



Organized polemics

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Nicolas Langlitz: I quit. I've edited the *Books Forum* for ten years and I feel it's time for it to switch hands. I'm so glad they will be your hands, Des. While we all constantly read books and reviews of books, there isn't a whole lot of discussion about the genre of the book review. That's why we decided to talk about my experience with and your vision for the reviews section. One reason why I'm happy that you're taking over is that I always thought of the *Books Forum* as key to the mission of *BioSocieties* to foster conversation between social researchers and life scientists—for example, by assigning reviews across disciplines. I very much enjoyed your book *Rethinking Interdisciplinarity Across the Social Sciences and Neurosciences* (2015), which you wrote with Felicity Callard, because it doesn't degenerate into another soapbox oratory on the virtues of interdisciplinarity. It provides a frank account of a series of experiments in interdisciplinarity, both critical and constructive. I could imagine that the *Books Forum* will prove a good space for you to continue this work, although in very different formats.

Des Fitzgerald: I'm actually writing two book reviews as we speak. One is for a mainstream sociology journal, where I'm trying unsuccessfully to craft a London-Review-of-Books-type essay about two recent monographs related to my current research (one of the books I think is badly flawed but interesting; the other I think is a disaster). The second review is one that I was invited to do, which actually I don't think has ever happened to me before—and I had this odd exchange with the editor where I somehow felt the need to confess, upfront, that though I was willing (even eager) to write the review, I expected to heartily dislike the book, and would feely

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duty-bound to express that in the review. We had an interesting back and forth on the ethics of this (should the editor commission me to review a book they now knew I would likely hate?) and in the end we agreed that they'd send me the book and I'd read it, but if I could only find negative things to say, well then I could just have a free book for myself, and we'd just not do the review. There's a few interesting things in all of that. One is that I want to say that I *really* value book reviews, and I write them when I can—I think they're very much worth doing, and I object in the strongest possible terms to the idea that they're something only for junior people to get an easy early publication, but a waste of time for more established figures etc etc. I hate that attitude. (Though I am keen that junior people also write them).

But it also draws attention to the question—as you helpfully put it—of the *genre* of the book review, and its limitations and possibilities, as well as the implicit expectations (fairness, linearity, singularity) that are attached to it. A question I would like to explore here—and perhaps too throughout my tenure with the journal—is: what is the academic book review actually doing, as a genre? Who is it for? What are its conventions? What are its untapped possibilities? I want to return to your larger question about discipline in a minute—but you also remind me of how, in a more prosaic sense, the academic book review has become an intensely *disciplined* genre. This will perhaps seem rude, but how many reviews have we all read where the author basically summarizes the content of the book chapter by chapter, says one fairly minor critical thing, before concluding that this is nonetheless an excellent volume that will be of interest to scholars of X, Y and Z, etc. I'm being unfair here, but you know what I mean. There are obviously large questions about why most academic book reviews (I include ones written by me) tend not to be extremely interesting—and I think those questions are in turn inseparable from questions of who is writing books, who is reviewing them, how power operates within the university, academic norms of deathly politeness and so on. And so one reason I was keen to take this role on, is that I think, over the last decade, with great success, you and *BioSocieties* have really been trying to do something else with the book review—and among your most important interventions, it seems to me, has been to insist that the review has to be a conversation, certainly between different books (hence the format of forum) but also more importantly, as you say, between disciplines and approaches and methods and histories. And that already lifts away some of the more conventional tropes. Am I right that this is what you were trying to do? And if so—has it worked?

NL: That's right. Breaking out of the disciplinary confines was definitely one thing I was trying to do. A lot of social scientists publishing research articles in *BioSocieties* have engaged very closely with the life sciences. They are their objects of investigation after all. Natural scientists have much less incentive to wrap their head around the humanities and social sciences. Giving someone a book to read and asking them what they make of it seems a relatively low-level form of engagement—at least in comparison to spending months or even years observing laboratory life or conducting and analysing large numbers of interviews. The psychopharmacologist Boris Quednow's (2010) radical critique of an edited volume on the neuroethics of cognitive enhancement continues to be one of the most highly cited publications of *BioSocieties*, although it's 'just' a book review. I have also



used this format to get social scientists to take up new primary sources that don't fall directly into their research area. For example, the anthropologist Gaymon Bennett (2016a) had brilliantly navigated the arcana of ecclesiastical history in a book on human dignity. So I invited him to review Pope Francis' encyclical on climate change and we got a wonderful text (Bennett 2016b). Over the years, this strategy produced excellent book review essays. But for each success story I could recount several failed attempts. Many life scientists are simply too busy to read whole books or they are not used to writing essays, which makes them difficult to recruit. More generally, it's not easy to get people to write for a journal that does not belong to their own field because they won't get much credit from their peers. And when I did manage to recruit a senior philosopher of biology to discuss the book of an anthropologist of science the review turned out to be so polemical that the editors felt it violated standards of academic civility.

