

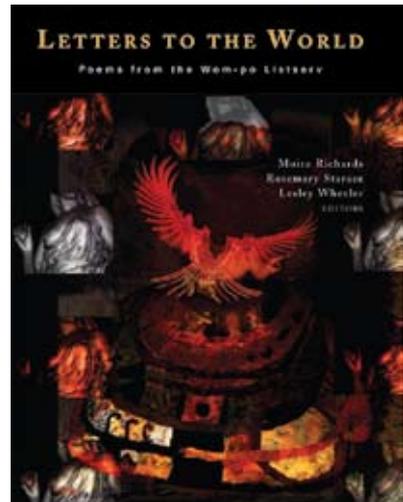
## POETS' PAGES

**ANN FISHER-WIRTH,  
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& LESLEY WHEELER**

### **Cento for an Anthology of Women Poets**

#### INTRODUCTION

*Letters to the World: Poems from the Wom-Po Listserv* (Los Angeles: Red Hen Press, 2008) is an anthology of contemporary women's poetry that documents the flourishing of a large electronic discussion group. However, the vibrant listserv named in the book's subtitle is not the only group with a stake in this publication. *Letters to the World* was edited collectively by a much smaller band of women from the listserv. This hybrid essay reflects upon the unusual process of editing *Letters to the World*: it begins and ends in a corporate voice, with an introduction and conclusion co-authored by some of the anthology's editors. The heart of this piece, however, is a collage of observations from members of the editorial team. While *Letters* owes much to feminist collectives of the 1980s, it also demonstrates how twenty-first-century technology has rearranged relations among poets, editors, and readers.



Cover page of *Letters to the World: Poems from the Wom-Po LISTSERV*, Moira Richards, Rosemary Starace, and Lesley Wheeler (eds), Los Angeles, California, U.S.: Red Hen Press, 2008. Cover image by Margo Berdeshevsky.

The poets whose work is collected in *Letters to the World* are all current or former members of the listserv titled “Discussion of Women’s Poetry.” This online community, nicknamed “Wom-po,” was founded in 1997 by poet and scholar Annie Finch; its members call themselves “wompos” or “womponies.” When the editing collective started its work in late 2005, Wom-po included 600 poets, publishers, teachers, and readers who came together because they value poetry by women. It has since swelled to almost 800 members. The culture of the listserv is described in more detail in D’Arcy Randall’s introduction to *Letters* and on the listserv home page ([www.usm.maine.edu/wompo/](http://www.usm.maine.edu/wompo/)). Wom-po is an inclusive group, democratic and feminist in spirit, and it is open to all interested parties – men as well as women. Its many daily posts can be passionate, political, scholarly, witty, emotionally moving, offensive, curious, and profoundly generous.

The anthology, referred to by participants as “the wompology,” arose from an impulse to gather sample poems from the diverse, geographically dispersed poets that comprise the Wom-po listserv. It also reflects our desire to document the vitality of Wom-po. Unlike most poetry anthologies, *Letters* does not manifest an individual editorial aesthetic. The 258 women and one man who submitted work to our anthology put their poems forward knowing the collection would represent their voices to other members of the community. The book we came to call *Letters to the World* makes a strong case for poetry as an instrument of connection in our splintered world.

The process began in November 2005 when Moira Richards, a poet and activist from South Africa, proposed to the Wom-po list a plan to collect one poem from every willing listserv member for a self-published book. She asked for volunteer editors, and the group we called “Team Editorial” began to coalesce. At the same time contributors started sending in their poems, which Moira collected on a temporary private blog so that list members could observe the manuscript’s expansion. In December 2005, Eloise Klein Healy brought the project to the attention of Kate Gale, managing editor at Red Hen Press, who promptly joined the listserv and offered to publish the anthology. This intervention raised the book’s profile and enlarged its potential audience, but also complicated the process of assembling it, requiring a new layer of administration for contracts and communications. We were also concerned about the impact on the editorial group’s autonomy and our egalitarian vision of the book. As it turned out, Red Hen Press designed, published, and promoted the book, but did not seek to influence its content. The final product includes contributors who represent 19 countries on five continents, and, as the brief reflections below demonstrate, a wide variety of aesthetic, ethnic, and professional affiliations.

