
Experimental Literature and
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Introduction:

Experimental Literature and Intermedial Relations

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Experimental writing is often defined as a deviation from generic norms, as formal excess, difficulty, or refusal; the essays gathered in this special issue suggest that experimental writing's departure from literary conventions is inextricably bound up with an interrogation of its intermedial and cross-cultural relations. As Nassim Winnie Balestrini has recently suggested, focusing on the genre of the novel in particular, "intermedial novels question traditional views of the possibilities of the novel by challenging how readers process media-specific communication and how readers translate form and content into meaning" (68). This issue builds on recent scholarship which has increasingly foregrounded intermediality as a key framework for understanding experimental literary practices, particularly in contexts where literature intersects with visual, digital, and performative media (Bruhn; López-Varela Azcárate). Yet, as Marina Grishakova has pointed out, "intermediality has always been and still is an incentive for experimentation with new materials, perceptions and cultural forms and extension of their perceptual, aesthetic, and social effects" (14). The texts examined in this special issue foreground writing as an encounter between media, whether through engagements with visual art, performance, technology or documentary materials. The lens of intermediality, understood as a critical reflection on mediation itself, investigates the ways in which literary experiment unsettles the separations between modes of representation. Intermediality does not only refer to the coexistence of different media within a single work but also to the complex relations that emerge when media intersect and reshape each other's formal possibilities (Rippl 3). Literary experiment, then, is the site where these boundaries between media are made critically negotiable.

This special issue brings together analyses of U.S.-American experimental works across a range of genres—including novels, a play, essays, and a book-length poetry collection—spanning the period from 1965 to the present, and concludes with an interview with contemporary experimental British poet Paul Stephenson. The temporal arc of these contributions coincides with the consolidation and expansion of intermediality as a field of study, from early theoretical formulations in the late twentieth century to its current engagement with digital and multimodal cultural forms. Yet the works examined here largely operate within the textual framework of the book or the dramatic script, foregrounding the page as their primary material support. Revisiting these works today allows us to reassess how experimentation within ostensibly "single-media" forms already mobilizes intermedial logics: through the remediation of other arts, the staging of

performance within text, and the incorporation of visual, spatial, or cross-cultural references. In doing so, the issue highlights how such works anticipate many of the questions that animate contemporary intermediality studies, demonstrating the continued relevance of textual experimentation for thinking about the shifting boundaries between media.

In **Steven Forbes's** contribution "'Cubistic Time' and Phenomenology in William Demby's *The Catacombs*," Cubism is more than a metaphor for fragmentation. Drawing on existential phenomenology, Forbes demonstrates how Demby's novel translates principles associated with modernist painting such as simultaneity and collage into narrative form. "Cubistic time" thus emerges as an intermedial construct: a reworking of phenomenology and art theory, which Forbes traces back to Michael Bakhtin and Peter Bürger, within the temporal structures of the novel. The text's metanarrative strategies and documentary materials create a compositional logic close to collage. By uncovering the theoretical foundations of Demby's novel, Forbes's article contributes to the recovery of this novel, still relatively unknown in both U.S. American and Black studies.

A different negotiation between media is the topic of **Joule Zeng Wang's** discussion of David Wojnarowicz's memoir *Close to the Knives* (1991) and his tape journals in their article, "'In These Moments I Hate Language': Reading David Wojnarowicz's Typewriter and Tape Recorder". As an artist working across visual art, performance, and writing, Wojnarowicz exposes the limits of language. Drawing on Jacques Lacan, who posits that the subject is constituted within and constrained by pre-existing linguistic structures, Wang reads Wojnarowicz's apparent rejection of language not as a refusal of language itself, but of its ideological uses. Instead, Wojnarowicz's work mobilises language through intensity and violence to contest dominant discourses. Wang frames Wojnarowicz's typewriter and tape recorder as material sites where body, unconscious processes, and politics intersect. Here, literary experimentation is inseparable from technological mediation.

