

**After Patriarchal Poetry:
Feminism and the Contemporary Avant-Garde.
Introductory Note**

*After Patriarchal Poetry.
I defy any one to turn a better
heel than that while reading.
(Stein 141)*

The terms most centrally at stake in this special issue of *differences*—contemporary poetry, feminism, avant-gardism, poststructuralism—do not settle easily into any stable constellation with one another, and that is precisely why they have been chosen. The absorbingly complex and embattled practices these terms designate, the discrepant commitments and discrete historical trajectories each evokes, are treated in these pages as though they were *all and simultaneously* of consequence to one another. The gesture is counterintuitive, perhaps, but the pitfalls of considering these practices in isolation, or even in pairs, are familiar enough to warrant it. We know very well, for instance, that discussions of avant-garde poetry can carry on for entire generations without ever seriously confronting the question of gender; we know also that poststructuralist theory can sustain a decades-long debate about feminine poetics while seldom betraying more than a vague awareness of the actual shapes assumed by contemporary poetic practice; and we know as well how the feminist poetry that has been institutionalized within women’s studies programs and teaching anthologies can be restrictively organized around a normative concept of “experience” that renders all but the most tentative

formal innovations by women inadmissible and anathematizes theoretical reflection on poetic practice (by poets themselves, by their readers) as an overly intellectualized interference with the immediate pleasures afforded by cathartic identification. An avant-garde without women, a poetics without poetry, a poetry for which entire registers of experience, innovation, and reflexivity are taboo: such are the results of failing to hold, in however tense an engagement, the necessary terms of the complex equation examined in this issue.

The task is all the more imperative in light of the emergence (or more accurately speaking, the reemergence) of a feminist avant-garde poetry and poetics in the years since 1970, a phenomenon that simultaneously renews and transforms our thinking about feminism, the avant-garde, and poetry. While not the first women writers to “turn a heel” on the generic conventions and institutionalized gender biases of patriarchal poetry—the vital precedents of the ’teens and twenties, of Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap’s *The Little Review*, of Gertrude Stein’s indefatigable experimentation, of Mina Loy’s and Else von Freytag-Loringhoven’s radical contestations of the sexual conservatism paradoxically retained amidst the “innovations” of many of their male contemporaries, of H.D.’s and Lorine Niedecker’s subtly sounded deconstructions of masculinist lyric tradition, are everywhere legible in the recent work by women avant-gardists—the generation that emerged in the late 1960s/early 1970s was the first to heed the lesson that Susan Rubin Suleiman would (retrospectively) summarize in *Subversive Intent*: namely, “that if women are to be part of an avant-garde movement, they will do well to found it themselves” (32).¹ The nexus of writers discussed in this issue—Alice Notley, Bernadette Mayer, Hannah Weiner, Nicole Brossard, Fanny Howe, Rosmarie Waldrop, Kathleen Fraser, and others—did just that, blending the long-held avant-gardist commitment to autonomous artistic production and the second-wave feminist imperative to establish an “independent women’s communications network” (Whitehead 21) with formidable results, not least of which has been the stabilization of a feminist counter-public sphere that, while certainly embattled, has proven resilient and enduring enough to facilitate, beginning sometime around 1989, the first unbroken generational transition in the history of feminist avant-gardism.²

The point has especial significance for this issue of *differences*, for while the texts upon which the contributors focus primary attention—Mayer’s *Sonnets*, for instance, or Brossard’s *Le Désert mauve*, or Weiner’s *Clairvoyant Journal*—are those of the initial generation, four of the six

contributors—Sianne Ngai, Susan Holbrook, Juliana Spahr, and Judith Goldman—are themselves poet-theorists of the succeeding generation.⁵ Returning to the words of Gertrude Stein that supply both this introduction’s epigraph and this issue’s title, we might say that the generation that heroically and definitively “turned a heel” to patriarchal poetry in the 70s has opened, both for itself and for the readers and writers that follow, the possibility of planting a first forward step into a space no longer organized around and governed by phallic privilege. There is no question that this step alone is powerless to spell an end to patriarchy-capitalism, nor any denying that the claim to be *after* patriarchal poetry will remain a counterfactual projection so long as we remain within the *longue durée* of patriarchy itself. Neither of these hard political facts, however, should lead us to underestimate the value of the tenuous but indispensable autonomy from patriarchal determination to be encountered “while reading” (Stein)—with every available resource provided by the oppositional legacies of feminism, the avant-garde, poetry, and theory *all and simultaneously* at stake—the contemporary poetry written “in the name of a postcapitalist, postpatriarchal future” (duBois). What is to be gained in the engagement, as I believe the following pages amply demonstrate, is something simply too important to pass up.

I want to thank Lee Ann Brown, the contemporary poet who—perhaps unintentionally—instigated this special issue during a train-ride conversation with Ellen Rooney, and Ellen Rooney herself for entrusting the editorial work on the issue to me. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the Women in the Curriculum program at the University of Maine, which contributed material support to the editing of this issue in the form of a research grant during the summer of 2000. Finally, and on behalf of all the contributors, I would like also to acknowledge the generous editorial attention Denise Davis paid to every word—including some exceedingly non-normative ones—in this issue. She, and her daughter Sophie, have our thanks.

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Notes

- 1 Poet and scholar Rachel Blau DuPlessis's pathbreaking study *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* remains a central reference point for any discussion of first-wave feminist avant-gardes. For her account of the impact second-wave feminism had on her own poetic composition, see "Manifests," especially the opening pages.
- 2 For two anthologies that between them assemble nearly one thousand pages of work by seventy writers of this generation, see O'Sullivan; Sloan. For a comparable, though even more embattled, development in the French context, see Giraudon and Deluy. For an overview of the ranging network of independent presses and magazines that facilitated the re-emergence of feminist avant-garde poetry, see Vickery. For an account that focuses on feminist movement poetry to the exclusion of experimental work, see Whitehead, esp. the chapter on "The Feminist Press and Poetry as the Medium of the Movement" (17–25). For the concept of a "feminist counter-sphere," which is here employed against the grain of the aesthetic commitments informing its initial articulation, see Felski, esp. 154–74.
- 3 Along with Ngai's *Criteria* and the books named in this issue's contributors' notes for Holbrook, Spahr, and Goldman, a sense of the range of work being done by women of this generation can be gleaned from the print-based journals *Chain* (coedited by Spahr and Jena Osman), *Big Allis* (cofounded by Melanie Neilson and Jessica Grim; presently coedited by Neilson and Deirdre Kovak), and *Raddle Moon* (edited by Susan Clark), as well as the indispensable web-based *How2* (http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/stadler_center/how2/index.html), an electronic continuation of Kathleen Fraser's newsletter-format journal *How(ever)*.

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