

Blue Studio: Gender Arcades

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to Barbara Cole

Dear Barbara: Thank you for addressing your querying letter to me. In response, I have been writing to you in my head, on trains, walking around, and sitting still, and now want to write everywhere, all through what you ask. You make me want to condense everything I know about gender and poetry and poetics into one heavy leathery medicine ball and to throw it towards you and to your “generation” or “genderation” – Hey CATCH! But if you can write the kind of letter you just did indeed write (and have written over all the years we have known each other), you are, without a doubt, working towards answering your own questions. Catching your own ball. So to speak. That much passionate desire to define, to understand, to formulate will not go unanswered—by yourself. And in the mean time....this.

But there is not simply one “ball” of “stuff.” Do you remember Matisse’s “Red Studio” (1911)—in MOMA, and once, in my kid years, my favorite painting in the whole wide world. The painting displays some of his own work reproduced in miniature—seven or maybe eight paintings, some sculpture, and empty frames, some ceramics, and some blue chalk and maybe brushes too, waiting to be used, some décor (a trail of vine in a vase) all set inside a passionate deep-but-flat red field—his studio, where the furniture magically recedes into outlines so that the work can float, hang and entice in this blood red space. Little mini-women are depicted (as Adalaide Morris reminded me)—as a statue, on a plate, in a painting—these figures are artifacts of Art as an institution, part of what is made, contained, and set within his magisterial red world. This a kind of Matisse-kit, the way the valises are a Duchamp-kit. But, to speak of red, we have also to account for another red painting, the odd, busier “Red Room” also called “Harmony in Red” (1908) in Leningrad/ St. Petersburg. A female servant, a table, bowls of fruit, wallpaper and tablecloth both aswirl with large blue baroque patterns, and in the window, or in a painting, stage left—a bluegreen field of flowering fruit trees. A bourgeois interior filled with gender ideas of making beauty in family service. Given these red paintings, it might be dangerous for the female figure to claim a Red Studio or a Red Room—looks like I might get absorbed into decor. So in the contrarian manner that got me naming a book The Pink Guitar, extending Wallace Stevens where he wasn’t himself going, I think I’ll call this Blue Studio.

Studios are places to work. Working and praxis. Let’s do it. I want to make a Blue Studio as a set of arcades of thought in which one might wander. But together they add up to more than just any one “painting” or “arcade” or “position.” Blue mischief, blue as the color for boys, blue for the Blau part of my name, blue as the “color” of open thought. Therefore blue gender trails out to various horizons. These were sometimes called “azure” in favor of an airy space beyond, a symbolist empyrean, but I’ll try to stay a realist and just say “blue.” This is because I want skepticism, formulations that don’t necessarily stay still, but urge transformative, progressive practices. I believe in your questions and in mine; I believe in the power of our observations. So therefore: Hardly in the spirit of a fixed “answer” but in the spirit of friskiness, pensive loose ends, and rumination--I give you this. A blue studio of arcades, through which to move.

Arcade 1. “Hurricanes are named to prevent confusion when there is more than one active at a time. Since 1953, Atlantic tropical storms have been named from lists originated by the National Hurricane Center, which are now maintained and updated by an international committee of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO). The lists featured only women’s names until 1979 when the WMO was persuaded to use male names and to name the storms in an alternating ‘girl-boy-girl-boy’ pattern.” (Information pamphlet from AMICA insurance)

Do you find this as amusing as I did? Amusing and riling. That agency-less “was persuaded,” loses those whose efforts did the persuading. The syntax makes turgid, lumbering institutions refigure themselves as originators, from their own benevolence, of a new clarification. Official History: there it is. Well—can we expect to get thanked? Whereas the truth of the matter—surly, intransigent, annoying questions, loud voices, and ironic contempt (“I mean they even name STORMS only after WOMEN”), anger about the deep cellular imbedding of ideology in every detail (“storms after women—so destructive, so femme fatale-ish, like Men are never destructive!”)—the whole raucous assemblage of rage, flair, critique, shoving, pushing, and analysis that was The Women’s Movement did change culture. We took initiative; we called it; we “told it like it is”—translation—as we saw it. And “it” was “everything.” The women’s movement still has the capacity fundamentally to call social and cultural arrangements into question, But Culture here, in the form of the WMO, opens its wide gullet and swallows the critique whole. What critique? it says, licking its chops. Now think of the university. We had the guts. Some got the glory. But you have to not want glory, but want to do things, to say things, to perceive things because they need rectification. So we have challenged, we have changed the naming storms.

The naming of storms like ourselves.

Arcade 2. I remember sitting, lonely and isolated, in approximately 1971 or 1972, in Lille, France, where I was teaching. It washed over me (such was the force of One of the Great Books of the early cultural-social feminist movement—Kate Millett’s Sexual Politics) that all of culture would have to be reseen with feminist eyes from the very beginning. Everything would have to be remade—the Greeks, the Bible, the histories of literature and poetry, all cultural products, all—name them! I could not even begin to name the number of genres—fairy tales. Children’s books. In a mini-second, far beyond drowning in the enormous sea of this, I lifted up as on a gigantic blue-green-grey wave; I might have imagined being on a tremendous surfboard—I don’t even have the metaphor. Riding the “second wave”? A long march through the institutions is more like it. Everything! Remade! Ever since, I have been doing what I could. It’s not euphoria or fashionableness—those could never motivate 30 years of work. It’s more like Conviction.

If “language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a *subject* by referring to himself as *I* in his discourse” (Emil Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics, 225)

one might be bemused by all that “he” “his” and “himself” or not (*it’s not emphasized, not in italics*)

Saying “language is possible only because each speaker

sets herself up as a subject, referring to herself
 as I in her discourse” is not wrong
 but it’s not the form that our Generalizations
 generally take,
 hence
 it sounds more particular, less authoritative, less applicable to All.
 Makes a specific observation, not a statement in Theory....
 What is the “lesson”?
 “When I count, there are only you and I together
 But when I look ahead up the white road
 There is always another one walking beside you” (T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land)

so there is a third
 travelling ahead of us or beside us (the ambiguity is fascinating)
 —“who is the third who walks always beside you?”
 looks like (is it an Antarctic hallucination? from the deep poles
 of ideology?) looks like
 it’s gender

Arcade 3. Let’s say a word about “Woman.” At all moments in feminist theorizing, the term “women” is a twisted but necessary umbrella caught in the crosswinds of strong political and ideological storms. In a storm, you might want that umbrella. Although to some, “woman” might look just like a female person, the term women has had a historically and temporally variable content, and has pointed to a variety of meanings necessary at various times to embrace and deplore, to worm out of, and to process, to affirm and to deny, to feel as central to oneself, and to feel as unimportant. For example, are women (Coca-Cola we might call them) “equal” and parallelly the same as that other gender (Pepsi we might call it), or are they different, which means emphasizing differences of all kinds in relation to production, the praxis of writing, theme, motif, subjectivity, dissemination, and reception. This long-standing dialectical debate between equality/ sameness and difference has created a very rich terrain. Faced with this insoluble debate, some people might find it annoying, rearticulating a position curiously similar (in a different context) to that taken by high-minded, pioneering women of the 1950s--gender does not matter at all. Or, under the rubric of queerness, they might take a pluralizing position—so many gender places to combine and articulate (Jolt we might call this position).

I always cite Denise Riley at this kind of moment, and I might as well do so again. This comes from the final pages of her important book “Am I That Name”: Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 113-114. “So feminism must be agile enough to say, ‘Now we will be “women”—but now we will be persons, not these “women.”’ ...To be, or not to be ‘a woman’; to write or not ‘as a woman’; to espouse an egalitarianism which sees sexed manifestations as blocks on the road to full democracy; to love theories of difference which don’t anticipate their own dissolution: these uncertainties are rehearsed endlessly in the history of feminism, and fought through within feminist-influenced politics. That ‘women’ [CHECK QUOTE] is indeterminate and impossible is no cause for lament. It is what makes feminism....The temporalities of ‘women’ are like the missing middle term of Aristotelean logic; while it’s impossible to thoroughly be a woman, it’s also impossible never to be one.”

Arcade 4. To call for, to notice, to gloss, to comment upon the productive presence of women artists and writers in this era and the eras long past is to be indebted to feminist cultural criticism and related modes of cultural poetics, such as gay, lesbian, queer and ethnic criticisms. To call for, to notice, to gloss, to comment upon the productive and generative presence of gender ideas

of all sorts—from the lurid to the utopian—in male and female writers is to be indebted to feminist cultural criticism and related modes of cultural poetics. I could go on. But I would like simply and openly to declare our collective debt to feminism, no matter that some people might reject, balk, wonder, resist, demur, take themselves away or out of that, see it as a trap. Feminism, and related gender-curious investigations have changed the terrain of the possible.

Feminism. As Virginia Woolf said in A Room of One's Own, certain material differences between men and women are constructed and perpetuated in our societies. It is the task of feminist politics to resist these, to try to dismantle them, and it is the task of feminist inspired gender critique to understand the impact of these material differences on the production, dissemination, reception and continuance of artists and texts. Feminist criticism is a materialist perspective, but it also investigates how this “matter” plays and is perpetuated in forms of the symbolic order—in ideology from poetry to religion, from “women’s place” to representations. Thus feminist thinking tries to hold in a single thought both materialist and ideological studies in their interactions. Their mutually supporting and mutually confounding activities.

