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“There Is No Content Here, Only Dailiness”: Poetry as Critique of Everyday Life in Ron Silliman’s Ketjak

In the midst of his 1978 prose poem Sitting Up, Standing, Taking Steps, Ron Silliman offers the following passage:

Tuesday, a.m. What, alarm, ceiling, clock, dull light, urine, toothpaste, blue shirt, jeans, water for coffee, bacon, eggs, soy toast, phony earth shoes, bus, another bus, typewriter, telephone, co-workers, salad, ice tea, more co-workers, bus, ambulance on freeway, another bus, a beer, chicken, rice and squash, today’s mail, feces, TV, glass of Chablis, darkness.

This appears to be a record of a relatively uneventful day: it moves, from the moment when the buzz of an alarm clock first stirs consciousness, through a litany of daily activities, such as brushing one’s teeth, commuting on the bus to and from work, eating meals, using the bathroom, and going to sleep. Because the piece also happens to be an experiment in writing a poem completely devoid of verbs, it narrates the day’s story solely through nouns, which results in a kind of list of things, objects, and small-scale events. The passage contains little one might think of as “poetic” or “beautiful”; the details of daily life remain rather defiantly untransformed, neither aestheticized nor turned into metaphor or symbol. The passage does not seem to be “about” anything, either, other than the day itself in all its dailiness.

Although it feels like a straightforward catalogue of what happens in the course of a day, the sentence also hints at some knotty aesthetic and philosophical issues that arise when a poet pays
this sort of attention to the daily. Reading this sentence, one might wonder if this is even “art.” Is it heightened, transformed, or crafted enough to be considered as such? Can an experience so undramatic and banal be appropriate subject matter for art or poetry in the first place? If so, how should it be represented? Do the features of this particular experiment—reducing a day to a string of key nouns—actually provide us with a full record or representation of the day itself? What does this account necessarily leave out? Would a different form of representation offer a different or better version of it? Furthermore, the passage raises the question of what the most significant components of a so-called ordinary day actually are. Does this slice of everyday life have any meaning, and if so, of what sort? Could a close examination of these details tell us anything about what it is like to be alive in late twentieth-century American culture, or about the economic, social, and political structures that underlie it? Is there something “universal” about the kind of experience the passage describes? Or do different people in various times and places experience the everyday so differently that it is misleading to imagine it as a universally shared experience?

Since the 1970s, Ron Silliman has been consistently and memorably asking these kinds of questions at the heart of a body of poetry that has rightly been called an “epic of everyday life.”

Overflowing with images like “[t]he squeal in the tone of a clothesline pulley” (Age 29), “Ritz crackers topped with cream cheese and, beside them, Crayolas” (293), “[g]reen tint to the shit” (11), and “[a]bandoned industrial trackside cafeteria amid dill-weed stalks” (294), Silliman’s writing returns again and again to “[w]hat is to be taken as no information, decisions we make each time we cross the street” (12). Convinced that we too often dismiss such aspects of the world as insignificant, as “no information,” Silliman would seem to concur with the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, who argues that “everyday life” is “in a sense residual, defined by ‘what is left over’ after all dis-

1. Silliman’s friend and fellow Language poet Charles Bernstein uses this phrase in a blurb on the cover of Silliman’s Under Albany, a work Bernstein refers to as “the shadow movement of Ron Silliman’s epic of everyday life, The Alphabet.”
tinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out by analysis” (Critique 97).

Lavishing fresh attention on that which is “left over” is one of the primary motives of Silliman’s writing. “I want to tell you the tales of lint,” Silliman writes at one point in his long poem Ketjak, warning us about the microscopic focus of his opus (Age 9). The vaguely archaic syntax and iambic lilt ironically hint that this is an epic poem we are reading, but it will not be about “arms and the man,” or “man’s first disobedience and the fruit of that forbidden tree,” or “the growth of a poet’s mind.” To truly tell the tale of the tribe, poets must talk of things like “lint.” “The lower the / existence, the higher the experience,” Silliman declares in the poem 2197 (Age 194), reversing our usual prejudices about what is valuable and meaningful. Like William Carlos Williams, a defining influence on his poetics, Silliman provocatively overturns entrenched ideas about what is significant and beautiful by insisting that so much depends upon the ugly, the humble, and the usually overlooked.

The quotidian credo at the center of Silliman’s work is neatly summed up in a single three-word sentence that repeats over a dozen times throughout the course of his one-hundred-page prose poem Ketjak: “Attention is all.” Because Ketjak is a poem characterized by constant, systematic repetition, there are hundreds of sentences that recur again and again, but this phrase carries a special resonance, ultimately becoming a sort of mantra for the entire work. It is not hard to detect in it a Shakespearean echo—both Hamlet’s recognition that “the readiness is all” and Edgar declaring “ripeness is all” in King Lear—but Silliman riffs on these allusions, substituting attention as the all-important prime mover. In effect, Silliman claims that what is paramount for his poetry, for life itself, is not imagination, not inspiration, not ripeness, nor readiness to act in a contingent world, but rather attentiveness to experience and to language. Throughout Silliman’s body of work, the idea that “attention is all” rings out as a statement of purpose and a dogma put into practice in the writing itself.

It is in Ketjak, the remarkable long poem that he has often characterized as a major breakthrough in his life and writing
career, that Silliman first transforms this ethic of attention into a highly influential poetics of everyday life. Written over the space of five months during the summer and fall of 1974 and first published as a book in 1978, *Ketjak* is a hugely ambitious work by a restless, young avant-garde poet seeking to develop a new mode of writing, one better equipped to present everyday life in late twentieth-century American culture with all its variety and contradiction intact.

In what follows, I argue that *Ketjak* has the potential to reorient the way we think about the persistent fascination in both contemporary American poetry and the larger culture with representing everyday life. Silliman’s work not only brims with sharply etched images of the daily but also mounts a compelling, self-reflexive inquiry into the importance of form, and formal innovation, in any attempt to render everyday life legible. By combining poetic practice with theoretical reflection on the everyday itself, Silliman makes the dilemma of how to pay attention to and represent the quotidian one of *Ketjak*’s central subjects.

Thanks to its formal experimentation and self-reflexivity, *Ketjak* poses a potent challenge to prevailing models of dailiness in contemporary American poetry, which is so often praised for its attempt to discover the extraordinary within the ordinary. Silliman remains deeply skeptical of this clichéd notion, which I refer to as “the transformation trope”—the idea that art’s role is to find transcendence in the ordinary, to permit us to escape from the everyday’s dullness and routine, and to transform the everyday into something rich and strange. This cliché is rampant in recent reviews and blurbs for books of poetry, where a particular poet (in this case, the former poet laureate Billy Collins) is hailed as “a master of the everyday” because he “reveals the unexpected within the ordinary. He peels back the surface of the humdrum to make the moment new” and “transforms those moments we too often take for granted into brilliant feats of creative imagination.”

2. The first two phrases can be found on the jacket for Billy Collins’s *Sailing Alone Around the Room*, while the last is taken from the blurb on the back of Collins’s book *Nine Horses*.
temptation to romanticize or aestheticize daily experience, as it attempts to pay attention to the ordinary without transforming it or reducing its complexity.

The everyday, for Silliman, is never neutral or free from determining social forces. Unlike many contemporary poets whose work seeks to uncover the beauty lurking in mundane moments, Silliman engages in a politicized cultural critique of late-twentieth-century consumer capitalism that reveals how its institutions and ideologies invade and determine the smallest details of everyday life. However, I will argue that Silliman’s groundbreaking poem is up to something even more radical and far-reaching: in both its form and its content, \textit{Ketjak} becomes an ambitious allegory of everyday life as such. As Silliman puts it in a pivotal sentence in \textit{Ketjak}, “There is no content here, only dailiness” (51). Ultimately, what the poem is “about” is everydayness itself.

