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Language Poetry: Dissident Practices and the Makings of a Movement

The New Americans vs. the Treed Americans[1]

> What has been used will be used again. So meanings appear only as acts of will. The rain was pushed sideways by its use. He clenched his teeth and drove the sentence inside the sound.[2]

The relations between the emerging Language group and the dominant formation within the local sub-field — the New Americans, under the shadow of figures such as Robert Duncan, Kenneth Rexroth, and Robert Creeley — were mutually reinforcing in their antagonistic relationship to the university system, yet fiercely divided amongst themselves. It is the positioning of Language poetry between these two economies of belief and the control over their own sites of production which can more aptly locate it and provide a useful way of considering how its coming into being was determined by changes already occurring in these other fields. The production of the group's "collective belief" has often been dismissed as a "preaching to the choir," and Silliman's theme of community could easily serve as evidence to support that claim. But a case can also be made for the homologies which provided audiences in new sites of production, such as the universities, where changes in the academic field opened up spaces for the recognition of Language poetry as a significant and undeniably new presence.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the "revolution" of poetry in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and Charles Olson's reconfiguration of the poetic canon, countered the Pound-Eliot-Auden tradition of the academy with an alternate modernism underwritten by a heritage found in Pound, Williams and Zukofksy. Louis Zukofsky, whose master poem *"A"* spans from the late 1920s to the mid-1970s, named the "Objectivist" moment in 1930,[3] along with writers such as Charles Reznikoff, Carl Rakosi, George Oppen, William Carlos Williams and Lorine Neidecker. Their re-emergence as prominent figures in the late 1960s was in large part due to the revisionism of Charles Olson, and in the 1970s, Zukofsky was revered as an elder statesmen for many poets of the Black Mountain strain.

The Language poets' formative relationship to this American avant-garde tradition and their break with it required a cancellation of the basic tenets from which they were claiming independence. The first issue of *This*, in which Robert Grenier rejected this received tradition, also had a photo/memoir homage to Charles Olson. This interdependence and inheritance of a common tradition requires a consideration of the self-definition of Language poetry as contingent on the dominant literary values of the New Americans. This older generation's antagonistic position to the New Critical hegemony had, by the early 1970s, witnessed a shift to the institutionalized center.

Much of the Language poets' "difference" was supported by a re-reading of common ancestral links, rather than a re-discovery of the previously ignored. The appropriation of other Modernist predecessors such as Gertrude Stein and Jack Spicer had already been claimed for the alternate canon of the New Americans. To take an example of Stein, Robert Duncan had published *Writing Writing* in 1964, an homage to the writing of Gertrude Stein. The Language poets also looked to her as a poetic source, with a special feature in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine (December 1978) devoted to readings of *Tender Buttons*.

That their readings of these works were motivated by a rigorous linguistic project exacerbated the tensions which have since been articulated as one of the New Americans' "anti-academicism" or the Language poets' "crude mechanical access." With such radically different readings being performed on these works, a battle over memory became one over the question of canonicity and poetic value. It is in this way that significant issues involving the reproduction of cultural memory and the role of the academic institution/industry come into play. For Language poets such as Charles Bernstein and Ron Silliman, attempts at generating a vocabulary with which to talk about

these works were entwined with a motive of ensuring literary endurance for themselves and their comrades.

David Levi-Strauss, poet/scholar at the San Francisco New College wrote a piece for the June 1984 issue of *Poetry Flash* entitled "On Duncan and Zukofsky on Film, Traces Now and Then." Ostensibly an article discussing two film interviews with these poets, Levi-Strauss took the opportunity to reminisce about an event six years prior. "On December 8, 1978, only months after Louis Zukosfsky' s death, the Zukofsky outtakes were screened at the San Francisco Art Institute under the auspices of the Poetry Center. This proved to be an occasion for the airing of two very different approaches to Zukofsky's work. ..."

According to Levi-Strauss, Tom Mandel, then director of the Poetry Center (also a poet associated with the Langauge group), introduced Barrett Watten to speak about Zukofsky's work.

> [Watten] then went on to perform an operation on parts of *"A"*, separating the poem into so many discrete parts that any hope of integration was lost. He spoke of the conic section as a fixed formal model for one part of the poem. ... Commenting on the technical difficulties with the opaque projector he was using to project the text, Watten at one point said, "This is very crude mechanical access." Many of us thought he was describing his approach to Zukofsky.

Tempering the causticity of this remark, Levi-Strauss admits that Watten was well-meaning, "but so tediously tendentious and *closed* that it did do real violence to the work at hand."

Continuing his account, Levi Strauss describes how, Duncan, having heard enough, sprang up and retook the stage, exclaiming, "you could here me yelpin' out there where my mind is frequently when we come to the possibilities that are suggested: that we have a very large *puzzle* and that we've just got language. Because, in the first place, I in no way believe that there is such a thing as 'just language,' anymore than there is 'just footprints.' I mean, it *is* human life that prints itself everywhere in it and *that's* what we read when we're really reading. I mean, we're good detectives of it — of the traces that are left in everything, including language."

