



Aarhus, MG 2023 'Prefigurative Poetics: Language Writing's New Sentence and the Politics of the New Left.' *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 11(1): pp. 1–22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.10213>



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Prefigurative Poetics: Language Writing's New Sentence and the Politics of the New Left

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This article argues that prefiguration is an essential concept for understanding the postwar avant-garde's affiliation with social movements. Against the backdrop of important recent arguments that link Language writing to the failings and inner conflicts of the 1960s, this essay claims that Language writing was bred out of a complex dialogue with the New Left as both a result of a disillusionment with political speech and an attempt to carry on the New Left's democratic experiments. I show how the technique invented by Ron Silliman and other American West Coast poets called The New Sentence not only was a way of posturing in the established language of the New Left, but actively sought to continue the political legacy of the 1960s in much more direct ways than previously acknowledged. Most importantly, the New Sentence inherited the notion of prefigurative politics and the hopes that such a politics, if transferred to poetic form, could enact change by constructing an alternative model of society. As a merger between New Left politics and institutional critique, the New Sentence—and other avant-garde strategies after '68—prefigures new ways of life through aesthetic form.

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How can we understand the relationship between social movements and politically engaged poetry? The editors of Commune Editions, Juliana Spahr, Jasper Bernes and Joshua Clover, recently compared engaged poems to *riot dogs*, the stray dogs that became famous during the 2008 Greek riots. Riot dogs do not spark political protest or tell protestors what to do, but they follow the lead of protestors and “catalyze the feelings people bring to the streets, the way a poem read out loud to a crowd might” (Voyce). This article offers to historicize American avant-garde poetry with a similar understanding of literary activism in mind, as it traces how poetry came to follow in the footsteps of the social movements of the 1960s. However, while post-68 experimental poetry acted as a riot dog to the political movements of the immediate past, it also transcended this function and came to embody some of the movements’ strategies in its form.

The article considers the case of the American poetry group referred to as the Language poets, Language writing, the Language school, or language-centered writing and its relationship to the New Left of the 1960s. In invoking the term New Left, I mean to refer to groups such as the Free Speech Movement, the Student Movement and the early Environmentalist movement that fought for a variety of objectives but all broke with traditional hierarchical organizing and the rigid party politics of the Old Left. What I here, for short, will call Language writing was a poetic movement that arose in the 1970s inspired by avant-garde and modernist poetics of the early twentieth century. The connection between Language writing and the New Left is a much-contested topic in scholarship, as Language writers have been criticized for posturing in the guise of radical politics while still seeking support and canonicity from mainstream literary institutions and English departments. While it might be true, as Julianna Spahr has claimed, that “of all the poetries that make political claims at the last half of the twentieth century, Language writing had fairly weak ties to street politics” (Spahr 7), the group is nevertheless exemplary of post-68 experimental poetry in its belief that *form is political*.¹ In this sense, Language writing acted out its politics in the realm of poetics as it sought a form that was more egalitarian and, ultimately, democratic. It is neither my intention here to offer an apologia for Language writing nor to condemn the phenomenon on aesthetical or political grounds. Rather I offer a view of prefigurative poetics as one strategy (amongst many) through which poetry in the postwar period sought out political ends, and as potentially useful in some contexts while quite powerless in others.

¹ The idea that literary forms bring with them particular values and norms has recently been theorized by Caroline Levine and other “new formalists” (Levine). The new formalism of recent literary studies, however, differs from the formalism of Language writers that tended to highlight the oppressive nature of mainstream forms.

With this piece, I suspend judgment on the quality or radicality of Language writing, instead using the group as a case to conceptualize what I call “prefigurative poetics.” Prefigurative poetics is the practice of *prefiguring* a desired society through poetic form—and this strategy, I argue, was inherited from the prefigurative politics of the New Left. Whereas the affiliation of Language writers to the New Left has been well-established, the exact way that concrete political strategies informed this literary upheaval has not been properly analyzed. Barrett Watten has argued that Language writing’s critique of speech was born out of an attempt to “become outside” (140) in opposition to the literary and political status quo. More recent scholarship has described the link between Language writing and the New Left in a much more pessimistic tone. Chen and Kreiner argue that: “As liberation movements faded from the streets, American poetry provided a cultural proxy for their concerns” (28), and Language writing became the placeholder for the Marxist Left in the poetry wars of the 1970s. Hickman has framed the same development even more critically, accusing Language writing of basking in a context of political defeatism as it “set out to fill this political vacuum, and to fight a now one-sided political crisis with a cultural formation” (142). While these recent literary histories of Language writing inform this article, it is my claim that scholars have not paid sufficient attention to the political strategies of the period. Rather than confront large aesthetic questions around the relationship between politics and art, the point of this article is to think about the concrete interactions and links between poetics and social movements. If we compare literary form to political strategy, we can differentiate the ways in which the avant-garde paralleled the movements of the 1960s, rather than assume a connection based on the poets’ own proclaimed sympathies. The point is not simply that literature imitated the political movements of the 1960s, or uncritically tried to apply political principles to art, but that this strategized poetics bred new forms of literature.

