

Numbers Trouble

Jennifer Ashton's recent article "Our Bodies, Our Poems" makes some bold claims about gender and contemporary poetry. Most striking is her claim that the "the recent commitment to women as formal innovators...is utterly and literally essentialist." Focusing on the poetry anthology, Ashton argues that while corrective anthologies dedicated solely to writing by women made a certain sense in the 1970s, "by the mid-80s efforts to 'redress the imbalance' had apparently succeeded—women seemed to make up more or less half of the poets published, half the editorial staff of literary magazines, half the faculties of creative writing programs, and so forth." She argues that only essentialism justifies the continued existence of anthologies that feature "innovative" writing by women.¹ She also argues that in addition to the women's poetry anthologies of the 1990s and beyond—she talks about Maggie O'Sullivan's *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America and the UK*, Mary Margaret Sloan's *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Women*, and Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr's *American Women Poets of the 21st Century*—the work of Kathleen Fraser, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Lyn Hejinian is guilty of this same essentialism.²

Ashton's article is provocative; our reaction was a combination of annoyance and confusion, with moments of agreement. (Although Ashton avoids talking much about feminism, we ourselves have some questions about how feminism shows up in the experimental poetry scene, especially how it does not show up that much in a lot of the anthologies that focus on work by women.) We started talking about her article by admitting that we had trouble saying anything coherent about gender and writing, especially contemporary writing by women, especially contemporary experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative writing by women (however one defines those pesky terms). We talked first about representational practices. Then we talked about economics, about publication, about lauding of works with prizes. Every time we started talking about who gets published, who wins prizes, and who

gets academic jobs, we ended up lost in a tailspin of contradictions.

And then we began to wonder, did the numbers support Ashton's claims? Is it true that "on the numerical level the problem of underrepresentation has been corrected"?

But before we get to that, we should probably confess some things.³ Ashton seems mainly to want to say something about essentialism and we do not. 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. But we are not jumping into that big, endless debate right now. Nor are we going to argue with her about how one might edit an anthology of women's writing for reasons other than correcting an imbalance, although we do want to quickly point out that anthologies can be edited to begin dialogues or to argue for new communities or to document certain moments or for a million other reasons.

Our other confession should be that Ashton wrote one small article. And it would be easy to ignore it. But one reason that it interests us so much is that we feel her dismissal of female community parallels a larger cultural dismissal of feminism that shows up in peculiar and intense ways in contemporary writing communities, often in the name of progressive politics. Instead of Ashton, we could point to the well-meaning but dismissive lefty claim in Ron Silliman's 1988 "Poetry and the Politics of the Subject" that manages to write women out of any history of formal innovation when he argues that the writing of "women, people of color, sexual minorities, the entire spectrum of the 'marginal'...should often appear much more conventional" because they are marginalized and the marginalized need to tell their stories.⁴ Or one could refer to how so many of the women's anthologies apologize for their existence. Even Mary Margaret Sloan, in a sentence that Ashton echoes, concedes:

perhaps a book such as [*Moving Borders*] marks the occasion when, at the end of a period of historical transition, such a book is no longer necessary. A barrier has been crossed; a roughly equivalent number of women and men are publishing the most significant and demanding innovative work of the moment.⁵

These are just two moments that are pulled somewhat arbitrarily from a long list that we feel is painfully evident to anyone who has been a part of contemporary writing communities. So we want to cop to a certain shorthand in this paper. When we say "Ashton" we are using

a metonym and talking about some much larger feelings that seem to permeate the experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative writing community, including a feeling that feminism is irrelevant or outdated or just plain over or boring or pathetic or whiny. And yes, we should also admit to feeling this way while writing this paper. We kept saying to ourselves, do we really need to count all this stuff? We felt forced to write about what should by now be out of date. The numbers game felt a little irrelevant to us. We do not, for instance, think that having an equal number of men and women in an anthology or giving a prize to an equal number of men and women necessarily means that these things are feminist or progressive. Plus we had a constant feeling that we had better and more exciting, i.e. non-gender specific, work that we wished we could be doing.

So this was where we started: with the question of whether Ashton's claim that all was equal between men and women in contemporary writing since the mid-80s was true. Our original thought was that she might be right, but that if she was right it was because of constant pressure from the very anthologies and journals that she was devaluing. We were agreeing, in other words, with Jennifer Scappettone's analysis that "having declined to distinguish between episodes of recent history, Ashton's account fails to register the force of the...anthologies in helping spur such developments." We talked about this constant, necessary pressure as a series of "feminist interventions." We imagined that what happened was that women who were ignored or excluded from poetry institutions such as anthologies created anthologies that featured work only by women to point this out. And then, we imagined, after the publication of these anthologies, future anthologies did a better job at including work by women. In our original thinking, the problem with Ashton's article was not that she was wrong in saying that "the problem of underrepresentation has been corrected," but that she was dismissing as unnecessary and essentialist the very things that helped correct the underrepresentation. We began by thinking that what we needed to do was look at how many women poets showed up in anthologies before and after *Moving Borders*. Or, we thought, there have been some big debates about gender on Silliman's blog; what if we looked at how many women he talked about before and after these debates. We thought we would see some changes after the interventions.

