Eleana Kim

Language Poetry: Dissident Practices and the Makings of a Movement

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Theory, What Theory?

> Words, finally, are not non-referential.1
>
> Writing develops subjects that mean the words we have for them.2

Language First

In *This* 3 (Fall 1972), Robert Grenier, the harbinger of this movement, published a poem entitled, *Four for to two/ Seeing through the Round*:

> What language does. the perception
>
> of language activity being half the writing. the perception of language forms experience. in language. of language. ‘and gathers in and radiates.’ (how. ‘meaning.’) in the room.
>
> with
>
> this then the physical activity writing organism pleasure shaping forms.

Regarding language as the primary organization of experience into thought, Grenier’s poems, such as those in the *Alcheringa* collection, magnify language, foregrounding the visual aspect which makes the perception of language an integral part of the "meaning" garnered from the arrangement of the words on the page:

> s o m e o l d g u y s w i t h s c y t h e s

The conscious rejection of a speech-centered poetics first made its appearance in *This* 1 (1971), the journal edited by Grenier and Watten. "I HATE SPEECH" was Grenier’s way of simultaneously registering his indebtedness to, and breaking with the Williams tradition: "To me, all speeches say the same thing, or why not exaggerate, as Williams did, for our time proclaims an abhorrence of "speech" designed as it was his castigation of the "sonnet" to rid us, as creators of the world, from restoration of the past dragged on in formal habit. I HATE SPEECH."

This initial break eventually developed into a theoretical project critiquing the production of meaning and locating tactics to reconcile their practice with a broader social view/politic.3 The communal practice presented in forums such as the Folsom Street Talk series, Langton Arts, and *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine seemed to have alienated those outside the group whose participation was constrained by their knowledge of or subscription to certain theoretical assumptions specific to the Language school "project." Contrary to popular opinion, however, the theoretical work of the group was largely investigatory, and generally non-prescriptive. Critics like Tom Clark would criticize it for an "anti-democratic" insularity, and "theoretical top-heavyness" would become a distinctive characteristic of the group, serving oftentimes to overshadow the actual poetic work of the individual members.4 Establishing their own evaluative systems through technique and form rather than through subject matter or emotional value, these poets were criticized for their overly scientific poetics, at the expense of the "human."

The talks at Folsom Street, which began in 1976, and others at 80 Langton Arts were published in Bob Perelman’s *Hills* 8/9 in 1980 and in *Writing/Talks* in 1985. As mentioned above, by around

1976-78, the journals also registered the cohesion of a core group, with writers affiliated with the New York School, Black Mountain, and the San Francisco Renaissance5 having been eased out in favor of others like Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Alan Davies, David Bromige, Craig Watson, James Sherry, Jean Day, Peter Seaton, Abby Child, Alan Davies, Hannah Weiner, and Diane Ward. Writers like Robert Grenier, Ray DiPalma, and Clark Coolidge, although older, continued to publish with them and were always included in the various collections which represented the Language group. There is evidence in these magazines that cross-coastal communication was taking place before the inception of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* in 1978, but from 1978 on, the incorporation of east coast writers and their effect in the coalscence of the group is undeniable.6

Following the *Alcheringa* collection, Steve McCaffrey, an experimental Canadian poet organized a symposium entitled, "The Politics of the Referent" (1976). The works which he examines are ones of "diminished reference," those which are most obviously informed by an experimental tradition more indebted to the older members of this "tendency," such as MacLow, Coolidge, or DiPalma. Silliman's letter to McCaffrey (republished in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* supplement no. 1, 1981) can be read as a preliminary draft of an essay published in 1977 in *One Hundred Posters*,7 which was later reprinted in *The New Sentence* as "Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World."

By 1978, the writers who were to later be tagged as "Language poet" had each published at least one book with Tuumba, This, or The Figures Press. Ron Silliman's *Ketjak* marks a new stage in the group tendency, from a "non-referential" minimalism to the new prose poem. And with the attention initiated by the 1979 *Poetry Flash* issue, the political implications of their self-conscious formation were openly investigated in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*'s special "Politics of Poetry" issue (October 1979). In 1980, Silliman's essay, "The New Sentence," consecrated a distinctive style and established the precedence of these writers, whose concentration on the sentence as a unit of meaning was framed within a discourse of literariness, presenting the work as a legitimate artistic development and a significant contribution to American poetics.

The Word

Concretist, transrational, and temporally disjunct, the early works in the *Alcheringa* collection deconstructed the word, focusing on the phonological, syllabic and sub-semantic elements of language as a way of calling attention to the the tangibility of the word as sound and grapheme. Spatial relations of the words on the page (dis)organize logical cognition or temporal unity, resisting transparency and thereby foreground the construction of meaning as a conscious act. The first of Bruce Andrews's *3 Poems* is a display of monosyllablic words whose phonological rhymes float spatially on the page, drawing equivalences between sound rather than semantic qualities. The second uses larger phrases and compound words, which are decontextualized, resisting narrative frames, and the third is composed of deformed morphemes, "non-words" in a "random" arrangement that compels synthesis even as these lexical fragments frustrate cognitive sense. Likewise, David Melnick's *Pcoet* uses neologisms derived from old English, injecting familiar words which become defamiliar in this context:

> Seta
> colecc
> puilse, i
> canoe
> it spear heieo
>
> as Rea, cinct pp
> pools we sly drosp
> Geianto
>
> (o sordea, o weedsea!)

The influence of the Russian Futurists transrational poetries and Formalist literary critics such as Roman Jakobson are helpful in considering this work of diminished reference.8 Removing the referential frames of these "utterances," a shift in the other functions of the linguistic utterance compensate to create a local context in which these elements might cohere. In removing temporal markers, works such as that of Bruce Andrews force the reader to draw equivalences across a syntagmatic axis, privileging the palpable, i.e., visual and aural presences, of these linguistic parts over representational frames. As Jakobson writes, "Poeticity is present when the word is felt as

word, and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality" (378).

Clark Coolidge's *AB7* utilizes purely grammatical elements, indefinite pronouns and relative clauses, which, through repetitions and shifting syntactical positionings, gather a non-referential presence within the temporal frame of the poem. A word such as "that," rather than standing in for some absent subject, takes on a subject position of its own as it moves through the text in new relations to the other words, similarly circulating, without any one of them granted privilege over the rest. Or as Silliman writes, "the flickering reoccurrences of information in Coolidge's work, each term of equal import (the one truly Steinian element in his writing)"9:

> there is on time
> to there is to time
> as of district
> to be is at there
> being as plain as though
> there be that other there
> as no as that though is plain
> as other as yes in those as being
> stairs

Writers like Steve Benson, Bob Perelman, Kit Robinson, Michael Palmer, and Michael Davidson at this time were working in an inherited New American lyric mode, incorporating surrealist imagery and decentering the speaking subject.10 Ron Silliman's own work, prior to *Ketjak* in 1978, was minimalist, with works such as *Mohawk* (1973) using word patterns in a manner which calls attention to their relative positions on the page and within the book, resisting narrative frames. The attention to spatial arrangement creates the desire for a vertical integration of these lexical units, and the repetitions of words entices a horizontal mapping of their movement through time. These two impulses organize the experience of the poem.

> wet
>
> loom
>
> star
>
> wicker
>
> silt
>
> very
>
> blue
>
> drift
>
> orchid
>
> rube
>
> orb
>
> stoop

Despite the fact that Barbara Baracks and Barrett Watten's work in "The Dwelling Place" were in prose form, non-narrative, and non-linear in progression, with shifting points of view, these first instances of "the new sentence" were not to be theoretically upheld until Silliman's talk in 1980, when his arbitration of the new group tendency presented it as an unprecedented formal development. The majority of their works had by that time moved away from the "diminished reference" of the *Alcheringa* selection, by extending the investigation of the production of meaning to higher levels of signification.

