Book Reviews

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Reviews

SELECTED LETTERS OF LANGSTON HUGHES. Edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel with Christa Fratantoro. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Publisher. 2015.

Assembling a collection of correspondence can be as loose as what Richard Wright once said about anthology-making: get a pot of glue and a pair of sharp scissors, and cut and paste the works together. Or, the process can be exacting, following the model of Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, who crafted *Selected Letters of Langston Hughes.* The editorial principle determining which of the voluminous body of letters to include illustrates their careful thought. Overall, their goal was to offer "a life in letters." In so doing, they created a documentary record that complements Hughes's two autobiographies, the artfully-conceived biographies of Hughes, and previous collections of correspondence, especially *The Hughes-Bontemps Letters, 1925-1967* and *Remember Me To Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, 1925-1964.* Reading *Selected Letters* against these other texts becomes a pleasure as we discover how it enlarges our understanding and insight into a life too often described as transparent and uncomplicated.

The organizational structure of the collection is chronological and divided into five decades, beginning in 1921 when his first nationally-published poem—"The Negro Speaks of Rivers"—appeared. The collection ends shortly before his death in 1967. In between these two markers are placed a number of letters that tease out, from Hughes's perspective, relationships with Arna Bontemps, Noel Sullivan, and Carl Van Vechten. Letters to these three individuals, however, are merely the tip of an epistolary iceberg. In a career spanning more than forty years, he had occasion to correspond with writers, politicians, and friends—many of whom are well-known to us today and just as many who were once prominent but now lost to historical anonymity—from Europe, Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, South America, and Mexico. The total collection is so massive that as Hughes sought to organize his letters for donation to Yale's James Weldon Johnson Collection he found a considerable number of unopened pieces. He often started his replies with an apology for being so slow to respond. But he could hardly be faulted for his tardiness. He typically received as many as thirty letters a day, often forcing him to choose between being a creative writer or a correspondent.

Some readers of *Selected Letters* will no doubt be disappointed because the ones revealing personal or intimate relations are missing or destroyed and are therefore unavailable to support a number of theories about the personal life Hughes jealously guarded. The ones included here show him to be, in one respect, quite like his irascible father. Langston, like his father James Nathaniel Hughes, was a business man and seemed extremely well organized in all of his financial affairs. Perhaps he had to be. By his own admission, he was the first writer of color to make a living solely from his writing. Herein lies the rub. Generally, the labor to support himself (and, at times, various family members) yielded little financial return. Thus he was often reduced to borrowing money from friends or living with them for free. The effort to achieve financial independence required him to accept writing assignments in many genres: the novel, short fiction, drama, lyrics, news columns, essays, libretti, and more. Guest lectures became a way of receiving honoraria as well as selling autographed copies of his work. In moments of humorous self-deprecation, he referred to himself as "a literary sharecropper," since he felt he was at the mercy of publishers, promoters, and others who "controlled" his life and livelihood.

This collection, unburdened by a scholarly apparatus and introduced by genial editorial comments and informative notes, achieves its goal of being "a life in letters." It reveals a personality that, for the most part, was balanced, affable, and simply outgoing. But there are demonstrations of anger and frustration too. The "tactful" refusal to endorse William Faulkner—whom he referred to as "the leading Southern cracker novelist"—for a major literary award is case in point. In brief, this collection is quite readable, informative, and nicely-assembled. Just when we think that we have heard all there is to know of Langston Hughes, he subtly speaks to us and cracks open the door just a bit more to provide us another glimpse of who he actually was. While we cannot claim *Selected Letters* has penetrated the barrier Hughes constructed to protect his inner self, we can rest assured that the self Hughes fashioned in his correspondence enables us to know him better.

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HOW TO TALK ABOUT VIDEOGAMES. By Ian Bogost. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2015.

Given his scholarly expertise in media studies and interactive computing as well as his critical and commercial successes as a videogame designer for Persuasive Games LLC and as a contributing editor for *The Atlantic*, Ian Bogost is ideally suited to help readers in the arts, humanities, and social sciences find their bearings in this age of ne mediar, mobile apps, and smart technology. In this hyper-digitalized age, hastening at such a frenzied pace that, as Bogost acidly notes, "the test of time" for a product is measured in "mere years rather than generations" (161). Crucially, Bogost wants *How to Talk about Videogames* to reach other readers, too, because the "era of fields and disciplines has ended" (187); a book pretending otherwise may end up "Balkanizing games writing from other writing, severing it from the rivers and fields that would sustain it" (187).

