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What is Experimental Poetry & Why Do We Need It?

This piece is about 11 printed pages long.

Critique of the appropriative *we* makes way for an inclusive *we* of human responsibility acknowledging the shared origin and destiny of every form of life on the planet. A planetary pronoun is inherently experimental. No one knows what its force might be. The question is how to deploy it in consequential synergistic projects (thought and living experiments) that compose new value coordinates for *we*.

paragraph 1

– Genre Tallique, *Glances: An Unwritten Book*

Here's a little thought experiment—a schematic essay of linked propositions with several implications.

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- a) There is the shock of alterity. Or should be.
- b) There is the pleasure of alterity. Or should be.
- c) We humans with all our conversational structures have yet to invite enough alterity in.
- d) Experiment is conversation with an interrogative dynamic. Its consequential structures turn on paying attention to what happens when well-designed questions are directed to things we sense but don't really know. These things cannot be known by merely examining our own minds.

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If there is or can be an experimental poetics, where “experimental” means something more interesting than the latest stylistic oddities, it will at least

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have to be an exploration of a), b), and c) by means of d).

These are working notes that range along a mirage line between the descriptive and prescriptive. It seems hopeless to dodge blurring a distinction I don't quite believe in. Doesn't the act of description always entail prescriptive exhortation: Notice this. Notice this in a particular way. Value that noticing. This is real. Take it to heart. Make something of it.

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It's equally true of descriptive acts in science and literature. Other similarities are less obvious because acts of description can take radically different forms in any and every discipline depending on the terms and logics of the operative conceptual framework. Languages of description may need to change under pressure of new angles of inquiry into how complex interrelationships make sense. (And vice versa as well.)

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In the early twentieth century, Niels Bohr was concerned about pressures that new theories in physics (the successful ones that were being hailed as discoveries) were exerting on conventional visualizations of causality. Max Planck's discovery of the quantum of action had produced the then startling, now familiar, contradictory conceptions of the propagation of light. The particle/wave contradiction illuminated a more complex, counterintuitive substrate of what had been thought of as the logical limits of the intelligible real. It could not be accounted for by descriptive conventions embedded in the language of theory to date. Bohr argued—against those calling for a return to reason, i.e., a reaffirmation of the principle of causality— for a transformation of descriptive language that could, among other things, fully incorporate key findings through the use of “pure numbers.” Numbers could dislodge thought from habits of perception that tend to cling to concrete intuitions. (Intuitions, for instance, that become “naturalized” by their very embeddedness in the metaphors of everyday language use.) Language could catch up later. In a 1929 essay entitled “The Quantum of Action and the Description of Nature,” he writes:

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In contrast with the demand of continuity which characterizes the customary description of nature, the indivisibility of the quantum of action requires an essential element of discontinuity in the description of atomic phenomena...

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Only by a conscious resignation of our usual demands for visualization and causality was it possible to make Planck's discovery fruitful in explaining the properties of the elements on the basis of our knowledge of the building stones of atoms. Taking the indivisibility of the quantum of action as a starting-point, the author suggested that every change in the state of an atom should be regarded as an individual process, incapable of more detailed description, by which the atom goes over from one so-called stationary state into another....On the whole, this point of view offers a consistent way of ordering the experimental data, but the consistency is admittedly only achieved by the renunciation of all attempts to obtain a detailed description of the individual transition processes. [1]

Are there similar pressures on our uses of poetic language? Ludwig Wittgenstein, who felt the language of poetry could express certain things unspeakable in ordinary language, lamented the effects on philosophy of a general reluctance to change language habits:

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People say again and again that philosophy doesn't really progress...It is because our language has remained the same and keeps seducing us into asking the same questions...As long as we continue to talk of a river of time, of an expanse of space, etc. etc., people will keep stumbling over the same puzzling difficulties and find themselves staring at something which no explanation seems capable of clearing up...And what's more, this satisfies a longing for the transcendent, because in so far as people think they can see the "limits of human understanding", they believe of course that they can see beyond these.[2]

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It's clear that both Wittgenstein and Bohr understood the extent to which our linguistic conventions are not unimpassioned habits. What we long for is implanted in our grammatical structures as much as it is in our vocabularies. Bohr, for instance, compares the need to believe in an orderly world, operating according to clear cause-effect connections, with our need to believe in free will: "We are concerned in both cases with idealizations whose natural limitations are open to investigation and

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which depend upon one another in the sense that the feeling of volition and the demand for causality are equally indispensable elements in the relation between subject and object which forms the core of the problem of knowledge.” (Bohr, 116-17)