Once this is said and acknowledged, I don’t particularly care who calls themselves/ herself/ himself “a feminist.”

Women had a lot of different ideologies to help them take voice and vocation as writers (and certainly a passel of ideologies and practices impeding that claim to voice and vocation). Powerful writers might gain power for themselves or possibly cultural power by separating from the “group” Woman and/or from any “label” attachable to that group, from “feminine” to “feminist.” This might be seen (judgmentally) as a form of “denial,” or more neutrally as a circumstantial strategy. Certainly no one has to claim that feminism’s rising tide helped their production if they don’t feel it did. But I think you are annoyed at the disingenuousness of others. So be it. Signing up, signing on is the issue—what does it mean to be a “feminist poet” or a “woman poet”—and of course these are different, for one is an ideological category and the other might be descriptive or laden with assumptions or both mixed up together.

One little attitudinal (and therefore methodological) practice that one might learn from the practice of feminist criticism—whether or not one likes, admires, cathects to, or loves any individual woman writer—is the necessity to offer at least as much empathetic understanding to the products of women as to those of men. This is linked to the historical responsibility to examine what women did and are doing, and why: motives, constraints, their own reigning ideologies as they entered the world to speak. (These reigning ideologies need not be attractive; they can involve self-disparaging, resistance to other women, brilliant rage, saccharine charm and so on.) This point comes from my historical experience of the notable erasure, disparaging, and undervaluing of women’s cultural products and testaments. This point must not be misunderstood as being uncritical of nor sentimental about women. No more empathetic understanding than one offers the work of men—just approximately the “same” calibration. This statement comes from a feminism of “equality/ sameness,” not one of “difference.” At the same time, because the literary products of women are still a bit rarer than those of men, one might offer a tiny dollop of identification, going beyond the extra mile. This statement comes from a feminism of “difference,” not one of “equality /sameness.” Watch out—I just somewhat contradicted myself. Look at the oscillation, the dialogic shimmer, the wobbling, the wavering, the fluidity, the tacking between semi-contradictory positions! having A and not-A coexist—both/ and thinking (as I said in “For the Etruscans,” written 1979). Or speaking, as Anne Waldman does, immediately in Iovis I, of “both/both,” beyond even “both/and.” There’s the blue studio of my feminism.

Another parallel working space occurs in the negotiation of similarity and difference among women—inside the group called “women.” These differences could be class or race or sexuality, or other social locations for subjectivity. The projects of feminism were transformed in the US by theoretical and pragmatic positions taken almost simultaneously, by lesbian women and by women of color, but by other supportive women also. This position asked forcefully how to perceive, understand and acknowledge differences of position and interests while also acknowledging similarities between and among women.

Arcade 5. There are at least four spheres in which your letter plays, and I want to separate them because I can only, really, speak to some. First: The largest political-social-economic arena: the difficult time in which we live and from which (as nice white US citizens) we vaguely—and precisely—benefit even when we do not desire to benefit. Second: The university as a workplace and as a site of cultural production and reproduction. As our workplace, set in a certain country at a certain time, it demands from us certain activities and tasks (‘grading,’ ‘analysis,’ ‘teaching writing,’), the forbidding of other tasks (can’t refuse to grade, for example), and inducing political choices (graduate student unionizing drives, for example). The university is emphatically part of the political-social-economic arena. And, as an institution of cultural dissemination, production, articulation and processes, the university is also part of the cultural sphere. Third: The cultural sphere, meaning the place where art products, writing and culturally valued objects and ideologies get made and used. This cultural sphere has numerous institutions and practices attached to it—whether these are coteries, magazines, poetic careers, reward systems, funding lines. Fourth: A fourth sphere (poetry) is hooked to all, but it most obviously intersects with the second and third—a site of activities and practices making poets who make writings and writings that make poets. The particular realm of poetry is vitally important to us. I know most of my answers are from a more particular realm than your questions, which seem sometimes to spill between these realms. However, the whole stage on which we act is the desire for social justice.

Arcade 6. I find my explorations for you occur along the line of cultural production, cultural dissemination, and cultural reception. You begin with a comment on production: a woman poet “producing” her own biography, rubrics, archive. This is, we would like to think, “secondary” to poetic production, but sometimes I wonder! It is clearly a very serious enterprise, part of the controlling of reception that many poets negotiate as significant work within their production. Your observation leads immediately into your comment about reception. “Canonized or forgotten” is your somewhat binarist formulation for women; one might add some other possibilities—minoritized, disparaged though remembered, frozen at one part of their career only, remembered for quirks and weirdnesses, remembered for their sexual partners, not for writing. But I take your point. Your sentences capture some of the sense of panic and avidity that characterizes our cultural moment. It is also interesting that your remarks suggest there might be conflict and contradiction between (in this case) production and reception. The person saying “I am not a feminist poet” might nonetheless be struck that her reception seems to be occurring under the rubric of “feminist reception.” Her. . . . (I assume it’s a her! why would a male poet say that? Think carefully about the meaning of that answer.)

So I’m going to talk about two of these three—production and reception, but, as you already said, they all loop together. One issue is “feminist production”—or more colloquially “I am/ am not a feminist poet.” Choose one, apparently? A second issue is “feminist reception.”

Arcade 7. Let’s begin again. The kinds of cultural questions you are asking emerged for me under the rubric “feminism.” But, aside from alluding to the importance of that formation for culture and politics, and declaring my indebtedness, and aside from suggesting (in a friendly tone) that everyone declare their collective indebtedness (see Arcade 3) to the gender materials that have

changed the terrain of the possible, I am agnostic, of two or three minds, whether another individual will accept that term, or even, whether she/he needs to. Such a refusal should, to be most effective, not be simply reactive, “against” something. Reactive, paraphrased something like this: “I reject the term because the powerful and annoying women of the generation before me embraced it, and I need to distinguish myself from them.” Or “The positions taken by feminism are out-dated; we don’t need them any more.” Or “We need to get on to other issues.” Debating with feminism, or going beyond it, should be creative, generative, coming from another space of the social and culturally possible. But, in my view, such a position must have a dialectical relationship with feminism—precisely subverting it and transcending it. Indeed, this is not refusal or negation, but dialectical negativity.

What is feminism? To me it means gender justice in the context of social justice. We do not have either, here in the United States, nor do people have it consistently in the world at large (a vast understatement), although some people, mainly in the first world, might do better than US women in particular legal and social rights (around child care, for example; around mandated gender balance in legislative representation, as in France). One needs gender justice only in the context of social justice so women do not benefit in their freedoms from the exploitation of other people, male and female. Since in some places, far from gender justice, the systems of gender and social repression, and multiple exploitations are intense, “feminism” seems like a good word to want to claim. At least until another comes along that can offer solutions, analyses, precisions, and hopes for gender justice in the context of social justice.

When a person refuses such a word or does not acknowledge the force of gender and sexuality in her/his political analyses of other issues (globalization, ecological disaster, health care policies, rampant nationalisms and fundamentalisms), it can appear as if the issues concerning gender justice and social justice are unimportant for that person. Now a quick segue to our privileged workplace: In the university, this non-acknowledgement might play into hands you (I don’t mean you) don’t want to be in, might leave a person holding hands with positions a person doesn’t want to be linked with—or used by. Loosely—the neo-cons. Or even the hand-wringing privileged. (I love those “hand” metaphors.) Strategically, if a person refuses the word “feminism” too assiduously or forcefully, the effect will be to isolate the women of the feminist generation, curtailing their effectiveness as mentors, as allies, as companions. Some simple results—people who study cultural products of women will once more be marginalized and minoritized as was formerly the case. Syllabi will not reflect the intellectual force of feminist and gender-laden scholarship—in romanticism we will not study romantic era women writers, for instance. People who do serious research on the recovery of women’s texts will go unrespected. It will be automatic to say, as was once commonplace, that their work is not up to “standards,” or shows “low quality,” or concerns “backwaters.” Issues important to women and gays in the workplace will be placed last, below last on the institutional agenda (like partner benefits). The marginalization of a prior feminist generation would be unstrategic for women newly entering the university, not in their best interests.

vagrant
 flagrant
 fragrant
 occupant
 clean haunting

Arcade 8. However, also strategically, a person might not want to affiliate with all the positions ever taken under the rubric feminism. Of course! The whole point is disaggregating the blanket term, making it precise and situational. This seems obvious, but worth repeating. “Feminism” is a

capacious, historically mobile term filled with its own intellectual and political debates, filled with the tugs and pulls of other social-subject locations (class for example, ethnicity, racial ideologies, religious cultures, national interests) and it (the same concept, “feminism”) has had features that would be plausible and necessary to criticize by other wings of feminist positions. Indeed, any political position would have criticizable aspects. So the question must be to ask what feminism, where, facing what, defined by what, responsive to what, blind to what, hostile to what. That is—the questions must be the usual, normal, always new analytic questions.