Bogost's overarching argument is that videogame criticism is a problematic enterprise in two respects. First, it tries to account for both the "instrument[al] and aesthetic" attributes of software and hardware, in contrast to modern and contemporary forms of criticism—whether, say, about painting or literature or film or food—which tend to obscure the "functional," tool- or machine-like characteristics of these cultural artifacts in favor of their "expressive" dimension (xii). And second, videogame criticism is "preposterous" because "the sustained attention that criticism entails" is fundamentally "bonkers," regard-

less of its target (xii). In fact, suggests Bogost, it might even be better if people did not fixate on videogames in a way that isolates them from other cultural objects and practices:

> Eventually, we might hope, books like this won't be necessary or even possible, because games will no longer make sense as a domain unto themselves, an elsewhere we go for stimulation or for worship. Instead, they will prevail by being a thing among others, ebbing and flowing into and out of our attention and commitments, taking their place as one of an infinity of dreams and inspirations, diversions and obsessions (188).

In short, *How to Talk about Videogames* is meant to contribute to its own obsolescence.

Still, because we haven't yet reached this next stage of cultural consciousness, Bogost offers a book comprised of numerous "attempts to take games so seriously as to risk the descent into self-parody" (xiii). Writing with sly humor (sometimes self-directed) and contagious enthusiasm, Bogost seems to have played every game on every platform created since the 1970s, from early classics like *PONG* (1972) and *Ms. Pac-Man* (1982) to current titles like *Candy Crush Saga* and *Madden NFL*. Individual readers will, of course, have differing experiences and interests, but I doubt anyone with the slightest passing familiarity with videogames—including those of us raised on first-generation Atari consoles who also frequented video arcades at a time when they were lively public spaces—could remain indifferent to the varied topics raised. For my part, I'd like to highlight Chapter 6, which examines how ostensibly free-to-play applications are structured in ways potentially as addictive and expensive for gamers as slot machines are for gamblers; Chapter 12, which contends that videogames ought not to become too cinematic but should instead allow players "to do what Hollywood cinema can never offer: to linger on the mundane instead of cutting to the consequential" (102); and Chapter 16, which posits that sports videogames are not "copies or homages" of physical sports, but "computerized variants" of equal legitimacy that may even influence their non-virtual predecessors (141).

Overall, *How to Talk about Videogames* is an inviting, accessible book: excluding a few pages of brief endnotes, the whole book—from introduction to conclusion, with twenty chapters squeezed in between—runs under 200 pages. (It should be noted here that readers already familiar with Bogost's work may be disappointed to discover that versions or portions of *nineteen* of its main chapters have been published elsewhere.) Furthermore, the scholarly apparatus is hardly perceptible: the book lacks even a rudimentary index, and most chapters have only a handful of citations taken primarily from tech blogs; gamer and game industry websites or print publications; and upscale magazines like the *New Yorker* or news outlets like the *Wall Street Journal*.

But this observation leads to the first of my two misgivings about *How to Talk about Videogames*: Bogost finds little existing scholarly commentary on videogames worth citing (consider, for instance, *The Legend of Zelda and Philosophy* and *World of Warcraft and Philosophy*, both published as part of Open Court's Popular Culture and Philosophy series). Perhaps Bogost believes doing so would contribute to the Balkanization mentioned earlier, yet he is not shy about culling discrete concepts from Kant, Wittgenstein, and Derrida. My second misgiving is this: why couldn't Bogost and his publishers develop a companion website that includes relevant audio clips, video clips, screenshots, etc.? For example, when Bogost describes the world of *Proteus* as "an island you can tune like a radio," in which "[s]ummer [sounds with] syncopated flowers" and autumn "jingles with the bells of leafiness" (126), I'd like to hear what he is referring to. Similarly, when

Bogost waxes poetic about the "gorgeous computer scenery" of *Flower*, which is "lush and beautiful, with wafting grasses and rosy sunsets" (15), I'd like to see what he means without having to conduct my own internet search. However, despite these concerns, I strongly recommend *How to Talk about Videogames*, and I hope it reaches the wider audience it seeks and deserves.

