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Our Bodies, Our Poems

I would like to begin with two statements, from two widely separated moments, written by two poets who would seem to be pretty much diametrically opposed politically and theoretically. The first is from T.E. Hulme's "Lecture on Modern Poetry," written and delivered to friends sometime around 1908, then revised and delivered as a public lecture in 1914. The second statement, by Lyn Hejinian, appears in a prefatory note (written sometime around 2000) for a panel talk given in 1983. First, Hulme:

Personally I am of course in favour of the complete destruction of all verse more than twenty years old. But that happy event will not, I am afraid, take place until Plato's desire has been realized and a minor poet has become dictator. Meanwhile it is necessary to realize that as poetry is immortal, it is differentiated from those arts which must be repeated. I want to call attention to this point -- it is only those arts whose expression is repeated every generation that have an immutable technique. Those arts like poetry, whose matter is immortal, must find a new technique each generation. Each age must have its own special form of expression, and any period that deliberately goes out of it is an age of insincerity.¹

And now Hejinian:

If, as many of us have claimed, the practice of poetry, in being a study of language, involves alertness to and critique of its misuse, and if its misuse in the form of public hypocrisy is one of the outstanding problems of our time, then it was incumbent on us to develop modes of invention which were not hypocritical. This should not be interpreted as a demand for the invention of honesty. The notion of honesty tends to be equated with truth-telling, and we felt a genuine distaste for both inherited and discovered notions of Truth. But it did, over time, develop into a demand for honesty of invention.²

For the purposes of this paper I'm going to set aside a number of questions these two statements provoke -- about art and contemporaneity, say, or about the status of truth claims in poetic language -- in order to focus on just one: What exactly does it take for a particular poetic form to avoid "hypocrisy" and count as "honest" (in Hejinian's terms) or "sincere" (in Hulme's)? In the context of the Language movement of the 80s and 90s, and more particularly in the context of the modernist legacies (Pound, Stein, Williams, Zukofsky) through which poets like Hejinian, Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten and many others articulated their avant-garde credentials, Hejinian's remarks are particularly striking, if only because she and her fellow Language poets have so frequently and explicitly invoked their commitment to rejecting the traditional lyric speaker. That is, in the context of a movement based on a general refusal to represent the kind of subjectivity that any conventional psychological understanding of sincerity and honesty would seem to require, Hejinian's remarks, and for that matter, Hulme's, demand a new understanding of the terms. Both statements seem to require us to think of sincerity or honesty as simultaneously collective and formal states. Moreover, sincerity (or honesty) seems to line up in these accounts with an effort to treat formal invention as an imperative (Hejinian) or even as a logical necessity (Hulme).

The general "demand for invention" in Hejinian's "Who Is Speaking?" emerges in the middle 80s as a distinctly feminist imperative in the work of a number of women poets affiliated with the Language movement. As we shall see below, part of what makes invention necessary for poets like Hejinian, Rachel

Blau DuPlessis, and Kathleen Fraser (to name a few) is a male dominated lyric tradition in which, as DuPlessis writes in her 1985 essay "Otherhow,"

... "woman" has always been a central site and icon for that tradition as a specially stressed sign, rather more rich than a sheep or a daffodil. "Woman" has been constructed by that tradition as the permanent object of scrutiny, rather than as the speaking subject, even when, as we all know, there have always been a few women poets. A Corinna. A Praxilla. Indeed, our whole poetic tradition is made up in great proportion of lyrical/social statements which produce women in various ways (semantically, linguistically, in image, in sequence, by allusion), produce them almost exclusively as the objects of regard.³

The gendered representational constraints established by these "lyrical/social statements" have served, according to both DuPlessis and Fraser, as the impetus for a general feminist resistance that precisely must occur as formal innovation.

Fraser argues in a 1988 essay reprinted in *Translating the Unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity* (2000), that that resistance is fundamental to the situation of writing as a woman -- that is, to the very subject position of the woman poet: "What if," asks Fraser, "the subject, itself, is resistance, vulnerability, seeming lack of will, the conditioned self-denial that creates uncertainty, unsteadiness in the world? How can the line be made to reflect those states?" (153). The "subject" that the "line" should be "made to reflect," is for Fraser an alternative to rather than a version of the "self" traditionally identified with lyric expression. These questions arise in the context of Fraser's observation that the "benign critical neglect" of work by certain women writers in the 1970s (Fraser's example is Barbara Guest) may "testify to a slight discomfort with women who do not assert the self in writing, who write in part to bring into

question the very notion of the self" (152-153). What one finds in the discourse on these writers in the decades that follows is what appears to be the opposite discomfort, namely a discomfort with poets who do assert the self, and do so in forms that we traditionally identify as lyric. Of course what is also striking here is that the states that Fraser enlists to characterize the resistant subject (which as we have already seen is offered as alternative to the asserted self of traditional lyric) -- "vulnerability," "seeming lack of will," "conditioned self-denial," "uncertainty," and "unsteadiness in the world" -- are among the most familiar psychological stances in mainstream lyric poetry. The popular lyrics of poets like Carolyn Kizer, say, or Sharon Olds or Marge Piercy represent such states precisely as a means of expressing (as opposed to questioning) the selfhood of the lyric speaker.