To say feminist—the fear might be that such a word brings in its wake lockstep allegiances and inflexible -- as well as unsubtle analyses. This, too, could be a problem with any political or politicized position. Surely one cannot use feminism as a convenient “whipping girl” for all that! That is, for the rejection of or claim of superiority to “the political.” But one might want the following “rule”: never let theory eviscerate matter. To claim NO or NEUTRAL or UNMARKED or UNIVERSAL “identity,” to claim that superior people don’t bother with these mired and specific social locations but rather transcend them (doesn’t everybody? my dear!), to assert that you (poor inadequate thing) have prejudices, biases, localisms, but I see the big picture and oh so clearly) are nasty policing devices that blindly favor hegemony and its interests.

Why should feminism be reduced to its own sentimentalities? Did it not have more to offer even to those who are invested enough in its meanings to attack it?

*We said
feminist*

Arcade 9. Here are three examples of uses of feminism in the arena of culture by members of (loosely) your generation. They are all notably serious, committed, inquisitive, and it does not matter whether each or any of them would claim “I am/am not a feminist poet,” for they are all doing work in this “blue studio” of yearning, hope, and gender horizons. They may not be in precisely the same arcade.

The first is by Rachel Levitsky. It is published as the enabling statement of a chapbook series she has produced from a reading series that she curates (2000, 2001) in New York City: “Belladonna is a reading series at Bluestockings Women’s Bookstore that promotes the work of women writers who are adventurous, experimental, politically involved, multi-form, multi-cultural, multi-gendered, impossible to define, delicious to talk about, unpredictable, dangerous with language.” The desire for what I once called “polygynous poetry” (“married” to many women) is one I resound with—all those multi’s make this a very attractive statement. But it’s more the notion of poetry as engaged with thought and language, with politics and poetics at the same time, that also attracts me to this statement. Because this is in the form of a list, it is not necessary to elaborate the exact relationship of these elements to each other. That’s lucky, and it also allows for a generative fluidity of potential linkages.

The second is by Linda Russo. It occurs in Rust Talks 7 (April 2001), a set of materials from Rust Belt Books in Buffalo, and it is in the form of a speculative letter. Hence it is less finished and summarizable. In the passage Russo talks of reading Irigaray and appreciating “her concern for the need to inscribe a feminine genealogy—not as biological imperative, but as a cultural one, a philosophical and political one—because we live in a culture, an era, where the feminine remains largely unscribed, where women have little influence in how we perceive our world—our myths, images, institutions, our very notion of the subject, the language user.” I am not sure I would only say “the feminine” here—but also “the female” AND females. That culture as we know it has notable ambivalence to the female I agree with absolutely; that this lack and

ambivalence are inscribed deeply in ideology, I agree with absolutely. She goes on to say that “Irigaray points out that a feminist genealogy needs to be created to exist alongside the existing one.” I am not certain that Irigaray wants two parallel ideological tracks, except as a provisional cultural step. In any event a “feminist genealogy” seems, at first, to be a useful project for Russo. But then later, Russo talks of writing poetry “in search of a mother,” adding “I don’t think I meant, to move over into metaphor, that I was in search of a genealogy of mother-writers—a not uncommon feminist project. I don’t consider my self a feminist, and I’m wary of my making of that project.” Here many of the concerns of feminist thinking—including the critique of gender ideology, including the desire for a new subject position, and including Irigaray’s challenge to make a new symbolic order, a genuinely bi-gendered symbolic order—are hinted at, but only a specific “parental/maternal” project is called by the name of feminism—and resisted. While I think this is a limiting statement of the many aspects of feminist projects, I do know what she means. The “recovery” of women writers was imbued with a variety of psychic needs. It would be interesting to examine these needs, to articulate the fascinating twist between the object of study and the apparent subject/ critic, to study these with an empathetic and analytical reach. Women critics are, however, not the only ones to identify with the writers they study—anyone ever look at most Pound criticism before about 1980 with an eye to that issue? A lot of different things are implicated for Russo here (including the sorting out of female/ feminine/ feminist), but it is also clear that what is at stake exists in the cultural sphere of gender materials. Whether or not Russo calls all this, or herself, “feminist” does not faze me one way or the other, because I read it emphatically as a gender arcade, or two.

A third statement from your generation occurs in Tripwire 3 (Summer 1999)--the issue is, in fact, devoted to gender. The statement at the head of the issue, written by the editors Yedda Morrison and David Buuck, reads: “The following pages contain a selection of writers and artists actively grappling with the complexities of gender as it pertains to daily life and social practice. Various tendencies seem to color these works: the continued influence of feminist theoreticians on current aesthetic, formal, and political practice; a recognition and inclusion of daily (domestic) life in both content and form; the desire for a simultaneous celebration and eradication of the traditions of one’s gender; a deconstruction of male-female binarisms, towards a critique of gender itself as a rigid and socially dictated location which limits and delineates its citizens; and the recognition that any move beyond the confines of gender-based identity and sex-based roles cannot manifest itself by mere proclamation or aesthetic liberty, but must navigate the deeply embedded material and historical relations of patriarchy.” This admirable statement shows the conscious interplay between ideological and material understanding, between the end of gender and its continuing presence; between existing feminist thought and assessment of that thought in practice; between queer thinking and gender inscriptions. It is a notably dialectic statement.

When I read these manifestations of gender-inflected thinking, I am not depressed (not blue that way), for it appears as if the struggle for a new subjectivity in which gender debates play a central role is well on its way. The major reconsideration of gender arrangements, and their implications for thought, daily life, and art seem notably, even thrillingly alert in these Gender Arcades.

Arcade 10. However, a person saying “I am not a feminist poet” might be taking another ideological position—that of individualistic performance, beyond “group.” One sees the temptation—to be taken as an individual. “I’m not a feminist poet; I’m just a poet.” Or even better--“I’m not a woman poet; I’m just a poet.” Good luck, sez I.

These remarks, however apparently negating, are working in the cultural terrain opened by gender-inflected thought—that is, by feminism. Here one must become appreciative of cultural ironies. Poets who thought that they were just poets, not women (for example, Louise Bogan),

have now benefited from the existence of a feminist criticism born out of the women's movement; have had their work valorized as part of the group "women" even if they just wanted, in some cases desperately and damagingly, to be poets, just ungendered poets. Other poets, who declared fast that they were feminists, in this gruesome apolitical time, have their solid, principled positions, their solid poetry found an annoyance, inadequate (for example, Adrienne Rich—this remark is dated very precisely in May 2001; by 2010, it will look bizarre, inexplicable). At this point, Black Nationalism looks teachable and "quaint" (please forgive me, if you don't understand I am dripping with irony), but feminism looks again like all those serious girls in ugly clothes who neither know how to put enough makeup on, nor know how to put on enough charm. To play in the cultural field, one always needs a strong sense of irony.

How about a female person saying "I am a human being, not a 'woman'"? There have been a number of feminist critiques of Woman as a concept, feeling it so riddled with bad ideology as to render it useless, suggesting that we need another name for that female person—once upon a time Monique Wittig polemically offered "lesbian." There have also been a number of reactions going in the other direction—the implicit—I am a woman not just a human being/ man—because women are better, sweeter, nicer, kinder, more fluid, less linear (a kind of "boy scout" position, so to speak. here there is a gap between ideology and practice). But for the "human being, not woman" statement-- the rejection of "Woman" is a time-honored position within feminism, not outside it. This is because the person's saying "I am a person, not a woman" has seen, even dimly, some disability and hampering attached to the social meanings of "Woman"—and would love to declare herself exempt. Who wants to be a woman, who thinks she is a woman, a woman only, a woman all the time, a woman in every fiber? (Read that Denise Riley passage again.) If I am going to hallucinate "gender" in my cold trek through culture, let me at least have freedom of visualization. Who is that third, fourth, fifth and sixth who walks there beside you? Who doesn't now want female masculinity, males' girlishness, feminine and effeminate texts and acts by males as well as females, androgyny (hey there—lookin' GOOD, again); poets embodying "malehood" (Olson's terms) or "spermhood" (my phrase on Pound), butch straight girls, male lesbians, matri-sexual persons; who doesn't want an array of subjectivities in their studios, engaging in what they imagine is "self-fashioning"? How, under these plural conditions of subjectivity, could we not want "women-as-just-persons" among them?

This is (I think!) what Alice Notley says in 1980 in her wonderful essay Dr. Williams' Heiresses (Tuumba, 1980). Notice how many contradictory, or unfinished positions on this subject she squeezes into her apparently innocent prose: "I'm not all that interested in being a woman, it's just a practical problem that you deal with when you write poems. You do have to deal with the problem of who you are so that you can be a person talking." [np, circa "p. 12"] Is she or isn't she holding for issues affecting women here? for woman-poet? for just-poet, no gender? The first sentence—it's a practical problem, one expected to finish with the statement—when you go out on the street and get harassed, or when you want more money on the job. What does it mean not being interested in being a woman if you are one—the way you used to have to dress? or some issues of ideological expectations, perhaps, whether internal or external? What is the practical problem of being a woman when you write poems? Isn't the practical act of writing gender-neutral? Or do we want to talk about interruption, domestic life and so forth. In what sense is being a woman "who you are"? This seems an interesting acknowledging of the force of woman-poet issues, even as they are somewhat shrugged away as an annoyance.