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THE ASSOCIATIONAL STATE: American Governance in the Twentieth Century. By Brian Balogh. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2015.

This volume assembles half a dozen essays published over the past generation by historian Brian Balogh limning the evolution of the field of American Political Development. Political historians have, in Balogh's nomenclature, moved away from an older "Progressive synthesis," which cast American politics as a function of "activist government" versus "limited government" antagonisms, toward a new "associational" synthesis, in which scholarly attention focuses on exploration of the state itself as a potent and interested actor in policy matters.

Attempts to understand the development of the American state, asserts Balogh, must reckon with the fact that American abhorrence of powerful central government is matched by American demand for energetic public policymaking. The key task confronting students, thus, is to explore the partnerships—among the federal government, market actors, organized interest groups, and the professions—that make possible a response to this apparently self-contradictory desire for activist, inconspicuous, governance.

Balogh argues that the associational state pattern, far from being new, is firmly rooted in the nineteenth century. The American state consistently has expanded through "a series of compromises brokered between central authority and local administration . . . a host of private and voluntary partners that blur the line between public and private spheres." (40) Twentieth-century associational state development was simply a continuation, one that "accelerated a long-standing American tradition forged over the course of the nineteenth century." (32)

Associational state patterns are not only venerable; they are persistent. Balogh challenges the notion that the associational state met its demise with the Supreme Court's 1935 rejection of the National Recovery Administration. Despite that failure, "the New Deal state dramatically expanded its reach into the political economy . . . through a mechanism that blended state, local, and private associations." (155) Similarly, Balogh disputes the view that Lyndon Johnson's Great Society destroyed pluralism, the central mechanism of the associational state, by drowning the concept of shared national interest in seas of individual rights. Although the Great Society did indeed "democratize" politics, "new entrants into the policy sweepstakes" nevertheless "had to play by pluralist rules." (198)

Several of these essays explore particular processes of associational state expansion. One avenue of growth has been provided by state actors' partnerships with market forces, as Balogh shows with his reinterpretation of Gifford Pinchot's turn-of-the-century successes at the U.S. Forest Service. In place of the standard telling, that Pinchot "sought to interpose administrative discretion in place of the market" (65) Balogh argues that Pinchot succeeded because he was able to merge state goals and market means, "framing his programs in the rhetoric of the market." (65)

Growth of the central state has proceeded through elaboration of the relationship between the state and organized interest groups. As illustrated by Herbert Hoover's 1928 presidential campaign's special reliance on women's organizations, state actors' partner-

ships with interest groups "laid the groundwork for crafting public policies that expanded the scope of government to serve select (and powerful) constituencies while avoiding the always dangerous charge in America of contributing to the growth of big government." (68)

The American central state also expanded via "the coevolution of federal institutions and the experts who eventually staffed them." (91) World war and Cold War "expanded administrative capacity and pushed professionals into these new positions on a national scale." (123) The federal government which emerged "not only responded to well-organized interest groups, it now had the capacity to create them . . . and to define the research agendas of a host of professional disciplines." (91)

Balogh writes with an agenda. He would like to see scholarship's associational state framework displace the stale "activist state versus limited government" paradigm that still structures American public discourse and, in his view, is responsible for much of our present policy paralysis. The attention of citizens should be as focused, as is that of scholars, on "how groups organize, how they gain access to the resources necessary to organize." (138) "The battle over how these intermediary institutions . . . serve collective ends" is, in the associational view, of paramount importance. (143) As Balogh pointedly notes, associational mechanisms are "merely a means to an end" and can "serve conservative *or* progressive objectives." (171)

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ARRESTING DRESS: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco. By Clare Sears. Durham: Duke University Press. 2015.

Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco is a compelling new work which explores the criminalization of this form of gendered expression. Clare Sears is an Associate Professor of Sociology at San Francisco State University. Her research specializations include critical criminology theory, sexuality and gender studies (especially queer theory and transgender studies), and the history of California.

