

## Emily Critchley

### Introductory Remarks

Exactly ten years ago, a much-needed anthology devoted to linguistically innovative women's poetry from the US, Canada & the UK, called *Out of Everywhere*, was published by Ken Edwards and Wendy Mulford of Reality Street Editions and edited by Maggie O'Sullivan, one of the leading contemporary women poets in the UK.<sup>1</sup> Its title, as Maggie O'Sullivan explains in the foreword, came directly from a question from an unnamed audience member present at a talk given by Rosmarie Waldrop in NY in 1988 on the subject of women's experimental poetry:

I imagine that you must have some difficulty with the more explicit, politically engaged writing, don't you? Or with the exclusion of poets like yourself [...] from, for example, the Gilbert and Gubar anthology of women's writing?

was the question put to Waldrop. The anonymous speaker went on:

There's an extra difficulty being a woman poet and writing the kind of poetry you write: you are out of everywhere.<sup>2</sup>

Though we are told "[laughter]" followed this comment, its implications are serious enough and still haunt some women writing experimentally today; that is, the conflict between work

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<sup>1</sup> *Out of Everywhere: linguistically innovative poetry by women in North America and the UK*, ed. Maggie O'Sullivan (London: Reality Street Editions, 1996), 9.

which is recognisably female or feminist, which involves communicating 'women's experience' explicitly and politically, and as such, is embraced by a certain kind of editor or audience (I am thinking of anthologies with titles such as *No More Masks!*, *The World Split Open & Deep Down: The New Sensual Writing by Women*<sup>3</sup>) and those poets who have wanted, as women, to write challenging, formally progressive poetry without either being excluded from serious feminist debate or marginalised by their avant-garde peers.

For certainly, such writing has been treated as "marginal" within the avant-garde, dominated as this has been, to use Ron Silliman's term, by "WMH"s or white male heterosexuals,"<sup>4</sup> many of whom have viewed some of the most radically progressive women's writing as too personal, too domestic or too niche, to speak to the readership of their particular press or anthology:

[W]omen, people of color, sexual minorities, the entire spectrum of the 'marginal' - have a manifest political need to have their stories told [so that] their writing [...] often appears much more conventional

Silliman wrote this in the July-September issue of *Socialist Review*, 1988. And though few critics would go on record with such a major generalisation these days, many women working in the

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<sup>2</sup> The full talk by Rosmarie Waldrop can be read in *The Politics of Poetic Form*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York, Roof: 1990) pp.45-72.

<sup>3</sup> *No More Masks! An Anthology of Poems by Women*, eds. Ellen Bass and Florence Howe (New York: Anchor, 1973), *The World Split Open: Women Poets 1552 - 1956*, ed. Louise Bernikow (London: Women's Press, 1974), *Deep Down: The New Sensual Writing by Women*, ed. Laura Chester (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1988).

avant-garde field, particularly in this country, still quietly feel the assumption behind Silliman's words. As Chris Cheek wrote in an email to the UK poetry list last week: the relative absence of women from avant-garde scenes is:

a serious issue, and [...] an issue that persists. At least in comparison to the situation here in US America, where it is not exactly wonderful but certainly better.<sup>5</sup>

Recent discussion on this email list, prompted by Mairead Byrne, as to the whereabouts of women poets when history was being made by "cliques"<sup>6</sup> of avant-garde British men. Peter Barry's 2006 *Poetry Wars*,<sup>7</sup> puts their invisibility down to "the pull of the Women's Consciousness movement."<sup>8</sup> As Robert Hampson suggested:

I knew women who wrote poetry but didn't engage with any of the activities around 'BPR'/innovative poetry in London - but they were involved in Women's Movement and Marxist groups and activities.

The fact is, of course, that lots of women *were* writing both non-political and politically-engaged experimental poetry, but their lack of physical visibility or vocal dominance at readings and in pubs, perhaps due to its very cliquishness, a lack of invitations to speak,

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<sup>4</sup> 'What / Person: From an Exchange,' Leslie Scalapino and Ron Silliman, *Poetics Journal* 9, eds. Barrett Watten and Lyn Hejinian, June 1991. p.51.

<sup>5</sup> Chris Cheek, email to the UK poetry list (Mon, 25 Sep 2006 16:15:01).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Hampson, email to the UK poetry list (Tue, 26 Sep 2006 09:45:16)

<sup>7</sup> Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars* (Cambridge, Salt: 2006)

<sup>8</sup> Robert Sheppard, email to the UK poetry list (Mon, 25 Sep 2006 21:05:34)

"because it was implicitly made clear they weren't welcome,"<sup>9</sup> or because there were children that needed putting to bed, means that they have been largely overlooked as significant contributors to the avant-garde scene. As Kathleen Fraser put it in her study of contemporaneous tensions in America, 'Partial Local Coherence / Regions with Illustrations / A Personal Account of Encountering' (1982): "the exclusion of females from the consolidation of literary groups is a 'common historic practice.'"<sup>10</sup>

The low visibility of women at such gatherings has, of course, made its attendant parallel in print. The exclusion of such important women modernists from 'the canon' as Mina Loy, Gertrude Stein, Dorothy Richardson, Lorine Niedecker, Laura Riding, Mary Butts, Ivy Compton Burnett, Lola Ridge and Genevieve Taggart, is slowly being corrected, if not, yet, in standard university curricula, then at least in postgraduate studies and specialist courses and by journals such as *How2*. At the same time as our concepts of cultural history are being revised and reformed, however, new exclusions are being perpetrated.