It worried us that Ashton's article had so few footnotes, so little research for some really bold assertions. So at this point we did several things. We attempted to construct a history of the experimental/post-modern/avant-garde/innovative scene and then to count its men and its women. And at the same time, because we figured that the numbers would tell only one story and we felt that this history could best be written with others, we wrote to a number of people—men and women, although our list was far from inclusive and also somewhat arbitrary—and asked them to tell us a story about poetry and gender. Again, our thought at this point was that Ashton was probably right, that there were somewhat equal numbers of men and women represented in most of the institutions that shape experimental/post-modern/avant-garde/innovative poetry, and yet we felt at the same time that while the numbers could tell a story of somewhat equal representation, the lived experience of writers in contemporary experimental scenes might suggest something more complicated. Or at least that was how it felt to us. We did not feel that as women it was hard for us to get published, but we did deal with a lot of gender trouble on a fairly regular basis, a lot of gender dismissal.

Our questions were:

1. Tell us a story about gender and the poetry community (however you define those terms).
2. Tell us about a reading series, press, magazine, book, person, or group of persons that you feel has performed an important feminist intervention in the poetry community.
3. How do you see feminist interventions in the poetry community connecting, or not, with the living and working conditions of women in a national/international arena?
4. We'd be curious if you can imagine some way that poetry, or poetry communities (again, however you define the terms) might do more to engage the living and working conditions of women in a national/international arena.

What follows is the history that we constructed with the help of those who answered the survey.⁶

Our history starts with Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry*, published in 1960. It is widely accepted as the seminal anthology, the one that establishes the current view that US experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative poetry is a series of located and specific scenes, each with their own concerns, rather than one unified scene. It argues, thus and importantly, not for US poetry but for US poetries. Like many anthologies of its time, it is notable for its lack of attention to writing by women: it features forty men and four women (9% women). And it was not alone. Paris Leary and Robert Kelly's 1965 *A Controversy of Poets* has fifty-one men and eight women (14%). Ron Padgett and David Shapiro's 1970 *Anthology of New York Poets* has twenty-six men and one woman (4% women). In his introduction to *The San Francisco Poets* (1971), with six men and no women at all, David Meltzer casually claims "The six poets in this book represent the history of poetry in San Francisco, in America, in the world."

As Ashton points out, a number of anthologies by women were published around this time as a corrective to this sort of editing. Among those that she mentions are *No More Masks! An Anthology of Poems by Women* (1973), *Rising Tides: 20th Century American Women Poets* (1973), *Psyche: The Feminine Poetic Consciousness* (1973), and the *Penguin Book of Women Poets* (1978).⁷ When looking at these anthologies together what is most striking is how little overlap there is between the feminist anthologies and the experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative anthologies. The women included in the experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative anthologies usually do not appear in the feminist anthologies. (There is some slight overlap with *Rising Tides* and *Moving Borders*. Both anthologies include work by Lorine Niedecker, Barbara Guest, Kathleen Fraser, and Anne Waldman.) And although feminism became a powerful part of the conventional poetry scene in 1973, it arrived later in the experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative scene.⁸ For some time, Kelsey Street, a press started in 1974 and devoted to innovative writing by women, seemed to exist almost on its own.⁹

But by the 1980s, a whole series of feminist interventions had happened and things had changed a little. *Raddle Moon*, a Canadian journal well known as a place friendly to women's writing, began in 1983.

HOW(ever), a stapled zine publishing creative writing by women only (although it featured critical writing by both men and women) began the same year. In 1984, *Poetics Journal* published an issue on “Women and Language.” In 1989, Dodie Bellamy edited a women-only issue of her journal *Mirage*; the same year *Big Allis*, another journal friendly to work by women, began publishing with a women-only issue.

As Ashton observes, there were some changes in the numerical representation of women’s writing in the experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative anthologies published in the 1980s. In 1982 Donald Allen and George Butterick published a revision of *The New American Poetry* called *The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revisited*. They managed to cut the men to thirty-three and add a woman, so that five are included (13% women). Ron Silliman’s *In the American Tree*, published in 1983, has twenty-six men and twelve women (32% women).¹⁰ Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein’s 1984 *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* has fifty-six men and thirteen women (19% women). Douglas Messerli’s 1987 “*Language*” *Poetries* includes thirteen men and seven women (35% women).

By the 1990s, an editor of an anthology would find it almost impossible to argue that writing by women just didn’t matter or wasn’t visible or wasn’t part of the experimental scene. A huge number of feminist interventions happened during the decade. In 1990, Rachel Blau DuPlessis published her now iconic critical study on women writers and experimentalism, *The Pink Guitar*. In 1994, Jena Osman and Juliana Spahr began publishing *Chain*; the first issue included only women writing on the subject “gender and editing.” In 1995, *The New Fuck You*, a collection of lesbian writing edited by Eileen Myles and Liz Kotz, was published. In 1996, O’Sullivan’s *Out of Everywhere* was published. Sloan published *Moving Borders* in 1998. Also in 1998, Jordan Davis and Chris Edgar began their journal *The Hat* with an issue that featured only writing by women. The feminist webjournal *How2*, a spin off of *HOW(ever)*, began publication in 1999, edited by Kate Fagan and others. And that same year Yedda Morrison and David Buuck published an issue of *Tripwire* called “Gender” that pointedly included a significant amount of work by men as well as women, noting that “despite the increased participation of women within the traditionally male-dominated ‘avant-garde,’ and the various advances of feminism, gender politics continues to be a contested site within

aesthetic practice and its articulation/translation/reception in a still largely phallogocentric system.” Also in 1999, Armantrout and Fanny Howe organized the Pagemothers Conference at UCSD. That same year Rachel Levitsky began the women-only Belladonna reading series.

