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BOOK REVIEW

The Editor Function: Literary Publishing in Postwar America. Abram Foley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021. Pp. 224.

The titular riff framing Abram Foley's first monograph, *The Editor Function*, plays on Michel Foucault's oft-cited essay from 1969, "What Is An Author?" Therein, Foucault lays the philosophical groundwork for a contextualist and process-oriented understanding of the author as an ideological authority figure, one with a regulating sovereignty in the political economy of modern literary cultures and their industries. The author's function is controlling: they regulate the proliferation of meanings, broadly in service of capital and the power structures codependent with it.

In echo, to reverse political effect, Foley pitches his concept as a model of counteraction. This is editing understood as a complex of "here-and-now practices" (5) that demonstrate a unique and "dynamic mode of textual and extra-textual meaning-making" (28). Rather than gatekeeping or tastemaking per se, the function of such counteractive editorial practices is to create "excess and discord in the literary field" (5). This typically generates quite singular models of "disorder" (2, 28)—highly subjective working methods and outputs—singularities that can be hard to understand comparatively at the level of method or the work of editing. Foley's literary-critical claim is that his concept can hinge "points of conjunction" (28) between endeavors that might otherwise seem unrelated but that, once hinged, collectively map "publishing formations that took shape in response to and in protest of more dominant trends shaping postwar American literary culture" (2).

Foley's model of the editor function pairs a critical outlook that is broadly Adornian—invoking Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's notion of the culture industry (1944), and the former's concept of second

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reflection from his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970)—with a creative intent he pegs to a genealogy of ideas about speculative worldmaking. Each chapter takes a literary-historical approach to one of five case studies: Charles Olson's petitioning of his many print editors, John O'Brien and his Dalkey Archive Press, Nathaniel Mackey's literary review *Hambone*, Chris Kraus's Native Agents series for Semiotext(e), and Janice Lee's online platform Entropy. Each study is said to demonstrate a different literary-political impulse that enacts the editor function in the name of, respectively, an open field, unsettling institutions, ensemblism, eros, and waiting or empathy.

This book's ambition is exciting. The promise to historicize, theorize, and describe editorial praxis as a generalizable creative-critical function qua literariness is innovative (175). The introduction suggests this book be "best read as a critical opening" (18), that is, as a beginning for further and shared thinking. That invitation is particularly fitting—editing and publishing need a confluence or people, ideas, processes and resources, so how better to study it—but only mitigates a knot in the authorial impulse of the book, a knot tied by a dizzying focus on storytelling. While the research is richly detailed and the close readings that organize each chapter are expertly built, in various ways the obsessive description of who-did-what-when overbears the pledge to build a functional (in every sense of the word) concept between and beyond five loosely connected case studies.

In the introduction, Foley gives a robust account of how and why editorial studies have fallen between the cracks of postwar American literary studies in the shadow of the rise of textual studies and its author-centric models, as spawned by the standardizations of print culture during modernity. This sets up the most direct move between the theoretical ambitions of the project and the storytelling that dominates it. In chapter 1, Olson's campaigning against the regulative effects of print standards, in support of a poetics of openness that stays tuned to the oral roots of languages, is smartly reconstructed through his letters to those editors who took up his work for print publication. Olson's poetic stakes are familiar and might more easily be explained through other evidence, but Foley's nuance and telling bring new perspective. On less familiar territory, the book's high point is an excellent chapter dedicated to Nathaniel Mackey's little magazine, *Hambone* (1974; 1982–). Foley pitches Mackey's editorship, via Jacques Derrida, as an act of radical hospitality, one that platforms a cross-culturalist poetics in name of a centrifugal effect, invoking Édouard Glissant and Wilson Harris in the process.

It is precisely this kind of projective and comparative theorizing that other parts of the book inadvertently bury under the weight of narratives. For example, the chapter on Chris Kraus makes a smart and detailed case for the effect of her editorial work on the compositional drivers of her best-known novel, *I Love Dick* (1997). Foley pins their connection to an

idea of eros, only to leave that idea underthought and unused elsewhere in the book. The following chapter—the book's last—focuses on communal online editing and the demand it makes for editorial empathy, which seems like a great chance to expand the idea of love and desire via a different kind of politicization, one that goes beyond Kraus's famed "public 'I'" (132) and into a collective we. The bridge is made, crossed, then almost immediately left in search of new stories, just as the book draws to a close.

The Editor Function is a literary-historical study, and it stays true to that tradition. There is a critical commitment to celebrating the uniqueness of each editorial practice discussed. There is also a self-reflexive struggle with the politics of exemplarity this provokes. However, the title and introduction promise something more if not something different—a more that Foley is absolutely right to say is missing in the broad field of textual studies. By so obsessively describing the uniqueness of his case studies, too little attention is paid to what they have in common and what they might collectively explain about the editor function in general. Where the book's structure creates space for such thinking beyond the examples, we instead get more stories. At the close of chapter 2, about John O'Brien's founding of the Dalkey Archive Press, we skip into a coda about the underrepresentation of black writers on their list. The pertinence of the critique is real but quickly lost to a story about an internship Foley undertook at the press, a story in which O'Brien becomes John and we hear about a prospective list of republications that may or may not have happened. Foley's titular concept is sketched so as to hinge together a set of really interesting literary histories, but here and in other sections it remains only sketched and secondary to those stories.

Foley's project asks two profound and linked questions: How do we differentiate editorship as a generative mode of textual practice from authorship, and what are the political horizons of editorship when adequately differentiated? This book makes a brilliant first move toward an answer by turning to practices that can problematize both questions. Those who pursue Foley's "critical opening" need to make a second move, away from narratives of authorial uniqueness, to instead figure out what is radically common about the collaborative practice of editorship and publishing disorder.

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