



THE WOMAN-ONLY ANTHOLOGY IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM
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Women's Work: Modern Women Poets Writing in English

Edited by Eva Salzman and Amy Wack

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IN THE 1970S, PROMPTED by the Women's Movement and by the realization that almost no women poets had been admitted to the canon of western literature, past or present, there was a sudden flowering of women-only poetry anthologies. I was a college student and aspiring woman poet at the time, and the publishing phenomenon was as thrilling to me and my peers as the eruption of a long-overlooked volcano might have been to a group of aspiring vulcanologists. A list of such volumes still in my possession, their covers yellowed with age and their pages exhaling embarrassing whiffs of cigarette smoke, would include: *Rising Tides: 20th Century American Women Poets* (1973), edited by Laura Chester and Sharon Barba with an introduction by Anaïs Nin; *No More Masks!: An Anthology of Poems by Women* (1973), edited by Florence Howe and Ellen Bass; *Mountain Moving Day: Poems by Women* (1973), edited by Elaine Gill; *I, That Am Ever Stranger: Poems on Women's Experience* (1974), edited by Nancy Esther James; *We Become New: Poems by Contemporary American Women* (1975), edited by Lucille Iverson and Kathryn Ruby; and *Touching This Earth: Poems by Women* (1978), edited by Mary Webber Balazs and Nancy Esther James.

That decade's anthologies had a clear mission, as articulated in their prefaces and introductions. Perhaps most of all, they meant to refute the prevailing belief that poetry by women was somehow inferior to poetry by men. We should not soon forget that there was a time when a leading twentieth-century poetry critic such as John Crowe Ransom could get away with writing that Edna St. Vincent Millay was 'not a good conventional or formal poet . . . because she allows the forms to bother her and to push her into absurdities. I imagine there are few women poets of whom this is not so, and it would be because few are strict enough and expert enough to manage forms, in their default of the intellectual disciplines.' In addition, those seventies anthologies sought to promote the novel idea that women's experiences, and women's

perspectives on so-called ‘universal’ experiences, could furnish legitimate subject matter for poetry. Women’s sexuality, pregnancy, childbirth, abortion, motherhood, marriage, friendships, daily lives, occupations, heroines from history and mythology, search for identity, victimization by sexual abuse, and anger toward oppression now became as fair game for poems as traditional ‘male’ subjects such as the objectification of the desired female, the ‘othering’ of nature, or the heroic quest. Prior to this point in history, Lucille Iverson wrote in her preface to *We Become New*, women’s lives had been ‘considered trivial and of no importance.’ But ‘an entirely new literature is evolving,’ Iverson proclaimed, ‘the content of which is women talking about themselves.’

Beyond dispelling the myth of the poet as male genius inspired by a female muse, beyond legitimizing women’s experiences as subject matter, those seventies anthologies sought to reconstruct and to construct a female literary tradition. Nearly every poet in *No More Masks!* strikes us today as a ‘big name,’ and yet, shockingly, as Florence Howe revealed in her introduction to that volume, ‘Many of these poets are out of print; others are not yet into print; still others are not available in libraries.’ Very little scholarly work had been published even on those few tokens who had managed to achieve a literary reputation despite their gender. As hard as it may be to believe now, thirteen years after Sylvia Plath’s death, Howe could observe that ‘Plath’s life has still hardly been touched’ by scholarly researchers. The women-only anthology would thus bring to light the work of neglected women poets of the past, stimulate the generation of new scholarship on them, and promote the work of contemporary women writers. It would help to rewrite literary history, reshape the canon, and inspire women poets of the future.

Jump forward to 2006, when three accomplished poets—Meghan O’Rourke, J. Allyn Rosser, and Eleanor Wilner—declared, in the pages of *Poetry Magazine*, that ‘we all concur that we ought to abolish the unpleasant term “women’s poetry.”’ Rosser, for example, argued that the term carried connotations of being ‘lesser than’ men’s poetry, that it raised expectations of politicized feminist content, that it implied that male readers might not be interested in it, that it lent credence to beliefs that style or voice could be determined by biology, and that it suggested that the poems’ range could be limited to ‘women’s issues’ such as childbirth or housekeeping and not the larger human condition. ‘At this stage,’ wrote Rosser, ‘would it not be a disservice to women’s hard-won prominence to contribute to a re-segregating anthology?’ Such was the radically changed landscape into which *Women’s Work: Modern Women Poets Writing in English* would make its appearance two years later, to a storm of controversy on several internet forums devoted to poetry. Clearly, to many—and especially to younger women who had come of age following the Women’s Movement—segregation by gender was no longer compatible with the goals of post-feminism.

