

## Feminism and Women's Poetry from 1970 to 2000

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In the 1940s and 1950s, the literary world, much like the culture at large, was still heavily male-dominated, awash in mostly unexamined sexist attitudes and practices, which presented a host of challenges to women poets. Nevertheless, they persisted. As we have seen, major writers like Elizabeth Bishop, Gwendolyn Brooks, Adrienne Rich, Barbara Guest, Denise Levertov, and Sylvia Plath somehow managed to emerge in the early postwar period, despite the deep-seated sexism and closed “old boys” network of the poetry establishment. Many of these poets, however, like Bishop, shied away from the idea that their work be viewed as in any way “feminine”; they addressed issues of gender and sexual relationships indirectly, if at all, especially in the earlier part of their careers. In some cases, they resisted the idea of being labelled or anthologized as a “woman poet,” which they saw as dangerously reductive or marginalizing for women. Despite the relatively progressive climate of the new underground poetry movements of the 1950s, women were pushed to the margins there as well; as we saw in Chapter 1, even the anthology that put these avant-garde groups on the map, Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry*, found room for only four women poets among its forty-four contributors, often including a single token woman for each group.

But then came the social upheavals of the 1960s, which had a dramatic and lasting impact on the direction of poetry by women writers and on their role within the literary world. A series of seismic shifts occurred during this period, which shook the foundations of traditional gender roles and attitudes – from the publication of Betty Friedan’s groundbreaking 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique* to the introduction of the birth control pill in 1960, which enabled women to have greater autonomy and reproductive freedom, to the mid-1960s explosion of the women’s liberation movement, which was energized by the civil rights and the antiwar movement.

Often credited with kick-starting feminism’s second wave, Friedan’s book analyzed the secret “dissatisfaction” and “yearning” felt by millions of American women (especially white, married, heterosexual, middle-class women) in the postwar period, famously identifying the pervasive malaise as

“the problem that has no name.” Her trenchant diagnosis doubled as a powerful call to action: “We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: ‘I want something more than my husband and my children and my home’” (Schneir 67).

As second-wave feminism took off in the 1960s, female poets began to respond to that voice within in a variety of ways, writing even more directly about their lives as women, as we have seen in earlier discussions of Plath and poets of the Black Arts Movement. Feminism's success in the late 1960s and 1970s turned this trickle into a flood, unleashing a broad surge of boundary-breaking poetry written by women who began to write openly about their lives and to use their work to directly critique sexism and patriarchy. One of the mantras of the feminist movement – “the personal is political” – became a watchword for the new poetry, which insisted that the intimate and private facets of women's lives are inextricable from public affairs, history, and politics.<sup>1</sup>

The poet Muriel Rukeyser pinpointed the revolutionary stakes of such an act in a 1968 poem: “What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? / The world would split open” (Florence Howe 103). A new influx of women poets began to do just that, as they started to tell “the truth” about many of aspects of female experience that had long been considered taboo – such as the particularities of the female body, women's roles as wives and mothers, sexual violence, female anger, and lesbian identity. Poems began to bear titles like “The Mother” (Gwendolyn Brooks), “Menstruation at Forty” and “The Abortion” (Anne Sexton), “About Marriage” (Denise Levertov), “Mothers, Daughters” (Shirley Kaufman), “Women” (Louise Bogan, May Swenson, Adrienne Rich), “The Woman Thing” (Audre Lorde), “I Have Three Daughters” (Ruth Stone), “Twenty Year Marriage” (Ai), “Taking Off My Clothes” (Carolyn Forché), “homage to my hips” and “poem to my uterus” (Lucille Clifton), “Poem Wondering If I'm Pregnant” (Kathleen Fraser), “Pregnancy” (Sandra McPherson), “I Am A Black Woman” (Mari Evans), and “Woman Poem” (Nikki Giovanni).

