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Language Poetry and Editorship in Lyn Hejinian and Carla Harryman: More Than the Gender Struggle

Manuel Brito

This essay examines the role of two innovative women poets, Carla Harryman and Lyn Hejinian, as editors, respectively, of the little magazines *Qu* and *Poetics Journal*, and shows how they have become exemplary of the controversial issue of women's presence within the language group. These magazines became the dynamic means through which Hejinian and Harryman contributed powerfully to a small poetic community in San Francisco that has become well known worldwide. They responded, discussed, and verified by simple experience that in an age of cultural change the critical construction of a new poetry would embrace theoretical debates and practice. Reflecting on larger gender issues that similarly affected male and female poets was the common ground for these women editors. They were involved in the complex transition from the lyrical and speech-based poetics of the 1960s to a poetry drawn to poststructuralist issues like the exchange value of language, and the social understanding of the self.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the widespread presence of American innovative poetry can best be seen through the little magazines which grew up in opposition to the established lyrical and speech-based poetic paradigms. In the Bay Area particularly, many poets were motivated enough to edit and publish little magazines at their own expense, such as Ron Silliman's *Tottel's* (1970-1981), Kit Robinson's *Streets and Roads* (1974) or Tom Mandel's *Miam* (1977-1978). These helped to establish a forum in which talks, radio series, small presses, readings, and workshops became fundamental activities for a community of poets

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with the radical political issues of the day. Ron Silliman's convictions could be taken to exemplify the general consensus. Briefly, they were 1) the civil rights and student movements of the 1960s, 2) resistance to the war in Indochina, 3) the self-destruction of the Nixon administration, 4) the 1974 oil embargo, and 5) the powerful and still growing feminist movement and culture. This socio-political spectrum illustrates how "Poetry was destined to change not merely because the content of daily life had changed, but also because the makeup of possible audiences was no longer the same" (Silliman, "Realism" 68). Independent publishers proliferated in an attempt to return to the ideal of the small homely community as a response to publication and distribution problems.

The language poets emerged from this literary milieu as dominant voices questioning the role of language and the factual self in poetry. Their academic recognition in the last two decades of the twentieth century became an empirical legitimization of their authority in the field. However, how women's issues and feminism are seen through the eyes of language-oriented women poets remains controversial. Their success cannot be judged by whether some of them were excluded or included in the language group. Two positions have become clearly established on this question. First, Ann Vickery argues that she wrote *Leaving Lines of Gender* "to explore not only the signs of gender in women's poetic practice (including publishing, editing, readings, talks, and collaborations), but also how gender's prescribed tracks have been variously challenged or left behind" (14). What remains certain in her rendering is that "The critical reception of Language writing has therefore tended to represent women as secondary participants or its passive benefactors" (12).[1] Alan Golding theorizes the second position, that women associated with the language group were concerned with questions of gender, though these "can get subsumed into the 'larger' category of the aesthetic or the experimental" (157).[2] In this respect, experimental women

[1] While Vickery's approach is mainly based on the feminist potential of these women poets, she recognizes the strength of their presence on the late twentieth-century American poetry scene. Publishing houses like New Directions and Sun and Moon, or university presses like Wesleyan, Alabama or California supported poets such as Lyn Hejinian, Bernadette Mayer, Kathleen Fraser, Susan Howe, Joan Retallack, Rae Armantrout, and Leslie Scalapino. Anthologies like Maggie O'Sullivan's *Out of Everywhere* (1996) and Mary Margaret Sloan's *Moving Borders* (1998), reinforced these women poets' active role, becoming more prominent in the academy as seen from the university-tenured positions of innovative poets like Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, Fanny Howe, Rae Armantrout, and Carla Harryman.

[2] This is not to say that Golding holds that the women poets were marginalized as a subgroup within the language tendency. Based on the poststructuralist viewpoint mainly associated with Foucault's avoidance of any discussion of gender and Althusser's denial of the possibility or construction of a female subject, Golding attaches himself to

poets should not be seen as subordinate but exercising a specific practice drawing largely from gender as an essential value, running parallel to the diverse responses within the language group to issues like politics, realism, Marxism, and the self.

