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Survivor: Wom-po Island – A Review of *Letters to the World*, an Anthology of Women’s Poetry Written, Compiled, and Edited by Members of the Wom-po Listserv

American experimental poet Susan Howe once wrote, “If history is a record of survivors, poetry shelters other voices.”¹ Conversely, as a marginalised practice, poetry also makes these voices an “other.” Out of necessity and conviction, poets tend to be a vociferous “other” and develop quite ingenious survival strategies. They often form supportive communities based around particular aesthetics and ideologies, and constantly search for subversive ways to make themselves heard. Over the past decade, many poets have embraced the Internet as an alternative tool to produce and disseminate their work. The Internet has also created the virtual proximity to invigorate discussions and collaborations among poets and poetic communities. While it does by no means ensure the wider recognition of poetry as a significant practice, it does create places where previously isolated poets can find refuge from the indifference of the general public. Thus poetry is maybe not a record of survivors, but it is a record of survival by a particular breed of writers who have successfully built

island networks offshore from the vast, shifting continents of contemporary popular culture.

Letters to the World, an anthology of poetry and essays written, collected, and edited by members of The Discussion of Women’s Poetry Listserv, or “Wom-po”² for short, clearly taps into the rhetoric of the insular, poetic community. It presents us with this rhetoric from two specific angles, pertaining to the marginalisation of female poets, and the marginalisation of both women and their poetry in publishing systems. These angles are closely related: the exclusion of women’s voices from poetic history reflects their struggle for room to write *and* ways to publish their poetry. An interest in both areas can be traced back into previous joint publications by female poets such as *How(ever)*.³ More broadly speaking, once poets decide to take publishing matters into their own hands, it is almost inevitable that they critically engage with the politics of the chosen media. The resulting work often reflects an anti-establishment agenda that extends from the poetry itself onto the processes of editing and publishing.⁴ This is also the case with *Letters to the World*. Readers are encouraged to view the anthology not only as a collection of significant poetic works, but also, perhaps even more so, as a communal expression of a gender-related writing and publishing ideology.

As a political missive from the Wom-po Listserv, *Letters to the World* suggests that online media foster the communication skills that have allowed women to challenge patriarchal textual practices, skills Jacqueline Rhodes summarises as women’s “quick use of personal contacts and underground networks to publish their writings widely and also to encourage other women to do so.”⁵ Apart from the service Wom-po offers directly to its members, it has paved the way for spin-off networks and become the subject of poetry

and critical essays (D'Arcy Randall 2008, 25). Seemingly, Wom-po does not suffer from what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have termed the "female affiliation complex."⁶ Instead, it provides a model of feminist poetic discourse that proudly embraces female affiliations, and fosters the retrieval and recognition of women's poetic history.

Similar to other feminist communities, though in contrast to many other poetic communities, the Womponies are not united by a shared aesthetic. As Jane Dowson observes, "[e]ditors of anthologies of women's poetry... tend to claim 'diversity' as the outstanding feature of their contents."⁷ *Letters to the World* is no different. In the preface, Wom-po founder Annie Finch (2008) emphasises that the anthology does not reflect "any one editorial aesthetic bias" (24). Accordingly, the works in it cover almost the entire spectrum of modernist, post-modernist, and contemporary poetic techniques. Among others, *Letters to the World* contains modernist poems (Louise Mathias, "Desert Flux;" Margaret Ricketts, "The Mountain, the Mayfly"), prose poems (Julia Spicher Kasdorf, "Poetry in America," 219), acrostic poems (Paula Bohince, "Acrostic: Queen Anne's Lace," 72), Beat poems (Eloise Klein Healy, "So the Teacher Jumped Up on the Desk," 193), verbal-visual poems (Shin Yu Pai, "it does body good," 292), and language writing (Cynthia Parker-Ohene, "Weather Report," 297). What holds this eclectic collection together is a certain thematic genericism that corresponds to the anthology's feminist polemic. Although Finch (2008) states that the editors did not "favor any common themes or threads" (24), she herself encouraged the Womponies to submit works that are thematically relevant to Wom-po (Randall, 2008, 28). Either way, by and large the poems all deal with the female experience of life, love, loss, and frequently, health issues, and most favour female

characters and/or lyrical subjects (with the most obvious exception being the poem written by the only male contributor, David Graham). Even those poems that do not sex themselves verbally, such as Janet R Kirchheimer's "Dogs" (234), Judy Jensen's "Past Perfect" (210), or Tami Haaland's "Reasons to Fly" (179), are still perceived to capture distinctly female perspectives through the company they keep within the book. In a sense, the shared Wom-po connection among the contributors overrides the variations among their works.