And yet and alas, the anthology numbers do not get that much better in the 90s.¹¹ The numbers are still far from confirming Ashton’s claim that by the mid-1980s efforts to redress the imbalance had succeeded. Eliot Weinberger’s 1993 *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders* includes thirty men and five women (14% women). Messerli’s 1994 *From the Other Side of the Century* includes sixty-one men and twenty women (25% women). Paul Hoover’s 1994 *Postmodern American Poetry* includes seventy-four men and twenty-seven women (27% women). Leonard Schwartz, Joseph Donahue, and Edward Foster’s 1996 *Primary Trouble: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry* includes forty-one men and twenty-two women (35% women).¹² Alan Kaufman and S.A. Griffin’s 1999 *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* includes 188 men and fifty-seven women (23% women). Dennis Barone and Peter Ganick’s 1994 *The Art of Practice: 45 Contemporary Poets*, with its pointed count of twenty-three women and twenty-two men (51% women), is the one exception we could find among mixed-gender anthologies that includes more work by women than men.¹³

So what we ended up finding was that the anthologies do not support, but in fact contradict, Ashton’s claims. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* published in 1984 had 19% women. And *The Outlaw Bible* published in 1999 had 23% women. A very modest improvement. Overall, in our admittedly arbitrary selection of mixed-gender anthologies that in some way identify themselves as experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative, we found that between 1960 and 1999 women make up an average of 22% of the writers. And although women have been editing and publishing women’s anthologies since the 1970s, they remain underrepresented in experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative mixed-gender anthologies both before and after the mid-1980s. On average, the anthologies published before 1985 include 16% women, while those published after 1985 include 29%. A fairly modest increase.

But of course the anthologies only tell part of a complicated story. They are a less messy place to begin because there are not a huge number of them. We assume this is why Ashton concentrates

on them. But because we were so surprised by the anthology data, we kept counting and trying to figure out what was going on with the numbers of men and women in contemporary writing. We wondered if it was just that anthologies, which tend to have an already-happened sort of staleness to their collecting, were out of whack, or if other parts of the experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative scene reflected similar numbers trouble.

We returned to Silliman's blog.¹⁴ This was in part because our thinking and questioning began there. When we began discussing this issue, we kept referring to Silliman's blog because it is both widely-read and notorious for its active comment boxes. We were sure that Silliman had started out writing mainly about men and that, after people complained, he wrote more about work by women. We thought that Silliman's inclusive and expansive and progressive personality made him susceptible in the best sense of the term to feminist interventions. We counted what we thought of as single-author posts (we admit that "single-author post" is a subjective category). We found that during its first year there were 127 posts about men on Silliman's Blog and forty-two about women; in other words, women made up about 25% of these posts.¹⁵

In the years that followed, several fairly intense feminist interventions occurred. One was by Silliman himself, who noted in 2002: "I've never written anything of substance about a female poet here, at least until my piece on Ange Mlinko, without receiving at least one email attack—the ratio when I write about male poets is about one such blast per ten items."¹⁶ The other was the particularly venomous response by several commentators to Silliman's positive review of Barbara Jane Reyes in March 2006, which prompted a lot of interventionist ire (directed at participants in his comment box, not at Silliman) and which resulted in a fairly intense discussion about gender and race.¹⁷

And then there was the October 2006 complaint by Elizabeth Treadwell on her blog about Silliman's blurb for Pattie McCarthy's book *Verso*:

Pattie McCarthy has been one of our most intellectually ambitious poets—a tradition she shares with Rachel Blau DuPlessis & with H.D. And indeed with the likes of Pound & Olson. We can still count the number of women who attempt writing on such a scale on the fingers of our hands. So it is worth noting & celebrating this addition to that roster.¹⁸

Treadwell's response accuses Silliman's blurb of being "divisive, damaging, and prejudiced, and of course it is also extremely, hobblingly limited in its comprehension of literary history; seriousness; scale; gender itself."¹⁹

With all this in mind we counted the single author posts for 2006, and we found sixty-one on men and twenty-seven on women (31% women). In other words, once again our instincts were wrong, the feminist interventions did not change much. Even during the year in which they happened.

After our original thought—that feminist interventions were actively changing the representational politics of poetry—tankled, we decided to look at some other categories.

It would take a larger study to determine if this is true or not, but our guess is that small independent presses might be the hardest places for women to get published. We looked at a few numbers. Roof Books, publishing since 1978, has published books by fifty-eight men and twenty-three women (28% women). We found similar numbers for presses that were founded after the mid-1980s. Subpress, publishing since 1999, has published books by nineteen men, eleven women, and one person who identifies as transgender (37% women). Green Integer, publishing since 1997, has published fifty-nine men and nineteen women (24% women). Atelos, publishing since 1998, has published eighteen men and eleven women (38% women). Wave Books, publishing since 2005, has published twenty-three men and sixteen women (41% women).