My intention is to examine the role of two innovative women poets, Carla Harryman and Lyn Hejinian, as editors of the little magazines *Qu* and *Poetics Journal* respectively, and to show how they have become exemplary of this controversial issue of women's presence within the language group. Their work consists not only of feminist social activism but also both make use of diverse strategies in this field, and their editorship clearly focuses on an avant-garde approach to meaning and its unavoidable implicit socially constructed biases. The male poets of the language group had founded some little magazines in the 1970s.[3] All of these presented poetry or essays dissatisfied with conformity, delving into the analysis of the hidden ideological underpinning of poetic values. However, women poets associated with the movement were underrepresented in these little magazines. Generally speaking, the statistics show an average ten percent of the poets published are women. This contrasts somewhat with language poetry anthologies, since Ron Silliman's *In the American Tree* (1986) included 12 women for a total of 38 contributors, and Douglas Messerli's *"Language" Poetries: An Anthology* (1987) published 7 women poets against a total of 20. This means that in just six or seven years women apparently tripled their presence, making their impact felt.

So the appearance of two little magazines fully or partly run by women poets in 1980, *Qu*, and 1982, *Poetics Journal*, could be interpreted as early responses to the absence of women poets in this kind of publication. But the wishes of both Harryman and Hejinian were common to the language group – a focus on the particulars of language, associated discourses like politics, philosophy or culture, and exploring formal innovations – reaching out further than *l'écriture feminine*, whether in the mode of "writing the body" (Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray) or the role of the subject (Julia Kristeva). Furthermore, both had a university education, operating from within academia, not having to gain a reputation outside first like some of their male peers. Hejinian graduated with a B.A. from Harvard University and got a B.A. in 1963, and Harryman from University of California at Santa Barbara in 1975 with an M.A. from San Francisco State University in 1978. Academia aside, they

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Marianne DeKoven's suggestion that "differential grouping" is necessary "to establish [women] as an 'ambiguously nonhegemonic' group in relation to male avant-garde hegemony, simultaneously within it and subversive of it" (Golding 157).

[3] For a list, see Appendix.

shared complicity in the small Bay Area community formed with other language poets.[4]

In their vicinity, Hejinian had previously founded the Tuumba series in 1976. She issued fifty chapbooks, a poster, and a broadside from 1976 to 1984. This was an attempt to produce public writing that reflected on language outside the dominant discourse, reminiscent of poststructuralist devices like dislocation, parataxis, and defamiliarization. This publishing experience, although a solo venture, served to reinforce her sense of how poetry requires the social interaction of individual readers to become fully real:

> I had come to realize that poetry exists not in isolation (alone on its lonely page) but in transit, as experience, in the social worlds of the people. For poetry to exist, it has to be given meaning, and for meaning to develop there must be communities of people thinking about it. Publishing books as I did was a way of contributing to such a community – even a way of helping to invent it. (Hejinian, "Tuumba" 257)

At the center of this editorial position is a connection between social and aesthetic activity in the realm of poetry, and language. In 1982 this literary project was completed with Barrett Watten, of the little magazine *Poetics Journal*, as co-editor. Watten had published twelve issues of the little magazine *This*, and both he and Hejinian were aware of issues like undercapitalization, modest marketing capability, and limited access to distribution. However – once the other little magazine focused on theoretical work, *L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e*, became defunct in 1981 – editing *Poetics Journal* could be considered a heroic insistence on continuing with the heavy diet of theoretical and epistemological issues so significant for the language poets. In fact, when Hejinian examines her former editorial work at Tuumba she seems to talk about *Poetics Journal*, "The Tuumba project was, rather, I think, an attempt to develop and establish values – and I don't want to qualify them as solely or merely literary or aesthetic values" (Hejinian and Schelling 16).