The team that created this experiment in feminist editing eventually included 15 women. Six are the co-authors of this essay; these six drafted, revised, and arranged the materials. In addition, others gave input and contributed comments below: Margo Berdeshevsky, Rachel Dacus, Louisa Howerow, Lillian Baker Kennedy, Athena Kildegaard, Deborah Moore, and Moira Richards. When we began compiling the poems, we were all members of the larger listserv but were mostly unknown to one another. We live in five countries spanning the globe and we work in diverse fields. Some of us volunteered as veteran writers or publishers; others joined willing to learn. Some had considerable experience in working via consensus – Rosemary Starace through participation in a feminist art collective, for example, and Ann Hostetler

through her spiritual practice – but prolonged electronic collaboration on a single project was new to all of us, and our models and theories emerged only indirectly or late in the process (see Sources below). Annie Finch, the founder of the list, also supplies her perspective here. She was not a member of Team Editorial, but she did help shape the book by intervening at a crucial moment.

Over a period of two years, Team Editorial worked together almost entirely through an Internet discussion forum in a process as distinctive as the poems themselves. Our virtual workplace was in most ways an advantage, but it also created unfamiliar hazards. Successful online global collaborations are common in some professions and in academia, but those groups often share clear goals and have access to financial resources. *Letters to the World*, however, needed to survive unpaid volunteers' varying motivations, philosophies, stores of time and energy, and capacities to resolve conflict. Further, in the thin context of an Internet forum, disagreements can be hard to negotiate. What has emerged as most remarkable about our group is its egalitarian working style and the effectiveness of that style for resolving potentially devastating setbacks. As co-editors Moira Richards, Rosemary Starace, and Lesley Wheeler write in the book's afterword, "an unspoken rule of openness largely ensured there were no major decisions made without whole-group participation" (407).

The reflections below illustrate and explain our motives and practices in assembling this anthology, as well as how we overcame an editorial crisis. Editing this anthology was both challenging and rewarding, and the differences among the editors contribute to the rich texture of the final product. As we gathered, organized, and edited this piece, Ellen Goldstein compared it to a cento, a poem or other work that collages together quotations from a range of sources. We will never quite speak as one, and that is something to celebrate. What follows is therefore a cento-like composite of perspectives.

## THE ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT

Moira Richards

I really, really wanted to have this book on my shelf. I wanted to be part of such an anthology. I thought it could be one of the most amazing, eclectic collections of poetry I'd ever come across.

Louisa Howerow

First, I wanted to support Moira and her initiative, which I saw as both brave and grand. Second, I wanted to contribute to the group as a whole. I saw this as a way of learning something new, introducing myself to Wom-po, and getting to know other members. I had no expertise with publishing or poetry, but I had time, knew how to work to schedule, and was willing to do the small tasks, leaving the others time for things I couldn't even envision.

Ann Fisher-Wirth

This is one of the first opportunities I've had to work collaboratively with other women. I am now 60 years old. When I was in high school and college, way too many girls and young women felt they could either be loved or be smart; partly for that reason, my friends tended to be guys. And all the way through graduate school, all but two of my teachers were men. Plus I'm a bit of a loner – that is, a loner when I'm not busy being a professor, wife, and mother of

five. I've loved having a voice and playing a part in the creation of *Letters to the World* – and in some ways I think it has been easier that those of us in the editorial group mostly didn't know each other when the project began. Perhaps that has made it possible for all of us to focus on the project, our mutual commitment, and yet for each of us to retain a degree of solitude – which, I think, writers tend to treasure.

D'Arcy Randall

I have been a long-term member of Wom-po and was excited about the book, but I entered this collaboration later than most participants. Acting on behalf of the others, Lesley asked me to write the introduction in late February 2006. Her timing was fortunate: the following month AWP took place in my home city of Austin, Texas, and so I was able briefly to meet many wompos – Lesley, Annie Finch, and Kate Gale – face-to-face. I interviewed Annie, and after the conference emailed her and Lesley to clarify the scope of the preface, introduction, and afterword.