Academic debates about the politics of Language writing span several decades and have various well-established positions. As opposed to early depoliticized criticism that contextualized the movement in relation to the American poetic canon (Perloff), arguments in the 1980s and 90s tended to frame Language writing in terms of opposition, defamiliarization, and negativity (McGann; Hartley; Reinfeld; Lazer 6–18). For these critics, the politics of Language writing was located in its capacity to oppose poetic habit or, indeed, habits of everyday language formation.² Missing from

² In an important study, George Hartley for instance hailed Language writing for its ability to expose the ideological frames around which we interpellate everyday speech acts and thus its ability to subvert the very processes through which power operates in language (Hartley 32). In this way, the oppositional strategy of Language writing could at times be framed as a form of class struggle—despite the relatively bourgeois class status of both the poets and the readership—which tried to wrest language from its control in the hands of the ruling class. Similarly, Jerome McCann under-

these early discussions, however, was a more pragmatic or sociological engagement with the crowds that read poetry and the institutions that form it. After all, Language writing's main appeal was not to the proletariat but to a particular class of people who could afford to take out several hours from their busy schedules to read obscure poetry or who were invested in it through their jobs as academics. In fact, the tendency of Language writing to embrace difference and Modernist "difficulty" in opposition to a claimed mainstream of American poetry can be understood in connection to the institutional developments in these years where poetry was becoming increasingly marginalized from public debates, while finding a steady place (and source of income) in American universities (Perelman; Hickman 156). The elitist tendency of Language writing to actively seek marginality—which, as we will see, can also be interpreted as a result of its prefigurative poetics—was uncritically embraced by early apologists who saw its high formalism as an end in itself. More recent criticism has questioned whether Language writing was as radically oppositional to general social developments as it claimed, opting to see literary developments as reflecting political or economic changes. Important recent scholarship has framed Language writing in the context of the fragmentation of the American Left into factitious identity groups (Chen and Kreiner; Yu) or in terms of the postwar avant-garde's convergence with the establishment of a new economic regime or "new spirit of capitalism" (Bernes). Common to these recent studies is an interest in reading the Language writers "against the grain" (Duncan) of their own claims and their own allegedly anti-capitalist aims. Similarly, my aim with this piece is not to pass judgment on Language writing's political or aesthetic accomplishments but to see them as symptomatic of a prefigurative strategy that has shaped much small press literature since.

New Sentence, New Politics?

The origins of Language writing can be dated rather precisely to the beginning of the 1970s and the publication of the manifesto "On Speech," in which the poet Robert Grenier exclaimed his famous phrase "I HATE SPEECH".³ Grenier's manifesto has

stood the movement in a tradition of oppositional poetics descending from Romanticism which intentionally rejected narrative conventions in order to point to "new orders and 'realities'" (647). In Hartley's words, Language writing was ideology critical, in McGann's it was "nonnarrative," but common to most of these early critics was the insistence on subversion, otherness and radical difference. For a more recent argument that frames Language writing's subversive strategies in relation to Rancière's aesthetics as a form of redistribution of the sensible, see Fisher.

³ I here inherit the genealogy presented by Ron Silliman and Bob Perelman (Silliman, *In The American Tree*; Perelman). For an alternative genealogy emphasizing the particular feminist foundations of the group as an attempt to "find a politics that enables subjects of difference to work together", see Vickery.

previously been interpreted as a break with an American poetic tradition that imitated speech patterns and spoken language, such as Projective Verse and some Beat poetry.⁴ Similarly, if we think of protest movements of the 1960s and early 70s, it is clear that many of these movements granted a significant role to sincere, authentic expression. Sincerity was understood as a way of resisting the cold instrumentality of the system—or what the student activist Mario Savio, in his famous speech in Berkeley in 1964, metaphorically called “the machine”:

There comes a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part; you can't even passively take part, and you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all.” (Savio)

Throughout the 1960s, speech in American poetry became associated with a similar kind of sincere authentic subjectivity, grounded in the body, which was able to speak freely and from the heart. Emerging at the cusp of the 1970s, Language writing challenged the poetic canon of speech, in part because such a position had been neglected in the activism of the 1960s.

Even though Ron Silliman is often associated with the New Sentence—because of his 1977 essay which coined the term—the technique is closer to a collective invention developed within the community of Language writers in the San Francisco Bay Area of the 1970s. As a writing technique, the New Sentence is fairly straightforward to describe, as Bob Perelman later pointed out: “A New Sentence is more or less ordinary itself, but gains its effect by being placed next to another sentence to which it has tangential relevance” (Perelman 61). In other words, the New Sentence involves putting radically different sentences next to each other, or shuffling them around so they come to seem out of order. Other traditional avant-garde techniques like collage, détournement, or the cut-up do similar things, but the interesting feature of the New Sentence is its effort to embody particular formal principles for political reasons. Admittedly, this creates writing that is very strenuous to read—at least for long periods of time. Consider for instance the following paragraph from the beginning of Ron Silliman's first New Sentence-text, *Ketjak*, which was written in 1974:

⁴ See for instance, Perloff.