Eva Salzman and Amy Wack, the editors of *Women’s Work*, were by no means naïve about the minefield into which they would be stepping. Both born

in 1960 in the U.S. and raised there, both residents of the U.K. for the better part of two decades, both accomplished poets with solid editorial credentials who were networked to the world of 'po-biz,' they understood that the book was not going to be greeted with the cries of joy that had poured out to welcome *Rising Tides* and *No More Masks!*. Some months before the anthology's publication, in February 2008, Salzman would post on the 'Wom-Po' (Women Poets) listserv that she was 'hoping to be provocative, to shake things up generally, but especially within the status quo run mostly here by a young/old boys network, in this country anyway.' For her part, Wack had submitted an introduction to the volume that began by quoting Margaret Atwood: 'Feminism is the new "F" word.' Salzman's separate, 29-page introduction to the anthology was a self-confessed 'polemic.' In it, she acknowledged that many women now objected to 'the separatist ideology to which anthologies like this are assumed to subscribe,' and that the danger of a women-only anthology was that it could 'perpetuate the very stereotypes about women's subjects we aim to disarm in this volume.' However, she argued, gender bias still permeated the editing of supposedly 'gender neutral' poetry anthologies. She backed up her claim with the results of her own informal survey of anthologies 'published in the enlightened post-1960s' in the U.K. and the U.S. Tallying the numbers of male and female poets included in each volume, she found the ratio of male to female poets to be overwhelmingly disproportionate in nearly every case. Salzman pointed, as well, to phenomena such as the *Great Poets of the Twentieth Century* series of pamphlets issued by Faber in conjunction with *The Guardian* newspaper: six 'great' men vs. one 'great' woman (Sylvia Plath). This marginalization of women within postmodern literary anthologies, Salzman argued, was reflected in the critical writing about them, which tended to evaluate their work according to a double standard—'graceful,' 'elegant,' and 'modest' being considered compliments for women's poems, but not for men's—or to focus on the sensationalized details of the poet's biography. Thus, concluded Salzman, despite the stereotypical connotations that had accrued to the term 'woman poet,' and despite the expectations for politicized content raised by the publication of a women-only anthology, it was necessary to publish such a volume to make up for the lack of space devoted to women in supposedly gender-neutral anthologies. 'Although a thin trickle of women's voices—often the usual suspects—runs through mainstream anthologies,' she explained, 'there's little value in an honour bestowed by editors (mostly male) who are *simply not familiar with enough women poets*. This book, in introducing this part of the canon and re-writing the list of "essentials," throws down the gauntlet to future critics and editors in the hope they can better represent the true breadth and vitality of the tradition.'

One could hardly argue with Salzman's *raison d'être* for the anthology. Indeed, she backed off so far from the notion that there could be anything 'different' about poetry by women, in relation to that by men, that she professed to also want to 'shatter the surprisingly persistent stereotype of what is meant to constitute "women's

subjects.” Women poets as a group, she declared, ‘are as interested as men—or not—in babies, family and housework.’ Hmmm. Here, I think, she was letting wishful thinking overwhelm hard evidence—just where is that great body of poems by men about babies and housework? While this seems to be the only weak point within her otherwise well-researched and well-argued essay, it does seem to have informed the overall organization of the volume, which is thematic rather than chronological. Poems by more than 250 writers from nearly every Anglophone corner of the world are organized into fourteen thematic sections. These cover love, love gone wrong, family, ‘heroines & rebels,’ memory and philosophy, language and writing, nature, time, work, art, spirituality, the body, cultural identity, and history/politics. Thus, to maintain the pretense that women write on the same subjects as men, poems on childbirth and abortion get filed in the family section, poems on women’s search for identity get filed with poems about the search for Native American and African-American identity, and the huge body of poems about women’s anger toward their oppression—so glaringly evident when one ruffles the pages of those seventies anthologies—gets demoted to a couple of poems scattered within the history/politics section.