Indeed, from a certain perspective it becomes difficult to sustain Fraser's distinction between, on the one hand, the resistant subject and the line it forms (or whose form it takes), and on the other, the lyric speaker and the self it expresses (or that is the expression of a self). This collapsibility of the production of form into the expression of self and vice versa is, I would argue, the basis for Juliana Spahr and Claudia Rankine's insistence in the introduction to their anthology, *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*, that there is no contradiction between lyric and what Fraser calls the "innovative necessity." For while Rankine and Spahr acknowledge that "much of [the work in the anthology] investigates representation itself to suggest alternatives to lyric's troubling and limiting history for women," they also insist

that their anthology's "emphasis on innovation...is a return to what made lyric so valuable centuries ago. Lyric is by definition innovative."⁴ "Innovative writing by women" (to borrow from the subtitle of Mary Margaret Sloan's important 1998 anthology, *Moving Borders*) has developed into a poetic industry of sorts, if the quick succession of anthologies like Sloan's or Spahr and Rankine's are any indication. Certainly issues of marketing and audience are relevant to any effort to explain the recent proliferation, not just of anthologies, but also of critical works focused on women's innovative writing. My concern in this paper, however, is with the way in which their self-justifications adhere to a larger theoretical trajectory, one that an account of market forces could at best only partially explain.

Why do we still have anthologies of women's poetry? The explosion of such anthologies in the 70s was driven by the need to correct a numerical imbalance, namely the presence of many more men than women in the major arenas where poetry was published, performed and studied. But while on the numerical level the problem of underrepresentation has been corrected, and on the theoretical level, the very category of woman has been subjected to a series of anti-essentialist critiques, the anthologies are still with us. For somewhat surprisingly, as we shall see, it's the category of woman as such that retains its power in the new wave of women's poetry anthologies (represented here by those edited Sloan and by Rankine and Spahr) devoted to the experimental and the avant-garde. I say surprisingly, because at first sight it may seem like a contradiction that the poets in these anthologies have themselves been among

the most critical of the concept of woman. As the 70s found women's poetry anthologies' *raison d'être* disappearing in the wake of their success, it was no longer the underrepresentation of women that mattered but their distinctiveness. Or to put the point slightly differently, it was no longer *how many* women's bodies that mattered to the writing of poetry, but the distinctive character of those bodies. By the 80s, however, the anti-essentialism of gender theory had made that reliance on the body look obsolete, if not positively regressive. And yet, that anti-essentialism, I will be arguing, has proven to be entirely compatible with the most recent wave of interest in women's writing – an interest that makes the distinctiveness of women's bodies as essential as it ever was. Indeed, I will argue that the critique of representation at the center of this women's avant-garde is in fact a technology for producing the primacy of the body and for keeping the category of women's poetry alive. So the anthologies that are no longer required by the underrepresentation of women, are now required, not exactly to represent women's bodies, but to uphold the commitment to the body made inevitable by the refusal of representation itself. At its most extreme, the new women's poetry understands its own avant-gardism as a direct extension and production of women's bodies.

During the 1960s and 70s in the U.S. anthologies of women's poetry seemed to be made necessary, as I have already begun to note, by the underrepresentation of women poets in all of the basic arenas of poetic production: among the slim volumes (and for that matter, anthologies) published by large and small presses; in literary magazines and on the editorial boards of

those magazines; on the faculties of creative writing programs; in public readings; in the distribution of arts grants, fellowships, and prizes and among the judges and committees who awarded them. Large market anthologies like the *Penguin Book of Women Poets*, issued in 1978, and a flurry of earlier volumes like *No More Masks! An Anthology of Poems by Women*, *Rising Tides: 20th-Century American Women Poets*, and *Psyche: The Feminine Poetic Consciousness, an Anthology of Modern American Women Poets*, were aimed, as the Penguin editors, for example, put it in their introduction, at "redressing the balance" and "correct[ing] a long neglect" of women's contributions to poetry.⁵ If the problem, in other words, was a literary and academic world that ignored women's poetry because it was written by women, the remedy was to insist that it be read because it was written by women.