Because \textit{Ketjak} was long out of print, until quite recently it has been difficult for readers to grasp wholly the architecture, scale, and intent of this major work and to gauge its subsequent impact. With the 2007 publication of \textit{Ketjak} as part of the cycle of poems called \textit{The Age of Huts (compleat)}, in an attractive, widely distributed new edition from the University of California Press, the full scope of Silliman’s achievement has become clearer, allowing for a reassessment of his pioneering contribution to contemporary practices of writing the everyday.\footnote{The publication history of \textit{Ketjak} and \textit{The Age of Huts} is rather complicated. \textit{Ketjak} was written in 1974 and first published as a book by Barrett Watten’s This Press in 1978. Around the same time, Silliman wrote a series of other poems in prose, many based on formal constraints. Three of these poems (\textit{Sunset Debris}, \textit{The Chinese Notebook}, and \textit{2197}) were published under the title \textit{The Age of Huts} in 1986 by Roof Books. Two other texts written around the same time, \textit{Sitting Up, Standing, Taking Steps} and \textit{BART}, were written as “satellite texts” or adjuncts to \textit{The Age of Huts} cycle. With the publication of \textit{The Age of Huts (compleat)}, Silliman has at last gathered the entire cycle under one cover.} Perhaps best known today for his exceedingly popular, much-discussed blog on poetry and poetics, Silliman is of course one of the founders and leading members of the avant-garde movement known as Language poetry, which arose in the 1970s and remains both highly influential and controversial. Although
readers of his work have long recognized the everyday as one of its central preoccupations, the idea that Ron Silliman, of all poets, should be dubbed an indispensable poet of everyday life may come as a surprise to some, especially those who continue to view Language poetry with suspicion and paint the writing done under its banner with too broad a brush. Detractors of Silliman’s brand of writing, as well as of Language poetry and experimental postmodernist writing more generally, have long characterized the work, for the most part wrongly, as a kind of antiliterary word salad—nonreferential, self-enclosed, overly theoretical and formalist, deliberately obscure and elitist, cut off from or disdainful of the “real,” and so on. In an essay on Silliman’s poetry, Hank Lazer observes that “a persistent caricature of innovative poetry would claim that it is divorced from daily life, from so-called ‘common experience,’ and from overt political engagement” (“Education” 82); as Lazer argues, such a reading overlooks a key aspect of Silliman’s work: “[His] writing is often overtly political, even didactic in its attention to the political meaning of daily experience.”

Far from being divorced from daily life and the “real,” Language poetry from the start has been deeply concerned with the theory, politics, and practices of everyday life. This concern is at the heart not only of Silliman’s work, but also of other landmark works of the Language movement, from Lyn Hejinian’s My Life to Charles Bernstein’s Content’s Dream, just as it courses through the poets’ engagement with a wide range of theorists and philosophers, including Karl Marx, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Walter Benjamin, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, and Stanley Cavell.

4. Among the most notorious and vociferous of attacks on Language poetry are Tom Clark’s two pieces entitled “Stalin as Linguist” (I and II), which advance many of these claims (65–83). For more on the typical terms and complaints found in the strong opposition to Language poetry, see early pieces by Perloff (“The Word as Such” [Dance 215–38]), McGann, Altieri, and Bartlett, as well as Perelman (11–37) and Lazer, Opposing Poetries.

5. Language writing’s preoccupation with theories and practices of everyday life is too extensive to document fully here, but it is worth noting the important three-part symposium “The Poetics of Everyday Life” that Carla Harryman curated in 1988, in Berkeley, which featured talks by Hejinian, Watten, and Michael Davidson, among others. These pieces are collected in Poetics Journal 9. See Davidson’s “Poetics of Everyday Life” for a brief but rich discussion of the everyday from the perspective of avant-garde poetics.
But despite the pervasiveness of everyday life as a guiding theoretical and aesthetic problem for its poetics, this aspect of Language poetry has not received the scrutiny it deserves. In fact, the poets’ radical investigation of the everyday is one thing that has gotten lost in the pitched discussions and fierce debates about so many aspects of Language poetry over the past three decades, debates that have most often focused on its theoretical concerns about language, reference, and ideology, its claims about experimental writing as a form of radical politics, its status as a poetic community and avant-garde movement, and its relationship to dominant institutions.  

The upshot is that the unique contribution that Language writers like Silliman have made to contemporary debates about the everyday has not yet been fully assessed. Those debates have emerged from the diverse body of everyday life theory associated with such figures as Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Guy Debord and the Situationists, Michel de Certeau, Raymond Williams, and perhaps most centrally—and most usefully for Silliman’s poetry—Henri Lefebvre, whose multivolume *Critique of Everyday Life* is a touchstone for contemporary theoretical discourses about the quotidian.

To understand the particular contribution Silliman makes to this terrain, it is useful to view his work as the offspring of a fruitful marriage between a few distinct sets of sources and com-

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6. There is an extensive body of critical writing on the history of Language poetry and its politics and poetics. In addition to the important early essays mentioned in note 4, also indispensable are the works of poetics produced by Language poets themselves, including those collected in *The L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E Book*, edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, and in Silliman’s *The New Sentence*; Bernstein’s *Content’s Dream, A Poetics*, and *My Way*; Barrett Watten’s *Total Syntax* and *The Constructivist Moment*; Lyn Hejinian’s *The Language of Inquiry*; Andrews’s *Paradise and Method*; and Bob Perelman’s literary history of the movement which he helped found. Other important discussions of Language writing include books by Perloff (*Poetic License, Radical Artifice*), George Hartley, Hank Lazer (*Opposing Poetries*), and Ann Vickery.

7. In recent years, there have been numerous efforts to draw this obviously broad set of thinkers and theories together to form a canonical core group of theorists of everyday life. Important studies that seek to introduce and analyze this body of thought include those by Michael Gardiner, Ben Highmore, and Michael Sheringham. Highmore’s *The Everyday Life Reader* consolidates a nascent canon of everyday life theory. See also Kaplan and Ross; and Felski.
mitments. First, Silliman inherited, and set out to reformulate, the aesthetic of dailiness pioneered by earlier avant-garde poets, especially an American tradition stretching from Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, and the Objectivists to the postwar “New American Poetry” associated with the Beats, Black Mountain, and the New York school. Second, during the early 1970s, he began to immerse himself in literary and cultural theory; his work was quickly energized by a diverse array of theoretical arguments about culture, language, ideology, and the everyday. And lastly, the flowering of conceptual art in the late 1960s and early 1970s—and especially its preoccupation with the use of procedures and constraints to compel attention to the daily and ordinary—had a profound impact on Silliman and his circle.8 Forged by the collision of these discourses, Silliman’s work (along with some strains of Language writing more broadly) represents the emergence of a philosophically informed and politicized poetics of everyday life that both extends and challenges the work of previous writers who sought to limn the daily. Furthermore, the fusion of these strands of fascination with everyday life—the poetic-aesthetic, the conceptual, and the theoretical-political-cultural—that one finds in Silliman’s work reverberate in many adventurous contemporary works that experiment with form in order to probe the quotidian.9

Recent studies of everyday life theory, like those by Michael Sheringham and Ben Highmore, have argued that for all its emphasis on the need to heed the quotidian, this tradition of inquiry often stresses “the everyday’s resistance to form” (Sheringham 22). It frequently reflects on the impossibility of representing, scrutinizing, or recording the everyday without killing it, robbing it of its vitality and elusiveness, its inconspicuousness, its refusal to be categorized—the very things that make it the everyday in the first place. In Everyday Life and Cultural Theory,

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8. For more on conceptual art and Language writing, see Watten, Total Syntax (esp. 200–223) and Hartley (84–93).
9. This blend can be seen, for example, in works like Joshua Clover’s Totality for Kids, an inspired crossing of Frank O’Hara and Guillaume Apollinaire with Guy Debord’s Situationism and Walter Benjamin, or in the conceptual poetics of the quotidian practiced by Kenneth Goldsmith, in works like Soliloquy and Day.
Highmore emphasizes this essential paradox: “the everyday represents an impossibly evasive terrain: to attend to it is to lose it” (20).

It is precisely because everyday life “eludes all attempts at institutionalization” and “evades the grip of forms” (to draw on Lefebvre’s terms [Everyday Life 182]) that so many explorers of the everyday like Silliman have been driven to break with entrenched conventions of representation and realism and to develop new, often challenging methods and forms. In other words, Silliman’s experimentation with form—including his use of procedural, constraint-based methods of composition, repetition, collage and disjunction, found and appropriated language, and extreme length and scale—grows out of a conviction that “the everyday is inherently resistant to being captured in the nets of realism” (Sheringham 42–43).

Indeed, a motif running throughout Silliman’s work is an impatience with conventional “realism,” especially the claims made on its behalf about its ability to render accurately and exhaustively the everyday and ordinary. “Realism is a strategy, not a condition,” Silliman writes in 2197 (Age 194). The conventions of realism are no more than a tool, a literary tactic, he suggests; realism does not amount to a natural, innocent, transparent mode or “condition.” In an early essay, “Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World,” Silliman goes so far as to denounce “realism” as nothing more than “the illusion of reality in capitalist thought” (New Sentence 10). But Silliman—unlike some avant-garde writers and artists—never entirely abandons the realist project. Instead, he strives to reconceive, expand, and improve it, while simultaneously surrendering realism’s dream of accurately or definitively capturing the “real” in its nets.

In the 1970s, Silliman discovered that these disruptive, avant-garde forms allow his work to provide a much more expansive and nuanced picture of everyday life in modernity, one that refuses to smooth over its contradictions, trim away its boredom, idealize its blemishes, or redeem its banalities. Laden with paradox, Silliman’s quotidian is a complicated, unstable mixture—of private and public, universal and particular, tedium and possibility, repetition and newness, deprivation and plenitude.
In its embrace of these contraries, Silliman’s work parallels Lefebvre’s belief that the everyday is “[a]ltogether empty and miraculously full” (Sheringham 143). What is needed, Lefebvre argues, is “a philosophical inventory and analysis of everyday life that will expose its ambiguities—its baseness and exuberance, its poverty and fruitfulness—and by these unorthodox means release the creative energies that are an integral part of it” (Everyday Life 13).