Revolving door. Earth science. Fountains of the financial district spout soft water in a hard wind. How the heel rises and the ankle bends to carry the body from one stair to the next. She was a unit in a bum space, she was a damaged child. The fishermen's cormorants wear rings around their necks to keep them from swallowing, to force them to surrender the catch. Dark brown houseboats beached at the point of low tide—men atop their cabin roofs, idle, play a Dobro, a jaw's harp, a 12-string guitar—only to float again when the sunset is reflected in the water. Silverfish, potato bugs. What I want is the gray-blue grain of western summer. The nurse, by a subtle shift of weight, moves in front of the student in order to more rapidly board the bus. [...] We ate them. (Silliman, *The Age of Huts* 3)

If we compare this piece of writing to Mario Savio's speech from ten years earlier, we see that on a formal and rhetorical level, the two pieces have very little in common. As opposed to Savio's coherent and emotionally tantalizing piece of oratory, the sentences in Silliman's text flow without causal relationship or emotional build-up. Further, as opposed to Savio's continual use of metaphors like the machine, the above quote seems to be devoid of metaphors—or, rather, if the reader intends to read any of the images in the passage metaphorically, she needs to perform a rather large mental leap. On the surface, the Silliman quote appears to simply be a compilation of detailed imagery, with primarily a visual character, but where the intricate connection of part to whole—necessary for metaphorical interpretation—is missing. Lastly, whereas the Savio speech repeats the universal “you,” which stands in for the generation of young people and students he is speaking for, we are often confused about who is speaking in *Ketjak*, which is in part a result of the variable use of personal pronouns (she, I, he, and we) which disorients the reader's perspectival orientation and point of view. In fact, the beginning of *Ketjak* seems to provide the reader with as few interpretive guidelines as possible for a sequence of grammatically coherent and relatively ordinary sentences. Having thus described the upheaval in style presented by New Sentence-texts like *Ketjak*, this essay moves on to reconsider the link between the New Sentence and 1960s social movements through the concept of *prefiguration*.

Prefigurative Politics

There is a tendency to understand the politics of the 1960s—and May '68 in particular—as either the first or the last of its kind; as either the last convulsions of a militant working class or as the dawn of “new social movements” that sought liberation beyond class-based issues. A more nuanced approach, in my opinion, is to focus on the strategies and methods of the 1960s in order to avoid some of the more

exaggerated claims. Rather than concentrate on a handful of influential thinkers and ideologues like Herbert Marcuse, C. Wright Mills, Paulo Freire or Guy Debord, this approach understands the New Left as the coming into popularity of a set of activist strategies that broke with an anchoring in class and party and sought to transform society through grass-roots mobilizing. One influential strategy in this endeavor was prefiguration or prefigurative politics.

Prefigurative politics is the attempt to create a small utopian community in the hopes that this community, through its alternative norms and values, might prefigure a better society, and that this prefiguration can affect the constitution of a future social order. Whereas the Old Left was organized around the party system with a hierarchical structure, an orthodox political line (sometimes tied closely to the Soviet Union) and one or more representatives, the grassroots groups of the New Left were often organized in a horizontal structure where the political program was determined communally through the participation of every member of the group. First coined by Carl Boggs, the term “prefigurative politics” was taken up by the historian Wini Breines in her analysis of the organization of the Students for a Democratic Society. But the American lineage of the strategy goes back at least to the Free Speech Movement’s early participatory meetings at UC Berkeley, or even the Civil Rights Movement and its attempt to create the “beloved community” through the praxis of non-violence.

As many have pointed out, the Civil Rights movement—and the anticolonial struggles before it—used prefigurative politics very consciously, not as a romantic or utopian gesture but to yield concrete results (Miller; Lightsey). Continuing this strategy, many social movements of the 1960s used participatory democracy on a micro-level to prefigure and help formulate a less exploitative and more democratic society on a macro-level: “The crux of prefigurative politics imposed substantial tasks, the central one being to create and sustain within the live practice of the movement, relationships and political forms that “prefigured” and embodied the desired society” (Breines 6). In this way, various New Left groups acted out their goals in their inner organization. For Wini Breines, this performative aspect was the essential strength of the New Left as it sought to oppose the cynicism and exploitation that dominated society writ large.⁵ Thus, Breines claims that the critical potential of prefigurative politics is not only found in its direct influence over the institutions of society but also in its ability to indirectly shape people’s hearts and minds in more democratic directions. As such, the effects

⁵ “It is my conviction that the attempt to seek the ‘salvation of the soul’ in politics, to forge a new definition of politics in which violence, authority and hierarchy did not reign supreme is the most unique and powerful legacy of the new left” (Breines 56).

of prefigurative politics depend as much on its pedagogical mandate as on its concrete political results.

Recent years have seen the resurrection of prefigurative strategies in various social movements from Occupy Wall Street to the Arab Spring (Swain). Srnicek and Williams have criticized contemporary prefigurative politics for being part of a naïve and unfortunate trend on the Left towards what they call “folk politics,” where larger claims for systemic change have been abandoned in favor of a fetishization of localism and direct democracy as ends in themselves.⁶ To be sure, this harsh indictment of prefigurative politics does not take seriously the pedagogical prospects of prefiguration and discounts the historical victories that prefigurative politics have won, particularly in the domains of cultural policy and anti-colonial struggles. After all, if Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi both subscribed to variants of prefigurative politics, the strategy can hardly be considered powerless. However, Srnicek and Williams rightly point out that a fetishistic commitment to prefigurative politics can cut off social movements from the institutions they wish to change. The dangers of prefigurative politics are similar to the dangers of vanguardism in that the people practicing prefigurative politics necessarily claim a moral higher ground and risk growing indifferent to those that *just don't get it*.⁷

Many artistic practices share important characteristics, strategies or goals with prefigurative politics—including the more politicized parts of the avant-garde tradition. In *Theory of The Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger argues that a distinguishing feature of the traditional avant-garde, which emerged and was active in the interwar period, was “the attempt to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art” (Bürger 49). Thus, a large part of the avant-garde tradition can be said to have been distinctly prefigurative, because it attempted an organization of life that was valid for all of society within the small community of a specific art group. Art was thought of as the grounds from which a new better society could be built—in a similar way that small participatory communities in the New Left were thought of as the means to a better social order.