Ron Padgett and David Shapiro's 1970 *Anthology of New York Poets*<sup>11</sup> notoriously featured only one woman, Bernadette Mayer, out of twenty-six writers - despite the huge contributions made to that scene by, for example, Barbara Guest, Anne Waldman and Alice Notley. The groundbreaking anthology of Language poetry,

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<sup>9</sup> Ken Edwards, email to the UK poetry list (Mon, 25 Sept 2006)

<sup>10</sup> from Fraser's *translating the unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity* Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 2000) p.57.

<sup>11</sup> *Anthology of New York Poets*, eds. Ron Padgett and David Shapiro (New York: Random House, 1970).

Ron Silliman's *In the American Tree*,<sup>12</sup> published in '86, included ten women out of forty poets. *A Various Art*,<sup>13</sup> edited by Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville in 1987 included Veronica Forrest-Thomson as the only female contribution, and Iain Sinclair's *Conductors of Chaos*,<sup>14</sup> which came out in '96 featured five women out of thirty-five.

Moreover, since *Out of Everywhere*, there have been few major publications with international availability devoted to women's experimental poetry. *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Women* (ed. Mary Margaret Sloan),<sup>15</sup> is a landmark anthology yet sadly it never got a reprint and so has become unavailable.

One of Rae Armantrout's most famous contributions to *In the American Tree*<sup>16</sup> was an essay teasingly entitled 'Why Don't Women Do Language-Oriented Writing?' that sought to explain that, contrary to appearances, women *do* write language poetry, but they simply don't get the same critical attention:

I've been asked th[e...] question [Why don't women do Language-oriented writing] twice, in slightly differing forms

Armantrout opens the piece by explaining:

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<sup>12</sup> *In the American Tree: Language, Realism, Poetry*, ed. Ron Silliman (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1986)

<sup>13</sup> *A Various Art*, eds. Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville (London: Carcanet, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> *Conductors of Chaos*, ed. Iain Sinclair (London: Picador, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Women*, ed. Mary Margaret Sloan (New Jersey: Talisman House, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> pp.544-547.

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.

She then stops herself in her tracks:

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 [...] I was asked to write an article explaining why women *don't* produce language-oriented works. [...] Was I being asked to justify th[e exclusion of women language-oriented writers...] from consideration? Lyn Hejinian, Bernadette Mayer, Alice Notley, Susan Howe, Hannah Weiner, Carla Harryman, Lynne Dreyer, Joanne Kyger, Anne Waldman and Maureen Owen seem, to one degree or another, language-oriented. Of course, that's a tricky term. If it's taken to mean total non-reference, these women don't fit. Neither, however, do Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten, Bob Perelman, Ted Greenwald, Charles Bernstein or Bruce Andrews. (p.544)

Amongst Language writers, the under representation of women within anthologies and subsequent criticism, despite equal numbers of women writing *Language poetry*, has been put down to a difference in critical output between the men & women of that

scene. Eleana Kim<sup>17</sup> is just one critic who has noted that the movement was very much framed and directed by the expository prose of Watten, Silliman, Perelman and Bernstein, whose confident, authoritative writing has the air of manifesto-making, not to mention the making of careers, while the low frequency of theoretical or polemical work accompanying the poetry of women Language writers meant that they were taken less seriously by their male peers - an anxiety that several Language-oriented poets realised and grappled with throughout the '90s.

Carla Harryman and Kathleen Fraser are two of the women associated with this Language scene who have subsequently explained the decisions they made at the time of the group's emergence to opt out of the loop of critical explanation and / or, as they saw it, self-promotion. Harryman:

If one wants the implication of a vision to develop, then fitting the radical object into the square peg of patriarchal canon-making narratives is not only an inaccurate way of proceeding but one that reinforces values that the art object itself critiques. [...T]he withdrawal from public discussion that occurs because it is not possible to meet its terms, its pre-existing categories — those experiences that are either actually silencing or that makes one feel silenced — become identical to the desire for solitude.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Eleana Kim, 'Theory, What Theory?' *Language Poetry: Dissident Practices and the Makings of a Movement* ([online](#): 1994) pp.16-17.

