

JENNIFER ASHTON

The Numbers Trouble with “Numbers Trouble”

The governing tone of Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young’s “Numbers Trouble” is indeed one of trouble—in their words “a combination of annoyance and confusion”—at what strikes them as a serious mistake about the current situation of women poets—the very situation, they argue, that so-called “innovative” women’s writing has tried to redress.

Spahr and Young’s troubledness is initially focused on my essay “Our Bodies, Our Poems” and its “assert[ion] without analysis” that “on the numerical level the problem of [women’s] underrepresentation has been corrected” in the communities and institutions most commonly associated with the practice of poetry. More specifically, they suggest that my essay constructs a picture of equity—in the form of approximately equal gender distribution throughout the major arenas of poetic production and recognition (publishing, arts organizations, prize committees, magazine editorial staffs, creative writing faculties, etc.)—that does not correspond to reality. They counter with a tally of their own, surveying anthologies and book series from the 80s to the present and extrapolating from published studies of prizes and higher-education hiring. What they offer are numbers suggesting that at the present moment women are getting something closer to 25% of the poetry pie than half of it. Not surprisingly, they end up “fairly convinced...that things haven’t been that great since the mid-80s.” I don’t really know whether theirs is a more accurate picture than the one they are contesting. To convince myself I would need access to much finer instruments and methods for data collection and analysis than either I or Spahr and Young possess.

But while it might be interesting and even salutary in some contexts to see a truly accurate picture, I want to make clear from the start that the accuracy or inaccuracy of that picture is completely irrelevant to the argument of “Our Bodies, Our Poems.” If it were relevant, I might have done what Spahr and Young seem to think I should have done—I might have had a lot more to say about feminism. (In that case I also would have had a lot more to say about the degrees to which

feminism has and hasn't been able to further the causes of social justice. And about the value, for example, of a feminism that concerns itself as much with whether women poets get equal time on Ron Silliman's blog as with the discrepancies between the wages men and women earn for the same work—and that concerns itself more with both of these than with the social and economic structures that prevent most people, men and women alike, from ever having such concerns to begin with.) But in fact, and as Spahr and Young themselves rightly observe (yet seem to forget whenever they point to the assertion about numerical representation as if it were the thesis of my essay), "Our Bodies, Our Poems" was about something else altogether.

Spahr and Young correctly identify "essentialism" as the target of my analysis. While they seem to want to disagree with me about what essentialism is ("We are fairly sure we define essentialism differently than she does. And to us, essentialism is not as damning as her article assumes it to be"), they nevertheless choose to set aside the topic from the outset ("we are not jumping into that big, endless debate right now"). But since it is the main issue in my essay, I'll start by clarifying my own position and what I take to be theirs.

Spahr and Young may claim to "define essentialism differently than I do," but they never actually say what their definition is. However, when they remark in one of their notes that "Foulipo," the performance piece I criticized in my essay, was not intended "to reinscribe... 'biological constraint,' or to argue that men's writing processes are innately formal, while women's are bodily," it's easy to see what they think my definition is. Or, at least, it's easy to see what they think I'm attacking in their performance piece and in the discourse of "innovative" women's poetry more generally. To be more precise, I would say that the essentialism they describe involves the (usually unacknowledged) assumption that the contingencies of a poet's situation, including her sex, necessitate certain choices—including choices about the forms her poems take. This is an essentialism that makes it seem as if one could read off the sex of a poet from the forms she uses, an essentialism that gives us the very possibility of a "women's innovative poetry" whose innovations are distinctive by virtue of having been produced by women.

But again, Spahr and Young think they "define essentialism differently than [I do]," so the definition that isn't so "damning" must be

something else. If what they have in mind as an alternative is something like the belief that the anatomical differences between bodies contribute, like many other contingencies, to the situation in which a poet (or any person) finds herself, and thus to some of the limits and opportunities she faces, then their definition would indeed be something quite apart from the theoretical mistake that I identify with the discourse of “innovative” women’s poetry. That essentialism would not be damning from my perspective either. I may be extending too much benefit of the doubt here, but I do think Spahr and Young understand very well that it’s one thing to think that a poet makes her formal choices in the context of a situation—a situation that inevitably includes her sex—and quite another to think that her sex dictates those choices in advance. Both involve essentializing sex, but the second kind of essentialism involves a mistake about the relation between bodies and forms that the first does not. And given that Spahr and Young mean to defend the “experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative writing community” against charges of this second mode of essentializing, they clearly understand the latter as a mistake. I think we agree, in other words, in our recognition of that mistake.