Just as the concept of prefigurative politics can serve as a prism through which to understand the redefinition of political activism that took place in the 1960s, it can also help explain much political literature from the same period. In American experimental poetry, prefigurative aesthetic gestures have appeared repeatedly since the Second World War. Projective verse, for instance, can be interpreted as an attempt to theorize

⁶ According to Srnicek and Williams, these “prefigurative islands, surrounded by an implacably hostile capitalist environment” (Srnicek and Williams) are ultimately powerless because they have given up the larger project of counter-hegemony in favor of ethical (rather than strategic) gestures.

⁷ See also Farber.

and practice a freer and more immediate poetry as a counter-model to the oppressive formal constraints of traditional lyric poetry and hierarchical devices such as the metaphor. Similarly, the homosocial communities of the Beats, and the establishment and delineation of “the best minds of my generation” (Ginsberg 9), can be interpreted as an attempt to create utopian social forms and counter-cultures that oppose existing social relations. The notion that guides these experiments in literature is that a more ethical form of writing has consequences for, or reflects positively upon, society at large.

The New Sentence as Institutional Critique

As critics have suggested, the concrete organization of the Language writers was never a utopian space free of power relations or in-groups and out-groups. Yu, Chen and Kreiner have all described the so-called “poetry wars” of the 1970s as exemplifying the fragmentation of the Left, as class issues were increasingly played out against struggles for cultural recognition.⁸ Language writing’s critique of “persona-centered, ‘expressive’ poetry” (Silliman et al.) mirrored the Marxist Left’s critique of identity politics, but later itself became a kind of (pseudo)identity that could be applied strategically to claim the superiority of Language writing against competing groups (Yu). Silliman would go on to claim that the compositional question around which he constructed his New Sentence poem *Tjanting* was: “What would class struggle look like, viewed as a form?” (Silliman, *Interview* 35). Thus, central to the political claims of Silliman and many other Language writers was an assumed analogy between aesthetic form and political form, where the poem was considered synecdochical to politics, as poetic form in a sense espoused a model for the politics of society writ large.⁹ The assumption that a more egalitarian poetic form automatically aligns with the struggle against social inequality is clearly problematic, as was Language writing’s (sometimes blind) formalism that neglected the pragmatics of how, and for whom, poetry actually matters. Nevertheless, we can understand the emergence of Language writing as simultaneously a response to a political moment and an attack on the institution of art of the times—what the Language writers sometimes referred to as workshop poems or official verse culture (Bernstein 247).

In *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger lays out two general ways to understand the avant-garde, as either 1) a revolutionary program aiming to destroy the division between art and everyday life, or 2) an artistic method of institutional critique.

⁸ More recently, certain Language writers, like Lyn Hejinian, have come to regret the exclusion of African-American writers and questions of race from Language writing (Hejinian 2015).

⁹ Or as Silliman has claimed: “My politics and my aesthetics are essentially different faces of the same argument” (McCaffery and Gregory 245).

“Institution” in this second phrase means the institutions that facilitate and administer the art world, such as museums, grants, and publishing houses. In poetry’s case, the institution (in Bürger’s sense of the word) would include prizes, creative writing programs, poet laureates and the national poetic canon. Whereas the world revolutionary projects of the avant-garde failed at the end of the interwar period, as Bürger famously claimed, avant-garde scholars have argued that the method of institutional critique lived on in the neo-avant-gardes of the postwar period.¹⁰ Institutional critique involves identifying a particular set of norms that guide the institution of art and proposing counter-norms, either explicitly through the various manifestos and poetics of avant-garde groups, or implicitly through artistic practice.

Language writing sought to continue the tradition of institutional critique by actively distinguishing itself from mainstream poetry. As was the case with many avant-garde groups before them, this involved a large degree of internal and external posturing. After its formative years, however, Language writing turned from an initial emphasis on critiquing mainstream poetry to a more constructivist praxis that, much like the New Left, tested out alternative models for art and life through specific experiments.¹¹ In this context, the technique known as the New Sentence was seen as an attempt to build new patterns and linguistic connections that propose new values and social forms.

In his essay “The New Sentence,” Silliman argued that three criteria influence the organization of New Sentences: “quantity,” “torque,” and “syllogistic movement.” First, the New Sentence treats the paragraph as “a unit of quantity” and the sentence length as “a unit of measure,” so that the text as a whole becomes organized according to strict quantifiable rules.¹² Second, Silliman claimed that the “[new] sentence structure is altered for torque, or increased polysemy/ambiguity” (Silliman, *The New Sentence* 91) Silliman borrowed the concept of “torque” from physics to imply a certain twisting movement happening within the sentence as a unit. The meaning of a New Sentence is imagined to be a spiraling thing that continually leads the reader in new

¹⁰ See Aarhus for a longer discussion of poetic institutional critique.