But maybe Denise Riley's wily temporalities operate here too—that is, sometimes a verse-writing female-person inhabits the position "woman poet" and sometimes not. In an interview with Ed Foster (Talisman 13 [Fall 1994/Winter 1995], 76), Anne Waldman precisely illustrates this—the strategic shifts around gender position, for within the space of a half page, she says the following

things—not contradictory, exactly, but taking up different emphases and different temporalities within the “feminist poet”/“woman poet”/“not” set of variables. 1) “the information I’m providing in this roundtable discussion is not bound by gender” One would imagine it is not. But there are issues in reception based on gender; sometimes when women speak they have less authority. Or sometimes, people take their words as being authoritative only when they speak on “gendered” (minor) things—ok to talk on the snack for kindergarten, not ok to talk about nuclear disarmament. In this caveat, Waldman acknowledges the force of assumptions about gender power. 2) (about Jena Osman/ Juliana Spahr’s journal Chain): “Well, this is a group of very strong women who feel that there are stories that need to be told and possibly wouldn’t get told unless there was a specific forum foregrounding women and their experience.” That is exactly and precisely the kind of thing another person would have said about twenty years earlier about Chrysalis or Calyx or Heresies. 3) Yet she goes on to say, also about Chain: “If it were just a magazine of women writing about being women, it would be like other soapbox feminist magazines and, by definition, limited.” This notably unappreciative remark is a rejection of feminist issues spoken in poetry while paradoxically using the “untold stories” argument that was perfected by those interested in feminist cultural critique. Soapbox is a curious word for Waldman to have used, since she accepts and champions an energetic politicized chant-rant poetry; indeed, she herself has produced enormous jeremiads and—not so much on gender—“soapbox” declamatory poems. So is it simply that declamation on any topic except gender is acceptable, but gender is not? This is an issue to reconsider. 4) “I think you naturally write out of your gender at times. It’s one of the energy sources.” Naturally, indeed. What does “natural” mean in this problematized setting? And later in the same piece (p. 78), her closing remark 5) “I think bisexuality is the actual mental condition.”

Arcade 11. Oh, to be judged and appreciated as a person, not a woman, with all the assumptions that might entail. Wouldn’t that be lovely? Maybe. Since men and women have different social and cultural positions, whose standard will we be using when we discuss the female of the species as persons? What is “universal” in this instance? Whose criteria? Who controls them? (This is a statement from “difference” feminism.) To want simple equality! to want simply to be judged as a person! Wasn’t that all Mary Wollstonecraft asked for, too? To yearn for the unmarked category.

A better response, in my view, is to mark the male—the formerly unmarked category—and make analytic sport of gendering in the cultural arena for both genders. This position mandates the end of any unmarked, universalizing category with its unspoken powers.

“In proposing gender as a basic problem and an essential category in cultural and historical analysis, feminists have recast the issue of women’s relative identity as equally an issue for men, who, upon ceasing to be mankind, become, precisely, men. Thus gender has emerged as a problem that is always implicit in any work.” Myra Jehlen, “Gender.” In Critical Terms for Literary Study, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. University of Chicago Press, 1990, 265.

You ask, at the end of your piece, “what now?” and one answer is more gender studies more more, including (what has already begun) gender studies of male figures, masculinity, male privilege, the varieties of male formation. Historicizing forms of manhood, ideologies of masculinity. No longer can “men” function as the unchanging flat backboard against which feminist balls get lobbed. This work is “feminist” in its sources and implications; it is politically and intellectually crucial work. I can think of Gail Bederman, Peter Middleton, Michael Davidson (“Compulsory Homosexuality: Charles Olson, Jack Spicer, and the Gender of Poetics,” in Cruising the Performative, eds. Case, Brett, Foster, 1995), Kaja Silverman’s work, some part of my new book (Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures); Libbie Rifkin’s study of gender and the

poetic career (Career Moves), unpublished work by Andrew Mossin and Eric Keenaghan. I can think of dialectics of gender—male and female together (as in Barrett Watten’s essay on Hettie Jones in Poetics Journal 10). I can think of the notable article by David Buuck in Tripwire 3, that uses both male and female critics and poets to explore: “how masculinist privilege remains a deeply embedded problematic for any attempt to further a political and aesthetic praxis that—ideally—would work against (and not simultaneously benefit from) any such privilege.” [Tripwire 3 (Summer 1999), 30.] “Malehood” is a new frontier—of feminist thinking. Doing all the things one did with women, with men, too.

This is complicated work, for the dangers of apologetics are manifold. Also, the dangers of taking attention away from women and the art work of women—this is probably the deepest danger and would need to be explicitly addressed and individually solved by anyone doing this work. To say the least, such work must self-consciously position itself as deeply rooted in feminist, gay/queer, and gender-inflected thought. So there is no doubt that we need as assiduous and politically-acute, deconstructive, skeptical and suspicious analysis of “male positions” as of female.

Arcade 12. Of course feminism began, and usually begins again, precisely with personhood in mind—the refusal of the ideological burdens of being lumped with all those droopy “women,” the sense of specialness, the horror—and shame, too, of being so mired. Look at the ambivalences of Simone de Beauvoir. (Just as feminism usually begins to be a little suspect when women are recommodified—c’mon, girls, you can wear nail polish and do swimsuit issues and be cute, and be powerful too! Why this is—our “flapper” moment after our “suffrage” victory--I am not totally certain, but commodification might be key. Leading to questions of where power really lies, what and who are hegemonic.)

But quickly, this painful feminism of dis-identification turns to find what gets analytically dumped on women—and proceeds to get angry in the name of all women (perhaps that was over-identification). To turn to female writers, for example: there are plenty of women writers whose gender basically controlled all the things critics said about them. All this has been well documented in an early article by Elaine Showalter (in the Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran anthology Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness, 1971) tracking the reviews of nineteenth century women writers, and it was complemented by an earlier, but parallel witty polemic by Mary Ellmann (Thinking about Women, 1968) on the critical flying of twentieth century women writers. I can think of an incisive chapter by Svetlana Boym (in Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet, 1991) about the poetess—the contradictory mix of excess and lack bespoken by critics constructing any woman poet as a poetess, and the woman poet’s sometimes acceding: her fate is that subjectivity. (What does “self-fashioning” mean under the regimes of gender?)

So I guess, historically, I see moments of painful, self-conscious dis-identification (“I am not a woman like those other women”) (“I am not a feminist, but...”) as the seed-bed for new efflorescence of gender-progressive thought.

This individualist personhood is what Dora Marsden was doing in 1913 with the Egoist—meaning not narcissist but individualist. And no longer a “free woman” but a “free person”—precisely the “I am not a woman but a person; I am not a feminist writer but a writer” that we have been discussing. My words (ventriloquizing Marsden’s position, not my own) were “feminism, o that old thing.” Then you later cited (my paraphrase of) Marsden’s curious corollary: “Now women can forge ahead. The burden of proof is one you. So write, women, write!” (Pink Guitar, 45) This kind of statement reveals that there is still a mark or stain of gender—women have something “to prove.” BTW, I didn’t say that last thing in my voice

either—it's not the kind of cheer that I would enact (in my little cheerleader's uniform) nor dispense as advice. I was being ironic about (as you say) "what such an invitation commands"—but it is the position of the Egoist, that important modernist journal—that there are no groups, only individuals. Historically, one would have to see this as originating in an internecine struggle inside feminism, between social purity and sex radical positions, a struggle which, as the journal's Egoist incarnation took shape, rapidly became an objectively a-feminist position, disinterested in affiliation with any group. (If this interests you, take a look at the "Seismic Orgasm" chapter in Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures, 2001, at Janet Lyon's superior book Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern, 1999, and at Bruce Clarke's incisive Dora Marsden and Early Modernism, 1996.)

In the cultural sphere, to say, right now, "I am not a feminist poet" can mean (and imply) a lot of things. Some of those things are contradictory, and some of those things are shorthand for debates and historically attested events that are being alluded to or summed up. In simple, it is part of an attack on hegemonic mainstream poetic practices, thematic rectitudes, and stylistic markers without necessarily seeing why people engaged with them. On the other hand a lot of wonderful work in poetry has been done by people who might well accede to feminism as a political and social demand for gender justice, but who might not particularly engage with the "women's poetry movement," as Alicia Ostriker names it in Stealing the Language, 1986. One might rather like equal pay for equal work (certainly one would not reject that demand, nor affordable decent child care, nor research on health issues affecting women mainly, like breast cancer), and not like every single poem in Rising Tides or No More Masks!, etc.

I actually prefer agnosticism about the feminism of production. I don't think women writers need be feminist; I certainly don't think they all need conform to my idea of feminism. (Lucky that—since they don't and won't!) It's enough that they found their way to writing and that I have the benefit of their careers and can watch, appreciate, respond to their struggles, struggles conscious or occluded, with gender and with other positions. I want them to write, women, write (!) in an exploratory, serious and roused way.