Levi Strauss tacitly supports Duncan and continues his account with Duncan's reading of the last poem in Zukofsky's last book, *80 Flowers*: "It was the first time I, and I imagine most of the other people in the room, had ever seen or heard of *80 Flowers*. Duncan's reading was truly exploratory. ... It was the most extraordinary display of an active poetics dis-covery, opening up a specific text I'd never seen. ..." Duncan's remarks exemplify the assumption of anti-humanism often attributed to the Language poets. It is ironic, in fact, that the original nostalgia for the gesture which initiated a Marxist reading of poetics had by this point been so overshadowed by the "death of the author" that the attempt to view language as material and meaning as coded became equivalent to language ideality. For the language poets, technique above all else is the valued aspect of writing, rather than than authorial sanction of the text's "real" meaning.

The letters to the editor provoked by Levi-Strauss's biased account of the evening — the dramatic encounter between the sovereignty of the old garde and the insurgence of the new — revealed the tensions accumulating around the increased visibility of this group. Silliman's outrage at Levi-Strauss's and *Poetry Flash*'s "[valorization] of censorship" was propogated not only by this incident, but the by "game which is rapidly becoming the pastime of the poetry scene. It's called Bash the Language Poets, and Levi Strauss' swipe at Watten is only the most recent example."4 Between the various re-iterations and personal takes on the event, the letters which came in evidence an ideological timbre which underscores the vital questions of poetics and tradition which seem to have been at the heart of the confrontation. Displacing Robert Duncan, the reigning patriarch of the San Francisco Renaissance, winner of numerous accolades from institutions in the community as well as the universities, those Language poets who came to Watten's aid openly or tacitly supported the intellectualism which had Duncan up in arms.

Duncan's interference and reseizure of the stage was seen by some to be indicative of the fear and reactionary censorship characterizing the general attitude of the New Americans to the Language project. But also at stake were questions of tradition, the implications of poetic assumptions and alliances. The "violence" to the work then turns into an issue of memory. Not only a contest over ownership, this drama was one contesting the value of the aesthetic artifact in relation to one's own self-image: The production of belief in Zukofsky was maintained by Duncan's personal anecdotes and legitimated by his own reserve of symbolic capital. The Language poets, on the other hand, by "sticking to the text," were working to create a basis of belief whose life

expectancy would rely not so much on personality, but on "academic," "intellectual," or "formal" transmission of knowledge. Shifting the terms of value was akin to a heretical break from the dominant tradition which had brought Zukofsky back into public recognition.

An analogous, although not as explosive, scenario took place on the East Coast, over the body of Ted Berrigan. In "Russian Formalism to the Present,"5 Barrett Watten opens, "I want to make a distinction between two different ways of looking at writing. The first is from the point of view of technique. ... And I want to oppose to that which the Formalists called the 'subjective aesthetic approach,' in which writing takes its basic values from psychology or biography. An example of this subjective aesthetic approach to current American poetry would be the recent discussion of Charles Olson as a 'big man,' in other words a biographical myth reduced to physical size" (1). The economy of recognition in the New American scenes was one based on this "subjective aesthetic approach," a recent example being the homage to Ted Berrigan, edited by Anne Waldman, *Nice to See You*. Filled with personal accounts of the magnanimity of Ted Berrigan's private persona, it signifies both the "old world" quality of the New York scene in the late 1960s and the "greatness" of Berrigan to these individual lives. Charles Bernstein's essay, "Writing Against the Body," attempts to salvage the maker from the myth which could extend the overwhelming body of Ted Berrigan into the body of the text, and thereby provide the means by which to think both historically and formally about the work, to contribute to its literary importance, and salvage that which is lost when a tautological circle is drawn around a life and work.

By 1985, the Language poets had been represented in several major publications and had represented themselves in three journal collections and three critical collections. They had been introduced to a larger poetry reading audience through the pages of *APR* and *Parnassus*. Bob Perelman's *Writing/Talks* (1984) and Barrett Watten's *Total Syntax* (1985) documented the talks which had a major function in defining them as a group. With these publications, reviews were soon to follow. Tom Clark, a poet associated with the New York School, now living and writing around San Francisco, took a swipe at Barrett Watten in the January 13 issue of the *San Fransisco Chronicle*'s Sunday Book Review. Clark's derisive tone, not unlike Levi-Strauss's in the Duncan-Zukofsky-Watten affair, sparked a controversy in the pages of the *San Francisco Chronicle* which Clark then reissued in summary form for *The Partisan Review* (1987), following on the publication of Silliman's *In the American Tree*. Stephen Schwartz's "Escapees in Paradise," for *The New Criterion* (1985), although a curmudgeonly dismissal of all alleged "avant-gardes" or "political" poetries coming out of San Francisco, nevertheless served to marginalize Language poetry as well as bring it into a larger media context. The same year, Michael Davidson wrote an essay for the *New York Times Book Review* (February 24, 1985) called "Writing at the Boundaries" which attempted to legitimate the new forms of writing, such as David Antin's performance pieces, Kathy Acker's revisions, and the prose poem of writers such as Perelman.