¹¹ Michael Davidson makes a similar point when he divides Language writing into two stages: “The first stage in this critique involves dismantling syntactic and semantic contexts, isolating words or parts of words to resonate among themselves. The second stage – best seen in the work of Ron Silliman or Lyn Hejinian, for instance – involves recombination according to numerical or formulaic patterns such that narrative or chronological progress is thwarted and new kinds of connectives established” (Davidson 18).

¹² In addition to *Ketjak* (1978), where the number of sentences in each paragraph is twice the number of the preceding paragraph, Silliman also used rule-based techniques in *Tjanting* (1981) where the number of sentences in each paragraph increases according to the Fibonacci sequence. Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life* is perhaps the best-known example of this tendency in Language writing, as each version contains the number of poems that matches the author’s age at the time of publication, while each poem contains the same number of sentences.

directions. Lastly, “syllogistic movement” is the act of making meaning or drawing connections between sentences. Silliman claimed that the New Sentence’s syllogistic movement is: “a) limited; b) controlled,” while “[p]rimary syllogistic movement is between the preceding and following sentences” and “secondary syllogistic movement is toward the paragraph as a whole, or the total work” (Silliman, *The New Sentence* 91). In other words, for Silliman, the New Sentence should primarily signify in relation to its immediately surrounding sentences and only secondarily towards the paragraph or the work as a whole.

So how exactly is meaning created in New Sentence texts? Again, an example from *Ketjak* can be instructive:

How the press of information, the first time you walk down a new street, cannot be repeated. One could propose, for example, the inclusion of anything. With such attention the mind can follow the act of her washing in the next room, it knows hands from neck from cheeks. Subtitles lower your focus. When Zukofsky debuted Reich’s Violin Phase on the west coast, the first person to stomp out was Mario Savio. Old sentences heard new carry a different purpose. Rhodochrosite, tourmaline. You wake in waves, each new day’s small tides of attention. Analysanda and their analysantia. Such poems are like keystones in need of a monument. Barnwood ash. Mention sex, fruit, candy, cities, books, the cinema or geology. (Silliman, *The Age of Huts* 22)

By quickly glancing over this passage, we see how the first few sentences—though certainly disorienting—possess an overall thematic structure centered around the theme of information. Phrasings such as “the press of information,” “such attention,” “subtitles,” “focus,” “purpose,” and “small tides of attention” all belong to this specific thematic cluster, as the passage initially portrays a person trying to come to terms with the multiplicity of sensory inputs of everyday life. If read this way, specific sentences stand out, as is the case with the sentence about Zukofsky, Reich, and Mario Savio, as well as with the listing of the minerals “Rhodochrosite, Tourmaline.” But these sentences, in turn, belong to a secondary theme of poetics, which comes out in a line such as “Such poems are like keystones in need of a monument.” Other lines, such as “Old sentences heard new carry a different purpose,” incorporate elements from both themes, because sentences are a form of information while *Ketjak* as a text is interested in sentences as linguistic units. In other words, these more ambiguous sentences can be read as gradual transitions from one theme to the next. Read on a thematic level, this passage thereby transports the reader from the theme of information to the theme of poetics via the continual blurring of the boundaries between the two separate thematic clusters.

It is obvious that the above quote is not an arbitrary collection of sentences, because sentences do relate to each other in sequence and connect to larger overarching themes. The criteria for Silliman's use of the New Sentence were modeled after the criteria of "quantity," "torque," and "limited syllogistic movement," but these criteria, we can add, mainly represented the way Silliman wanted to write at that moment. As such, these criteria were extensions of his ideas about how traditional sentences work and what the alternative to this traditional function ought to be. These criteria were chosen to disrupt traditional literary habits along with narrative conventions like plot and character.¹³ Later adaptations of the New Sentence, such as Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*, were not as explicitly interested in combating narrative structures *per se*.¹⁴

As I have pointed out, in these early years, Silliman intended for his writing to protest against a particular notion of mainstream literature. As such, his aesthetic criteria were situational and strategically motivated in opposition to a perceived institution of art, to use Bürger's suggestive phrase. As Altieri pointed out in an early review, however, there was never any guarantee that the New Sentence would not itself be institutionalized, made to bolster capital accumulation or class exploitation.¹⁵ In this sense, the task for the critic is to see the alternate values that specific instances of institutional critique propose, or, conversely, where the avant-garde has failed and where it can succeed.

Transparency, parataxis and participation

While it is true that the New Sentence was an attack on mainstream literature, it does not necessarily follow that its aim was exclusively negative. As Silliman stated in an interview looking back on the experiments of the 1970s: "The real question is whether the writer is proposing value or simply operating within the thoughtlessness of lazy habit" (McCaffery and Gregory 256). Writers propose value in deciding to write according to a specific form, a decision that directly influences the political content of the work. Formal experiments such as the New Sentence are imagined to propose a political alternative to "lazy habit" in ways that render a given poet's formal choice a political decision. In general, Language writers like Silliman prefer the New Sentence for at least three poetico-political reasons: 1) transparency, 2) parataxis and

¹³ At this moment, the Marxist Silliman had an idiosyncratic attitude towards narratives because narrative, for him, had been recuperated by the genre of the novel: a genre that was "a primary source for any etiology of this fetishized reality" (Silliman).