And this imperative went beyond the strict egalitarian motive, especially as the corrective effort met with more and more success. The editors of these anthologies were engaged as much in a project of appreciation as of recognition, arguing that the point of publishing women's work as women's work was not just to "redress the balance" in terms of numbers but also to find value in the representation of identities and experiences specific to women's poetic voices.

According to the editors of the 1973 anthology *Rising Tides*, this meant first of all,

[a]cknowledg[ing] that one is a woman and...discovering what that may mean. These poems show that discovery taking place. ...They are poems which speak with a woman's voice, through a woman's perceptions, about a woman's experiences; they reflect what may be called a feminine consciousness.⁶

Published the same year as *Rising Tides*, the anthology *Psyche: The Feminine Poetic Consciousness* takes that "feminine consciousness" as its subtitle and organizing subject. Distinct from the poetry presumably identified with "masculine consciousness," poetry written by women, the editors suggest, cannot help but reflect the seemingly incompatible imperatives that divide women's psyches: "Society," they insist,

allows a man's vocation to assume chief priority in his life. He may identify himself as poet first, while his social roles of husband or father assume a secondary psychological importance. But for a woman to adopt this attitude seems to imply a certain selfishness, a shirking of obligations, or a distortion of femininity. Too often a self-destructive frustration and guilt results from trying to do justice to all the conventional functions expected of women and still honor the creative necessity.⁷

These are, of course, familiar arguments from the women's movement at that time, which concerned itself with (among other issues) precisely those conflicts women faced in assuming careers of any kind. But there's a further implication here that is meant to bear specifically on poetry: namely that "social roles" or "conventional functions" are fundamentally distinct from what the *Psyche* editors call the "creative necessity" -- or rather, not just distinct from, but actively opposed to, one another. For the "feminine consciousness" of women's poetry is generated, in other words, out of a deep incompatibility (which men are said to escape) between those "conventional" "social roles" and the so-called "creative necessity." The conflict that concerns the editors of women's poetry anthologies in the 70s, is thus between something like a socially constructed femininity imposed on women and an essential or necessary femininity that seeks to express itself behind and despite those facades. The anthologies that resulted

from that interest were above all efforts to make visible those essential and, as some of them put it, *necessary* creative expressions.

Hence the title of Florence Howe and Ellen Bass's 1973 anthology, *No More Masks!*, borrowed from a line in Muriel Rukeyser's 1968 poem, "The Poem as Mask." Like the other two anthologies I've been discussing, theirs is interested in delivering poems in which women expose, question and resist the social performances and facades -- the masks -- that otherwise constrain their self-expression. If the pressures of a male-oriented world stifle women's expression -- "it was myself, split open, unable to speak, in exile from myself" writes Rukeyser in "The Poem as Mask," which also serves as the epigraph to Bass and Howe's anthology -- then women must say "no" to those masks (and the exile they impose) and sing directly from the self.⁸

The imperatives that these anthologies from the 70s held in common -- both to give equal voice to men and women, and at the same time to identify and celebrate what made women's voices different -- demanded new scrutiny, however, in the decade that followed. As I have already begun to suggest, on the one hand, by the mid-80s efforts to "redress the imbalance" had apparently succeeded -- women seemed to make up more or less half of the poets published, half the editorial staff of literary magazines, half the faculties of creative writing programs, and so forth. In short, poetry by women was no longer the poetry of the underrepresented. On the other hand, the project of celebrating the distinctively "feminine consciousness" of women's poetry began to look problematic not so much because it no longer seemed necessary, but because it

seemed never to have had merit the first place. The relatively accessible, self-expressive modes of lyric represented in the work of poets like Rukeyser, Marge Piercy, Adrienne Rich, Sharon Olds, Alice Walker, Sandra McPherson, Cherríe Moraga, Joy Harjo, and Carolyn Forché (to name a few) looked theoretically and formally conservative, or simply naïve, to poets and critics working from poststructuralist and postfeminist perspectives. For American avant-garde poets writing under the dispensations of the Language school, the traditional lyric "speaker" or "voice" – the one that Rukeyser's poem is designed to liberate from exile and suppression -- was now thought to be sustained by a whole series of familiar but deeply questionable hierarchies. Lyric poetry was thought to privilege the authority of the poet over that of the reader, the meaning of signs over their materiality, the autonomy of the work of art over its instability and indeterminacy, transparency and accessibility over opacity and difficulty, nature over artifice.