University presses are a little more skewed to gender equity. Wesleyan, which is known for publishing mainly women, has ninety books by men and seventy by women (44% women); a better number but far from "mainly." The University of California, whose contemporary poetry series began in 2000, has ten books by men and twelve by women (55% women). University of Iowa is, at the time of publication, even: twenty-three books by men, twenty-three books by women (50% women). The Pitt Poetry Series has done sixty-one books by men and sixty-three by women (51% women).

Briefly leaving the experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative scene and looking at prizes, things get more depressing. Among the most shocking numbers that we found was that the American Academy of Arts & Letters Gold Medal, awarded since 1911,

has been given to twelve men and only one woman (8% women). We concentrated on the big money, prizes with at least \$100,000 purses. The MacArthur Foundation, since its inception in 1981, has awarded \$500,000 poetry fellowships to twenty-two men and thirteen women (37% women). The Poetry Foundation has given the \$100,000 Ruth Lilly Prize to fifteen men and seven women (32% women). The Lannan Foundation has given its \$150,000 Lannan Literary Award to thirty-four men and seventeen women (33% women). The Academy of American Poets has awarded its \$100,000 Wallace Stevens award to twelve men and two women (14% women).

We talked some with Steve Evans, who did an excellent analysis of prizes awarded between 1998–2004, which was published in *The Poker*. What he told us was interesting. He said he found that in those years, around 919 women and 854 men won prizes. But if he counted only prizes that paid \$1,000 or more, he found that 645 men received \$9,365,262—an average of \$14,520 per man—while 709 women received \$7,049,017—an average of \$9,942 per woman. So while 53% of prizes over \$1,000 were won by women, women only won 43% of the total money.

We want to briefly discuss one of Ashton's undocumented claims: that women make up half the faculties of creative-writing programs. We cannot find any comprehensive study of gender in creative writing faculties. We tried to produce some numbers ourselves but were stymied by several factors. One is that it is impossible to tell who is an adjunct, who is tenure-line faculty, and who is visiting faculty on many of the creative-writing faculty lists that are available on the web. Because women tend to be disproportionately represented in adjunct positions, and because MFA programs tend to use adjunct faculty even more than the literature components of English departments, there is a chance Ashton is right. But to have this number matter, we would want to make sure that they are not being paid dramatically less than men. Our guess, and this is based only on anecdotal evidence, is that women earn significantly more MFAs than men. This might be another reason why women could be equally represented in MFA faculties and still be underrepresented (when compared to the ratio of men and women with MFA degrees). But we do want to mention a very well done 2006 American Association of University Professors study, which concluded that although women earn more than half of all graduate

degrees, they are still underrepresented among tenured and tenure-track faculty members. (The study does not provide separate data for creative writing faculty.) The study notes four things about the 2005–2006 academic year: nationally women made up 39% of full-time faculty positions but 48% of part-timers; women held 44.8% of tenure-track positions and only 31% of tenured positions; women held on average just 24% of full professorships; female professors earned on average just 81% of what men earned.

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What we found upset and confused us. We had thought Ashton was right. And that all we had to argue was that she wasn't reading the data correctly. But we're not so sure anymore. We're fairly convinced she is wrong: things haven't been that great since the mid-1980s.

And then we asked ourselves, should we care? And what number is the right number? Should all anthologies be 50% women? Should all prizes? Does it matter if women are not very well represented in some of this stuff?

Our answer was mixed.

On the one hand, anthologies and publication and prizes do matter. They lead to more jobs and money, and women need these things. Anthologies in particular, partly because they are so frequently used in the classroom, suggest a sort of snapshot of a scene that often gets institutionalized. They can shape the critical reception around a scene for many years by naturalizing certain definitions.²⁰

But at the same time, how poetry matters is much larger than this. And because we could think of so many endless feminist models, we ourselves found the continuing sexism of the experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative writing scene to be somewhat easy to ignore and a little pathetic. Everything from *Kelsey Street* to *Pussipo* (a listserv of over 150 experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative women writers) showed us that we could do what we wanted to do. And we distinctly remember thinking this when we were younger writers, trying to figure out what we could do.

But all of these possibilities born of a long history—of women publishing magazines and starting presses, of women starting listservs—couldn't really fix or address the other kinds of gender trouble

we still deal with in experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative poetry communities on a fairly regular basis. And when we put together our informal survey, we asked that first question—tell us a story about gender and the poetry community—because the constant, somewhat snide anti-woman rants and comments that define the experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative scene to this day feel like more of a problem than the unequal anthology numbers and prize monies. Or as K. Silem Mohammad wrote to us in reply to our questions,

I have become a lot more aware over the past year or two how often gender dynamics operate in really screwed-up ways within a community I had complacently assumed was a lot more progressive and enlightened than it sometimes reveals itself to be. Just at the level, for example, of how much men outnumber women on tables of contents, or how women's comments are ignored in blog conversations, or how men get threatened and aggressive when women speak up about these things.