¹⁴ See Perelman for a discussion of "renarrativization" in later usage of the New Sentence.

¹⁵ "After all the basic dodge of capitalist advertising consists in promising an undefined freedom that depends on a person's thinking that he or she is the only one on the block to compose a certain order or possess a certain way of arranging his or her world" (Altieri 306).

3) participation. These three ideals share an ethos with the participatory democratic experiments of the New Left and, in this way, form a very direct link between the political experiments of the 1960s and the poetic experiments of Language writing.

First of all, the New Sentence was considered to be transparent about the principles of its own composition. As is apparent in *Ketjak*'s use of lines as a "unit of measure" and its controlled thematic composition, new sentences were considered akin to building blocks chosen because of line-length or preestablished rules. By using what one critic has called "rule-governed procedures" (Watkin), the New Sentence openly exposes its compositional means and formal measures to the reader. The New Sentence, in this way, trivializes its own composition in order to point to how the writer is a normal everyday person not unlike the reader. This trivialization of poetry acted to conceptualize literature and art as a specific kind of labor similar to other forms of labor (Huntsperger). The alignment of the labor of writing with other forms of labor can be read as a kind of critical maneuver directed against a specific ideology interested in maintaining art as separate from society. But it also can be understood to articulate an ethical imperative for literature to not hide behind ideological self-perceptions that restrict and alienate it from the larger part of the population.

It is this article's central claim that the transparency we find in texts like *Ketjak* should be understood as a kind of prefigurative politics. By making transparent its formal and compositional laws, the new sentence prefigures a society that does not hide its power structures behind any ideological and bureaucratic filters. In this way, the New Sentence's formal and compositional principles correspond to the New Left politics of transparency implied by, for instance, the Free Speech Movement's claim for free speech. Central to the New Left was an ideal of open governance, which revolved around a belief that governments should acknowledge and lay bare their power so that citizens had the opportunity to critique and interfere if necessary. In political theory, "minimization (eradication, if possible) of unaccountable bureaucratic power in public and private life" (Held 214) is considered one of the general principles for participatory democratic values. Movements for transparency and debureaucratization try to unmask power structures so that as many citizens as possible might participate in their own governance.

Besides transparency, the New Sentence is preferred by Silliman and others because of its *parataxis*, as is apparent in the first few pages of *Ketjak*:

A cardboard box of wool sweaters on top of the bookcase to indicate Home. A day of rain in the middle of June. A sequence of objects, silhouettes, which to him appears to be a caravan of fellaheen, a circus, dromedaries pulling wagons bearing tiger cages,

fringed surreys, tamed ostriches in toy hats, begins a slow migration to the right vanishing point on the horizon line. (Silliman, *The Age of Huts* 3)

When Silliman starts every sentence in the quote with “A cardboard box,” “A day of rain,” or “A sequence of objects” he is essentially listing or adding on sentences and visual images. Through its syntactical imitation of a list, the text replicates a flat, paratactic form, because lists do not discriminate but act as though each item is equally important.¹⁶ Readers of the New Sentence text, of course, attribute importance to the sentences as they read, but the sentences are not organized to point to causal narrative qualities such as epiphany, turning point, or point of no return. The reader can combine and restructure the sentences according to narrative causality, but this move is not contingent on the organization of the text itself. In this way, the New Sentence calls into question any hierarchies imposed on language from the author’s hand. No single sentence is given extra priority, because New Sentences actively resist hierarchical organization such as narrative subordination.

It was parataxis that led Fredric Jameson to call the New Sentence symptomatic of the schizophrenia of postmodernist art because it stressed disjunction “to the point at which the materials of the text, including its words and sentences, tend to fall apart into random and inert passivity” (Jameson 31). For the Language writers, however, parataxis was not so much the product of an aesthetic commitment as it was of a horizontal, participatory politics.¹⁷ In a participatory democracy all participants have an equal vote on all matters that concern them. The politics are determined as a compromise of every particular person, or as the common will, but every person’s particularity is, in principle, respected, rather than subordinated to a representative as in liberal democracy (Held 85). A similar logic is implied in the New Sentence and its relationship between the unit (the sentence) and the whole (the paragraph).¹⁸ Whereas the particularity of each sentence is presumably respected, because sentences are not subordinated to an overarching hierarchical logic, New Sentences do add up to a kind of thematic whole when read in context. The beginning of *Ketjak*, quoted at length earlier in this essay, for instance, paints a canvas of San Francisco’s financial district complete with the “revolving doors” of bank buildings, “fountains” and the waterfront

¹⁶ In Silliman’s context, this equalizing gesture was undoubtedly meant as a critique of traditional narratives, insofar as narratives conventionally emerge by way of a subordination of some sentences to others.

¹⁷ For a reconstruction of the social context in which the New Sentence emerged and a critique of Jameson’s allegorical argument, see Halpern.