And as I have already begun to sketch, for a number of women poets writing at the same time as or just in the wake of early feminist anthologies like *No More Masks!* (poets like Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, Kathleen Fraser, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Harryette Mullen, and Rosmarie Waldrop), the traditional lyric forms chosen by Rukeyser, Rich, Piercy, Olds, *et al.* also counted as an unwitting acquiescence to centuries of male dominance in the art of poetry. DuPlessis, for example, argues in "Otherhow," that gender hierarchy is so inextricably "embedded in the history of poetry," that no feminist subject matter can alter the fact that poetry's forms are fundamentally "male-gendered": "Narrative 'realist'

poets, including feminists," by which DuPlessis means poets generally associated with the literary mainstream in the U.S. -- "cannot," she says, "simply discount this past; they must consciously address the formal and social imbeddings of gender. Nothing changes by changing the content only" (141). Thus according to DuPlessis, it's not sufficient to write lyric poems in which a woman's experiences are the main subject matter of the song; for the very forms of the lyric – including even basic grammatical forms used to represent the presence of a speaker – are themselves indices of a history of male domination. For DuPlessis, this means substituting plural for singular verb tenses, for example, as in her imperative to "examine the instruments whereby writing 'are' fabricated," or rejecting the speaking "I," as she does in a sentence that is simultaneously about the linguistic technology of the first-person singular pronoun and governed by an action that requires a subject: "Want the poetry of shifters, a pronominal poetry, where discourses shift, tones shift, nothing is exclusive or uniform, the 'whole' is susceptible to stretchings and displacements, the text marks itself, and there is no decorum" (144). Here we are faced, consequently, with at least two simultaneous possibilities: the ungrammatical expression of the first-person desire for "the poetry of shifters," etc., or the perfectly grammatical expression of an imperative addressed to a second person -- "[you there should or must] want the poetry of shifters," etc.

Kathleen Fraser, in "The Tradition of Marginality and the Emergence of *HOW(ever)*," an essay written the same year as DuPlessis' (delivered, in fact, as part of the same St. Marks Poetry Project lecture series, curated by language

poet Charles Bernstein), describes her own early formation as a resistance to the same "narrative realist poetry" that DuPlessis criticizes for participating in the long history of male dominance. Citing avant-garde poets like Guest and Bernadette Mayer, Fraser describes how a much smaller group of experimentalists became her primary influence and her alternative to the poetry DuPlessis identifies with complicit "decorum." And just as for DuPlessis, what characterizes such work for Fraser is its willingness to resist, abandon and rupture everything that might count as a recognizable linguistic or poetic form.⁹ Fraser's own feminist awakening may have occurred, as she says, "through some combination of Simone de Beauvoir's call to consciousness in *The Second Sex*, Adrienne Rich's grave and alarming poem "The Roofwalker," and Barbara Guest's tenacious insistence on the primacy of reinventing language structures in order to catch one's own at-oddsness with the presumed superiority of the central mainstream vision." But it's Guest, not Rich, who exerts the strongest hold over Fraser and characterizes "the tradition of marginality" to which her essay title refers (Fraser 31).

What Fraser and DuPlessis depict as comparatively rare efforts to resist poetic decorum is precisely the basis of anthologies like Sloan's and Rankine and Spahr's. If the mainstream arenas of poetic production have succeeded in achieving more or less equal representations of men and women, these anthologies focus on the avant-garde as the vital poetic territory in which women still count (or have recently counted) as marginalized. Sloan's introduction to *Moving Borders* offers a compelling demonstration of the point with a survey of

what she identifies as the "precursor...anthologies of innovative writing." Even when the gender representation in many mainstream poetry anthologies was reasonably equitable, the ratio of men to women in avant-garde anthologies from the 60s and early 70s was extreme by any standard of comparison: 13 to 1 in Donald Hall's *The New American Poetry*, for example, and 26 to 1 in Ron Padgett and David Shapiro's *The New York Poets*. But the point emerges for Sloan even more sharply in the momentum-building anthologies of poetry from the language movement published in the 70s and 80s. Despite the movement's emergence following the second wave of feminism in the 60s and 70s, despite its egalitarian rhetoric, and despite its powerful feminist voices, influential anthologies like Ron Silliman's *In the American Tree* and Douglas Messerli's "*Language*" *Poetries* nevertheless managed to depict an avant-garde in which men apparently outnumbered women 2 to 1.

Not surprisingly, the imperative for these recent women's poetry anthologies has been framed almost entirely through and against the political concerns that dominated the previous generation of anthologies. When Sloan, for example, introduces *Moving Borders*, she implies that former justifications for such an anthology (giving voice to women in a male-dominated art) have since been displaced, her own anthology serving primarily as "evidence of the actions women have taken to shift" the boundary that has historically "located [them] at the periphery" of poetic innovation.¹⁰ To put this another way, the very need that Sloan's anthology is supposed to serve – essentially the same corrective one

that the anthologies of the early 70s served – has, as she herself implies, already begun to vanish at the time of publication.

