

SIMONE KNEWITZ, *Modernist Authenticities: The Material Body and the Poetics of Amy Lowell and William Carlos Williams* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2014), 249 pp.

Within the larger context of modernism, the complex relationship between the material body and poetic expression is one of two analytical foci of Simone Knewitz's study. In order to examine this relationship in detail, Knewitz chose works by Amy Lowell and William Carlos Williams, and, in a final chapter Jean Toomer, as the objects of her scrutiny. As Knewitz argues, this is by no means an arbitrary selection, as "Williams was in daily contact with physical bodies [...] and the epistemological question between self and world is at the center of his poetry. Lowell [...] has been literally subjected to her body, being reduced to her obesity by literary critics" (17). Toomer, finally, was famously insistent that he did not want to be categorized by his "body," i.e. by his partly African ancestry, but saw himself, in a color-blind fashion, as an American artist, who took his inspiration from works of art, not from his "race."

The second focus of Knewitz's book concerns the question of "authenticity" in modernism. Here, she acknowledges the historical nature of the term, and opts for the Romantic definition as "related to the search for an essential, inner, core—the real and truthful self—and notions of originality and identity" (19). However, she does not take the definition at face value, but as a starting point from which to deconstruct the concept in the tradition of Derrida, Butler, and Foucault. Thus, Knewitz also acknowledges that when it comes to Lowell's and Williams's claims about "the body as a locus of authenticity" she needs to "distinguish their position from [her] own" (20). The methodological solution to this essentially ironic interpretation of authenticity is her application of theories of "performance" and "performative language" to the poetry of Lowell, Williams, and Toomer.

The main body of *Modernist Authenticities* is made up of five chapters, which all contribute to the argument that in modernism authenticity has to be seen as a performative, procedural concept, in spite of its relation to the apparently stable "materiality" of the body. At the same time these chapters have the character of independent essays, full of background information and well-researched contextual findings. In her chapter "Poetry

and Materiality: The Flower as Modernist Trope," we learn about the history of the trope of the flower and its cultural significance reaching back to classical antiquity. Then, the pastime and science of botany is presented as a "female" science (at least in the U.S.), and a poem by Longfellow is introduced as a typical example of a flower being employed as a symbol for a universal yearning for transcendence. In a still wider context, the hobby of gardening is discussed, together with its potential for civilizing the wilderness. In the next step, moving towards modernism, Knewitz considers the use of the codified "Language of Flowers," in poems by Lowell, T.S. Eliot and H.D. She interprets flowers (and fruit) in her examples as symbolic expressions of sexuality, and, in the case of Lowell, as tokens of the "precariousness of female sexual desire," as well as erotic evocations of the clitoris (49-51). A similar erotic flower imagery is identified in H.D.'s poetry. In the final passages of this chapter, Knewitz analyzes some of Williams's poems centered around flowers in the context of visual representations of flowers at the beginning of the twentieth century, showing how at the beginning of the recognition of photography and film as art forms (not just as "mechanical" or "chemical" processes) photographers and filmmakers turned flowers and plants into "images of nature as artifice" (65). The chapter ends with an analysis of Williams's poem "The rose is obsolete" from *Spring and All*. In a remarkable close-reading, Knewitz emphasizes the complex interplay between the notions of "edge" and "space" in the text, showing the anti-mimetic impulse of Williams's poetry.

In the next analytical chapter, "Authenticity, Presence, Voice: Modernist Formal Innovation and Early Twentieth-Century Expressive Culture" Knewitz concentrates on the "material body" and its significance for poetic expression. She claims that "what connects modernism with early twentieth-century culture is the desire to locate authenticity in the physical and performative aspects of culture" (79). Her key contextual argument in support of this thesis is American Delsartism, or, in her preferred terminology, "expressive culture movement" and in particular the related ideas of the elocutionary theorist Silas Curry. Knewitz claims that there are typological parallels between Curry's and Lowell's principles of poetic expression. This is certainly the case, especially when set against other modernists,

and in particular the impersonality theories of T.S. Eliot. But while Lowell held the conviction that poetry should be the “sincere expression of a man’s thought,” Knewitz rejects this notion, on the basis of the philosophical premises put forward in her “Introduction” and via a deconstructive reading of Lowell’s well-known poem “Patterns,” again emphasizing not the expressive, but the performative quality of Lowell’s poetry. Lowell’s “polyphonic prose” is used as a further example for the crucial and multivocal relationship between performance and authenticity. When it comes to Williams’s early poetry, Knewitz positions him similarly as a poet of a mediated theatricality, whose references to his own somatic experiences (and/or those of his personae) result in a “fluctuation of mediation and immediacy” (117).