Arcade 13. Feminist poet. It is always valuable to try to slow down somewhat and to articulate what the content of that phrase is. Saying this implies that there is a well-understood entity denominated "feminist poet," but like any such entity ("objectivist poet"; "New York School poet"), it is only as good as the family resemblances extrapolated from a field of examples that you yourself have assembled (or that someone else has assembled, but you are agreeing with). Here's a little incomplete list of possibilities, some quite contradictory:

Feminist poet=one who talks a lot about gender and sexuality in her/his work. No, wait—that would be lots of poets--Olson, Williams. So try—a poet who marks the constructedness of gender and sexuality in her/his work, takes gender as an ideology about male- and femaleness and wants to investigate, to critique, not simply to benefit.

Feminist poet=woman poet

Feminist poet=woman poet consumed (studied, read, appreciated) under the regime of or in the economy of feminist perspectives, whether or not she is a feminist. One might want a different term for this—see the note on "feminist reception" below.

Feminist poet=[woman] poet who has certain themes in her work, themes (tautologically?) agreed upon as feminist. These themes—Alicia Ostriker names a number: self-division, anger, investigation of myth, assertion of the female body—are very palpable, valuable ways of organizing poetic texts, but have the flaws of their formulizable virtues: of being reductive or making the poem one-dimensional.

Feminist poet=[woman] poet who writes poems about the liberation of women

Feminist poet=[woman] poet who resists stereotypes of women—in her life? in her work? both?

Feminist poet=[woman] poet who resists stereotypes of women and men—again—where?

Feminist poet=[woman] poet who comments on gender issues in her critical work, who thinks about gender in the cultural field

Feminist poet=woman poet whose work is selectively seen, certain materials heavily valorized because of the existence of feminist criticism and its paradigms.

Feminist poet=[woman] poet who takes certain themes of “difference” involving women’s experiences –menarche, menstruation, childbirth, kid life, sexism experienced, rape, incest--as central subject matter (some of these topics are not exclusive to women)

Feminist poet=[woman] poet who tells the truth about her life as a woman. And with that verbal emphasis on truth and the unmediated communication of experience, one also might want to investigate the word “tells” or representation. As Margaret Homans so presciently said about Rukeyser’s rousing manifesto “No more masks!”: “Lines like Rukeyser’s and the expressions of faith derived from them are always exhortatory, never descriptive, because to speak without a mask is an impossibility, for men and for women...” (Women Writers and Poetic Identity, 1980, 40)

Feminist poet=[woman] poet who used to be called a poetess

Feminist poet=[woman] poet in a certain anthology (like No More Masks!)

Feminist poet= poet who destabilizes the normative terms of gender/sexuality and makes some kind of critique of those issues in her/his poems. This is closing in on the word “queer” as synonym for “feminist”

Feminist poet=[woman] poet who refuses (self-censors) certain themes or solutions, certain images or insights because they do not explore or lead, in her view, to the liberation of women

Feminist poet= [woman] poet who calls explicit attention to the relative powerlessness of women and the relative power of men—or who exaggerates this positionality into female powerlessness, male power in all cases.

Feminist poet=[woman] poet historically coming to her production in some relation to the liberation of women, and to the cultural critique of female exclusions made by feminism in general

Feminist poet=[woman] poet writing something “politically involved...multi-gendered, ...delicious to talk about, unpredictable” (to cite the Belladonna formulation from Rachel Levitsky)

Feminist poet=[woman] poet affronting the complexities of sexuality, eroticism, desire, *odi et amo*, frank and startling, decorum breaking (like Dodie Bellamy or Leslie Scalapino)

Feminist poet=[woman] poet who investigates language, narrative, genre and representation in its ways of constructing gender and gender roles. This is Kathleen Fraser’s argument: “I recognized a structural order of fragmentation and resistance” that was anti-patriarchal; her argument for the crucial intervention of formally innovative and investigative poetry into a feminist field in Translating the Unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity, 2000)

Feminist poet=a person who is a feminist, and who also writes poetry

Feminist poet= angry woman, writing poetry

Feminist poet= ironic woman, writing poetry

Feminist poet=[woman] poet who is “disobedient” (Alice Notley’s term for herself); transgressive (like Carla Harryman); “resistant” (my term about myself); imbuing knowing with its investigative situatedness (like Lyn Hejinian’s “La Faustienne”) in full knowledge of gender normativities

Feminist poet=a poet radically skeptical about gender ideas and arrangements in a culture

Feminist poet=a poet who knows what she thinks about gender ideas and arrangements in a culture and does not particularly change her mind

Feminist poet= a poet who sometimes shows herself to be ironic and skeptical about gender and sexual arrangements, but other times is not, or not overtly

Feminist poet=a woman protesting the place of woman in culture and society (in her poetry? not in her poetry? I didn't say)

Feminist poet=one who finds herself “mounting an enormous struggle” within culture, including poetry, because of its deeply constitutive gender ideas

From that contradictory, jubilant and annoying list, there's sure a lot to choose (and you might want to suggest still more options). Feminism in poetry is absolutely not one position. Indeed, one might say that feminism will circulate among, or manifest itself as a number of somewhat alternative positions. Further—remember—these might be inflected with: Difference (women are really different from men; have their own life-themes) (Some women are really different from each other). Androgyny/ mental bisexuality (best person is fused genders in some way). Rights/ sameness (equality of access, of laws, of treatment, generally). Transcendence (have gender but transcend it—it does not play in the realm where writing is made). Queering (breaking the binarist gender norm; eroding the social and aesthetic forms that depend on binarist hierarchies) Just speaking personally, I've probably been in or around all five positions.

And there will always be a woman poet who may right now be wishing there were no such thing as gender. (Could there be a male poet so passionate on this topic? Think of how their investments differ.)

Seems unrealistic, but who can blame her. One might see the position as a Blue Studio—as utopian, not as dismissive.

Arcade 14. A lot of the above list is implicitly about production. That is—to define feminism in poetry, many people have settled upon a feminism of production: having the poem “come forth” as a “statement” that shows certain “ideas” or “themes” and their “rightness.” What indeed is the “role” of ideas or the delivery of knowledge in poetry? So we are here; this much debated issue, another one that isn't going to get solved. It is impossible to hold that ideas and knowledge do not occur in poetry explicitly: Dante? Milton? Blake? Ginsberg? Lucretius? or implicitly: Niedecker? Wordsworth? Or both: Yeats? Oppen? I'd even have tried to say ideas are best if the reader only surmises them—that is, if the writer has carefully hidden them—but that cuts out Dante and Milton. Whoops. A nice correct thing to say here is that it's all about subtle thought, faceted thought. That tends to leave out Pound in certain moods, Eliot in other moods, Swift, etc. So it's not only about subtle thought—poetry can sometimes be about very crude thought. Well, there's always persona theory to work through—who is really “speaking” these ideas and did s/he really “mean” it?

Ideas in poetry and nothing else gives you a poem that is “an example of” something—of a certain position. This is not terrible, but it doesn't necessarily give more than a sermonizing rhetoric, something to swing to. I've always preferred essay to sermon (sez I smugly—well, you know that I do.). We want the evocative! the porous! the subtle! the imbeddings in language! but I am having a hell of a time defining it. I think it is about conviction that happens inside language within the deepest sensations of language and structure. I think, personally, that poetry should not be bits of tidy patness, embodying thoughts good for me, in poetry. In part this is a manipulative and “rhetorical” use of poetry—someone has in her mind to convince me of something, out of her (or his) benevolence. Let there be one genre that does not Sell Me Something, that does not Condescend to me, that does not Teach me—please! That is, a poetry of meditation, of thinking as praxis, that compels the language to offer up all its resources of play. Let there be one genre that thinks its thinking, and is not a pill or message I am being forced to take! A lot of poetry that uses ideas is really like a fancy glossy advertisement in an upscale catalog. Pottery Barn Poetry. That's what I am arguing against. Didacticism dressed up in attractive language.

“We write to find what we believe and what we do not believe: there are things we believe or want to believe or think we believe that will not substantiate themselves in the concrete materials of the poem,” said George Oppen (Sagetrieb 3, 3 [Winter 1984], 26).

Message-bearing poetry where the message has been fixed beforehand, not tested in the acts of language, will make me, as a reader, fly away in the other direction and hide in the eaves. One might then subscribe to the loosely projectivist idea of discovering content/as form and form/as content in the act of writing, or in the practice of writing. This is my position. But I can't be naïve as all that. I know damned well that poetry is full of ideas and positions that preceded the writing of any particular poem. Olson wants to convince me of Jung, and so does Rich at a certain point. Baraka wants me to face racism and my race privilege. Hopkins wants to show me the power of his Christian witness and struggles. H.D. wants me to see the mother matrix under Graeco-Roman-Christian culture, whose occlusion has created our cultural and psychic problems even unto war. These people have ideas, and they don't put the ideas aside when they write. So what am I talking about? Is it that the ideas are enacted or performed in language, as if discovered anew in language and structure, inside all the means and mechanisms of poetry? Yes, something like this. As if the language discovers that these ideas are “right”—right for this poem, right here, right now. The poet forgets and then remembers. The reader may remain agnostic, or entranced.