Sloan is also suggesting from the outset that her anthology -- unlike those of the past, or for that matter, unlike the writing of the women included in it -- does not itself aim to shift the boundary and move women out of the periphery, but rather to document “evidence” of past success in doing so. Moreover, even that “evidence,” she speculates, may serve no urgent political needs in the present: “perhaps a book such as this,” she writes, “marks the occasion when...such a book is no longer necessary” (3). But as I have already noted, the purpose of Sloan’s anthology is not simply to showcase women’s writing; it is to showcase their so-called “innovative writing”: avant-garde, experimental work that has more or less by definition occurred “at the periphery,” outside the center of mainstream literary focus. This raises a slightly different question about Sloan’s suggestion of her own editorial obsolescence, and about innovative writing more generally: in what way could the project of making innovative writing visible ever become unnecessary? That is, if our ability to recognize writing as innovative already puts that writing at the outer margin of any established field of production, then won’t there always be a margin and, by Sloan’s own logic, a need for anthologies of the work that resides there?

Sloan’s announcement that “such a book” may “no longer [be] necessary” refers in part the fact that by the time of her anthology’s publication, much of the work included in it had indeed moved from the periphery to the center of contemporary poetic production and its critical discourse in the US. Certainly the

characteristic disjunctive gestures favored by poets included in her anthology -- DuPlessis, Fraser, Hejinian, Howe, Myung Mi Kim, Mullen, and Rosmarie Waldrop (to mention a few), are now as ubiquitous as the mainstream "workshop" lyrics to which these writers have often explicitly declared their opposition. The pages of even the most traditional and most widely distributed literary magazines -- *Poetry*, say, or *The Paris Review* -- now include poems with the same shattered syntax and polyvalent voices that during the 70s and 80s would more likely have landed them in the editors' slush piles. In other words, the very linguistic and formal "innovations" that during those decades required a vast alternative landscape of manifestos, small presses and independent magazines to establish that work's value and make it available to the public now count as markers of the poetic mainstream. As Sloan rightly implies, if these women poets have moved from the margin to the center of American poetry, so has the poetry that until recently constituted its avant garde.

Thus for Sloan in 1998, and even more so for Rankine and Spahr in 2002, the movement of avant-garde women writers from margin to mainstream serves not so much to confirm the end of their marginality but to point, recalling the words of Fraser, to something like a "tradition of marginality." Accordingly, and precisely because there's no shortage and no question of their visibility -- "it is the increase in *number* of innovative women writers in the past few decades that is striking," writes Sloan in her introduction -- the numerical imperative to anthologize innovative women poets gets replaced with one that is simultaneously historical and taxonomical. In other words, with the appearance

of such numbers comes the need to acknowledge their presence and identify just what it is that brings them together in their numerousness (5). And repeatedly, overwhelmingly, really, it is “innovation” as such that gets invoked. Neither is this surprising, since the effort to yoke innovation with a certain necessity is more or less ubiquitous in the writing of the “innovative” women poets themselves.

As we have already seen, DuPlessis argues for poetic intervention on grounds that language is so “teeming with...gender ideas” that the only way to avoid simply accepting and perpetuating them is to disrupt forms in every manner possible (143). Because “[e]ach word,” she says, “tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life,” the alternatives for the user – whether poet or ordinary speaker – are thus either to “reaffirm the narrative(s) the word is telling” or “break into [the words] by distorting or deforming [them]” (144). Fraser pins this same impulse to distort to the very socialization that is the object of resistance:

Breaking rules, breaking boundaries, crossing over, going where you’ve been told not to go has increasingly figured in the writing of the contemporary woman poet as a natural consequence of the restraints placed upon her as a child being socialized to the female role her class and culture prefer. (156)

Fraser makes a similar claim a few paragraphs earlier when she writes that “Resistance is an ongoing condition-of-being for most women poets” (154). At these two moments, Fraser seems to be arguing that certain social contingencies determine one’s situation in ways one cannot choose, and by “condition-of-being” she surely must mean something like those contingencies. But what is striking here – and I’ll have much more to say about this in a moment – is her

observation that these various modes of resistance (“breaking rules, etc.) have “figured...as a natural consequence” of one’s social situation and its “restraints.”