Silliman’s profound belief in the significance of the everyday and the “creative energies” lurking within it gives his writing a potent ethical dimension. In Ketjak this ethical charge is most powerfully conveyed through the poem’s frequent recourse to images of morning and waking, which culminate in the moving admonition of the poem’s closing sentence: “Awake, for nothing comes to the sleeper but a dream” (101). In effect, Silliman declares that awakening to the material realities of everyday life is a cardinal virtue, a poetic and even moral goal. As we will see, he connects this critical and creative awakening to the promise of active, left-wing political and social change.

Like Walter Benjamin, Silliman conceives of capitalism, and the false consciousness that sustains it, as an insidious “dream-filled sleep” (Benjamin 391); both authors use the metaphor of awakening to make tangible that a central mission of their work is to wake us up from that numbing slumber. In The Arcades Project, Benjamin criticizes the Surrealists for being too easily seduced by the lure of the unconscious and dream and, in contrast, portrays his own project as an adventure in philosophical and political waking: “whereas [Louis] Aragon persists within the realm of dream, here the concern is to find the constellation of awakening” (458). He refers to The Arcades Project itself—an innovative “constellation” of fragments intended as an inventory and analysis of the urban everyday—as “an experiment in the technique of awakening” (388).10

Ultimately, Silliman’s Ketjak casts itself as exactly this kind of experiment in wakefulness. Although the poem clearly echoes and anticipates many of the philosophical and political ideas

10. For more on the notion of awakening, dream, and surrealism in Benjamin’s work, see Gilloch (esp. 89–139).
about the quotidian that theories of everyday life articulate, it
does something else as well: by exploring new formal means,
Silliman puts those ideas into practice and extends them. If much
of this body of theory declares that habit and other forces have
led us to neglect the everyday and ordinary, leaving us anesthe-
tized and blinded to the reality of an everyday that has been
“colonized” by capitalism and power, Silliman’s writing takes
this insight as the motive for a practical act, of criticism and of
attention—the creation of his own “constellation of awakening.”
His work, like that of many innovative writers and artists who
devote themselves to the everyday, does what theory and cri-
tique point toward but cannot always achieve. At its best, Silli-
man’s writing suggests that certain kinds of art can model new
modes of attention that change the way we experience our every-
day lives and that perhaps even wake us to action.

Inventing a New Everyday Life Poetics: The Ketjak Breakthrough

In his own frequent retellings of the narrative arc of his career,
Silliman has repeatedly cited the writing of Ketjak in 1974 as a
kind of “Eureka!” moment. Indeed, it is one that has taken on
almost mythic proportions in the story of Silliman’s work, as well
as of Language poetry as a whole. Silliman has described Ketjak
as “my first really serious work” (“Interview” [Tursi]) and noted
that it “in many respects marks my adulthood as a writer” (Inter-
view [McCaffery and Gregory]). The centrality of this poem to
Silliman’s subsequent work is even more apparent when we con-
sider that he has given the title Ketjak to his entire body of
poetry. Although the dramatic turning point this particular
long poem represents can be (and has been) assessed within a

11. Silliman has discussed the origins of Ketjak and its significance to his life and work
on many occasions—in his works, in interviews, and on his blog. See, for example, the
account in Under Albany, Silliman’s most autobiographical text (61–62).

12. Silliman has often explained that he sees all of his writing as constituting a single
work, titled Ketjak: “What I am writing is one poem. That it may [be] composed of poems
is a problem more for poetry than for me. Overall, I have always thought of this project
as Ketjak” (Interview [Brito] 153). See too the chart in Under Albany, where Silliman illus-
trates the overall structure of his work, all under the title Ketjak (21); see also Silliman’s
number of critical contexts, I wish to focus on a key aspect of the *Ketjak* breakthrough: how it facilitated Silliman’s creation of a potent new mode of addressing the everyday, one that managed to fuse form and content in complex, innovative ways.

The question of whether certain aesthetic forms can help render the everyday visible, without unnecessarily falsifying or distorting it, seems to have been central to Silliman’s struggles with his work in the early 1970s. At first deeply influenced and inspired by the avant-garde poets of the previous generation who were lumped together under the rubric “New American Poetry” (Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, Jack Spicer, Philip Whalen, and others), Silliman felt that their work “for a time offered a more fully generative response to daily life” (Interview [Beckett]). But he quickly began to view what the New American poetry had to offer as a “false model,” because it was based on a “speech-imitating poetics” that left Silliman and his peers with a sense of “limiting claustrophobia.” In other words, although he found the New American poetry’s emphasis on dailiness initially liberating, Silliman felt that even the “open” forms pioneered by Ginsberg, O’Hara, Creeley, and Olson “concealed their ‘made-ness,’” as they fetishized the supposedly “speech-based,” “natural,” and “organic” nature of their poetics (“Interview” [Beckett]).

In a 1976 response to a questionnaire about his writing, Silliman recalls that he “started out as a conventional writer of lyrical poems” in the mid-1960s but “became quickly frustrated & bored” with “the forms I’d inherited” (qtd. in Lally 62):

> The pseudo-formalist approach of the post-Projective writers, with which I experimented for a time, offered no real solution. At best, the equation of the page to “scored speech” was a rough metaphor, & it excluded more of the world than it could bring in. Asserting that such writing exposed completely their inner selves, most of these writers had in fact created elaborate & idealized personae. Their mysticism, like the incessant gossip orientation of the so-called younger NY gang, was simply one way to avoid confronting the fact that, by 1970, there was no content left in anybody’s work.
Silliman’s critique of his New American poetry predecessors rests upon two issues that would become quite important to the direction of his work in the 1970s: inclusiveness and content. He felt that the New American poets failed to provide an aesthetic that could accommodate a full enough range of everyday experience: their work “excluded more of the world than it could bring in,” and as a result was severely limited in terms of “content”—a lack barely covered over by the metaphysical pretensions of Duncan or Olson or the coterie chatter of the New York school. Even though these writers developed new poetic forms highly attuned to the daily, the local, and the mundane, for Silliman, they remained too chained to habits of perception, continuity, narrative, and order. Even worse, he saw them as too beholden to an outdated, untheorized model of the self and subjectivity, in which poets seek to expose “their inner selves” and cultivate “elaborate & idealized personae.”

After a period of experimenting with fractured syntax and isolated words in the minimalist vein of Creeley, Robert Grenier, Clark Coolidge, and others, Silliman found himself at something of a dead end. The leap forward came when he decided to try two new devices in his work that enabled him to take up the mantle of dailiness from the New American poetry but to refashion and extend it. First, he began to experiment with prose poetry, developing the use of what he would later famously call “the new sentence”—complete, usually grammatically correct sentences, juxtaposed paratactically in collagelike, discontinuous structures. And second, at almost the same moment, he invented a procedural constraint, based on repetition, expansion, and modification, that would guide and generate the writing of

13. In a 1998 interview, Silliman describes his earliest poems as “publishable but unmemorable neo-workshop lyrics” (“Email” 12) and acknowledges that his first three books were derivative of the New American poetry and Clark Coolidge: “I was writing post-Williams, post-Creeley, post-Olson kinds of lyrics, struggling with the problems implicit in Olson’s equation of the line with breath”; “Mohawk . . . reads like Coolidgeana to me now” (11, 12).

14. For Silliman’s definitive discussion of “the new sentence,” see the title essay of The New Sentence. For an overview of “the new sentence” and the use of parataxis, see Perelman (59–78). Timothy Yu’s recent discussion of arguments surrounding “the political significance of this aesthetic device” is useful (45).
a poem. As he has explained, the idea for the form of Ketjak came to him after he heard a performance of a piece of repetitive minimalist music (Drumming) by the avant-garde composer Steve Reich. Silliman was likewise inspired by the Balinese oral performance “ketjak,” a ritual also known as the “Balinese monkey chant,” in which hundreds of performers chant and dance a dynamic, rhythmic reenactment of a battle from the Hindu Ramayana epic.

Silliman composed Ketjak according to the following constraints: (1) each paragraph has twice as many sentences as the previous paragraph; (2) the new paragraph repeats each sentence from the previous paragraph in the exact same order, although sometimes those earlier sentences are altered or expanded; and (3) the new sentences in each new paragraph are placed between the existing sentences. The predetermined formal mechanism results in a poem made of expanding blocks of prose that grow exponentially in size: the first paragraph has only one sentence, the second features that sentence plus one more, the third consists of four sentences, and the fourth paragraph has eight sentences. The last paragraph of the one-hundred-page work, the twelfth, features 2,048 sentences and over ten thousand words.

15. On Reich’s importance to Ketjak, see, for example, Silliman’s comments in Under Albany (61) and in various interviews, including his remarks to Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory about Reich’s use of repetition in Drumming (“Interview”).