¹⁸ “These details are presented as a democracy of particulars, stripped of any false or imposed hierarchy of significance” (Epstein 756).

scenery that characterizes this area. These images are paired with reflections on the hidden exploitation of financial capitalism which finds its symbol in the fishermen's cormorants that "wear rings around their necks [...] to force them to surrender the catch" (Silliman *The Age of Huts*, 3). In this way, *Ketjak*'s opening paragraphs add up to a mass of relatively autonomous sentences that when paired nevertheless form a kind of common meaning. Rather than an arbitrary or schizophrenic collection of words, the paratactical organization of sentences imitates a society where everyone's voices are given equal importance.¹⁹ Parataxis treats every statement as equal without discrimination and, as such, is prefigurative of a community which leaves room for every sentence to add its voice to the whole.

Third, the New Sentence demands participation from its reader. Having built up its paragraphs from an initial length of one sentence to a final paragraph that spans over fifty pages, *Ketjak* concludes by addressing how the compositional method has worn itself out:

I told him I was tired, bored by sense of his misuse, my voice the line drawn. Stubborn as a mule, sir, stubborn as a mule. Log fort. How then can the sense and the truth or the truth and the sense of sentences collapse together. As map could expand beyond the margin. It was the voice of Big Black, "Awake, for nothing comes to the sleeper but a dream." (Silliman, *The Age of Huts* 101)

This is how *Ketjak* concludes, not with a climactic resolution but with a matter-of-fact statement that the speaker is "tired" and "bored" and therefore has to end the text. *Ketjak* does not build towards closure or a logical conclusion but rather leads to the exhaustion of the compositional method, because the next paragraph is too laborious for the writer to write. If the text simply ends because there is no way to continue writing it, it nevertheless leaves itself open to the hermeneutic reworkings of the reader.

The openness of the ending of *Ketjak*, and other New Sentence texts, again corresponds to a participatory ethos that can be traced back to the New Left. In political theory, "direct participation of citizens in the regulation of the key institutions of society" (Held 215) is considered a central feature of a participatory democracy. But, as I mentioned earlier, in many groups within the New Left, participation was thought of not only as a fair and effective method for making decisions but also a way to remove certain oppressive behaviors from the group—as is apparent in the fondness for

¹⁹ As Charles Bernstein has put it: "Silliman's structures can be read as political allegory for a society that is nonauthoritarian (playful and provisional structures) and multicultural (the absolute right of difference)" (Bernstein 314).

prefigurative strategies and horizontalist decision-making processes.²⁰ Similarly, the New Sentence assigns most of the hermeneutic responsibility to the reader to ensure that the reading of texts does not become one-way communication. The open text seeks to break the traditional stranglehold that the author has had over the reception of art, or replace the value of authorial authority with the value of dialogue.

All in all, then, the New Sentence tries to act out a specific New Left political ethos through its form: an ethos based on transparency, parataxis and participation. Whether it succeeded in practice or mobilized flesh-and-blood people is a question I have steered away from up until now. The point is, rather, that the formal structures of New Sentence texts like *Ketjak* sought to parallel the political experiments with participatory democracy that were practiced in many factions of the New Left. While this schematic analysis does not capture all the themes and ideas at play in an over-100-page text like *Ketjak*, it helps us recognize how its New Sentences fundamentally work on a political level—summed up in the concept of *prefigurative poetics*. As we recall, prefigurative politics is the practice of creating a utopian mini-society in the hopes that this miniature model, through its alternative norms and values, might prefigure, or, at least, serve as a critical example to the macro-society. Similarly, if the New Sentence's aesthetic values are radically different from the way mainstream poetry works, then the prefigurative hope of the New Sentence is that it will rub off on literature, writ large, and change society in its image.

Prefiguration and the postwar avant-garde

I have thus far attempted to stay clear of any value judgments about prefiguration—instead opting for a more descriptive approach. At any rate, as a political strategy, prefiguration should not be judged from a theoretical perspective but for the hearts and minds it is able to persuade. I nevertheless want to end this essay by pointing to a few questions one could pose in relation to the New Sentence's central political gesture and hint at how we can begin to judge the successes and failures of the postwar American avant-garde—a topic that recent scholarship has engaged more thoroughly (Bernes, Hickman).

An obvious objection to the New Sentence is that organizing sentences is not the same as organizing society because, ultimately, sentences are not human beings and sentence structures are not social structures. The analogy between poetic form and

²⁰ Paolo Freire's ideas about "critical pedagogy" are a useful example of this participatory ethos within the New Left. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, participation and dialogue were considered pedagogical techniques that could help ensure the grounds for a future liberation of mankind. This liberation first required that certain hierarchical relationships were abolished from society, such as in pedagogy's case the "student/teacher contradiction" (Freire).

political form depends on a partly inadequate understanding of who reads poetry and why it matters to them. The assumption that an ideal reader would necessarily be able to approach the poem on the terms in which it sets (i.e. as a transparent, paratactical and participatory space) is clearly problematic, because it does not address the differentiated access that readers have to poetry. The underlying logic of the New Sentence's prefigurative poetics nevertheless seems to be that poetry can, in a fundamental way, change society in its image.²¹ At this point we can ask: did the Language writers really believe that by applying their alleged democracy to sentences they were at the same time promoting democracy among people? Was this not overly naive?