Steve McCaffery's symposium, "The Politics of the Referent" (1976) was the first application of a marxist reading to Language writing. McCaffrey's essay, "The Death of the Subject: The Implications of Counter-Communication in Recent Language-Centered Writing" considered the implications of works of "diminished referentiality" as were presented by Ron Silliman in *Alcheringa*.11 Originally published in McCaffrey's journal, *Open Letter* (Summer 1977), this and other papers were reprinted in a special *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* supplement (#1, June 1980). The editors, Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews, introduced it with a clarification of its relevancy to the work which had since been foisted with the label of 'Language-centered':

> It seems worth remembering, in looking back on these essays, that the tendencies in writing McCaffery is talking about under such headings as 'language-centered' are as open to the entrapments of stylistic fixation as any other tendency in recent poetry. The reason we have shied away from any such labels in editing *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* is that our project, if it can be summarized at all, has had to do with exploring the numerous ways meanings can be (and are) realized — revealed — produced in writing. In this context, the idea that writing could be stripped of reference is as troubling and confusing a view as the assumption that the primary function of words is to refer, one-on-one, to an already constituted world of "things."

Despite these caveats, this article measures the importance of both McCaffrey's theoretical contribution to the project and the function of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* in documenting and disseminating an aesthetic tendency around which negative accretions were quickly forming. That the *Alcheringa* collection is recalled in 1981 by Bernstein and Andrews seems to act as a way of clarifying and distancing themselves from that "early" work, yet also establishing a "history" of founding principles, its name, and its concerns.

The World

In his essay, "Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World," Silliman's oft-quoted12 analysis of the effacement of language's materiality in capitalist society appears:

> What happens when a language moves toward and passes into a capitalist stage of development is an anaesthetic transformation of the perceived tangibility of the word, with corresponding increases in its expository, descriptive and narrative capacities, preconditions for the invention of "realism," the illusion of reality in capitalist thought. These developments are tied directly to the function of reference in language, which under capitalism is transformed, narrowed into referentiality.13

The critique of referentiality proved to be the least understood and most controversial aspect of their project. In the essay, "Surprised by Sign," for the *Alcheringa* collection, Silliman writes, "Words, finally, are not non-referential." And in his letter "For Open Letter" to Steve McCaffrey in 1976, Silliman preambles his brief history of reference with a distinction made between "non-referential" and "post-referential." "Non-referential" language, attributed to the work of Grenier and Coolidge, functions in negative relation to reference, "typically doing so by the utilization of specific contexts." Post-referential, however, implies a freedom from the reference/non-reference binary. From this stance, referentiality, which Silliman defines as "a specific historical deformation of reference," can be deconstructed through poetic praxis.

Silliman argues that the transformation of reference into referentiality witnesses the effacement of gesture from communication, the physical movement which engages a spatial dialogue between objects and persons. "For it is the disappearance of the word that lies at the heart of the invention of the illusion of realism and the breakdown of gestural poetic form" (*The New Sentence*, p. 12). With the invention of writing, according to Silliman's schema, the erasure of the material substance of the word was soon to follow, and in the novel, the invisibility of the production of meaning creates an illusion of naturalness which renders the word a fetish. By politicizing the very act of consumption involved in reading poetry, Language-centered poetry, for Silliman, removes itself from the realm of the commodity fetish and from the sad fate of its Modernist predecessors. Although at odds with the capitalist bureaucratic state, Modernist writers failed to extricate themselves from the very tools of commodified reality, and therefore fell easy victim to co-optation. Silliman's letter lays bare the very foundations of the Language-project, which he envisions to be a political aesthetic aligned with that of the Futurists:

> Language-centered writing, which this is, has a direct historical predecessor in Russian Futurism. These groups have two things in common which suggest a higher order of struggle: (1) they place language at the center of their work, (2) they place their work directly into a program of conscious and active class-struggle. They recognize that every creative act is, in its essence, revolutionary.

Coming into difference, the self-definition of the Language group, articulated from the very beginning by Silliman, involves a conscious relationship to history, poetic tradition, and the dominant. In contradistinction to the aestheticist non-referentiality of Coolidge and Grenier, therefore, the Language poets' "higher order of struggle" (i.e., "avant-garde") encompasses a diachronic dimension through the self-conscious defiance of a historically conditioned and institutionally supported dominant aesthetic. The naturalness of discourse is produced through certain textual devices and codes maintained by the genres sanctioned by the economic power of the capitalist state.14 It is , however, only through self-conscious theoretical articulations of this position that the Language poets' use of language can be recognized as part of a larger social struggle. The Futurist/Formalist project sanctioned a poetic and theoretical agenda that enabled them to conceptualize a practice in which language and the social could become integrated into an active critique.

McCaffrey's "The Death of the Subject" takes as its fundamental proposition that this new writing of "diminished reference," by returning materiality to the signifier, and in undercutting the referent, resists the fetishization of the word characteristic of capitalist aesthetics since the rise of realism. These "writerly" texts blatantly subvert the conventional modes of reading as consumption and de-hierarchize the relationship between reader and writer. The communicative aspects of language can thus enter into a synchronic play in which authorial control is ceded to the reader, whose position shifts from consumer to producer. In these works of diminished reference, language is presented as material — primarily graphemically — with its secondary (referential) signifying function deprivileged, so that the page becomes the spatial site of meaning production, wherein the interplay between the graphemes/lexemes compose the experience of the text.

In "Intraview,"15 McCaffrey explains the connections between Marx's notion of commodity fetishism and Derridean *différence*. The assumption of reality behind the sign is linked to a modernist teleology, itself linked to capitalist reification. McCaffrey's strategy of resistance involves a demystification of the fetish: "[to] reveal the human relationships involved within the labor process of language will involve the humanization of the linguistic Sign by means of a centering of language within itself; a structural reappraisal of the functional roles of author and reader, performer and performance ..." Ironically, this rehabilitatation of the alienated word through an attention to the human labor involved in the production of meaning would later be inverted by critics into a technologizing of the poetic and a de-humanizing scientificism.

The uses of language and literature are radically called into question by McCaffrey's suggestion. Reading becomes a creative practice in which the author no longer holds the key to the Truth of the text, in which the assumed positions of consumer and producer must be rethought through a "committment to reading." Joan Retallack (1984)16 wonders, however, if this sort of "counter-communication" ultimately replaces the egocentrism of the author with the equally narcissistic ego of the reader: "This clearly extricates us from certain kinds of conventional response, but to what extent does it liberate us from habits of association which are prone to take over when logic fails? If our role in the collaboration is to fill in the blanks with free associations, there is a danger that we are merely turning inward, rather than toward community and responsibility as language users." Retallack's criticism doesn't, however, take into consideration the fact that the text is not only an aesthetic object, but is also a historical artifact. The dialectical relation between the synchronic and diachronic frames of reference is part of the art consumer's reception, and stands as a safeguard against a thoroughly solipsistic reading. As Jakobson states, "The reader of a poem or the viewer of a painting has a vivid awareness of two orders: the traditional canon and the artistic novelty as a deviation from a canon. It is precisely against the background of the tradition that innovation is conceived" (46).

Silliman's distinction between non-referential and post-referential writing functions as a link between the Language project and that of the Futurists, and relies on an abstract relation of theory to practice, in which the aestheticist model gains political relevance only through the application of a supplementary concept. For what besides the poets' *intent* makes the work of Grenier and Silliman, to pick two examples, distinct? Both create local sites of synchronic layering on the page and foreground the construction of meaning through spatial organization. It is the reader's own *historical* sense which will render either of the two post-referential, i.e., politically motivated. In

"Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World", Silliman refines his initial postulates and rewrites the segment from "For Open Letter":

> By recognizing itself as the *philosophy of practice in language*, poetry can work to search out the preconditions of a liberated language within the existing social fact. This requires (1) recognition of the historic nature and structure of referentiality, (2) placing the issue of language, the repressed signifier, at the center of the program, and (3) placing the program into the context of conscious class struggle ... (*New Sentence*, p. 17-18).