But there wouldn’t have been much point to writing “Our Bodies, Our Poems” if my main objective had only been to explain what’s wrong with imagining the relation between the form of the poem and the sex of the poet on the model of the relation between, say, sweat and the gland that secretes it. Such an explanation is nothing new, and anyone attentive to these debates would be able to recognize it. What spurred my argument, rather, was a contradiction: the discourse of women’s “innovative” poetry seemed to be making the very mistake that its rhetoric ostensibly denied. On the one hand, that discourse claimed to “move away from too easily separated and too easily declarative identities” (as Spahr puts it in the introduction to one of the most important anthologies of the movement). On the other hand, the discourse organized itself around precisely the most easily declared identity separation there is: the one between women and men. In other words, my argument was a response to the fact that the “innovative writing community” on the one hand explicitly embraces the logic of poststructuralist and anti-essentialist feminisms of the 80s and 90s, and on the other spins out an implicit logic that makes women poets’ formal choices look like a necessary function of

their situations as women.² I suppose if I have any regret about “Our Bodies, Our Poems” as a consequence of reading Spahr and Young’s response, it would be that I didn’t put the point more baldly: If you know it’s a mistake to think that your sex determines your artistic choices, why accept a theoretical framework for your projects that entails making that mistake?

It’s tempting to conclude my response to “Numbers Trouble” right here, if only to emphasize a point that actually is central to the theoretical stakes of “Our Bodies, Our Poems.” For even as Spahr and Young clearly grasp that “essentialism” is the target of my analysis, they continually mistake its contingent relation to a history of claims about numerical representation in poetry for an implausibly necessary relation that my argument neither proposes nor entails. But in focusing only on essentialism, I wouldn’t be addressing Spahr and Young’s criticism of the assertions about numbers in my original argument, a point that is clearly central to theirs.

So how do the numbers matter in this context?

Well, they obviously matter a lot if you think that women are being discriminated against, and if you think that the unequal ratio of women to men in the various arenas of poetic production and recognition is an index of that discrimination. In many of the earliest mainstream anthologies of women’s poetry (and, for that matter, in some of the earliest efforts to collect “innovative” women’s writing) this claim was the key rationale for the focus on women. And while a corrective agenda of this kind does depend on a very basic essentialism, it precisely is *not* the kind of essentialism I was criticizing in “Our Bodies, Our Poems.” The effort to redress numerical imbalances does depend on thinking that poets are gendered (there’s no other way we could notice the discrimination in the first place) but it *doesn’t* require us to think that their poems are gendered. If an anthology editor thinks women are being discriminated against, and numbers reflect that, the numbers do matter. If my essay had had the same corrective agenda as most of the early women’s poetry anthologies, the numbers would matter to it as well. But it didn’t, and they don’t.

But what happens if you think women are not (or no longer) being discriminated against? Or what if eliminating discrimination is simply not the goal of your women-only anthology, journal, liter-

ary prize, etc.? Clearly you need some other rationale if you want to continue promoting work on the basis of its being written by women. My argument in “Our Bodies, Our Poems” was that this new rationale is precisely where the problematic essentialism emerges, for despite their frequent proclamations of anti-essentialism, the most visible purveyors of women’s “innovative” writing end up with an “innovation” that is itself gendered.

