

Ron Silliman, *The Age of Huts (complete)*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2007. 324pp. \$19.95

The Age of Huts (complete) includes four core texts that were first published individually in small-edition or chapbook forms: “Ketjak,” “Sunset Debris,” “The Chinese Notebook,” and “2197.” Each core text was composed using various constraints, which offered the writer a certain kind of freedom. In various interviews and essays, Ron Silliman has revealed the ideas and procedures behind many of these constraints, and critics have clearly enjoyed pondering their implications. “Ketjak” is based on a musical form—the Balinese choral version of the Ramayana myth—and a “cumulative effort” that creates ordered repetition. “Sunset Debris” is a thirty-page text made up entirely of questions that, as Silliman has said in an interview, “explore the social contract between writer and reader.” Marjorie Perloff describes “The Chinese Notebook” as “a sequence of 223 aphorisms, most of them on questions of language and poetics, that sometimes echo, sometimes gently spoof, the method of the *Philosophical Investigations*.” *2197* alternates between broken lines of poetry and prose paragraphs and comprises twelve syntactically scrambled pieces that focus on the disjunction between words (rather than, as elsewhere in *The Age of Huts*, the disjunctions between sentences).

Silliman is a devoted practitioner in the genre of incompleteness, to use Michael Wood’s phrase for a lineage that includes Beckett, Stein, and Cage. Specifically, he is central to the movement formally named L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E (after the magazine by the same title) and now generally referred to as “Language poetry.” Since its inception in the late 1970s, Language poetry has been inspiring young bards (for better or worse) to resist the mythology of self-expression and to question assumptions about narrative truth. Language poets ask instead that we interrogate our relationship to language itself and subvert our preoccupation with meaning and poignancy by rejecting the narrative model that is the core of most literatures.

Silliman coined the term “the new sentence” to describe the prose that he and other Language writers were (and still are) using. This prose links sentences that, as Language writer Bob Perelman notes, have only a tangential relevance to one another. As Perelman explains, “Parataxis is crucial: the internal, autonomous meaning of a new sentence is heightened, questioned, and changed by the degree of separation or connection that the reader perceives with regard to the surrounding sentences.” In *The Age of Huts* Silliman takes the new sentence beyond parataxis, creating whole systems of sentences that are held up by the poem’s specific structural integrity.

As a reader, one’s inclination is to focus on Silliman’s structures, and to think about them as clues for gaining access to the work. As if anticipating this, Silliman writes in his essay “Wild Form”:

Often I am asked of a new work, “What is its structure?” As if there were any other answer than that available through the process of reading the text. Implicit in the question is an idea of structure or form as hidden, to be revealed.

Silliman is saying that you should resist the inclination to search outside the text for any cues to how to read it. Trust yourself—go with it. If you hate it, that’s OK. This isn’t work that begs for unconditional love, as much poetry does. It is, instead, work that puts the poetry-book reviewer in the spotlight: not as an authority on Ron Silliman and the intelligibility of language (or whatever), but as an authority on herself, as a reader of *The Age of Huts (compleat)*. Ultimately, the book asks to be experienced by you—and thus it is an exercise in accountability.

Ketjak is a book that, like Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*, inspired me and many other writers of my generation—including Juliana Spahr, Rob Fitterman, Jena Osman, and Joshua Clover—to use narrative disruptions and gaps between sentences to build texture and language play into our poetry. Reading it taught me how to write, although I can’t say that I enjoyed the experience (as I enjoy reading a detective novel, for example). It’s hard work and the biggest stumbling block is the awareness that the book’s difficulty is central to the experience of reading the book:

Normal discourse. Prefers instruments of percussion, for discreteness. Write this down in a green notebook. Piano man. Power curtain. Interest is something you impose. Television in the 1950s. Evolution of the mailbox. A deliberate refusal to perform the normal chores of verse. A kick in the coccyx for good luck. Silverfish, potato bugs. Deliberate sentimentalism perceived as description. His friend forgot her sandals. Tiger balm. We stopped for hot chocolate topped with whipped cream and to discuss the Sicilian Defense. A book of short poems to be called Spare Parts. The odor in towels. Early morning mental system. The tenor sax is a weapon.

I detach after “The odor in towels” (perhaps because of some subconscious association) and this is only ten pages in. My eyes are reading but my brain is somewhere else. That’s OK. I remain zoned out until page twenty when, like an old friend, I encounter a sentence that I’ve met earlier in the work: “We dove through fields of artichokes.” It’s part of the pattern, and the moment of recognition pulls me back in for another page. Then I’m out again. Feeling anxious because I can’t concentrate. Feeling like I should be reading something else. Feeling like a failure. I hate this! Then, suddenly, feeling a distinct sense of pleasure because the text isn’t pressuring me to keep up with a plot. I’m back in the text again...until I encounter: “The odor in towels, the

oil in skin.” Zap, I’m back out again. Something about references to stinky towels, like the *Manchurian Candidate* snap, wields a weird power over me. There’s sure to be a sentence that has a similar effect on you.