That touches on the question you raised about writing very negative book reviews. Of course, there are certain standards that should be respected. For example, reviewers should try to challenge an author's arguments rather than attacking the author personally (even though the red line between situating knowledge in its social context and *ad personam* criticism might occasionally be thin). But I don't think that reviewers should shy away from discussing books they dislike. I have sometimes heard concerns about the consequences for untenured authors. But I think that's a problem for tenure committees, not for book reviewers. The humanities should maximize the number of intellectual alternatives available to us and polemics are one way of achieving this goal. When Quednow dismissed the entire edited volume on cognitive enhancement because his reading of the pharmacological literature suggested that none of the drugs the neuroethicists were concerned about actually enhanced cognition, that was undoubtedly a polemical intervention across disciplinary boundaries, but it provoked a very interesting controversy, which we published later that year (Langlitz 2010b).

DF: There is a really interesting question there about the role of the book review in the attention economy, if we want to use that term—and what tactics a reviewer or a review editor may wish to use (polemic is surely one such) to help maximize the amount of attention available to the kind of texts and topics that interest them. I think, in cases such as these, the central ethical duty is to the field rather than the text—i.e. the issue is maximizing the public for our field (even just its share of the academic public) by creating a lively, interesting even entertaining space, even if that means the occasional monograph takes a hit. I don't say this glibly. One review of my own first monograph opened with: "I was looking forward to reading this text. Unfortunately, I was left not only unimpressed but somewhat dismayed by what I found." I won't deny that I found this arresting. To be clear: I don't find snide critique entertaining (here I'm not referring to the critical review of my own book, which, though I disagreed, was actually very sincere and engaged). The book review that is basically an exercise in the reviewer vaunting their superior cleverness is a huge turn-off for me. It's liveliness, not negativity, that I'm after—while recognizing that what constitutes the category of the 'lively' is not always going to leave everyone unbruised.



I remember seeing Richard Sennett once say in a talk something like ‘I’m sure what you say is very true; but it doesn’t interest me at all.’ I think he was basically arguing that, in the social sciences more generally, we don’t pay *anything* like enough attention to rhetoric—to the actual compositional technics of making a compelling claim, and the labour of actually bothering to carry some audience along with you—and his point was something like (I’m working from memory here): this is a big part of why disciplines like sociology and anthropology have largely departed the public sphere. One can agree or disagree with Sennett, but I think you’re absolutely right in your related point that, essentially, books in the humanities and social sciences—and especially in a rich but, let’s be honest, somewhat niche area such as social studies of the life sciences—absolutely have to maximize whatever outlets are available. Again, we need to be insistent that the ethics of the question lie with our duties to the wider field—rather than, and here we agree I think, anxieties about tenure, career etc. I am of course speaking from a position of privilege here, and happy to be told I’m wrong, but I sometimes also think these fears are a bit over-played. I recall, while still on the job market myself, a good friend being on the end of a rather grim review in *Critical Inquiry*, and while of course I commiserated with that person, secretly I was thinking: Wow, I would be *delighted* if my book got a pasting in *Critical Inquiry*. So glamorous!

There is a wider issue here of course. I don’t know how many times I have sat through talks from (often famous) STS or medical anthropology scholars thinking, you know, I’m sure your careful ethnographic and historical explication of this specific polycarbonate reaction or whatever—I’m making up words here, not gesturing at anyone in particular—is very true and right, but it just *does not interest me at all*. Similarly, I don’t know how many times I have read a book review (and here I exempt *BioSocieties*), maybe even of a book by this same fictitious scholar, discussing the history of research on the same polycarbonate, thinking: I’m sure your very careful account of what is going on in this book is totally accurate, but.... you get the idea. I should insist, again, in case anyone gets a bad impression, that I don’t equate interest with critique. Rita Felski puts it well—“the aim is [not] to diminish or subtract from the reality of the texts we study but to amplify their reality, as energetic coactors and vital partners in an equal encounter” (Felski 2015, p. 185). I don’t know if I can improve on that as general depiction of what a book review, in my view, should be aiming for.