Much of the publication process was familiar to me because of my first career in literary publishing. During the 1980s, I worked as fiction editor for the University of Queensland Press in Australia. Early in my career, New Zealander Keri Hulme won the Booker McConnell Prize for *The Bone People*, a novel first published by the feminist Spiral Collective. The following year, Hulme's novel was set for a women's literature course I was taking, and presumably many others around the globe. I had no reason to doubt that, if the vision and timing were right, a feminist publishing collaboration could thrive and make a lasting contribution.

Deborah Moore

I figured I could join in on this project and work on it in a peripheral sort of way, helping out when I could and watching it take shape. And while that was true enough, what I didn't anticipate was how connected I would become, not just to the book/the project/the outcome, but to those working on it alongside me. I read posts that showed me how to speak with grace when distant – physically and philosophically – from those listening. I found assistance when I couldn't keep up with what I had promised to do. I had a baby while this book was put together, and the list celebrated with me. I learned so much from these women, and I admire the hell out of them.

Lesley Wheeler

I had knowledge of collaboration as a poet and scholar – I had participated in successful literary collaborations and studied others, with a particular eye to how gender and sexuality function in co-authorship. However, my initial commitment to this project was really more poetic than feminist; I was more interested in the product than the process. I came to see the process, however, as the product in a crucial way. The book is a good anthology, but it also illustrates an ideal model of poetic community, and the act of making it was in some ways subversive and daring.

Rosemary Starace

It was the challenge of this particular project that really intrigued me: how to create an excellent book from an editorial standpoint while reflecting – in both the process and the product – the egalitarian, inclusive nature of Wom-po membership and the Internet in general. I saw this as lovingly subversive of certain perspectives, practices, and conditions in publishing today that disempower poets and limit their opportunities. I hoped that this book could embody

a convincing alternative. It was a personal risk for me, but the rewards – in the form of rich community and the book itself – have been immeasurable.

Lillian Baker Kennedy

I did it for the poetry, in service to an egalitarian publishing process. I did it in the company of some really patient, strong, (even) brave women. For the gift of poetry – all the contributors deserve credit.

Ann Hostetler

I was excited by the possibility of being able to read poems by a diverse range of the writers whose fascinating and sometimes contentious posts I'd been reading. As the editor of an anthology myself, I'm fascinated by the process of collecting, editing, and arranging poems so that they converse with one another. The possibility that a conversational online group could use the Internet to collaborate in such a process was particularly enticing.

## THE PROCESS

Lesley

To facilitate the conversation, Moira set up a private forum for the editors, separate from Wom-po. In the early days she made endless lists about what had to be done and coordinated the editorial labour in volunteer sub-groups: who would collect biographies and contracts and who would proofread. Rosemary took over most of this once we were at the production stage. The tone of the messages among the editorial group tended to be friendly and tactful, consensus-seeking rather than hierarchical. Various people stepped up or stepped down according to their inclinations, abilities, and availability.

Our messages always meshed the personal and the professional, so we went back and forth about births, deaths, and illnesses almost as often as we did about the book. A transparent process was always the goal – every single person could weigh in on every single issue, if she wanted, which meant that the transaction volume was high (about 3,000 official messages over three years with many more back-channels).

Louisa

I have always found the Internet a boon to collaboration; given the right participants, it allows for a certain paradoxical closeness in spite of the distance. When disagreement or concerns arise we can leave the “table” to rethink. I've never found it to be that easy in a face-to-face group. Those who are vocal tend to dominate. Some dominate merely by force of personality. In Internet interactions, where all the participants are comfortable with the written word, everyone has an opportunity to speak.

Lesley

Writers are better about managing tone in email than other people are, but there were still occasions for disagreement, offence, and hurt feelings. We struggled about the title and the cover, how to credit editorial labour, how to accommodate the round of late entries we eventually solicited, and contracts and deadlines generally. We handled these conflicts by talking, talking, talking and generally goodwill prevailed. Some of the worst conflicts took place on the main Wom-po listserv, when we took various questions to the group as a whole.

