

HOFER, Matthew, and Michael GOLSTON, eds. 2019. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Letters: Selected 1970s Correspondence of Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, and Ron Silliman*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. Pp. xiv + 426. ISBN 9780826360656, Hardback \$75.

One of the many aspects of the influential group of North American writers known as the Language poets that expands in captivating detail from reading *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Letters: Selected 1970s Correspondence of Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, and Ron Silliman* is their approach to group formation. In these letters, the correspondents are casting the contours of a “language-centered” poetics that is cut loose from the self-invested sincerity of the individual poet and dependent on the strong poetic community that gradually takes shape as the correspondents tune into each other’s vibe and as the shared quantity of their respective poetics grows letter by letter. But crucially the developing community also resists setting up a “conspiracy of us” (BERNSTEIN 1979), as the implied writers insist on the poetic, political, and personal differences and the vast geographical distance between its members rather than on a unified group identity. In a famous line by Gertrude Stein, repeatedly called upon by the trio as a shared literary ancestor, they consciously try to “act so that there is no use in center”. The fruits of this attitude reveal themselves on practically every other page, in the wide horizon and extreme curiosity of the young poets, i.e. in the electric enthusiasm with which Charles Bernstein describes a letter he has received from fellow poet Barrett Watten containing critical, even “ungenerous”, readings of his own poetry. Bernstein’s unmistakable excitement over the prospect of this correspondence, potentially leading to a “clash of aesthetics” (260), is representative of the inclusive, curious, and generous sense of a poetic community that rises from these letters, to an extent that may surprise readers familiar with some of the movement’s subsequent critics who in later years have depicted it as somewhat monolithic and tending to marginalize women and queers and to exclude non-white writers (VICKERY 2000; YU 2009). Yet, as I shall return to, the center also has its own ways of settling and of sneaking up on the group, especially when it comes to the poets’ sustained preoccupation with — but also their palpable practical difficulties with — including into their poetic community the poetry of individuals (i.e. women, male homosexuals, non-whites, non-Americans) who in concrete ways challenge the figure of the self-sustained male white genius that they were very much

united in wanting to overthrow as the illegitimate center of “official verse culture” (BERNSTEIN 1992, 248).

From what appears to be an enormous archive of material, the editors Matthew Hofer and Michael Golston have made an informed selection focused on the formation of a shared sense of poetics and on the urge to establish a common infrastructure and critical forum for this geographically scattered and poetically fairly diverse, although demographically strikingly uniform, community. The letters cover almost the entire decade of the 1970s, as the involved poets first met and got acquainted with each other, something that to a large extent took place in correspondence since they were divided between east and west coasts. The collection documents their formative years, not primarily as individual poets but first and foremost as a unique cross-coast grouping in American poetry. This was more than forty years ago, when the internet was nothing but a delirious late night fantasy of Ron Silliman’s — in a letter from 1977 he fantasizes of the day “when we will have computer terminals in every home [. . .] [w]henver I had an idea, I’d just send it” (225) — and the postal system was the infrastructure utilized, both for community formation and for the distribution of a poetry and poetics not aligning with the conventions dictated by official literary institutions of the time. As indicated by the title, the correspondence culminates — after starting a cross-coast xerox distribution service for small press poetry books, chapbooks, and out-of-print poetry journals — with the launch of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. Co-edited by Andrews and Bernstein, it came out in thirteen numbers and three supplements from 1978 to 1981 and has retrospectively become almost synonymous with the movement as a whole.

As stressed in both of the editors’ engaging and insightful prefaces, the letters consistently refer to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* not as a journal or a magazine, as it is commonly referred to in later accounts of the publication, but as a *newsletter*. This name forwards the epistolary aspects of this stapled pamphlet series, which is repeatedly envisioned by the poets as an immediate extension of their private correspondence towards a larger public. From this perspective, the Language community emerges not just as a group formed *by writers* but furthermore as a group formed *in writing* — letter writing, specifically. The letters’ informal style, including a deliberate deviation from strict conventions of orthography and formalized reference systems, the (aspiration towards) relative brevity, and the sense of urgency and direct address are all aspects of the correspondence that are cultivated as ideals for group formation in and beyond the private letters. As such, the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* newsletter interestingly anticipates the mix-

ing of epistolary and public writing that since has become a characteristic of many internet genres and, accordingly, the cohesive group not based on physical proximity but on written communication makes the Language poets predecessors of online community formation.

If the figure of the corresponding poet is a classic — Emily Dickinson, for instance — what appears new here is the strong impulse to democratize this practice, to make it not about and for themselves as individuals and friends but rather to turn it into a public matter. Already before conceiving of the newsletter, the correspondents practice an extensive xeroxing and passing on of letters and parts of letters beyond their original addressees whenever the content appears relevant (forecasting the forwarding and copy-and-pasting of email). The two-way correspondence becomes a conversation open for a whole community of peers, and the newsletter is thus conceived as an *Open Letter*, as the fellow Canadian periodical (1965–2013) was appropriately called. And as with every self-confident avant-garde, the radical generosity of this gesture goes hand in hand with the touch of megalomania always implied in a movement craving to impose its own agendas upon the whole world, or at least the parts of it that show any interest. What is also pointing forward into digital culture is the *prosumerist* aspect of this open-peer orientation. Neither the newsletter nor the distribution service is in a traditional sense audience-oriented — they are about maintaining a community of writers who need to be able to read and communicate with each other — but crucially this collegial infrastructure is extended to readers as well. Rather than addressing any version of a mass audience, all three poets speak of seeking readers one at a time, with the same dedication with which they look for other writers to read, print, discuss and collaborate with. If Roland Barthes — also a household name in these letters — had recently announced the birth of the reader, then *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Letters* show this claim taken dead seriously in the immense interest these poets take in their readers. This is also where the collective foundation of the movement becomes clearest, in the literal acknowledgement of the audience, the community, the sharedness of art and poetry being an integral part of its aesthetic quality. Thus, many of the letters argue the importance of a mailing list supplying the writing with the right readers, “wch in fact is the context wch gives [it] great meaning” as Silliman puts it (220). An interested reader ready to collaborate with the writing is an equal member of the community, which disturbs the age-old hierarchy between readers and writers in a way that obviously points towards the internet’s more recent breaking down of the clear borders between producers and consumers.

