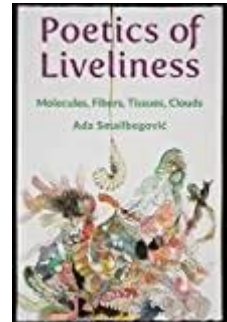


Ada Smailbegovic. *Poetics of Liveliness: Molecules, Fibers, Tissues, Clouds*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. xi + 337 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-19827-1.



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The Softness of Matter: Microsemiotics and Textural Texts

Can poetic language act as an amplification device that allows us to overcome our somatic and epistemic limitations? According to Ada Smailbegović, poetry has indeed the capacity to render perceptible material scales otherwise inaccessible to the human sensory spectrum, from the flows of matter to geological temporalities. To prove this, in *Poetics of Liveliness*, Smailbegović bridges seemingly disparate epistemic and aesthetic strategies, namely poetry and science, as a methodological entryway into the “entangled nature of material-semiotic dimensions of the universe” (p. 65).

The main focus of the book is to investigate how discourses of natural history influenced the poetics of twentieth- and twenty-first-century North American poets who have in some way drawn on the methodologies of the natural sciences in their poetic practices. While the author references several artworks throughout the book, the primary corpus consists of literary works by

Christian Bök, Jen Bervin, Gertrude Stein, and Lisa Robertson. Another core focus is to examine the reception of Greek atomist thinkers, particularly Roman poet Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*, in contemporary poetry. While these two objectives are already quite ambitious, the book actually offers much more than this. In fact, by looking at the material properties of language, the author builds a highly sophisticated conceptual framework that brings to life the lyric dimension of material substances and, at the same time, the textural qualities of language.

Central to Smailbegović’s arguments are an array of notions drawn from the Western philosophical tradition: Heidegger’s “thing theory,” Spinoza’s notions of “substance” and “immanence,” Leibniz’s doctrine of “little perceptions,” and Uexküll’s concept of “Umwelt.” The author also explicitly aligns herself with theorists “who have been in close dialogue with a tradition of feminist thought in science studies” (p. 20), includ-

ing Vinciane Despret and Donna Haraway, among others. Additionally, her work is clearly influenced by Jane Bennett's foundational book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2009), as well as by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Renu Bora's theories of affect and texture and Elizabeth Grosz's theoretical concerns with time. Even with such a rich lineage of philosophical thinkers, Smailbegović still manages to offer original insights into the intersection of poetics and new materialisms. Building on centuries of debates over the ontological nature of matter, the author compellingly presents crucial epistemic recalibrations that provide a glimpse into the sensuous, proprioceptive, and somatic dimensions of experience beyond the species barrier. A key insight that emerges is her theorization of texture as relational, which opens up exciting possibilities for new modes of being—and becoming—in the world.

Poetics of Liveliness is divided into two parts followed by a short coda. Part 1 contains the introduction and two chapters, which lay out in lucid terms the conceptual framework that provides solid grounding to the subsequent textual analyses. Part 2, in the words of the author, “examines ways in which scientific methodologies of observation, description, and experimentation allow poetic language to register material transformations and the variability of nature” (p. 27). Each of the four chapters in the second part concentrates on a case study exemplifying a particular type of textural poetics, in order: molecules, fibers, tissues, and clouds. Besides providing broad historical connections to artistic movements to further contextualize the literary works in question, the internal references between chapters, combined with the intentional repetition of core concepts, help readers navigate the complex theoretical framework, while also making clear the common threads among and across chapters. As a result, the book presents a well-organized and consistent structure.

By appealing to the properties of poetic language to “crack open an edge of the Umwelt of another organism” (p. 6), already in the introduction Smailbegović convincingly refutes possible critiques of anthropomorphism. Having equipped readers with a strong philosophical foundation, in the first chapter she turns to the refined formulation of “soft matter,” the key notion of the project taking inspiration from architectural theory, more specifically from the concept of “soft architecture.”

In chapter 2, Smailbegović delineates two genealogies of materialist poetics: the first one, rooted in the reception of Lucretian atomism; the second, in the influence of the scientific method and a training in natural sciences on the poetics of the writers included in this study. To illustrate her methodological approach to materialism, she takes John Cage's *Mushroom Book* (1972) and William Carlos Williams's poem *Paterson* (in Lytle Shaw's *Fieldworks*, 2013) as examples of how the textural properties of language or even the physical surface of the page can stand in as proxies for the animacy of the material world.

The following chapter investigates how the linguistic and aesthetic dimensions of poetry work together to enhance the liveliness of materiality, particularly in Christian Bök's biopoetic project *The Xenotext Experiment* (2015-), an attempt to encode a poem directly into the DNA of bacteria. By examining the juxtaposition of material and semiotic elements in the poem, Smailbegović develops the intriguing concept of “molecular poetics,” which tends to surfaces, shapes, and textures at a molecular scale.

