

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN CHRISTIAN

Tom Fleischmann

Tom Fleischmann: To start off, could you talk a bit about how “Our Lot” fits into the rest of your work? Have you always used outside texts and voices as you do in recent essays?

Brian Christian: I’m very interested in mixing things, connecting things: lexicons, registers, genres, and so on. And in that sense, “Our Lot” — a story that looks like a play that’s built out of nonfiction and poetry — fits in with a lot of my other recent work, though it’s probably doing that mixing at a more overt and conspicuous level than I’ve done in other pieces.

When I was in high school I got into writing music, and quickly found that the most expressive type of music for me was sample-based electronic music. In part that was a logistical concern: I didn’t have the means to get talented guitarists, pianists, etc., into my house and make high-quality recordings of them, but I had tons of high-quality recordings of guitar, piano, etc., already lying around my house and my computer, and it was easy enough to cut them up and move the notes around. In that way I bypassed many of the more technical aspects of getting music to sound good, by working with clips that were already cleanly recorded, mixed, compressed, mastered, etc. But beyond this logistical level, working with samples gave me a sort of chameleon-like, or shapeshifter-like ability aesthetically. It almost started to seem weird to me that traditional musicians would use the same instruments, the same timbres, again and again and again. Whereas with samples the music can go anywhere at any moment. The laptop as Johann Mälzel’s panharmonicon, Mark II: the universal machine. And it allowed me a sort of delight in juxtapositions: putting Vanilla Ice over Paul Mauriat, or Ani DiFranco’s guitar over Blink-182’s drums, that kind of thing.

I got a similar kind of mash-up pleasure from composing “Our Lot”, starting a sentence with, say, a traditional sea shanty and finishing it with a pair of cognitive scientists from the mid-’80s — hopefully there’s pleasure there for the reader too.

Maybe more to the point, though, I think that there is a more pro-

found weight behind reference, citation, allusion, sample, attribution. Part of it, I think, feels like a kind of honesty, authenticity, full disclosure. As a composition teacher I was constantly telling students to cite where they were getting their assertions from. The ultimate Wikipedian zinger — “citation needed” — may be just the thing that an informed democracy needs.

Part of it is a humbleness: the implication of, “I don’t simply know this through some general personal genius — I learned it from someplace specifically. And don’t take my word for it, take theirs.” Part of it is an empowerment to the listener/reader to find out more for themselves. And part of it might even be a kind of conflict resolution: notice how if someone says “x” and someone else says “not x” then you’re immediately in trouble. There’s a clash: one of those statements must be false. But if you go to your sources — “I heard that x.” “I heard that not x.” — then you’re in way better shape for a constructive conversation rather than a zero-sum armwrestle. The argument becomes about philosophical soundness rather than philosophical validity, which is much less personally insulting. And imagine if the media, if the pundits, if political candidates argued in a manner that included attribution of their statements. (McCain: “The facts are facts...” Obama: “And that’s not the facts...”) Can you imagine how much more useful a debate would be if it took place on a wiki, where any cited figures were tagged with citations? I remember Slavoj Žižek saying in his recent Seattle lecture that the one thing he wanted to know from McCain (this was before the election) was, “Who’s your Karl Rove?” We forget that our candidates, in some sense, are only as good as the sources they trust for their facts — because those sources are almost never made clear. Attribution leads us away from the “Yes it is”/“No it’s not” scenario and towards, say, fact-checking, which is much more useful. And as for the sources themselves: to have their names irremovably attached to their assertions makes their accountability go much further.

So there’s an ethical dimension, but maybe the even more important one for me is identity: in some sense, I feel collaged, as an individual, from those around me. I can point to certain verbal tics of mine and say, this one [using “blah blah blah” as a dactylic three-syllable noun, e.g., “then there was that whole blahblahblah”] came from my dad, that one [using a word as its own adjective: e.g., “watery

water”] came from my friend David from L.A., this one [the phrase “kind of intense”] I picked up in the Brown dorms, and so on... In my super-brief contact with Cultural Studies while in a pedagogy class in grad school, I came across some article about the difference between the homogenizing “melting pot” metaphor for U.S. culture versus the more pluralistic, heterogeneous “salad bowl” metaphor. The only difference between the alloy and the salad is the scale at which the elements are being mixed. (If you want to keep things more parallel, think salad versus smoothie.) In some ways I think that this is the only difference between borrowing “other voices” and using one’s “own voice” — the scale of the mix. Everything I say is some kind of echo, or echoes — the assertion from one place, the tone from another, the grammar from a third — of something else, maybe nameable, maybe unnameable.

