

**POETRY FOUNDATION****FEATURED BLOGGER**

# Language Poetry Soothes Me

BY KIMBERLY ALIDIO

I have a newly released book (from Belladonna\*) that undoes in language normative relations of self, lover, body, nature, verb, noun, adjective. This description is from the book's metadata, which quotes from something I wrote in my publisher's author questionnaire. I'm happy to give my press and book distributors a tagline to say what my book does. To say what a book does seems to address the problem of saying what any poetry book is about. Poetry translation is challenging, as Lyn Hejinian has said, because poetry primarily functions to give the reader an experience of its language rather than to provide content outside of itself. As I write this post, I am aware of the narrative pull to fill in the about of my book with memoir and personality, as if the poetry isn't the point but instead a vehicle for something else, such as my value as a social subject. I'm working out ways to sidestep a privatized poet-self to make way for poetry already related to the abstractions of the everyday, which is to say a poetry engaged with present-day catastrophe and crisis.

The need to reorder normative relations in the wake of loss is, for many, a long-simmering need. This past summer, this need found a parallel articulation in the word abolitionism, which at present co-exists with the word pandemic. One of those words seems abstract and the other descriptive. The strange juxtaposition is appropriate to how civic institutions are failing to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is also, to quote Dionne Brand, the “global state of emergency of antiblackness.” Abolitionism is a long refusal of the institutions that simulate, privatize, and police us in differential ways, a horizon of freedom without endpoint, to paraphrase Zoé Samudzi. These are not just (as Fred Moten has noted) “the school, the clinic, the jail, but also the self, the subject” called into being by them. We start with refusing to act as guarantors and administrators of the future of such institutions. Some talk of an exodus or an escape plan rather than buy into the experience promised by reopening schools and economies. To disinvest one’s future from the futures of institutions might lead you to be called pragmatic, as if pragmatism blocks you from, say, the experience of an MFA’s literary community.

Another immediate example of working out new forms of livable relations is this very writing. Here, I’m writing for the Poetry Foundation, an institution whose leadership has moved aside in response to public criticism, but which some say might need to deeply divest from its major funding source and even dissolve. To write here is to speculate on and work out a kind of pragmatist participation in institutions. Might it be

possible to act here to help forge a future that is not dedicated to the institution's survival and relevance? If so, it seems necessary to give up the terms of a morally, legibly coherent poet-self to say, Now, all we have to do is want what we have: our interdependence, our radical complicity, our autonomy from institutionalized relations, and poetry.

More than restoring meaning to language (as George Oppen has declared), poetry now can be a means of language inventory. It can divest certain normativizing meanings from language. Furthermore, it can be a practice of activating new relations to language itself, as well as to readers. An open-ended interface between a poem and reader (not a poem's speaker and reader) might be a way of sharing the psychic burdens of disrupting the world to make it more livable, rather than merely surviving these long crises in the hope that institutions might reform themselves.

My new book is a sequence of poems without pronouns. It has no lyrical "I." The poems are without conjunctions and prepositions. There is no received narrative structure, syntactical ordering, or consistent poetic line. The poems do have their own system of arranging language that came out of a procedure. This procedure arose from a need to see social and intimate relations in a more livable way. The need to do so reflects a long cycle of learning from survival and grief. But my book is not about such lessons, personal or collective, because the need to reorder normative relations of self, lover, body, and nature for me must occur in the very medium of poetry: language.

*Platform: Kameelah Janan Rasheed perhaps, there is no sequel 2020 Photo by Daniel Ortiz Courtesy of Rice Public Art and the Moody Center for the Arts*

Reading a poem from *why letter ellipses*, my forthcoming third book one evening two Junes ago, my partner, Stacy Szymaszek, looked up and said mischievously, You are a Language Poet. Her years spent in the stacks of a large poetry bookstore (Woodland Pattern) and leading an anti-bureaucratic space for poetry community (The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church) has given her the ability to share with me off the top of her head a list of poets she has known and cared about: Ted Greenwald, Steve Benson, Ted Pearson, Joan Retallack, Tina Darragh, P. Inman... As I read through this book list, I had moments of being freed by the abstraction of language forms. One such moment was with P. Inman's *Vel* (O Books, 1995), which divides graphemes, the smallest units of language, with periods, and variously scores the spacing between punctuation and letters. Inman does so playfully and humorously to improvise communication with others: some poems are titled in dedication. I experience *Vel* as spoken language from within embodied situations: it is broken, stuttering, noisy, deictic, phatic. It leaves room for silences, mispronunciations, and heteroglossia. It doesn't demand my intimate relationship with a poetic speaker, and it doesn't thrust me into a privatized reading space with a normative poetic experience.

My reading experience in Language poetry has led me to write about translation, postcolonial diaspora, and my family's many languages (more on that in my next post). Language Poetry may not provide a place for a

coherent poetic self, and this bothers a lot of poets who seek social change and transformation. But it may offer a set of practices relevant to our present catastrophe: a space beyond recognition, legibility, surveillance, conditioning, incentivization, and expectation.

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Quick Tags

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Kimberly Alidio (she/they) is the author of *Teeter* (Nightboat Books, 2023), *why letter ellipses* (selva oscura press, 2020), *: once teeth bones coral :* (Belladonna\* Collaborative, 2020), and *after projects the resound* (Black Radish Books, 2016). Her writing has been nominated for the United States Artists Fellowship and was awarded...

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