Is it the old “they shouldn't have “designs” on me? Sort of, but sort of not. I seem to have just said this—am I taking it back now? But how is that possible—don't the writers embody their conviction? What's wrong with, say, Susan Griffin having a few designs on me (in Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her), making me think certain gender ideas or reminding me to be uplifted or critical? What is wrong with Alice Notley's The Descent of Alette having plenty of smart designs on the reader about tyranny, about the internalization of ideology, about the collapse of society, about some male privilege, some male pain and female quest? The poem even, drastically, accepts the necessity of well-managed spiritually engaged assassination to “kill” the tyrant inside and outside and thus to liberate those trapped on the subway. If this isn't a feminist poem of ideas—what is?

I think that the poem I want is the poet's real struggle on the page inside language, inside poetic traditions, inside ideas, inside her time and place, and not the packaging of “fake struggle” set forth either to edify and patronize the reader or narcissistically to embellish the poet.

After all, a test case of “ideas” in poetry is Christianity in Poetry. I mean Herbert, Donne, Milton, Hopkins, the later Eliot—the whole panoply of practitioners whose poetry is absolutely in an idea frame, a whole mythology and set of allusions, a closural, teleological loft (“My God! My King!” kind of ending). I can't not deal with it—it is one central formula of the History of Anglo-American Poetry. Indeed, I see it as an effective mythopoetic tradition, like Greek myths, but telling a different story. What's then wrong with contemporary feminist mythologies and thematizing? Just that it has no churches? (Believe me—I am not calling for this!) Just that it is not as hegemonic as Christianity? Perhaps criticizing awkwardly correct feminist poetry is making women pay the price for the non-hegemony of their gender insights. Or maybe it's just picking out bad examples of period style and saying “oh pooh on that” while ignoring dim examples of period style that are less radical in opinion. Or maybe it's criticizing feminism for acting as if it is Christianity—or any teleological religion, always potentially sanctimonious, and filled with the Right Knowledge of Correct Paths to Salvation.

But all of this is why I do NOT want a “feminism of production” to be taken as the central cultural act performed by feminists and their intellectual kin. I am enough of a liberal and civil

libertarian to resist obdurately anyone telling me (or strongly implying to me) how to write in the correct period-style, what to write, and what formal or linguistic solutions to come up with, what themes are acceptable, and what moves to make with an eye to making rules and boundaries for expression. And I am not fond of anyone's implying that radical poetics are the only route to salvation, either. Any fixed concept of Salvation serving as an inflexible structure of feeling is the problem.

If feminism is someone telling me, you, her or him how and what to write—this is emphatically a problem in the cultural field. And insofar as “feminism” has done this, it deserves to be criticized. BUT it does not, however, deserve to be treated as if it were the only set of conventions trying to impose themselves (and be imposing) in a cultural field. Indeed, a newer, rawer ideology or praxis upthrust or fissuring through the accepted is much more visible than the “Old Mountain” of Ideologies that have Always (oh yes, and Already) been “there” and are so crunched in your cells and your landscapes that you don't feel them, see them, or acknowledge their telling you what to do, what to write, how to make it all come out. That's just called “good writing.” Now think of The Four Quartets. When people complain about the quick and sketchy invention of a set of conventions made by writers calling themselves feminist, they need a quick and sketchy dose of understanding how conventions occur—have always occurred-- as historical formations out of cultural practices.

Arcade 15. This is why I am agnostic about the feminism of production, but want to say a VERY strong positive word for the feminism of reception. What does this mean? To maintain feminist (that is, gender-alert) RECEPTION is crucial, not to insist that certain forms, styles, strategies, subjectivities, themes are more female, feminine, male, masculine, gay, straight, queer on the level of production. The feminism of reception means a high level of analysis making legible gender materials and the materials of other social matrices, and showing a subtle alertness to the play of gender (plus) and its deep structures, in culture, everywhere. Gender-alert, materialist-inflected reception is interested in the discussion of social location not only of artists, but of genres, discourses, images, textualities, ideologies, communities. Feminist reception demands that everything that has been written needs multiple modes of gender analysis. Feminist cultural poetics has, to date, primarily engaged itself with female subjectivity and female agency, but with the tools developed from this phase of feminist thinking, one can begin to talk about male subjectivities and agency. Thinking about gendered subjectivities, performative genderings, styles of femaleness or maleness, sexualities as represented in artworks, thinking about ideological attitudes to gender of any individual author are all modal moves within the feminism of reception.

Note—I am not calling for “feminine reception,” as Terence Diggory called my position in his introduction to The Scene of My Selves: New Work on New York School Poets (National Poetry Foundation, 2000) in which the title of my article is “The Gendered Marvelous: Barbara Guest, Surrealism, and Feminist Reception.” That slip of the pen (“feminine reception”) is his little accident within ideology. A metonymic posy from Reception = Receptivity = Femininity= Feminine.

Note—the “feminism of reception” will be continuously alert to the issue of erasure. As Elizabeth Treadwell points out in Tripwire 4, “The problem of erasure is *everreal*. It is never, I've found, that women weren't there [in literature], but that they were there and it takes us forever to re-figure it out.” And later: “Those of us who find ourselves figured as Other—in whatever era, in whatever way: *We are never silent to ourselves.*” Tripwire 4 (A Letter to the Editor), Winter 2000-01, 180, 181.

But this “feminism of reception” will try to position the recovery of women artists as events in the general history of literature, not solely or narrowly as an act for women. (This point from David Buuck, Tripwire 3, 31)

Arcade 16. Since “feminism” changed the cultural landscape, willy nilly, there are plenty of people who are indifferent to “feminism” and agnostic about “women,” but who have become, as you suggest, a poetic “nexus.” This idea that you’ve enunciated is a very important one. Dare one say a “feminist” nexus, taking “feminism” to be an act in reception, not production—that is a “nexus” read under the influence of feminism, a reading strategy that has allowed us to become very very curious about the ways women poets have negotiated their gender, within their writing and their poetic careers? “Feminist nexus”? A number of those involved might not agree with that phrase. “Gender-inflected nexus”—means a lot of very interesting women writing each other and reading each other, but the phrase is dim and jargon-esque. “Women’s Nexus”? Well, nexus is a key word, anyway. As Peter Quartermain and I said about The Objectivist Nexus (University of Alabama Press, 1999)—the participants didn’t have to agree; they didn’t have to like each other, nor be a school nor sign a manifesto—but they had to be engaged with each others’ work for the majority of their writing life. Their work was magnetized by the fact that a certain rubric was set in motion; their work got involved with certain historical responsibilities—in this case the pressure of feminist thought and action. The writers kept reading each other, kept poking at each others’ ideas, engaged, even if annoyed at the turn some took in relation to each other. The idea of “nexus” seems thoroughly apropos, allowing for the fact that not one set of linked terms in one seminal essay is the propellant (which was the case for the Objectivists). In Zukofsky’s 1931 essay, the terms are objectivist, sincerity, and objectification in relation to the materialist political/cultural movement of communism, socialism and the progressive left. For the “Female Nexus,” there are several terms and several waves of “originating” interventions (around woman, gender, feminist, feminine—the latter as in French theory) in relation to a materialist political/cultural movement called second wave feminism. There does, indeed, seem to be a “Female Nexus.” Alice Notley has recently argued the same thing. In conversation, she calls all the women writing in this period “the group without a name.” (I think she’s said this in print too, but I can’t find it.) The critic Ann Vickery states: “We need a map of Language writing as a field of rich and diverse feminisms”; she has gone a long way towards providing a beginning. (Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing, Wesleyan UP, 200, 50) Her topic is clearly this “Female Nexus” (though it is also specifically “Language”women and not a wider field of innovation).

Can one call this “feminine”? This writing, marked by a greater allegiance to the post-structuralist rupture of humanisms, selfhood, and identity, and marked by the influence of experimental modernisms has, in some criticism, gone by the name “feminine.” One might thereupon have two attitudes—contradictory, of course. To call non-linear structures, cross-generic experiment, collage, non-narrative play with subjectivity, temporality, syntax—by the name of “feminine” follows “French feminism” of Cixous and Irigaray. One could nod approvingly, as does Joan Rettallack in her article in Feminist Measures, accepting the word “it is the women (among experimental poets) who—for the first time in large numbers using “feminine” formal processes—are presenting us with our strongest, most challenging models of literary feminisms” because they actively explore multiplicity, unintelligibility, the “articulation of silence” and so on.³⁷⁵ Also, following Irigaray, the feminine is the principle of the transgressive, and that which resists universalisms of all sorts (346). So the female use of the feminine is especially striking for Rettallack; she calls it the poethical. Her eponymous punning other, Genre Tallique says “Feminist writing occurs only when female writers use feminine forms”³⁵⁹, mainly because Tallique is overly concerned to avoid “the feminism of polemic”^(359 bottom) (That means that

no man could ever write a feminist work, even in feminine forms; this is a polemic argument that is, in fact, quite exclusionary).