Moira, Queen of Numbered Lists

The conflicts that arose on the main list made things difficult for us, perhaps, in terms of gauging opinion, continuing our work. However, the conflicts on the general Wom-po list might have actually strengthened relations between members of the editorial team. I was often in the position where Wom-po listers wanted me to take some control and I seemed to spend a lot of time diverting questions away to the right team member. I also tried to voice my own opinion as little as possible for fear it might carry more weight than it should. My job was only coordination, even though I'm listed as co-editor. But I was initially the public face of the team. I think the word "editor" often carries assumptions that don't fit our set-up. It is another mark of the success of our teamwork/collaboration that my activity/involvement/role has been able to diminish to such an extent over the years.

D'Arcy

Our members kept the common good in mind, but offered their own individual gifts when they were most needed. Many of us work, or have worked, constrained by job titles, but in this project if one of us had skill delegating, organising, proofreading, negotiating conflict, brainstorming, soothing or preventing hurt feelings, or battling thousands of emails, we found it and made good use of it.

Rosemary

When discussing how to credit our work on the cover and title page, we had the obvious questions: is it appropriate to single some people out in a non-hierarchical group, where no one person had authority over any other? Is it right to not credit people for their extensive contributions? Is it feminist? And, in a purely practical sense, wouldn't it reflect badly on the book if there were no editors' names on the cover? Ultimately we realised that, though everyone's input was important and even essential, it was clear that some people had done more work than others or had taken leadership roles for various aspects – and that this deserved appropriate recognition.

Moira

I found our collaboration feminist in the same way that a feminist marriage/partnership is feminist and not patriarchal/hierarchical. The old type of marriage had a "head of the house" with all sorts of veto powers (legal, financial, etc.). Feminism brought to life-partnerships a whole different way of making a shared life with job divisions being according to skill/time constraints, a respect for the needs/worth of both parties, the shared commitment to the creation and maintenance of the home/kids/pets/lifestyle/whatever – a respect for differences and a willingness to accommodate them, a will to make things work, a safe place to share one's less-pretty feelings.

Margo Berdeshevsky

As the person who created the book's cover image, a collage, I should add – smilingly – that my collective process in this particular piece of artwork was with myself. Seriously, as a collagist, the many parties do meet and elbow for attention and inclusion. And the finished work is a collaboration with all the eyes in my own head! I was stubborn and surefooted on the idea that a visual art piece could not benefit by more than one cook. But I willingly served up more than a few dishes until the happiness factor clicked. A process both creative and frustrating. And, finally, I'm deeply pleased that it serves the whole.

My own truest insight on the subject may be that collaboration by no matter what sex – women, or angels, or men – is needed for peace. And for anthologising (so that multiple viewpoints are not missed ...). But most art needs brave individualists. Then again, we'd never have "Oh what a beautiful morning" without Rogers and Hammerstein. And the ensemble, in theater, or circus, or orchestra, or angels ... can finish with a profoundly satisfying ode to joy. Collaboration is an ideal to be devoutly wished – some of the time.

Ann F-W

I signed on to the project because I was curious, and because a couple of years ago I made a vow to myself to say yes, whenever possible, to the adventures life would bring me. I thought a Wom-po anthology would be interesting, beautiful, fun, and a great way for us all to get to know each other's work even better. Eventually, when the time came, I volunteered to be a proofreader and was assigned a section of the manuscript to read. However, I quickly became enchanted and ended up proofing and reading the whole thing. As I turned page after page, read poem after poem, my conviction kept growing: this manuscript is varied, intense, lively, moving, and really good!

Ann H

From its first introduction on the list by Moira, the anthology idea generated much conversation and some controversy. While both well-published and little-published poets embraced the anthology idea, there were dissenting voices on the list concerned with professional credibility. That we could create an excellent anthology without a traditional vetting process was simply not conceivable for some of the listserv members. Moira, especially, endured with patience and perseverance a great deal of negative feedback in the process of developing the anthology concept.