Silliman's vision of art would reinfuse the aesthetic with those elements repressed under a capitalist hegemony, namely, the modes of production. The aesthetic object could then be received as a shared communicative act, negotiating connections of relative value and social contingency between individual and group consciousness. "The poem returns us to the very social function of art as such: for the group, art interiorizes its consciousness by the ordering of individual sense perceptions; for the individual, be it artist or consumer, art provides her with experiences of that dialectical consciousness in which subject and object, self and other, individual and group, unite" (*NS*, p. 17). Extending the horizon even further, Silliman locates poetry, in its relative historical resistance to capitalist reification, as a semi-autonomous sphere in which the structural analogies between the aesthetic object and real social conditions, could be both acts of resistance, of explanation and demystification, as well as a mode of prescription, "so as to indicate appropriate courses of action. The social role of the poem places it in an important position to carry the class struggle *for* consciousness to the level *of* consciousness" (*NS*, p. 17).

Theoretically resistant to the dominant or not, any political-poetic praxis is clearly dependent on a community of reception and shared codes. For Silliman, the social task of the poem is conditioned by the homology of positionings between author and intended audience. In the "Politics of Poetry" issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (October 1979),17 Silliman expresses what might be a response to Bruce Boone's admonition in *Poetry Flash* #74 (May 1979) regarding the Language School's lack of "developed social sense." This short essay is further developed in "The Political Economy of Poetry"18 in which Silliman examines the commodity status of poetry in order to better formulate a strategy of transmission which could negotiate the fact of the poem with its social work.

Silliman organizes his personal poetics around a specific audience constituency which would render a "philosophy of practice in language" effective. Directed to a specific, bourgeois (or declassed bourgeois) readership, educated and informed by literary history, Silliman thereby grounds his vision in a program placed "into the context of conscious class struggle." This class-specific, even gender-specific19 program tailors defamiliarization devices to the consumer/spectator through specific literary codes and frames of reference which reveal contexts of meaning and the dependency of those meanings upon certain assumptions and exclusions inscribed within the social. Silliman recognizes the overlapping of social identities in any potential audience, but nevertheless considers the relationship between work and context to be vital, and for that relationship to determine the tactics necessary towards the the long-term goal of "undermining the bourgeoisie."

That Silliman's far-reaching claims do not pertain to the others affiliated with *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* is obvious from the wide array of concerns articulated in the four-year run of the magazine. A debate between Jackson MacLow and Ron Silliman took place on the pages of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* on the topic of socialist politics and literature.20 In the "Politics of Poetry" issue, Silliman inserts an addendum which criticizes MacLow and others for lacking a broad-based program which could situate political tactics within a larger strategy for change, and for working within, rather than against, an oppressive capitalist system: "The idea that progressive political (& literary) work can be carried out within a context that does not fundamentally challenge the existing 'concrete oppressive' economic relations of the world is typical not merely of members of social democratic parties, but of most of the poets in the United States, specifically including those who associate themselves with *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*."

James Sherry, in his essay for *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, "The Limits of Grammar," expresses doubts about the efficacy of applying language to ideology critique, when grammar becomes a totalizing metaphor for the repressive mechanisms of the state. Sherry points out that writers who maintain an abstract relationship to the state apparatus are nevertheless continuing to inhabit the system they purportedly oppose. "Can we assert a more generative or additive attitude (other than reactive)?" Sherry articulates the necessity for a new relationship between grammatical interventions and social action. It is at "limits of grammar" that new linguistic constructions could arise for new thought constructions. Only then might transformations in language avoid political

aporia or the misconstruals which read a fractured surface as the recycling of a modernist desire/nostalgia for order.

Silliman makes the distinction between language writing and African American poetry as that between differing necessities of form and content: "new forms occur only at the site of already digested contents, just as, conversely, new contents occur only at the site of already digested forms." Sherry, on the other hand, senses the danger of this type of formalism. When normative grammar becomes the analogue for all structures of domination and subordination, the paradigm reduces the work to its own systems of value, assuming both the existence of a unified, originary subject and the ability to express it in a coherent manner. The problem, as Sherry sees it, "is not how to create an undifferentiated 'libidinal' mass, but how to avoid it as an alternative to the oppressiveness of normative grammar." Consciously battling pre-existing categories of literariness, the individual writer negotiates a relationship with her work and with the ideological implications or social vision of her practice. Although objectively indeterminate, these negotiations are essential to the fact of writing. These difficulties — the complex interstices of the writer, the work, language, and the work's entry into the social — were collectively interrogated by these writers and others who shared a belief that these issues were inseparable from the private acts of writing and reading.

Barrett Watten, in a talk published in this same issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (expanded version published in *Total Syntax*, 1985), "Method and Surrealism: The Politics of Poetry," responds to the "Politics of Poetry" issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* by expressing his dissatisfaction with writers who apply political conceits to writing yet fail to interrogate how the politics of poetry implicate the writer and the work in the world: "The test of a 'politics of poetry' is in the entry of poetry into the world in a political way. The means for this entry are not to be found in the identity of politics with a style, where A=B, but in a self-conscious method, and the greatest example of such method to date is Surrealism." He defines a vocabulary of terms which carry through the talk on Breton's relationship to Surrealism and the possible lessons and applications of those terms to Language writing.

Watten's investigations attempt to negotiate the "subjective aesthetic" with a formalist approach, taking into consideration the dynamic relationship between technique, style, and method and the mechanisms which determine the "work in the world." His reading of Ron Silliman's "Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World" brings to bear the desire of the writer which necessitates an "explanatory fiction to reconcile the other which is writing and which is found in writing ... despite the difficulties of method." In three "talks" later appearing in *Total Syntax*, Watten undertakes the problematic of politics and poetry by means of three functions involving the subjective and objective relations of the writer to her work:21

> One could say that *technique* is the principle of construction in the writing. In other words, how the writing is written, prior to the finished work. *Method* is the principle of construction which begins with the finished work, with the activity of the writer as a whole, the extension of the act of writing into the world and eventually into historical self-consciousness. *Style* might be the middle term. At the origin of method, technique is *predictive*; that is, it is capable of producing new meaning, out of a stockpile of resources into a future, possible world.22

In other words, the encounter of the individual producer with material language generates the "technique" that involves the subjective implications of the writer's psychological, biographical, and contingent existence. "Method" is the objective relation of the work in the world and its reflection on the writer. It is determined by the historical conditions in which the work originated and is sensitive to transformations of those conditions, which, as in the case of the Breton, reduced the social scale of the work and its political intentions. For Watten, technique opens onto method. The words laid on the page are enframed by moral or political realities which implicate and negotiate the writer's personal and social existence. When, as in the case of Breton, the two coincide in abstract and concrete terms, the writer has control over his method. But with the transformation of material conditions, method ceases to operate in both spheres, and becomes reduced to a subjective aesthetic. "Style" constitutes the ideological component of the work, which together with method and technique compose a "total syntax" of the text's constitutive spatial and temporal relations.

Or, as Carla Harryman describes this dialectical process, "Characterizing the middle where what's enlarged (subjective) and what's reduced (external) by speaking gather."23 Against Silliman's insistent structural analogies, Watten's approach establishes these relational terms and then tests them against avant-garde precusors such as Russian Formalists, Breton, and Charles Olson. The

impulse behind Watten's self-conscious rehearsals of an avant-garde tradition is engaged with the vital necessity to identify the fact and act of writing in the present. Through a figure of dynamic relations, Watten is then able to explore the various elements of a work which determine its social processes.