We agree and yet we want to mess with Mohammad's comments so they read "how men and women get threatened and aggressive when men and women speak up about these things."²¹

We are a little confused how Ashton misses this, especially since she is also a poet and we assume she reads the same internet spew and sprawl that haunts us. The majority of writing about gender and/or feminism in the experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative scene has not been about essentialism or women's bodies; it has been first-person accounts of dealing with sexist dismissals.²² The comments we got back reminded us of how endemic these dismissals continue to be. They ranged from Jennifer Scappettone writing about how the critical study of experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative scene in the academy has managed to remain strangely untainted by the canonical shifts of the last twenty years: "I've been subjected to hours-long conversations or seminars about literature and poetry in which not a single woman was mentioned as agent or matrix of influence. I am continually congratulated or appreciated for pointing this out when it happens, which is laughable." To Eileen Myles confirming the uneasy (and unprofitable) outsider status that an identity as a feminist (and a queer) can confer:

I found out a few years back that for many years the recommendation from John Ashbery that I had been using opened with the language: “Eileen Myles is a militant lesbian.” I sent it for jobs where I definitely knew people on the committee. Finally a total stranger at one of those institutions that maintain recommendations told me on the QR that I shouldn’t use it. I managed to get my hands on it and I was stunned. That’s when I felt totally outside the poetry community, ’cause I realized that no one protected me. Nobody thought it was politically offensive or destructive. They probably thought it was funny.

When read together, one would think that the stories and comments from our respondents were about the 1970s, not about today, when feminism is supposed to be unnecessary.

Yet we had to admit, we sort of agreed with Ashton about the limits of the women’s poetry anthology. No one in the experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative poetry scene writes in a women-only space. And often the poetry collected in these anthologies is not saying that much about feminism or gender. And finally, we are not sure the women-only anthologies are doing that much to fix the numbers trouble. They certainly do not seem to be changing the gender spreads in anthologies.

But at the same time, if we allow that the women-only anthology is unnecessary, it is not because gender equity has been reached. Rather, it is because the experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative poetry scene needs a more radical feminism: a feminism that begins with an editorial commitment to equitable representation of different genders, races, and classes but that doesn’t end there—an editorial practice that uses equitable representation to think about how feminism is related to something other than itself, and to make writing that thinks about these things visible.

Because, let’s face it, we might still get less on the dollar than our male comrades, we might get less prize money and appear less often in anthologies, but when we turn our vision out of our little experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative poetry puddle, we have to admit that we are deeply complicit in a larger system of fucked-upness that makes us in no way oppressed or marginal. We are citizens of a nation that uses a lot of resources, that bombs a lot of countries. And our fear is that when we lean too heavily on the numbers, we

end up arguing for our share of the American privilege pie and doing little else. We end up with first-world myopia. And what is the use of a feminism that does that?

We are also suspicious of relying too heavily on the idea that fixing the numbers means we have fixed something. We could have 50% women in everything and we still have a poetry that does nothing, that is anti-feminist. When it comes down to it, feminism really only matters if it engages with issues in an international arena, if it extends its concerns with equality beyond gender, if it suggests that an ethical world is one with many genders, if it addresses resource usage internationally, if it has an environmental component, if it works toward access to education for all, if it...

How to do this? We don't know. We still don't know. We could simply say that poets do not have to deal with this. But it seems to us that poets have to deal with it as much as anyone else.

Hoping to find an answer with help from others, we asked that last question: We'd be curious if you can imagine some way that poetry, or poetry communities (again, however you define the terms) might do more to engage the living and working conditions of women in a national/international arena. And what we heard in response was a mixture of not knowing and some anecdotes and ideas. Here is what we got back:

I can't think of any. Write poetry?

—Anne Boyer

Again, I am tempted to reject/question the terms of the question here.

—David Buuck

First is female education; any serious literacy projects around the world that increase female access to education at all levels should be supported.... Second, people need access to the means of dissemination—books, journals, and libraries, but even more notably now, the internet. Third, us citizens and other first-world citizens need to develop a respect for the cultural work accomplished in conditions and with traditions and language choices that differ notably from what we know or are comfortable with.

—Rachel Blau DuPlessis

Across ages, from older to younger and in reverse, I think there's a responsibility for women to attend to one another's work.

—Susan Gevirtz

I think women need more money, their own money in their own hands.

—Renee Gladman

Again, I don't know...I guess by doing things in addition to poetry, like organizing and striking and revolting.

—K. Silem Mohammad

We should do actual work like Buddhists. We should get our hands dirty.

—Eileen Myles

I'm interested in the idea of pragmatically hybrid poetry communities: formed to address urgent socio-political matters impacting women.

—Joan Retallack

You write a poem, you drive a neighbor to get her groceries, you talk to an elderly friend whose husband is dying and she takes the time to caringly advise you about your professional life, you buy some bare-root roses with another neighbor and she shows you how to plant them, you go and buy some veggies from an organic farmer and she tells you a story that makes you laugh, and you teach her how to swear in Québécois...

—Lisa Robertson

Poetry workshops for women in a community.

—Linda Russo

It might continue the project of reconstituting awareness of the body as a political site, as matrix and vortex of political halts and flows.