Louisa

I saw working on the anthology as a way to legitimise my participation as a contributor to the anthology. I found the discussion on the list as to who should contribute and who should not disconcerting. I certainly did not want to see the project go under before it had started because a poet might not want her poem alongside mine, a beginner with no "poetic" academic credentials or books. I remember voicing this concern to the list as a whole and volunteering to withdraw. A number of poets wrote to me off-list to not give in to the negative concerns of others. I realised that those who were voicing the strongest objections to the project as a whole were in the minority and continued to be so.

Lesley

The poems were proofed but *not* substantially edited. The brief essays that punctuate the book were selected and edited. Rosemary and I took charge of this work, and we turned down a few essays that didn't fit the criteria. Our main requirement was that the essay had to concern the list as a community, not just poetry generally. We corresponded heavily with some writers about the wording, content, length, and accuracy of their contributions. Most people were happy to get feedback; others pushed back on suggested changes when they felt they needed to. Authority was an issue here, but we gave authors final say on the shapes of their pieces.

Most essayists celebrated the listserv as a way of making community across distance and despite the divides of socio-economic, political, gender, and racial differences. Others

described productive offshoots and collaborations that were enabled by Wom-po. A few addressed the conflicts that arise on the list because of the vast differences in our lives, careers, and politics. I was glad to see the latter. Wom-po is not a harmonious list; it's not always safe to say what you think there. That's one of the interesting things about the group. From Wom-po I have gained a much fuller sense of what issues people fight about when poetry is at stake.

## CRISIS

Ellen Goldstein

We were all sitting back writing each other congratulatory messages about finishing the almost-year-long task of putting together an anthology when Annie Finch wrote us asking if we would reopen the process to include new poets. The first response anyone on the list had to the request was "oh, my," which summed up our feelings precisely.

Our group achieved consensus quickly enough: we were tired, we were volunteers who had put a lot of time into the anthology, we had done good work, and it was finished, we did not have energy to take up the editorial work again. Annie persisted, taking a longer view of the process, looking at the anthology as a permanent record of the list. The power dynamic shifted. We were no longer a team of people, everyone participating to her ability and inclination, with equal say in the process. Annie was the founder of the listserv and a "name" in the poetry world. The anthology depended on her. Consensus is easy when everyone agrees, but what do you do when a group suddenly develops radically different, strongly held opinions about how it should move forward?

Virtual reams of well-thought-out and well-argued emails went back and forth. Some feelings were hurt and some hard things were said out of frustration and misunderstanding. The stability of our little group became uncertain, but what saved us was our common goal. During that time, Moira said she would walk in faith, which I took to mean faith in the process and in everyone's good intentions and dedication to the book. And so when the difficult things were said, we tried to overlook the frustration and see that we all had the same goal. And eventually we each found a way to embrace the expanded anthology. It would have been easier for one person to dictate our course of action, but as each of us expressed our views and our ideas on how to make things work, we came up with a collective vision. It was strong, hard-won, and true to each of us.

Lesley

Annie's request, while grounded in a spirit of inclusiveness we all value enormously, initiated a significant crisis. The original collection had been created through an open call, and we had turned down latecomers after that call had closed – it did not seem fair now to add only a select few. Logistical concerns also troubled us: we felt too exhausted to put out a new general call that could enlarge the book significantly, introduce errors, and involve another long time commitment.

After much discussion, we created a new submission process that reflected the same standards of openness and self-selection that had operated during our first call for poems and essays. A short window for submissions kept the number of new contributors to about

60, a 30% increase over the size of the original book. Red Hen's willingness to publish a larger book, and the fact that we all wanted our anthology to reflect Wom-po's remarkable constituency, made a new, expanded book possible in another year's time. The wompos who had joined the list since the first call were enthusiastic and grateful for the opportunity. Their excitement supported us as we dove into the process again.