Or one could dissent, uncooperatively, both from the original denomination of the term feminine by Cixous and Irigaray—in my opinion they both mean something like “écriture bisexuelle” (essay on the essay) and because the term feminine is too mixed up with its destructive elements, at least for someone brought up in the 50s. If one wants to say transgressive, resistant, anti-hegemonic, why not do so in as many words? And why not call this transgression of women and about women’s position in society “feminism”? Why not be able to analyze just where Bram Stoker or D.H. Lawrence was feminist and just where each could not go further and became self-compromising and politically retrograde? One would, of course, have to broaden this term as applying to forms of female resistance in cultural products. I am not sure, but it appears that Retallack wants to resist the term feminism as tainted (presumably by Alicia Ostriker and other pioneers), while I want to resist the term feminine as tainted.

Go to p. 245 of *American Literary History*.

Of course, as soon as this attack on the term “feminine” is complete, I find this citation from Cixous’s “Castration or Decapitation” (1981. *Signs*): “A feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there’s no closure, it doesn’t stop, and it’s this that mat very often makes the feminine text difficult to read. . . .a feminine text starts on all sides at once, starts twenty times, thirty times, over” and I am so attracted to this that the whole subject is open again. Probably one cannot use the term feminine without at least acknowledging that we are not talking about a stylistic marker here, but about a relationship to the body of the mother—the feminine as access to the preoedipal desire. Another tonality, other voices, the mishegoss on the page. So in that sense, what does it mean that I write feminine texts but do not want to acknowledge them as such? Am I denying the body of the mother and my desire. or am I expressing écriture bisexuelle, the struggle on the page between the mother and the father tones, modes, authorities.

What is this Female Nexus? It’s the “polygynous” (post patriarchal?) poetries within the years of, just after, and in some cases parallel to the women’s poetry movement and the feminist political movement—and I use polygynous precisely to suggest the Kristevan polylogue, the radical poetics of this group of writers. But historically, I would factor in the propulsion from both the feminist movement in culture and analysis and theory and “the women’s poetry movement” as an as-yet under-acknowledged spur. Some of the most fruitful moments of women poets’ exchanges on these issues came during the twenty-plus years from the 1980s to the present under the rubric of “innovative”—when at least multiple sets of women writers were engaged, at least sporadically, in utopian projects, in their own Blue Studios—to examine what the regime of gender-marking gave to culture and to see what the economy of gender-investments gave. A tremendous number of fruitful cross-fertilizations have emerged in the past two decades—kind of like everyone going into the Tunnel of Love and coming out with different people’s lipstick smudged on them, and smudging in return. This has indeed been a very merry and lively moment. There have also been those travelling, at times, through opposite tunnels—tunnels of annoyance and ambivalence, of rage and suspicion. But being in a nexus does not demand assent (see Oppen vs. Zukofsky); it simply demands attentiveness, fixation, sureness that these poets must be read. This “nexus” moment of great significance to the consolidation of innovative women’s writing as a practice is perhaps best represented by Mary Margaret Sloan’s *Moving Borders* anthology (Talisman House, Publishers, 1998). But the Female Nexus came into being as a “nexus” both in linkages between coterie formations (St Mark’s; early Language; HOW(ever),) but also in relation to the “women’s poetry movement” and the French feminist theory interventions by which some of its work is marked (some of this is Vickery, some is not).

Arcade 17. A moment of silence. For the women who jumped from windows, away from the blue.

Arcade 18. If you are impatient with other women for having to go over that ground again and again (“the same old arguments simply recirculated / regenerated or, even worse, left to stagnate”) and then, if you say that you didn’t “fully understand [at one point in your own life] that my own thinking might be considered ‘feminist,’” take a look at what you’ve said! These two statements construct a great generative contradiction (saying 2 opposite things, A and not-A) from which you might make a number of surmises and dialectical resolutions. One might be patience with the positions of others. Though I know it is hard to be that which is called, and calls itself feminist. You can become a lightning rod for many a free floating electric strike. But if you were once “not” (not quite) willing to say feminist about yourself, you might see others the same way. Perhaps they will become your allies in a little more time. And/or you might also allow that you could change and not want to call yourself feminist. Though this seems unlikely.

Arcade 19. Can one be a political feminist—committed to gender justice, to resisting (as possible) hierarchies and inequalities based on gender, privileges and constrictions in the social and economic realm AND also be a cultural agnostic, demanding the interest of complexity? Can one admire Olson’s projects and his omnivorous claims, and resist a lot—almost all-- of his gender politics? Can one encourage women to talk in class when they often hold back, and then listen to them present mushy, even ridiculous opinions about issues you hold dear? Can you protect the right of a male student with an even higher sense of entitlement to say even worse, stupid things? Of course. You can also outline the terms of debates in all cases, the reasons people might want to rethink this or that. Can one be rigorous and empathetic? Anti-simplistic, but with clean lines; Can one illustrate opacity and confirm clarity at one and the same time? You’d better believe it.

Tell her “she”
 Tell her “her”
 tell her what
 I can

Arcade 20 This exchange dates from 1978. “Anne Waldman: I was talking to Diane di Prima last week and she said that so many of the talented women of that time and place (New York City or San Francisco in the fifties) who could’ve blossomed, didn’t because they were uninformed. They just weren’t getting the information from the so-called master and male poets.” Note the particularity of “uninformed”— translated as—what? out of the loop? excluded? too identified with that particular loop and unwilling to bond with other women? needing the male to shepherd, chaperone, and otherwise connect you to the scene—not allowed to connect yourself.

“Ted Berrigan: They didn’t know how to convert this male information to female value. ... But it was true, it wasn’t a very good time for women.”

From an interview by Anne Waldman & Jim Cohn of Ted Berrigan (August 1978):
 In Nice to See You: Homage to Ted Berrigan. Ed. Anne Waldman. Coffee House Press, 1991, 107.

Note how the flaw has passed from men’s not including/ informing women (that is, from clubbiness and exclusivity) to women not able to convert whatever information they were getting. This is a slide from being a “men’s problem” or a problem between men and women to being solely a “women’s problem.” Notice the statement of difference—male information must get

converted to female value, in order to be useful to women. I am not saying he's wrong or right (women might feel enabled by at least having a place of difference in this array); I'm just looking at the structure of feeling. There are no "just human" people here; these are definitely gendered folks, acting in ways rather sharply differentiated by gender. Note how, after a little material that I cut (not on this subject) the subject of women's exclusion comes back, the return of the repressed. "It wasn't a very good time for women"—a firm litotes. Not only a pensive understatement, but also another glissade—why is such a situation "not a very good time for men and women"? Why indeed. The answer is in ideology: women are women's problems. Men's attitudes are women's problems. Women are the repository of everyone's "gender problems," and they are the synecdochic marker for such problems. Men, presumably, do not have gender problems; they are neither responsible for such problems nor do they have any agency in facing the issues.

Time for the wake up call—do we want it to revert to not "being a very good time for women"?

"Rise up paginal" says Anne Waldman (Iovis I, 187)

vaginal page, erect

page in service apprenticed to culture

to hope

in the Blue Studio

Arcade 21. So, you ask, am I a feminist poet? The easiest answer is yes. But in fact, only in certain ways. Only by certain of the criteria, above. I would resist some of the others. An easier question is, am I part of the Female Nexus. There the answer is emphatically yes.

I am certainly a feminist who is a poet. I have had some feminist projects in poetry, notably the revisionary myth poems "Eurydice" and "Medusa," in Wells and "Crowbar," in Tabula Rosa. "Crowbar" is a work that angrily and thrillingly takes on the voice of the "Lady" in trobar clus poetry, but she uses a language crowbar to pry up and resist ideology about female figures. It's both overtly feminist and verbally tricky, radical and elegant. ("Crowbar" is my anthology piece, Susan Howe once winningly told me, but it was never in the anthologies it should have been in. It, and the poem "Writing" are works of significant leverage and turn in my writing.) My current project is inflected with gender resistance to some of the "scripts" or ideologies of poetry as an institution. I'd say, to cite Arcade13, that I have found myself "mounting an enormous struggle" within culture, including poetry, because of its deeply constitutive gender ideas.

My long poem Drafts has been going on since about 1985-86—so 2001 makes them 15 or 16 years old. I am rounding into having written about 47 of them (an average of 3 per year—this statistic is mildly interesting to me—I am curious about all the little functional details and deep positional feelings of writing a long poem). The feeling of doing this work is sublime: it is a readied, incorporative, flexible, and open form, that is also a grid of relationships. As you know Wesleyan is bringing out Drafts 1-38, Toll in just a few months (October 2001), and I am composing the next group of nineteen (the next "fold"), Drafts 39-57. Drafts is poetry that at the same time as it reaches deeply and saturatedly into poetic traditions of all kinds, wants enormously to resist "poetry" and to reconfigure what it can do, how it is regarded, and what its scope and meanings are. I really want to write (as Oppen did) a poetry of critique. Of driven, stricken skepticism. This is a large thing to say, and thinking the poem will be judged and read against this kind of statement makes me---not frightened, but happy.