NL: The genre of the book review requires the review to react to the work of another author. This is tremendously important for scholarly fields. I often feel that I write too much and read too little. Considering that we don’t get promoted for being avid readers, there are strong institutional incentives that keep us from engaging more with each other’s work or finding out about more distant fields of learning. Book reviews can serve as a very modest corrective to this situation.

But an essentially reactive genre is always at risk of fostering *ressentiment* in Nietzsche’s (1989[1887], pp. 86–89) sense. The challenge is to do justice and to critique the work of one’s peers or even people in other disciplines without losing one’s own active, creative and affirmative impulses. That’s why I always reminded book reviewers that what we really want is an essay that does not just inform readers about the contents, merits and shortcomings of the discussed books, but we want to



hear the reviewer's own voice, an argument they are advancing in response to the book. Ian Hacking's (2012) review of some recent publications on autism might be a good example. It's a philosophical text of the very peculiar kind that Hacking invented, which is worth reading for its own sake, even if you're not primarily interested in the books he discusses. The 2000–3000 words that we usually provide to reviewers really allow them to develop their own thoughts, ultimately coalescing in a captivating essay title (rather than just bibliographic information on the reviewed book, which you find in the reviews sections of many other journals).

DF: I wonder if we're inching towards a firm account of the review here—to the point where it occurs to me that there might even be some virtue in trying to set out a rough ideal type of the scholarly book review—wholly speculatively, in my case, and based on 10 years quasi-ethnographic encounter in yours. Some things I think we've already said are: (1) It should be a *review*—a reaction to the work of another author, as you put it, not a summary of that author's efforts; (2) it should be interested—in the two senses that there should be some desire to engage the other author, but also in the sense that there is something at stake, that the reviewer should be risking something, or putting something on the table; (3) it should meet the text as an equal—which means being neither awed by the (anyway almost always imaginary) fame of the author, nor keen to establish the author/text as firmly beneath the reviewer; (4) it should be worth reading for its own sake, even if you don't care about—or know anything about—the topic under discussion and thus (5) relatedly: it should be intelligible to someone who doesn't know anything about the topic under discussion; (6) it should have an argument of its own that exceeds the actual text being reviewed—this is sort of a diluted version of the Hacking essay: in the same way that Hacking might have written that essay about a whole range of things (and in fact he did write other versions of it about other things), it just happened in that moment to be about some publications on autism—so the ideal review, for me, is similarly advancing some claim or agenda of the author's that is in some way independent of the text under discussion.

NL: That all sounds right to me—although I'd be equally happy to see a reviewer vary and even transgress the ideal type. What's productive about a discussion like this is that it makes explicit some of the norms of the genre. Of course, there is a pedagogic dimension to this (similar to the way in which the editors of *American Anthropologist* and *American Ethnologist* spelled out their expectations for original articles; Besnier and Morales 2018; Boellstorff 2008). But by laying out unwritten rules we also open them up to critique and enable ourselves to deliberately experiment with the genre. Talking about experimentation, there are some parameters which only editors can manipulate because reviewers can only respond to an invitation (especially in *BioSocieties* where we don't accept unsolicited reviews). The standard book review requires the reviewer to discuss a recently published book. That raises two questions: Is there a point in reviewing books that aren't current? And does a *Books Forum* after the Gutenberg age always have to review books? Could we also review other publication formats?

DF: Recently I went to see the exhibition, “Living with Buildings,” at Wellcome Collection in London. It's basically an account—a slightly partial account—of how the politics of health intersected with town planning and architecture in twentieth



century Britain; I was actually thinking that I would really love to see a serious scholarly engagement with it in *BioSocieties* (and already that makes you think: who should be in that conversation? Architects? Curators? Public health people? Public housing tenants?). Have you actually experimented with reviewing beyond books? On the question of currency: I think unlike most people in the academy I actually take novelty to be a pretty good predictor of what is worth reading and arguing about *now*. I'd nearly go the other direction and ask—why are we reviewing books that came out, what, twelve, eighteen, even twenty-four or more months ago, and that were then probably submitted to the publisher 3 years previous to that, that were still being written 5 or 6 years ago, were maybe *conceived* in another decade... I know I can't use this forum to work through my own wide-ranging issues with academic temporalities, but I would at least like to play around with immediacy a bit. I suspect we don't agree.