This bracing, empowering new mode of poetry struck a chord in an era of dawning feminist consciousness. Suddenly, it seemed poetry could play an important role in the fight for women's rights, equality, and autonomy. The black poet Audre Lorde may have articulated this sentiment best when she argued that “For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence” (Gates and McKay 2210). Women's poetry accordingly found a new and wider readership, as feminist presses, literary journals, and popular

<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of feminism and poetry of the period, see Ostriker, Sewell, Keller and Miller, and Kinnahan (*A History*).

anthologies, such as the landmark collection *No More Masks!: An Anthology of Poems by Women* (1973), began to appear (Florence Howe). The idea of “women’s poetry” as a distinct category also gelled, increasingly serving as the object of feminist literary criticism.

This new body of poetry sparked lively debates about a range of issues: How should poetry best address female experience and gender roles? How should women writers conceive of their own relationship to a male-dominated canon, to tradition, to literary community? Should gender and femininity be conceived of as a coherent, essential identity, determined by biology, or as fluid, performative, and socially constructed? Poets and scholars also began to challenge the blind spots of mainstream feminist thought, activism, and literature, which all too often seemed to rely on white, heterosexual, middle-class female experience as a norm and standard. Influential women of color, like Audre Lorde, Lucille Clifton, Ai, Joy Harjo, Leslie Marmon Silko, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Marilyn Chin, began to write about their own experiences as women of color who understand intimately how conflicting categories of identity and systems of oppression, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, interact with and reinforce one another.

To speak broadly about the form and style of the feminist-inspired poetry of the period, it often features many of the qualities central to the predominant mode of the 1970s that I discussed in Chapter 8: Fueled by the new freedoms unleashed by confessional poetry, the dominant mode features first-person lyric poems that place a premium on developing a “natural,” “authentic” voice, draw upon personal experience, and tell linear anecdotes organized around moments of epiphany or revelation. However, unlike some of the mainstream poems discussed in Chapter 8, feminist poetry of the 1970s also incorporates direct political commentary and outrage, especially on the subject of identity politics and patriarchal oppression. At the same time, an opposing model emerged on the margins, practiced by experimental women poets (some affiliated with Language poetry and its descendants). As we will see later in this chapter, the latter were deeply skeptical of the conventions and notions of identity in the accepted model of women’s poetry and turned instead to avant-garde strategies in order to critique oppressive gender codes and explore feminist concerns in more oblique but no less potent ways.

No other poet played as large a role in the evolution of women’s poetry in this period as Adrienne Rich, by all accounts a pivotal figure in the history of feminism. After starting off her career as a typical, traditional young woman and poet of the 1950s, Rich underwent a dramatic transformation in the 1960s.

She became one of the most influential and widely read writers associated with the feminist movement and an outspoken, eloquent advocate and activist for women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) rights and equality. In addition to being a poet, Rich is an indispensable feminist thinker and critic – the author of pioneering works on such topics as motherhood (*Of Woman Born*), “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience” (1980), and the radically feminist, subversive core of Emily Dickinson’s work.<sup>2</sup>

Rich was born, as she puts it, “white and middle-class into a house full of books” in Maryland in 1929, and raised by “a father who encouraged me to read and write” but who was also domineering and demanding (*Adrienne Rich’s Poetry* 93). She attended Radcliffe College where she immersed herself in an almost exclusively white male literary tradition, gravitating toward poets like Robert Frost, Dylan Thomas, John Donne, W. H. Auden, Wallace Stevens, and W. B. Yeats, who shaped the style of her early work. In 1951, Auden chose her first book, *A Change of World*, for the Yale Series of Younger Poets, which effectively launched her career before she had graduated from college. It is not surprising that the reigning male powers-that-be immediately singled her out for praise since her early poems so capably fit all the requirements of the predominant New Critical, formalist style that I discussed in Chapter 1. In these poems, Rich’s writing is impersonal, traditional in form, masterful in craft, marked by decorum, restraint, passivity, and modesty, and concerned with achieving what she calls the “perfection of order”; “control, technical mastery, and intellectual clarity were the real goals,” she later recalled (*Adrienne Rich’s Poetry* 89). Even still, the praise she received was colored by sexism; for example, in his famously patronizing introduction, Auden referred to her poems as “modestly dressed” and said they “speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs” (qtd Wasley 148).