To me, *Letters to the World* illustrates both the advantages and disadvantages of insular communities. Some of the very features that make it an amazing feat are also those that make it a problematic read. On the one hand, the feminist rhetoric in the anthology's preface and introduction greatly appeals to my notion of sisterly determination, nobility, and ultimate success in the face of "otherly," brotherly adversity. I am inspired by the Womponies' unbridled optimism in the face of the prematurely proclaimed "death of poetry" (Randall, 2008, 27), and empathise with their justified pride in a collaborative editorial accomplishment that undoubtedly required a lot of commitment and work. The product reflects the strength and formidable size of the community it represents and suggests that Wom-po, as a gender-specific network, a movement, an island shelter, is bigger than the sum of its poetic parts. On the other hand, as a poetry reader, I have to confess that I have some misgivings about both the scope and the polemic of *Letters to the World*.

While the anthology is undeniably an excellent example of proactive feminism, it is also an example of some of the pragmatic and conceptual difficulties that arise when a democratic, anonymous, inclusive virtual community is qualified and quantified in print. In many ways, the book jars with the aspirations

of Wom-po, because it reveals processes, material limitations, and information that undermine, if not to say contradict, the ideals of the online Wom-po community. How severely the reader experiences these contradictions partly depends on whether he/she approaches the anthology as an appendix to life on Wom-po island, as a revolutionary feminist manifesto, or as a sampler of contemporary women's poetry. These approaches are not as such mutually exclusive, and at times, they necessarily converge in relation to the feminist concerns the anthology addresses. Yet, at other times, the book illustrates that Wom-po is still an insular community affected by a possibly misguided over-estimation of its reach and significance within the wider realm of both feminist and poetic writing. There is no malicious intent in this. Rather, it is a common by-product of insularity: the confines of island communities do amplify the voices of its members, and, by extension, their perceived importance. This can make it easy to forget that the community is still confined, and only represents a particular selection of voices within its part of the ocean. Finch (2008) may tell us that Wom-po is not a "club" (24), but at least from the pages of the anthology it did look very much like a club to me, a friendly, welcoming one, but a club nonetheless.

The first issue I encountered was primarily pragmatic: the sheer number of poems in *Letters to the World* is impressive, yet also overwhelming. I gave up counting after the first 50, but since there are 259 contributors, there must be well over 200 poems. Although the works are ordered alphabetically by author's name, on such a large scale the alphabet does not provide much order anymore, and the editors offer little other navigational guidance to the reader. It is almost as if we are given a list of Wom-po island's inhabitants without any indication of where they live on the island. Admittedly, both Finch (2008, 24) and D'Arcy

Randall (2008, 29) reveal that this reduced editorial structuring is a deliberate strategy to ensure the island's democracy.⁸ Yet while I can see why the poems would have been arranged in this manner, it nevertheless made it hard for me to orient myself within the book. By ensuring equality among the contributors, the editors leave the reader in a slightly disadvantaged position.

Compounding the arbitrary order of poems, *Letters to the World* does not offer much explication on the various styles and influences in the poems. Apart from general and/or theme-based statements in Finch's preface and Randall's very brief introduction, poem-specific information has been largely omitted in favour of recounting Wom-po history and promoting Wom-po politics. Such emphasis on an agenda that is to some degree separate from the poetry is perhaps a necessary sacrifice to the greater cause, and I do not question the validity of this cause. As Rhodes suggests, at least superficially, the development of a shared rhetoric has helped to make the feminist movement a more coherent force in writing and publishing.⁹ Besides, since the works in the anthology are so stylistically diverse, it is maybe inevitable that both preface and introduction are fairly general in their treatment of the poetics. Still, as a visitor trying to find my way around *Letters to the World*, I would have appreciated a bit more information concerning the architecture of its various sites. In particular, I would have enjoyed more discourse on the relationship between the recurring themes and the stylistic choices made by the different poets, especially where these choices draw on techniques associated with the male-dominated historical avant-garde. After all, the works in the anthology are not only poetic reflections of women's issues, but also engagements with poetic legacies that traditionally have not accommodated women's voices. It would

have been interesting to hear some more nuanced comments on how the Womponies reconcile their techniques with the notion that the marginalisation of women is partly perpetuated by the coded structures of (poetic) language itself.¹⁰ Without such deeper self-analysis, the anthology's introduction sounded like a slightly hollow litany of feminist clichés.