"The entry of poetry into the world in a political way" necessitates a consideration of the isolated acts of resistance by the writer and the dynamic of reception which the fact of the work invites. "[T]here is a useful distinction between means and effect between the person and the work."24 Like Sherry, Watten is not satisfied with freedom from normative rules, but is interested in what language enables in the infinite potentialities between signification and form. In "The Politics of Style," Watten uses Charles Olson as an example of how the outmoding of inherited forms by the transformations of contingent reality and new intensities of a language (which no longer "fit") result in a generative tension between form and content. The forms are ruptured by overdeterminations, or overloads of signification, and thereby open up a dialectic of vision and revision. "The 'constructive principle' of the work derives, partly, from the demands placed on the available but overloaded and inadequate modes of statement."

"The fact of style in language itself without forgetting values brought into the poem from its literary past can be the locus of investigation into the poem as ideology." Through this optic, poetry's ideological baggage ceases to be dependent on the commodity status of the book or poem, and instead is placed both in its existence as a material object on the page, as well as in the fact of its materiality in language. In resisting identification, or the impulse for fixity, poetry is placed in shifting contexts and mutating functions. From the predictive potential of construction to the thinking through of method, poetry's social function is articulated against the actual to offer the possible. A desire for social transformation, for the work to provide "new meanings for old words,"25 is everywhere evident in Watten's critical work. Not only the personal investment in writing, the professional writer, or the isolated fact of the poem in the world, but how the agency of the work's components might engage language both socially and politically.

Questions such as these are what made the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* forum both stimulating and important. Nevertheless, this serious investigation into the possibilities of linguistic activism, of converting a formal practice of resistance into one of productive artistic and cultural change could only be articulated in a self-constructed community. The control over production and reception within this restricted economy enabled the coincidence of theory and practice, yet the group's position within the literary field as well as in the culture industry, despite all conscious acts of self-determination, could not preserve its oppositional character. As their poetic works became assimilated into broader networks of critical attention, these theoretical questions were often jettisoned.

The troubling relationship between writing and social relevancy is taken up by Bruce Boone ("Writing's Current Impasse and the Possibilities for Renewal," *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E,* 1981) who traces the development of *art engagé* through modernism and the crisis of left politics in the twentieth century. "Instead of both criticizing power and furthering socialism, the writings which did eventuate from the late 60s — our writing — has concerned itself far more with the critique of power than with an advocacy of socialism — bracketed as too 'thematic,' concerned with content. As a result, our left writing of the 70s has had its characteristic deformation. It has become 'textual' at the price of abandoning any specific political tasks." What he concludes is that an organic relationship26 between writers and their politics is requisite if their writing is to extricate itself from the aestheticist bind of textuality and co-optation.

Silliman's "The Political Economy of Poetry" (1979) rationalizes this relationship by insisting on the primary importance of "integrating composition of the audience into the field of writing" (*L=A=N=G*. 1981, p. 65). The need to position himself and therefore his class in a theoretical frame which could transcend the present oppressive system requires the concrete realization of communicating change on the most local level. "Context determines the actual, real-life consumption of the literary product, without which communication of a message (formal, substantive, ideological) cannot occur" (p. 57). Silliman's rationale seems to condone a practice of "preaching to the choir," or guaranteeing positive reception through certain assumptions of shared codes. He argues that by deconstructing or revealing the ideological constructions of social codes, a poem can activate an interrogation of the structures which produce them. What those shared codes might be, however, do not seem as exclusive as Silliman would like to believe. Silliman's arguments seem to confirm and reinscribe an already instituted *consensual* dynamic within the community formation of the Language school.

As outlined by Silliman, the hegemony of corporate publishers in the production of poetry places the formations on the margins in positions "jockeying for the token slots in the metanetwork" (Silliman, 1987, 30). Poetry which strives for these token slots, however, is invested in the maintenance of the status quo, and is not the mode in which Silliman is interested. For oppositional poetries, writers who position themselves on the outside, audience reception is essential to their projects, militating, for Silliman, a deliberate attention to "the *attitude toward reception* it demands of the reader" (p. 31). This, more than the "content" is the ideological freight of poetry. In frustrating the expectations of the reader/spectator, poetry can reconfigure the customary, hegemonic standards which determine "taste," thereby extending a poem's function into broader scope of "attitude toward information," as well as contribute to changes in the dissemination and reproduction of the "poetic."

Edited out of the essay reprinted in *The New Sentence* is a stronger appeal by Silliman for "the attitude toward reception." This attitude produces the mark of difference for poetic schools, determining both their intention and form.27 The "*consciousness* of response" is palpable at the level of form, making it the primary ideological component of works produced in "aesthetically defined networks."

Just as obviously, different social groups exist for real reasons and will have different poetries. Oppressed groups have, in a very general sense, a similar direction of the struggle which permits coalition building across group borders. The problem for aesthetically defined networks and scenes is how to do likewise.

Community is a way of registering an organic relationship, one which justifies their political project against other "oppressed groups" in which the relationship between individual and group experience is more materially grounded than it is for "the white male heterosexual [who] has come into recognition of his own, pervasive presence" only through "the struggle of non-whites, of women and of gays..." The ideological struggles between networks of predominantly white male heterosexuals, in this "new" context of polyvocal scenes, are, in being "aesthetically defined," restricted to a system of legitimation which seems barely distinguishable from a high modernist mold.

The political project is entwined within a poetic tradition dominated not only by a conventional confessional mode, but also by white male (heterosexual) producers.28 For members originating in a dominant class, yet "prizing an awkwardly marginal position"29 within the capitalist hegemony, an oppositional poetics which critiques power through radical linguistic methods are in danger of becoming "naturalized" through the very "social struggles" enacted with other groups of identical positionings, i.e., the New American and their satellite networks. Forced into a position of antagonism, this group was incorporated within those patriarchal structures of power which would render them the "newest development" in a "dynamic" tradition of American poetry.

Decoding The Sentence

Writers such as Barrett Watten and Bob Perelman were writing in sentence and prose form as early as 1973.30 Ron Silliman's *Ketjak* was published by The Figures Press in 1978, as well as *Sitting Up, Standing, Taking Steps*, and by 1979, Carla Harryman's *Percentage*, Bob Perelman's *a.k.a.*, and Barrett Watten's *Plasma/Parallels/"X"* were all published by Lyn Hejinian's Tuumba Press. Watten's "Chamber Music" from *Decay* (This Press, 1977) is recalled by Silliman in "The New Sentence" as the first poem which drew his attention to this new and unprecedented writing style. The shift in emphasis from sub-semantic signification to above sentence integration repositioned the project away from the concretist tendency.

> I found my new life to be hard, constant attention but a great joy.
>
> Two hundred black boxes, delivered to his new address, haunted his life.
>
> Now that the visual function is outmoded, we are free to live in caves.
>
> You are no more aware of the passing of time than a machine, desist.
>
> What further nature has gone aground on the shadows of uncontested change?

Composed of 58 sentences, "Chamber Music" shifts points of view and juxtaposes these declaratives without temporal order, sequential development, or referential frames. These distinct units deploy the grammatical ambiguities of subordinate phrases to invite equations between asymmetrical constructions. The banality of expression includes lines such as "This method presupposes any value, leaving the choices unapproached," which functions self-reflexively, yet cannot account for, or be subordinated to, the other unassimilable parts.

> The sole precedent I can find for the new sentence is *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* and that one far-fetched.
>
> I am going to make an argument, that there is such a thing as a new sentence and that it occurs thus far more or less exclusively in the prose of the Bay Area.

It could be contended that up to this point Language poetry as a movement was nothing more than a community of writers who shared common concerns over poetry and politics. Yet with the documentation of the New Sentence, a code was instituted, a legitimate formal development located in a history of American poetry. Like William Carlos Williams's variations on the line, and Charles Olson's concentration on breath and syllable, the Language poets became "the first" to look to the sentence as a tool, "the hinge unit of any literary product" (Silliman, 78). Williams's *Kora in Hell*, Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, and Jack Spicer's later work suggest precursors to the New Sentence, but whereas Williams and Stein use the prose poem as a means of "cubist portraiture," the work of poets such as Carla Harryman, Bob Perelman, Barrett Watten, and Silliman himself are not concerned with capturing phenomenological perception in the way suggested by a "portrait," but with constructing linguistic spaces around the absences inherent in signification.