To explore writing in Hejinian's terms was to highlight the open text being used primarily to provide refuge for theoretical concerns. Yet many of the Tuumba chapbooks appeared possessed of intellectual content, thanks to a supporting structure of criticism derived from poststructuralist philosophers like Roland Barthes or Michel Foucault, and Gertrude Stein or the Frankfurt School.[5] Hejinian's *The Guard* was the

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[4] Especially Rae Armantrout, Steve Benson, Robert Grenier, Tom Mandel, Michael Palmer, Bob Perelman, Kit Robinson, Ron Silliman, and Barrett Watten.

[5] The language poets were part of the irreversible change of consciousness becoming complete by the late 1970s, brought out in Lyotard's insistence on unrepresentability,

last chapbook published within the series and served to emphasize that the poem is not simply an aesthetic object, and that there was work to be done on the limits of poetry and poetics:

> It takes a very normal person to create a new picture.
> As the two lines scurry
> ant nuzzles ant. The concave sentence –
> one shaped like a dish
> – with a dip in the middle –
> to read it was like gliding in.
> They have achieved the inability to finish
> what they say. (n. p.)

Inarticulateness affects the reading of this text but besides simply sustaining that surface it is also intended to prescriptively set a challenge, since poetics should not limit themselves to no-longer-valid cultural models. Thus, the Tuumba and *Poetics Journal* projects followed this conceptual challenge to linguistic material. Both projects also pursued the construction of a writing community, in which practice and theory were viewed as essential values.[6] Barrett Watten affirms that both aspects were mutually implicated and mutually supportive, "A dialogue between, rather than an equivalence of, theory and practice has been our editorial

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especially after Auschwitz. They were accused of writing that follows a path leading to a dead end, since "The self is removed, replaced with pure language, and reduced to methodology" (Sloan 40). De Villo Sloan attacks the language poets for their overemphasis on literary theory and the "endless chains of metalanguage" (40), although his final sentence on this tendency foresees an unhindered institutionalization for these poets, "It is a movement perfectly packaged for the university classroom" (41). However, they produced texts with multilayered processes of mediation and interpretation of the social self, working towards the ideal of human emancipation from repressive cultural conditioning.

[6] Little magazines edited by the language poets like *Tottel's*, *Toothpick*, *Lisbon & Orcas Islands*, *This*, *Hills*, *Streets and Roads*, *Oculist Witnesses*, *A Hundred Posters*, *Miam*, *Roof*, and *L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e* lasted only an average of five years. These magazines published a range of writing that codified the language poets' interest in the "self-sufficiency of language," challenging writers like Gertrude Stein, Louis Zukofsky, and texts like Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, and Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. One potential reason for their short life was that the editors were not only committed to the editorial work, but also to the whole process of publication – distribution, printing, and especially looking for funds from the grant programs offered by the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines. These editors were really involved in an economy of loss that confirmed their somewhat romantic attitude. However, Lyn Hejinian was not alone in the 1970s and 1980s. Other women editors also published innovative little magazines like *Big Deal*. *Dodgems*, *How(ever)* *Qu*, *Telephone*, and *United Artists*. Nevertheless, Hejinian maintained editing and publishing as an activity in which social and intellectual expertise were the first premise.

goal. By extension, this dialogue would lead to various kinds of post-modern cultural engagement" (Brito 197). This principle of agreement between Hejinian and Watten was also found among the contributors to other little magazines like *L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e* and *Hills* – especially the talks issue, 6-7 (Spring 1980) – pursuing conversation and connection. In 1988 six members of the West Coast language poets, including Hejinian and Watten, signed a collaborative manifesto, mapping some extensions derived from their critical and creative practice, "the concern with theory has drawn our work outward from the aesthetics of the 'self-sufficient world' to more explicitly social and political issues" (Silliman et al. 270). But it would be a mistake to disregard their strong sense of community, which made the language group not so much interested in critical judgment or prescriptive evaluation of poetic competence, as in being a group of individuals who wanted to learn something from each other: "If there has been one premise of our group that approaches the status of a first principle, it has been not the 'self-sufficiency of language' or the 'materiality of the sign' but the 'reciprocity of practice implied by a community of writers who read each others' work'" (Silliman et al. 271).

