Books Forum

Poieses: Making Organisms, Texts, and the Field of Synthetic Biology

Reviewed by Nicolas Langlitz

Department of Anthropology, The New School for Social Research, New York, USA.
E-mail: LanglitN@newschool.edu

BioSocieties (2018) **13**, 656. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41292-017-0085-9>;
Published online 23 March 2018

About a decade after the formation of synthetic biology, we are now seeing a number of social scientific publications and collaborations that engage this new field of biological research and engineering.

Sophia Roosth's *Synthetic: How Life Got Made* provides an account of synthetic biology between 2005 and 2017. It focuses on Drew Endy's laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and mimics the form of a traditional ethnographic monograph. Anthony Stavrianakis' review proves that there is an accounting for taste. He identifies the book's genre as kitsch (as opposed to camp) and rejects Roosth's aesthetics and the supposedly underlying ethics of not taking seriously the object of her anthropological and historical inquiry. More than 30 years after the publication of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), disputes over the poetics of ethnography seem to be coming back with a vengeance.

The volume *Synthetic Aesthetics: Investigating Synthetic Biology's Designs on Nature* could be an ethnographic specimen from

Roosth's collection. The bioengineer Drew Endy brought together synthetic biologists, STS scholars, and artists to converse about nature as a design object. Although it includes critical voices who seek to draw a sharp line between the affirmative practice of design and the critical practice of art, the volume largely serves an aestheticization of synthetic biology, Talia Dan-Cohen argues. As an anthropologist of science, she understands the cross-disciplinary collaboration that gave rise to this book as involved in the project of constructing the field of synthetic biology.

Andrew Balmer, Katie Bulpin, and Susan Molyneux-Hodgson's book *Synthetic Biology: A Sociology of Changing Practices* counterbalances the other books' focus on the United States by offering a case study of synthetic biology in Great Britain. Reflexively, it also examines how the sociologists' collaboration with synthetic biologists transformed their own research practice. Instead of commissioning a book review, we invited Felicity Callard and Des Fitzgerald, the authors of a recently reviewed book on collaborations between sociologists and neuroscientists, to talk shop with two of *Synthetic Biology's* authors.

The three books discussed in this Books Forum reveal synthetic biology as a field that produces more than just biological parts and artificial organisms: aesthetic experiments, cross-disciplinary collaborations, and an emerging field of technoscience.

Reference

Clifford, J., and G.E. Marcus (eds.). 1986. *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.