To substantiate his claim, Silliman investigates the systematic omission of the sentence from modern linguistics, beginning with Saussure's own bias against writing in favor of speech. As a consequence of this historical evasion, linguistics can offer only a skeletal definition for the sentence: a unit of writing which is fixed by a period. Without a singular authority delimiting the function of the sentence in linguistics or in literary criticism, Silliman looks to a variety of sources to establish his taxonomy and the possibilities and limitations it poses for the "new prose poetry."

> So what is the *new* sentence? It has to do with prose poetry, but not necessarily prose poems, at least not in the restricted and narrow sense of that category. It does not have to do with the prose poems of the Surrealists, which manipulate meaning only at the "higher" or outer layers, well beyond the horizon of the sentence. Nor with the non-surrealist prose poems of the Middle American variety, such as the dramatic monologs of James Wright or David Ignatow, which do likewise (p. 87).

Moving through Emile Beneviste to Ferrucio Rossi-Landi to Gertrude Stein, Silliman formulates the defining features of the New Sentence, a fundamental property of which is the control or limitation of syllogistic movement of the sentences composing a paragraph. Establishing the integration of linguistic parts up to the level of the sentence, Silliman uses Rossi-Landi's hypothesis of the syllogism as the classic paradigm of above-sentence integration.31 It is only above the level of the sentence that higher orders of meaning such as emotion can occur.

Examining the prose poem, then, Silliman first describes its roots in 17th century France, when it developed as a subversive response to the rigid versification rules imposed by the French Academy. Closer to the prose poetry of the Symbolists such as Mallarmé, the New Sentence is without precedent in American poetry, this in part due to the exclusion of prose from the poetry canon as a "bastard form." He looks to Stein for an explanation of prose: "Prose is the balance the emotional balance that makes the reality of paragraphs and the unemotional balance that makes the reality of sentences and having realized completely realized that sentences are not emotional while paragraphs are, prose can be the essential balance that is made inside something that combines the sentence and paragraph."

The sentence, therefore, stands on the border between these two levels. Lexical and syntactical integration works up to the sentence, and a group of sentences in a paragraph create a context in which higher levels of meaning and expression occur. The play of signifiers within each sentence and the larger syllogistic movement which strives to build an equation is controlled by the syntax or length of sentences within the paragraph. Using these qualities, Silliman incorporates them into a definition which locates this tendency within certain *traditional poetic devices*: What was once visible on the surface is now posited to be within the grammatical structure of the sentence and in

the ratio of sentence to paragraph, an interiorization of poetic form. Sentence length becomes equivalent to the line, paragraphs are a unit of measure, much like the stanza, and the torquing achieved with line breaks are reconfigured within the syntactical makup of the sentence.

This technique, according to Silliman, has "a much greater capacity to incorporate ordinary sentences of the material world, because here form moves from the whole downward. ..." Thus, the reconfiguration of the relationship between part and whole, or sentence:paragraph:complete work allows for these disjunct elements to engage in new, diverse contexts, revealing relationships between lexical units within the syntactic structure of the sentence, as well as illuminating other structures through its relationship to adjacent sentences. Rossi-Landi also offers a collusion between language-systems and labor production, i.e., the sentence and the division of labor: "In this view, the completed tool is a sentence."

Andrew Ross extends this argument of sentence as social tool, describing its social function as both class marker and practical efficiency quotient in a technocratic world: "it is at the level of the sentence, then, as the central symbolic form of the social fabric, that meaning is exchanged, which is to say, culturally received, accepted and consumed by the individual."32 As a political choice, then, the Language project is reframed within a new political formalism, one which resolutely rejects the mythic aestheticism of high modernism in favor of an engagement with "the political realities of a shared discursive condition." Sanctioning this new "organic" critique of capitalist reification, Ross seems to believe that their appropriation and deconstruction of this dominant discursive form marks a sufficient break from the automatism sustained through the experimental formal devices of their avant-garde precursors. Those devices have been systematically defused as the shock of the new becomes deformed into the digestible: "Behind the lure of autonomism is the cunning of automatism." Working within an already commodified form with the intent of exposing the universality of those codes, however, courts the danger of being mistaken for a unconscious symptom of the "shared discursive condition," rather than a self-conscious critique of it.33

Fredric Jameson's reading of Bob Perelman's "China" in his famous essay, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1984)34 provides an example of how the subversiveness Ross attributes to the new sentence, in its theoretical dependence, is prone to misapplication — one which confuses ideology *critique* with ideology. Borrowing Lacan's definition of schizophrenia — the breakdown in the signifying chain — as a "suggestive aesthetic model," Jameson describes the postmodern crisis in temporality as reflected in the inability to unify past, present and future into linguistic coherence through the sentence. "With the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifers, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time."

Perelman's poem is presented as exemplary of this postmodern trend, the "joyous intensities" which displace the alienation and anxiety characteristic of high Modernism through this general category of schizophrenic disjunction. Jameson's reading does account for its being "in some curious and secret way a political poem," yet he is more interested in the schizophrenic fragmentation which he names as Language poetry's "fundamental aesthetic." That Perelman is being identified as a prime example of the cultural status quo proves the vulnerability of any politically motivated aesthetic formalism when it is interpreted as an artefact of the disinterested artist. Jameson divests Perelman's poem of any self-determining political content when he divulges Perelman's original compositional technique: "But we have not yet fully exhausted the structural secrets of Perelman's poem, which turns out to have little enough to do with that referent called China ..." Describing how the author had come across a book of photos in Chinatown and composed the poem as captions to the photographs, Jameson thus concludes, "the unity of the poem is no longer to be found within its language but outside itself, in the bound unity of another absent book."

Jameson's first reading granted the poem "some more unified global meaning," yet this is sacrificed in his second reading by the knowledge of the pre-mediated, pre-meditated process which resulted in Perelman's China. Much like "photorealism," the underlying "reality" turns out to be a simulacrum, and thus renders China unquestionably absent, shattering for Jameson the "unity" of the poem. This privileging of unity (which is Jameson's own priviliging of Modernism), is first posited in the *idea* of China ("within [the poem's] language"), then as lost, outside of the text, within the missing book of photographs. As if this unity could be found in the language of the poem or in the book of photographs, as if a China of the mind was an adequate approximation of the "referent called China," Jameson's own Modernist nostalgia overlooks the residual imperialist impulses of this poem, even as he extols its virtues for *capturing* "something of the excitement of the immense, unfinished social experiment of the New China ... the freshness of a whole new

object world produced by human beings in some new control over their collective destiny; the signal event, above all, of a collectivity which has become a new 'subject of history' and which, after the long subjection of feudalism and imperialism, again speaks in its own voice, for itself, as though for the first time."

How then does Perelman "capture" the "freshness" of this "new subject of history," what voice does he give it? Giving voice to China can only be problematic, unless the author is consciously working within a specific audience context and within a specific tradition where this, albeit self-conscious and politically-sensitive gesture, would be appreciated for its conceits. Geoffrey Hartley's reading of this text is sympathetic, in that he is intent on recuperating Perelman's poem from Jameson's totalizing Marxist agenda.35 Yet there are problems inherent in the construction of a linguistic metaphor for the relationship between China and the First World which fail to compensate for Perelman's conspicuous Eurocentric bias:

> We live on the third world from the sun. Number three. Nobody tells us what to do.
>
> The people who taught us to count were being very kind.
>
> It's always time to leave.
>
> If it rains, you either have your umbrella or you don't.
>
> The wind blows your hat off.
>
> The sun rises also.