Although Rich’s early work does not skirt questions of gender entirely, it does address them in a detached and resigned manner. Instead of delving into her personal experiences, the poems portray third person characters and use elegant form and stately stanzas to muffle any anger. “In those years,” she notes, “formalism was part of the strategy – like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn’t pick up bare-handed” (*Adrienne Rich’s Poetry* 94–95). In “An Unsaid Word,” Rich writes of a woman who declines to disturb “her man” during the time when “his mind forages alone,” and instead

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of Rich’s life and work, see essays in Rich (*Adrienne Rich’s Poetry*), Werner, Kalstone (129–169), Altieri (*Self* 165–190), and the recent biography by Holladay.

“keeps her peace and leaves him free,” suggesting that women must learn to remain silent and wait passively while the men in their lives enjoy complete autonomy and independence (*Fact 5*). In “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” Rich uses orderly, rhyming quatrains and some rather heavy-handed symbolism to set up a contrast between a fictional female creator’s imaginative art and her constricted lived experience as a wife and woman. Aunt Jennifer’s needlework may depict idealized images of fearsome tigers who “do not fear the men beneath the tree” and “pace in sleek chivalric certainty,” but she lives a life of struggle, fear, and repression (*Fact 4*). Rich makes clear the cost of marriage and domesticity: “The massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band / Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand. // When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie / Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by” (*Fact 4*). The poem provides some consolation, perhaps, in the notion that the tigers she has created “will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.” Symbols of masculinized strength in an imaginary “world of green,” these tigers may serve as a form of limited escape for Jennifer, but she, ironically and tragically, remains trapped, plagued by the unnamed problem that Friedan would soon highlight in her famous book.

Rich quickly came to feel her poems were overly artificial and detached from her own experience and emotions, and too removed from political realities, and began the slow process of transforming her work, and her life. Like Plath, and so many other women who would soon find their misery diagnosed in *The Feminine Mystique*, Rich felt deeply unhappy and unfulfilled by the roles proscribed for her; she felt especially riven by the conflict between “the subversive power of the imagination” and the traditional female roles of mother, wife, and homemaker.

In the famous manifesto-like essay “When We Dead Awaken” (1971), Rich charts her own personal transformations of this period and calls for a new feminist poetics. “The sleepwalkers are coming awake,” she announces. “It’s exhilarating to be alive in a time of awakening consciousness; it can also be confusing, disorienting, and painful” (*Adrienne Rich’s Poetry 90*). In the 1970s, this personal awakening led Rich in new directions in her life as well as in her work, as she left her husband and embraced her identity as a lesbian as well, and began to write about same-sex love and queer selfhood. Gradually, Rich started to write “directly about experiencing myself as a woman” (with a first breakthrough coming in the form of the poem “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law”). In the 1960s, as she grew more active in the civil rights and antiwar movements, her poetry changed dramatically, both in style and form as well as content. Inspired in part by the openness promoted by the more avant-garde New American Poetry, Rich rejected the tight patterns, the rhyme and meter, the restraint of her earlier works like “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” and turned to

a looser, more conversational, and more personal mode. Her poems become more fragmentary, more exploratory, and less "predetermined" in advance by any "prior plan" (*Adrienne Rich's Poetry* 89). They also became much more directly political, a controversial turn in her work, which led some readers to criticize her for subordinating subtlety and artistry to feminist outrage and strident activism.