NL: I indeed disagree. The Hungarian philosopher Gyorgy Markus (1987) argued that sciences and humanities differ in the temporal structures of their references. While the sciences mostly cite work that is no older than 5 years and a few seminal papers rarely dating back more than 50 years, only the humanities added classics to the mix and they might have been written hundreds or even thousands of years ago. Their function is to organize polemics. In philosophy and related fields that reflect on the life sciences, we still see Aristotelians fighting Platonists, Hobbesians sparring with Rousseauens, etc. In 2007, our predecessor Javier Lezaun organized a *Books Forum* around Archie Cochrane's *Effectiveness and Efficiency: Random Reflections on Health Services* (1972). He asked different scholars what they made of this book at the beginning of the 21st century, which seems an interesting way of answering the question of what difference today introduces with respect to yesterday. I once invited bioscientists to write about social scientific publications and social scientists to write about bioscientific publications that changed how they thought about an issue in their own field (Langlitz 2014). Of course, these also tended to be older books and journal articles, but the point of collecting such stories was to learn about exchanges between the two cultures today. Like you, I prioritize the present but I think old books are part of it. So why not make them the object of editorial experiments in the *Books Forum*?

But your unease with academic temporalities also reminds me of a few colleagues of ours who share your concern. Fed up with what George Marcus (2003) called the “unbearable slowness of being an anthropologist now,” Paul Rabinow and Talia Dan-Cohen's book *A Machine to Make a Future* was researched and written within 9 months in 2003—and it was still only published by Princeton University Press in 2006. Aspiring to publishing much closer to the fast-paced events, Rabinow and his coauthor Gaymon Bennett posted the manuscript of what would become *The Design of Human Practices* on Rice University's *Connexions* platform in 2008. They invited readers to comment. We decided to review version 0.8, which was still titled *Ars synthetica*. We won over Marilyn Strathern (2010) to write an essay about the anthropologists' experiment with synthetic biology. By the time, *BioSocieties* came out Rabinow and Bennett's manuscript was under contract with University of Chicago Press and the link to *Connexions* was broken (Langlitz 2010a). It took another 2 years for our readers to be able to access a different



version of the text we had reviewed (Rabinow and Bennett 2012). I briefly wondered if I should feel terribly embarrassed about reviewing a book that didn't exist. But it was a great way of drawing attention to how the Web 2.0 could transform publication processes, turning readers into collaborators, at least in the early stages, and making a manuscript available almost in real time. Its sudden disappearance highlighted the transience of the new digital media.

DF: I saw the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist give a talk a few years ago, where he claimed that he'd once organized a conference where there were no talks, and no programme, only a series of coffee breaks. I guess you have achieved something similar here: a book forum for which no book exists, only some reviews. There is also of course, and more seriously, the growing phenomenon of post-publication review in some of the life sciences—certainly some of my own neuroscientific interlocutors are very excited by the potential of post-publication review, i.e. a process of peer review that refuses a split between the time of the review and the time of the paper; so the paper appears, people comment on it (openly), authors respond, and those discussion then become part of the manuscript as it develops over time. This is a similar displacement, I think, of where/when the text ends, and of the role of reviewers in playing around with potential boundary-points. Obviously a book review in a journal is not a peer review, and it serves quite a different function—but your example of the Rabinow and Bennett text *does* similarly point to a horizon in which the review might be in a position to be more than commentary, however sophisticated, and actually play a more active role in the constitution of the text. I don't think this is ludicrous when we consider e.g. the advent of high quality open access book publishers. I'm thinking for example of Mattering Press in STS, where 'the text' is more and more 'the pdf'—which is of course a much less stable object than a printed book (though Mattering Press also produces very beautiful books). And all of this, of course, despite being bound in very contemporary technological and economic developments, harks back to a much earlier stage of scientific and literary production in which texts were rather more ambivalent and mutable objects. I don't know how I feel about this: in principle, like any good postmodernist, I am in favour of the contingent, the mutable, blah bah, but the idea of someone presuming to engage in a more dynamic fashion with *my* book... hmmm.