Under the column, "Among the New Poetry", Clark's "Keeping up with the Avant-Garde" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, Jan 13, 1985) is nearly a blueprint for the antagonistic, conservative New American reception of Language poetry. Dubbing Watten the "principal strategist and critical architect" of the Language group ("a group whose innovative theories have so far largely outdistanced its performance"), Clark employs mechanical metaphors to describe Watten's approach, and makes a concerted effort to defame Watten's ideas by attacking his grammar as "gimmick." Extracting sentences from their contexts, Clark concludes, "This is the kind of mumbo jumbo you'd hear from a guy who stumbled into a linguistics lecture one day, and walked out an instant expert the next." Following this bashing of *Total Syntax*, he then moves on to a poetry still connected to "reality": "Like stakes driven into the ground to found a city, Robert Creeley's finest poems state a sense of primary placement, a landmark kind of emotional definition."

The utter divestment of the term "avant-garde" is obvious from the positive reviews given by Clark to Creeley, Alice Notley, and Bill Berkson. Praised for their artistry in depicting the everyday, Clark treats Creeley with a deference befitting an elder which makes his inclusion here verge on the ridiculous. Creeley appears to be more over the hill than avant-garde: "These are poems of later middle age, when memory replaces action, and nostalgia or regret become familiar emotional terms"; or Berkson, who "in these nicely understated, self-ironic poems opts 'to live in this world,' anyway." Clark has abandoned the revolutionary connotations of avant-gardism entirely and relies on poets of his own generation whose avant-garde moment was, in 1985, at the very least, dated.

That Robert Creeley still holds an "avant-garde" position in Tom Clark's literary schema is telling of the reviewer's myopia, as well as his skepticism of a poet such as Watten in comparison to the genuine article, Creeley, and other older New York School poets, such as Notley or Berkson. In an interesting placement, Hejinian, coeditor with Watten of *Poetics Journal*, ends this set of short reviews: "Berkeley's Lyn Hejinian is one of the most respected practitioners of avant-garde poetry

these days." Clark never explains why any of these poets are "avant-garde," so that the term shifts between the self-proclaimed (Watten) who are not, and the well-established who it would appear, just are.

Clark's inflexibile vision, so resolute in preserving the old-garde, refuses to recognize that these poets are no longer a vanguard. His treatment of Hejinian, the only one of whom he deals with formally, criticizes her for her "discontinuity": "When the holes in the story become the story, there's no story left." This review, like David Levi-Strauss's article, sets up a division between the Language poets and the consecrated avant-garde, and also, in a move characteristic of other critics, places Lyn Hejinian and Michael Palmer at a remove from the more verbally and politically aggressive counterparts.

In June 1985 (probably as a conscious re-agitation of the "poetry war" incited by Clark's attack on Watten's dilettantish linguistic appropriations) *Poetry Flash* published a review of Bob Perelman's *Writing/Talks* solicited from George Lakoff, a UC Berkeley professor of linguistics, specializing in the theories of grammar and meaning. Called "On Whose Authority?" the article endorsed their communal project intellectually, emotionally, and scientifically.

> This is a book of essays and talks by language poets, about what they do, what they think about, and what they care about — as poets: their own poetry, the poetry of others, their historical roots, their social role, their passions. There is nothing cutesy here, no isn't-poetry-wonderful, no talking down; just poets talking seriously to their peers about their deepest mutual concerns.

Lakoff valorizes them for their "authenticity" of feeling, dedication to poetry, and for preserving their project from the rot of institutional cooptation through the production of critical works which usurps the role of the establishment. He denies feeling alienated from such a constructed set of relations, and instead expresses his pleasure in witnessing the "passions" of these writers, allowing him to engage in a sort of textual voyeurism. He grants canonical value to the recent publications of *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, *Writing/Talks*, Michael Palmer's collection, *Code of Signals*, and *Total Syntax* by attributing to them the achievement of constituting a new genre. "The genre is what the movement is about.... It is about the rejection of authority and control, only here it is the authority and control of the critical establishment."

What seems to please Lakoff the most about these new writers is their counter-hegemonic literary pursuits. Underwriting them requires him to present the issues at stake in a simplistic binarism, which would define their project as an unprecedented co-mingling of the theoretical and poetical, without evacuating the emotional under the weight of the polemical: "Passions and ideas both: that is the power of the genre." Muddling his terminology, Lakoff first presents them as anti-institutional, and then commends them for institutionalizing this "genre" in which the "myths" of the anti-intellectual artist are debunked. "Good artists aren't dopes. They read. They think. They talk to one another about ideas. They know what they are doing. And they know a lot more than that. It's about time that fact was institutionalized into a genre."