In a related context, I was struck by some conflicting messages in the anthology's meta-text, comprised of the preface, introduction, autobiographical essays and notes. In the preface, Finch (2008) tells us that *Letters to the World* is a "remarkable document" because it presents "perhaps the most complete cross section currently available of the great range of women *writing* poetry in English today...not publishing, mind you, but *writing*" (24). Randall (2008) uses a similar line of argument in the introduction where she states that one of Wom-po's central goals is "giving women poets and their poetry the attention they deserve" (25). Many of the essays validate this goal by illustrating the women's gratitude to Wom-po for providing a much-needed sounding board for their writing. Through this pervasive rhetoric of exclusion, be it from publishing systems, general acclaim, or like-minded company, we are led to believe that both Wom-po and *Letters to the World* have brought together a wide range of latter-day Emily Dickinsons, contemporary incarnations of the famously isolated nineteenth-century poet whose work is referenced in the anthology's title and dedication, as well as in Finch's poem "Letter for Emily Dickinson" (2008, 145). After reading preface and introduction, I thought that the book primarily contained "outsider" poetry, hidden experimental gems by female writers working in a malevolent environment (and one male writer who may sympathise with this isolation).

The notes at the end of the book, however, tell a different story. At the time of printing, the vast majority of the 259 poets in this anthology were published and even award-winning writers. While they may be geographically dispersed, they are clearly neither excluded from the publishing realm, nor unacclaimed as poets, and therefore it is hard to believe that they have no like-minded associates outside Wom-po. It seems that most of these women are not castaways whose survival depends on Wom-po Island, but insiders who have gone off on an exclusive island retreat.

Of course, it is one of the hazards of successful female networking that it can inadvertently cast doubts on the harsh reality of women's continued struggle for acknowledgment. In view of women's and Wom-po's history, there may be good reasons to perpetuate the notion that the Listserv shelters voices that are not heard elsewhere. Since it was founded in 1997, it may well be that many of the poets in the anthology joined Wom-po before they started publishing. Thus what now appears to be the island's founding myth may have started out as a legitimate and historically familiar tale of exclusion. Moreover, given the relative anonymity of online discussions, the geographic distances among Wom-po members, and the inclusiveness of their network, it may also well be that the Womponies were not aware of each other's publishing history.

Nevertheless, I cannot help but feel that the autobiographical notes betray some of the utopian ideals of the Wom-po community. In her essay, Rosemary Starace (2008) states enthusiastically: "I, or anyone, can participate in this vibrant, vital, credible world arena [of Wom-po] on the merit of words alone, without having to brandish particular credentials" (398). Yet *Letters to the World* does brandish the contributors' credentials. In the anthology,

the Womponies' "words alone" are apparently no longer "enough," separating an inclusive, anonymous community of women into mostly highly educated individuals who are writing and publishing. Despite all good intentions, *Letters to the World* reveals that Wom-po is ultimately an exclusive and insular network featuring a cast of privileged voices, who mainly hail from North American countries.

Beyond failing to acknowledge this insularity, the anthology is also marred by some misrepresentation of the wider field of women's writing. For instance, I am not certain that it is correct to say, as Randall (2008) does, that Wom-po explores certain themes – "sexuality, maternity, women's reproductive lives, women's spirituality" – "with a depth and candour found nowhere in print" (27). This hyperbole discredits the lively discussions about such issues conducted by groups of women all over the world, and overlooks the many published works by female writers that address these issues very candidly and deeply. While the Wom-po Listserv may be presently one of the biggest and most widely accessible networks of its kind, these features threaten to obscure, and ironically, marginalise the (net-) works and interests of women outside it.