An examination of the language of relations (probable and improbable) between subject and object is of course squarely (or not so) within the purview of the poet as radical epistemologist. (The constant question: what things can be known only by means of poetry?) If one were to compose a retrospective manifesto listing the aesthetic imperatives of a little pantheon of early twentieth century “experimental” poets, e.g., Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound (in the *Cantos*), T.S. Eliot (in *The Waste Land*), it could read like this (I import Bohr’s language with one minor edit):

WE WILL DEDICATE OURSELVES TO

1. descriptive discontinuity
2. resignation of our usual demands for visualization and causality
3. renunciation of all attempts to obtain a detailed description of the individual transition processes

Pound explored ideographic visualizations. Eliot, with Pound’s editorial assistance, created a discontinuous descriptive constellation of language with a new kind of gravitational field of the sort Lynn Keller has called centrifugal.[3]

Gertrude Stein transformed character description to such an extent it is no longer recognized as description at all. In *The Making of Americans* and her early portraits, Stein’s experiments in rendering character onto the page were based on the conviction that it is the things we repeat that provide cues to our bottom-most nature. Instead of telling the reader what Isadora Duncan was *like* in “Orta Or One Dancing” by means of the usual battery of metaphorical identity logics, Stein created a flow of repeated phrases, with subtle successive permutations. The resulting pattern leads the reading eye to move from one word unit to the next, not to follow

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semantic development but as one might follow a dancer's movements frame by frame (think of Eadweard Muybridge's motion studies) on the stage. Page becomes stage transfigured into time-bracketed instances of a continuous present; written language becomes a surprising performance of its charged materiality.

I think of this strategy as quintessentially experimental because it begins with an operational question: How to create an experience (ideally, a profound understanding) of character as it is beginning to be understood in twentieth century psychology, using materials of language absent nineteenth century literary devices.

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Stein, for personal as well as aesthetic reasons, was interested in creating things with language that could be felt without directly stating what they were meant to be. She praised Shakespeare as a genius of this kind of indirect palpability. Interesting coincidence that methods of indirect detection turn out to be central developments in the physics of her time.

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It was participation in experimental design involving character typologies in William James's lab at Harvard that drew Stein toward medical studies in psychiatry at Johns Hopkins, but ultimately she preferred to continue experimentation as poet rather than scientist. A close study of this progression—from laboratory to page—brings into the foreground important differences in methodologies as well as in what can be known scientifically and what can be known poetically.^[4] The work that came of this transfer of energies is *The Making of Americans* in which Stein does literally attempt to make Americans out of words—one example of what it can mean to conduct an experiment, in this case, by inventing a new poetics of the novel.

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Artists and scientists share similar cultural climates and thus similar concerns. They may even pay attention to each other on occasion. Many of

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the poets of the early twentieth century were following accounts of developments in physics, if only by reading explanations of the strange new concept of relativity in the papers. Einstein was part of the daily news and entered Stein's correspondence. Everyone was experiencing extraordinary technological innovations in their daily lives, new sights and sounds, the latest political disruptions, the latest war. One way or another these things entered the work of almost all but those entirely bent on transcendence.[5]

To widen the angle of vision a bit, the consequence of the last two hundred years of rapid-fire transformation of the planet (in large part, the history of harnessing thermodynamic energy) has been a succession of contemporary moments whose material, emotional and intellectual effects exerted radically unprecedented pressures on human individuals and communities. Each "moment," as we like to label the freeze-framed "historical contemporary" of our narrational slide shows, has created new entropic excesses unimaginable in the "moments" preceding it. The contemporary is the latest further complication of the past and therefore poses problems of every sort, not least of which is how to cope with its surprises. Some are delightful; some are catastrophic or on the verge of becoming so. All are characterized by the unintelligibility of the future as it reconfigures the shore of the present

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John Dewey, in "Experience, Nature and Art" (1925), wrote of the innovative contemporary arts of his time that they could be unappealingly "scientific," sterile "technical exercises," but:

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At their best...they enlarge and enrich the world of human vision....Fine art *consciously* undertaken ...is peculiarly instrumental in quality. It is a device in experimentation carried on for the sake of education. It exists for the sake of specialized use, use being a new training of modes of perception. The creators of such works of art are entitled, when successful, to the gratitude that we give to inventors of microscopes and microphones; in the end, they open new objects to be observed and enjoyed.