TF: Could you talk a bit more about the way the personal fits into these essays, considering the importance of citation, reference, etc.? Are the verbal tics a type of citation?

BC: Some people look at a piece with a ton of citations and see it as impersonal. But for me it’s highly personal — I’m telling you what books I’ve read, and, by a certain implication, what books I haven’t read. Each of those citations is a kind of fingerprint lifted, or, you know, a hair follicle left at the scene: I was there. And I’m telling you what phrases and passages really stuck with me. To me that feels very personal indeed.

There’s often this confusion with poetry students where they read a poem that talks about, you know, beating up an old lady, and they say to the author, “I can’t believe you beat up that poor old lady!” And the poetry teacher has to go in and set up the speaker/author distinction. But there are always two things you can pin on a poet, no matter how thickly styled their speaker is. The speaker can’t speak what the poet doesn’t know — in the sense that no character can be more articulate than the author, and probably no character can be cleverer than the author. If the speaker spews out ethnic slurs, the writer is complicit to a certain minimum extent, just for knowing them. Secondly, and more importantly, you can always pin on a writer their fascinations. My old mentor, Brian Evenson, has a number of incredible fiction books, almost all of which are

incredibly violent. Some people make the mistake of thinking that he's a violent guy. (About ten seconds with Evenson will be enough to relieve you of that idea.) But there's no doubt about the fact that he's a guy whom violence fascinates. And even the most thickly ironic, too-cool-for-school nonchalance needs its subject matter, and that subject matter is absolutely nonrandom. So the fascinations, I think, you can absolutely pin all the way "upstream" to the writer.

(Anne Carson – "Every sound we make is a bit of autobiography.")

It's tempting to say that the referencing is a facade, an attempt to be less personal. But on the other hand, you go to a personals website, and how are people attempting to convey their inner them? Favorite books, favorite movies, favorite quotes, favorite music...presenting themselves to the world, in a sense, as the sum of the things they like. We start thinking of our own identities/personalities as these nexi of influences. So, creatively, if self-expression is part (if not the name) of the game, then perhaps to show off these constellations of influences as boldly as possible is to be yourself as boldly as one can.

I sometimes think of a person as a flute, or violin, if you will, into which "white noise" (quotations, or arbitrary found material generally, or the world itself at large) blows or bows, and out of which comes a tone, which tells you not about the air coming in but the shape of the vessel, what its resonance frequencies are —

So, as for myself, part of me wants to say that the subject matter, the references...it feels to me like there's a fairly clear self-portrait.

TF: You began with a degree in Computer Science — how has your interest in programming languages affected your interest in writing?

BC: Yes, my BA was in Philosophy and Computer Science and I ended up doing a special program that Brown had in the early '00s called the Capstone program, where instead of writing a thesis in the Philosophy or Computer Science departments, I worked with the Literary Arts faculty on a book-length manuscript. I was really grateful for the chance to pursue those different things simultane-

ously, and I think that trying to keep those three plates spinning, if you will, at once has been good for the writing.

There's a kind of rigor and precision to the way language is used in each of those disciplines: in computer science, when you name a variable, if you use that name again later in the code and misspell it or capitalize it differently, then it won't know what you're talking about at all. And a line with one semicolon too many or too few can bring down, you know, a ten-thousand-line program. Philosophy is similar, in that one of the things you're always on guard for is "equivocation", where a word is switching illegally between two different meanings in an argument, like, for instance, "Feathers are light; light things can't be dark; feathers can't be dark". And of course the first thing you do when someone asks you a philosophical question is dissect their diction choices — what do they mean by x, y, z. I think that the strictness of those two ways of using language strengthened my chops, cut my teeth, but also fanned in me the desire to act out, to misbehave: to, say, deliberately equivocate — the double entendre, the pun — to let the words loose, essentially. What I love about the lyric essay, the experimental essay, is the space for both the rigor and the vigor, maybe more so than in any other mode of literature, maybe any other mode of anything.

TF: You've also published in cognitive science journals. Are your essays and poems a way to apply this logic and science to art, or a break from the procedures of that world? Is it false to ask you to separate these two activities?

BC: The separation/segregation of disciplines is something that's always interested, and sometimes vexed me. For one example: in almost any English department there's some kind of distinction between the production of English literature and the analysis and history of it. But in, say, a philosophy department, there's no such distinction. Yet the divide can be huge! When I studied existentialism in college, we read Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*: extremely aphoristic, associative, scattered — and the first and last sections are filled with what he calls "rhymes" and "songs"! This was the text that we were looking at for months, but it was a "do as I say, not as I do" situation from the professor, because if any of us tried to write like Nietzsche — if any serious contemporary philosopher tried to

write that way — it's hard for me to imagine us, or them, being taken seriously. Yet he's someone the field reveres, and it's a book that they take incredibly seriously. So should we distinguish between "performance" and "analysis" the same as we do in the arts?