Alicia Ostriker, who is one of the poets featured in the anthology, observes in an essay on women's poetry: "Retaliatory strategies confirm rather than alter the unacceptable cruelty of the patterns by which we live: a reversed pattern remains a pattern."¹¹ I can detect traces of such a reversed pattern in *Letters to the World*. By sexing their work in broad yet semantically problematic terms, the Womponies could be accused of defining themselves in accordance with patriarchal ideas of women as an aberrant other and, simultaneously, of assuming an unauthorised role as representatives of women poets in general. These are issues that have

unarguably divided feminists. As Jane Dowson suggests, they have led some women writers to distance themselves from any nominal or active association with feminist communities. Not all women are, or want to be, on the same island.¹²

Wom-po's broad them-and-us mentality also fosters somewhat fallacious notions about the marginalisation of gender-specific themes. While the anthology does contain works on certain themes, such as cervical cancer (Chryss Yost, "Advice for Women," 399), which I have not seen in poetry so far, I have also not come across any poetry on prostate cancer. Although either disease may warrant poetic treatment, I doubt that the exclusion of the former from print reflects discriminatory practices by publishers or editors. Rather, it is generally easier to find an audience for works that are thematically broad enough to transcend the limits of personal experiences. A poem that recounts specific autobiographical events may be relevant and cathartic for the poet, but it can be difficult to access for the reader.¹³

Admittedly, this situation does present a conundrum to women poets, because anecdotal realism tends to be more prevalent in women's than men's poetry. It reflects the need to assert women's perspectives, and illustrates that many women continue to feel disconnected from a world of which men have long since spoken in universal terms. Conversely, some women poets contend that autobiographical meaning is imposed onto their poetry, because they are not allowed to speak in universal terms. In *Letters to the World*, Caroline Williamson writes: "The trouble with reading a poem/ by a woman is you're always looking/ behind the words for the life" ("Biographies," 394, 1: 1-3).¹⁴ In a fictive scenario, this would mean that a woman writing about cervical cancer will be seen to

write primarily about her experience of the disease, while a man writing about prostate cancer will be seen to use the disease as a metaphor for a wider, conceptual affliction. While this particular scenario may seem far-fetched, it points to one of the myths associated with women's poetry, namely that women think, speak, and write from a narrow, emotive, and largely domestic perspective.

Yet, as I suggested, there is some truth in this myth. Women poets often do choose themes of such highly personal meaning that, in front of the words, the reader sees the life, one specific life, without even looking for it. Quite a few of the works in *Letters to the World* fall into this category, with intimate experiences of cancer being a recurring theme in both poems and essays.¹⁵ Audrey Friedman's "The Morgan Health Center" (154), for example, establishes an analogy between a child's collection of lifeless dolls and a row of women patients in a cancer ward, which includes the lyrical subject's friend, "Eileen." Both the title and the named character establish a point of view that is so personalised that the reader's attentions are distracted from any universal commentary the poem offers on the experience of a common, serious illness. Although Friedman's poem appeals to the reader on a human level, its personal content overpowers the elements of abstraction necessary to widen its poetic significance. This has less to do with the fact that Friedman is a woman writing about a woman's experience than with the fact that she is writing about people, places, and events that ultimately matter more to her than to a stranger, even a female one, reading the poem.

To be fair, there are also many poems in the anthology that very successfully manage to translate the personal into the universal. In response to Wom-po's interest in poetic history, several poems establish thought-provoking anachronistic relationships with historical

figures in writing, both male and female. Susan Bright's "Enheduanna Wrote on Stone" (76) reaches back the furthest by setting up an imagined dialogue between a contemporary lyrical subject and a female poet, Enheduanna, who is said to have lived more than four thousand years ago. The poem compares past and present technologies of inscription/communication, but gains its strength from its focus on philosophical questions about human suffering and violence, and from its concise, sober imagery. Another potent weapon in the repertoire of the Womponies is a wry sense of humour. Martha Deed's "Illegal Entry" (112) and Alicia Ostriker's "Everywoman Her Own Theology" (289), for instance, draw the reader in with a light-hearted parodic tone that carries more profound undercurrents of social criticism in its wake. While these poems do speak with distinctive voices and reflect personal sentiments, they expertly traverse the divide between poem and reader by avoiding the kind of semantic specificity that ties together poet and work and leaves the reader on the outside.