In this phase, Rich's poems begin to celebrate the creativity and strength of trailblazing women (like Marie Curie in "Power" and the pioneering female astronomer Caroline Herschel in "Planetarium"), to explore the female body and sexuality, and to express rage at systems of oppression and sexism ("The Phenomenology of Anger"). It is worth noting that in contrast to many women poets writing in a more confessional mode, Rich's work is less intensely personal, more prophetic and oratorical, always attuned to the public dimensions of her subjects. In "When We Dead Awaken," Rich speaks to the great excitement and potential waiting in this "whole new psychic geography to be explored" by women writers, but she also acknowledges how difficult and dangerous it will be, since we must "try to find language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into, and with little in the past to support us" (*Adrienne Rich's Poetry* 91).

This is precisely the theme of one of her most famous poems, "Diving Into the Wreck," which uses the image of a woman scuba diving in the ocean as a powerful metaphor for the difficult feminist quest to dismantle the myths of the past and discover new, more egalitarian, and women-centered language and images. After "having read the book of myths," the poem's speaker embarks on an archetypal quest as she assumes the typically male role of explorer. Unlike male adventurers, like Jacques "Cousteau with his / assiduous team," supported by money and privilege, she is "here alone," bravely descending a ladder, "Rung by rung," into the murky depths of the sea. Never straying too far from her roots in symbolism and poetic tradition, Rich makes it crystal clear that the poem functions allegorically: The dark realm of the ocean stands for the ruins of the human past, with its dead myths about women and men and their relations. "I came to explore the wreck," she writes "I came to see the damage that was done / and the treasures that prevail" (*Fact* 163). The questing figure in the poem is also notably androgynous, as if one goal is to delve back into the past, to go back to a moment before culture constructed the rigid the inimical binary categories of male and female. The poem's moving conclusion calls for a communal effort to uncover the sources of the wreck of history, to undo the ancient hatreds and misunderstandings that shape our sense of gender: "we are, I am, you are / by cowardice or courage / the one who find our way / back to this scene, /

carrying a knife, a camera / a book of myths / in which / our names do not appear” (*Fact* 164). What she hopes to do is to reinscribe “our names,” to un-erase women from history, so she can return to the sunlit surface ready to start over with a new understanding of women and men and of the world itself, speaking both within and against what she calls in another poem “the oppressor’s language” (*Fact* 119).

In the 1970s, Rich’s work moved forward into the space cleared by poems like “Diving into the Wreck” as she plunged into a new life and new consciousness. Part of this project entailed writing candidly and bravely about lesbian experience and same-sex relationships and desire. Central to that effort is “Twenty One Love Poems,” a sequence of beautiful poems that deliberately echo and subvert the centuries-old tradition of the sonnet cycle – a form that traditionally features a male poet singing the praises of his female beloved – by focusing instead on lesbian love, sexuality, and daily life. With such poems, Rich helped fling open the door for the kind of unabashed poetry of LGBTQ identity and relationships that has flourished in her wake. In later works like *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991) and *Dark Fields of the Republic* (1995), Rich’s work continues to fuse the personal and the public, but grows even more ambitious in scope, addressing itself to the national and human collective, taking up the mantle of Whitman to sing the song of America itself, in all its complexity, triumphs, and failures.

More so than many other white feminists, Rich was also keenly aware of the need for feminism to broaden its scope and acknowledge racial, class, and sexual difference. When she was awarded the National Book Award in 1974 for *Diving into the Wreck*, Rich insisted that two African American writers, Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, who had also been nominated for the prize be awarded it alongside her “in the name of all the women whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world, and in the name of those who, like us, have been tolerated as token women in this culture, often at great cost and in great pain” (*Collected Poems* xlv). Led by writers of color, feminists during this period began to embrace what we now call intersectionality – challenging the “language of sisterhood” prevalent in second wave feminism, they took aim at the idea, central to much women’s poetry, that femininity is a universal category, shared by women independent of race, class, and sexuality. Instead, they highlighted their own experiences as women of color and pointed out the limitations of white liberal feminism; they celebrated difference and analyzed how multiple forms of oppression intersect and reinforce one another.