Formally composed of twenty-six lines, calling attention to the English alphabet which is being employed to represent this Other, the structural relations within the poem shift and decenter points of reference. There is no narrative which encompasses China, yet even this element of irreducibility is reliant upon the identification of these disjunct parts to this unifying name, "China." Whether or not Perelman is successfully demystifying the Western political notions of China and the Third World, the simple, direct declarative mode conveys a certain innocence or childlike defiance which is, on the one hand, patronizing, and on the other, "properly" self-conscious.

> I'd rather the stars didn't describe us to each other; I'd rather we do it for ourselves.
>
> Run in front of your shadow.

The "unified global meaning" which Jameson senses is determined by the perception of China from an historically informed American capitalist frame in which the relationship with China is recognized as being driven by economic imperialism, patriarchal colonialism, and western exoticism. Perelman is obviously attempting to comment on these, but he employs irony to inhabit the frame from the point of the view of an imaginary "China":

> *Hey guess what?* What? *I've learned how to talk*. Great.

The slippage between the objectification of China from a western viewpoint and the inhabitation of a fictive China which is resistant to those boxes is problematic when the evacuation of the speaking subject tends to both actively resist a universalizing impulse, yet also, (unintentionally) reinscribe "objectivity." Jameson, however, seems to prefer the transference of these linguistic constructions onto a specific site designated by the free-floating, detached signifier, standing in for an historically-loaded nation-people-geography, "China."

The poem aims to reveal the discrepancies between the referent and ideas equated with it, bringing to light the ideological stuffing which fills the gaps, and its affect relies on this acknowledgement. This could be an example supporting Silliman's claim to community, in which personal codes are supported by group understanding, yet what Perelman is attempting to enact extends beyond any group consensus on what China is or is believed to be. Perhaps commenting more on the Western impulse to name and colonize, Perelman, in utilizing China, inverts a post-colonial discourse into a neo-colonial appropriation.

Whether or not Perelman's "China" is ideologically sound, however, the significance of the poem and its exemplification by Jameson as symptomatic of a postmodern aesthetic reveals the downside of interventionist strategies which would enter into the dominant site in order to critique it

from within. Unable to control reception beyond their coterie, their devices became read as a style, a symptom of the the post-modern subject (i.e., the Modernist subject-in-crisis), rather than as a critique of the very subject on which such definitions are predicated.

In the version of his essay published in the *New Sentence* (1987), Silliman takes the opportunity to respond to Jameson's characterization of the postmodern text. Denying that the New Sentence fulfills Jameson's "sentence in free-standing isolation," Silliman insists upon the fundamental contextual nature of the New Sentence, the play and control of syllogisms whose "effects occur as much between, as within, sentences" (p. 92).

"The New Sentence" documents a development which Silliman makes clear is not simply a "postmodern" style:

> Unlike, for example, the short enjambed lines of Robert Creeley, which were so widely imitated in the late 60s, the new sentence has successfully resisted any proprietary appropriation. It is in this sense something different, and more, than a style. The new sentence is the first prose technique to identify the signifier (even that of the blank space) as the locus of literary meaning. As such, it reverses the dynamics which have so long been associated with the tyranny of the signified, and is the first method capable of incorporating all the levels of language, both below the horizon of the sentence *and* above.

The comparison to Robert Creeley's use of the line implicates these writers in a very specific frame of reference, which posits their difference in relation to the "ground-breaking" developments of their New American forerunners. This self-consecration of avant-garde status makes a further claim as to the New Sentence's immunity from "proprietary appropriation." He does not address what element of this new technique had preserved its integrity, but in the previous paragraph, Silliman insinuates an element of the unknown: "it reveals that the blank space, between words or sentences, is much more than the 27th letter of the alphabet. It is beginning to explore and articulate just what those hidden capacities might be."

Listing eight qualities of the new sentence, Silliman offers the reader Carla Harryman's "For She," to practice her newly acquired reading skills:

> The back of the hand resting on the pillow was not wasted. We couldn't hear each other speak. The puddle in the bathroom, the sassy one. There were many years between us. I stared the stranger into facing up to Maxine, who had come out of the forest wet from bad nights. I came from an odd bed, a vermillion riot attracted to loud dogs. Nonetheless I could pay my rent and provide for him ...

Silliman is quick to add that these elements do not compose a "heap of fragments," but cohere through the tension generated between and among these parts, rather than through narrative or any external referential frame. Even after identifying sentence:paragraph ratios and the length of lines corresponding to phonological/ morphological assonance or dissonance, the syllogistic movement cannot be tracked or reduced to any net result. All one can really conclude is that there is no *one* reading. The emotional content of the sentences integrating into Stein's "emotional" paragraphs, however, remains unexplored by Silliman.

The hierarchies which determine cognition/interpretation dissolve within the "vitiated" dialogue,36 and the orientation of meaning production is levelled from the vertical compression of the conventional lyric into a lateral extension of linguistic play. Describing the use of shifters, for example, and the decentering of the "I" through the instability of viewpoints, fails to come up with a summation of these linguistic affects. It is in the dialectical relationship between the constituent parts and the work as a whole that provides an open linguistic space with limited, yet multiple possibilities. The sentences, each being non-referential in isolation, create a shared context within the paragraph, a charged field of signification wherein the reader is free to re-create.

Silliman's taxonomy was motivated by a specific poetic field of production, in which the definition of a distinctive characteristic was essential to their presence in American poetry. Making their mark, Language poetry was now "readable," articulatable, and comparable to their New American predecessors. "The New Sentence" made few political or metaphysical claims, instead concentrating on how a unit of writing previously untapped was being explored by a group of writers endebted to Gertrude Stein.

An Essential Situation

In 1982, Kathleen Fraser's "Partial Local Coherence/ Regions with Illustrations/ A Personal Account Of Encountering" appeared in conjunction with Ron Silliman's *Ironwood* anthology.37 She describes the emergence of these poets as a group, saluting their efforts to break out of traditional prescriptions of "the Poetic" and "value." Recognizing Silliman's indispensible role in the movement, she outlines how he systematically created an audience and frames of reference for writers who may not have been otherwise recognized: "Rae Armantrout, whose discrete, finely-tuned structures needed an informed and caring set of hands to guide them into a readership where they would be received with the appreciation they deserve." With this example, Fraser discloses (and perhaps overemphasizes) the continuing necessity, yet increasingly problematic, mentorship women writers receive from "established and respected male members of the writing community." But there are conflicts between what those male "leaders" would prescribe as "good" language writing and political issues which concern women writers on the left: "while the structural preoccupations of language-centered theory and practices are both stimulating and, at times, concretely useful in this enterprise, their esthetic distaste for self-referentiality and/or *evident* personal investment in one's subject immediately introduces a series of prohibiting factors."

Joan Retallack (1984) has a similar complaint when she juxtaposes Bruce Andrews' *Praxis* with Tina Darragh's *Pi in the Skye* and Hannah Weiner's *Spoke*. Quoting Julia Kristeva on *jouissance*, Retallack sees the control over language employed by Darragh and Weiner as retaining the "warmth of the personal in language" without "the privileged placement, status, and access of the ego-centric authoritative voice. ..." As opposed to the fractured "I" in these two women poets, Andrews' *Praxis*, by denying the reader "an organizing consciousness to push against," is, to Retallack, akin to a hermetic scientificism, utterly divorced from the world and restricted in "play." Retallack's gendered readings of these works begs the question: In evacuating the authorial "voice," do these writers also fail to note the readerly impulse to simply replace the "missing" voice with that of the dominant, white male authoritarian?