However, even the most universally relevant poems do not always find their way to an audience. In contemporary Western culture, poetry is a marginalised form of expression, and all poets struggle to get the attention they (think they) deserve. I cannot think of one contemporary poet who manages to live off his/her art alone, and even some of the great names in recent poetic history are largely unknown outside the ivory towers of university English departments (which are littered with poets who need to supplement their income). From a marketing perspective, the cause of feminism is thus not served well by poetry; and who and what gets published and recognised within the field of poetry is not a very accurate reflection of women's place in contemporary literature. In narrative genres, women writers have become a formidable presence over the

past decades. By overlooking these advances, the Womponies implicitly subscribe to a version of feminism that equates the struggle to get published with the discrimination of women. Yet as far as poetry is concerned, this equation is erroneous; or, to be more precise, it has to be qualified in relation to the marginalisation of poetry. Poetry is highly relevant to those who write and read it; but it would be wrong to assume that this does, or even must, make it relevant to the world at large. In fact, from a creative perspective, the margin is not necessarily a bad place to be for poets, because it extracts them from the pressures of commerce and audience expectations that often compromise the artistic integrity of popular writers.

Romanian émigré and Wompony Ana Doina (2008) makes a strong case for the benefits of marginalisation. She asserts: "Whoever doesn't think of poetry as changing the world does not consider the world I know" (166). Doina supports this claim by recounting how poetry aided the stirring of revolt against Romanian dictator Ceausescu. What her essay points to is that the transformative power of poetry goes hand in hand with its marginalisation, which, at its height, encourages a particularly courageous freedom of expression that can only be sustained on the cultural fringe, in the world of underground networks, and insular communities.

Again, however, *Letters to the World* sends mixed messages. Doina's revolutionary rhetoric is moving and convincing, and it is easy to see why Randall (2008, 27) chose to quote her in the introduction. Yet, on the whole, this rhetoric does not correspond to a revolutionary stylistic approach in the poems. In their choice of title and dedication, the Womponies clearly try to affiliate themselves with the legacy of the great, revolutionary Emily Dickinson. As Corinne E Blackmer argues, this

is a common strategy among contemporary American women poets, because Dickinson "wrote poetry that defied all conventional gendered norms."¹⁶ Alas, the poems in *Letters to the World* do not strike me as defiant of such norms, nor do they break new ground in terms of their techniques. Especially for works produced by members of an online community, they are mostly fairly conservative and print-specific. As a result, *Letters to the World* has qualities of a retrospective of twentieth-century poetry. From the flotsam and jetsam of their predecessors, the Womponies have crafted some sophisticated structures; yet, all too often, these structures amount to an imitation rather than a revision of the poetic past, or a revolution of its present.

I was particularly surprised that there were no signs of active artistic collaboration among the Womponies, which is something that would have conveyed the spirit of Wompo discussions and established a stronger conceptual link between the Listserv and the book. More importantly, collaborations among the poets would have complemented the collaboration among the anthology's editors, not least of all since the Womponies consider the latter to be a significant aspect of *Letters to the World*.¹⁷ Given the numbers of poets in their network, the Womponies could have made their anthology an awe-inspiring work of mass-, cross-, inter-collaboration. Instead, they stuck to the well-trodden path of to-each-her-own-page, which here only serves to visually sever the connections that are the reason for the book's existence.

The question may even arise why the Womponies opted for print publication at all. Why abandon the media that brought you together only to take up yet another fight with a medium that demonstrably does not and cannot permit the same level of writer/editor/producer equality? Undoubtedly, digital

media would have been better suited to handle the Wom-po community's size and meet its democratic needs. While the Womponies may have minimised editorial interference, the process of print publication is necessarily a process of selection, even where a rather substantial collection like *Letters to the World* is concerned. A printed letter to the world is always going to be materially limited and it is only ever going to reach a rather select part of a rather exclusive part of a world. As American poet/artist Kenneth Goldsmith says about the current state of print media: "Publish it on a printed page and no one will ever know about it."¹⁸

Alternatively, the choice of print media may also be part of a politically motivated strategy. The return to an older, and more exclusive publication medium can be interpreted as an anachronistic settlement of a previously hostile textual environment. As such, it is a triumphant gesture of survival in memory of poetic foremothers who fared less well, a memorandum to anyone who may still doubt that women's poetic voices are alive and thriving. The use of print media also provides hard copy evidence of a particular stage in the evolution of Wom-po. It illustrates and cements the commitment of its members by presenting a tangible body of work in an archival format. Through *Letters to the World*, the Womponies emerge from the anonymity, impermanence, and conceptual vastness of their digital refuge to put their names, work, and ideas on permanent record. The anthology is like a solid ship sent out from Wom-po Island to take a message of women's poetic, editorial, and networking skills to the old world.