Running for sixteen years (1982-1998), nine of the ten issues of *Poetics Journal* were conceived as discursive, since each envisaged a specific topic like "Close Reading," "Poetry and Philosophy," "Women and Language," "Non/Narrative," "Marginality: Public and Private Language," "Postmodern?," "Elsewhere," "The Person," and "Knowledge." In an interview with Dubravka Djuric, Hejinian recognizes that this magazine was conceived as a forum, whose origin was the Talk Series that began in the Spring of 1977 in Bob Perelman's apartment at Folsom Street. In emphasizing her sense of community, it is interesting to notice that Hejinian always insisted on the integration of both men and women as producers, not consumers, of intellectual materials – hopefully leading them into becoming potential contributors to *Poetics Journal*:

> Writers create the work but remain silent about what it intends and what or how it means. Barrett and I wanted to create an intervention in this situation. We had two motives: we wanted to provide a forum in which the theoretical work that was going on in the Language movement could develop further and involve a larger public, and we wanted to provide a site in which poets and other artists could be the ones to define the terms in which their work was discussed. As I see it, those were and are the goals of *Poetics Journal*: to initiate discussion (by proposing various topics as foci for different issues) and then to encourage its development by publishing provocative (not definitive) essays. (Hejinian, *Language* 175)

Both Hejinian's and Watten's proposals had a profound effect on the sensitive readers of *Poetics Journal*. For a period of seventeen years, the 1,074 pages of this little magazine provided a convenient forum to develop the positions of many poets. Interviews, reviews, essays and a few poems served not only to present interpretations on openness and writerly texts. They also served to propose other theoretical frameworks to work within, like Marxism, feminist theory, postructuralist thought, and referring individuals to social critique. Over the course of some 246 contributions, heavily focused on poetics, *Poetics Journal* established itself in the mid-1980s as a conceptual and technical site through which a university-educated community of poets interacted with each other. However, collecting material was somewhat discouraging, since many poets saw a gap between their creative work and their own poetics. Such a view was held by Lyn Hejinian who operated a kind of anti-intellectualism in this, though her editorship was clearly interested in discussing and encouraging a consistent link between creative and theoretical work. Both Watten's and Hejinian's success in carving out this position within the language poets' community is due to this mixing of texts as a medium capable of subverting appropriation by the establishment. In this way, poets were invited to explain the impact of their discoveries and gain substantial visibility, though some doubted the significance of what they had to say:

> Poets have little opportunity to engage in prolonged and rigorous discussion of their work, and they have little sense that what they have to say, even about their own concerns, could be regarded as credible and valid; they have little sense that what they say could be valuable and important.
> (Hejinian, *Language* 175)

Hejinian applied this belief for *Poetics Journal* after recognizing that a group of poets displaying their critical writings was the ideal means to shed light on a variety of writing practices, and to establish a community in which mutual support was essential. I would identify this as her editorial goal with this magazine and to a great extent thereafter, since she felt more attracted to the virtues of broad collaborative artistic experimentation than to an overtly feminist-oriented type of writing. This question has appeared off and on for years in Hejinian. In a letter to Susan Bee in 1983, she confessed that "I do begin to think that feminism is an attitude, not an art style" (Hejinian, "Letter"). She thus considered feminism an analytical tool, "a system with which to approach an understanding of the social and political context of events and ideas, including art events and art ideas. But it isn't an art form itself. Like Marxism" (Hejinian, "Letter"). Her intention was to open the magazine

to both male and female contributors. Indeed, the gender of the writers did not figure as a significant factor for the questions she wanted to address in this issue. Rather, she was interested in receiving two types of essays, one focusing on earlier women writers, and another one focusing on contemporary accounts of theoretical and personal views. As she explained:

> I would say that I am expecting two types of essays and articles for that issue – one dealing with questions in terms of earlier women writers and artists (Stein, Laura Riding, H.D., etc.) and the other discussions by and about current writers and artists and their own present thoughts. Which is to say, I am interested in both the historical and the "personal" approach – certainly I do not want to confine the subject to the historical. (Hejinian, "Letter")

Thus, it is not surprising that when she invited contributors for the special issue of *Poetics Journal* on "Women and Language," seven of the eighteen contributors to this issue were male poets. To understand Hejinian's preference for a wider focus on this matter we should attend to her fundamental affinity for language itself, mostly developed in her essay "The Rejection of Closure," published in this same issue of *Poetics Journal.* Here she prioritizes language itself as a continual challenge, rather than remaining within Luce Irigaray's more specifically female or "genital" model of women's language opposed to the symbolic order, the law of the father:[7]

> The desire that is stirred by language is located most interestingly within language itself – as a desire to say, a desire to create the subject by saying, and as a pervasive doubt very like jealousy that springs from the impossibility of satisfying those yearnings. ("Rejection," *Poetics* 142)

A remarkable detail is that when Hejinian re-publishes this same essay just one year later in Bob Perelman's edition of *Writing/Talks*, she pol-

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[7] In 1984 Lyn Hejinian affirmed in a letter to Rae Armantrout that she wanted to know more about feminist views of literature. She was particularly interested in some French women critics who were developing various theories about language and what they called "parler femme": "One of the theories that runs through what little of this stuff I've read so far is that 'feminine' language seeks to do away with hierarchy, or to attack the power base, which is the dominant or normative vocabulary and style. This then gets designated as 'male' – which seems questionable. The descriptions of what would be 'parler femme' sounds more or less like a definition of post-modernism: disjunct grammar, disjunct narrative devices, paradox, rejection of closure, etc. I don't know – some of it is hokey. One writer says women have a multiple view because women's genitals are double – two lips; whereas men are single-minded because their genital organ is single, the penis. Hmmm. That is hard to take." Hejinian here references Luce Irigaray.

ishes the first sentence of this last quotation, making her voice clear on this matter, "For me, too, the desire that is stirred by language seems to be located interestingly within language, and hence it is androgynous" ("Rejection," *Writing* 283). Beyond this function, language seems also to play an important mechanism in the recognition of subjectivity, since language collaborates but also deserts us in our relationship with the world, and this forcefully drives us to enter into a dialectic relationship with it, "Yet the incapacity of language to match the world permits us to distinguish our ideas and ourselves from the world and things in it from each other" (143). For Hejinian, nothing could be clearer than this account, which insists on the openness of language, extending its function as did male members of the language group, considering it as discourse with social, political, aesthetic, and personal implications. Yet, looked at closely, this model clearly responds to Hejinian's literary experience. In her exchange with Andrew Schelling, Hejinian goes on to say that editing and publishing "is socially constitutive and supportive," and writing "may be socially subversive" (Hejinian and Schelling 17). Here these two considerations, far from belonging exclusively to the province of theory, have passed over into the camp of practical sociability. If Hejinian's effort was addressed to maintaining a special focus on the social ethics of writing, rather than specifically commenting on women as a thematic representation, it is due to her idea that poetry cannot be unidirectionally appropriated.

What does hinder any attempt to interpret Hejinian's project as disregarding feminism or gender issues is the fact that almost everywhere in her poetics she legitimizes "the feminine in opposition to the dominant phallo-logical" (Hejinian and Miller 39). However, her female subject-position considers the world "as vast and overwhelming; each moment stands under an enormous vertical and horizontal pressure of information, potent with ambiguity, meaning-full, unfixed, and certainly incomplete" ("Rejection," *Writing* 271). Poetry fitfully responds to these features, though it also turns out thus to be precisely the strategic, ambiguous field that accounts for differences by reference to the male-female experience, "Ideally, poetry might be a logical site for the moebius-stripping of male-female distinctions, precisely because it contributes to the instability of poetry" (Hejinian and Miller 39).