Lakoff's assumptions of what the category of "poet" entails are crude and uninformed, especially for the audience of *Poetry Flash*. His condescending tone, to the detriment of the writers he is promoting, undermines his own validity as an authority, and provides evidence for the detractors who would argue that linguists do not good poets make. His arguments in favor of these writers are substantiated by a presentation of an elementary linguistic principle, that of referentiality, which Lakoff then equates with a romantic ideality. The language poets, he contends, having rejected this traditional mode,

> have correctly seen many of the limitations and fallacies of the referential theory. Meeting the romantic ideal of communication, they argue, is not what makes good poetry. That theory and that ideal have led to a lot of bad poetry. They have led to a situation where some of the best poetry of the century is overlooked or misinterpreted. And they have handcuffed contemporary writers. The point of the movement is to overthrow by positive force — by good writing of a sort that cannot possibly fit the referential theory and by a usurpation of the authority of the critical establishment. Language poetry is seen as political act in the deepest sense, the reclaiming of the territory of language itself.

This good/bad dichotomy is clumsy and shallow and in attempting to mediate the reception of language poetry, Lakoff alternates between an imperious expository form and a chummy, personal

appreciation, on the one hand legitimating their project from a dumbed down linguistic point of view, and, on the other, barely maintaining the "reviewing" function of the essay, except to use the book itself as evidence of their "correctness."6

That *Poetry Flash* solicited Tom Clark's response for this reason is not surprising. "Stalin as Linguist," in taking the opposing extreme, however, generated a slew of "Flashback" letters which revealed the very real tensions and subversions taking place within the San Francisco scenes. The divisive reactions ignited by these writers' radical textual practice, and more importantly, their aggressive, organized dissemination of theoretical discourses, resulted in a common view of their project as an inflated ideologism, making claims that failed to be actuated in practice. The enclave nature of their project, however, contributed to its perception primarily as a mode of thinking to "be converted to" (Kathleen Fraser) and secondly, as a foil for a lack of "authentic" talent.

Clark goes after the Language poets for their self-determination/narration, their control of criticism, their appropriation of New York School poets, the evacuation of emotion from formal transposition, and cites Jonathan Swift's *Tale of the Tub* to fill out his characterization of them as Grub Street Yuppies (Clark also quotes from Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad*): "Language school criticism is an insect-like analytical method that's ultimately blunted by the inability of those who employ it to think or write clearly. A writer who's all thumbs can never point a finger at anything. By definition whatever such a writer writes will be non-referential because accuracy of reference is continually escaping. For such a writer to celebrate nonreferentiality (as all 'language' writers do, much to the joy of Prof. Lakoff) is a case of the very common condition of reverse envy. A person who does something badly feels compelled to devalue the skill he or she lacks."

The "democratic" values of these writers is then demystified as "solipsistic," "safety in numbers," "gang mentality," and "militaristic." And in "Stalin as Linguist," Clark recounts the battle which took place in and around the pages of *The San Francisco Chronicle* and *Poetry Flash*, concluding that their break with the speech-centered poetics of the Williams tradition is a break with democracy, calling forth Chaucer and Whitman as allies from the literary annals to support him: "Williams's historic decision to base his writing on the spoken American language — paralleling Chaucer's decision to write in English instead of Latin or French, the "literary languages" of his time — was the great democratic gesture of poetry in this century, expanding its audience to fulfill the grandly inclusive aims of Walt Whitman. The language school has set out to draw back the perimeters of that audience, contracting poetry until it fits around only themselves."

The willingness for the purported Marxism of these writers to be read as "Stalinism" is the poetic litmus test that Silliman coins in his review of Watten's *Progress* (*San Francisco Chronicle*, November, 1985). Their intellectual Marxism was often equated to Cold War Communism, and their socialist community values likewise interpreted as a repressive totalitarianism. That Clark's "counter-review" generated so many responses is revealing not only of the offensiveness of his attacks, but of the very predictable position takings constellating around the Language poetry formation. Such blanket dismissals and virtuoso tabloid talk were unable to be ignored by other producers operating in the San Francisco scene, pro-Language and Langauge Bashers alike.7 Any communal formation which attracts attention to itself as distinct carries with it the assumption that it is seeking to gain power through the subordination of others vying for position in the same site of production.

Judging from the sheer number of responses to the sparring on the pages of *Poetry Flash* , it would seem that the fragmentation of the San Francisco poetry community was diverted by the presence of the Language group, reconfiguring the decentralized scene into a bipolar conflict. The empowerment for one faction therefore became directly transferred into a "surrogate social struggle," in which a battle over the legitimacy of differing representations of reality was also one vying for a common audience.