My own ship, however, ended up stuck in murky waters offshore Wom-po Island. Part of the problem is that my ship has two captains: one is a woman who feels drawn to the Wom-po sisterhood, supports its fight against

historical and contemporary forms of gender-based marginalisation, and shares some of its enticing utopian ideas; the other one is a poetry reader and critic who feels dissatisfied with *Letters to the World*. This latter captain thinks that the anthology makes what should matter most, namely the poetry, secondary to advancing the Wom-po ideology. Thus it runs the risk of primarily addressing an audience who is equally passionate about this ideology. As someone who is primarily passionate about poetry, the second captain on my ship wanted more discussion of the poetry. She could have quite happily done without some of the Wom-po adulation, the superficial nods to feminism, and the autobiographical notes in exchange for comments on each author's practice, or for practical reasons, even one comment on each group of thematically and/or stylistically affiliated works. The second captain believes that, in all their efforts to minimise editorial interference, the Womponies missed a great opportunity to maximise the impact of their anthology as an example of poetic and editorial innovation. Sometimes, not interfering can be the biggest interference of all.

To qualify and moderate my criticism, I understand why *Letters to the World* has been produced in a particular way, and I am sure that difficult choices had to be made in order to transpose a long-running, and constantly evolving online community into the limited parameters of print publication. I suspect that this transposition has created a somewhat inadequate image of the Wom-po community. By its very nature, a book cannot maintain the qualities that make Wom-po such a successful exercise in female networking and poetic discourse. Most evidently, a printed collection is a closed archive, and therefore cannot possibly be as inclusive, democratic, and multi-vocal as an online discussion forum. Perhaps what really happens on Wom-po Island must stay on Wom-po Island.

Readers who are not part of the Wom-po community may grapple with the anthologised proceeds from this island retreat. *Letters to the World* is an ambitious project with a democratic premise and a noble purpose, and does present a very comprehensive range of poems, many of which deserve attention irrespective of the poets' gender and agenda. Yet its arrangement and political packaging caters better to the community that spawned it than to a migrant reader. The Womponies seek recognition, inclusion, democracy, and revolution; but in many ways, *Letters to the World* undermines these goals. Most of the anthology's contributors are recognised, published writers; though theoretically inclusive, the book represents an exclusive range of privileged voices; its material characteristics do not reflect the democratic, collaborative processes used in its creation; and in themes and styles, its poetic content is not as revolutionary or political as readers are perhaps led to believe. In a collaborative essay on the anthology published in the June edition of *Junctures*, Wompony Moira Richards reveals: "I really, really wanted to have this book on my shelf."¹⁹ I am pleased that she now has this book on her shelf as a lasting snapshot of life on Wom-po Island. Tragically, beyond Wom-po, *Letters to the World* would be most inspiring to those it will not reach: female poets who remain isolated, unpublished, and have no like-minded company. Although the anthology already contains works by hundreds of women, I have no doubt that there are many more carving out truly lonely existences on lumps of rock in stormy seas who could really do with a letter from Wom-po Island.

- 1 S Howe, "Incloser," *Postmodern Culture*, 1:2 (1991). Electronic Poetry Center. <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/howe> (last accessed 27 September 2008).
- 2 See "Centio for an Anthology of Women Poets", *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue*, 10 (2008): 115-128.
- 3 It is noteworthy, though not at all surprising, that women poets often feel more strongly marginalised than women working in other fields of creative writing. By sheltering "other voices," poetry can affirm in them any pre-established sense of exclusion from dominant literary traditions. If you already feel left out of history due to your gender, ethnicity, or beliefs, becoming a poet may well make you feel even more excluded. As a genre of writing that condenses and amplifies the codes of linguistic structures, poetry also condenses and amplifies the codes of the linguistic community that maintains these structures, even if they are discriminatory. Moreover, women poets must battle for acknowledgment on two fronts: on one side, they are pitched against a general public dismissive of all poetry; on the other, they are pitched against a masculine poetic history that relegates feminine aesthetics to a subordinate position.
- 4 UbuWeb, a website for Visual, Sound, and Concrete Poetry, for example, prides itself on its blatant transgressions of copyright regulations. Its founder, American poet/artist Kenneth Goldsmith, suggests that since there is little if any profit to be made from experimental poetry, copyrights do little other than hinder the dissemination of such work. See "UbuWeb," eds K Goldsmith, M Perloff, et al. (1996-2009), <http://ubu.com/> (last accessed 11 June 2009).
- 5 J Rhodes, "'Substantive and Feminist Girlie Action': Women Online," *College Composition and Communication*, 54:1 (2002), 116-42, at 117.
- 6 S Gilbert and S Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 1 (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1988), 168.
- 7 J Dowson, "'Older Sisters Are Very Sobering Things': Contemporary Women Poets and the Female Affiliation Complex," *Feminist Review*, 62 (1999), 6-20, at 12.