Given the postfeminist context in which Fraser writes these words, a careful reading more or less requires us to grant as much mitigating force as possible to her choice of the verb “figured” and its attribution not to herself but to the more general field of contemporary women’s poetry. Otherwise we find ourselves perilously close to an essentialized conception of the woman poet – one that not only Fraser and DuPlessis, but most of the other poets in the innovative women’s poetry anthologies would claim to refuse. As I’ll go on to show in a moment, the logic of essentialism still abides despite all claims to the contrary. Nevertheless, by these poets’ own accounts at least, innovative poetry emphasizes broken rules and formal artifice in part in order to refuse what the feminist poetry of 70s supposedly valued, however naively -- namely, as DuPlessis puts it, an “aesthetic of sincerity, authenticity, uncovering unmediated truth” (145). And just as DuPlessis questions the degree to which anything like sincerity or authenticity are possible within received poetic forms and linguistic structures, Fraser describes her own rapid disenchantment with the same aesthetic of sincerity and authenticity during her early career : “The women’s movement came on strong,” she writes, “and poetry was at the center of it. Finally, one imagined, there would be a warm room where the multiple styles of women’s minds and bodies and poetic languages could flower” (31). But according to Fraser this hopeful moment in the mid- to late 60s turned rapidly into a “necessary but painful phase of feminism” in which, she says, “something else

happened. There were political needs -- raw, bottled-up feelings wanting out -- and a call for the immediately accessible language of personal experience as a binding voice of women's strength" (31-32). For Fraser and the other experimental poets she came to admire, the problem with the "accessible language of personal experience" that 70s feminism promoted was that it tended (unwittingly) simply to reproduce the highly problematic and limited identities for women available within the gendered status quo. And, as we have already noted, this accessible lyric mode was thought to preclude the formal innovation that the experimental poets saw as integral to their politics of resistance.

To return to the 70s anthologies that I mentioned near the beginning of this talk: If the editors of collections like *Rising Tides* and *No More Masks!* sought to strip away facades and masks, anthologies like Sloan's and Rankine and Spahr's, along with the poets whose work they promote, have explicitly celebrated masks as ways of pointing to the performative condition of any gendered situation. DuPlessis, for example, declares in "Otherhow" (included, as it happens, in Sloan's anthology):

As a woman writing, I had to seize some power over story as a social institution. Seize the mask. Not *carpe diem*, the dominant injunction to me as delightful object in one poetic romance, but *carpe personam*, the female injunction to myself as critical subject in a politics of narrative. Seize the mask, the fictive, examine the instruments whereby writing "are" fabricated. (146)

Innovation ("fabrication" for DuPlessis) thus becomes a necessity for women poets precisely because they imagine there is no authentic identity to express; there is only the possibility of rupture, artifice and distortion. According to

Rankine and Spahr in the introduction to their anthology, innovative poetry “moves away from too easily separated and too easily declarative identities” (2-3). Sloan’s anthology makes a nearly identical claim, insisting that the writers collected in it “have not generally produced their works in support of defining identities.” On the one hand, then, both the innovative women’s writing itself, and the recent explosion of critical interest in it, clearly understand themselves as participating in a larger critique of identity. But it’s just as clear, on the other hand, that it’s not a critique of identity as such. For this general postmodern and postfeminist commitment to the performative is nothing if not a commitment to identity – only the identity to which it is committed is imagined to be constructed rather than natural or essential.

But if formal innovation is conceived simply as a means of exposing and attacking received ideas and types, what exactly are the terms of its *necessity*? A vivid demonstration of the general assumptions that underlie this commitment to the so-called innovative necessity – and a vivid demonstration of the degree to which they have taken hold -- comes from Linda Kinnahan's *Lyric Interventions: Feminism, Experimental Poetry, and Contemporary Discourse*. In a chapter on Fraser, Kinnahan argues that during the 60s and 70s, Fraser and the painter Joan Mitchell both undertook formal innovations specifically designed to “contest[] the masculinization of poetic and artistic theory” that had taken hold among New York School and Black Mountain artists and poets.¹¹

According to Kinnahan, Joan Mitchell chose to resist the “masculinized field of the canvas erupting in [Jackson] Pollock's wake” through a “subtle

emphasis on the central area" (62) of the canvas.¹² Because the "allover" form of Pollock's paintings was so consistently identified with the physical activity of the man who made them, Kinnahan suggests, those paintings participated a larger movement that served to "discourage women" by emphasizing masculine strength. Kinnahan cites Mitchell herself recalling "times when I really got discouraged and thought why am I doing this, because I'm a woman and women can't paint" (62). Kinnahan makes clear that Mitchell is referring in part to the sexism that drove gallery quotas at the time, but the implication of her juxtaposition of statements about Pollack's "volcanic" "talent" with statements by Mitchell is not just that if women couldn't paint like Pollack they couldn't satisfy a market that wanted work like his, but that women couldn't paint like Pollack because they didn't have the (implicitly masculine) physical strength. Within Kinnahan's logic, then, Mitchell's decision to place a "subtle emphasis on the central area" looks like more than an effort to produce a form that would be the conceptual opposite of Pollack's "allover-ness"; it looks like an effort to make paintings that required the *literal* opposite of Pollock's masculine strength -- i.e., that required the opposite of Pollock's sex to produce them.

