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**NEGATIVE  
THEOLOGY AND  
UTOPIAN THOUGHT  
IN CONTEMPORARY  
AMERICAN POETRY**

Determined Negations

**Jason Lagapa**



American Literature Readings in the  
21st Century

Series Editor  
Linda Wagner-Martin  
University of North Carolina  
Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA

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Jason Lagapa

Negative Theology  
and Utopian  
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in Contemporary  
American Poetry

Determined Negations

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macmillan

Jason Lagapa  
English Department  
University of Texas of the  
Permian Basin  
Odessa, USA

American Literature Readings in the 21st Century  
ISBN 978-3-319-55283-5 ISBN 978-3-319-55284-2 (eBook)  
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-55284-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017938914

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Cover image: Détail de la Tour Eiffel © nemesi2207/Fotolia.co.uk

Printed on acid-free paper

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The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG  
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*for Tenney Nathanson*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have had a great deal of support and encouragement as I conceived of and wrote this book, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to express my gratitude. Tenney Nathanson was a leading force in my development as a scholar, and I can trace back my abiding interest in reading poetry closely to him. In fact, I often think that nearly all that I know about poetry came from his instruction. Whatever that is good in these pages can be attributed to Tenney and his guidance, and, for this reason, I dedicate this book to him. I would also like to thank Herbert N. Schneidau, Roger Bowen, Jeremy Green, Dan Cooper Alarcon, and Colin Dayan for the training and knowledge that I received from them while I was a doctoral student at the University of Arizona.

This book also benefited from the many friendships and working relationships that I have forged since my time in Tucson. I am privileged to be part of the academic community at the University of Texas—Permian Basin, and the time that I have spent here has been an enriching one. There are a great many colleagues from the Department of Literature and Languages and across the entire College of Arts and Sciences who have granted me clarity of purpose while completing this project. I must also give thanks to the many graduate students and English majors who have been part of my classes; they might not know the profound effect their goodwill, efforts, and thought had on my work, but I certainly do.

Additionally, the kindness and assurance that I feel from long-time friendships and family members has been indispensable. Dale Smith, Brent Cottle, Orlando DiMambro, Kevin Amherd, and Steve Bagley all have offered me friendship that strengthens me to this day. My wife's

family has always made me feel as if I was one of their own, and such a connection has been a great source of support for my work. As for my immediate family, I have drawn vastly on the friendship and love from my sister and brother, Sharon and Ed Lagapa; as the youngest sibling, I do not know a world without them—such is their influence and orbital pull on me. I cannot put into words what I have learned and gained from my father and mother, Fred and Dorothy Lagapa. The debt that I owe them is immense and incalculable, yet it is also something I have no trouble acknowledging. Lastly, I would like to thank my wife, Emily Weinberg. This book is a testament to what is possible, and I am able to see this because of her: she is my very being and purpose.



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## Introduction

**Abstract** This chapter takes as its subject the utopian imagination in contemporary American poetry and explores the ways in which experimental poets—Language writers and other formally innovative poets—formulate a utopian poetics by adopting the rhetorical principles of negative theology. Lagapa argues that an understanding of negative theology is essential to recognizing the utopian potential of American experimental poetry. Negative theology proposes using negative statements as a means of attesting to the superior, unrepresentable being of God, and a strategy of negation similarly proves optimal for depicting the subject of utopia in literary works. Negative statements in contemporary experimental poetry illustrate the potential for utopian social change not by portraying an ideal world itself but by revealing the very challenge of representing utopia directly.

**Keywords** Utopia · Negative theology · Language poetry · Experimental poetry · Negation

This book takes as its subject the utopian imagination in contemporary American poetry and explores the ways in which experimental poets—Language writers and other formally innovative poets—formulate a utopian poetics by adopting the rhetorical principles of negative theology.