Writers like Watten, Silliman, and Bernstein published their talks and papers and even their interviews38 in a determined and concerted effort to establish a platform within a certain educated sector of the writing and reading public. Discoursing on the production of literariness, on the production of poetic value, on the history of poetry in capitalist society, on language as a system, grammar as a form of social control, the division of labor inscribed in language, devices which could resist the ideological illusions of metaphor and romantic transcendentalism, which could prescribe courses of action for the consumer/producer, these men employed both anti-expository as well as conventional modes which could "clarify" these vital points for a wider audience.39 Even as they eschewed the institutionally regulated "coherence" of critical style, however, they, for obvious reasons, also made use of it.40

With the proliferation of theoretical/polemical works being produced by the male poets of the group, the women associated with the movement oftentimes seemed underrepresented. In *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine, for example, the women wrote reviews,41 but there are no instances aside from Bob Perelman's Talk series in which a theoretical examination of poetics was presented by a woman.42 The first issue of Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten's *Poetics Journal* in 1982 took as its topic women and writing, which suggests a lack of attention paid to gender in the years prior. Recalling Rae Armantrout's response to "Why don't more women do Language-centered writing?" as well as Scalapino's response,43 the low frequency of critical work by women, rather than pretending to be a measure of the women's relative "value" in comparison to their male counterparts, may indicate a difference in how and where they chose to express their opinions on writing and politics.44

As editor of the Tuumba series, Lyn Hejinian's contribution to the development of the Language poets' alternative publishing network was indispensible. Maintaining a consistent presence of these poets' names within the literary sphere of production, Hejinian, during the seminal period of the Language movement, 1976-1982, published over forty hand-printed, hand-bound books — mostly shorter works which would have been economically unfeasible for other presses.

Lyn Hejinian's "The Rejection of Closure" was given as a talk in 1983.45

Republished in Perelman's *Writing/Talks* (1985), as well as in *Poetics Journal*, Hejinian's essay is a convergence of French feminist theory and compositional analysis that returns to writing a subjective, psychological aspect. It attends to the political resistance and transformation available through literary work, and also to the personal emotion and desire involved in the work's

realization. "The Rejection of Closure" is an investigation of compositional devices which serve to create formal yet open works:

> In writing, an essential situation, both formal and open, is created by the interplay between two areas of fruitful conflict or struggle. One of these arises from a natural impulse toward closure, whether defensive or comprehensive, and the equal impulse toward a necessarily open-ended and continuous response to what's perceived as the "world," unfinished and incomplete. Another, simultaneous struggle is the continually developing one between literary form, or the "constructive principle," and writing's material. The first involves the poet with his or her subjective position; the second objectifies the poem in the context of ideas and of language itself. (*Poetics Journal*, p. 134)

The conflicting subjective desires for closure, stability, and containment of the chaotic world-experience on the one hand and the desire for discovery, transformation, and renewal on the other are placed next to the objectified relationship of the work's form to its language. These two relationships, however, are not perfectly analogous. Russian Formalists, Gertrude Stein, John Keats, Benjamin Lee Whorf, Umberto Eco, and Goethe are some of the figures who participate in Hejinian's investigation. Without conflating formalism with closure or openness with free linguistic play, Hejinian presents a chiastic and indeterminable dialectic between form and openness. "It is not hard to discover devices — structural devices — that may serve to 'open' a poetic text, depending on other elements in the work and by all means on the intention of the writer."

The "closed" text is one in which all its elements are enlisted towards a single reading, while the "open" is generative, inviting the reader to participate in a process of the work, and "thus resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material, turn it into a product; that is, it resists reduction." It is this infinite potential for multiplicity and freedom from monological discourse or binary structures which Hejinian finds articulated by the new French feminists such as Luce Irigiray:

> It is really a question of another economy which diverts the linearity of a project, undermines the target-object of a desire, explodes the polarization of desire on only one pleasure, and disconcerts fidelity to only one discourse.

The symbolic order, the Law of the father, which insists on an equation between word and thing and represses difference, is ruptured by this other economy of desire.

Privileging parataxis over hypotaxis, with syntax as a cohesive device, the work can offer spaces of signification without the linearity of argument demanded by normative structures. Through this optic of a personal/political poetry, Hejinian shifts the frame onto an integrative field in which the unknown becomes essential, personal as well as political. Tackling head-on the transformative element left unaddressed by Silliman and Watten, Hejinian's invocation of a Faustian "rage to know" introduces the primary, libidinous drives enacted in writing. As words strive for reference, the unconstrainable lateral reach for identity opens the text, which provides a structure for thought, without evacuating its "generative power."

> Can form make the primary chaos (i.e., raw material, unorganized information, uncertainty, incompleteness, vastness) articulate without depriving it of its capacious vitality, its generative power? Can form go even further than that and actually generate that potency, opening uncertainty to curiosity, incompleteness to speculation, and turning vastness into plenitude? In my opinion, the answer is yes; this is, in fact, the function of form in art. Form is not a fixture but an activity. (p. 137)

For Hejinian, there are formal means which, in rejecting the closure of the symbolic order — conventional modes of thought, cognition, and logic — reconfigure the linguistic space and generate gaps in which the units of signification take on new relationships and meaning. Grammatical parallelisms cohere what might otherwise appear as disjunct sentence fragments. "Meanwhile, what stays in the gaps, so to speak, remains crucial and informative. Part of the reading occurs as the recovery of that information (looking behind) and the discovery of newly structured ideas (stepping forward)." (p. 136)

These libidinal drives in language, linked to the theoretical work of Irigiray and Hélène Cixous, allow feminine desire and pleasure to be articulated in equal opposition to the patriarchal order. Hejinian is interested in the "identification of language with power and knowledge — a power and

knowledge that is political, psychological, and aesthetic — and that is identified specifically with desire." (p. 141) She remains dubious, however, of the "narrow definition of desire solely with sexuality."

Hejinian's talk reinfused the discussion of poetics with an attention to the human and mysterious elements in language, mitigating the "scientific" approaches of writers like Silliman or Watten. Hejinian's rhetoric permits a speculative "plenitude," the fortuitous meeting of form and openness. Returning the primary impulse of writing to a psychological human condition, Hejinian picks up where Silliman left off at the end of "The New Sentence." Silliman's "blank space," the absent presence which the New Sentence reveals, dangles with a promissory note: "[The New Sentence] is beginning to explore and articulate just what those hidden capacities might be." Hejinian's stance, consciously linked to feminist poststructuralism, locates a new site for resistance in which the personal and political coincide, negotiating the balance between a personal desire for liberty and the politics of form.

The function of critical theory in the group formation set them apart from their New American predecessors, to whom they frequently made reference. Watten notes, "The failure of the postmodernists [i.e., the New Americans] to develop a comprehensive poetics is now matched, in the university, by the overdevelopment of critical theory without any sense of American writing since 1945."46 The appropriation of contemporary social and cultural theory and the incorporation of those ideas into practice lent credence to their aesthetic production and later came to facilitate the entry of these poets into changing university agendas. Documenting poetics and criticism served doubly as political articulations and as self-promotional material, providing a vocabulary of concepts and terms with which critics could think about the work being produced. By 1986, with a virtual library of language work having emerged in the form of critical collections, anthologies, and poetry, this concurrence of theory and practice paradoxically clarified the group's internal diversity while solidifying their reputation as a coherent formation.

Articulating an oppositional practice and calling upon avant-garde predecessors, this proliferation of textual data soon attracted the attention of critics. "Language poetry" as a complex field of tendencies, contradictions, intentionalities, and potentialities came to designate a body of discourses that, through its reception, hinted at the tensions and constraints of the group's self-realized and self-determined identity.

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1 Silliman's refrain, originally appearing in *Alcheringa*, 1975.

2 Hejinian, Lyn, "The Rejection of Closure," reprinted in *Poetics Journal*.

3 To reduce the politics of the group to that of the most vocal representative, Ron Silliman, is not my intention. But in that he emerged as the most articulate, uncompromising, determined, and "coherent" of the group has definite implications for the ways in which they were perceived from the outside.