One way to get a sense of what is at stake here is to think not so much about what a distinctively female art would look like, but about what a distinctively male art would look like. In 1961, Andy Warhol made his first oxidation painting or "piss painting," by urinating on canvas prepared with copper oxide. On the basis of both biographical evidence and the form of the painting itself, critics have treated that work as a direct homage to Jackson Pollack. There are a number of

anecdotes, of course, about Pollack himself as an enthusiastic pisser, including the famous story of his urinating in Peggy Guggenheim's fireplace. The interest of such anecdotes have to do as much with the availability of associations between Pollack's pissing and his "drip" and "splash" painting technique as with their intrinsic shock value. Indeed, Warhol's own decision to use his body to produce the paint and control its application on the canvas is essentially a dramatically literalized enactment of the relation people were already arguing for between Pollack's bodily gestures and the form of his paintings. If "splatter" is the distinctive formal characteristic of such masculine painting, the feminine equivalent in the history of 20th-century art is the "stain." In a sophisticated critique of the logic of bodily production that produces Warhol's oxidation paintings out of Pollack's allover paintings, Lisa Salzman argues in "Reconsidering the Stain: On Gender and the Body in Helen Frankenthaler's painting," for a similar genealogy of women's painting. The work of Frankenthaler, along with other women painters of the New York School, was already understood, Salzman argues, as a figurative representation of women's bodies by virtue of the paint's resemblance to menstrual stains.

To return, then, to Kinnahan's account, where the relationship between Mitchell's formal innovation -- her "emphasis on the central area" -- and her sex begins to look not so much arbitrary, but simultaneously contingent and necessary, as if what came out of a body like Pollack's had to cover the entire canvas and what came out of a body like Mitchell's had to "emphasi[ze] the central area." Kinnahan herself obviously does not intend such a determinate

correlation between the body of the artist and the form of the art, but as she goes on to establish an analogy between Mitchell's visual projects and Fraser's poetic ones, she cannot help but reinforce the idea: "For both Mitchell and Fraser, the encounter with the field of the page/canvas differentiates itself from the allover (Pollack) or the projective ([Charles] Olson) through an attention to the white space, the margins, the interweaving of foreground and background, the lyric refigured through the unreferenced, the incidental, the tangential" (63). Just as Olson's "Proprioception" had words filling pages at cross-angles like Pollack's splatters across the canvas, Fraser's poems, described as appearing on "oversized pages that allow each poem...a generous margin, an enclosure of white space that often gives the poem the impression of floating," immediately recall Mitchell's "subtle emphasis on the central area" (and we might say, Frankenthaler's "stain" (63).

What has happened here? We have gone from thinking of the form of a given poem or painting as a choice made by the artist in order to criticize certain powerful ideas that appeared to be taking hold to thinking of form as something the artist's own body caused her to make. For as long as Mitchell is just choosing to make paintings with a "subtle emphasis on the central area" in order to make something that looks different from Pollack's alloverness, we can easily imagine that she might have found any number of other ways to refuse alloverness, or any number of other aspects of Pollack's painting to engage, or for that matter, any number of other painters or paintings to use as a point of resistance. And of course, on this theory, there's really nothing to require

resistance to anything in the first place. One can always choose to do something else. But as soon as Pollack's alloverness becomes a function of his sex -- moreover, as soon as Olson's textual displays are understood as a version of Pollack's alloverness and equally linked to what both their bodies share -- their male sex -- Mitchell's and Fraser's formal choices in turn become literally determined by their female bodies. In these examples, in other words -- indeed in the wider field of women's poetry as it is currently being conceived -- the so-called "innovative necessity" is nothing if not a profoundly essentialist turn in feminism, and for that matter, in the concept of the lyric.