16. For more on the influence of the Balinese ritual known as “ketjak” on Silliman’s work, see his comments in “I Wanted to Write Sentences” (13–14) and in the interview with McCaffery and Gregory. For a particularly interesting, lengthy discussion of the Balinese “ketjak” and its relation to his work as a whole, see Silliman’s Blog 20 Sept. 2003. For an extensive critical discussion of the relationship between Balinese “ketjak” and Silliman’s poems, see Marshall.

17. Although Silliman devised this basic scheme for the poem, it should be noted that the opening paragraphs do not conform exactly to this pattern: for example, the third paragraph breaks from the pattern by including two new sentences between the two sentences in the previous paragraph, rather than interspersing them between each of the prior sentences, and the fourth paragraph features fourteen sentences instead of sixteen. Silliman has discussed the incorporation of these “errors,” saying that the poem would have followed this scheme perfectly “had I not made that decision on the run during the opening stages of the poem and chosen to retain the unrevised structure of the first paragraphs to formally mark the process and place of the decision itself” (“I Wanted” 13). See also his remarks in the essay “Wild Form” on why he decided not to “go back to falsify the text’s record of that decision” (137).
and runs for nearly fifty pages of unbroken prose. The most stimulating, rewarding aspect of *Ketjak* is that each new paragraph features all the previously used sentences appearing in order except that they are now interspersed with new sentences. Each time a sentence recurs, the reader recognizes the familiar phrase but finds it in a completely different context, sandwiched between two new sentences, raising many interesting questions about repetition, variation, and meaning’s relationship to context.

Like other writers attracted to formal constraints, from John Ashbery to Georges Perec and the Oulipo, Silliman became convinced that using this sort of device to generate a text had the potential to free a writer from unexamined habits and received conventions that delimit what is possible in both writing and consciousness.18 “*Ketjak,*” he explained in an interview, “was precisely an attempt to identify a form that would enable me to break away from the habits of continuity” ([Tursi]). In *Under Albany,* he recalls that in *Ketjak* and the other procedural texts that followed it, he was experimenting with “structures that carried forward a formal concept as a mechanism for breaking up the habits of perception” (22).

When explaining his turn to constructivist, procedural mechanisms for generating poetry, Silliman rejects the notion that his conscious, systematic use of a formal constraint in *Ketjak* is different from the use of rhyme or line breaks or any other kind of form in poetry: “All poetry is formalist,” he insisted in a 1985 interview (Beckett), “the intervention of forms into the real, the transformation of the real into forms. But the real is social, discontinuous, unstable and opaque. Against that, any fixed poetics (any valorized, codified set of procedures) is necessarily a falsification.” Silliman suggests that existing forms of poetry, conventions of “realism,” and habits of narrative and perception seldom provide a picture of the “real” that matches our experience of it—as a phenomenon that is “social, discontinuous,

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18. For more on the turn to artifice and formal constraints in modernist and postmodernist literature and art, see Marjorie Perloff’s *Radical Artifice* (especially her discussion of the Oulipo and related experiments in chapter 5, 134–70).
unstable and opaque”—and instead only falsify and distort it. In other words, form matters, immensely: it can even dictate the kind of “real” a poem describes and presents. Or as Silliman’s friend and fellow Language writer Barrett Watten puts it, “New form means new content” (Silliman et al., “For Change” 468).

The Content of a Poem That “Renounces ‘Aboutness’”: “A Real Taste for the Humble”

To be sure, when it comes to considering content, it can be hard to locate what a work as disjunctive and decentered as Ketjak is “about.” Clearly, Silliman does not set out, like so many contemporary lyric poets, to provide a self-contained anecdote, essay, or meditation about a particular subject. Nevertheless, he insists that the decisions governing a procedural, formalist work like Ketjak are very much “content-dependent” (Interview [Beckett]): in other words, the choice to use a particular device is determined by a desire to present particular kinds of content and subject matter.

So what kind of content did Silliman have in mind as he developed the form for his long poem? When asked in a 1982 interview about the content of Ketjak, Silliman explained: “Ketjak is very content centered. It has been pointed out to me by various other people that there is a great deal of ‘dailiness,’ a real taste for the humble, in Ketjak. That sense was very important to me, and still is; it was something I had not been able to approach using a speech-based metaphor for the text” (Interview [McCaffery and Gregory]). In other words, despite the imposing structural exoskeleton (or from Silliman’s perspective, because of it), Ketjak is not just a formalist exercise: it is actually very focused on its content. Further, what constitutes Ketjak’s content is nothing more nor less than daily life itself. As Silliman explains, his conscious goal in the poem is to get at aspects “of American life not much acknowledged by the language of public institutions, which includes creative writing. Presenting these ‘ignored’ areas of experience was and is of definite concern to me, and in that sense Ketjak is extremely content oriented.”
When asked, “Why is it that certain ‘contents’ become ignored? Is it mainly a matter of convention, or do certain objects have a reason for being talked about over and over again?” Silliman replies: “The question of what is appropriate content is mainly conventional. People tend to have things in the world that they are taught to view as meaningful” (Interview [McCaffery and Gregory]). For Silliman, social conventions, aesthetic customs, and ingrained hierarchies of significance all guide what kinds of content we notice, what we accept into our poems or artworks, and by extension, into our world-view. In the poem *Sunset Debris*, Silliman asks, “Don’t you see how so-called good writing is a sort of distortion, positing dishonest limits on the real?” (*Age* 112)—further underscoring his conviction that the tidy shape, obvious subject matter, and logical organization of “so-called good writing” can insidiously distort and restrict our knowledge of lived reality. In contrast, the kind of writing he has in mind “allows for the relationships within the poem to be as complex, as mediated, as contradictory, as disjointed, as indirect and as over-determined as they are in life. Perversely, this enables the work to much more accurately document the realities of the universe than any so-called unified text, any writing organized under the hierarchical principles of narrative or exposition” (Interview [Beckett]).

For Silliman, a nonhierarchical work that ignores the demand for “aboutness” can get considerably closer to the realist project’s dream of being able to “accurately document the realities of the universe” by offering a much more rich, uncensored picture of everyday life and the social real:

That which restricts itself to what reason can comprehend of the real is necessarily going to be exclusionary and narrow, linear instead of polymorphic. A writing which is never “about” anything is never limited as to what can enter in. . . . Which is why a writing which renounces “aboutness” can be so rich at precisely the level of content. . . . When writing is organized hierarchically, content is not only restricted, but much more easily subjected to a wide range of possible social conventions, internal as well as external censorship.

(Interview [Beckett])
Silliman’s way of thinking about content and the everyday here helps explain the crucial sentence I mentioned earlier, which appears twice in Ketjak, once just before the ending, where it takes on even greater resonance: “There is no content here, only dailiness, the driver education car poised in the intersection by the playground, around which a jogger orbits, all in the hill’s shadow at sunset” (51–52, 100–101). Why would Silliman suggest that the poem we are reading has “no content”? And why is “dailiness” cast in opposition to subject matter or content? Because Ketjak “is never ‘about’ anything,” because it is relieved of the burden of representing “content” in the conventional sense, it “is never limited as to what can enter in.” If we give up looking for what we think of as “content,” Silliman suggests, we may wake up to the “dailiness” right in front of us, all around us: the driver’s ed car, the playground, the jogger, the hill, an ordinary evening in San Francisco. In saying “There is no content here, only dailiness,” Silliman proclaims that by relinquishing “aboutness” he has found a way to tune into a kind of raw feed of the polymorphic everyday itself as it constantly unfolds.

Silliman frequently reflects on the absorptive model of everyday poem he has created, the kind of poem that dreams of being wide enough to contain the whole world. When the poem talks about itself, the text highlights its own expansiveness, its logic of accumulation, as when Silliman writes, “One could propose, for example, the inclusion of anything” (12); “This new arc is wider, more gradual” (7); and “If you go wider, deeper” (74). At one point, ironically reappropriating advertising language to “sell” the merits of his long poem, he writes, “Bigger, to serve you better” (57). Silliman’s sense of his poem’s expansive scope, its status as a kind of encyclopedia of everyday life, is echoed at another point: “You could start almost anywhere and find anything” (45). In reading Ketjak, one feels this to be just about true.