Take, for example, what happens in Mary Margaret Sloan’s introduction to the *Moving Borders* anthology. At the precise moment when the women’s poetry anthology’s anti-discriminatory agenda looks obsolete (“perhaps...such a book is no longer necessary”), Sloan presents the new visibility of “innovative” women writers as a reason to collect their writing (“it is the increase in the *number* of innovative women writers in the past few decades that is striking”). As I have already noted, caring about the fact that it’s women “innovative” poets who are being discriminated against doesn’t require that we think their “innovations” are gendered. But when your anthology celebrates the increase in the number of women poets writing a particular kind of poetry (“innovative”), the relation between the women you are celebrating and the poetic form you are celebrating starts to look pretty essential. If you thought what mattered most was the women poets themselves and the particularities of their situations as women, why would you care about distinguishing their “innovative” poems from any of the other poems they produce? And if you just cared about the formally innovative features of the poems, why would you care that they were written by women? Unless, of course, what you cared about most was the relationship between the form of the poems and the gendered situation of their authors.³

The history of “innovative” women’s writing, has gone, in short, from being concerned with the visibility of women writers in a context of discrimination to being concerned with what makes the poems of these writers distinctive as the poetry of women. This shift, I argued in “Our Bodies, Our Poems,” involves a mistake, one that contradicts the “innovative” writers’ desire to refuse or at least complicate the claims of gender identity. Moreover, it’s a mistake that has nothing to do with discrimination. Thinking there is something distinctively feminine about one formal innovation or another would remain a mistake no matter how many women were being published or oth-

erwise recognized at any given moment in the history of poetry. And it would be as much of a mistake in a hypothetical world where there were no women in poetry anthologies as it would in a world where there were only women in every anthology.

So, for the purposes of my argument at least, the numbers really don't matter. Why, then, are Spahr and Young so committed to reproaching me with them? As their new tally and their collection of anecdotes about gender in "Numbers Trouble" make clear, what really motivates them is their belief that women still are the victims of discrimination, and quite possibly they're right. But that was not the rationale for the anthologies, essays, and scholarly works that I reviewed, and that was not the position I attacked.

My purpose in this response has not been to emphasize Spahr and Young's confusion about the argument of "Our Bodies, Our Poems" so much as to make clear what I think is mistaken in the theoretical commitments of the innovative movement more generally. But what has become even clearer to me in writing this response is just how persistent that mistake seems to be, for it surfaces once again in the logic of "Numbers Trouble."

When women's "innovative" poetry anthologies moved from an anti-discriminatory agenda to an aesthetic one, I argued in my earlier essay, the continued insistence on the importance of the poems as women's poems transformed the contingent relation between the sex of the authors and the forms of their poems into a necessary one. That, I argued, is the essentialist mistake of the "innovative" movement. The same mistake happens here, when Young and Spahr go from thinking that my argument is upsetting because it seems to dismiss the corrective effects of "feminist interventions" (even though they decide by the end of their tally that maybe the feminist interventions of the corrective anthologies weren't all that effective against discrimination) to being upset that my claims are a "dismissal of female community." "Anthologies can be edited" as they are quick to point out, for reasons other than fighting discrimination: "to begin dialogues or to argue for new communities or to document certain moments or for a million other reasons."

All fine and good, but what happens to any of these agendas when what matters most about them is that the people undertaking them are women? As I have already pointed out, women matter to

the anti-discriminatory agenda of certain poetry anthologies because it's women who are the targets of discrimination. But how do they matter to the "female community" being promoted by the "innovative" agenda? It's not quite enough for the "innovative" movement to care about the community because it's made up of women—what if they're not all writing "innovative" poetry? And what if they're not really a community? What makes them a community, of course, is their shared interest in certain formal "innovations." But why do they need to be women to have that interest? The "female community" I dismiss would only be worth hanging onto if you thought there were some necessary connection between the forms that count as "innovative" and the bodies that count as female. But there isn't. If you're interested in poetic communities, communities of "innovative" poets make sense. Communities of women (or men) don't.

NOTES

1 / More pointedly I would say these logics are two halves of the same gesture. For a particularly powerful demonstration of how the logic of post-structuralist feminism (most vividly in the work of Judith Butler) entails the very essentializing claims it is designed to defeat, see Toril Moi's *What Is a Woman?* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993).