As editor of the Tuumba series of chapbooks and co-editor of *Poetics Journal*, Hejinian considered editorship as an experiential and aesthetic activity. Her principle of the community as essential to the development and functioning of the language group's poetics was successful, since to historicize their literary and social context we need to attend her editorial work that greatly facilitated the exchange of creative work and ideas among poets in the Bay Area community in the 1970s and 1980s. What

was a "utopian undertaking" (Hejinian, *Language* 321) became an influential group, converging into multiple little magazines and small presses.

Clearly addressing the same issue of community, in which to recognize and deal with the question of hybridity in literary genres, Carla Harryman founded the little magazine, *Qu*, in 1980. This magazine was initially devoted to the new prose and among the contributors we find well-known members of the language group settled in the Bay Area,[8] who regularly contributed, keeping an ongoing challenge to the whole taxonomy of poetry. Of the twenty-two poets published on the pages of *Qu*, only nine were women poets, although most of its special issues of this magazine were devoted to women like Erica Hunt, Fanny Howe, Kathy Acker, and Abigail Child. Harryman edited ten issues of *Qu* running from 1980 to 1984. With this magazine she not only created the impression of supporting collaboration among poets, publishing their poetry instead of poetics as in Hejinian's case; her own creative work shows this cooperative dimension, working on performances with the Poet's Theater, with visual artist John Winet or with Lyn Hejinian in *The Wide Road*, an erotic picaresque. The result is that, whatever degree of complexity her editorial goal in *Qu* reached, she also helped language poets to break through the formerly insuperable barrier.

In talking about Hejinian's concern with feminism or gender issues, I insisted that she adhered to a particular epistemology focused on language mixing gender, politics, realism, and subjectivity as a mode of knowledge. Megan Simpson agrees that language-oriented women writers failed to follow an organized doctrine or method on this matter, focusing like their male counterparts on the treatment of language (and by extension discourse) "as an event, suggesting that *how* we know and *what* we know are not distinct categories" (Simpson, *Poetic* 7). But Harryman's literary biography appears to be more activist, from her membership in Students for a Democratic Society in the late 1960s to her immersion in Feminist thought:

> But I'm very committed to my project as a woman. So while it does matter what form I'm writing in, what matters more is that I'm investigating that. I'm very interested in power and the marginalization of women. I'm very interested subjectively in the gap between my experience and the discourse that's available to me – whether it's theoretical, philosophical, or just sort of quotidian media – and I feel that the older I get, I think more and I know less what a woman is, and I think that is good. (Simpson, "Interview" 532)

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[8] For instance, Steve Benson, Bob Perelman, Lyn Hejinian, Kit Robinson, Barrett Watten, Tom Mandel, and Larry Price.

The general import of this should be evident from this quotation. Note her unequivocal criteria for distinguishing her subjective experience from public discourse, and the uncertainty about a specific characterization for women. Harryman's editorship repeated Hejinian's pattern, perhaps touching even more areas than purely feminist issues. Harryman was approaching a wider phenomenon, namely that innovative poetry, far from ordinary language and with its distinctive markers, had helped to establish larger communities of individuals sharing opposition to the dominant ideologies in society. And the technique, not method, she preferred to present was experimental forms based on narrative and poetic prose. The blurring of boundaries between prose and poetry can be considered a potent projection from Harryman's experimental experience in the 1970s literary milieus of San Francisco, in which collaborative work, talks, discussions, and roundtables became transformed into poetry and essays.[9] This fluid process of textualizing poetic activities in diverse forms – poetry, essay, prose, interview, theater – left it clear there was no fixed shape and presumptions could only be questionable. Of course, narratives in *Qu* were on the borders of autobiography, history, folktales, or daily episodes, taking on extreme forms and meanings far from one-sided interpretations. For instance, Charles Bernstein's "The Rudder of Inexorability" published in *Qu*, exemplifies a combination of his surrealistic prose, the question of the material of poetic language, and its social or communicative dimension that so much concerns scholars now:

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[9] Carla Harryman and Steve Benson coordinated the Grand Piano readings and performances from 1976 to 1979. The Talk Series began in the Spring of 1977 in Bob Perelman's apartment at Folsom Street, the Writer in Residence program at 80 Langton Street was coordinated by Renny Pritikin. The Works and Words series were carried out by Aaron Shurin and David Levi Strauss, and the Intersection Writer in Residence series were organized by Jim Hartz, Johanna Drucker, and Norman Fischer. All these activities taking place in the Bay Area had their correspondence with others in New York, like the St. Mark's Poetry Project, and the Ear Inn reading series. Fortunately, some of those activities led to varied publications, scrupulously and suggestively edited by the leading members of the language group. Among others, the special issue of *Hills* 6-7 (Spring 1980) and *Writing/Talks* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985) deserve mention, both edited by Bob Perelman. Renny Pritikin coordinated various editions of *Artists Writers in Residence: 80 Langton Street*. Charles Bernstein edited *Live at the Ear* CD-ROM (New York: Elemennope, 1994). The latest publication of this kind is a collective autobiography comprising ten parts, *The Grand Piano*, which includes ten authors identified with Language poetry in San Francisco: Rae Armantrout, Steve Benson, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Tom Mandel, Ted Pearson, Bob Perelman, Kit Robinson, Ron Silliman, and Barrett Watten.

> Reading the coffee, drinking the paper. Elevation of surround, bogus tip forward. Muscular tinsel: bravura autophasic slime grabs gums of encomium. Dart clause gesticulates insolvent harbour. Gone through assume, to you would bounce back as well, what she'd have who is on spending, very much, not to have been, of accumulated skip. Hook up this refutation as use, indiscriminately would category, that than thing that's the same problem any application of, to be specifically could well slightly in that it – "unnennobled by spiritual desire" – could have contained. But for me which means or better to say takes place, it's ground encapsulated onto dubbed. (n. p.)

The difficulties encountered in crossing the boundaries of meaning still prove troublesome for a full understanding of the language poets. The degree of acceptance as regards this kind of text was challenged by opponents to this movement.[10] Though we find clear opposition in Harryman's work to the female passive condition, and she was "interested in theories of oppression, a marked-as-masculine and intellectual interest supposedly discontinuous with politics of personal experience" (Harryman, "Playing" 45-46), we can also observe that she did not want to be condemned "to the body difference which the conventions of art and culture wanted to consign me" (Harryman, "Drift" 24). Such declarations explained that her editorship focused on experimental writing and its social practice rather than on an essentialist conception of feminism:

> Writing is a world of authority in its affirmation of the forming of the bond between the person and the collective. The words stand for the collective and the bond is both created, affirmed, and understood in the writing practice, because *I can* use words that I do not possess. This is the opposite of a view from Irigaray in which a disenabled woman can't speak because the words are owned by men. We may use words to manipulate and maintain power over others, but just in the same way that we know that the notion of property is not essential to human existence, we know that words are owned by no one. (Harryman and Hejinian, "Correspondence" 41)

Though this text came out years later, *Qu* was an antecedent of this position, and the criterion for the selection was based on texts mixing literary genres, as a kind of play in which poetry, narrative, theater, or interview subverted the mode of representation. This provided a sense of hybridity that stands out sharply against what is familiar to us and therefore announces new factors. Indeed, if one persists with a very orthodox

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[10] Eliot Weinberger insisted on considering these poets who disregarded academic poetry as practitioners only of literary deconstruction, disdaining the traditional prosodists, "When one picks up a 'language' anthology or magazine, one knows exactly who will be included, who will be writing about whom, and in what manner" (*Written* 87).