While I was an undergraduate, the Literary Arts department at Brown effectively seceded from the English department. They got their own course registration code, their own major, and the faculty resided in their own building, across an alleyway from the English department. Presumably the autonomy was good for them, but it also created a sharper binary between genres than had been there before: playwriting, poetry, fiction, and hypertext came over to LitArts, but nonfiction stayed in English. As someone interested in hybridizing poetry and nonfiction, sometimes I felt, if you'll allow for a sort of melodramatic hyperbole, like I sort of got stuck in that alleyway. At the University of Washington, if you want to do a nonfiction thesis you have to apply in fiction, so likewise the "lyric essay" doesn't quite fit in. I remember talking to an agent from New York this summer about a nonfiction manuscript I'm working on, and he asked me to talk about my background; I said I did my MFA in poetry, and that I — "Wait, I don't get it," he said. "You're a poet, but you want to try to write nonfiction?"

Cognitive Science is another place where the demarcations get strange. At Harvard and Berkeley, for instance, it's considered a branch of the Psychology departments; at Brown, the Cognitive and Linguistic Sciences are separate from Psychology but fused to each other; at Princeton there's no undergraduate department but there is an interdisciplinary "certificate program." At MIT I think there are actually two programs; a friend of mine got tripped up when he sent his PhD application to the wrong one. But part of what intrigues me about the field is this very confusion over where and what it is, this absence of clear demarcating lines — it permits a kind of eclecticism and collaboration where everything from anthropological data to fMRI results to armchair philosophy gets a seat at the table.

Disciplinary divides have always been suspect to me. Or, like literary conventions, useful when obeyed but far more useful when trespassed. There's a quote from Richard Feynman where he says,

“If our small minds, for some convenience, divide this glass of wine, this universe, into parts — physics, biology, geology, astronomy, psychology, and so on — remember that nature does not know it!” And he goes on, “So let us put it all back together, not forgetting ultimately what it is for.” I love that. In some ways I see my mission as a writer as a kind of putting-it-back-together project, bringing various spheres of language together — scientific, philosophical, lyrical, comedic, erotic, and so on — and examining the ways in which developments in any of these areas bleed into the others and can change, complicate, or enrich our experience of being human.

A number of mentors of mine over the years have described some of my poetry as leveraging a kind of “wrongness of fit” between the problem facing the speaker and the method they choose for solving it. Like using a fishing rod to unscrew a lug nut, or something. In part I agree that there’s humor in trying to think very rigorously about, say, one’s own emotional life. But on the other hand I’m not sure it’s so inappropriate after all — I mean, for example, sex has Hertz, whether we want to think that numerically about it or not. So to talk about “having 1.45Hz sex with my spouse after dinner” can be funny but not because it’s wrong, you know? It’s a weird way of thinking about it but it can be insightful. Maybe, as is often the case with metaphor, the weirdness is even proportional to the insight.

TF: Thinking of the way the internet affects the reading process, have you explored hypertexts at all?

BC: I’m interested in Flarf poetry, which mines its ore from Google search results, and in other found-art methods using the computer. And I’m extremely interested in computational linguistics, and have played around, for instance, with using statistical tables (something called n-grams) to generate texts. However, and you’d think for someone who’s into computer science and literature it’d be a natural marriage, but I’ve yet to be deeply moved by a hypertext. Actually my first CS course at Brown was with Andries van Dam, who actually built the very first hypertext system in 1968. (Oddly enough I just learned this about him today on Wikipedia, which is, itself, of course, a hypertext.) I feel pretty strongly, as I was saying before, that hypertext may be the best medium for rational argumentation and political debate. Probably the best medium for encyclopedi-

style information storage. But I haven't been hit at an emotional level by one yet. Maybe I just haven't found the right stuff yet.

As an undergrad, I "shopped" the hypertexts class — Robert Coover taught it! — but I remember dropping out after our first assignment. I'd worked on my first piece for a week straight, and then ended up not being able to show it to the group because the virtual reality lab kept crashing. That frustrated the bejesus out of me. Also, none of the projects from previous years' students seemed that compelling — the VR was cool, and some of the writing was interesting, but putting them together, no sparks flew, at least for me. But again, I'm still open to a conversion experience...