Arcade 22. My poetry has been a way, for a long time, of thinking about gender. But some of these thoughts are registered indirectly. Thus—generally I work with gender not directly through statement and image and theme (though sometimes I do), but obliquely through consideration of the constitutive structuring materials of any poetic text set in a critical, responsive relationship to poetic tradition. For example, each of the new poems that I am currently writing is dedicated to a specific person; thus the works in Drafts 39-57 construct a variety of “I-you” relations not typical of the power and gender ideas often expressed in short lyrics, in which “I”/author has the power of the word in relation to the “you”/listener, a generally female figure. Instead, the poems create a varying inter-subjective space between addressee and speaker. The creation of a “space of the between” has a gender meaning in eroding the former I/you relations of poetry.

Feminist ideas about the position of women in discourse, conventions, and culture, the works of certain male and female writers, and the position of female figures inside poems are materials that I have examined throughout my scholarly career; indeed, my critical work has helped to foreground these issues. Some of the same concerns animate my poetry. I want consciously to alter gender traditions that have been institutionalized as poetry itself inside poems, often providing their climax, their justification, their satisfactions. I mean such idea-embodiments as muse, female figures and their relationship to language, poetess, male speakers/ female listeners or recipients, poetry as transcendence of the real, even “feminine” rhyme as lesser, light, comic, popular. With my poetry, as with my scholarship and my essays, Pink Guitar-ish interventions, I want, essentially, to change poetry and to change how poetry is understood.

Arcade 23. To name the whole work and its individual cantos “drafts” is to make a statement about this praxis (alias, genre). I start from the metaphoric presumption of provisionality--these poems are pretended (and it is a generative and wonderful pretense) as “unfinished.” That means that none is perfect, iconic, static—something, as I just said, that has gender meaning for me as a criticism of the uses of the female/feminine in a good deal of the poetic tradition. As Drafts, these poems are open to their own revision and disassembling. The interest in having no stasis, having so much in any poem, having links and ties to prior work in the series all ruptures the iconic. I desire to create hybridity and mixed kinds of texts.

I am building a work that mimics memory, that plays with the textures of memory, including its unexpectedness, its flashes, its fragmentations, and its erasures. I do this emotional and thematic work in two main formal and structural principles that help me construct memory formally, and as well, help me formulate individual units within the grid-like space in which this poem now takes shape. First, I create linkage by randomly repeating lines and images throughout, a recontextualization of materials and a building of traces that eventually gives the reader the feeling of having heard it all before. This sense of déjà vu is quite important to the main thematics of the work. This repetitive repositioning of material goes with genre in that it suggests that any one poem is only a “draft” of something else that is palpable but unattainable. Second, the works are organized on a periodicity of nineteen, with a structural idea I’ve called “the fold.” Discovering that I wanted to do this was a stroke of tremendous luck, in a poem in which all the choices have been made on the ground, in the doing of the act of writing. (Here an analogue is Robin Blaser’s Image Nations.) Beginning with “Draft 20: Incipit,” each new draft corresponds in some sensuous, formal, intellectual, allusive way to a specific “donor” draft. This tactic creates a regular, though widely spaced, recurrence among the poems, and a chained or meshed linkage whose regularity is both predictable and suggestive, textured with internal relationships, yet making the work malleable and porous. So the poems hold together in a grid, something that has strong analogues to contemporary art, but within that grid, there is elasticity and variation. Both the tactic of randomized repetition--recurrence of lines, phrases, situations, words--and the

“folding” of one unit of nineteen poems over another are ways of making the work act like a gigantic memory of itself.

These formal tactics make the already-written poems the “muses” for the next work. Speaking, already spoken lines and words are muses for the next poems. I cannot emphasize this strongly enough. The structure of repetition and folding makes related drafts stand as muses for themselves: the poems already written are the muses for the unwritten. This short-circuits the issue of the silent female muse-figure well-known in poetic tradition but whose silence and semi-visibility are very problematic for actual women writing, women like myself.

Arcade 24. Drafts responds thematically and structurally, in texture and in conception, to memory and time. But the work wants to resist the memorializing functions often ascribed to poetry, and especially to lyric poetry. Drafts therefore undertakes the task of replicating the open-ended displacements and random waywardness of memory, rather than making an iconic object that eulogizes what is lost. Since these iconic objects are both poems (in the extra-diegetic) and female figures (inside the poem, in the diegetic)—the resistance to the iconic is in a general and loose way based in a gender critique. This is, and I’ve argued this before, my resistance to the “pure lyric hit”—that narrow, lovely thing—a feminist resistance that sees that kind of poem as working with deeply imbedded ideas about female and feminine. That I’ve overstated this does not make the idea less powerful for myself.

My critique of lyric in my own mind can be organized more largely as this kind of resistance: from W. G. Sebald, Rings of Saturn (New Directions, 1998, 194). “at times it seems to me...as if all works of art were coated with a sugar glaze or indeed made completely of sugar.” That is precisely the artwork I do not want to write. Nor, mainly, do I want to consume anything like it when I read or see artworks.

There is no doubt that poly-interruptibility and a sense of multiple vectors, the collaging of these, the play with “sequence of disclosure” and rhythms of understanding mark my work in both poetry and the essay. I have also made a serious gender critique of the “lyric tradition” and want to encircle, rupture, torque, destabilize lyric poetry as such. But, carefully (and with a little help from my friends—Hank Lazer and Nathaniel Mackey), I do not reject “lyricism” or melody as one effect built among many in a poem (sound, segmentivities, charms--though I do emphatically reject the charming, the decorative, the pretty. I have a principled resistance to “beauty” as a marker of verse, a serious claim of dissent and resistance, but my creolizations are not ignorant of beauty. Nor do I reject syntax as one means of directing attention, the “sequence of disclosure”—in George Oppen’s wonderful phrase (Sagetrieb 3, 3 [Winter 1984], 26). I am fascinated by the way syntax intersects with and interacts with any poetic line or unit of segmentivity. I use sentence and fragment, argument and disjunction, putting rapture next to rupture, so to speak. I want the passion, sense of the ethics of writing synthesized with discursive variability, and linguistic/ textual creolization.

Arcade 25. My critique of lyric in my own mind might also be articulated under Theodor Adorno’s famous “After Auschwitz to write [lyric] poetry is barbaric.” (Prisms, The MIT Press 1983, 34) (I am strangely aware as I write this to you that your name is Barbara, and you have been given some secret stake in this debate.) This complex statement has had many midrashic glosses made upon it, as well it must. Not the least are several by Adorno himself, some of which misquote himself to deny that “after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems.” (See Negative Dialectics, 362, as cited by Lyn Hejinian in The Language of Inquiry—for her midrash, see the essay “Barbarism” [University of California Press, 2000]; but also see Shaping Losses: Cultural Memory and the Holocaust, eds. Julia Epstein and Lori Hope Lefkowitz; 204 has Julia Epstein’s

midrash [University of Illinois Press, 2001].) Of course, his emphasis is not so much on lyric but on the barbarous and the barbarity of Shoah and the sheer inadequacy of any artwork in the light of such a reality.

But in terms of the impact of this magisterial comment on praxis, here is my particular midrash at this moment. I no longer write lyric poetry, but am engaged in a complex and odic/ ex-odic heterogeneric work, resisting “pretty poetry” and little poetry—this resistance, as I’ve mentioned, being (for me) also feminist in origin. This makes a double resistance to the lyric, or to the lyric only. This means something about “genre”—or, to say it with a less static feeling, something about the rubric under I currently put my praxis. There are, in all the Drafts, “debris” and “fragment”—a formal and an ethical issue coinciding. These words are used by the mid-century German philosopher Walter Benjamin. One presiding presence in this work is his angel of history, displaced in the storm blowing the angel backwards into the future, while it is still staring stunned at events and their unfixable detritus (“Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Illuminations, Schocken Books, 1969).

I want in this light to mention that gender is not the only social location for the subjectivity writing Drafts nor for the subjectivities created in them. Curiously (to myself), quondam Jewishness—a very secular, skeptical cultural Jewishness—is important. Thus I am haunted by moral nightmare, ambiguities about authority, and the demand for awe made by the Abraham and Isaac story, alluded to in “Draft 25: Segno” and elsewhere. As is Unitedstateness, given the compromises and strange estrangements of that global privilege. Thus I am being haunted, by homelessness in “Draft 24: Gap,” and the sense of moral or ethical losses of community. I am haunted by the “outsider” artist (“Draft 22: Philadelphia Wireman”), whose powerful wire sculptures came close to being lost, thrown out with the trash. As is a spiritual yearning and awe to which I do NOT give the name of any existing (or future) religious formation or allegiance. Figured too are the vastness of the universe and the littleness of the dot, or letter, or self, something that appears in these works repeatedly, as a pinhole, as “any bit of fleck along the crack” (in “Draft 24: Gap”), as the (smallest) Hebrew letter, “yod,” and in other guises. There is also a strange thing to say—the social privilege and location of being alive and well enough to say all this, to say anything I can in the time it takes, given the existence not of real ghosts but of ghostly traces of those without most of this privilege. I am haunted by the losses of many people in the holocausts of the twentieth century, represented over and over in my work, for instance in the “hoops of unforgiveable bone” in “Draft XXX: Fosse,” in “ghosts of ghosts at the open fosse” in “Draft 27: Athwart.” Many of these poems speak of the enormity of the universe, and the enormities of what has happened in our milky corner of it. These are haunted poems, poems of commitment.

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