The recourse to negative theology for utopian literary projects is a necessary one. Just as negative theology proposes using negative statements as a means of attesting not only to the superior being of God but also to the representational deficiencies of language, a strategy of negation proves to be an optimal approach for conveying the elusive, hard-to-represent subject of utopia. The premise of negative theology, or the apophatic tradition, is that language is unequal to the task of depicting God's transcendent being. As Jacques Derrida has written, "negative theology consists of considering that every predicative language is inadequate to the essence, in truth to the hyperessentiality . . . of God; consequently, only a negative ('apophatic') attribution can claim to approach God" (4). Utopia is a concept that similarly defies representation and outstrips efforts to depict it: the goal of creating a viable blueprint for an ideal society is elusive, and literary depictions of utopia all too often bear a stain of implausibility. A feasible utopian society can seem, consequently, impossible to envision, beyond the scope of the human imagination. It is the argument of this book that negative rhetorical constructions—including negative phrasing, negative particles, and other forms of grammatical negation—are key to a proper understanding of the utopian literary projects of experimental poets, for such negation instructively indicates the logic of negative theology at work and appropriately addresses the complex challenges of presenting utopia. A strategy of negation, in this manner, provides a means of postulating utopian ideals, particularly as a straightforward and direct rendering of utopia would undermine the force of utopian thought and fail to express the transformative potential of utopian principles.

Understanding the political claims that have been made by experimental poets is vital to ascertaining how and why the tenets of negative theology are employed for utopian poetics. In *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writers and Literary History*, Bob Perelman, after duly accounting for the complexity and diversity of Language writing, outlines a generalized, common endeavor for Language writers, which was to create works in "opposition to the prevailing institutions of American poetry" (12). Elaborating further, Perelman writes that the group of writers from the early seventies who would later be called "Language poets" did have a "loose set of goals, procedures, habits and verbal textures: breaking the automatism of the poetic 'I' and its naturalized voice; foregrounding textuality and formal devices; using or alluding to Marxist or poststructuralist theory in order to open the present to critique

and change” (13). These aims went hand in hand with a commitment to political and social ideals, even if a politically informed poetics was antithetical to the ethos of the era: “the poet as engaged, oppositional intellectual, and poetic form and syntax as sites of experiment for political purposes—these [at this time] would not be found” (Perelman 12). In response to a poetic environment seemingly disinterested in political and social change, Language writers would form a loose collective of poets whose work was an intervention into the politics and poetry of the status quo.

The degree to which Language poets and writers of experimental poetry are able to achieve their goal of intervening in social and political problems facing the world has, however, been the subject of much debate. The espousal of an experimental, socially committed poetics indeed raises the question of poetry’s efficacy to realize a political end. Speaking, like Perelman, of the poet as a public intellectual, Ron Silliman makes plain his case that the politics of contemporary poetry hinge upon the relation between thought and language to create what he calls a “social practice”: “language, and thus the poem, is inextricably involved with thought, and through this with the entire function of the intellectual . . . for whom thinking is a ground for social practice. Writing is itself a form of action” (4). Silliman’s linking together of thought, writing and action is an effort to illustrate that language is enmeshed with the political and to affirm that language is never neutral nor is it ideologically free—that is, absent of politics. The Language poets’ tendency to foreground how language works and to refuse to treat language as given, moreover, can have profound—even political—implications, as Linda Reinfeld elaborates: “by examining, and on occasion deliberately exaggerating, the effects of formal logic and linguistic structures on our own thinking, [Language poetry] demonstrates how those structures can determine what we see and how we behave” (4). However, the Language poets’ more intricate claims—steeped in linguistic and poststructuralist theories—about the utopian capacity of their work remain open for scrutiny. Indeed, what prompts the sharpest debate is the stated interest of Language writers to free language from its habitual role as an instrument of political power and also to mitigate the complicity of language with the dominant mode (of late capitalist) discourse.

Tenney Nathanson has argued persuasively that the “utopian strain” of poets like Steve McCaffery and Charles Bernstein, for instance, is “both theoretically problematic and at odds with the textures of the poems themselves” (309). Assessing the utopian impulse within the literary projects of the Language poets, Nathanson isolates two specific theoretical claims about the transformative potential of Language poetry with regard

to formal innovation and linguistic and syntactic fragmentation. First, when a reader is confronted, for instance, by fragmentary syntax and unorthodox form in a Bernstein poem, Nathanson contends, the reader can come to an understanding of the poem, according to the conventions of Language poetry, whereby the production of meaning shifts as much to the reader of the poem as to its writer. In this sense, the reader participates in the process of constructing meaning, an activity that—along with the Language poem’s formal fragmentation—displaces and disrupts the aura of the individual poetic “voice” so esteemed in MFA program workshops and mainstream poetry.