One of the most influential of these boundary-breaking women, Audre Lorde, proudly declared herself a “black feminist lesbian mother poet” (qtd Gilbert and Gubar 1069). Lorde’s work marvels at various types of difference and honors her own sometimes conflicting identities: “I am not one piece of myself. I cannot be simply a Black person, and not be a woman, too, nor can I be a woman without being a lesbian” (Ramazani Vol. 2, 615). Born in New York to West Indian immigrant parents, Lorde began publishing her poetry in the late 1960s under the influence of the Black Arts Movement and published her first major collection, *Coal*, in 1976. She soon became widely known for her nonfiction writings in books like *Sister Outsider* and *The Cancer Journals* on race, gender, lesbian identity, and her own struggles with breast cancer. In her famous 1979 essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Lorde bluntly lays out the case for intersectional feminism: insisting that “racism, sexism, and homophobia are inseparable” (*Sister* 100), she calls out “the failure of academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength” (102) and argues that without “significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians” (100), feminism is doomed to merely engage in “a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought” (*Sister* 103).

Lorde fleshes out these themes in her poetry, which tends to be open in form, spare, stripped of most punctuation, plainspoken, and forthright. In the title poem of *Coal*, Lorde draws from the resources of both confessionalism and the Black Arts Movement, creating a memorable “song of myself” centered around a celebration of blackness: “I / Is the total black, being spoken / From the earth’s inside” (*Collected* 6). But the poem also declares that black women must speak and write out of their own experience: “I am Black because I come from the earth’s inside / now take my word for jewel in the open light.” Similarly, in “A Woman Speaks,” Lorde asserts a connection between her femininity and her racial, African heritage (“my sisters / witches in Dahomey / wear me inside their coiled clothes”) (*Collected* 234). Like Plath intoning “beware, beware” at the end of “Lady Lazarus,” Lorde warns of her female power, though in this case it is also defined by its divergence from whiteness: “I have been woman / for a long time / beware my smile / I am treacherous with old magic / and the noon’s new fury / with all your wide futures / promised / I am / woman / and not white” (*Collected* 234).

As I discussed in Chapter 7, a number of black women poets, such as Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez, June Jordan, and Nikki Giovanni, were central to the Black Arts Movement, and all wrote powerful feminist poems about the



spaces where blackness and womanhood overlap (like Sanchez's lament for Billie Holiday, discussed earlier). Another major black woman poet, Lucille Clifton, came to prominence in the wake of the Black Arts Movement. Clifton became known for her stripped down, short poems with minimal punctuation and lower-case letters, often filled with wry humor, warmth, and pointed anger about racial injustice. She writes candidly about ordinary people and moments of daily life, and especially about the realities of women's lives and bodily experiences, in poems such as "poem to my uterus," "to my last period," and "the lost baby poem." Her poem "homage to my hips" is a bold feminist celebration of the black female body: "these hips are big hips," she writes, "they need space to / move around in" (Ramazani Vol. 2, 660). The poem is giddy with a sense of empowerment and self-pride that brings together an affirmation of both gender and race: "these hips / are free hips. / they don't like to be held back. / these hips have never been enslaved, / they go where they want to go" (Ramazani Vol. 2, 660).

Like Rich, Clifton also attempts to reclaim those lost within the dark spaces of the collective past – for example, in a poem about visiting a cemetery on the grounds of an old plantation in South Carolina, Clifton decries those erased from history – especially black women, whose "honored work" has so often been forgotten: "among the rocks / at walnut grove," she observes, "nobody mentioned slaves" even though "some of these honored dead / were dark / some of these dark / were slaves / some of these slaves / were women" (Ramazani Vol. 2, 661–62). Clifton's body of work seeks to rescue those "foremothers" and lend dignity and three-dimensionality to the lives and minds of black women past and present.