NL: I share your unease. Personally, I even dislike some of those postmodernist preferences. If we conceived of all books as experiments, if they all turned into short-lived documents that had to be cited with a date of access, our book culture would be much poorer. Hopefully, some people still aspire to writing the classics of the future. I was very impressed by Michael Hagner's (2015) defence of the book—published in print and by a renowned publishing house and not on an Open Access platform—as the heart of the moral economy of the humanities. But I feel that the *Books Forum* should not be confined to such books. It should also draw attention to the emergence of new forms.

DF: I want to shift gears here slightly, though, and return to something we have gestured at a couple of times—but which you mention explicitly above—and this is the question of asking people to write across the social and life sciences. I'm interested in hearing more about your experiences with this. For context: I am right



now putting together my own first forum, and I'm trying to solicit reviews of some interesting-looking new books on sociogenomics, I have one text by a sociologist and one by a geneticist—both of them really interesting but also of course contestable in different ways—and I'd really like to get a geneticist to review the sociology book, and a sociologist to reviewing the genetics text. My worry is that everyone is just going to hate the text they're given, and I'm setting everybody up for a bad time. Any advice you can offer would be much appreciated.

NL: Even if they hate the texts they are given, they might very well have fun with them. That depends entirely on the temperaments of the reviewers. Maybe invite both the authors of the books and the reviewers to a short conversation, which might be a lively way of concluding a contentious forum.

DF: I *really* like the format of the conversation. As you know of course, you asked Felicity Callard and me to have a dialogue with Andy Balmer and Sue Molyneux-Hodgson around their recent book about collaborating in and around synthetic biology—and that worked out really well I think (at least I liked it; Balmer et al. 2018). It's such a small but important shift from saying, to a blank page—'here's a thing I didn't like about this text,' to saying to another person: 'here's a decision you made that I am a bit iffy around, and would like to hear more about.' So in that book, for example, the authors had put a lot of the more reflective material into 'codas' at the end of chapters, which I didn't like at all—but when I raised it in the conversation, Andy Balmer talked through the different ways they had thought about incorporating these bits of information, and then related it back to histories of playing with text in 1980s STS, and pointed out that the recapitulation function of the coda was a nice way to get scientists and engineers to reads the bits of the text that he really wanted them to read! That totally changed my view. And none of this, of course, would have emerged from a more conventional review.

NL: I would like to raise one last point that both exhilarated and exhausted me as editor. The *BioSocieties Books Forum* differs from other book review sections in that we don't discuss individual books but look at whole bodies of recent literature on a particular topic. This offers a fantastic opportunity to survey broader trends, chronicle how the field collectively brings new topics into focus and problematize an emerging issue from different angles. Of course, it's rare that all the relevant books come out within one or 2 years, so we often include books that other journals have already reviewed 2 or 3 years earlier. The surplus value of our approach lies in relating these slightly older books to more recent publications. I always imagined something like the wonderful essays in the *New York Review of Books*. Considering how microhistories and ethnographies have dominated the social studies of science, this format seems especially important to me because it can assemble these miniature paintings into broader tableaus—even if only in the form of three brief and sketchy review essays. I really enjoyed writing the short editorial introduction to each forum because it provides a synthesis of those syntheses. You identify common ground, points of contention, recurrent problems and diverging responses—and point the reader to the most provocative issues raised by both the books and the book reviews. What makes this format so challenging though is that it has proved quite difficult to persuade reviewers to take the time to read and write about more than one book. That's why we occasionally had to contend with three



essays on three books, which only the editorial brought into a conversation. I found that to overcome this limitation one had to align a number of different interests. For example, we recently persuaded Schiavenato and Rapp (2018) to review nine(!) books on reproductive medicine. We offered them the whole forum—9000 words—so they could write a full-blown review article, more like those very well received overviews published in the *Annual Review* journals. The co-authorship model also worked out very well. As a graduate student at NYU, Schiavenato had to write a literature review anyways and Rapp had to supervise this work. Thus, we piggy-backed on work they were already doing in a pedagogic venue and in return for investing a little more they got a nice publication out of this.

