On the Relationship between Ethnopoetics and Language Poetry

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When Jerome Rothenberg and I were editing the seventh issue of the magazine *Alcheringa/Ethnopoetics*, which appeared in 1975, we accepted a mini-anthology of works that would later be called «Language poetry» or «Langpo» (*Alcheringa* new series vol. 1, no. 2, 104-120). It was compiled by Ron Silliman, who titled it «The Dwelling Place» and included the work of nine poets: Bruce Andrews, Barbara Baracks, Clark Coolidge, Lee DeJasu, Ray DiPalma, Robert Grenier, David Melnick, Barrett Watten, and himself. Silliman observed that their work was «called variously 'language centered,' ‘minimal,’ ‘non-referential formalism,’ ‘diminished referentiality,’ ‘structuralist’» and that these terms referred «not to a group but a tendency in the work of many» (104).

In the notes following his *Alcheringa* anthology (118), Silliman quoted Charles Bernstein as desiring «wordness» and Robert Grenier as seeking «the place where words are most themselves». By way of explanation, Silliman added that «neither the words nor the processes of the poem must point away from the poem itself». He went on to quote Robert Creeley as saying, «Poems are not referential, or at least not importantly so», thus installing Creeley in a seminal role.

In the first issue of *Alcheringa*, in 1970, Rothenberg and I had proclaimed our magazine to be «a place where tribal poetries can appear in English. . . . While its sources will be different from those of other poetry magazines, it will be aiming at the startling and revelatory presentation that has been common to our own avant-gardes» (old series no. 1, 1). We wished «to encourage poets to participate actively in the translation of
tribal/oral poetry», and «to encourage ethnologists and linguists . . . to present tribal poetries as values in themselves rather than as ethnographic data». As time went on, we included the writings of contemporary poets who seemed to be «connected with the same source», as Robert Kelly once put it, along with ancient poetry and the folk poetry of the Western world.

Among the poets who contributed translations, retranslations, and original work to Alcheringa were David Antin, Gary Snyder, Robert Kelly, Anselm Hollo, W.S. Merwin, Charles Simic, Diane DiPrima, Clayton Eshleman, Theodore Enslin, Barbara Einzig, Édouard Glissant, Edward (later Kamau) Brathwaite, Armand Schwerner, Anne Waldman, Simon Ortiz, Ian Tyson, Nathaniel Tarn, bpNichol, and Jerome Rothenberg.

Among the anthropologists, linguists, and folklorists (some of them poets as well) were Stanley Diamond, Dell Hymes, Michael Harner, Allan F. Burns, Richard Dauenhauer, Jeff Titon, Peter Gold, Leanne Hinton, Jill Leslie Furst, Susan Stewart, Barbara Tedlock, and myself. Many of the contributors departed from standard formats for presenting poetry, creating compositions resembling those of concrete poets, finding ways to deal with iconic writing systems, making use of calligraphy, or producing scripts or scores designed to be read aloud. Most issues included a disk recording of performances.

None of the poets who were anthologized or quoted by Silliman (except for himself) ever contributed to Alcheringa independently. Rothenberg and I did not foresee where they were headed, but they were on their way to constructing a space for themselves outside of Alcheringa and ethnopoetics, whether or not this was among their intentions. We had published poetry that was «language centered», including language games; «minimal», consisting of a few words that did not form a sentence; and «non-referential» in the extreme, consisting of formally organized syllables that did not constitute words in any language. But none of this poetry came from the space Langpo would claim as its own, nor did the poetry cited by

Among all the poets who have ever been categorized or anthologized under the Langpo rubric, the only ones other than Silliman who ever sent work to *Alcheringa* were Jackson Mac Low and Steve McCaffery. Before anyone associated them with Langpo, they were well-known under other auspices. Mac Low was a performance artist and practitioner of chance composition, and he was often mentioned together with John Cage. In 1972, *Alcheringa* published his calligraphic renditions of Hindu chants and a recording of a performance piece for five voices (no. 4, 47-48 and disk). McCaffery was a sound poet, and in 1973, he joined sound poet bpNichol in founding the Toronto Research Group. Both of them were also visual poets, and as such they shared in the multi-ethnic aspirations of *Alcheringa*. In 1975, *Alcheringa* published bpNichol’s concrete rendition of a Montagnais song (new series vol. 1, no. 2, inside back cover), followed in 1977 by McCaffery’s «Drum Language and the Sky Text» (new series vol. 3, no. 1, 79-84), an essay in which he interprets shamanic drumming as a language.