The 1970s and 1980s also saw the appearance of a wide range of writing by feminist poets of color that extends far beyond the work of black writers (a topic I will return to in Chapter 11). During this period, Latina, Asian American, and Native American women begin to write powerfully about their own complex identities as terrains where differences of race, ethnicity, class, and gender clash and interact. The poet and theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, for instance, develops the influential metaphor of "borderlands" to name a "liminal space that explores the intermixings of diverse social identities, including race and ethnicity, working class and middle class, and straight and queer sexuality" (Heuving and Hogue 65).

The work of Lorna Dee Cervantes, a poet of Mexican and Native American descent who considers herself "a Chicana writer, a feminist writer, a political writer," explores these borderlands in powerful ways. Her poems convey the painful experiences of in-betweenness, hybridity, dislocation, and violence she confronts as a woman, as a Latina, and as an American. Her award-winning

first book, *Emplumada*, features blunt, hard-hitting poems that chronicle violent domestic abuse (“Uncle’s First Rabbit”) and rape (“Lots: I”). In “Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, an Intelligent, Well-Read Person, Could Believe in the War Between the Races,” Cervantes wrestles with the tension, faced by so many feminist poets and poets of color, between the pull of the aesthetic and the urgency of the political. Recalling Nikki Giovanni’s poem “for saundra” (discussed in Chapter 7), Cervantes identifies herself as “a poet / who yearns to dance on rooftops, / to whisper delicate lines about joy / and the blessings of human understanding. / I try” (*Emplumada* 35). But even as she attempts to retreat to “my tower of words and / bolt the door,” the “sounds of blasting and muffled outrage” cannot be ignored. “I believe in revolution,” she writes, “because everywhere the crosses are burning, / sharp-shooting goose-steppers round every corner, / there are snipers in the schools ... I’m marked by the color of my skin. / The bullets are discrete and designed to kill slowly. / They are aiming at my children. / These are the facts” (*Emplumada* 35–38). Here, Cervantes suggests the speaker’s fraught and complicated personal identities – as a political activist, as a person of color, and as a woman and mother in a hostile and racist culture – collide, leaving her unable to retreat to mere aestheticism or her “tower of words.”

Asian American women poets take up similar themes and debates in their work. For instance, Marilyn Chin explores the never-ending tensions and play between different elements of her identity: “I am a Chinese American poet, born in Hong Kong and raised in Portland Oregon. My poetry both laments and celebrates my ‘hyphenated’ identity” (Ramazani Vol. 2, 1013).<sup>3</sup> This fascination with mixtures of identity and nationality drives her widely anthologized poem “How I Got That Name,” a playful and biting look at her own history and the complexities of immigrant and Asian American experience. Subtitled “An Essay on Assimilation,” the poem chronicles the origins of the poet’s name, “Marilyn Mei Ling Chin,” which embodies the mixture and hybridity that fascinate her. Chin assesses the damages wrought by her liminal, double status as an Asian American woman: “neither black nor white, / neither cherished nor vanquished, / just another squatter in her own bamboo grove / minding her poetry” (Ramazani Vol. 2, 1015). With its buoyant and ironic tone and loose form, its riffs on popular culture and its confessional exposé of family history, Chin’s poem echoes earlier influences like the New York School and John Berryman (who she alludes to in the poem) but adapts those resources to the specific experiences of Asian American womanhood.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of Asian American women’s poetry, see Chang (in Kinnahan, 90–105) and for more details on Chin, see Wang (*Thinking* 93–161).

One of the most prominent strands of women's poetry to emerge along with the successes of second-wave feminism is the post-confessional lyric, practiced by a long list of poets, like Louise Glück, Maxine Kumin, Linda Pastan, and Carolyn Kizer. One of the most widely read and controversial among these poets is Sharon Olds, who takes the "confessional" baton from Plath and Sexton and runs with it. Raised in California in a conservative, fiercely religious family, Olds rejected that upbringing when she began writing in the 1970s and published her first book, *Satan Says*, in 1980. The first poem in her debut initiates her taboo-breaking aesthetic, which speaks back to male authority in many forms: "I am trying to write my / way out of the closed box / redolent of cedar ... *Say shit, say death, say fuck the father*" ("Satan"). Olds's bold and sometimes shocking poems focus intensely on her own life, probing her relationships with her parents and her children, her marriage, her own bodily experience, and, most famously, the realities of sex and desire.