- 8 The self-consciously democratic practice of listing contributors alphabetically has become fairly common in the wider publishing realm. Most notably, it is now often used for movie and television credits where it helps to lessen evidence of the hierarchies implied by the more traditional most-famous-first listings. Sadly, it is a thoughtful, though ultimately ineffective gesture that rarely translates into an actually democratic relationship among the cast. The fact that the most famous actor's surname may start with "Z," which puts him/her at the bottom of the credits, does not close the substantial divide between his/her salary and career prospects and those of the supporting cast member whose surname starts with "A."
- 9 Rhodes, "'Substantive and Feminist Girlie Action,'" 117.
- 10 Cf. LA Kinnahan, "Experimental Poetics and the Lyric in British Women's Poetry: Geraldine Monk, Wendy Mulford, and Denise Riley," *Contemporary Literature*, 37:4 (1996), 620-70, at 621.
- 11 A Ostriker, "'What Are Patterns for?': Anger and Polarization in Women's Poetry," *Feminist Studies*, 10:3 (1984), 485-503, at 486.
- 12 With reference to an essay by Alicia Ostriker, Jane Dowson argues, "to say that poetry by women is ungendered is to classify it as male" (Dowson, "'Older Sisters Are Very Sobering Things,'" 12). I think this is a highly debatable suggestion. The question should never be whether poetry by women is gendered or not, but whether a given poem is gendered or not. I very much doubt that I would have been able to attach a gender to some of the poems in *Letters to the World* if they were not presented in a context that foremost draws attention to the poets' gender.
- 13 There are, of course, exceptions to this "rule." For instance, Lyn Hejinian's acclaimed poem *My Life* is an autobiographical text. However, Hejinian treats this genre subversively and innovatively by exploring its linguistic structures and conventions. The poem is not about Hejinian's experience, it is about the experience of a particular language application.
- 14 Poems by men are, of course, often looked at in the very same manner. Despite repeated attempts by postmodern critics to separate the life of the poet from the life of the poem, readers commonly try to decipher the codes of poetry with the help of autobiographical information about the poet. Many famous poetic works have become closely associated with specific events in the given poet's life. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "This Lime Tree Bower My Prison" has been related to the real-life accident that imprisoned him in the bower; Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" has been related to his experiences in a mental institution. Within feminist discourse, the search for a correspondence between work and life has been central to the establishment of a history of marginalisation. Indeed, from a feminist perspective, the suppression of women's writing must be inextricably entwined with the suppression of women in life, the struggle to be heard as a woman with the struggle to be a woman. After all, the catastrophic alternative would be that women's poetry simply is not interesting enough to warrant attention.
- 15 In the context of the anthology's feminist polemic, it occurred to me that the life and work of many Womponies has been shaped more substantially by an indifferent disease than by an indifferent patriarchy.
- 16 CE Blackmer, "Writing Poetry like a 'Woman'," *American Literary History*, 8:1 (1996), 130-53, at 130.
- 17 A Fisher-Wirth, E Goldstein, A Hostetler, D Randall, R Starace and L Wheeler, "Cento for an Anthology of Women Poets," *Junctures*, 10 (2008), 129-43, at 130, 137.
- 18 K Goldsmith, "If It Doesn't Exist on the Internet, It Doesn't Exist," Electronic Poetry Center (2005). http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/if_it_doesnt_exist.html (last accessed 3 October 2008).
- 19 *Letters to the World: Poems from the Wom-po LISTSERV*, eds M Richards, R Starace and L Wheeler (Los Angeles: Red Hen Press, 2008), 131.

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