To get a sense of the range of images, information, and materials on offer within the “wider, more gradual” arc of Ketjak, we might consider a typical passage plucked from the flow of the poem:

Frying yellow squash in the wok, with string beans, bell pepper, tofu, sprouts. Intermittent as it is, the process of refrigeration sets up a hum
in the wall, non-specific, not to be avoided, not precisely heard, felt rather by the wake in the belly’s fluids. Bone bruise. Rose of china embedded in the lamp. An old spool for cable made into a table, made home for a garden in an old wine jug. The alimentary life. Each morning geese circle the lake until they reinday’s forms. Feta cheese. Normal discourse. You are not the most complicated of men eating an English muffin. What in the wall whistles. Exploration in closure. Prefers instruments of percussion, for discreteness. Fat dimpled thighs. Raw mushrooms. The waitress looms over the table, pot of coffee in hand. Write this down in a green notebook. The rectangular geometry of the tiles, the plane of floor held stories above the ground, which flows under the metal door into this cubicle of the john. Celery, salary. Auto-dactyl dream. Piano man. He gave the impression that very many cities rubbed him smooth. Almonds. The warm blood of rain, say, such image as proposes an aesthetic. Power curtain. So it seemed I woke in a castle, or, rather, its inner court, whose walls of yellow and brown brick supported vines of ivy, until, standing, shaking off dead leaves, I could see into the windows of the rooms, the classes going on there. Each day new vistas become possible, yesterday’s earlobe, today’s toenail, a radio on a mantel one had forgotten to think of, a flashlight. Would pour pigment directly on the canvas, then manipulate that. Interest is something you impose. Endless possibility, drifting from campus to campus, hanging out. Cohn’s loans. . . . An harbor, Ann Arbor. Evolution of the mailbox, professionalism of cops. The poem as long as California, or summer. Until I myself became trapped in the Bermuda Triangle of the heart. Technographic typography. A calculated refusal to perform the normal chores of verse.

It is quite difficult to appreciate the full effect of a poem like Ketjak from excerpts, but its main features should be apparent in a passage of this length (except for its use of repetition, which can be better experienced over longer stretches of the poem). Obviously, the nonlinear, disjunctive form of the passage displays Silliman’s use of the “new sentence,” with its reliance on non sequitur, parataxis, and juxtaposition for its effects. The intense self-consciousness about language and representation so common to Silliman and to Language poetry more broadly can be seen in the many references to the poet’s act of writing the text we are reading (“Write this down in a green notebook”) and to the nature of the poem in front of us (“A calculated refusal to
perform the normal chores of verse,” “The poem as long as California, or summer”). In this way, the poem continually flaunts its own “madeness,” its status as text, as writing. Silliman also interweaves moments of metacommentary about specific aspects of writing and art that resonate with the text at hand (“Normal discourse,” “Exploration in closure,” “Would pour pigment directly on the canvas, then manipulate that,” “Interest is something you impose”). His penchant for puns and wordplay (“Celery, salary,” “Cohn’s loans,” “An harbor, Ann Arbor,” “Technographic typography”) draws attention to the materiality of the signifier. He also reflects, ironically, on other, contrasting poetic modes, as in the remark, “The warm blood of rain, say, such image as proposes an aesthetic,” which sounds like a dig at the 1970s vogue of “deep image” poetry, an often watered-down version of surrealism that was fond of images like “the warm blood of rain,” an aesthetic Silliman implicitly rejects.

At the same time, the passage amply displays Silliman’s goal of eschewing “content,” conventionally understood, in favor of “only dailiness” itself. With hyperprecise language and careful observation of the minute and humble, Silliman trains his attention on a wide range of extremely specific, concrete, ordinary details: food (“Frying yellow squash in the wok, with string beans”; “Raw mushrooms,” “eating an English muffin”); intimate and unpoetic aspects of the body (“Fat dimpled thighs,” feeling “the wake in the belly’s fluids”); unglamorous everyday spaces, like a public bathroom (“the john”); and the background white noise of daily life (“the process of refrigeration sets up a hum in the wall . . . not precisely heard”). There are also slivers of narrative about daily encounters (“The waitress looms over the table”), alongside comments that illuminate the cultural landscape and its public institutions (“Evolution of the mailbox, professionalism of cops”). Mixed in with all this are bits of possible autobiography, like the description of a revealing dream where the speaker seems to be looking in the windows of an ivy-covered academic institution while classes are being taught, or the reference to being “trapped in the Bermuda Triangle of the heart.” There are also evocations of recurrence in everyday life (“Each morning geese circle the lake until they refind day’s
forms,” “Each day new vistas become possible, yesterday’s earlobe”) and of the bodily, routine aspects of daily life (as can be seen, for example, in the many images of eating and “[t]he alimentary life” which run through this particular passage).

If Silliman’s unusual experiment is designed to grant us a new and improved picture of everyday life in modernity (“Bigger, to serve you better”), what kind of portrayal does a passage like this convey? For one thing, it quickly becomes apparent that Silliman conceives of the everyday as an ongoing, fluid, dynamic process more than as a tangible thing or set of experiences. Rather than a sphere where privileged moments of heightened experience or revelation occur, which can be singled out by the artist for the reader’s edification, we are presented with a dizzying, swirling world of concrete details piled up one after the other. These details are presented as a democracy of particulars, stripped of any false or imposed hierarchy of significance. (Or, as he puts it at one point in Ketjak, “No individual sentence given particular attention” [78].) As Hank Lazer notes, “Silliman resists an emotionally heightened fetishizing of [the] objects” he is constantly documenting; he “does not isolate such details as part of a narrowed version of ‘realism’” (“Education” 74, 93). They are offered as parts of a world only, facets of a vast mosaic of information, constantly juxtaposed with other fragments. In this manner, Silliman wards off the temptation—regularly succumbed to in much twentieth-century poetry—to treat everyday experience sentimentally, or as a mere stepping-stone to transcendent moments of vision.

While Silliman’s writing does not seek to transform the mundane or celebrate its hidden riches, neither does it denigrate the everyday as a site of unrelenting boredom and alienation. Filled with variety, ugliness, and beauty at every turn, Silliman’s everyday is immensely varied. It is densely textured and multifaceted, both positive and negative, exhilarating and repetitive. Recoiling from synthetic, narrow versions of what “ordinary” American “daily life” is and means, Silliman refuses to define the everyday in absolute terms. Instead, his goal is to challenge those reductive, constructed versions of the everyday that circulate in our culture through movies, television, advertising, popular music,
novels, and poetry. In his verse essay “Artifice of Absorption,” Silliman’s friend and fellow Language poet Charles Bernstein decries “the simplistic reduction / of everyday life” fostered by the absorbing distractions of television and “entertainments” (“the fastread magazines & / fictions and verse”) (Poetics 84). For Bernstein, such cultural products end up “fueling the banality of everyday life, / not reflecting its elusive actualities.” Bernstein, like Silliman, calls for a kind of writing that might be able to put “an end to this / monotonizing of experience: not to be further / submerged in it.” In fact, one goal of Silliman’s poetry is to lay bare the protocols and subtle forms of “internal as well as external censorship” which limit what “content” is permissible—the ideological machinery that creates this highly mediated, simplified sense of the everyday in the first place.

The Revolving Door of Ketjak’s Form: “Extension, Addition, Modification”

As I have suggested, the particular picture of contemporary everyday life that Silliman presents emerges from far more than just the poem’s content, the scenes, moments, people, and actions he chooses to weave into the poem’s tapestry. It arises out of the complicated interplay between this content and the poem’s unusual, disruptive form. Indeed, the form of this poem—even more so than in later Silliman works that do not rely on procedures of repetition and expansion—actually causes the poem to function allegorically, to the point where the form comes to embody or approximate everydayness as such.

In other words, Silliman’s Ketjak can be read as a postmodernist allegory, in that its formal features—for instance, its reliance on accumulation, its use of a mathematical procedure of expansion, its paratactic piling up of fragments—begin to glow with figurative as well as merely formal significance. But as an alleg-
gory for what? Dailiness itself, I would argue, because the formal and structural features of the poem feel so emblematic of many of the everyday’s constitutive features: endless progression without teleology, discontinuity, repetition, variation, accumulation, contingency, polyphony, and simultaneity.

In a recent interview, Silliman reiterates his belief that our experience of the “real” is, in actuality, “discontinuous,” a quality clearly embodied in the jagged jump cuts that make up the poem’s form. “[W]e experience the world not as a stream of consciousness,” he observes, “but rather as a series of far more finite events . . . if you pay close attention to the phenomenological experience of daily life, it is filled with such junctures & they’re always abrupt” (“Interview” [Tursi]). In order to approximate this dimension of the “real” more accurately, Silliman creates the disjunctive structure of *Ketjak*, which acts as an analogy for the discontinuity at the heart of the phenomenological experience of the everyday. The form of the poem also exhibits a world where an almost impossibly large number of things are happening at once. As the text says of itself at one point, “This sequence presents simultaneity” (82). And as a collage of multiple voices and sources, the poem’s form evokes the fundamentally social nature of the everyday, which compels us to be aware of the pluralism and polyphony of everyday culture, events, and language.20

In the essay “I Wanted to Write Sentences,” Silliman explains that he “set up a form in the poem *Ketjak* that revolved around the sentence as a visible, foregrounded element of the reading structures can be read as political allegory for a society that is nonauthoritarian (playful and provisional structures) and multicultural (the absolute right of difference)” (*Content’s Dream* 314). Timothy Yu argues that *Ketjak* offers “through its form, an allegory of a new social order” (39).