Defying repressive strictures and taboos, Olds's poems are filled with vivid, and quite visceral images and evocative metaphors, often circling around physicality and the body, which she treats with a Whitman-like excitement and striking lack of inhibition. In "The Moment the Two Worlds Meet," she ups the ante on a poem like Mina Loy's "Parturition," a daring early twentieth-century poem about childbirth. Olds writes frankly about the tactile sensations of labor and delivery: "that's the moment I always think of – when the slick, whole body comes out of me, / when they pull it out ... and it shines, it glistens with the thick liquid on it." She even acknowledges an erotic dimension to the experience that might surprise and discomfort some readers: the moment the "baby is / sliding between worlds, / wet, like sex, it *is sex*" (Ramazani Vol. 2, 808).

Olds often digs into her complex, ambivalent relationship with an abusive, alcoholic father, building on the example of Plath's "Daddy" but taking that extreme poem to an even further extreme. She frequently reminisces about her repulsion and attraction to the father's body, as in graphic poems like "My Father's Breasts" ("their soft surface, the polished silk of the hair") (*Dead* 43). In "Once," she depicts the moment the speaker saw her father naked while he was going to the bathroom, "so unprotected, / so seamless, and shy, like a girl on a toilet" (Ramazani Vol. 2, 810). This feminist-inflected act of dethroning and emasculating powerful male figures can also be seen in Olds's rather notorious poem called "The Pope's Penis," which portrays a figure of supreme masculine authority only to quite literally disrobe him. The poem uncomfortably exposes the physicality and sexuality that hypocritically lurk beneath the

“great man’s” veneer of power, infallibility, and celibacy: “It hangs deep in his robes, a delicate / clapper at the center of a bell. / It moves when he moves, a ghostly fish in a / halo of silver seaweed ... at night / while his eyes sleep, it stands up / in praise of God” (Ramazani Vol. 2, 807). The poem seems to highlight religious hypocrisy and the dangers of repression, but it also celebrates the body as divine in and of itself, even (or especially) in its irrepressible urges and raw sexuality.

Although her work has received (often quite gendered) disapproval for trading on exhibitionism and shock value (the esteemed critic Helen Vendler has even called it pornographic), Olds’s unabashed brand of confessional, feminist lyric poetry has resonated with many readers, who have seen her poems as moving, liberating, and empowering.

Not all women poets during this period were drawn to the straightforward, identity-based, personal lyric at the heart of the kind of feminist poetry by both white women and poets of color I have been discussing. Poets who opposed this reigning model include many associated with Language poetry (Lyn Hejinian, Rae Armantrout, Susan Howe, Carla Harryman, Joan Retallack, Leslie Scalapino, and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge), the New York School (Barbara Guest, Bernadette Mayer, Alice Notley, Anne Waldman, and Eileen Myles), and other closely affiliated tributaries of experimental writing (Diane di Prima, Kathleen Fraser, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Rosmarie Waldrop, Fanny Howe, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Harryette Mullen). Inspired by modernism and the avant-garde tradition, they reject the dominant model in favor of a poetry of formal experimentation based on a quite different understanding of what a radical feminist poetics might look like and accomplish. They remain skeptical that a poetry founded on self-expression, clarity, accessibility, and a belief that language can unproblematically capture “reality” or represent a coherent, stable self, is the most useful aesthetic for engaging in feminist critique and political subversion. As Nancy Berke notes, such poets “questioned a feminist poetry that condemned patriarchy’s oppression of women while still adhering to its forms of composition” (165–66).

