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Little Magazine: World Form by Eric Bulson, and: *Provisional Avant-Gardes: Little Magazine Communities from Dada to Digital* by Sophie Seita (review)

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3. On this aspect of *Rhythm* see Andrew Thacker, “Modern Tastes in *Rhythm*: The Visual and Verbal Culture of Advertisements in Modernist Magazines,” *Katherine Mansfield Studies*, vol.2 (2010): 4–19.

4. See J. Matthew Huculak, “*The London Mercury* (1919–39) and Other Moderns” in Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, eds., *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, vol.1, *Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 240–62.



Bulson, Eric. *Little Magazine: World Form*. Columbia University Press, 2017.

Seita, Sophie. *Provisional Avant-Gardes: Little Magazine Communities from Dada to Digital*. Stanford University Press, 2019.

Reviewed by Suzanne W. Churchill

Vito Acconci’s 350-line poem “Act 3, Scene 4” appeared in the fifth number of the little magazine *O to 9* (January 1969)—but not in one piece. Rather, a single line of the poem was distributed across 350 copies of the magazine, “thus making each copy unique and a complete reading pretty much impossible.”¹ Acconci’s number play underscores the near impossibility of a complete reading of not just the poem, but the little magazine itself. How do you account for meaning when you can’t access the whole, or even the sum of its parts? Even if you could get your hands on a copy of #5 of *O to 9*, you’d be hard pressed to recover all 350, read them consecutively, and comprehend how each issue changes depending on which line of the poem it contains. Hence the challenges of reading little magazines: so much puzzling and irregular material, so difficult to access and account for.

Nevertheless, scholars continue to study little magazines, enticed by the windows they open to literary experimentation “as it happened.” Part of the lure is to get back to artistic origins, prior to the academic canons, criticism, and theorizing of modernism and the avant-garde that inflated the value of some exponents, while others depreciated. Little magazines beckon with the promise of recovering more inclusive canons and histories. Yet, as David Earle and others have warned, studying them also runs the risk of reinforcing white, masculine, Anglo-European biases and shoring up the value of coteries, the preciousness of “littles,” and the elitism of experimentalism.² For it should be acknowledged from the start that when we say “modernism” and the “avant-garde,” we *ipso facto* refer to predominantly

white, male-dominated phenomena. Despite efforts to expand the boundaries of these categories, the whiteness of modernism and the avant-garde persists, and the originary canonical definitions, standards, aesthetics, and practices tend to remain the starting point and function as comparative measures for noncanonical individuals and groups.

In the face of this stubborn conundrum, the desire to study little magazines is met by a drive for more inclusive methodologies. Eric Bulson's *Little Magazine, World Form* and Sophie Seita's *Provisional Avant-Gardes: Little Magazines Communities from Dada to Digital* represent two recent efforts to widen the horizons of little magazine scholarship. Whereas Bulson broadens the scope geographically, offering a comparative global study of magazines from the 1910s to the 1960s, Seita expands the arc temporally, providing a diachronic study of American little magazines from the early twentieth century to the present day. Bulson examines geopolitical contexts and technological developments, focusing on paratextual discourses—letters and statements from the editors, manifestos, and promotional rhetoric. Seita investigates avant-garde communities and “actual practices of writing,” diving deep into the contents of the magazines (2). Both emphasize form as a means of accessing the social, political, and historical dimensions of little magazines. For Bulson, *form* refers to “the internal structure of a magazine and its external shape, design, and construction” (22), and “analysis of formal materiality” provides a means of recovering “some of the history and politics of little magazines” (24). Seita likewise emphasizes the materiality of the form, insisting on the importance of “encountering texts in their original publication contexts rather than as canonized, decontextualized objects of study” in order to recover the history and politics of canon formation (4).

Bulson offers the term *world form* to emphasize the diverse manifestations and functions of the little magazine—“the English term associated with an Anglo-European print culture and used to define this noncommercial, experimental medium produced in limited quantities (usually under one thousand) for a select group of readers.”³ Viewed in a global context, he argues, the little magazine “looks quite different from what we’re used to, less a stable container for literary storage . . . , and more a live wire through which local and global energies alike were transmitted all at once” (3). Yet as much as the little magazine served as a conduit, he argues, it was just as often characterized by disconnection, isolation, and exile. Offering a global tour of little magazines, Bulson investigates “the concrete conditions under