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Dewey includes poetry in the arts he's referring to but what he cannot in his time take into account is the extent to which language is a prime exemplar of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. The moment literary language enters an experience it changes it, creating, as Francis Ponge put it, a new, textual reality. The descriptive imperialism of the omniscient novel is a case in point—a textual territory occupied by the (benign or not) despotic novelist who creates a subaltern class of characters, consonant with nineteenth century geopolitics, full of the pleasures of mastery afforded by structures like the British Raj. (Sometimes, however, a character seems to spring the trap, e.g., Hawthorn's Hester Prynne.^[6]) Literary and socio-political structures have always exhibited more than coincidental parallels not just cooked up by the new class of cultural critics.

The launching question of every formal experiment catapults one toward the unknown (often improbable) possible. In that move away from the present state of things is an implicit critique of prior blunders, oversights, limitations. During the second half of the twentieth century, many of us came to the idea of uses of language that are not only in conversation with the surprises, unintelligibilities and most intriguing messes of the contemporary moment but enact interrogations into its most problematic structures. A poetics that can operate in the interrogative, with epistemological curiosity and ethical concern, is not so much language as instrument to peer through as instrument of investigative engagement. As such it takes part in the recomposing of contemporary consciousness, contemporary sensibilities.

Various affiliations and cross-affiliations among those actively rethinking the place of poetics in a changing world (a nexus that should, at this point, be only loosely labeled "Language") were once located primarily in and around urban areas—New York, San Francisco, Washington D.C., facilitating the development of conversational communities. Like the many such groupings documented as the historical avant-garde, they were

similar to the working communities Thomas Kuhn sees as essential to productive work in the sciences: characterized by a substantial portion of shared values, questions and critiques. With more contacts and thus greater geographical spread, journals became an important locus of poetic investigations. One outcome of a spectrum of Language preoccupations was the appearance of more interrogatively dedicated journals, printing the “results” of work on clusters of interrelated questions, rather than collections of randomly submitted work—the model of the Chicago based *Poetry* journal, dedicated to showcasing individual talent.

Working on related poetic projects in an atmosphere of socio-political concerns, thinking of poetics in a context of collectivities, has stimulated formal experimentation that to some extent recapitulates the scientific turn to empiricism on the threshold of humanist modernism. In poetics something analogous has been happening in the turn toward alterity via a new foregrounding of the material realities of languages as forms of life.

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The twelve issues of *Chain*, founded in Buffalo by Jena Osman and Juliana Spahr, are particularly compelling examples of gatherings of richly diverse responses to editors’ calls for work on specific topics, e.g., gender and editing, hybridity, polylingualism, translation, public forms. Each issue became a kind of catalogue of formal approaches to substantive questions. Oulipo-like, but not entirely. Distinct from the gloriously abstracted high-lit spirit of Oulipo, *Chain* addressed issues of public consequence, equally foregrounding ideational content and compositional structure. The calls for work were attempts to gather the widest possible range of poetic sources and allegiances, approaching the dedicated eclecticism of platforms like Naropa and the Bowery Poetry Club. The final issue reports results of two “experiments” pertaining to a poetics of “facts.” These “experiments” are really reader polls, not themselves very interesting models, but the fact of their deployment by a literary journal raises interesting questions about the role and criteria for experimental design in

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poetic projects.

Chain had an open door editorial policy for most of its run—the idea being that every serious response to the guiding question of the issue would be of some interest. That contributors understood this generous policy when a call went out probably fostered more risk taking than would otherwise have occurred. There is stronger and weaker work, some of which might be called failures if post facto criteria were clarified. A key criterion of well designed scientific experimentation is that failure is recognizable. Recently there's been a realization among editors of certain scientific journals that descriptive reports of hopelessly failed (but significant) experiments should be published too—to prevent unwitting replication, to learn from what doesn't work. *Chain* is a perfect site for asking whether and how we know a poetic experiment when we come across one; how to know a failed poetic experiment from a successful one. The *Chain* library provides models of poetic engagement fueled by an experimental attitude (not always the same thing as experimentation) aimed at significance richer than mere formalistic exercises.^[7]

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If we can agree that experiment is a reaching out to experience things that cannot be grasped merely by examining the state of our own minds, here's another little thought experiment: Suppose a loose affiliation of “we”s were particularly concerned right now to invite parts of the world, previously excluded, into the operational purview of our poetics—somehow on their own terms. Suppose poets began to operate under the rubric “ecopoetics” with the aim of developing a body of work that reinvestigates our species' relation to other inhabitants of the fragile and finite territory our species named, claimed, exploited, sentimentalized, and aggrandized as “our world.” Those others have been fatefully excluded from a review of our intentions but not from their consequences. That is, they (trees, birds, other animals, grasses, rivers.....) experience but cannot imagine us. We imagine but too often do not really experience them.