—Jennifer Scappettone

I don't know. Sometimes I just want to leave my job and do some more direct political work.

—Elizabeth Treadwell

But my question goes back to power—who has the power to imagine these transforming things, the things that will transform the

circumstances or conditions of others? I think it takes a visionary character. But then, there is the question of confidence. And my thoughts go back to the question of race.

—Bhanu Kapil

We can't imagine that any of our respondents think that their answer is The Answer. And reading this list, it would be easy to dismiss it (we imagine some saying in a tiresome snotty tone...and what does poetry, not to mention buying bare-root roses, have to do with women working in a *maquiladora* in Juarez?). But we are hesitant to dismiss these answers because sometimes the anecdotal and the small mutates into structural critique. But we do see this list as just a beginning.

And so we want to end this article not with the traditional concluding thesis, but with an invitation. We'd like to make a larger list of these suggestions. We'd like to start a conversation. We'd like to compile a long list of experiments in poetry communities that might lead us somewhere else. We'd like the suggestions and experiments to be serious. To be outlandish. To be possible. To be funny. To address a specific locality or issue. To be a big bummer of accusation and blame and guilt. To be written in weird languages. To be for group practice. To be short. To be impossible. To be impossibly long. To be foolish. To be confusing. To be an aphorism. To be prescriptive. To have steps and procedures and maps. To be done alone with one's eyes closed. To employ the internet. To deploy the internet. To be song. To seize the means. To release. To require the body. To require work. To be still. To involve reading.

We'd love it if you would send us now or some time in the future some outlandish or completely rational idea (email is probably easiest: jspahr@mills.edu and syoung@mills.edu). Isn't that one of the many lessons of this feminism we have inherited: that we need each other; that we need you; that we can't get there alone?

NOTES

*As we wrote this, we emailed many people and asked them questions. Thanks to Rae Armantrout, Michael Basinski, Taylor Brady, David Buuck, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Steve Evans, Erica Kaufman, Deirdre Kovac, Rachel Levitsky, Pamela Lu, James Sherry, Mary Margaret Sloan, Elizabeth Treadwell, and Martha West for their quick replies. Sara Wintz helped us some with counting, as did Rachel Weiner at Chicago Review, who fact-checked our numbers. Thanks to Jen Scappettone for sharing her forthcoming essay and also for the long conversations about various issues in this essay. Thanks also to Teresa Carmody, Matias Viegner, and Christine Wertheim for organizing the conference *Feminaissance*, where the first draft of this paper was presented.*

1 / By “innovative” she loosely means Language poetry and some poetics that follow, or come out of, Language poetry.

2 / Ashton refers to “Rankine and Spahr’s introduction” several times in her article, but the introduction was written only by Spahr.

3 / And we should probably also admit that our annoyance with Ashton is in part personal, dating back to her critique of a talk we gave at the 2005 CalArts Noulipo conference. (A version of that talk is archived at <http://www.stephanieyoung.org/blog/>.) We felt that her reading of our talk in “Our Bodies, Our Poems” missed the joke. We undressed during the talk not to reinscribe, as Ashton writes, “biological constraint” or to argue that men’s writing processes are innately formal, while women’s are bodily, but rather to argue that these ideas show up in various poetry institutions, such as Oulipo, well known for having very few women among its ranks. We meant to argue nakedly but with our tongues in our cheeks that these things could not be separated, that we wanted both, damn it (and for this reason, we also had several undressed men as part of our performance). And yet, although we wrote that paper thinking of it as a joke of sorts, it was also a bit of a lament, a lament for provocative feminisms. The question of whether women are represented equally or not in contemporary poetry institutions feels irrelevant to this lament. Because even if they are, we still feel that something was happening in all that work from the 70s that is still sadly missing from the intellectual discourses around contemporary poetry. Jennifer Scappettone talks more extensively about Ashton’s misreading of this talk in her forthcoming essay, “Bachelorettes, Even: Strategic Embodiment in Contemporary Experimentalism by Women.”

4 / See also an exchange between Leslie Scalapino and Silliman on this issue in “What/Person: From An Exchange.” *Poetics Journal* 9 (1991) 51–68.

5 / Dodie Bellamy (who edited a women-only issue of her journal *Mirage* in 1989, the introduction of which includes a similar claim of belatedness: “This issue is a retrospective, a chance to look back and ponder how far ex-

perimental writing by women has come”) has a reading of *Moving Borders* and the suspicion of women experimentalists toward women-only anthologies. See “The Cheese Stands Alone” in *Academonia*, which also includes Sloan’s response and Bellamy’s introduction to *Mirage*.

6 / The following people responded: Anne Boyer, David Buuck, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Susan Gevirtz, Renee Gladman, Bhanu Kapil, K. Silem Mohammad, Eileen Myles, Joan Retallack, Lisa Robertson, Linda Russo, Leslie Scalapino, Jennifer Scappettone, and Elizabeth Treadwell.

7 / Several times in her article Ashton argues that those in the experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative scene see anthologies such as these as naïve (see page 216 where she argues that this work “looked theoretically and formally conservative, or simply naïve, to poets and critics working from poststructuralist and postfeminist perspectives” and page 225 where she speaks of a “consistent effort to distinguish their theoretical underpinnings from the supposedly more naïve ones of the 1970s”). While we have a mixed reaction to these anthologies (several seem narrow) we also want to make clear that we not think this sort of work is conservative or naïve.