Charting this path often left these women feeling doubly marginalized. On the one hand, they were alienated from the male-dominated spaces of supposedly progressive avant-garde groups, where their voices were sometimes silenced or treated with less gravity than their louder male counterparts. On the other hand, they were simultaneously divorced from the main currents of feminist poetry, where their work was deemed too obscure and elitist, not focused enough on the self and feminine experience, not clear and direct

enough in its political commitments. Susan Rosenbaum points out that the latter “bias has led many avant-garde women poets to avoid identification with the feminist movement, even as their poetry espouses ideals of gender equality” (“The ‘do it yourself’” 337).

Poets like Kathleen Fraser experienced this split rather acutely – finding “herself uncomfortable with the expectations of not only the Language community but the women’s writing community as well,” Fraser launched the important journal *HOW(ever)* in 1982 with poets Beverly Dahlen and Frances Jaffer (Keller, *Thinking* 4). The journal’s goal was to provide a venue for the wealth of experimental women’s poetry that was mostly being ignored by both the Language movement and by feminist journals and presses. *HOW(ever)* became a crucial site for the recovery of earlier female experimentalists like Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore, Mina Loy, H.D., Laura Riding, and Lorine Niedecker, and the perpetuation of the contemporary feminist avant-garde.

Even as they avoid the conventions of the identity-based feminist lyric poem, experimental women poets nevertheless grapple with typical feminist concerns, including the repressive nature of traditional gender roles and masculine authority, the erasure of women from history and the literary past, the realities of female bodily experience, pregnancy, and motherhood. In contrast to mainstream feminism’s brand of poetry, however, these feminist avant-garde poets do so by engaging in an array of radical experiments with both form and content. I have already touched on many quintessential examples of experimental women’s poetry in Chapters 2, 4, and 9, including Lyn Hejinian’s radical take on autobiography, *My Life*, Susan Howe’s innovative handling of the textual traces of the archive, Bernadette Mayer’s groundbreaking long poem *Midwinter Day*, an experiment in real-time writing that tracks a day in the life of a young mother, and Alice Notley’s feminist epic *The Descent of Alette*. As we have seen, formally innovative women poets eschew conventional first-person lyric poems in favor of fragmented, disjunctive poems that scatter or pluralize subjectivity into multiple voices. They share what Hejinian calls “an antagonism to closed structures of meaning” and use various experimental tactics to draw attention to the workings of language, its material reality, and its ideological dimensions – especially language’s role in the constitution of gender, power, and identity. They also challenge the stable, unitary self, and “authentic” voice of the conventional lyric and often fashion collages from found materials and language appropriated from a variety of sources and voices (*Language of Inquiry* 56). In response to the male-dominated history of the long poem as a form, they have also frequently composed sequences, serial poems, revisionary epics, and book-length poems, such as Mayer’s *Midwinter Day*, Hejinian’s *My Life*, DuPlessis’s

*Drafts*, Howe's *The Europe of Trusts*, Waldman's *Iovis*, Notley's *The Descent of Alette*, and Mullen's *Muse & Drudge*.

The opposition between "mainstream" and "experimental" women's poetry always depended on a somewhat exaggerated sense of division and difference, which had the result of papering over some of the commonalities between authors and different camps and threatening to reduce each mode to caricature. Nonetheless, these tensions continued to simmer from the 1970s to the 1990s, and only began to ease toward the end of the millennium, when the gap between these starkly opposed camps began to dissipate with the new "hybrid" mode I will discuss in Chapter 12.

The experimental women poets who emerged in the 1970s and 1980s and contested the reigning mode of feminist lyric poetry left a significant and potent legacy. They opened the door for a wide range of innovative poetry by women, which I will return to elsewhere in this book, including by numerous poets of color, like Cha and Mullen (whose work I will discuss in Chapter 11), Myung Mi Kim, M. NourbeSe Philip, Monica de la Torre, Robin Coste Lewis (see Chapter 12), Cathy Park Hong, and Rankine (see Chapter 12) who often use radical and experimental methods to explore the structures of sexism *and* racism at once, as well as all the ways these systems of oppression continuously intersect.