> The poetry scene is decentralized and pluralistic, with tendencies or groups that simply reflect the difference between distinct social constituencies. There is no such thing as a better group of poets. There are, however, real tensions and struggles that occur between social groups, which are played out in poetry as a struggle over an imaginary and non-existent homogenous Audience, capital A. Because of this, criticism in this country tends to address the poet, rather than the poet-audience relationship which actually constitutes the community, the literal scene of writing.8

Poetry for Silliman is an ideological issue which, in the case of the Language school, places them in a contested field of battle with the New Americans. This battle over audience, with the New Americans purportedly guarding a position of dominance against the threat of dissolution

presented by the Language poets, presupposes a hegemony of white male producers in a field serving white male consumers. Defending the value of this communal practice with an assertion of the "poet-audience relationship," Silliman is able to divide the reading public into sectors dictated by identity. As explored in Chapter 4, Silliman's conceptualization of the political value of poetry as inseparable from its reception, requires agreements in the racial, ethnic, sexual, economic, and educational background of the writer with an audience who might "get it." While this claim holds some validity, it also tends towards reductive generalities and minimizes the probability of multiple spheres of influence.

With the publication of the two anthologies in 1986 and 1987, reviews and papers appeared in scholarly journals, with critics such as Jerome McGann, Hank Lazer, Charles Altieri, Marjorie Perloff, Jed Rasula, Michael Greer, and Peter Middleton providing introductions and critical assessments of the group's project and their positioning within the poetic and avant-garde traditions. The major works, those being the anthologies, the critical essays of Watten, Silliman, and Bernstein, and the "talks" compiled by Perelman, comprised the group's representation as a coherent movement with critical texts providing the theoretical frames in which the writers were presented. Although *Hills* and *This* had both ceased publication by 1983, and despite the apparent lull in the animated communal activity which had characterized the decade from 1973 to 1983, the proliferation of discourses surrounding the movement sustained it as a coherent entity.

From 1987 to 1989, the academic establishment took up Language poetry as an interesting alternative to the lyric tradition as well as an opportune moment to reexamine its own critical apparatus. The relationship between politics and poetry was explored with great vigor, yet responses to this group's presence most often focused on their political claims rather than their actual poetic devices. The Language tendency, by providing its own vocabulary, was easily promoted for its alterity, or else critiqued for its self-indulgent preoccupations.9

In 1988 Ron Silliman, then executive editor of *Socialist Review*, compiled a group of Bay Area writers in a collection entitled, "Poetry and the Politics of the Subject."10 Compared to his earlier editorial roles, Silliman breaks out of the Language mode and here presents eight poets to "suggest some of the diversity of current writing by poets who align themselves with progressive political movements." Displaying the heterogeneity of the San Francisco scene, Silliman deconstructs the myth of the homogeneous poetry canon. Leslie Scalapino and Bob Perelman are presented alongside Aaron Shurin, Lisa Bernstein, Nathanial Mackey, Juan Felipe Herrera, Bev Dahlen, and Carol Dorf on a spectrum ranging from "radical social constructionism" to "relative essentialism." The factionalist impulse having abated, Silliman curates a group which permits the multiple perspectives and senses of reality to be gathered from different communities.

To introduce the non-cognoscenti among the *Socialist Review* readership, Silliman first establishes the social functioning of poetry and the machinations of the poetry industry: "Much of the poetry that has been academically legitimated in the United States has been the work of white men with a predictable class and educational background, and even from a particular region, the northeastern United States." By aligning the writers of his collection against the establishment group — which is dominant in class, gender, and race — Silliman is able to frame this aesthetic battle in the form of a class struggle.

> Poetry in this sense, is a test case for the creation of alternate social formations. One political content of the poem is its constitution of a specific social subject out of multiple discourses, a subject that may be decentralized, destabilized or even fragmented. The ways in which this content manifests itself differs dramatically according to the author's (and the audience's) location in the larger social body. Progressive poets who identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history — many white male heterosexuals, for example — are apt to challenge all that is supposedly "natural" about the formation of their own subjectivity. That their writing today is apt to call into question, if not actually explode, such conventions as narrative, persona and even reference can hardly be surprising. At the other end of this spectrum are poets who do *not* identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history, for they instead have been its objects. The narrative of history has led not to their self-actualization, but to their exclusion and domination. These writers and readers — women, people of color, sexual minorities, the entire spectrum of the "marginal" — have a manifest political need to *have their stories told*. That their writing should often appear much more conventional, with the notable difference as to whom is the subject of these conventions, illuminates the relationship between form and audience. It also illustrates why any prescription for a "correct" aesthetic program (socialist realism comes to mind), not unlike the Great

> Books and "cultural literacy" movements, can only homogenize and suppress real social difference.

Silliman's statement could be construed as investing the white male heterosexual with a more legitimate claim to "avant-garde" practices, and with a monopoly on the "decentered" subject.[11] Silliman implies that these historically underrepresented groups must *first* fulfill the need to tell their stories through the conventions of the "natural" imposed by the dominant Western historical tradition (assimilation), *before* they will be able to "come into their own," self-realized and inscribed in the social body to the degree of the white male heterosexual. Silliman places "marginal" in scare quotes, implying the ideological fictions implied in marginality. Yet his own aesthetic categories spatialize and hierarchize the literary field in which those "marginal" constituencies are placed on a lower rung of the literary evolutionary ladder.