8 / For a more detailed history of women’s editorial work in experimental/postmodern/avant-garde poetics, see Linda Russo’s essay “The ‘F’ Word in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: an Account of Women-Edited Small Presses and Journals.” Russo’s essay chronicles women’s editorial efforts in the twentieth century and illuminates, in particular, the role of women’s editing in the production of innovative poetics: “Editing, as an act of insertion and assertion, makes visible affiliations and dialogues, and redefines the legitimate and the utterable, the individual and the community—all that occupies and constitutes fields of literary production.”

9 / There has long been, as many have pointed out, a skepticism in the experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative scene toward feminism and/or publishing projects limited to women. For instance, it is the confusion around Language writing and women, rather than convinced righteousness, that motivates Rae Armantrout’s jokey 1978 essay “Why Don’t Women Do Language-Oriented Writing?” The essay begins: “I’ve been asked this question twice, in slightly different forms. In conversation I was asked, ‘Why don’t more women do language-oriented writing?’ I answered that women need to describe the conditions of their lives. This entails representation. Often they feel too much anger to participate in the analytical tendencies of modernist or ‘post-modernist’ art. This was an obvious answer. The more I thought about it the less it explained anything important. Most male writers aren’t language-centered either. Why don’t more men do language-oriented writing? Several months later, by mail, I was asked to write an article explaining why women don’t produce language-oriented works. The letter suggested I might elaborate on the answer I’d given before. But it wasn’t the same question!” For more discussion of

this skepticism, see DuPlessis's "Blue Studio." See also Barbara Cole's "Barbara Cole to Rachel Blau DuPlessis: Open Letters: Feminism From & To."

10 / For more on gender in *In the American Tree*, see Silliman's afterword to *The Art of Practice: 45 Contemporary Poets*, where he notes: "Women outnumber men in *The Art of Practice*—quite unlike *Tree* and *Poetries*—not out of any editorial sense of redress, but because margin and center have shifted over the past decade. Many of the women whose work is collected here began to publish widely only after 1980 and/or can be read as much as a critique by example of a narrowly configured (and macho) language poetry as they can be read as part of it."

11 / There has been some critical discussion, little of it about gender, about the large number of experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative anthologies that were published in the 1990s. See Perloff's "Whose New American Poetry?," Alan Golding's essay "New, Newer, and Newest American Poetries," and Steve Evans's "Anthslide."

12 / In this case, we only counted the "poetry" section. There is a "poetics" section as well. It includes five men and two women (29% women).

13 / The Barone and Ganick anthology also pointedly juxtaposes itself to the Silliman and Messerli anthologies: "The impetus for this anthology was two previous ones: Ron Silliman's *In the American Tree* and Douglas Messerli's *'Language' Poetries*. None of the poets included here appeared in those books, though some—John Taggart and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, for example—easily could have been while others were perhaps at too early a state in their on-going work or did not precisely fit the conceptual frames of the editors."

14 / A brief disclaimer: we are concentrating on Silliman a lot in this paper. This is not because we think he has an especially troubling relationship to women. It is the opposite. Over the years he has had many interesting things to say about gender. See for instance, his discussion of the editorial problems in *The New American Poetry*, especially the lack of gender parity in the anthology: <http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2007/06/donald-allen-theres-no-such-thing-as.html>. See also his attention to what he calls "White Male Rage" in the "Wounded Buffalo" school of poetry. Our focus on Silliman has more to do with his lively critical presence, both historically as an editor and anthologizer and, over the past four years, as an increasingly central figure in online poetry communities. His poetry blog is one of the few written by a member of his generation. This position, combined with his wide-ranging attentions and near-daily critical writing, has made Silliman's blog (and its comment boxes) a lightning rod for all sorts of issues in the discussion of contemporary poetry.

15 / We counted the first year from December 2002–November 2003.

16 / <http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2002/11/this-blog-is-not-official-sponsor-of.html>

17 / <http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2006/03/one-of-ironic-coincidences-of-american.html>

18 / For Silliman's response to Treadwell, see <http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2006/10/f-eleanor-anne-porden-1797-1825-naval.html>

19 / Treadwell's blog, Secretmint, is no longer available online, so we are reproducing the entire post here:

The Gender of Seriously

Reader, I am sure I was not alone, at least among the female crowd, in feeling a certain terribly familiar slap of insult, frisson of paranoia, rising of anger at reading Silliman's blurb for Pattie McCarthy's second book, *Verso*:

Pattie McCarthy has been one of our most intellectually ambitious poets—a tradition she shares with Rachel Blau DuPlessis & with H.D. And indeed with the likes of Pound & Olson. We can still count the number of women who attempt writing on such a scale on the fingers of our hands. So it is worth noting & celebrating this addition to that roster.

—Ron Silliman

Now, this is divisive, damaging, and prejudiced, and of course it is also extremely, hobblingly limited in its comprehension of literary history; seriousness; scale; gender itself. It is unfortunate if not surprising that this comment comes from the king of the poetry blogmentators himself, as anointed by *Rain Taxi*, and well, by all of us willing to notice. (Certainly we don't all take his voice's "even keel and stateliness" the same way.)