Annie Finch

I began to realise late in the process that the listserv had gotten much more diverse since the anthology began and that it would be good and important for the anthology to reflect this. I felt terrible requesting a change, after all the team's work, but it seemed essential to me. When I offered to do much of the additional work myself, they declined, but I wasn't off the hook that easily, because I needed to be part of the process of dealing with the group while the decision was being made. I think it took about a month of daily exhaustive emails. In the end I learned a lot and gained a lot of respect for the editors. It gave me a feeling of clarity, that the process had been transparent and fair to the wishes of everyone involved in the editing. At one point, Rosemary emailed me to check in about my motivations and feelings about one of the steps I was taking. I was struck by her dedication to the process and by the depth of her commitment to honesty and fairness. It was a privilege to work with the group during this difficult time. I learned a lot about feminist process.

In the time of crisis, Ann H wrote:

*There are two visions of this anthology in conflict here, with deep investment in both. One is a vision of the anthology as a representation of a process – a profoundly non-hierarchical volunteer process of collaboration, almost unprecedented in this world.*

*The other vision is that the anthology should be the best representation of an ideal Wom-po – a vision that while it may appreciate the process, views process as obviously subordinate to the final product. It is the view of someone who has edited many anthologies, lives in the world of publishing and representation, and understands how to get things done.*

*Perhaps both of these approaches – in their extreme forms – are ideals. Those of us longing to see a totally collaborative project succeed are touchy about an authority coming in and changing the process. Those of us who see more diversity in an ideal representation of Wom-po can't understand why people would get so invested in a process that they might be perceived by others as being inhospitable.*

*This seems like a classic problem in feminism – and representation. Let's not get caught in the binary. Is there a way we can bring these two views into a creative tension?*

Rachel Dacus

When our close-to-complete manuscript was opened up again by the insistence, not of any one participant in our collaborative process, but by someone who had stood outside it, I felt sad. I felt the tissue of something delicate and amazing being torn in service of politics and public opinion. It did not feel right to me to yield to this pressure, and I was disappointed when as a group we did yield to the request to open up the process and, despite all the work already completed to finish a manuscript, allow members who had joined since the inception of the book to send poems for inclusion.

On reflection, after seeing that this remarkable online collaboration has risen to the occasion and absorbed and moved past what felt to me like a disruption, I am impressed with the cohesion and integrity of our process. I think every collaborative effort must find the way to absorb and transform conflict if it is to cohere and succeed. Our anthology collaborators did so. They moved in a magnificent spirit of inclusiveness and determination not to sink under the usual burdens imposed by conflict from within or without.

That we now have *Letters to the World* out in the world speaks of a new spirit – one which I think women are uniquely suited to pioneer – a spirit of collaboration and cooperation as the new paradigm for work and art and life.

## OUTCOMES

Moira

The thing that drove/sustained me in the beginning was the picture of this book of poems in my hand, on my shelf. Now that it's there, I look back and find that is my secondary, perhaps tertiary reward. Best of all for me is knowing that I was part of a successful collaboration, one that both worked well and that completed its project successfully. Second was to see our vision of the content actualised. Way back when we started it seemed rather idealised, perhaps unattainable, and yet it was possible after all.

Rosemary

A kind of practical trust had to develop first: we had to get to know each other and figure out how each person operated. Eventually our underlying devotion to this project and the ideals that supported it became obvious, and we learned we could depend on each other's commitment to manifesting our shared vision. This feeling deepened during our crisis over whether and how to expand the book; we were pushed by this conflict into clearly defining what our ideals and guiding principles were.

But then there came a leap, and it was in realising that our movement forward, past the crisis and into all the work that had to be done, depended on an absolute trust in everyone's good intentions, dedication, reliability, creativity, and general brilliance. For me it was a stunning, concrete example of an abstract spiritual principle: that we human beings really do come shining forth in an atmosphere of high regard and openness. It's a case of positive self-fulfilling prophecy. I certainly felt that attitude at work in our group and supporting me.

Athena Kildegaard

Art, discovery, honesty seem to me to be at the core of the creation of this anthology. We all had preconceived ideas at the beginning, but as the process unfolded we felt comfortable abandoning them. That's what creative collaboration can do when it's working, which it so clearly has been!