So much for the obstacle course of historical context, real-time controversy, and editorial front matter that one must navigate before beginning to read the poems. Which brings us, at last, to the main question: How good a book is it? ‘Magnificent,’ would be my answer. Fifty pages into it, I felt the way I had felt the first time I walked into the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. Certainly, I had seen artworks and photography by Georgia O’Keeffe, Mary Cassatt, Camille Claudel, Frida Kahlo, Louise Nevelson, Diane Arbus, and Cindy Sherman in other museums. But seeing them all in one space at the same time, together with works by rising women artists who were as yet unknown to me, brought tears to my eyes—and I am not a person who weeps easily. How does one explain to a man or even to a twenty-something woman how those tears represent not only pride in the talent and accomplishments of one’s fellow women, denigrated as inferior to male artists for so many thousands of years, but also grief for all of the gender-based injustices one has witnessed or heard narrated in one’s own lifetime? In Simon and Garfunkel’s song ‘The Boxer’ (1968), of the same era as those seventies anthologies, a failed boxer ‘carries the reminders / of every glove that laid him down / or cut him.’ That’s how it feels sometimes, to be a woman of a certain age, as I imagine it must feel for members of minority groups when their own floodgates of memory open. And to be reminded of all of the pain and injustice of the past while witnessing the glory of women’s artistic achievements gathered in the present is to be, even for a wordsmith, at a sudden loss for words. Reading *Women’s Work* affected me every bit as strongly as that museum visit; once again, canonical women artists whose works I loved stood shoulder to shoulder with talented artists who were new to me, all under the same ‘roof,’ so to speak, although this time the medium was poetry.

Until that moment, I had not realized how very many postmodern poems by women had become canonical—just as solidly canonical as Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ or Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’ or Frost’s ‘The Road Not Taken.’ Just for fun, stop and try to list them: Stevie Smith’s ‘Not Waving But Drowning,’ Gwendolyn Brooks’s ‘The Pool Players,’ Sylvia Plath’s ‘Lady Lazarus,’ Nikki Giovanni’s ‘Nikki-Rosa,’ Carolyn Kizer’s ‘Bitch,’ Louise Glück’s ‘Mock Orange,’ Sharon Olds’s ‘I Go Back to May 1937,’ Joy Harjo’s ‘She Had Some Horses,’ Carolyn Forché’s ‘The Colonel,’ Adrienne Rich’s ‘Diving Into the Wreck,’ Jenny Joseph’s ‘Warning’ (‘When I am an old woman I shall wear purple’), Wendy Cope’s ‘Strugnell’ parodies, Rita Dove’s ‘After Reading *Mickey in the Night Kitchen* for the Third Time Before Bed’—and others, too, but I am naming ones that appear in *Women’s Work*. Now, quickly, list the canonical postmodern poems by men. You will come up with essential male poets, yes, but not necessarily essential poems.

It is also refreshing to see women poets from so many different English-speaking countries grouped together. So many of the anthologies that I read limit their focus to American poets, and when I do come across a new Anglophone or ‘world’ poetry anthology, the inclusion of men and the need to be comprehensive as to nationality and/or time period severely limits the number of modern Anglophone women who can be represented. Many American readers, like me, will be familiar with the work of Anglophone writers from outside the U.S. such as Margaret Atwood, Lorna Crozier, Carol Ann Duffy, Wendy Cope, Sophie Hannah, Ruth Padel, Eavan Boland, Medbh McGuckian, Menna Elfyn, and Pascale Petit, but also like me, will have to keep thumbing excitedly to the contributors’ notes in the back of the volume to find out more about the author of the poem that just blew them away. Some of those new discoveries, for me, were Rhian Gallagher, of New Zealand (‘Amaryllis’), Heather Buck, late of England (‘The Poppy’), Susan Wicks, of England (‘Pistachios’), Ros Barber, of Scotland (‘What Happens to Women’), Deborah Randall, of England and Scotland (‘Ballygrand Widow’), Polly Clark, of Canada and then all over (‘Elvis the Performing Octopus’), and Carole Satyamurti, of England (‘My First Cup of Coffee’). Considering how long Salzman and Wack have lived on the other side of the Atlantic, I was pleasantly surprised to see so many strong American poets from the Boomer and X generations included: Dorianne Laux, Kim Addonizio, Molly Peacock, Rita Dove, Daisy Fried, and Beth Ann Fennelly, to name just a few. Salzman and Wack are also no snobs toward poets who have achieved greater success with popular audiences than with academic ones, such as Jenny Joseph and Maya Angelou, or toward ‘light verse’ geniuses such as Dorothy Parker and Wendy Cope. When I edited the twentieth-century poetry for an American Southern literature anthology a few years ago, I struggled mightily with the powers-that-be to get two neglected women poets from the mid-century into it; now I see with delight that not only those two poets, Vassar Miller and Margaret Danner, but also two of the very poems I had picked

