberg, a text of pleasure.
The penultimate article in the special issue, “The ABCs of Conceptual Writing” by Jacquelyn Ardam, situates the recourse to alphabetical sequences in recent conceptual writing within a larger history of alphabetical writing, in order to foreground the readability of—as well as the role of the reader in—such works. Asking what conceptual reading should look like, Ardam offers new ways to read the texts generated through gamelike compositional procedures of conceptual poetry, and thereby seeks, like Rettberg, to dislodge the recent critical fixation on the ersatz “genius” of its poetic curators (i.e., the “unoriginal geniuses” often reified by poet–critics) and the illegibility of conceptual works. Ardam discusses how the nonhierarchical sequence of the Roman alphabet privileges formal position over sequential meaning (“Z isn’t worth more than A is. It’s just further along”); in doing so, the poetic recourse to alphabetic systems for ordering poems poses basic epistemological questions about whether the alphabet constitutes a form or a medium for logical order, or whether such sequences demand a totalizing or atomistic view of literature. Focusing on Kenneth Goldsmith’s book-length poem No. 111, Ardam proposes that conceptual texts elude or exceed, in their very readability, not only the procedural constraints established by their authors, but also their critical and conceptual programs as well. In place of Goldsmith’s emphasis on skimming and nonreading, Ardam proposes a reading invoking the pleasure of alphabetical texts, and advocates what Mallarmé might call the elocutionary disappearance of conceptual authors as well: what does it mean, she asks, to attend to the poems themselves rather than merely observing the formal laws that govern their composition?

Proposing a critical taxonomy of its own, Brian Kim Stefans’s article distinguishes “speculative” (as opposed to “conceptual”) poetry as a new heuristic category or “dominant” for comprehending the epistemological and formal investments of certain tendencies in contemporary poetics. Bringing together representative works of procedural poetry with philosophical work by “speculative realists” such as Quentin Meillassoux, Stefans argues that the “terrible engines” of contemporary ludic writing—with their constraints, recursive principles, and recombinatory formal procedures—be considered as a medium for speculative thinking, or even for speculating about the impossible, unthinkable operations of contingency “beyond thought.” Stefans argues that one of the key features of this new “dominant” has been the sidelining of human subjectivity. Instead, in this body of work one finds both human “characters” and “authors” treated as objects among other objects; artworks, in turn, are more often composed out of found (or “dead”) materials, generated by machine, or multiply authored, instead of being the expressive product of an individual writer. Stefans contends that the “abandoned language” of such works can, once resurrected by the act of reading, enable “thinking”
to extend into the “unthinkable,” or what Meillassoux calls “the great outdoors,” beyond established categories of thought and language. Stefans, like Ardam, thus challenges Goldsmith’s claim that conceptual poetry solicits a “thinkership” rather than a readership, instead proposing that the kind of thinking demanded by poetry games surpasses merely “getting the point” of the poem’s compositional conceit.

Rather, as Stefans proposes, by flaunting and exploiting the centrality of chance in rule-based writing, and by challenging the idea of the author’s total control over a text, these new, ludic forms of writing lead us to the very limits of knowability and induce us to speculate about “what our present universe can’t allow.” Like the “terrible engines” of economic game theory themselves, contemporary poetics offers new systems for venturing into unknown territory, albeit an epistemological rather than economic form of speculation.

As a whole, the articles in “Poetry Games” argue that twentieth- and twenty-first-century poets draw on, and radically update, the long-standing idea of poetry as a form of play, in that the form continues to afford new opportunities for grappling with the contradictions, limitations, and possibilities of modernity itself. Some contemporary poetry games and conceptual projects use playful composition methods in order to challenge the effects of contemporary capitalism by ironically reproducing and parodying dominant ideologies, discourses, and social conditions. Some trumpet the liberating artistic or political potential of new media, while others expose how enmeshed we are in the very structures such artworks strive to critique. Rather than adopting the notion, familiar from Goldsmith and other recent practitioners and commentators, that the digital is merely the condition for contemporary poetics, the articles gathered here show how procedural poetics not only evolve in tandem with modern systems theory, cybernetics, and digital systems but also, in the language of pataphysics, comprise their imaginary solution as well.

Pennsylvania State University and Florida State University

Notes

INTRODUCTION


6. For more on theories of play, see, in addition to Huizinga, the seminal critique and extension of Huizinga in Roger Caillois’s Les Jeux et les hommes [Man, Play, and Games] (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001). For an extended discussion of play and the ludic in literature, specifically, see Warren Motte’s Playtexts (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995). Before arriving at his own conceptual framework for understanding “literary ludics,” Motte offers a detailed discussion of both Huizinga, and Caillois’s response to Huizinga: “Calling Homo Ludens a powerful and original work, Caillois nonetheless suggests that most of its affirmations are highly questionable and proceeds to challenge Huizinga on several fronts. He argues that Huizinga fails to classify and describe games, faults him for speaking of the spirit of play to the exclusion of games, and says moreover that, even within his limited compass, Huizinga examines only one sort of play, that of ordered competition, or again” (6).


8. See, for example, Jan Kwapisz, David Petrain, and Mikolaj Szymanski, The Muse at Play: Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2009).

9. Eyben’s Restless Youth in Ancient Rome (London: Routledge, 1993) notes that “the Ancients used the verb ‘ludere’ to refer to writing poetry. Poetry is for them ‘only’ a game, but this does not exclude the game’s being played in deadly earnest” (187). Michèle Lowrie notes that “poetic play (ludus, ludere, saeum, etc.) denotes two related things: stylistic elegance of the Alexandrian variety and erotic poetry.” See Horace’s Narrative Odes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 41.


11. In addition to Higgins’s Pattern Poetry, see Robin Raybould’s Introduction to the Symbolic Literature of the Renaissance (Victoria: Trafford Books, 2005), especially the sections “Poetry and Rhetoric” and “Figure Poems.”


14. For more, see Marjorie Perloff, Radical Artifice (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and David Huntsperger, Procedural Form in Postmodern American Poetry (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).