It's important for everyone to be able to say what she thinks; but it's not ideal for anyone to have to compromise. What's ideal is to find a way to work together, to wrangle over the issue, and to find ways to collaborate rather than compromise.

Ann H

Collaboration requires saying and having to listen to painful things sometimes, and then not walking away. That's what quite takes my breath away – that those who had invested so much were willing to persevere through this process. There's something really powerful and energising about that endurance of a vision. This book is an eloquent testimony to collaboration.

Ellen

We found ourselves in a very good place at the end of the collaboration. We put together a wonderful document and survived some serious shit to do so. At one point there was some conversation about trying to take our collaboration further and start a publishing collective. Maybe six months or a year from now we will miss each other's voices and reconvene to publish a smaller anthology. Whether or not this happens, the impulse to do it speaks to the tremendous creative charge of our process.

## SOURCES

The principles that characterised the process of creating *Letters to the World* revealed themselves to us incrementally, though they were operative from the beginning. We had a vision – we knew that we wanted both the book and our process to reflect the egalitarian nature of Wom-po and the Internet – but the project's rapid evolution limited theoretical discussion. We were thrust immediately into the work of producing the book, getting to know one another, and figuring out how to collaborate. We examined every pending decision about procedure and policy in relation to our ideals, but it was only when we encountered crisis midway, and later when we finished the book, that we stopped to see what the literature had to say. As we state in the afterword to *Letters*, “We groped and stumbled toward an efficient process that remained true to our collective vision ...” (407).

Critical literature about collaboration, we found, corroborates much of our experience. Lisa Ede and Angela Lunsford, in their book, *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), describe two modes of working together: hierarchical, “a widespread means of producing texts in all the professions,” and dialogic, in which “the process of articulating goals is often as important as the goals themselves and sometimes more important...we think of this mode as predominantly feminine” (133). *Letters to the World* resulted from such dialogic editorial collaboration.

Helen Cafferty and Jeannette Clausen also affirm our conviction that our process was demonstrably feminist, as well as feminine, in their essay, “What's Feminist about It? Reflections on Collaboration in Editing and Writing” (in *Common Ground: Feminist Collaboration in the Academy*, edited by Elizabeth G Peck and JoAnna Stephens Mink, Albany: SUNY Press, 1997). For them, feminist collaborations share distinctions that set them apart from other forms of collaboration: “[W]e believe that feminist collaboration does not ‘just happen,’ but is constructed with varying success through conscious and unconscious choices affirming the feminist politics of inclusion, power sharing, egalitarianism, consensus and trust in the context of shared feminist commitments” (83). The afterword to *A Women's Picture Book: 25 Women Artists of Aotearoa (New Zealand)*, (Wellington: Government Printing, 1988) by

two of the editors, Marian Evans and Bridie Lonie, illustrates the complexities involved in the idealised politics of inclusion and egalitarianism and the many precipices we walk along on the way to consensus. Though we improvised through every phase, the shared vision that guided us matches Cafferty and Clausen's ideals while echoing part of Evans' and Lonie's experiences.

While mirroring recent feminist theory and practice, the process that unfolded in the creation of *Letters to the World* also made use of methods and attitudes that predated the feminist second wave and influenced both the feminist and Internet cultures from which our project emerged. Quaker thought, with its emphasis on the manifestation of divine light in each individual, allowed many Quaker women in the nineteenth century "to speak out with authority on public issues such as...universal suffrage" and informed the consensus politics used in Quaker governance (see *The Reader's Companion to U.S. Women's History*, edited by Wilma Mankiller et al., Boston: Houghton Mifflin Books, 1998, 484). The early suffragists may also have been influenced by the then proximate and flourishing Native American Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) who also practiced consensus politics but enjoyed a gender equity unknown in Europe or the United States (see Mankiller et al., 189, and the chapter "Who is Your Mother? Red Roots of White Feminism" in Paula Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

The Quaker approach to consensus is typical in that it is not about achieving unanimity, but incorporating all views into the creation of a solution everyone can live with and agree is best for the group. Productive, effective and innately pluralistic, their methods have been adapted and used by grassroots movements around the world, including the Internet itself. Our Internet-based editorial collective reflected the Internet's inherent egalitarianism, and our process the radical transparency that has characterised the Internet since its beginnings. (See "'Rough Consensus and Running Code' and the Internet-OSI Standards War," Andrew L Russell, *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing*, July–September 2006, 48–61.)