which [the little magazine] was brought into and made to travel through the world,” as well as the way it responded to geopolitical events and advances in transportation and communications technologies (3). *Little Magazine, World Form* includes chapters on the worldwide network that connected little magazines, the Atlantic ocean that obstructed their mobility, and the rise of Fascism that restricted the freedoms of Italian *reviste*, as well as on postcolonial, wireless, and digital (“digittle”) little magazines. The case studies read like short stories, plotting out various magazines’ trajectories. Bulson’s comparative, geohistorical approach “focuses less on individual texts that appeared in these magazines and more on the ‘concrete situations’ out of which they emerged” (5), and he does a marvelous job bringing those situations to life. The “story” he tells, as he puts it, “involves the little magazine coming of age in multiple countries around the globe not long before World War I, only to be followed by the rise of Fascism and Nazism in Europe and the decolonization of countries across Africa and the West Indies after World War II” (5).

Whereas Bulson emphasizes the concrete conditions in which little magazines were produced and circulated, Seita emphasizes the social networks they foster and reflect, defining little magazines as “media that capture and create provisional and heterogeneous communities” (2). She offers the concept of *proto-forms* in order to theorize avant-gardes “as provisional networks of affiliation rather than rigidly demarcated groups, where *proto-* suggests provisionality and heterogeneity, while *forms* stresses media, genres, and groups” (3). Adopting a “material, group-oriented, and textual” approach that emphasizes “hospitality” and “kinship,” Seita argues that little magazines are themselves *proto-forms*, which provide meeting grounds for writers and artists to forge communities of practice, identify genealogies and bonds of affiliation, and negotiate lines of tension and difference (7). *Provisional Avant-Gardes* offers chapters on New York’s proto-dada little magazines of the 1910s and ’20s; proto-conceptual magazines of the 1960s and 1970s; proto-Language and New New narrative magazines of the 1970s and 1980s; feminist avant-garde magazines of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s; and avant-garde print communities in the digital age. The case studies revise canonical avant-garde groupings, looking at “edge cases” that reflect competing interests, techniques, or political aims inconsistent with the canonical sensibility. While the most useful aspects of the chapters may be the cogent histories of avant-garde groupings, the most captivating are when Seita dives into the magazines, analyzing texts that complicate

those histories. A brilliant interpreter of experimental forms, Seita makes you want to get your hands on the magazines in order to imaginatively join the avant-garde communities they represent. From her pithy analysis of Barbara Barg's multiple choice questionnaire in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (1979), to her extended discussion of Holly Melgard's *Black Friday* (*Troll Thread* 2012)—a 740-page work, 734 pages of which are black except for white page numbers—Seita has a knack for selecting and illuminating avant-garde texts, exposing the serious implications of linguistic play, and transforming a baffling experiment into an intelligible, engaging commentary on contemporary culture (112, 164–67).

In their materialist, pluralistic approach to form, Bulson and Seita represent a new breed of repurposed formalism in literary studies, for which Carolyn Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* might be a manifesto. This approach sees literary forms as patterns or models that are embedded within political, social, and material worlds—constitutive, responsive, and resistant, as well as persistent, recyclable, and reusable. Levine distinguishes her methodology from the “new formalisms” of the late 1990s, which view literary forms as either reflecting or resisting a particular social context:

Both groups of new formalists read literary form as epiphenomenal, growing out of specific social conditions that it mimics or opposes. Thus neither camp takes account of one of forms' affordances: the capacity to endure across time and space. From the gender binary to rhyme and from prison cells to narrative prose, aesthetic and social forms outlive the specific social conditions that give birth to them: the scroll does not altogether disappear with the codes but in fact reemerges with surprising pervasiveness in the age of the Internet; the quest structure of the ancient epic remains available to the contemporary novelist. None of these forms spring up in response to particular social facts but instead hang around, available for reuse. In this sense, forms are not outgrowths of social conditions; they do not belong to certain times and places.⁴

Although the little magazine was an outgrowth of publication technologies and market conditions in the early twentieth century, it might well be added to Levine's list, as it adopts various styles and formats, yet remains available and reusable as a form, even in the digital age, when it assumes the guise

of zines, tumblrs, and multi-authored blogs. To say that the little magazine persists across space and time, as Bulson and Seita do, is not to say that it is a transhistorical constant; rather, the form responds and adapts to different places and times, reacting to larger currents and changes, yet remaining distinct in character from large circulation, mass commercial, or institutionally sanctioned magazines. Although neither Bulson nor Seita mention Levine, like her, they emphasize the persistence of the little magazine form across space and time—its recognizability despite variations in geography, historical context, theme, style, and marketing. As Bulson argues, the *world form* “never belonged to a single country or continent and was never contained by geopolitical borders, no matter how they were configured” (13), nor as Seita shows, was the *proto-form* confined to a specific historical period. Even today, she argues, rather than becoming an anachronism in the digital age, the little magazine is undergoing a process of “intermediation” fostered by “the ongoing coexistence and mutual transformation of print and digital technologies” (163).