The Age of Huts ends with a series of “satellite texts”—texts, I take it to mean, that were written on the periphery of the four core texts. Ending the book with the satellites certifies that the four core texts haven’t solidified into a “collection.” The orbit is ever expanding, attracting new language games like microbes to a flaming comet.

The last satellite in the book, “Bart,” is a good introduction to the pleasurable brainwork involved when language patterns generate immediate energy. The poem is like a webcam attached to Silliman’s forehead as he rides the subway, descending further and further into both internal and external perceptions. It’s a twelve-page single sentence, with commas delimiting the view:

, waiting to go the other way, hot rods on the freeway beside us,
24 East, man in the yellow shirt is reading TV Log now, there’s a
cemetery, I notice a ring on his left hand, for a long time we’ve been
turning slightly to the left, in Walnut Creek you can see Mt. Diablo,
it’s the mountain here as much as Tam, more parking lots, more
condos, why didn’t someone just shoot old Henry Ford,

The pleasure here, as in *Ketjak*, is the work of staying with the text and allowing it to carry you along, push you out, send you into reverie, snap you into focus, infuriate you, entice you to invent a narrative to keep your mind steady, abandon the story in your head, let the language come over you like music. Or like static—it depends on where you are in your head at the moment of reading. (Training in meditation, the act of noticing your own mind as it thinks, is helpful.)

, I get off at Concord, no place to sit down, clock says my watch is
slow, lots of motorcycles in the parking lot, voice on the speaker
system says don’t ride bike on the platform, crowd begins to thin
out, I find a bench, old men still wear puka shells out here, women
in pastel pantsuits, that’s a shopping mall a block away,

It’s a wild ride, and it collides right smack into the present: 4:51; 9.6.76. It doesn’t matter that this present happened thirty years ago—the patterns have fallen into place, and if you stay with the text, there you are.

“The words are not ‘out there,’” Silliman writes, engaging an aesthetic conversation that gets hashed out through the very process of his composition. Silliman’s work is science in the form of poetry—a set of proofs,

hypotheses, and experiments within a system. Meanings are not found “out there,” beyond the text and the language used to assemble it, but rather, for Silliman, they are found in the connections between words, and between words and sentences.

Herein lies the difficult pleasure in reading this work. Difficult because it challenges my expectations of how a poem is supposed to behave; pleasurable because in refusing to lead me along a narrative, the text forces my brain to assemble patterns and associations that are unique to me. This means that the reading I have done reveals my own thinking processes and not necessarily the writer’s intentions (which I have, perhaps mistakenly, tried to communicate here).

Still, I lament the fact that *The Age of Huts* lacks an introduction—reading the book is like looking through a telescope pointed straight into a uncharted mass of stars. Without an introduction, *The Age of Huts* leaves it to the reader to decipher causality, to insert her history in place of the book’s. The book ignites and excites my thinking—but only because I know what I know. And in spite of all that I know about postmodern theory, I still want to know the “why” behind Silliman’s radical approaches to language.

Assumptions of “active” reader-reception, often recited in reviews of Language poetry (I actually was trying to avoid it) raise plenty of red flags. Silliman’s work anticipates this skepticism, and sometimes even engages it. For example, entry #173 in “The Chinese Notebook” recounts the response of a friend and “member of the Old Left” who challenges his aesthetic. “How, he asks, can one write so as not to “communicate?” Silliman replies, “It is a more crucial lesson, I argue, to learn how to experience language directly, to tune one’s senses to it, than to use it as a mere means to an end.” The friend replies, “I don’t understand.”

Not understanding Silliman is a perfectly reasonable response. We often look to writing to discover meaning in our lives, as if my “I” or my “soul” is something to be figured out, a puzzle to be completed. But the “I,” according to recent work by cognitive scientists such as Douglas Hofstadter, is the rich convergence of patterns based on my individual experiences, associations, relationships, and attempts to amass knowledge. Silliman’s work makes a similar point. If I’m going to make it through *The Age of Huts*, I’m going to have to activate patterns and associations that are particular to my knowledge-base.

This may not be an appealing exercise for many readers. Even if my “I” is the sum total of the experiences stored in my brain; even if language is a system of signs that creates an illusion of truth; even if meaning is basically a delicate pattern of mistranslations, most readers still expect literature to help us find meaning in the world. Silliman’s poetry won’t do this for you. Rather, readers of *The Age of Huts* will be challenged to figure this out for themselves.

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