In chapter three, “Borderline Modernism,” Knewitz continues her exploration of the expression of “selfhood and the relationship between self and the world,” now with respect to Williams’s literary experiment *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*. While the larger context of Williams’s poetics has to be placed into modernism’s attempt to “resolve the gap between body and text,” (122), Knewitz concentrates in her readings on the anxieties of representation on the one hand, and on Williams’s conviction that the “body itself is the source of all knowing” (126) on the other. In spite of Williams’s insistence on “the new” and “the original,” she comes to see Williams’s texts as more conventional than the poet claimed. Again, her solution lies in the emphasis on “performance”: since our contact with the world is (one could add, “always already”) mediated, Knewitz is critical of Williams’s claims of authenticity and emphasizes the role of his texts as part of a “discourse,” determined by traditionalist and, just as important, anti-traditionalist impulses. She identifies a parallel aesthetics of paradox and fragmentation in the film *Borderline*, a classic of modernist cinematography.

Chapters four and five (“Techniques of the Observer: Formal Experimentation in Williams’s Voyeuristic Poetry” and “Pictures of the Floating World: Racial and Sexual Otherness in Lowell’s Enclosed Garden”) deal with poetry as they relate to desire, eroticism, “the gaze,” and the perception of bodies with respect to power relations. By considering some highly interesting historical material on the medical and photographic discourse

of so-called “deviant” bodies, Knewitz contextualizes Williams’s famous/infamous stance concerning women and male voyeurism and shows the poetic instances to be possibly influenced by these discourses, while, at the same time, also ironically undercutting them. Her interpretations of a number of lesser-known Williams-poems and of some of his “Doctor Stories” emphasize the dramatic quality of the autobiographical details in the poet’s writings and the way he turned his “gaze” into an authenticating device within his search for the American idiom. Knewitz interprets this as an essentially sexual outlook (male onto female)—which certainly goes with Williams’s own statements about his writings. Similarly, Knewitz identifies in Lowell’s *Pictures of the Floating World* an interest in deviant bodies, this time as part of a search for “alternate conceptions of sexuality” in eighteenth-century Japan. When it comes to the question of racial and sexual Otherness, Knewitz sees an ambivalence in Lowell’s writing, an idiosyncratic Orientalism, both “exploiting and subverting common stereotypes” (191). She decodes seemingly harmless and exotic descriptions of Japanese prints as expressions of passionate, even illicit desires, or as representations of powerful women, in full command of their sexuality, even with associations of vampirism (202). Concluding the chapters, Knewitz again emphasizes the role of surfaces and of the transposition of authenticity outside the poet’s self, either in the Orient (Lowell) or in terms of the bodies and actions of the, often under-privileged, people he encountered on a daily basis (Williams).

In her “Coda” Knewitz turns to Jean Toomer in order to address not just “how African American modernists negotiated the material body in their texts, but rather as the beginning of a recontextualization of my results in a larger perspective” (215). Irrespective of Toomer’s categorization as “African American” (which he himself rejected) and the question whether the artists of the Harlem Renaissance have properly been seen as being “closer” to the body and thus to performance than the so-called white tradition, the conclusions of this study’s findings can be summarized in a number of agonistic diagnoses with respect to the material body and authenticity in modernism: photography with the promise of immediacy vs. fragmentation, performance vs. essentialism, subversion of traditions vs. construction

of new traditions, and, most importantly, the presence of the performative vs. the absence of the signified. In this respect, towards the end of her study Knewitz also thematizes the role of literary and cultural criticism and the task to “make these tensions in our analyses productive” (229). One of the most remarkable ways Knewitz’s study is productive in this respect is in the attention she pays to the ac-

tual cultural and social environments of the poets she examines. She reaches beyond text and literary tradition to include other media and also more ephemeral cultural practices and performances, thus providing interesting new perspectives on significant modernist texts and their authors.

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