The critique of the naivety of the New Sentence is, in many ways, similar to the one we saw directed against prefigurative politics. The utopian hopes for prefigurative politics are located in the claim that by constructing a mini-society, the values of this mini-society may be projected onto society at large. Similarly, the political hopes for the New Sentence are located in the claim that by constructing a more democratic poetic form, the values of this form may be projected onto society. Breines claims that the potential of prefigurative politics is not found in the direct influence that the prefigurative groups have over society—which in poetry's case is very limited, because poetry has such a small readership—but as a counter-model to dominant politics (Breines 56). I would claim that it is along similar lines that we can view the adherence to prefigurative poetics. In the case of the New Sentence, the political claim is, in large parts, a pedagogical one meant to teach its readers how to further participate in the process of reading and writing.²² Poems are not mystical or metaphysical higher beings but collections of words on a page assembled according to certain values. By proposing new values for poetry, the New Sentence points to how the values underlying our social lives, on a similar level, are exchangeable.

At the time it emerged, Language writing was not the only artistic movement interested in promoting the values of transparency, parataxis and participation. The "rule-governed procedures" (Watkin) of the New Sentence, for instance, had its immediate predecessor in the experiments of the French *OuLiPo* group of the early 1960s. Even though differences exist between *OuLiPo*'s use of rule-governed procedures and the New Sentence, both were interested in a kind of demystification of poetry and

²¹ In this way, prefiguration has commonalities with the American tradition of future-founding poetry, which is "based on the assumption that the future is not simply somehow there, just like place is never just there, but that it is a concept that needs to be actively constructed, produced, and maintained in imaginative and material processes" (Pöhlmann 2).

²² The relationship between pedagogy and avant-garde art is a subject that deserves much more scholarly attention. See, for instance, Golding.

art. Similarly, in terms of parataxis, much of the avant-garde of the 1960s combined a participatory democratic ethos with “a fondness for formal juxtaposition, parataxis or levelled elements in a repetitive or serial order” (Ørum et al. 227). Finally, participation became a buzzword for many “neo-avant-garde” groups during the 1960s and 70s (Foster). Umberto Eco had already by 1962 written a book entitled *The Open Work*, and, by the end of the 1960s, Roland Barthes had developed his ideas about the death of the author and the equal participation of reader and writer in the meaning-making process. Language writing was part of a larger political movement, but it was also part of a larger transcontinental aesthetic movement that worked towards applying these ideals to art.

What has happened to these ideals and values since they were conceived in the avant-garde art of the 1960s and 70s? Even though a comprehensive interpretation of the social effects of the postwar avant-garde is beyond the aims of this article, I want to conclude by hinting at certain paths one could take such an argument. If we observe things through a more contemporary lens, we see that culture today, in many ways, has been shaped by the values of the 1960s and 70s, without this implying that people have started embracing more democratic ways of living. The workplace and the labor market, for instance, have undergone rapid transformations over the past 50 years, in an attempt to satisfy some of the demands of the New Left. Luc Boltanski and Éve Chiapello define this as “the new spirit of capitalism,” which, in large part, was the result of a particular crisis in capitalism that culminated in 1968 (Boltanski and Chiapello). According to Boltanski and Chiapello, as a result of the cultural protests of the 1960s, a form of pseudo-participation was incorporated into capitalism and wage labor. While the newly won flexibility within the workplace served to disarm the more radical voices of the New Left, the new spirit of capitalism also made work an integral part of the individual’s claim for self-realization and integrated work subtly into leisure time.²³

If participation has been recuperated into mainstream society, so perhaps has parataxis. As we have seen, the New Sentence practiced a paratactic organization of sentences as a counter-model to the hierarchical organization of everyday language. If you open a newspaper, for instance, the page will tend to be organized with a headline and partly emphasized or bold text. Further, the writing will often be organized as a kind of narrative with a beginning, middle and end and various narrative conventions such as character, plot, tension-building and closure. The New Sentence criticized

²³ For a more comprehensive analysis of the poetic avant-garde’s relationship to the new work regime and “new spirit of capitalism” which emerged in the 1960s, see Bernes.

such hierarchical organization of information by presenting the reader with a strange instance of parataxis that did not conform to the way s/he usually read, wrote or experienced the world. But if the organization of old media, like the newspaper, was traditionally hypotactic or hierarchical, the organization of new media is increasingly becoming paratactic. In his formative book *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich describes the internet as a “non-hierarchical network of hyperlinks,” which “assumes that every object has the same importance as any other, and that everything is, or can be connected to everything else” (Manovich 41). If you go on Twitter, for instance, the text tends to be organized as an ongoing scroll with links leading in a multiplicity of directions. Rather than leading to any foundational sources, these links are horizontally organized in a relatively flat network. In this way, the internet is suspiciously paratactic and might in fact have realized the New Sentence’s dream for parataxis as its guiding principle.

All this is not to say that the avant-garde is directly responsible for the mutations of capitalism since the 1970s. Rather, perhaps, the stakes of certain avant-garde strategies have changed, as a result of the changes happening to the values and norms guiding the institution of art. Some of the aesthetic norms fought for by Language writing have become standardized in areas of everyday life like work and surfing the internet, without this implying that our society has become any more democratic. These developments in norms and values imply that future avant-gardes need to invent new strategies. As the media landscape and the institutions of art change, so must the avant-garde, if it is still to retain some kind of critical sting.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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