The second claim that Nathanson addresses concerns linguistic reference, whereby Language poets propose that, within their poems, signifiers can become freed from signifieds. Taking up Steve McCaffrey’s poetics, Nathanson writes: “McCaffrey’s other reading paradigm . . . attacks not just the idea that reference is something already encoded which we consume rather than produce, but the very notion of reference itself. A text that so persistently makes referential projection difficult, that is, might be conceived as doing with out [reference], as simply, so to speak, being itself—‘a signifier,’ as McCaffrey’s solcism puts it, ‘without a signified and whose destination is inward to the center of its own form’” (Nathanson 311). This second position, in other words, would argue that a Language poem could be extricated from the system of language and modes of discourse that govern all other forms of writing and speech, existing as a pure signifier without reference to meaning beyond itself.

The desire for pure signification freed from signifieds or meanings becomes the main sticking point for Nathanson and other critics. Nathanson contends that the release from meaning is impossible, stating that “such expressive potential [of pure signification] is disturbed in turn by the recalcitrant and seemingly ineffaceable presence of symbolic structures, codes that reshape [the poetic text’s] performance and expropriate its gestures, alienating them in the very moment of their enunciation” (313). In short, the formal fragmentation characteristic of many Language poems cannot so easily be separated from the conventions of speech that shadow all language and therefore “conveys a strong sense of the inescapability of the already spoken” (Nathanson 313). In other words, Language, even language that is fragmentary, nonsensical, and void of context, is difficult to conceive of as *not* being part of speech or the conventions of grammar and syntax, even as it violates such conventions. The reader, in confronting such a text, necessarily responds to it as a communication of speech and attempts to make meaning of it.

Norman Finkelstein, registering his own skepticism about the prospects of Language poetry and its utopian implications, formulates a similar complaint and associates language poetry with what he calls—following Foucault—the “utopia of language” (106). For Foucault, Finkelstein contends, language is, “equally the product of ideological and utopian thought,” simultaneously expressive of a “repressive power” and “a utopian space in normative social relations where reference and self are blissfully destabilized” (106). In “The Discourse on Language,” Foucault further expands upon the utopian aspects of language and writes of his yearning to be engulfed by language, “enveloped in words, borne away beyond all possible beginnings” in a dream of speech liberated from the matrices of power that infuse language (Foucault 215). However, such a dream of being “borne away” to some original space that predates the system of language, as Foucault acknowledges, is unattainable. Finkelstein likewise recognizes the impossibility of developing an unencumbered language, one that is freed from ideological dynamics: “Discourse, which in its ‘true’ (that is, its ideal) state would be innocent of desire and power, is in its actual state complicitous in the machinations of [power and] our will to truth” (*Utopian Moment* 107). The unavoidable fact that language is always embedded within semantic codes or vectors of institutional power thus renders, as Nathanson and Finkelstein illustrate, the Language poets’ utopian aim to create texts composed of pure signifiers or liberated bits of language problematic.

While Nathanson and Finkelstein seem to hold a hard line against the linguistic claims of textual freedom advanced by Language poets, both of them also speak to the utopian *potential* of Language writing that is yet to be achieved. The distinction between realization and potential is a key one. The utopian project of Language writers and experimental poets ought not to be viewed as fully realized or accomplished by the texts themselves; the poems instead indicate the latent or deferred nature of the utopian drive. For Nathanson, Language poems, in their desire to disrupt linguistic norms and discursive systems through formal experimentation, are not themselves utopian but *could* lead, in a practical manner, to political action that has a socially progressive and utopian end: “[Bernstein’s] poems do not embody a language that would escape symbolic constraint, but instead register, in their straining against received discourse and normative syntax, the desire for such apocalyptic liberation. Unrealized and perhaps unrealizable, this desire may nonetheless energize political practice” (316). Finkelstein’s own take on the utopian impulse of experimental poetry focuses equally on