In "The Political Economy of Poetry," (1979)[12] using as an example Robert Gluck's naïveté in give the same reading to a gay movement group as he did to a university crowd, Silliman advocates a poetic practice which would "make [the] audience recognize their own presence in the world as part of a dynamic and structured series of relations, to which a variety of options can be applied, yet what this recognition entails, and what these options need to be, depends largely on integrating composition of the audience into the field of writing. The poet who gives the same reading to a university crowd and a gay movement group is neglecting one of them." Yet this statement assumes the homogeneity of both of these "distinct social groupings" and would posit a definable system of values respective to the social positionings represented by the group structure.

While it can be argued that marginalized groups share a more "organic" relation between self-expression and social concerns (i.e., between individual and group experience), it nevertheless also implies that the other divisions within these groups, which intersect class, race, and gender, are irrelevant. The consideration of audience is essential to the realization of a poet's intention, but it at the same time is contributing to a balkanization of the aesthetic sphere, in which shared concerns between members of a group appear to have little or no bearing on the works of others.

Shared codes are indispensible to the formation of community relations, but they are also not fixed within these groups, and the multiple subjectivities which Silliman contends for his own constituency of mostly white male heterosexuals is excluding a whole range of possible interactive and communicative relations with others.[13] In terms of the Language project, Silliman's vocalization of these concerns could construe that project as an abstract high-brow aestheticism which has removed itself from any real possibilities of social transformation by discounting the inclusion of so-called special interest groups.

Leslie Scalapino, one of the writers Silliman included in the *Socialist Review* collection, responded to Silliman's introduction, and their exchange of letters was printed in *Poetics Journal* as,"What/Person, an exchange." Scalapino's deployment of a non-normative expository style confronts Silliman's own "coherence" in a manner which testifies to these different agendas and the regulatory establishment modes which determine the efficacy/integrity of interventionist practices.[14] Scalapino takes Silliman to task for the paragraph cited above, criticizing his implicit value-laden usage of "conventional": "My point about development and form in writing was the following: Those in social power and those without it might be equally capable of questioning their subjectivity. But those who are without social power are less inclined to see reality as orderly; for example, less inclined to see the social construction as unified" (*Poetics Journal*, p. 52). She interprets Silliman as equating the critique of the unified subject with a position of transcendence/objectivity, and imposing an *a priori* essentialist perspective to members of oppressed groups. Silliman responds with an appeal to historically distinct identities and a notion of "privileged oppression" which locates the white male heterosexual in a conflicted relationship to his own position of power.

Advocating a radical pluralism over any nostalgic desire for unity, Silliman speaks for himself and others who find themselves in the quandary of "privileged oppression":

> Ours is not a struggle for unity, but rather with unity itself. ... So language poetry (to pick a project) is not — and can never be — the research and development department for 'progressive' literature. Rather, it is the practical, day-to-day writing of a real community, complex, historical, positioned flawed. Not a struggle for unity (objectivity, transcendence), but rather with the mutual problem of domination in a world of difference. We must not privilege any position, our own included.

The Language project, despite all self-representations which denied its own privileged status, was nevertheless being perceived against the predominantly white male formations of the New Americans, and came to represent progressive insurgency rather than systemic subversion. To return then, to Silliman's introduction to *In the American Tree*, the most obvious reference being a family tree, and his avowed denial of a "hegemonic" position in the poetry "wars": "it is possible to see that each audience is a distinct social grouping, a community whether latent or manifest. It is now plain that any debate over who is, or is not, a better writer, or what is, or is not a legitimate writing is, for the most part, a surrogate social struggle."

The necessity of breaking with the dominant New American tradition placed the Language poets in a contest over the definition of "the poetic." This antagonism and the production of community and audience affiliations could not be reconcile their radical democratic principles with the real conditions of social struggle on the left. Taking for granted the contingency of any evaluative judgement, it is possible to see that Silliman's need to identify a community for himself and to position the Language project within a "distinct social grouping," replicated the "us-them" mentality which relegated other social formations to their own self-designated spaces, and engaged confrontations with the New Americans over dominance in the field and canonical legitimacy.

Respecting difference is no doubt a vital component in reconfiguring social injustice and hierarchies, but, relative values aside, this "hogging" of a tradition is problematic, considering the canonization of the New Americans. No less problematic is the exclusive sanction of white male heterosexuals with the means and sensibility to critique the dominant literary forms. The receiving end of the dissemination of poetic taste is not class, race, or gender-specific, and the concerns of writers from marginalized groups are not as distinct as Silliman would attest. It is no longer the "job" of these writers to establish a "canon" in the form of the dominant tradition, whether an alternate canon or a history of subjects. And it is no longer to be expected that oppressed groups who "have a manifest need to have their stories told" will do so under the conventions of Literature. "Privileged oppression" reinscribes a hierarchy which translates into a self-sanctioned legitimacy, a hegemony on the margins which defuses any counter-hegemonic critique of the capitalist system or of the poetic tradition.

From the conflicts of the mid-eighties surrounding their existence as an insurgent formation, a new set of debates over their actual or perceived contributions to American poetics arose in 1988, indicating the movement's full elaboration. This element of closure permitted evaluations to be made regarding the changes they had effected in the field.