So it's quite nice to have Alice Notley saying things like, and I paraphrase: it's too bad about gender, but now is the time for women.

It's quite nice to fall into step with Norma Cole and Kathleen Fraser on the way to the Poetry Marathon, last July in San Francisco, and feel such kindness and kinship. It sure is good to have Myung Mi Kim, Paula Gunn Allen, Leslie Scalapino, Maxine Hong Kingston, Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel... to talk to in one's becoming (and becoming) a writer.

A lot of things are quite more than nice, you see. Like the expansive and inclusive editorial/curatorial work of, say, Renee Gladman, Joyelle McSweeney, Sawako Nakayasu, giovanni singleton, Jena Osman & Juliana Spahr, Stephanie Young, and others more numerous than I know, I'm quite sure.

Let's reach across differences of culture, economics, aesthetics-poetics, geography, sexuality, "education," race-class-&-gender, supposed-&-compartmentalized poetic lineage...let's do!

Let it be known that there is a floration of communication, support, variety, argument, and excitement between young(/er) "experimental" women poets in this instant, here and now. (See Myung's evocation of moment, instant, below.)

Let's also not get lost in some melting pot puddle but tend to our specifics. For me as I age I certainly see more and more clearly that my

most personal questions and sources are my most profound guides.

Which brings me back to McCarthy, with whom I have a common stake in Irish(american)ness; women's history; story-telling; and word-architecture. We do not need to compete for Ron's ten-spot. Indeed with the likes. We are plenty.

20 / The role anthologies played in defining New York School and Language poetry are fairly potent examples of this kind of naturalization. There was no historical justification for almost entirely limiting the New York School to men, but that is the way it was represented in *The New American Poetry*. (There were many women poets writing in New York during the years of the New York School who could have easily been included.) Similarly, the three major Language poetry anthologies (by Messerli, Andrews and Bernstein, and Silliman) use Language poetry to denote a group of writers working together in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Readers unfamiliar with these social networks, however, would have a difficult time understanding why, on the basis of the editors' aesthetic and political criteria, certain writers were excluded from these anthologies. Anthologies tend to take shortcuts by privileging social groupings over literary aims, and thus often end up retrospectively ascribing certain shared aesthetic sensibilities to communities of people who share a social identity.

21 / Here are some anecdotal examples of the sorts of dismissals that discussions about gender or feminism or women's writing has provoked in recent years:

- Dale Smith's angry reply on the Poetics list in September of 1997 to Bellamy after she pointed out that the latest issue of his magazine featured "a total of 24 contributors, only four of which were women" (this discussion begins with a post from Smith titled "The Name & the Paradox of Its Contents," archived at <http://listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu/>, and continues for several days).
- One of the best examples of male-on-male anger following a discussion of gender is David Hess's tirade against David Buuck, in "The Passion of St. Buuckthead."
- There are endless examples of this in the comment boxes on Silliman's blog. See comments made in response to Silliman's supportive reading of DuPlessis's essay "Manhood and its Poetics Projects." Silliman's post is here: <http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2007/03/rachel-blau-duplessis-has-fascinating.html>. The comment stream can be accessed at the end of the post. Or comments made about a Jessica Smith photograph, which Silliman posted to introduce a post on her work: <http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2007/06/first-time-i-ever-read-excerpt-from.html>.

22 / Bellamy, DuPlessis, and Fraser have all been very articulate about this in their work.

METHODOLOGY

We did our counts independently and twice. When we got different numbers because the thing we were counting was subjective (such as single-author posts in Silliman's blog) we sat down and discussed the differences in an attempt to reconcile them. But there is still a margin of error. Some of our data is obviously self-selected rather than random (for instance, we decided which anthologies we wanted to count, which ones were experimental/post-modern/avant-garde/innovative).

The four large categories we examine here—anthologies, small presses, blog posts, prizes—are somewhat crude. They leave out a myriad of connective points, specifically magazines and journals, which were too complicated to select and too time-consuming to count.

For the press counts, we only counted single-author books. For Green Integer, we only counted books on their poetry list. We did not count any titles listed as forthcoming.

We do not know how many women are submitting work or how many women writers there are. So we're looking at a slightly fuzzy picture. Although we find it hard to imagine, we suppose that there is a chance that women tend to be writers less often and thus are over-represented in their publication records.

In terms of gender changes, if someone changed their gender we counted them under the gender to which they changed. Our one exception to this is the writer kari edwards who refused to be limited to male or female (edwards shows up in the Subpress numbers). (Full disclosure: Juliana Spahr is a member of Subpress.)

The interventions we include are not by any means an exhaustive list. We made this list from a combination of moments Ashton mentioned in her article and moments that our respondents mentioned.

The more we counted, the more we wished that we had been able to research where funding for all these things comes from. Our guess is that academic publishers are more likely to "get their numbers right" around representational politics, resulting in the experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative community feeling less pressure to pay attention to these things.

We did not chart out race and class as we did this. But we can assure you without a doubt that racial and class representation is dramatically skewed toward white middle-class writers in all the contemporary writing scenes we examined, way more than gender. And that this also has a lot to say about the failures of feminism.

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