



Powers of Possibility: Experimental American Writing since the 1960s

Alex Houen

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In *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1957) Georg Lukacs discussed how the power struggle of the Cold War made it all the more pressing for literary writers to present 'concrete potentialities' of individual character in novel ways. *Powers of Possibility* explores how American experimental writers since the 1960s have set about presenting exactly that while engaging with specific issues of social power.

The book's five chapters cover a range of writers, literary genres, and political issues, including: Allen Ginsberg's anti-Vietnam War poems, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka and Black Power theater, William S. Burroughs's novels and the space programs, Kathy Acker's fiction and biopolitics, and Lyn Hejinian, language poetry, and the Cold War.

Each chapter examines how relations of character and social power were widely discussed in terms of potentiality: Black Power groups, for example, debated the "revolutionary potential" of African Americans, while advances in the space programs led to speculation about the evolution of "human potential" in space colonies. In considering how the literary writers engage with such debates, Alex Houen also shows how each writer's approach entails combining different meanings of "potential": "possible as opposed to actual," "a quantity of force," a "capacity" or "faculty," and "potency."

Such an approach can be characterized as a literary "potentialism" that turns literary possibilities (including experiments with style and form) into an effective aesthetic force with which to combat or reorient the effects of social power on people. Potentialism is not a literary movement, Houen emphasizes, so much as a novel concept of literary practice--a concept that stands as a refreshing alternative to notions of "postmodernism" and the "postmodern avant-garde."

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