DF: Yes, I read the Schiavenato and Rapp piece when it came out, and I think it is absolutely exemplary of what a forum like this should be doing—it really hits the sweet spot between the rigour of an *Annual Review* type piece and the style/readability of a more wide-ranging NYRB\LRB type review. What I especially like about it is that Schiavenato and Rapp don't just put the texts in conversation with one another, but also with classic texts around reproduction and child-rearing (e.g. Schepher-Hughes 1992; Strathern 1992). I was also flicking back through some back issues of the journal: there's Warwick Anderson, Vinh-Kim Nguyen (reviewing three books!) and Marsha Rosengarten, all on viruses in 2016; Anne Pollock and Andrew McDowell (reviewing five books!) on the biopolitics of global health in 2015 and then Heather Davis, Graham Harman, Suparna Choudhury and Alberto Sanchez-Allred all zeroing in on just one text, Isabelle Stenger's *Cosmopolitics I*, in 2014. There is, if I may say, almost a kind of ostentatious display of scholarly riches in some of these forums. You know, genuinely, sometimes when I read these forums I think: who has the time for that? And that's an actual sociological question, I think. *Who* has the time for that? Here I want to situate your experience of difficulty in persuading people to do this, and the preference for the review-of-literature review within an abiding concern of mine, which is the very mundane politics and economics of particular modes of scholarly production.

So, for example, if a UK-based graduate student suggested to me that they were going to write a 9,000-word book review, and/or survey five or so recent books in a field, I would be really, really slow to agree that this was a good idea. That's partly because the British graduate experience is very different to the experience where you, for example, are based—it's shorter, more project focused, and less invested in these in these kind of (I'm going to risk being a bit rude here) performances of intellectual mastery than I think people in North American programmes sometimes are (we have no equivalent of the 'comprehensive' exam, for example). But also because the British academy is much more regulated and rationalized than it is elsewhere, and the job market is absolutely centred on a narrow range of publications that can be submitted for five-yearly research assessment exercises, and a book review, no matter how rich or in-depth, absolutely does not cut it. That's sad, but it's also the reality, and I am torn, on the one hand, between wanting to valorize the review-of-literature review as a very elegant kind of resistance to these crude and actually sort of brutalizing assessment devices (David Beer 2016 in a really nice article on book reviews for *Times Higher Education* says something very much like this); but also, on the other hand, worrying about centring the review on a particular



kind of elite mode of scholarly production that is today really only located in a small set of (largely private) North American Universities—and thus only available to people working in or somehow attached to these universities—whose existence, in turn, is predicted on all sorts of crazy exclusions and hierarchies that the people in those institutions don't hugely like to talk about. Clifford Geertz, sitting in his office at the Princeton IAS, taking, I imagine, many months crafting those—we agree—very beautiful essays for the NYRB is the absolute apogee of this mode. But he's also a very stark reminder of its limits.

NL: Well, considering how many people Geertz reached with an essay in the NYRB, he could have done worse. Both you and I have taken time to write for the *Books Forum*. I never claimed it was an easy time to be a reviews editor. The review essay is the most underrated of academic genres. Today, writing about books is a labour of love (or spite). People don't do it to get promoted but because they are intrinsically motivated. And that is precisely why it's absolutely worth the effort.

DF: I think we have ended on a note of non-trivial disagreement—but that's no harm. I think I have learned three really important things in the course of this conversation. First, that my ideal contribution to the *Books Forum* is a short, lively, personal essay that moves through and around a small set of recent texts or other scholarly or creative productions, but is absolutely not an evaluation of those texts in any straightforward sense; Second, and this is already implied there, that I would like the forum to be largely about books but not only about books—relevant exhibitions, films, objects, scientific papers, etc. should also be within the purview of the forum. Third that I want to think about who is reviewing and who isn't, what kinds of voices, institutions and modes of scholarly engagement are in there—and what ones are not. Sort of unavoidably, the book forum is kind of an elite object—it demands resources (who has the time to review?), networks (who is invited to review?) and cultural capital (who has the confidence to review?). How can these facts become visible and contestable without destroying the very conditions that make a forum like this even tentatively sustainable in the first place? This is what I consider to be the major challenge facing the forum in the next few years.

NL: I'm curious about what this new series of editorial experiments will produce. May the *Books Forum* become as lively as you wish for it to be.

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