out of theirs, have been included in *Women's Work*. Finally, it is refreshing to see poets from virtually every significant poetry movement of the twentieth century represented in one collection; too many American editors tend to overlook those movements with which they are not in sympathy. While Salzman and Wack prefer accessible poetry, and thus, say, a Language Poet may be represented by a not-very-Language-y poem, here still are representatives from the Modernist, Harlem Renaissance, Beat, New York School, Black Mountain, Confessional, Movement, British Poetry Revival, Confessional, New Formalist, Language, and Spoken Word poetry movements. If Deep Imagism is missing, it is only because there were no women among its core members. There are even representatives from the 'Ultra Talk' (or 'Stand Up') movement (Denise Duhamel, Amy Gerstler, Barbara Hamby), which is so new that it has just been named. Salzman provides a helpful overview of modern poetry movements and schools in her introduction.

Of course, with any anthology the omissions are as interesting as the inclusions. Because Elizabeth Bishop famously refused to have her work included in women-only anthologies, her absence haunts the collection like a black hole lurking at the heart of a glittering galaxy. Two living poets declined to be included on similar grounds. Prohibitive reprint permission fees kept Anne Carson and May Swenson, among others, out of the collection. Having seen the reprint permission fees for my Southern literature anthology balloon to triple the original estimate, while our publisher slashed the number of pages we had originally been allotted, I know what it is like to have to cut favorite poems to try to rein in costs and meet space requirements. The anthology of one's dreams gives way to the anthology of reality, in the end. Still, though, a few omissions strike me as grievous. Where are Marge Piercy, Erica Jong, and Judy Grahn, those beacon poets of the Women's Movement? Why no Mary Oliver in the section on nature? Why no Susan Howe, whose 'Thorow' could have bridged the language and writing, nature, and history/politics sections? Granted, there are enough terrific postmodern women poets of colour to fill the anthology on their own, but why no Sonia Sanchez, Audre Lorde, Ai, Harryette Mullen, Patricia Smith, or Natasha Trethewey? And if, as Salzman admits, one of her goals is canon formation, then why are certain utterly canonical poems so conspicuous by their absence: Sylvia Plath's 'Morning Song' and 'Daddy,' Anne Sexton's 'Her Kind' and 'Sylvia's Death,' Lucille Clifton's 'homage to my hips' and 'wishes for sons,' and Lynn Hejinian's 'My Life' (excerpted, of course), for example:

One quibble: the book could have benefited from more rigorous copy editing. If my bleary, middle-aged eyes could spot such glitches as 'Back-Drafr' (p. 16), 'Construc-tivism' (p. 20), a should-be-superscript 59 overcome by gravity (p. 20), 'Alice Notely' (p. 188), 'siezed' (p. 236), and 'ice flow' (p. 238), then God only knows what a fresh young pair could discover.

Around the same time that *Women's Work* was published, two anthologies of poems by women came out in the U.S. but managed to escape controversy.

The first was *Letters to the World: Poems from the Wom-Po Listserv*, edited by Moira Richards, Rosemary Starace, and Lesley Wheeler (Red Hen Press, 2008). Anyone who chose to join Wom-Po, an internet community devoted to the study of poetry by women, was invited to submit a poem to the anthology, and all submitted poems (including one of mine) were accepted. The process was so democratic that there is even one man among the contributors; yet, because the collection was not shaped by a pattern of editorial choices as was *Women's Work*, in the end it is an anthology that one dips into at leisure, not one that compels the reader to stay up late, reading feverishly. Making no claims of canon formation, keeping nobody who wanted to be included out, *Letters to the World* has escaped the controversy that has dogged *Women's Work*. So, too, has *Poems from the Women's Movement*, edited by Honor Moore (Library of America, 2009). Bearing a black-and-white photo of a 'Women's Lib' demonstration on its cover, and prefacing its poems with a brief historical recap of the Women's Movement and its relationship to the poetry of the sixties and seventies, this women-only volume also stands above reproach despite its gender segregation—for who can argue with historical 'fact'? Either a poet was alive then and writing about the movement, or she was not, one presumes. But Salzman and Wack make bold claims about gender discrimination and canon formation. They do not shy away from controversy.

'A man may work from sun to sun, / But woman's work is never done,' goes the old folk saying. The editors of *Women's Work* have labored long and hard, at considerable risk to their professional reputations, to further the work begun by those pioneering anthology editors of the seventies. Their work is now done. *Women's Work* is good work, and you would do well to rest some time, and read it.