20. Interspersed among the multitude of sentences in *Ketjak* are a high number—neither attributed nor set off by quotation marks—that are taken verbatim (or sometimes slightly altered) from a wide range of texts, including Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*, Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies*, and Karl Marx’s *Capital* and *The Communist Manifesto*, as well as works by the philosopher of language W. V. Quine, avant-garde composer Iannis Xenakis, Ezra Pound, Jack Spicer (“the poem as long as California, or summer” [*Age* 40]), Wallace Stevens, Francis Ponge, John Cage, and Bob Dylan, in addition to myriad samples drawn from popular culture, advertising, overheard speech, and so on.
experience and that utilized repetition to undercut hypotaxis. Borrowing an idea from the music of Steve Reich, I realized that accumulation itself could be used to suggest direction” (13). Repetition and accumulation, then, become governing formal devices because they enable the writer to counteract our unthinking, habitual reliance on order, linearity, continuity, teleology, vertical hierarchy (“hypotaxis” refers to the subordination of clauses in a sentence), and closure—all of which tend to mask or distort what Bernstein has called the “elusive actualities” of everyday experience (Poetics 84).

Silliman learned from both Steve Reich’s music and Balinese ketjak a crucial lesson: a form based on “accumulation” can provide a work with a sense of direction. Building a text upon this insight permits Silliman to evade the pull of teleology and linear progress which drives most types of writing; at the same time, he avoids having to surrender a feeling of forward movement. Even more to the point, writers and artists have often found that the act of accumulation can be a powerful tool in the quest to rescue the everyday from neglect. The effort to amass data—to gather, collect, archive, and document—is a key feature of twentieth-century everyday life projects. Silliman’s attraction to “ketjak”—even to the point of bringing together his entire oeuvre under this title—stems from his fascination with the notion of form-through-accretion: “the term Ketjak . . . stands in my own imagination as a figure for accumulation, an allusion to the remarkable layering of voices at the heart of that chant” (“I Wanted” 13–14).

In the poem Ketjak, the deliberate structure of accumulation and repetition is directly tied to its desire to approximate the experience of everyday life. For one thing, the poem’s formal repetition manages to convey a powerful sense of the repetitive, cyclical rhythm that so many theorists of the everyday have seen as its most important feature. Indeed, for Lefebvre, the word “la quotidienne . . . really refers to repetition in daily life, to that which repeats itself consistently” (“Toward a Leftist Cultural Politics” 78). The systematic repetition in Ketjak’s form becomes a way for Silliman to compel us to recognize recurrence as a, perhaps the, constituent feature of everyday life. But in this case, the repetitive
nature of daily life is portrayed not as something to be decried or celebrated, but rather as a paradoxical and complex phenomenon worthy of exploration.

From the very first sentence of the poem, repetition takes center stage, both formally and thematically: “Revolving door.” Because of the rules that generate the text, this carefully chosen line serves as the sentence ushering us into each of the poem’s twelve, ever-expanding paragraphs. As such, the phrase “[r]evolving door” seems designed to serve as an emblem for the text itself. It can even be read as a figure for the fusion of form and content that I have been highlighting; while Silliman himself has said that “‘[r]evolving door’ is a metaphor for the reading function of re-entering the content in each line,” he also has noted that the sentence was inspired by seeing the door of the Bank of America skyscraper in downtown San Francisco, so it serves as a sign of the particular material and economic culture of the late twentieth-century (“Reading Ketjak” 50; Under Albany 61–62). By using a revolving door as linchpin and symbol, Silliman underscores the circular quality of both the text and everyday life itself. Each leaves us forever revolving (with no stops for epiphanies) but also constantly moving into new experiences, new days, new sentences.

Alongside the use of repetition, the extravagant length and enormous scale of the poem play an allegorical role in this project. The one-hundred-page poem’s intentional excess, vast size, lack of closure, and “revolving door” repetition become emblematic of the sheer endlessness of everyday experience. At its darkest, Ketjak hints at the incessant circularity and tedium of day-to-day life that one finds in other works about the everyday—such as those of Samuel Beckett (Happy Days, Endgame, Waiting for Godot). When we read a sentence like “Constantly waking, new day” (35), or “Walking each day through the business district, select a facet on which to fix attention, displays of white loafers, calendars at half price” (87), and then encounter the exact same words again two, four, or forty-five pages later, we cannot help but recognize, even feel, the endless, dizzying round of waking up, going to work, walking down the street, going to the bathroom, going to sleep. By using a repetitive struc-
ture to create a very long poem, Silliman crystallizes—not only on the level of content but in the experience of reading the poem—the circularity and repetition that give the everyday its flavor of ennui, sameness, and perpetual recurrence. As Silliman puts it, “Each dawn is a return to an eternal conclusion” (29). One might think of it as the Groundhog Day effect. Silliman even includes a two-word sentence, “Xerox days” (34), that captures, in a particularly succinct manner, the grim sensation that our days are little more than infinite copies of one another—everyday life in the age of mechanical reproduction, perhaps.

And yet to repeat is not to Xerox. In The Chinese Notebook, Silliman wonders: “Is the same sentence in two contexts one or two sentences? If it is one, how can we assign it differing meanings? If it is two, there could never literally be repetition” (Age 173). The Chinese Notebook is a series of numbered statements modeled on Philosophical Investigations, and in this passage Silliman engages in a Wittgensteinian meditation on how repetition affects meaning. He seems to be thinking through the implications of his own use of repetition in Ketjak (a text he had only recently completed when he wrote the philosophical meditations of The Chinese Notebook): each time a sentence reappears in his poem, it exists in a different context and is therefore not the same, has a different meaning. One could take this a step further and argue that by analogy, or even in terms of allegory, each time a fragment of the quotidian in Ketjak appears in an altered context, it is quite literally not the same. By extension, then, Silliman’s repetitive structure actually challenges the belief that the everyday is a realm of experience defined by little more than numbing repetition, one in which the predominant ontological feature is sameness and repetitive experience. Instead, it casts the quotidian as a space of difference, change, and variety, albeit within a framework of continual recurrence. In Silliman’s presentation of everyday life, each day is not a Xerox of every other day, although it may feel that way at times: each walk to work is a new walk, each tedious bus ride a new bus ride.

Perhaps counterintuitively, Ketjak’s use of repetition highlights the richness, variety, and ongoing mutability within endless reiteration. This is because the poem’s structure evokes the way
human life is driven, paradoxically, not merely by repetition but also by the accretion of experience—which becomes apparent when one glances at the shape of the poem’s first few, increasingly long paragraphs and then looks ahead to the gargantuan final paragraph. With its formal structure founded on a logic of what Silliman refers to as “extension, addition, modification” (34), *Ketjak* embodies the paradoxical mixture of sameness and newness, boredom and possibility, stagnation and change that characterizes modern everyday experience.

“*Ketjak* Is a Political Act”: Poetry as Cultural Critique

For all his obsessive attention to concrete, daily experience, Silliman is acutely aware that we have no access to an unmediated reality, that there is no way of disentangling the “real” from how it is constructed and imagined via our languages and forms of representation. Despite his profound investment in the poem as an everyday life project, a deep skepticism about the capacity of poetry, or any other form, to represent the everyday in any objective or exhaustive way runs throughout Silliman’s work. *Ketjak* incessantly questions its own ability to represent the “real,” showcases its status as text, acknowledges that “[a]rt is a mirage” (97), and generally reflects on the difficulty of creating a “poem as real as life” (92). Of course, Language poetics as a whole depends upon exactly this kind of self-reflexive metacommentary, this raising of questions about the nature of representation and language. But it is important to note that, for Silliman at least, the crisis of representation so central to Language poetry is inseparable from the problem of the everyday. Furthermore, one benefit of actively building such skepticism into the poem is that Silliman manages to keep the conceptual dilemma of the everyday itself—and modes of access to dailiness—at the forefront, as both a theoretical and an aesthetic concern.

However, despite this awareness that “[a]ll depiction’s false,” as he puts it in a later poem (*What* 27), Silliman remains convinced that the attempt to comprehend everyday life is a crucial element of the political critique of capitalist, consumerist American culture that has engaged his energies for decades. As
numerous critics have shown, one of the most distinctive features of Silliman’s work is its politicized depiction of the complex, textured landscape of late capitalism through sharp-eyed observation and the juxtaposition of telling fragments. Bob Perelman argues that an “oppositional stance” is “implicit” in Silliman’s sentences, “as they simultaneously depict and critique their world” (69): “Far from being fragments, his sentences derive from a coherent, wide-ranging political analysis,” in which his “sense of the broken integers produced by capitalism is inseparable from his commitment to the emergence of a transformed, materialist society” (66).21

Silliman’s work is not merely politically engaged, though. More specifically, it seeks to document the micropolitics of daily life, exposing just how infiltrated by power, class, gender, and race the everyday can be. The conviction that capitalism and mass media have invaded, or even “colonized,” twentieth-century everyday life joins the work of Silliman to the projects of Henri Lefebvre and Guy Debord. In Lefebvre’s words, “The commodity, the market, money, with their implacable logic, seize everyday life. The extension of capitalism goes all the way to the slightest details of ordinary life”; “A revolution cannot just change the political personnel or institutions; it must change *la vie quotidienne*, which has already been literally colonized by capitalism” (“Toward a Leftist Cultural Politics” 79, 80).