2 / Readers familiar with Sloan's introduction might object that she never explicitly suggests that there is anything like a formally identifiable "women's innovative poetry," and they would be right. Moreover, it's clear from Spahr and Young's response that they don't imagine themselves to be arguing for such a thing either. But you don't need to insist on any particular distinctive formal features to arrive at the mistaken essentialism that they and Sloan and so many others have fallen into. You just have to think that whatever the formal endeavors have in common, it has to do with something essential to their authors' situations—in this case the fact that the authors are identified/identifiable as women. Or as Sloan puts it in her introduction, "reading is reading as." She goes on to explain what she means: that even though the writers in her anthology "have not generally produced their work in support of defining identities—that is, as women writers—they are read as such." Clearly Sloan thinks of this as a way of emphasizing the contingency of the "innovative" woman poet's situation, but in fact, the minute it becomes the organizing principle of her anthology (for the anthology is nothing if not a reading of these poets "as women") it has the opposite effect. By implication, such a "reading as" entails precisely the acceptance of the poets' identities as

women. In other words, organizing an anthology that gives us poets who are to be “read as women” (and poems that are to be read as poems by women) just becomes a way of conceding to the very essentialism Sloan thinks she’s defending against. Elisabeth A. Frost and Cynthia Hogue, the editors of the most recent addition to the growing stack of “innovative” anthologies, *Innovative Women Poets: An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry and Interviews* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2006), take a different defensive route, emphasizing the diversity of forms that “innovative writing” has come to include. But (again) precisely because the anthology is organized by the sex of the poets whose work it collects, emphasizing the poetry’s formal diversity just becomes a way of caring all the more about the degree to which what the poems have in common is the sex of the women who made them.

During the proofreading process, an editor at *Chicago Review* suggested an interesting objection to my reading of Sloan. His concern was that the effort to bring together some common aspect of the poets’ situation and some aspect of the poetry doesn’t automatically get you the essentialism I’m criticizing. To make his point, he suggested a hypothetical counterexample with a geographical instead of a gender focus—an anthology of Chicago Poets. You could, he argued, think there was such a thing as Chicago School (a shared aesthetic) or you could think that there was particularly interesting work being produced in Chicago, or you could want to make visible a particular community of writers who happened to live in Chicago, but you wouldn’t be required to think that the geographical contingencies of their Chicago-based situation were somehow the essence of the writing. Well, yes and no. There’s a difference among these various ways of configuring the “Chicago” anthology. They all involve thinking there’s something essential to the poems, but some of the essences are more plausible than others. As long as you were mainly interested in the shared ideas or the existing community (maybe all of the poets talk to each other regularly about their work), then Chicago makes some sense as an organizing principle insofar as it’s an index of the shared ideas or of the community or of both. But the Chicago part would be nominal—no one thinks Chicago is what matters most about the ideas embraced by the Chicago School of Economics or that Frankfurt is the salient thing about the Frankfurt School. Just try to imagine an “Ovarian School” of poetry, where “Ovarian” referred to a group of writers who cared, say, about criticizing global capitalism and just happened to be women. That clearly isn’t what we mean by “women’s innovative poetry.” The fact that the poets are women is never negligible.

Some of the women collected under the category of “innovative women poets” no doubt do consider themselves part of the same poetry community in that they actively share ideas about their formal experimentation and other matters. But many others collected under the same heading have nothing to

do with one another (as the editors of *Innovative Women Poets*, for example, are eager to point out, in the interest of emphasizing the diversity of the poets). So either you do share ideas (and perhaps also, thereby, have a community), in which case the ideas are indeed essential to the poems being produced and rationalize reading the poems collectively. Or you don't have any particular shared ideas, but if it's the second, then what would rationalize our interest in reading the poems collectively? Well, in the case of the Chicago Poets anthology, you'd be left with a bizarre Chicago essentialism (is it something in the water?). In the case of "women's innovative poetry" you're left with a poetry whose essence is the sex of its authors.

The point, in other words, is that the moment you're in the business of celebrating a poem for the situation in which it was produced at the same time that you're celebrating its form as such, you've basically got a machine built for nothing but the business of essentializing. With the idea of the woman poet at one end and the idea of "innovative" form at the other, the logic of women's "innovative" poetry is like a teeter-totter whose requisite fulcrum is that essentialism. And it doesn't really matter which way the teeter-totter tips; the interest in women remains grounded in a commitment to form, and the interest in form remains grounded in a commitment to women.