Earlier in 1988, a debate between Michael Davidson and Eliot Weinberger, executive editor at *Sulfur* magazine, was published following Weinberger's bashing of Language poetry. "A Note on *Montemora*, America and the World"15 recalled the ethnopoetic magazine which discontinued in 1982, and the failure of the subsequent generation of avant-gardists to continue the important practice of translation. Finding the Language group conspicuously lacking in significant contributions through international exchange or importation of foreign writing, Weinberger finds it characteristic of "an era of rampant nationalism and xenophobia." The stylistic proclivity for the non-sequitor is read by Weinberger (through a Jamesonian postmodern lens) as an ahistorical reflection of Reagan-era depthlessness, a pillaging of the great Modernist techniques into replications of television sound-bytes.

Davidson inveighs against this substitution of "broadside blast for careful analysis"16 by calling forth the importance of continental theory to Language writing, as well as the influences of the European avant-gardes to the group. Countering the equation of the non-sequitor with mass media reification, Davidson characterizes it as a paratactical strategy which "functions not to destroy history ... but to bring alternate forms of temporality into play," extricating writing from teleological frames. What appears on the subsequent pages of this exchange are issues which bring to bear the historical precedence, insularity, canonic interventions, and literary contributions of the group. As a politically motivated movement, Weinberger finds it lacking with respect to the creation of an alternate canon, failing to provide "a new context in which to locate the new" (p. 199). By doing so, it would contribute to public understanding rather than fulfill its own narrowly defined goals. Theoretical discourses do not satisfy Weinberger's criterion of expansion of the field, which he concludes, as Tom Clark had bombasted in years previous, is contracted by the intransigence of this *troblar clus*.

Alongside the appearance of this exchange of letters, Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Clayton Eshleman gave their own opinions of the Language school, and Ron Silliman's MLA Paper,

"Negative Solidarity: Revisionism and 'New American' Poetics" was also printed. Later that same year, a collaborative statement, "Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto," was published in *Social Text* 19/20. Each one of these articles treat Language poetry as a fully elaborated fact, locating it in a landscape of American poetry sandwiched between bland academic verse and New American individualist poetics.

The *Social Text* Manifesto, a collaborative statement issued by Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, Bob Perelman and Barrett Watten, signifies the recognition on the part of these individuals of the need to assert a degree of agency superceded by the categories inscribed by critical responses.

> While we are flagrantly writing this article as a group, the perceptive reader will already have noticed that until this point neither the 'Language School' nor 'Language Poetry' have been named. This is no accident; the politics of group identity are a problem (and challenge) particularly for those alternately identified within and without it. We would all, in short, admit to being primarily interested in our own work but does that release us, or it, from social context? (p. 272-273)

Peter Middleton discusses the problematic mode of address employed by the poets in this document, wherein "the perceptive reader" is welcomed into the coterie which posits the "we" of the collective in "this other space where identity remains intact, where 'we' can speak of 'our' work to an 'anyone.'"17 The dynamic of the individual within a community formation guarantees a measure of social perspective by placing poetic production directly into a communal process, diverting the "alienating processes of social atomization" (p. 273). They claim that the shift in focus from the individual "expressivist" poetry has formulated a dialectical relation between individual work and social context, a "congruence of method *outside* the 'self-sufficient poem' [that] has opened up new possibilities of agency for the poet" (p. 274).

This narrative of Language poetry ends in 1988. Having evolved from a generative antagonism with the previous generation of writers, the group became increasingly incorporated into the university structure, enough so that Eliot Weinberger could state, "The rise of 'language' poetry occurs exactly at the moment when the English Department was split in two: one branch remaining as the Eng. Dept., and the other as the Creative Writing Program." Silliman's MLA paper, "Negative Solidarity" addresses the belligerence of the New Americans when confronted with the "intellectualism" of the Language school. Organized around a common oppositional stance towards the academy, the New Americans experienced "a loss of internal completeness" as they became assimilated into "a heterogeneous 'mainstream,'" and the Language group provided the negative force necessary to regain a provisional sense of cohesion.

Silliman's analysis cuts both ways, however, and the conditions which were constitutive of the Language phenomenon necessitated an actively oppositional stance which claimed ideological battles with all established orders. Espousing change through radical democratic ideals, the movement, as a utopian avant-garde, could only maintain difference through the negation of actual competitors or regulators controlling the field. When the field itself transformed, along with the university structure, the group's initial terms shifted and became appropriate institutional tactics. Elaborating critiques of the Modernist subject, incorporating poststructuralist theories, invested in canon reformations, and having acquired the language of the academy, their gradual installment into the new critical hegemony now locates many of them in faculty positions.

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1 As coined by Clayton Eshleman in *Sulfur* 22 (Spring 1988, p. 195), respecting, with an ironic edge, Silliman's resistance to the label, Language, to refer to the writers included in *In the American Tree*, in the same way that Silliman refers to the writers of Donald Allen's anthology, *The New American Poetry,* as the "New Americans."