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Transcendent traditions of nature poetry have absorbed the vast, unimaginable Kingdoms Phyla, Classes, Orders, Families, Genuses, Species of “theys” into literary tropes and musings fed by chronically ego-bound, short-sighted human desires. Now that we’ve perhaps begun to truly feel the shock of alterity—something logically resistant to representation in human language—what is to be done? Here’s one answer: A radical reconceptualizing of “nature poetry” is currently taking place, so radical that, like Stein’s invention of new methods of description, it’s hardly recognizable as the genre formerly known as.

ecopoetics, the journal, first appeared in 2001. The founding editor, Jonathan Skinner writes in his “Editor’s Statement” that there might be no need for an *ecopoetics*,

if the creatures encountered or thoughts crossed while walking under the sky somehow made their way into poems...But conditions for outside discoveries, in human language arts at the turn [of] the millenium, feel narrow...at least since Homer poetry has been working hard to lose “nature”...Contemporary poetry’s complexities might actually be useful for extending and developing [our] perception...*ecopoetics* would ideally function as an edge (as in edge of the meadow, or shore, rather than leading edge) where different disciplines can meet and complicate one another...The literature of [the] largely Anglo-American [environmentalist] tradition...comes up short in “poetics”—demonstrating overall, for a movement whose scientific mantra is “biodiversity,” an astonishing lack of diversity in approaches to culture, to the written and spoken word...The environmental movement stands to be criticized for the extent to which it has protected a fairly received notion of “eco” from the proddings and complications, and enrichments, of an investigative poetics...The avant-gardes of the last decades..., noted for linguistically sophisticated approaches to difficult issues, also stand to be criticized for their overall silence on a comparable approach to environmental questions. ...It is precisely because of this historical urgency that *ecopoetics* appropriates “eco” (and for that matter, “poetics”)—to return them to the drawing board.[8]

The human imagination has always done a brilliant job of occupying the “empty spaces” of alterity. When alterity has no opportunity to speak back how can there be anything but a monodirectional dynamic of voluble us and silent them. But what about a reciprocal alterity? Our shared peril on a degraded planet turns us all into potentially fatally estranged subjects—

those whose lives most depend on forces least within their control.

What does a poetics of reciprocal alterity look like? Is it by necessity experimental?

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Looking through issues of *ecopoetics*, one can see that a good deal of the work coming out of the cluster of concerns and questions that pack the term “ecopoetics” with urgent meaning is enacting an experimental attitude. Perhaps, for instance, the previously inactive reciprocal alterity of metaphor-imbued nature poetry is approached through some of the visual poetics that appear frequently in the journal. If the aim is life-furthering interest and respect, correctives to “nature” narratives of segregation, dominance and nostalgia—failure to acknowledge “them” as inextricably intertwined with “us”—are imperative. The question is how can poetics do that.

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One of the scandals of the history of poetry is the misconception that in structuring our imaginings we can by-pass the hard work of acquiring accurate knowledge. Poetry is not science, after all; though the sciences are regularly raided for ornamental terms like “black hole” and “gravitational field.” The very word *ecopoetics* may be seen as an experimental instrument that creates a new order of attention to the possibility of a poetics of precise observations and conversational interspecies relations with all contributing to the nature of the form. The experimental tradition in the sciences has been mostly discipline bound. Experiments in poetics, however, like many of the new interdisciplinary scientific fields (complexity and chaos theory, neuroscience) have the capacity to function on or “as an edge” in Jonathan Skinner’s sense.

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One can add to these considerations a Cagean experimental strategy, which from the fifties on always began with this question: What can we discover when we stop trying to describe nature through our emotions or

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as if holding up a mirror to reflect her forms? Cage felt that we should not attempt to imitate nature's appearance (always saturated with our desires), but instead adopt her manner of operation. In that way we no longer stand apart from the rest of the world but participate in it as one among many. We join in the ecodynamics of what Cage liked to refer to as the global village whose inhabitants—human and others—have equal value. The first requirement is thus to understand as much as possible about how nature, in her anarchic harmony, works.