Questions of embodiment and mediation take a different form in **Eline Cremers's** "Reading the Body as the Site of Dreams/Dreaming/Dreamers in Kathy Acker's Work". Focusing on Acker's engagement with dreams across her oeuvre, the article argues that the body functions simultaneously as agent and product of inscription, troubling the distinction between dream and reality. Drawing on feminist theorists of embodiment by e.g. Judith Butler, Elisabeth Grosz, Julia Kristeva, and McKenzie Wark, Cremers shows how Acker's incorporation of dreams produces a form of textuality in which the body itself becomes a form of textual mediation. Thus, Cremers reads the abortion in Acker's novel *Don Quixote* (1986) as a challenge to the patriarchal mind/body binary, momentarily opening up other gendered identifications. However, this transgression remains constrained by phallogocentric structures and the material limits of the body, as illness reasserts embodiment. Ultimately, Acker's protagonist turns to dream and madness to reimagine these limits, consistently blurring the boundaries between body, identity, and reality.

In **Kerry-Jane Wallart's** article "Cross-cultural Drama, Tragic Anomalies, and Queered Spaces: The Case of Cherrie Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (1995)", the focus shifts to the medium of theatre and to the cross-cultural dimensions present in Moraga's re-writing of the Greek myth of Medea. Examining how theatrical form is mobilised as a site of cross-cultural and aesthetic disruption, it puts forward a reading of Moraga's play as an experimental re-writing which brings together heterogeneous cultural and dramatic codes, producing what it describes as "anomalies" that resist stable interpretation. In this sense, Moraga's dramaturgy foregrounds performative experience as a mode of knowledge production, collapsing inherited discourses—classical tragedy, feminist critique, and Chicana cultural expression—into a hybrid theatrical space. The play's ambiguous structures, shifting cultural references, and queered spatial imaginaries thus exemplify how experimental theatre can function intermedially, staging encounters between traditions, genres, and epistemologies.

Ege A. Özbek's article "Intermedial Resistance: The Politics and Poetics of Genre and Intermediality in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014)" examines Rankine's book-length lyric essay through what the author terms "intermedial sentimentality": a mode in which textual and visual forms intermingle to create an affective representation which lays bare the lived experience of systemic anti-Black racism. Building on work by Irina Rajewsky on the concept of the media border, as well as Lauren Berlant's conceptualization of the sentimental, the article examines in what ways *Citizen* constructs a sentimental space of resistance in which affect is read as inherently political in its linking of private experience to collective critique.

The final contribution to this special issue is an interview conducted by Hannah Van Hove with poet **Paul Stephenson** entitled "On the Act and Forms of Writing Grief: Paul Stephenson in Conversation about *Hard Drive*". In his debut collection *Hard Drive* (2023), shortlisted for the Polari Book Prize 2024 and the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Poetry 2024, Stephenson considers the impact of his partner's sudden death through affectionate, humorous, and formally adventurous poems. In this conversation, Stephenson shares his thoughts on the experimental strategies used in his poetry, reflecting on the act and forms of writing grief. The discussion also explores intermedial influences, from Jackson Pollock's paintings to the integration of documentary material, alongside a playful engagement with visual form. In the two poetry recordings included here, the interplay between spoken word, musicality, and the text on the page is brought into sharp focus.

Taken as a whole, the contributions to this special issue suggest that experimental writing does not simply incorporate the nonverbal; it reveals literature's entanglement with other media and, in doing so, reframes how we understand literary experiment too. Read in the contemporary moment in which intermediality is often focused on as a phenomenon concerned with technologically hybrid or overtly multimedia works, the contributions gathered here allow us to (re)consider how intermedial experimentation

unfolds within the textual space of the page. Through the remediation of visual, performative, and cultural forms, the works examined in this issue test the limits of literary expression while foregrounding the porous boundaries between media. Read from the vantage point of contemporary intermediality studies, these texts appear not only as formal innovations of their respective moments but also as explorations of literature's ongoing dialogue with other artistic and cultural practices. In this sense, they invite us to reconsider experimental writing as a site where media relations are continually negotiated, and where the literary text becomes a dynamic space for thinking across forms, genres, and sensory regimes.

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