My friend and fellow writer — and fellow *Seneca Review* contributor — Evan Nagle and I are starting an online magazine called *Ink Node*, and we're interested in things like, for example, getting rid of the linear table of contents in favor of a sort of stigmergy — in this case, a system that tracks people's reading patterns and links pieces together based on reader behavior. So random reader behavior starts to self-organize, like how ants follow each other's pheromone trails to the best food...I don't know if that's quite a "hypertext," per se, but I'm excited to see how that develops.

TF: Considering your interest in work that brings in outside texts and writers, is "the voice to tell the shifting story of the world" by necessity polyvocal?

BC: I don't know if it has to be polyvocal, per se, but to my mind it has to be polyphonic, polytimbral, hybrid: on any given day, the world sees so much joy, so much grief; so much murder, sex, nose-picking, electromagnetic radiation, dryer lint...the mind jump-cutting from heartwreck to errands... But so little art, to my mind, seems to capture these key changes, these timbral fluctuations. Funny movies are funny from front to back, thrillers are thrilling from front to back. That's almost getting to be strange for me. Genre itself starts to demand a suspension of disbelief.

I fell in love with the Emerson quote that John D'Agata includes in his *Next American Essay* anthology — "Here everything is admissible — philosophy, ethics, divinity, criticism, poetry, humor, fun,

mimicry, anecdotes, jokes, ventriloquism — all the breadth and versatility of the most liberal conversation, highest and lowest personal topics: all are permitted, and all may be combined into one speech.” If the world itself could speak, I think that would be the manner. I have a hard time imagining it leaving any of the stops pushed in.

TF: How much do you expect, or hope, your audience to be familiar with authors you quote? Are you thinking differently when you use texts like Ovid, which are likely familiar to everyone, then when you use the documents on parking, which are probably new to all of your readers? What about the texts that may or may not be familiar? Are the readers who haven’t read *Sun Under Wood* missing something that readers who know Hass will find?

BC: I know, for example, that when some people read Flarf poetry — take Katie Degentesh’s *The Anger Scale*, for instance — they have Google sitting at the ready, and they’re looking up every line and trying to see what she’s appropriating from and where the “seams” of her collage are, and how she’s de- and re-contextualizing the phrases, and so on. I hope that for people either already familiar with my source materials or willing to imagine (or track down) the original contexts, there’s a pleasure to be had in the strange-bedfellows aspect of the sources, and in the way that I’m taking certain things out of context or punning on what those sentences were originally referring to.

As far as the familiar/unfamiliar aspect — I think the Internet has drastically changed the nature of quotation, even in print media. In many ways the gap between familiar and unfamiliar is closing. And I think that a lot of the pretension has come out of it. The interesting thing about the Internet — Google and Wikipedia especially, and also things like Urban Dictionary — is that any reader, as long as they have some sense that you’re making a reference, and possibly a sense of what you’re making reference to, is just two to three seconds away from knowing what you’re talking about.

For me this definitely alters the compositional thought process. For instance, when I’m using my own writing voice, and I want to use a word like, say, “aposiopesis” — if this were the 1990’s I’d probably shy away from the word, or at least define it as I’m using it, for fear

of putting the reader off because either they don't know what it is and so get frustrated, or think that I'm trying to flaunt my erudition, or something like that. But because accessing these external sources of information is so easy — on the *New York Times* website, merely double clicking a word brings up its definition — that risk seems to me much less. So when I use a word like that, I'm not necessarily assuming that the reader knows it, nor am I assuming that my knowing it will come off as impressive (because the language is more accessible to me, too). I remember reading the *Publishers Weekly* review of Forrest Gander's *Science & Steepleflower* — which was, I think, the first book I ever read by a living poet — where it says, "Yes, the vocabulary is rather recondite. But as R.P. Blackmur pointed out in a famous essay on Wallace Stevens, a phrase like 'the moonlight fubbed the girandoles' is perfectly comprehensible if you have a dictionary at hand." Of course the irony is that this reviewer's Blackmur allusion is actually quite tricky to track down, so his defense of Gander's aesthetic turns out to be, itself, guilty of worse crimes than the poems it seeks to defend. But I agreed with the point. And now, ten years after that review was written, all the more so.

This allows for a kind of celebration: of the nooks and crannies of the language, a praising of its rarities and oddities, a sense in which encountering unfamiliar terms can be cause for intrigue more than frustration. This change excites me, because I think it opens the lexicon way up — both to the writer and to the reader. English has the widest lexicon, I read somewhere, of any language. So that's something we can really revel in, and, I think, should.