In order to make visible the mechanisms that enable this colonization and to trace its effects on our lives, Silliman offers vignettes drawn from a wide spectrum of American culture, often merely by presenting concrete details, without authorial comment or editorializing. As a result, the range of subject positions adumbrated in a piece like *Ketjak* is deliberately enormous. Thus we encounter a social world that teems with diversity and variety: a “City of stenographers. . . . City of busboys, of administrative assistants” (53–54), of fishermen and businessmen, fac-

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21. See also Bernstein (*Content’s Dream* 305–20), Watten (“There is an ethical value being given to the particulars that are taken in” [*Total Syntax* 109]), and Lazer (Silliman’s work is “often overtly political, even didactic in its attention to the political meaning of daily experience” [*Education* 82]), among others.
tory workers, suburbanites, bohemian poets, and “Tourists from 
Taiwan” (20), where “Women, smelling of ammonia, board the 
bus” (20), a “Man on the bus, scavenger, sips cough medicine” 
(21), and “men eat[] burgers in silence, at a drugstore counter, 
wearing t-shirts and short hair, staring at their food” (21). This 
embrace of difference, along with its implicit commentary on the 
keynote in American culture, is a major aspect of Silliman’s 
work, one that admirers have often hailed as one of its most 
salient and political features. “Only someone who had thought 
tensely about the fate of other people’s lives could have written Ketjak,” Watten observed in an important early critical response to the poem: “To imagine another life without power gives value to the fact. Identity is all that literary politics can produce. Ketjak is a political act. Identity in Silliman’s work is open-ended” (Andrews and Bernstein 271).

This intense concern for “the fate of other people’s lives” leads Silliman to conceive of poetry as what Lazer has called “an extended act of indigenous ethnography”—an auto-anthropo-
logical scrutiny of contemporary American culture that takes 
nothing for granted about the familiar activities and practices of 
its people (“Education” 68). This project leads Silliman to present 
an extremely varied, uneven social field and to consider details 
of daily life within that field semiotically, as markers in a com-
plex system of forces that operate within even the most trivial 
and tiny aspects of our experience. The notion that one can “read” the supposedly unimportant details of everyday life as 
an index of the large-scale political and cultural dynamics of 
contemporary culture becomes a central feature of Silliman’s 
work going forward. For example, in his 1988 poem What, he 
writes, “Out of the behavior / of drivers at an intersection you 
can read / the state of the nation” (111).

Thus Silliman implies that every scene, moment, or fragment 
of everyday life in Ketjak could provide us with a picture of the 
state of the nation, if only we would pay attention. To that end, 
he offers countless glimpses of daily life lived within an often 
invisible system of capitalism, corporate and media manipula-
tion, class difference and rampant inequality, racial hierarchy, 
and so on. The world he depicts is marked by both the excessive
abundance and the deprivations of late-twentieth-century culture, and Silliman zeroes in on how their uneasy coexistence is often ignored or repressed in our daily lives.

One of his favorite tactics is to use juxtaposition to sharpen the critique and heighten the contradictions. For example, on the first page of *Ketjak*, Silliman places “[f]ountains of the financial district”—a signifier of American corporate culture and economic might—right next to a tableau in which a group of “idle” men, on the roof of a houseboat floating in the bay, “play a Dobro, a jaw’s harp, a 12-string guitar” (3). Part of the critique’s power lies in the jolt that comes from yoking together these two starkly different cultural instances, one familiar, the other much less so.22 Similarly, in a later paragraph, when an ironic reference to a “Portrait of the best worker in Auto Plant 7” is immediately followed by the reappearance of the sentence “Fountains of the financial district spout soft water in a hard wind,” Silliman detonates another little collision of contrasting class registers, of different, dehumanizing spaces within the economic system (10). Across the variegated landscape of the poem, Silliman allows the strange habits of consumer-mad American culture—“Shopper’s world, a whole store for quilts” (24)—to bump up against the experience of the impoverished: “Stood there broke and rapidly becoming hungry, staring at nickels and pennies at the bottom of the fountain” (10). We are frequently reminded that in the midst of all this plenty, in a society where some of us can shop in a store selling nothing but quilts, enjoy “[a] tall glass of tawny port” (6), or garnish our pizzas with anchovies, there is also profound privation and poverty which many of us rarely acknowledge: “A metal table, round, whose center is a large beach umbrella placed instead upon concrete, at the pool’s edge, for us to set our drinks upon while we gaze at the divers. Layers of bandage about the ankle. People are starving. Anchovy” (32).

One effect of Silliman’s ethnographic investigation of such a multifaceted social landscape—of devoting so much attention to

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22. In an interview, Silliman held up the sentence featuring the Dobro-playing men as a prime example of the “‘ignored’ areas of experience” he hoped to draw attention to (“Interview” [McCaffery and Gregory]).
class in particular—is that it allows him to avoid simplistic clichés that equate “everyday life” with a dubious, universalized notion of commonness or “the common man,” which so often serves as a quiet stand-in for white, bourgeois, heterosexual, and male experience. With its seemingly endless multiplicity of quotidian instances, the poem’s capacious pluralism demonstrates the concept that everyone lives within the everyday, whether they are politicians or homeless people, stock analysts or gang members. But extending the notion of dailiness to a broad range of cultural experiences and lived spaces does not mean that Silliman simply conceives of the everyday as “universal.” He never suggests that everyday life is the same for everyone; instead, he demonstrates tangibly that, for all the differences shaped by culture and identity, everyday life is a level of existence experienced by everyone, regardless of class or region, race or gender.

Silliman also casts an unsparing light on submerged assumptions about identity, including his own, as he frequently stresses just how much our lives are shaped by gender roles, social class, or ethnicity. At one point, for example, the text explains, “It was my racism causing me to hear these blacks in the café discussing Heisenberg” (54). With such uncomfortable admissions, Silliman insinuates that the most basic experiences in daily life—here, the way one might perceive even the most offhand overheard remarks over coffee—are actually determined by deep-seated racial assumptions and more broadly by ideology. In Silliman’s world, the specter of the political haunts all of our day-to-day activities and behaviors. It lurks nearly out of sight in our workplaces, our dining rooms, and our most intimate relationships: “Couple at next table, over coffee, discuss power relations of their home” (52). In order to make such dynamics of power more visible, Silliman often denaturalizes the dominant class and race, treating what he observes anthropologically rather than as a natural default setting, as in the particularly memorable, defamiliarizing image, “White tribe, the golfers migrate up the slope” (82).

By suggesting that Silliman’s radically inclusive vision of the social produces a potentially liberating ideological critique of everyday life, I do not mean to imply that Silliman himself man-
ages to transcend the limitations of his own subject position. In an incisive recent discussion of *Ketjak*, Timothy Yu argues that while Silliman may aim “to create a broad-based account of contemporary experience that achieves a modicum of objectivity,” the text is still “marked as emanating from the perspective of a white male avant-gardist” (39). After highlighting numerous ways in which the poem reinscribes whiteness and sexism (especially by pointing out how often it traffics in disturbing displays of the male gaze and the objectification of women), Yu writes, “It is Silliman’s hope that the method of the new sentence deployed in *Ketjak* will provide a realistic and documentary language that manages to escape the boundaries of his own (straight white male) perspective, with all its limits” (70). In other words, what saves this ostensibly politically progressive text from falling prey to the “perspectives and prejudices” of the author’s “identity as a straight white man from a working-class background” is its discontinuous, fragmented form (71). Yu argues that Silliman’s use of parataxis “refuses to allow that perspective to cohere—serving, in essence, as the author’s bulwark against himself.”

The notion that Silliman deploys the paratactic form of *Ketjak* in a bid to free himself from himself seems consistent with his stated desire to break with his own habits of perception through formal experiment. It underlies Silliman’s effort to evade the perilously narrow view of the social real provided by most linear and hierarchical forms of writing, including that of his New American poetry predecessors. At the same time, there is no question that the text remains tied to the white male heterosexual subjectivity of its author in ways that Yu sensitively addresses. However, this line of inquiry makes one wonder: does Silliman make a strong claim that his work is able to transcend the borders of his own class or racial position? Does he in fact believe that the map of the everyday social world he draws could ever be “objective” or “universal,” especially given his profound skepticism about the ability of representation to capture the “real”? One could argue that Silliman deliberately refuses to treat either his own subject position or his ethnographic attention to the “other” as neutral or unproblematic. Self-aware, self-critical
comments occur throughout his work, such as the remark about how “racism” forced him to be conscious that some strangers discussing Heisenberg were African American (Age 54). For example: “You use, she said, rising up from the bed angry, sex as a weapon” (91); “Do you at times presume that merely by observing the person, a glancing diagnosis, you can, by extension of the imagination, understand their fuller lives?” (116); “The crowd at the hockey game / is entirely white” (What 70); “How concerned was I over her failure to have orgasms?” (Alphabet 1). Instead of claiming that his poetry permits him to transcend a white male perspective to arrive at an objective vantage point outside of ideology, Silliman often uses his writing to uncomfortably display his own assumptions and prejudices, including his sexism. In this manner, Silliman’s poetry puts flesh on the bones of the theoretical insight that our everyday language and daily lives—even those of the poet himself—are thoroughly imbricated with our class, race, and gender identities.