What animates these repurposed formalist studies is the sense that they’re not just doing recovery work; they’re doing discovery work—developing new methods and giving serious, sustained attention to non-Western, postcolonial, and feminist little magazines. Bulson’s chapter on postcolonial little magazines may be his most groundbreaking, quite literally venturing beyond “the West” to Africa and the West Indies and past World War II to the 1960s. He tackles the problem of proceeding chronologically from Eurocentric modernism to postcolonial publishing ventures, a teleology that gives primacy and originality to the European progenitors, positioning the postcolonial writers and editors as following in their wake and adopting their models. He examines the material and historical conditions in which several postcolonial magazines, including the *Beacon* (Trinidad), *Black Orpheus* (Nigeria), and *Transition* (Uganda), emerged and circulated in order to show how the same form responded to very different circumstances. Whereas Western modernist magazines reacted to the dominance of the mass commercial press, postcolonial magazines responded to colonialism, decolonialism, and the “wreckage of collapsed empires” (190). Seen this way, the postcolonial little magazine is not a derivative of a modernist innovation, but an alternative use of the form, equally responsive and adaptive to its own time and place. Likewise, *Provisional Avant-Gardes* accumulates energy as it goes, heating up in the chapter on feminist avant-garde, where Seita offers diachronic study of five feminist little magazines

from 1980s to early 2000s—*HOW(ever)*, *HOW2*, *Raddle Moon*, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, and *Chain*—arguing that together they “form an important avant-garde cluster whose publishing history has not yet been given the level of critical attention it merits” (131). With no canonical narrative to undo in this chapter, her scholarship is not just transformative, but formative of a theory of the avant-garde that does not reinscribe canonical models of revolution and rupture, but applies metaphors of hospitality, paranoia, and reparation to account “for the complex negotiations around the inclusiveness, hierarchies, and gift-exchange of magazine communities” (132). Whereas previous chapters offered valuable revisionist histories, in this chapter, the excitement comes from amplifying this important history and distilling from it a provisional, feminist theory of avant-gardes.

Another invigorating dimension of these studies is their analysis of how new technologies influence the little magazine form. Bulson’s chapter on “Wireless Magazines” shows how advances in wireless communication didn’t make print culture obsolete, but inspired it to remake itself. The invention of telegraphy “challenged the Futurists to invent new strategies for *print communication*” (233), their writings began to mimic the telegraph in form and speed, and their magazines formed a network that imitated wireless transmission from various hubs (237). Similarly Seita examines how the photocopier influenced “a new mentality of working with text and language material” among American Language poets (108). Photocopiers made it faster, easier, and cheaper to reproduce little magazines than the more laborious processes of mimeograph or letterpress printing, allowing “editors and poets to sidestep conventional channels of approval and finance” (108–09). Moreover, “by reprinting their own works or those of others, proto-Language magazines and small presses could easily extend their avant-garde family tree” (109), thus creating historical networks analogous to the geographic ones deployed by the Italian Futurists.

Because Bulson acknowledges the ways in which new technologies reanimate existing print forms, it’s surprising that he effectively pronounces the little magazine dead in the digital age (271). While he admits that digitization has preserved and made the medium more accessible to scholars, he laments that “the world it once belonged to is gone,” eroding what made the little magazine “unique”: it was a “lifeline when life was short, a conduit for cultural and literary transmission when the power lines were unreliable or not even up, and a channel for communication when it was impossible to know who, if anyone, was on the other end, wherever that