In 1978, Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein founded *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, a magazine they published in New York City. It last appeared in 1981, a year after *Alcheringa* ceased publication. The contributors included all but one of the poets represented in Silliman’s *Alcheringa* anthology. Among the others were Susan Howe and Steve McCaffery, both of whom, along with Bernstein, eventually served as faculty members in the English department at the University at Buffalo. Howe came in 1988 and left in 2007; Bernstein arrived in 1989 and left in 2004. Robert Creeley, who had been on the Buffalo faculty since 1967, proposed the formation of a Poetics Program in 1990, and when it became a reality the next year, Howe and Bernstein were among those who joined him as founders, along with Raymond Federman, Robert Bertholf, and
myself (I had arrived in Buffalo in 1987). Myung Mi Kim joined the Poetics faculty in 2002, followed in 2004 by McCaffery, who had received his doctoral degree in the program in 1997.

Compilers of Langpo lists and anthologies have a way of extending their reach beyond the poets who regard themselves as belonging to a group of that name. Eight poets are grouped under the «Language Poetry» heading on the website of the Academy of American Poets: Susan Howe, Bernadette Mayer, Charles Bernstein, and Jackson Mac Low on the East Coast; and Lyn Hejinian, Michael Palmer, Rae Armantrout, and Ron Silliman on the West Coast. All of them were contributors to \textit{L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E}, and all of them are represented in a 1986 anthology that is commonly described as a leading Langpo source, Silliman’s \textit{In the American Tree} (National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine at Orono). But Mac Low did not consider himself a Language poet, and neither do Howe and Mayer.

Steve McCaffery, a British-born Canadian, is absent from both the Academy website and the \textit{Tree}, since both sources confine the term «American» to the U.S.A. Also absent from both sources is Myung Mi Kim, whose work comes up in discussions of «postlanguage» poets. She dislikes labels, but she shares with many of these poets an interest in narrative, a concern for cultural identity, and an ambivalent attitude toward theory. That leaves Charles Bernstein as the only indisputable practitioner of Langpo who has ever taught in the Poetics Program at Buffalo.

«American», as a term appearing in the title of literary anthologies or works of literary criticism published in the U.S.A., is even narrower than it might appear. The literature in question is nearly always confined to the works of authors who are not only residents or citizens of the U.S.A., but whose authorial language of choice is English. In fact, the space defined by the present boundaries of the U.S.A. is and always has been multilingual, and it has always included residents who are bilingual or multilingual and
who sometimes switch languages in the same written composition. The languages of the literature written and published inside the U.S.A. number about two hundred, and Werner Sollors and Marc Shell have offered a sample (with facing-page texts and translations) in their *Multilingual Anthology of American Literature* (New York University Press, 2000).

At this point we may raise the question of the language of Langpo, though it is not a question that would ordinarily arise in the context of an English department. Some of the poets on the Langpo lists occasionally translate poetry from other languages into English: Bernstein and Palmer from French, Grenier from German, and Hejinian from Russian. But they are like other poets on the lists in that foreign languages seldom surface within the English of their own poems — except in the form of proper names or, in the case of Silliman, in titles. Mac Low was not a translator, but he occasionally included Italian or other foreign phrases in his chance compositions. Howe is not a translator in the conventional sense but has ventured far beyond contemporary English, resounding some surprising moments from its past, and McCaffery has also ventured into ancestral English. Occasionally, Silliman, Bernstein, and Andrews have switched dialects or class levels, and McCaffery translated the *Communist Manifesto* into an endangered dialect of the West Riding of Yorkshire.

It remains that for most of the poets on the Langpo lists, most of the time, «Language» has meant contemporary, college-educated English. They do have ways of interfering with referentiality, mainly by interrupting or diverting the expectations produced by syntax and narrative, but otherwise they use the standard English of the present-day U.S.A. Their chosen words and phrases neither evoke the past of English nor come from the dialects, languages, classes, or cultures that surround the world of standard English and exist within the personal histories or communities of those who have mastered it.
From the point of view of Langpo, *Alcheringa* and its embrace of ethnic diversity are on the fringe. From the point of view of *Alcheringa* and ethnopoetics, practitioners of Langpo have retreated inside a world that is all too familiar. They have brought about some changes in poetics, but they have done so by working within the system. In the process, they have left the established national and linguistic boundaries of «American literature» intact.