4 In order to do justice to the differences of the individual participants, a consideration of their personal poetics and their specific allegiances/conflicts within the formation would be both necessary and desirable. That is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

5 Robert Creeley, Anselm Hollo, Darrell Gray, Lewis MacAdams, Larry Fagin, Bill Berkson, Joanne Kyger, Bobbie Louise Hawkins, and surprisingly, Tom Clark, their most notorious and vitriolic critic, had all contributed at least once to these two magazines in the early 1970s.

6 Ron Silliman notes the arrival in the Bay area of writers including Charles Bernstein, Lynne Dreyer, Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop at the end of his *Alcheringa* selection (1975), but for convenience, based on the subsequent developments and migrations, I will be considering them as primarily East Coast Language writers. The Waldrops, whose Burning Deck press published and (continues to publish) writers such as Silliman, Hejinian, Rodefer, Andrews, Armantrout and many others, were vital to the "movement," and although this satellite community developed in close parallel to the Language project, it was not actually integrated into the formation.

7 see note introducing "Repossessing the Word," *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 2, April 1978.

8 cf. Jakobson, "The Poetry of Grammar, the Grammar of Poetry," in which he outlines the six functions of language, corresponding to six factors. The poetic function is one in which the

message is foregrounded.

9 This Steinian element of a dehierarchized linguistic space exhibits a paratactical structural organization which for most of these writers is a formal means toward a democratic writing practice.

10 see for example, Steven Benson's *As Is*, Kit Robinson's *Dolch Stanzas*, Michael Palmer's *Blake's Newton*, or Bob Perelman's *Braille*.

11 Steve McCaffrey, despite his invaluable contribution to the theoretical inception of Language poetry, fell away from the formation as it became increasingly tailored to a model of "the latest development in American poetry."

12 see Perloff, 1984, Bartlett, 1986, McGann, 1987.

13 from *The New Sentence*, p. 10.

14 This also dictates the education and perpetuation of these codes through the university, which, during the latter sixties, as it became increasingly corporatized, was viewed by student radicals as complicit with the state, and as an appendage to the capitalist machine.

15 Excerpt published in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 2, April 1978 as "Repossessing the Word"

16 "The Metaphysik of Play,"*Parnassus* 12:1, 1984.

17 The editors asked writers to "give their view of what qualities writing has or could have that contribute to an understanding or critique of society, seen as a capitalist system."

18 "The Political Economy of Poetry," a talk first given in 1980, published in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 1981, and reprinted in revised form in *The New Sentence*, 1986.

19 "My poetry recognizes an audience that possesses a bourgeois origin, is educated (to the point of being conscious of literary history), predominantly white and even male. The body of individuals which make up this class has a specific history, specific internal relations, and a specific future." *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, "If By 'Writing' We Mean Literature (if by 'literature' we mean poetry (*if*...))...."

20 *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 7, 8, 9/10, 13

21 see "Russian Formalism and the Present," "Method and Surrealism," and "The Politics of Style," in *Total Syntax*.

22 "Method and Surrealism," *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, vol. 4, p. 129.

23 *The Middle*, Gaz, 1983, p. 1.

24 "The Politics of Style," first given as a talk in 1981, republished in *Poetics Journal*, p. 59.

25 as quoted in *Poetry Flash* #74 and attributed to Bob Perelman.

26 I use the term "organic" to signify the convergence of the personal and political, the dialectical relationship between individual and group consciousness, and its expression in a comprehensible and intentioned manner, which should be differentiated from the "organic" work of art, which, as defined by Peter Bürger, is one in which the parts are subordinated to the whole, subsumed within the unity of a hermeneutic circle. (see his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*). Obviously, the formalism of the Language group suggests a level of artifice which rejects the "naturalness" implied by organicity.

27 Applicable to Eigner and Coolidge as in the example of the non-referential and post-referential distinction: similar formal features need not be transpositions of the same political intentions. Yet distinctions such as these are telling of Silliman's own structuralist bias. The function of any artefact is not altogether predictable and the desire to posit social efficacy or even an alternate evaluative system for works with a politicized "deep structure" is dangerously limiting even as it

enables a utopian project through such self-promotion: "holding up as a value the *consciousness* of response."

28 It is ironic that Silliman consistently uses the feminine pronoun in place of the phallologocentric "neuter" when the constituency he is addressing is, as he admits, primarily white male and heterosexual. Well intentioned but doomed.

29 Steven Benson, "for *Change*," *In the American Tree*, p. 486

30 see Watten's *Opera-Works* and Perelman's *Braille*. Works from these collections were first published in *This* and *Hills*, respectively.

31 Jakobson's explanation also applies: ""In poetry not only the phonological sequence, but, in the same way, any sequence of semantic units strives to build an equation" (Jakobson, 85)

32 Andrew Ross, "The New Sentence and the Commodity Form," *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson an d Larry Goldberg, 1987.

33 Ross's support of the Language school project is also embedded in a broader reformist agenda for Marxist scholarship. Tracking the history of socialist poetry in America from the Objectivists, Ross locates the Language project at a critical juncture coinciding with the shift to Althusserian Marxism. Against the privileging of the novel by Marxists such as Jameson and Macherey, Ross sees the potential of a linguistically rigorous poetry for a new consideration of culture and language in Marxist theory.

34 originally appeared in *New Left Review*, reprinted in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1991

35 see Hartley, "Jameson's Perelman," *Textual Politics and the Language Poets*, p. 42-52. Hartley's book considers the various claims made by the Language group, establishing an Althusserian Marxist critique which he then uses as a template for the poetry's structural functions.

36 attributed to Volosinov and also used by David Antin to describe his own work.

37 *how(ever)*, a journal for experimental writing for women was started by Fraser in 1983 for reasons she addresses in this article: "...there is an understandable wariness in simply following the diagrams of the new formalists who are, once again, male-dominant in their theoretical documents. It would seem more urgent and more interesting, really, for many women writers, to first attend our own buried history and its unearthing. ..." As the male Language poets find commonality through the study of Louis Zukofsky, Fraser's project is interested in "unearthing" Lorine Niedecker, who continues to be overlooked by the academy and, suffering the fate of neglect, her works are, consequently, out of print.

38 see Silliman's *New Sentence* (1987), Watten, *Total Syntax* (1985), Bernstein, *Content's Dream* (1986) and *A Poetics* (1992).

39 see Bernstein's "Characterization" in *Writing/Talks* and *Content's Dream*. The discussion of Silliman's didactic critical style against a Steinian experimental discursive mode is discussed in relation to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine and the possibiltiies for *multiple* discourses rather than a "better" one.

40 Scalapino addresses this in "What/Person," in which she reiterates to Silliman the rejection by *Socialist Review* of her letter of response on the grounds that it was "too poetic and did not qualify as political discourse." She continues: "That is to say, I must speak a language recognized as discourse before it can be regarded as public and as germane."

41 e.g., TinaDarragh on Susan Howe, Susan Howe on Maureen Owen, Rae Armantrout on Carla Harryman. In *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, there was an average of two articles by women printed in each issue, against an average of 25 total. Ron Silliman's "Second Front," in *In the American Tree* presents 21 essays, a third of which are by women in the group, and the majority of these were the only essays these women had contributed to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* during its four-year run.

42 Even so, of the sixteen talks printed in *Writing/Talks*, five are given by women: Rae Armantrout, Bev Dahlen, Carla Harryman, Fanny Howe, and Lyn Hejinian.

43 see Chapter 3, p. 24 ff.

44 Carla Harryman published *The Middle* in 1983, which also appeared in Perelman's collection in its "talk" form. Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* is incredibly significant for its cultural and academic contribution, as well as indicative of the grounds on which the commitments of the women and men in this group may have been divergent.

45 republished in *Writing/Talks*, 1985.

46 *Total Syntax,* p. 1.

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