TF: Could you talk a bit more about how research affects your drafting process? Especially with this piece, where the research is "more overt and conspicuous," how do you build an essay out of that information?

BC: I remember going to the Architecture and Urban Planning Library at the University of Washington and putting literally all of the books they had on parking on the checkout desk, then explaining to the girl on staff that I needed them "for a poem." She shot me this amazing eyebrow-raise.

With “Our Lot” I actually had a fairly good idea going in of what I wanted the piece to look like, both typographically and narratively, and so I was reading through those books with an eye out for where I could appropriate certain quotes for certain moments in the piece. And likewise I was going through *Will to Power*, and a lot of poetry. There was a tradeoff between what I wanted to say and what I could get “sound bytes” of, and like with any formal constraint, there were certain sacrifices I had to make as well as certain serendipitous moments of discovery where things came together in great, unexpected ways. In most of my other work, there’s a flow between the first-person voice and the quotations, or in many of my found-text collage pieces I have less of an idea going in of what I want the final result to look like. So the formal pressures, for better or worse, often aren’t nearly as great as they were in “Our Lot.” It was incredibly time consuming but a real adventure, those constraints.

TF: Do you still think of yourself as a poet? What were the restraints you felt there that have moved you more toward the essay?

BC: I think of literature sometimes as a lava flow, where you’ve got this highly detailed, cooled material on the outsides and this amorphous, molten core that’s pushing stuff outwards. Something like a cookie-cutter action novel (I remember, with horror, someone at a writing conference who’d heard from a prolific thriller writer that you need to have exactly x “pinch points” for your main character every y pages, that that was the precise ratio that you must have...), or an English sonnet, might be there at the fringes. And that’s where you have genre, too. The sonnet has been mutating as the sonnet for centuries. So that’s poetry the cooled, you know, pumice. Then there’s poetry the molten amorphous core. If a play starts veering out of safe play territory, we start to shelve it in “poetry”. If short stories start to wander out of safe story territory they go “poetry.” (Not being much of a fiction writer, I’d always felt sheepish that my two favorite writers are both fiction: Borges and Barthelme. But John D’Agata counts Borges among the essayists and Dave Eggers puts Barthelme among the poets, so maybe that explains things.) Basically it feels like all of the other genres are little Lesothos in the South Africa of poetry, or Piedmonts in the Oakland of poetry.

Indeed, some of the things I’ve published — “Our Lot,” for instance,

and a piece in *Ninth Letter* called “Heliotropes” — I refer to as essays, poems, stories, etc....largely depending on the audience. If I’m talking to poets I’ll call them poems to fit in more, or if I’m applying to poetry fellowships I put them in my publication list as “poems,” and if I’m talking to essayists, or applying in nonfiction, they become “essays.”

What moved me toward the essay...David Shields has this great anecdote about how a lot of times a piece of fiction is like a rocketship that propels you up to this epiphanic moment. But the epiphany isn’t narrative, it’s an idea. Or you could think of a novel as a missile, with this tiny payload of idea inside it that it has to deliver. I love a good story, and I love the sheer potency, the mind-altering magic of words. But for me the biggest stakes have always been in ideas. The essay seems to me to be the most direct way of working with them. But there’s something more visceral, splanchnic about poetry. It’s more intense. I feel like I need to have those two modes together.

TF: You say that “genre itself starts to demand a suspension of disbelief.” What would you say are the genre considerations of your own writing and this essay that might beg disbelief? Is the lyric or experimental essay, as a genre, forming new trappings?

BC: I suppose any piece of art misrepresents the world by being more interesting than the world. Maybe that alone is where the unreality begins.

And I think every artist has certain obsessive concerns, so, for instance, when you watch a Woody Allen movie, you’re buying into a worldview where virtually everybody’s worrying and fretting about sex constantly, etc.

As for the lyric essay...I think there are certain conventions that are starting to consolidate, certain fronts on which the protean slime is starting to spicate, the magma turn to a’a — which is both a good and bad thing — the footnote, in the hands of Nicholson Baker, David Foster Wallace, Mark Z. Danielewski, Jenny Bouilly, has formed a kind of tradition. And “listiness” and whitespace-use would other fronts on which you’re just now, I think, starting to be able to see “generic” lyric essays, which was impossible until recently. The fact

that it has a name is evidence of some degree of consolidation/os-sification. But I think there's plenty more lava to come: in 2005 C.D. Wright said of the lyric essay, "This is the place where the word is breaking open again." I agree; for me the lyric essay remains the place I most want to watch, and the place I most want to be.