reading of which type of literature determines the spirit of a given period or society, this kind of abortive text leads to further social determinism, assuming that the emergence of financial exchange value in writing creates a new interest in social life. This proposition is also subject to unexpected dialectic reversal. The complexity of these authors' poetics, and their adventures in disjunct grammar, disjunct narrative structure, and paradox are far from democratizing the reading of these texts. New perceptual categories tend to be linked to poststructuralism and this drove the poets published in *Qu* to produce some of the most innovative and difficult texts in American poetry. Indeed, Harryman as editor offers us such contributions in this light, playing throughout with the production and consumption of the writers' texts. It is particularly relevant to my argument that Harryman, like Hejinian in *Poetics Journal*, mirrors the equation: process of writing = poetry = world. In other words, the logic of this particular approach, which she calls "an aggressive kind of play,"[11] or "the ethics of playfulness" (Simpson, "Interview" 514), is such that writing appears to insist on its own process of elaboration while at the same time directing the reader's attention toward the construction of the social framework. This context is perfectly consistent and repeated in her preface to *There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn* (1995), which speaks for itself:

> These hybrid writings, staged as they are between fiction and theory, the domestic and history, abstractions and androgeny, the rational and nonrational, the creator and her artefact, organize themselves against normative ideas while using whatever tools of novelistic, philosophic, autobiographical, or poetic discourses present themselves to advance their tellings. Concepts such as narrative, character, and binary thinking are manipulated, and scrutinized but not adhered to methodically. The writing is also a response to literature and the things of the world: it does not separate one off from the other. (1)

Lyn Hejinian and Carla Harryman coincided in time (the early 1980s) and in space: little magazines, both expanding their concern for the complexities of language, human experience and the world. These magazines became the dynamic means through which Hejinian and Harryman contributed powerfully to a small poetic community in San Francisco that has become well known worldwide. They responded, discussed, and verified by simple experience that in an age of cultural

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[11] In a personal interview with Megan Simpson (*Poetic* 145), Harryman insists on this expression as parallel to Wittgenstein's "language game," through which unexpected, and reversed images can appear, while at the same time representing the process of writing.

change the critical construction of a new poetry was necessary, embracing theoretical debates and practice. Reflecting on larger gender issues that similarly affected male and female poets was the real common ground for these women editors. They were involved in the complex transition from the lyrical and speech-based poetics of the 1960s to a poetry drawn to poststructuralist issues like the exchange value of language, and the social understanding of the self. They were not alone. Other little magazines run by women emerged in the 1980s and 1990s: *Black Bread* (Sianne Ngai and Jessica Lowenthal), *Chain* (Jena Osman and Juliana Spahr), *The Impercipient* (Jennifer Moxley), *Tinfish* (Susan Schultz), continued publishing innovative poetry.

The act of producing such material in the last decades of the twentieth century may be viewed as linked with and expressive of the power of unfixability that no merely mechanical process could ever mimic. And in the case of these editors, it demonstrates not only their capacity to say more than before but also to take the poetic reins into their own hands, thus participating fully in an alternative reading community.

Appendix: A Complete List of the Little Magazines Mentioned in this Essay

Big Deal (Barbara Barracks)
Black Bread, Chain, Dodgems (Eileen Myles)
Hills (1973-1983, Michael Waltuch and Bob Perelman)
How(ever) (Kathleen Fraser)
A Hundred Posters (1976-1979, Alan Davies)
The Impercipient, L = a = n = g = u = a = g = e (1978-1981, Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews)
Miam, Oculist Witnesses (1975-1978, Alan Davies)
Poetics Journal, Qu (Carla Harryman)
Roof (1976-1979, Tom Savage and James Sherry)
Streets and Roads (1974, Kit Robinson)
Telephone (Maureen Owen)
This (1971-1982, Barrett Watten and Robert Grenier)
Tinfish, Toothpick, Lisbon and Orcas Islands (Michael Wiater)
Tottel's (1970-1981, Ron Sillman)
United Artists (Lewis Warsh and Bernadette Mayer)

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