Arresting Dress is the first detailed investigation of late-nineteenth-century cross-dressing law in a single American city. While San Francisco was only one of the thirty-four cities to enact such laws between 1848 and 1900, it constitutes a particularly productive site for "the production and policing of normative gender in relation to broader societal trends." Sears uses these laws to understand how normative definitions of gender, race, and ability were shaped by societal changes relating to manifest destiny and territorial expansion, chattel slavery and race, immigration and the nation, as well as emerging issues of morality, difference, and citizenship (4-5).

Methodologically, this work is shaped by queer and transgender studies, gender history, and urban studies, as well as critical legal and critical race studies. In focusing on the "historical production and subsequent operations of the boundary between normative and nonnormative gender," Sears emphasizes the scholarly utility of bringing together "a range of cross-gender phenomena" historically marked as both transgressive and acceptable. Sears suggests a new framework—*trans-ing analysis*—for examining the "political significance of attempts to produce and police normative gender boundaries through cross-dressing laws." In the process, Sears seeks to draw attention away from the *figure* of the cross-dresser and toward *practices* of cross-dressing (7-8).

Charting the 15 years prior to the criminalization of cross-dressing in San Francisco, Chapter One ponders its meaning on the Californian frontier. During the social upheaval and changing demographics of the Mexican-American War and the gold rush, cross-

dressing recreations flourished amongst miners. But these practices were not necessarily transgressive, Sears suggests, for they supported a "temporary fantasy of binary gender" which facilitated racialized heteronormativity (31). Following this period of lax governance, new municipal laws sought to regulate a number of practices earlier tolerated. Chapter Two examines how shifting attitudes toward what constituted indecency came to be enacted in law. Cross-dressing and prostitution were connected conceptually and materially—"as two sides of the same gender-transgressive coin," but also in midcentury sex workers' symbolic self-presentation (43). In 1863, to address these new public anxieties, San Francisco's Board of Supervisors criminalized cross-dressing by prohibiting "a person from appearing in public in 'a dress not belonging to his or her sex'" (42).

But was cross-dressing law ever enforced? As Chapter Three demonstrates, San Francisco police made 100 arrests before the turn of the twentieth century (62). The "problem bodies" which contravened expectations about sexuality, race, disability, and public space were targeted, whereas charges against women who could prove their wealth and respectability were routinely dropped. Chapter Four describes the voyeuristic surveillance needed to maintain binary gender at the level of clothing, interrogating the invasiveness of police photography and the spectacle of the court trial. However, in "framing white cross-dressing subjects as criminal nuisances and queer freaks" while ignoring the offences of racial minorities, Sears argues, the law "established the production of normative gender as the prerogative of whites and drained gender variance from Chinese and Mexican communities" (81, 93). In light of this conclusion, it is surprising that the case of mestiz@ Elvira Mugarrieta/Babe Bean/Jack Garland is mentioned only in passing (110).

Chapter Five considers the paradox of the late-nineteenth-century popular entertainments which featured cross-dressing. From vaudevillian theatre and dime museum sideshows to commercial tours of San Francisco's "underworld," these entertainments celebrated gender transformation. This existed in direct contrast with the legal construction of cross-dressers as criminal nuisances (97). Chapter Six interrogates how racialized gender normativity became a precondition for national belonging in a period of expanding immigration restrictions. Coupled with the construction of gender in anti-Chinese and anti-immigrant propaganda, Sears concludes, cross-dressing gradually came to trigger "a new form of spatial control: not exclusion from city space but expulsion from the nation" (137).

That *Arresting Dress* does not consider concurrent shifts in fashion is perhaps an oversight. Recalling Sears' stated focus on the *practices* of cross-dressing, it is worth reflecting upon how attitudes toward fashionable dress intrinsically shaped what acts appeared transgressive. Apart from a brief discussion about sensationalized descriptions of cross-dressers' outfits in San Francisco newspapers (92), Sears rarely describes or interrogates the specific outfits which contravened expectations surrounding masculinity and femininity. The reader must assume that a pair of trousers or a skirt popularly constituted male or female clothing. Correspondingly, the intermittent analysis of the "bloomer costume" overlooks the degree to which its proponents strove toward gendered normativity. While contemporaries saw the outfit as a thoroughly transgressive form of gendered inversion, many mid-century bloomer-wearing women emphasized their overskirts to clarify their gender identity and avoid completely overturning the gendered status quo.

