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### The Index of the Quotidian: Folk Music and Language Poetry

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## The Index of the Quotidian: Folk Music and Language Poetry

Gus Tafoya

Poetry in a Digital Age

November 23rd, 2019

Folk music has earned the reputation of being one of the most authentic and fundamental artistic expressions of the recent modern generation. In part because of the adverseness of it's artists to entering the commercial sphere in favor of remaining more closely linked to the experiences of their respective communities, re-considering the relationship to music and those who it engages. This nuanced decision is not unlike the mission and process of the 1970's Language Poets, who's radical view of "life as language" caused their own collaborative process to similarly express a utilitarian view of community consciousness and the quotidian.

### LANGUAGE POETRY

The language poetry movement was one born in the early 1970's in San Francisco, originating from authors such as Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, Rae Armantrout, Susan Howe, Bob Pearlman and a list of others. Much of the production of this movement was developed through the publication of the literary magazine:

*L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. The work mainly took inspiration through the work of the modernists, especially that of the Objectivist's such as Louis Zukofsky and William Carlos Williams. In addition to that, the Language poets were strongly linked to leftist politics and Marxist thought; which was expressed in the poets distinct disjunctive style. Initially, the poets maintained a

strong aversion to the academic setting but gradually their work was admitted to the contemporary poetic canon and the poets joined the academic elite.

The critical point to be made of the language poets is their process and association with leftist politics. LEGEND is the collective work of five poets; Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Ray DiPalma, Steve McCaffery and Ron Silliman. A majority of the poems within the text are written by two or more of them often through an exchange of letters where each poet would write a single line and then exchange. Besides the table of contents entailing which poets worked on which poem there is no way of knowing what was written or edited by who. Muddying the waters of ownership and commodification of the work. The language poets were attempting to expand the possibilities of personal representation in the work by exemplifying the text itself rather than the personality and style of a single author - which ties into the ideas stated previously about reconsidering the idea of literature in the first place. Take into account line 90 of "MY LIFE AS A MONAD", written by Charles Bernstein which will serve as the text for which the rest of the analysis will be based.

90. Apart from the social--commodity--value of being a "poet" and writing "poetry", wouldn't it be more likely that writing, unlike painting, would be self-viewed not as a specifically art-creating activity but rather as part of a more general, non-writing centered, activity-- the investigation and articulation of humanness? <sup>1</sup>

Within this abrupt diversion from the form and style of the rest of the poem is indeed an important articulation of the Language Poetry movement as a whole. Bernstein is stating explicitly that the activity (of creating poetry) is one more akin to any general existential query

than it is to any artistic expression. In particular, I would like to focus on the social implication of what Bernstein means by “general, non-writing centered, activity-- the investigation articulation of humanness.” This implies the investigation - and the answers that it may find - are something to be shared. A natural stage or act of any creature abiding by our social contract. Therefore, it is not an artistic expression as much as it is a cultural expression, one earned by the inevitable processes of life.

This goes hand in hand with the populist political outlook of the American left, one rooted in the principles of strengthening the working class, the “every person” and the disenfranchised. In other words, those not interested in the artistic canon. *LEGEND* is reconciling the politics of it’s authors with the same unrest instilled within the American people, forcing it’s lyric to be defined as a collaborative social act rather than a personal process.

Technically speaking, the style and form of the language poetry is one constructed through the omission of conventional poetic elements such as narrative and legible english syntax. To better describe the work of the language poets here is an example from the collective masterwork of the Language poets, *LEGEND*:

Horse laugh twenty / Keyhold nastier years / Go seek over your eyes / Let them hit me  
again with a sea power complex / Deferential studying a hangnail / Something glass to  
bark / The procedure is to soar it / Up fa-sol & put in a little / Quote law at hair la-si/ <sup>2</sup>

Further into *LEGEND*, the poems drift even further into nonsense, being composed of both symbols, spaces, and seemingly arbitrary combinations of four letters that render the work almost unintelligible. Naturally this makes the accessibility of language poetry an issue. The

impulse of the reader is to believe that the Language Poets are operating under the mission to contain as much slippage in their poetry as possible and to force the reader to try and draw the lines themselves. But in fact that is only part of the story, the language poets are not simply enacting a sort of de-structuralist anti-establishment revenge, but rather they are processing the integral idea of Language differently. Language has long been regarded as the way in which the external is translated to the internal. Therefore being the means to the end of understanding but the Language poets are rejecting this claim and are instead opting to see the world *as* language, thereby reframing the need and/or ability of the written word itself when any collection of letters, numbers, characters, or symbols is a more direct “representation” of a subject. Charles Bernstein says more on the subject in his essay *Thoughts Measure*,

Our learning language is learning the terms by which a world gets seen. In talking about language and thinking, I want to establish the material, the stuff of writing, in order, in turn, to base a discussion of writing on its medium rather than on preconceived literary ideas of subject matter or form. <sup>3</sup>

Bernstein here is radically suggesting that the content of poetry should no longer be concerned with representing life through writing, but rather fundamentally attempting to understand life as writing. In turn, the language poets exercises in form, content, and style are the first steps to discovering a literary world that could focus on critiquing the relationships between letters themselves as opposed to narrative or structure. Thereby leaving us with LEGEND that is so unrecognisable to the reader. The “nonsense” is actually the facilitator to understanding our current and potential future in regards to the literary world.