Juliana Spahr's *things of each possible relation hashing against one another* is an instructive and moving example of an (experimental?) ecopoetics that adopts nature's manner of operation (the hashing part). Spahr says in the research/procedural notes that are part of the project, "I took an ethnobotany course because I was trying to be a better poet. I was trying to learn more about the world...around me."^[9] There is an important poethical statement here. Poethical in the normative sense of questing to know what can be known only by means of poetry, approaching what is radically unknowable prior to the poetic project, acting in an interrogative mode that attempts to invite extra-textual experience into the poetics somehow on *its* terms, terms other than those dictated by egoistic desires. It's obviously a logically impossible pursuit and yet it is to a significant extent realized in the poem as it focuses on the problematics of analogous processes (rather than structures) in creating a productive tension between what biologists and poets mean by the idea of analogy. The poet as persona is largely absent from the poem while the investigative passion of the poet informs every syllable.

Spahr's "hashing" project constitutes a wager that it matters to find new ways of being among one and others in the world via poetic forms. The project is, I think, experimental—and, therefore, educational—in Dewey's sense of opening up new modes of perception. Spahr's poetic operations create a textual reality along a linguistic edge "where things are meeting and complicating one another." Ethnobotany is complicated by

ecopolitics. The investigation of “analogy” as technical term in biology (highlighting misleading similarities from a genetic point of view) happens alongside an analogously disturbed poetic genealogy of analogy:

the problems of the analogy
 and even as one also continues to be the seeing of the turnstone
 western concepts of government, trade, cash and imposing
 the vision from the track
 then the introduction of ant and coconut heart rot
 while what we are knows the unlike and
 while one becomes the various compositions formed by nature
 the problems of the analogy
 are the sight of the trace
 and nature as the way to see the fly-catcher
 and the series of large and extremely fast modifications
 in the sight of the land
 and the introduction of the plants and the animals, others, exotic
 when it is we, it is the unlike knowing and
 if one were to transform nature’s given forms
 then the problems of the analogy of it appear

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If you begin with questions: How can the unlike know one another if “know” means to encounter and experience one another well? How can the bird, the fly-catcher, enter the poem without having to do work for the sentimentally needy poet? Such questions suggest an experimental design (a way to investigate the questions) of a poem that must be driven by honest observation, research, and—because it is a poem—chancing, inventing new interrelationships among subjects, vocabularies, literary devices. The results, if one calls all this an experiment, are the poem itself.

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The chaotic interconnectedness of all things, the dynamic pattern-bounded indeterminacy in which we find ourselves, in which we must somehow find/make patterns among contingencies not intelligently designed for our convenience alone, leads to the pragmatic necessity of ingenious experimentation as wager on the possibility of a viable, even pleasurable future together in this world with all those others.

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We will always have strategic imaginations. It would be naïve to think our creativity can function as the instrument of some sort of pure curiosity and

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wonder. But strategies of imaginative imperialism may not even be necessary to control pathogenic bacteria and viruses. New evolutionary approaches to the medical model suggest that working with nature, rather than dosing her with naturacides, may well be more successful in the long run. Whether or not that will be the case depends entirely on the invention of new experimental designs in biology. [10] Could it be that so much depends on something both similar and completely different in poetics? Practices that reach out (interrogatively) toward constructive new ways of understanding and being in the world may be our only chance at real instruments of optimism.

Notes

- [1] *The Philosophical Writings of Niels Bohr, Volume I, Atomic Theory and the Description of Nature*. Woodbridge Conn.: Oxbow Press, 1987. pp.108-09.
- [2] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Culture and Value*. Translated by Peter Winch. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, p.15e.
- [3] Keller discusses the implications of centrifugal forms in her essay “FFFFFalling with Poetry: The Centrifugal Classroom,” printed in *Poetry and Pedagogy: The Challenge of the Contemporary*, eds. Joan Retallack and Juliana Spahr. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- [4] I deal with this at some length in my introduction to the new “Gertrude Stein Selections” forthcoming from University of California Press.
- [5] I’m speaking here of the Euro-American and Russian scene. Critical events and pressures, along with responses in the arts, have been of course very different for those on other continents, in other cultures.
- [6] I’ve written about this seeming logic-jumping, significantly lettristic phenomenon in “The Scarlet Aitch, 26 Notes on the Experimental Feminine,” in *The Poethical Wager*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- [7] The first issue of *Chain* appeared in 1994; the last, #12, in 2005. Osman and Spahr. were joined over the years by a number of special and contributing editors. Janet Zweig became the art editor, starting with issue #4.
- [8] *ecopoetics*, no.1, winter 2001, pp.5-7.

[9] Palm Press, 2003, p.27.

[10] See the work of the evolutionary biologist Paul W. Ewald, particularly his books *Evolution of Infectious Diseases* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) and *Plague Time: The New Germ Theory of Disease* (New York:Anchor Books, 2002).

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