may be" (271). But though the world has changed, life remains short, power lines are still unreliable in many parts of the world (including California), and even though Google analytics can identify how many "hits" a site gets and where they come from, we still don't know if those hits translate to meaningful communication. Moreover, as Seita argues in her chapter on "Communities of Print in the Digital Age," the birth of the internet has not resulted in the "death of the book" or magazine, but reinvigorated these forms, as small presses and magazines like *Troll Thread*, *Gauss PDF*, and *Triple Canopy* "incorporate print technology and its concomitant materiality, reading habits, and literariness into the digital to create printedness digitally without attachment to paper" (176). Certainly magazines and newspapers are moving to digital editions, and sometimes even eliminating print production, but little magazines, both print and digital, continue to proliferate, transforming the "make it new" impulse of modernism into an ethos of "make it now"—an interest and ability to reflect immediate, contemporary developments in the arts (176). Far from being outmoded, Seita argues, "the little magazine today, as it was for the proto-Dada community, remains a laboratory, but the experiments in, and realities of, form, politics, and sociality are available for much larger networks to see and participate in" (188).

The limitations of these groundbreaking studies stem from the intractable masculine and white biases of modernism and the avant-garde. Despite its global span, *Little Magazines: World Form* begins and ends with Anglo-European modernism, concluding with two snapshots off. T. Marinetti, who thus comes to represent the age of little magazines. Bulson acknowledges that Pound is another "recurring presence" and warns that his "vision of the little magazine in the first decades of the twentieth century should not be ours" (5–6), yet even Bulson can't evade Pound's dominance over the field. The book gives little attention to women writers and editors, to African-American little magazines such as *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and *Negro World*, which helped propagate the global "New Negro" movement, or to diasporic Caribbean periodicals such as the *Panama Tribune* and the *Limón Searchlight*, which, according to Lara Putnam, had greater success navigating the Atlantic than the American and European magazines discussed in the chapter on "Transatlantic Immobility."⁵ Although *Provisional Avant-Gardes* addresses a diverse set of American little magazines and gives more sustained attention to women editors and contributors, the book nevertheless reflects the racial biases of the predominantly white communities it

addresses. Seita acknowledges the critiques of the whiteness of the avant-garde issued by Harryette Mullen and Cathy Park Hong, and gives more sustained attention to the feminist avant-garde's paranoia about its own exclusiveness and complicity in white patriarchal structures. Yet like the little magazines it surveys, the book proves unable to represent in practice the racial diversity it advocates in principle.

"I'm not foolish enough to think I could, like some modernist Magellan, map out the entire little magazine universe," Bulson wisely admits: there are too many magazines, compounded by the difficulties of language barriers and national borders (11). So what are little magazine scholars to do when even such far-reaching studies cannot fully overcome the biases and exclusions of modernist canons and avant-garde communities? In her epilogue, Seita provides, if not the answer, at least a direction, asking, "How do we get the world we want?" (191). Political transformation is not something accomplished in a single monograph (or two), but occurs collectively, provisionally, and diachronically through our choices about what and how to read: "A critic's politics lie partly in her choice and mode of reading" (194). We would do well to ask why certain avant-garde impresarios and coteries continue to command our attention, and examine what they may be blocking from view. Like Bulson, Seita recognizes her inevitable conditioning in "the matrix of imperfect exclusion": no matter who or what we choose to study, someone or something of value will always be overlooked (197). Rather than proclaiming a comprehensive global study of little magazines or a definitive new theory of the avant-garde, Bulson and Seita repurpose formalism, offering comparative, diachronic, and provisional methodologies that encourage us to widen our horizons, open our borders, and revise our histories of little magazines in order to be more hospitable to their variability and diversity.

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multi-authored, multimedia scholarly book, *Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde* (mina-loy.com), which won a 2017 NEH Digital Humanities Advancement Grant.

NOTES

1. Sophie Seita, *Provisional Avant-Gardes: Little Magazine Communities from Dada to Digital* (Stanford University Press, 2019), 63. Hereafter I will refer to this book with page numbers in parentheses.

2. During the rise of modernist periodical studies, David Earle was one of the first to warn against fetishizing little magazines and overlooking more popular forms. See *Re-Covering Modernism: Pulp, Paperbacks, and the Prejudice of Form* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009) for a critique of the little magazine as a privileged form that has crowded out other genres—especially pulp magazines, which, he argues, were just as much a modernist genre. Thanks to Adam McKible for suggesting this reference and other helpful comments on this essay.

3. Eric Bulson, *Little Magazine: World Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 13. Hereafter I will refer to this book with page numbers in parentheses.

4. Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 12.

5. Lara Putnam, “Provincializing Harlem: The ‘Negro Metropolis’ as Northern Frontier of a Connected Caribbean,” *Modernism/Modernity* 20, no. 3 (September 2013): 472.