Chapter 4 considers whether a poem can act as an instrument attuned to scales of sensation beyond the human spectrum of perception. By centering the discussion around Jen Bervin's *Silk Poems* (2017), written from the perspective of a silkworm, Smailbegović formulates the compelling concept of “interspecies translations,” made even more captivating by the analysis of moments of incomplete translations, as in the case of Nina

Katchadourian's *Mended Spiderweb* series (1998). The shift to microscales of perception relevant to the silkworm, combined with an attention to the kinetic elements reproduced by the poet on the page, give special access to the sensuous and subjective universe of the silkworm. Toward the end of the chapter, Smailbegović also examines the materiality of erasure poetry and its textural qualities in Bervin's poetic experiment *Nets* (2003).

Chapter 5 focuses on Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* (1925), a project that sets out to develop a taxonomy of human personality. In particular, Stein's compositional style is examined in the context of brain histology and her training in psychology. Based on the observational and classificatory practices employed in Stein's writing, Smailbegović elaborates the concept of "descriptive poetics," or what she defines a "soft taxonomy of relations" (p. 28). While the problematic nature of taxonomy is recognized in its risk of "ossifying the lively dynamism" of natural entities (p. 202), the stagnation of material fluidity imposed by epistemic objectivity is somewhat overlooked.

The final chapter continues the discussion of descriptive poetics by addressing Lisa Robertson's cloud-writing in her poetic text *The Weather* (2001). To capture the potentials of poetic language to remain responsive to the transformations and temporal microdynamics of matter, particularly atmospheric agents, Smailbegović develops the generative concept of "soft entities." The short coda serves both as a recapitulation of the main arguments and as an invitation to turn to haptic poetics as a way to get in touch with the sensuous dimension of the material world.

Aside from the vigorous theoretical and conceptual framework, one of the strengths of *Poetics of Liveliness* is that Smailbegović manages to effectively interweave disciplines, thus demonstrating the enrichment that derives from transdisciplinary research that dares to bridge the divide between the humanities and sciences. With great easiness, she brings together biosemiotics, onto-

logy, natural science, new materialisms, animal studies, and poetics, which is made possible through an ecological sensibility that recognizes the interconnections and vibrancy animating the material world. An additional strength of the book lies in Smailbegović's close readings, especially in chapter 4, by virtue of her attentiveness toward syntactic, semantic, and figurative details, which facilitates the surfacing of the textural properties of language as well as the temporal flux and microdynamics of materiality. Besides highlighting the lyrical dimension of scientific language, even her own writing style is characterized by lyrical nuances, standing out particularly in the opening section of chapter 6, dedicated to her personal experiment in descriptive poetics written "in the attempt to depict the vaporous dynamics of the architecture of a cloud that constitutes the Blur Building" (p. 229). Readers are thus invited to embark on a mesmerizing journey of expansion in their understanding of—and, possibly, care for—the liveliness of tiny nonhuman subjects.

Although there is an underlying intention to discuss the (bio)politics of matter and, drawing from feminist theory, to go beyond binary thinking, embracing the queerness of nature and non-Western epistemologies more boldly would further amplify nondualistic experiences while celebrating the complexities of nonhuman agency. Smailbegović briefly mentions rejection in response to nonhuman participation in human artistic practices. However, to further highlight the liveliness of the material world beyond the species barrier, the ethical repercussions of interspecies collaboration could be explored in more depth. In fact, rather than collaboration, the examples brought up often showcase instances of resistance, thus revealing acts of refusal to the human colonization of their bodies and invasive interference with their livelihood. This is particularly evident in the *Mended Spiderweb* series and in Bök's bacteria experiment. Particularly with the latter, Smailbegović lingers primarily on the aesthetic dimension of the poetic act, an approach

that overshadows the poet's anthropocentric interests in creating a living bioarchive of human culture and that inevitably leads to unreciprocated communication as well as the histories of institutional exploitation of nonhuman others in medical laboratories. This is also the case for sericulture history, which the author describes as interdependency, a misleading definition that erases the violent and unsustainable practices of silk production. Similarly, a failure of consideration for nonhuman materialities and agencies emerges when animal products are used for artistic purposes, such as in the case of the Crochet Coral Reef Project (p. 31), where the fibers of sheep hair, commonly known as wool, are not acknowledged as tangible bearers of systemic nonhuman oppression.

Overall, Smailbegović argues convincingly that poetic language has the capacity to amplify miniature animacies and that the material world is intrinsically endowed with lyrical qualities. The book also makes a valuable and original contribution to interdisciplinary studies, by showing that poetic and scientific discourses are not mutually exclusive ways of knowing. For this reason, it will be appealing not only to literary scholars, but also to a broader audience of philosophers, ecologists, new materialists, and possibly even to the scientific community, from entomologists to physicists. Because of its strong theoretical foundations, *Poetics of Liveliness* will surely act as a catalyst for future inquiries into the study of material ecologies.

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