By imposing laws that criminalized gender nonconformity within the urban environment, cross-dressing law worked to produce gender normativity. However, different categories of cross-dresser—from the gold rush miner to the criminalized asylum patient, and the celebrated entertainer to the denigrated immigrant—did not receive the same legal treatment (139). What is most interesting is Sears' suggestion that the public commentary surrounding cross-dressing may have proved rousing enough to provoke aspirational

desire (95-96, 118-120). Clearly, as Sears powerfully charts, the law provoked sustained opposition and resistance (141-147). *Arresting Dress* celebrates those individuals who challenged and defied the law, yet the encounters which capture their experiences for posterity often led to lives blighted by ridicule, institutionalization, or deportation. The many others who successfully evaded the law do not enter the records and so are lost to the pages of history.

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ERNEST HEMINGWAY: A New Life. By James M. Hutchisson. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press. 2016.

After a spate of big-time Hemingway biographies appeared in the 1980s and early 90s, that mini-industry went dormant. Hemingway scholarship, of course, has since continued, with the multi-volume scholarly edition of his letters being perhaps the most notable recent publication event. Nor did commercially oriented publication on this twentieth-century icon dry up. Books, good, bad and indifferent continue to be sold, but they tend to be on specialized topics such as Hemingway's relationship with his wives, his boat, his firearms, his Nazi-hunting in the Caribbean, and his kunstler roman years in Paris.

Professor Hutchisson's is the first general, full-life biography to appear in a generation. It is a worthy effort, and a welcome one. With some 250 pages of text and another 35 of scholarly apparatus, it is, in the first place, inviting and manageable for readers who are not devoted Hemingway specialists. The volume is handsomely published with 23 useful though unexceptional photographs included. It is a work of mature judgment and rigorous scholarship, lucidly, often elegantly written.

While the author does not devote a large percentage of his text to criticism of the fiction, it is nonetheless fair to call the volume a "life and art" biography. Each of Hemingway's books and many of his most important shorter pieces (especially his short stories) are described and analyzed, sometimes in fresh ways. For example, Hutchisson's considers *Across the River and into the Trees*, which is usually reckoned to be Hemingway's worst novel, at some length. He does not try to redeem the book through overpraise, but he does analyze it in a fresh and unjaundiced manner, contrasting it interestingly with *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, taking into account Hemingway's attempts at stylistic innovation, before concluding that the book deserves a more sympathetic assessment than it has received. It is more of a worthy failure than an embarrassment or disgrace.

Such judiciousness is frequently evident. The uglier sides of Hemingway have been well-documented, and some biographers have seemingly been overcome by the negative, as if their books come most alive when they are tearing down the great man. We have long known that Hemingway was a man unable to maintain friendships with his peers, a man incapable of sustaining a marriage, a hypercompetitive boaster, a man too prone to surround himself with inferiors and open admirers, a man, to borrow John Dos Passos's phrase, "who hated his own mother."

Hutchisson's typical response to these aspects of Hemingway's character is to say, "yes, but . . ."or "yes, and . . ." It seemed, for example, a settled matter that from his thirties onward Hemingway had disowned his mother and seized any opportunity to badmouth her. While openly acknowledging the fraught nature of their relationship, Hutchisson also points out that Hemingway understood her as an independent-minded woman born ahead of her time rather than the overbearing and self-centered character that comes through in other biographies. Hemingway, Hutchisson informs us, generously supported both her

and her live-in companion Ruth Arnold (the two were widely thought to have a lesbian relationship) until their deaths.

Likewise with Hemingway's competitive streak, which could turn him mean and petty and which sometimes came out in sophomoric utterances. But Hutchisson wisely notes that the competitive streak was intertwined with the ambition, the devotion, the work habits, and the stamina that allowed Hemingway to become the writer who changed the mid-century fictional landscape. Hutchisson brings balance, then, to his portrait, but he brings something more. The Hemingway who emerges from this shorter-than-usual biography is a fuller, more sagely and humanely appraised figure than the Hemingway who appears in many a longer work.

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