“The Dawn Light Is Before Us”: Ketjak as a Constellation of Awakening

As we have seen, Ketjak is highly sensitive to the often grim reality that politics, power, and inequity permeate our daily lives. Nevertheless, a quiet optimism about the everyday and its possibilities suffuses the poem’s sentences. Consider the tonality and outlook of these instances that run through Ketjak’s fabric like brightly colored thread: “Each morning I rise to praise these faces” (31); “Each dawn a return to an eternal conclusion, the lemon tree in flower” (29); “Each day there’s the bridge” (48). It is striking to see how frequently Silliman uses the word “each” in these sentences and in many, many others throughout the poem (“Each day now the late sun later” [85]; “Each day as I lie here, I hear her rise and wash” [35]; and so on). “Each” serves as an anaphora at the opening of these sentences and as such becomes a key component in Silliman’s presentation of everyday experience as a “revolving door,” a paradoxical mixture of continuous newness and interminable sameness.
The hopeful tone and gentle lyricism that pulse steadily in *Ketjak* are connected to what I earlier called a guiding trope and central, if unstated, thematic core of the poem—the act of waking. Throughout the piece, Silliman deploys dozens of images related to waking and morning. In doing so, he often suggests that each day is less an oppressive “Xerox” of all other days than an opportunity for renewal and revitalized attentiveness: for example, he writes that “[y]ou wake in waves, each new day’s small tides of attention” (8), refers to “[s]weet wake-up” (83) and “[t]he clarity of winter morning” (96), and celebrates that “Each day new vistas become possible, yesterday’s earlobe, today’s toenail, a radio on the mantel one had forgotten to think of, a flashlight” (20).

*Ketjak* is, fundamentally, a poem of “morning,” an embrace of dawn—not just the particulars of any given sunrise, but morning as an existential state of mind, as a mode of awareness and attentiveness to the world around us. In this, the poem echoes the famous passage in *Walden* in which Thoreau praises morning as a way of being rather than a time of day. For those who are truly awake, “the day is a perpetual morning,” Thoreau writes. “It matters not what the clocks say or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me . . . To be awake is to be alive” (73–74). What Silliman’s poem models is a comparable ethos, a way of being in the world that puts into practice Nietzsche’s similar injunction: “Try to live as though it were morning” (qtd. in Bloom 79).

As we saw with Walter Benjamin’s use of the metaphor of “awakening,” writers and artists who champion daily life and alert us to its vitality often articulate this vision by pitting images of slumber or dream against wakefulness, as when John Cage describes his experimental music as a way “simply to wake up to the very life we’re living” (95), or when the painter Fairfield Porter remarks, “the whole question of art is to be wide awake, to be as attentive as possible” (qtd. in Spring 38). The French writer Georges Perec urges us

To question the habitual. But that’s just it, we’re habituated to it. We don’t question it, it doesn’t question us, it doesn’t seem to pose a problem, we live it without thinking, as if it carried within it neither questions nor
answers, as if it weren’t the bearer of any information. This is no longer even conditioning, it’s anesthesia. We sleep through our lives in a dreamless sleep.

In the last pages of *Ketjak*, Silliman arrives at a profound recognition about his creative project and how it might address the problem that Perec poses. The final, climactic sentence of the long poem, which appears only once, takes the form of a rather startling commandment: “It was the voice of Big Black, ‘Awake, for nothing comes to the sleeper but a dream’” (101). The message uttered by this mysterious, authoritative voice in the last sentence of this massive work resonates with the themes of the entire poem, as it seems to say something quite similar to Perec’s warning: the habitual is a form of anesthesia; wake up. Sleepwalking through our lives condemns what are actually the most important aspects of our existence to oblivion and gives us nothing in return but silent shadows and dreams.

But Silliman does not use these images of dawn, morning, and waking merely to declare the importance of an alert responsiveness to daily life, or to reject the siren call of dream and imagination. Just as Benjamin draws a link between the “constellation” that he creates in his work and an “awakening” from the specific “dream sleep” that is capitalist society (458), Silliman’s images of waking are also, subtly yet directly, connected to political awareness, ideological unmasking, resistance, and action. When Silliman writes, in one of the poem’s host of references to morning, “The dawn light is before us, let us rise up and act” (48), he underscores the connection between tropes of dawn and leftist political opposition to the status quo. Silliman has appropriated this particular image of dawn from a 1948 speech given by Mao Zedong, calling the Chinese Communist Party to revolution (although the remark is unattributed and appears without quotation marks). The phrase is also quoted (in French) in “The Kingfishers,” by Charles Olson (168), who served as a formative influence on Silliman. Thus Silliman is not merely alluding to any old dawn but hints at the possibility that political awareness and acts of resistance might help us awaken to a dramatically
new world, through what the French Situationists called “the revolution of everyday life.”

To see how Silliman brings this theme to fruition, consider again the poem’s final line: “It was the voice of Big Black, ‘Awake, for nothing comes to the sleeper but a dream’” (101). Who is “Big Black,” and why does it, or he, say this? Is it the dark night, telling us to wake up? A number of figurative resonances are possible. But once the identity of “Big Black,” the person who spoke this sentence, becomes clear, the poem’s political charge—its ethical commandment—deepens. The sentence refers to the bloody prison uprising at the Attica Correctional Facility in upstate New York in 1971, and to Frank Smith, one of the inmates involved, “a huge man with a booming voice” who was known by the nickname “Big Black” (Martin). The Attica uprising occurred when fifteen hundred inmates revolted and took over the prison to protest inhumane conditions. After a four-day standoff, the state police stormed the prison in a military-style assault, killing dozens of inmates and hostages in a horrific, racially charged crackdown. “Big Black” Smith had in fact tried to keep the situation from getting out of hand and represented the prisoners as a negotiator with the authorities during the standoff, but once the rebellion was crushed, he, like others, was brutally beaten and tortured by police officers.23

So what does the Attica uprising and Big Black’s voice have to do with Silliman’s Ketjak? First, Silliman spent most of the 1970s, including the period when this poem was written, working as an activist and lobbyist in the prison reform movement. So one could surmise that everything “Attica” symbolized—about American racism, the oppressiveness and violence of state institutions, the American public’s lack of awareness regarding the inhumane brutality of the prison system, and so on—held deep personal and political meaning for him. Second, the movie Attica, a well-received documentary chronicling the injustice of the prison and the violence of the crackdown, was released in

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1974, when Silliman was at work on this poem. Most importantly, the final line of the film is spoken by Big Black, who says, “Wake up, because nothing comes to a sleeper but a dream.”

In a 1974 review of the movie in *The New York Times*, Vincent Canby specifically pointed to the power of this closing moment: “[T]here is nothing so eloquent as the last line of the film, spoken on the soundtrack by an ex-inmate who would shake the public out of its historic disinterest in penal reform.”

By incorporating Big Black’s stirring demand for social justice, racial equality, and political awareness into *Ketjak*, Silliman ends his poem with a sentence that fuses the image of waking up with the need to shed the blinders of ideology, the need to become more aware of how power and politics infiltrate our daily lives. In this way, Silliman’s insistence that “Attention is all” broadens outward, becomes an active response to destructive social, ideological, and political systems.

In the act of writing *Ketjak*, Silliman seems to have discovered a way to overcome the anesthesia that Georges Perec and Big Black warn us about. He did so by creating his own “constellation of awakening” (Benjamin 458)—devising a strange, challenging new form that allowed him, and perhaps us, to break with entrenched habits of perception and to escape prejudices about “content” that tend to keep the everyday, its pleasures, pains, and politics, hidden. Although Silliman sets out to undertake a pointed critique of everyday life that is informed by Marxism and leftist cultural theory, the poetry itself rarely feels doctrinaire, since the primary message it articulates (*open your eyes and stop dreaming; attention is everything*) is more open-ended and exploratory than topical or programmatic. Through the force of its own moving, even inspiring example, *Ketjak* demonstrates that the effort to wake up to the very life we are living, to those things we forget or are taught not to notice, is an imperative of the highest order. Now that the dust kicked up by the furious struggles over the meaning of Language poetry as a movement has begun to settle, the radical and influential nature of Ron Sil-

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24. I am indebted to Aldon L. Nielsen for suggesting to me that this phrasing, as well as the name Big Black, were connected to the civil rights movement.
liman’s groundbreaking work of the 1970s can come into sharper focus. Because it confronts the enduring problem of how to present those aspects of human experience that seem almost by definition beyond representation, Ketjak has much to teach us about our never-ending attempt to catch up with the always elusive everyday.

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