So, while one may have been tempted to ask why, when anthologies of innovative women writers seemed "no longer necessary" in 1998, we would need more anthologies of the same writers in 2002, the question no longer applies, it would seem, because the grounds of necessity have shifted. Moreover, these recent anthologies have shifted in a more or less identical direction to the one they took in the 70s, despite the consistent effort to distinguish their theoretical underpinnings from the supposedly more naïve ones of the 70s. That is, in both cases, the anthologies entered the literary scene as a response to a perceived injustice, and in both cases the injustice had to do with the supposed underrepresentation of women's writing. In the first instance, women were underrepresented because women's writing was not adequately valued and encouraged, in the second case they were underrepresented because "innovative" writing by women was not adequately valued and encouraged. And in both cases, as these efforts to correct an imbalance met

with success, the field of women's poetry – and the anthology offers a particularly vivid window onto that field -- has shifted focus from producing conditions of fairness for women's writing to producing accounts of what makes women's writing different from men's. As long as the women's poetry anthology is a kind of *salle des refuses*, there needn't be anything distinctively gendered about the poems themselves; the idea is that they were refused because they were written by women or by innovative women. Now these poets are no longer in the anthologies by virtue of being women, but the argument has been inverted – they're in the anthologies because there's something distinctively gendered about their poems. And they are distinctively gendered, it would appear, *because they have been produced by women's bodies*. It's as if the woman poet's formal innovation were something akin to a mollusk's secretion of its shell. The body in this context begins to look like a superior technology for achieving the standard of honesty that Hejiniian demands in "Who is Speaking?" What could be less hypocritical than one's sweat or one's piss?

The literary feminism that began in the 80s as an attack on underrepresentation thus turned into an attack on representation, and it did so by way of an avant garde's insistence on formal innovation.¹³ If the innovative poetry of the language movement has insisted on the materiality of the text (and its material effects on the reader) as an alternative to the meaning of the text (and the intentions of its author), the "innovative women's writing" that has emerged so powerfully out of that context has insisted on an even more literal connection between the text and the body. Now the text is not a function just of

the reader's bodily experience of it (how we come to care about the text's materiality in the first place); it is a function of the poet's bodily production of it. I don't mean to suggest, however, that there was any point in this brief history of the women's poetry anthology that I have been outlining in which women's status as women was thought to be utterly irrelevant to their poetry; the point was always to make sure that women were fairly represented by including them as women. My point is rather that the success of that effort of inclusion – the elimination of the unfairness – almost immediately transformed the commitment to equality between women and men into the respect for distinctive differences between them. And the radicalization of that transformation by the theoretical avant-garde has simply redescribed the presence of a distinctive female experience or point of view as that of a distinctive female body. Indeed, the demand for formal innovation was the technology of this redescription, since it required that the femininity of the poem be understood not as a function of its content but as a function of its form. Thus even though the recent commitment to women as formal innovators has been accompanied by a critique of essentialism and a celebration of the performative, its actual agenda is utterly and literally essential.

¹ T.E. Hulme, *Further Speculations*, edited by Sam Hynes (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), p. 69.

² Lyn Hejinian, prefatory note to "Who Is Speaking?" in *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 32-33.

³ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 149-150.

⁴ Juliana Spahr and Claudia Rankine, *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), pp. 3, 13.

⁵Carol Cosman, Joan Keefe and Kathleen Weaver, editors, *The Penguin Book of Women Poets* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), pp. 30, 32. It's worth remarking that there was (and still is) no Norton equivalent to *The Penguin Book of Women Poets*. The first edition of the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, edited by Susan Gilbert and Susan Gubar, was issued much later, in 1985.

⁶Laura Chester and Sharon Barba, eds., *Rising Tides: 20th Century American Women Poets* (New York: Pocket Books, 1973), p. xxvi.

⁷Barbara Segnitz and Carol Rainey, eds., *Psyche: The Feminine Poetic Consciousness, an Anthology of Modern American Women Poets* (New York: The Dial Press, 1973), p. 18.

⁸It's worth noting that another large-market anthology from the following year, *The World Split Open: Four Centuries of Women Poets in England and America, 1552-1950*, edited by Louise Bernikow (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), also takes its title from Muriel Rukeyser. {explain}

⁹Essay reprinted in Kathleen Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity* (Tuscaloosa, AL and London: The University of Alabama Press, 2000), pp. 25-38.

¹⁰Mary Margaret Sloan, ed., *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Women* (Jersey City, NJ: Talisman House, 1998), p. 3.

¹¹Linda Kinnahan, *Lyric Interventions: Feminism, Experimental Poetry, and Contemporary Discourse* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2004), p. xxi.

¹²Kinnahan gets the phrase "subtle emphasis in the central area" from Judith E. Bernstein, *Joan Mitchell* (New York: Hudson Hills 1988), p. 38.

¹³I give a fuller account of American avant-garde poetry (specifically the Language movement) as a critique of representation in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).