It is important to note that this in no way argues that any character or digit could be thrown on a page haphazardly, but only that the conventions of literature, narrative and referentiality are inherently flawed. To combat this, the language poets operate under the opinion that life is language and the absence of referentiality in poetry is not possible as it is all in accordance with real life. This theory put into practice produces stylistically erratic results that in turn satisfy the central proposition of the movement. Henry Sussman of the University of Buffalo dissects the satisfying qualities of language poetry further in his article *Prolegomena to any Present and Future Language Poetry*,

When language poetry becomes aware of itself, in the early 1970's, it celebrates with exuberance the language-constitution of the world. Poetry is no longer a rarified form of language, itself the abused handservant of some overarching and prior truth or spirit. The world, such as it exists, is already language, and poetry is the index, the very culmination of this linguistic dynamics. The world is already a poem, oftentimes a brutal and sad one, if we are only prepared to read and see the lineaments of its composition. <sup>4</sup>

So language poetry is indeed the most direct, articulate way of translating life into legible form. As Sussman puts it, "Poetry is the index." It is the logbook of the human condition as it correlates to the literary tradition and an accurate translation of the external world onto the page.

## FOLK

Objectively speaking, the differences between American Folk music (and Folk art in general) could not be more apparent in comparison to that of the abstract, conceptual practice of the Language Poets. Folk music is rooted in an intense communal tradition that is strongly

associated with the authentic, timeless expression of a particular group's traditions, realities, pleasures and pain. The International Folk Music Council describes folk music as the following.

“The product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission. The factors that shape the tradition are: (1) continuity which links the present with the past; (2) variation which springs from the creative impulse of the individual or the group; and (3) selection by the community which determines the form or forms in which the music survives.”<sup>5</sup>

Factors two and three are critical for the sake of this argument, the nuances of the folk intellectual ownership and how it relates to the social production and transmission of the work itself.

Folk authenticity has long been questioned and analysed within the ethnomusicology field, with experts and musicians alike wondering when a folk song or folk music officially crosses into the commercial sphere and therefore leaves the authentic folk sphere which has so long been implicated with the cultural context of the working class. In other words Folk authenticity is derived in the “poor-mans” outlook, one of little commercial success but immense spiritual ache. Isabelle Mills comments on this in her essay, “The Heart of the Folk Song.”

England folklorists have found that economic conditions are the most decisive factor in creating this fund of songs. The most inventive bearers of folk songs are most often found to be the keenest minded, and best informed people of the community, but also the poorest.<sup>6</sup>

Authentic folk practitioners (and in turn, successful ones) are the people who are capable of understanding the issues of the people with the worst conditions in their community. Naturally this renders the likelihood that the folk musicians *would* be the poorest of the community; not out of necessity but out of happenstance. This theory would further explain the importance of communal tradition to that of the folk song, as it could be the primary expression of the consciousness of the particular group not of the individual musician.

The degree of importance that community standing has to do with folk music also ties into the ideas of folk ownership as a whole. Folk music developed through a completely utilitarian process, with musicians usually only singing in informal settings as a means of social interaction to display both their community pleasure and pain. As a symptom of that, traditional folk music is almost completely anonymous. A majority of traditional folk songs aren't held as intellectual property within the folk community. Every song is taken, re-seung, rewritten, and re-performed because declaring singular ownership would be allowing the commodification and individuality to disrupt the actual purpose of the music. Elements of this are visible even in the realm of published Folk Music, where usually an abnormal amount of tracks on the record are covers. Individuality of the musician was not represented in the content of the song but in the universality of its language and the intimacy of its performance. As well as the idiosyncrasies of the performers and the unique playing styles or personalities presented while playing.

Both the collaborative narrative and political bent of Language Poetry and the Folk Revival cause its style, forms, and use of language to be utilitarian as well as timeless, thereby "tapping in" to the unexpected quotidian. Through the Language Poets universal index they are



in turn generating a connection to the Folk sphere by translating the every-day, communal character of folk music in general into similarly timeless political commentary on the social situation.

The differences between these two movements are evident. Folk music and folk art is the embodiment of narrative and well-established tradition. Both of which are symptoms of the origin of folk, which as mentioned, is strongly intertwined with the emotional expression of the impoverished and disenfranchised. The simple rhyme scheme and catchiness allows it to exist in both a mainstream consciousness while also speaking directly to those who are participating in it's oral distribution. A perfect example would be the folksong movement of the 1960's which had popular folk musicians such as Pete Seeger and Phil Ochs touring liberal colleges to hold massive festival-like concerts that both satisfied and ignited audiences desire to be heard politically. The work of the Language poets on the other hand is based on the absence of form, with the assumption that this brings it closer to the expression of real life.

Language Poetry may not be as accessible to the average listener/reader but it does exude the essence of folk, that being a non-commercial tradition with an emphasis on referentiality (as the Language Poets perceive it) to better exemplify the communal spirit. The crucial element within this however, is the central theme of reconciling the quotidian through the collaborative, utilitarian nature of both works process and end result. The language poets understanding of language as an autonomously referential tool is not unlike the folk musicians relationship to text, lyric, and language as the essential, critical, fact of meaningful communication. Neither group sees it as an art as much as they do an unarticulated diagram of linguistic sonics, referentiality

and pattern. Each word, sound, syllable to the language poet is equal. On top of that, the populist, rural, and erratic nature of folk music with its endless referentiality to communal consciousness is comparable to that of the language poets as being a legitimate figure of the quotidian. Both are tapping into the structural figure of language itself, not as an artform but as life, as a tool, as a catalog, an index.

## Notes

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2. Silliman, Ron, Charles Bernstein, Ray DiPalma, Bruce Andrews, and Steve McCaffery. *LEGEND*. New York, NY: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, 1980.
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4. Sussman, Henry. "Prolegomena to Any Present and Future Language Poetry." *Mln* 118, no. 5 (2003): 1193–1212. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2004.0024>.
5. L. Lloyd, *Folk Song in England* (London: Unwin Brothers, 1967), p. 15.
6. Mills, Isabelle. 1974. "The Heart of the Folk Song". *MUSICultures2* (June). <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/MC/article/view/21894>.

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