As I have suggested, the letters often revolve around lists of names, not only for the crucial mailing lists but also in naming modernists like Stein, Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky, the immediately preceding generation of poets, including Clark Coolidge, Robert Duncan, John Ashbery and Jerome Rothenberg, and in naming their contemporaries. These lists define the borderlines of the project that the poets are carving out. Occasionally the naming moves towards blaming and excluding, and concerns who is in and who is out, at which points the negative potential in group dynamics springs to the fore. If the strong, affective cohesion in the community in part arises from the intense commitment to the recipient that the epistolary form stirs up, it also in part springs from a shared set of dislikes (ostensibly related to “official verse culture”) that stand out as the initial glue in the letters as well as the movement at large. Shared antagonism breeds stickiness and makes partners in crime, and as Andrews suggests in a retrospective interview conducted by the editors, and supplied as one of the edition’s several useful appendices, the members of the community were united by their dedication to “jettison all these people who we found outrageously overrated and not interesting and holding everything back and not articulating why they thought they were better than other people” (389).

In this light, it seems overt that the mechanics of group dynamics in the Language community can advantageously be seen in the context of the sticky tightness of today’s online communities, and the violent antagonisms they can also breed from — and towards — outsiders. Studying the mechanics of the sometimes aggressive antagonisms towards the Language community in what is casually referred to as “the poetry wars” in the notes and prefaces — but never really explained for the non-insider — could teach us something about the agitated dynamics of many social media debates, and the affective technologies at play in various cliques on and beyond the web. All of which brings us back to the point of the center sneaking up on the community as a bias excluding certain points from view. In the end, some women but very few non-white writers manage to get included in the most engaged poetic conversations unfolding in the letters. That this bias was clearly not a product of ill-will, of knowingly excluding anyone, does not, however, make its consequences less real. The point is finally highlighted when Andrews concludes the contemporary interview by pronouncing *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine “a broad snapshot of the scene [. . .] of the poetry world” of the 1970s and embraces the limited outlook of the community: “When we were in the midst of it, we thought

that there's going to be a number of competing, fascinating tendencies in the American poetry world that, in retrospect, will be talked about, will be really valuable. And then it turned out that that just wasn't true. It turns out there was nothing, there was nothing, we were it. It's like all there fucking was" (391). Obviously, the so-called "poetry wars" were also about this misconception. As has been shown by Timothy Yu, Aldon Nielsen, Ann Vickery, Juliana Spahr and others, America in the 1970s certainly had other poetry communities, even avant-garde ones, worth mentioning than those represented in the pages of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. When Andrews in 2019 is still free to ignore this and claim that the Language poets "were it", he also testifies to their own path from "outlaw to classic", as Alan Golding once called it, a path giving entry into various literary institutions capable of supporting such as narrative.

The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Letters is published in the University of New Mexico Press' Recencies series dedicated to "research and recovery in twentieth-century American poetics". Whereas the selection of letters is truly first class, the prefaces are intellectually compelling, and the supplied contextual material is all relevant and well made, the basic contextualization and framing of the letters is surprisingly sparse for a scholarly collection of letters. Also, it seems to me, it offers an esoteric air not entirely helpful when it comes to including new readers. For instance, applying a simple practice — like the one used by Edward Burns in his editions of the correspondence of Gertrude Stein — of always adding the family or given name of a mentioned person in brackets when either one or the other is omitted would make a world of difference for the graduate student not on first-name terms with every friend of the correspondents and not immediately catching every inside reference. Frankly, it is not easy to keep track of which Bob, Barbara or Robin is being discussed now, or to decipher the frequently appearing internal acronyms for writers, organizations and works of poetry. Giving the full name would also support the practice suggested in the "Note on the Text", that the index of names be used in lieu of more expansive notes; as it is, looking up a Bob or Robin in the index is futile. Moreover, the font used for the letters, IBM Courier, does not effectively support more extensive metatext and scholarly contextualization, as its readability is relatively low. This typeface may resemble that of (some of) the actual letters (although this is not something that is directly stated) and it certainly resembles the typeface used in the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* newsletter, which provides it with a distinct retro-ambience, but it also makes skimming close to impossible and it graphically complicates the use

of additional notation. Since the letters are transcriptions and not facsimiles, the typeface appears a nostalgically-informed choice, and nostalgia, to me, seems an editorial principle that divides a lot more than it includes.

Such issues are of some importance in a publication for research purposes such as this one. Although the engaging, dedicated address of the private letter does not deny itself — the collection makes a surprisingly compelling read from cover to cover — a vast majority of potential readers of this volume are likely to be interested in retrieving specific letters or in reading about specific authors, works or issues for research purposes, and such an approach is not well supported by the edition as whole. In spite of the epistolary intentions behind the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* newsletter, the essays and reviews found there do not always exhibit an intensity of persuasion equal to the one that comes across in the letters. In that sense, the letters — next to the actual poetry, of course — are a perfect place for new readers to meet the Language community, and that makes the esoteric attitude infusing their graphic presentation, notation, and contextualization all the more regrettable.

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