2 Bob Perelman, *a.k.a.*, Tuumba, 1979, p. 7.

3 "An Objective" was solicited by the editor of *Poetry Chicago*, Harriet Munroe, to describe this "movement." see Allen, *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, 1973.

4 "Flashback," *Poetry Flash*, #136, July 1984, p. 7.

5 originally part of the talk series, since reprinted in Total Syntax.

6 Robert Glück reviewed Barrett Watten's *Total Syntax* in this same issue of *Poetry Flash*, and is a much more even-handed and well-considered critique and promotion of Watten's project which maintains the individual poet's integrity apart from the Language rubric.

7 Gloria Frym expressed her outrage over Barrett Watten's reaction to the Lakoff-Clark incident. According to Frym, and later recounted by Tom Clark in his *Partisan Review* article, Watten sent out a "not for publication" message to members in the San Francisco poetry community, calling for a boycott of *Poetry Flash*. Frym finds Watten's actions intolerable, tyrannical, and arrogant: "What sort of dictatorial force is at work here? And has been at work for the last 10 years? It is work that is more symptomatic of our era than critical of it. It is an attitude of an increasingly right-wing, de-personalized corporate sucking up of individual voices" (*Poetry Flash* #149, August 1985). Likewise, Fredrick Pollack writes in, "Language-school leftism is either stupid or disingenuous, the icing on a cake only bourgeois intellectuals can afford." And Ed Dorn: "That the hand-me-down theories of 'the language school' should have received *any* first rate attention, let alone the careful inspection you printed, could turn out to be the literary anomaly of the late twentieth century. But Tom Clark is a serious and generous man, as perhaps only a writer who makes his living writing can afford to be. I assume the school as a whole is grateful." Jerry Estrin presents an opposing opinion: "Clark is basically a journalist whose 'facts' in their relation to poetry consist of the hearsay of his cronies. That is, male bar talk gets printed as authority." And in the next issue, Joe Safdie writes, "Ever since I moved to the Bay Area in 1980, a group of writers — who have, at times, denied they were a group at all — have almost monopolized discussion of current poetic practice. Their *work* has not been homogeneous, but the *discussion* of it, and of other writers' work, largely has been.... Perhaps the main virtue of Tom's article is that it gets this discontent that many of us in 'the community' have felt for years out in the open, where it can be debated and better understood." Benjamin Hollander writes a lengthy, concerned letter on the grounds of Clark's dismissal: "What first troubles me in Clark's argument is his assumption that the conjunction between linguistic study and poetic practice should be muted and made illicit." Clarifying the historical and poetic validity of linguistic connections to poetry, Hollander tempers the otherwise reactionary and non-critical "counter-punches": "We are witnessing, in this climate, territorial readings without accuracy of reference or representation."

8 Silliman, Ron, "Flashback," *Poetry Flash* , #136, July 1984.

9 The first issue of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *City Lights Review* (1987) featured a "panel" on "Political Poetry and Formalist Avant-Gardes, Four Viewpoints." Four male critics, Adam Cornford, James Brook, Iain Boal, and Tom Clark, responded to the question, "Does so-called political poetry have a political-agitational effect on its readers? Are the connections between formalist avant-gardes and their associated political tendencies purely fortuitous? Is the opposition between 'formalist' writing and 'content-oriented' writing false, real, productive or unproductive? What of the relationships, if any, between poetry and social revolution, or poetry and the transformation of life?" It seems obvious that the influence of the Language school presence was being specificallyaddressed (and undermined) under a veil of "general observation." In each instance, the Language project is critiqued with varying degrees of vitriol.

10 "Poetry and the Politics of the Subject," *Socialist Review*, July-September 1988, p. 65.

11 As he articulated earlier in the decade distinguishing between the writing of African Americans and "aesthetically-defined" groups, "new forms appear only at the site of already digested contents, just as , conversely, new contents appear only at the site of already digested forms," (*L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, "If by 'writing' We Mean Literature (if by 'literature' we mean poetry *(if...))....*", 1979.

12 reprinted in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E,* 1981 and *The New Sentence*. see Chapter 4, p. 43-45.

13 The *Socialist Review* collection was intended to illustrate the heterogeneity of the San Francisco scenes, as well as demonstrate the newly defunct polarity of conventionalist / avant-garde poetries. The work of such writers such as Aaron Shurin, Nathaniel Mackey, or Lisa Bernstein represent the breakdown of categories and bridges being formed between communities.

14 As mentioned above, Scalapino describes the rejection by *Socialist Review* of her letter to the editor. On the grounds that it was "too poetic and did not qualify as political discourse. ... That is to say, I must speak a language recognized as discourse before it can be regarded as public and as germane."

15 "A Note on *Montemora*, America and the World," *Sulfur* 20, 1987.

16 "Davidson and Weinberger On Language Poetry," *Sulfur* 22, 1988, p. 178-188.

17 Middleton, "Language Poetry and Linguistic Activism," *Social Text* 8-9, 1990, p. 242.

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