<sup>18</sup> 'Women's Writing: Hybrid Thoughts on Contingent Hierarchies and Reception' ([HOW2, online, vol 1, No. 1, September 1999](#)).

And Fraser writes in the introduction to her 2000 collection of essays *Translating the unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity* of:

Learning to move out from under the perception of non-presence, that uncounted /unwritten part of one's experience; entering into the activity of articulation, attempting this struggle within the inhibiting field of established precedent are urgencies that have shaped the essays here collected. (p.1)

One of the writers who has most radically attempted to shift the terms, not to mention the vocabulary, syntax and typography of narrative-making, canon-formation and critical engagement from the very start of her career, Leslie Scalapino, famously debated the issue of the low frequency of women's participation in the experimental scene with Ron Silliman in 'What / Person: From an Exchange' (June 1991). She called Silliman up on his prior claim in *Socialist Review* that: "the [writing of the] 'marginal' [...] often appears much more conventional" (51) by pointing to the rejection by *Socialist Review* of her own letter on the grounds that it was "too poetic and did not qualify as political discourse." She continued:

That is to say, I must speak a language recognized as discourse before it can be regarded as public and germane.  
(p.52)

It seems then that either women experimentalists have been taken

as too polemical, too obvious and therefore not avant-garde enough *or* their non-normative poetics, their refusal to work within the received structures of inherited language - poetic or critical - deeply embedded as these are within the very inequalities they seek to avoid or "outrun" has rendered them incomprehensible. Their inclination to experiment with parts of the debate in non-traditional ways has at times been viewed as a lack of ability, rather than deliberate political strategy: "'[D]is-location' is seen as merely personal aberration or failure to comprehend the whole, rather than strategic and phenomenological" as Scalapino wrote in 'The Cannon,' from *The Public World / Syntactically Impermanence*.<sup>19</sup>

There is nothing conventional about the work you will hear throughout this festival - which is the first of its kind to take place at this university - an institution which is held to be one of the epicentres of experimental poetry. Nor do we feel that writing for and about a half of the world's population is an activity that should any longer be thought of as marginal or niche.

We hope this festival will demonstrate the brilliance, as well as the number and diversity of women writing experimentally around the world today - some of whom you will know, others you might never have come across before. We want to help publicise those younger poets you will see and hear reading, as well as celebrate the more established writers who have helped bring about the opportunities that this new generation enjoys.

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<sup>19</sup> *The Public World / Syntactically Impermanence* (Hannover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), p.20.

We want this festival to be practice-based and community-focused, rather than purely academic. We want it to be a multigeneric celebration of the large number of women writers that are not backed by any university, as well as those that are.

We want to celebrate the tenth anniversary of *Out of Everywhere* and its makers: Wendy Mulford, Ken Edwards, and Maggie O'Sullivan, who we are lucky enough to have at this festival. We hope there will be more publications like this in the future. We also want to draw attention to a number of small presses being run or co-run by women - some without any form of public funding - whose efforts have achieved so much for the promotion of women's experimental writing, among them: Dusie, Tinfish, Bad Press, Tangent, Reality Street, Barque and rem.

We want to try to combat the exclusiveness about which I've talked, which is still visible here in this town and perhaps in a town near you, by initiating discussion about women's experimental poetry, its successes, its visible presence or marginal status in contemporary scenes, and in the case of the latter, how changes in this situation can be best effected, perhaps through the nurturing of a different, more generous kind of critical environment from which all of us might benefit.

We want to examine the politics of talk - for instance, why it is that women often seem to feel less comfortable partaking in critical discussions - written or verbal. Why, according to Ann Vickery's brilliant recent study of the subject, *Leaving Lines of Gender*, "a

female speaker is more vulnerable to criticism in a public forum."<sup>20</sup>  
As she puts it:

Most women feel uncomfortable using traditionally "male" registers of public speech, which are often authoritarian in tone and even polemical. [...] women have not been able to speak in the first-person, universal voice. (p.121)

Or why, as Carla Harryman writes, so many female poets feel that talking critically about their work must be the same as self-publicising:

Women must be able to speak critically and analytically about each other's and others' [...] works or we will be misrecognized. However, if such writing *about* is *about* canon-formation, then the misrecognitions will persist along with an endless series of misnamings. ('Women's Writing: Hybrid Thoughts on Contingent Hierarchies and Reception' *HOW2, online*, vol 1, No. 2, September 1999)

In an effort to initiate discussion about such matters, and to subvert a trend of exclusivity, we've very happily invited several male poets and readers to give us their views, and simply to share work with us; attempting, as Scalapino's poetry consistently urges us: "to unravel dichotomy" per se, and undo conventional hierarchical divisions. (*The Public World / Syntactically Impermanence*, p.15)

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<sup>20</sup> Ann Vickery, *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing* (New England:

Because, to paraphrase the end of Armantrout's article: "[t]he writers we like are surprising, revelatory [...] Some of them are women and some of them are men" (p.546).