As poets, we can speculate that we were drawn to this form of collaboration because of its generative potential: "When consensus works well, it becomes a creative process." (See *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery*, Starhawk, New York: HarperOne, 1989, 184.) Like earlier feminists and Internet pioneers, we developed a faith in the consensus process itself and in the intelligence, goodwill, and creativity of the individuals in our group. The trust that developed among us was arguably the most powerful and productive tool at our disposal. Good listening, patience, openness, respect for difference, and, perhaps, the cooling distance of the Internet were the operative factors in our case. Though we agree with Cafferty and Clausen that our successful process did not "just happen," we also do not rule out a measure of luck and grace.

As part of these Poets' Pages, we include three poems as a sample from *Letters to the World* below. The authors have agreed to the reprinting of their poems for this purpose.

**Length** by Ivy Alvarez

I could collect  
basketfuls of my hair  
knit a little rug from  
what I've shed

you could weave a carpet  
lay down whole rooms  
a house  
down the street  
and out into the highway  
with yours

a full twenty years on me  
plus the chemotherapy  
you've got a head start

the miles you could've covered  
with your hair

**Fluid, fecund, forget me**

**not** by Metta Sáma

Yes. The moon metaphors you. A pulse of  
Yes. The moon metamorphoses you. A push of  
Yes. The moon metathesizes you. A pucker of  
Yes. The moon meteorites you. A puddle of  
Yes. The moon. Metonym. You. Pukka.  
You. A punch. A meta-. A muse. The yes.  
You. A metallic puff. The powdered mood. Yes.

***The Paper-Wasp*** by Christine Whitemore

I tracked her by the sound her mouthparts made:  
rasp, rasp on a dry stick. She straddled it  
and worked her jaws, reviving something dead,  
collecting shreds of fiber. Once, in Egypt,  
strips of plant stem, pressed in crisscross bands,  
were made into smooth sheets – a list, a map  
of the world beyond, a glove for midwives' hands  
so the child, born into papyrus, would not slip.  
Rasp, rasp on a dead stalk; she chews old string  
to papier-mâché, builds her fluted chambers,  
a symmetry of shadows, multiplying.  
Her children prosper, folded in the aumbries,  
cradled in paper, smocked in the complex fabric,  
the house the wasp has made, her enduring book.

**Margo Berdeshevsky** lives in Paris, France. Her book, *But a Passage in Wilderness*, was recently published by The Sheep Meadow Press.

**Rachel Dacus**'s new poetry collection is *Femme au chapeau*. More of her writing can be found at [www.dacushome.com](http://www.dacushome.com)

**Ann Fisher-Wirth**'s third book of poems, *Carta Marina*, will be published in 2009. She teaches at the University of Mississippi.

**Annie Finch**'s recent books include *Calendars* and *The Body of Poetry*. She directs the Stonecoast Brief-Residency MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Southern Maine.

**Ellen Goldstein**'s poems have appeared in *Poetry Southeast*, *StorySouth*, *The Formalist*, and *Lilith* (forthcoming). She lives in Massachusetts, United States.

**Ann Hostetler** is the author of *Empty Room with Light* and the editor of *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*. She teaches at Goshen College in Indiana, United States.

**Louisa Howerow** is a Canadian writer.

**Lillian Baker Kennedy** is the author of several poetry collections, most recently *Leavings*. Kennedy practices law and lives in an old cape bordered by wild roses in Maine, United States.

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**D’Arcy Randall** co-founded *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review* and teaches at the University of Texas at Austin. Before moving to Texas, she worked as fiction editor for the University of Queensland Press in Australia.

Google “**Moira Richards**” to find links to her essays on women abuse, her reviews of woman-authored books, and to other writing and editing work she does for various print and e-publications. Offline she writes accounting textbooks and a poem or two.

**Rosemary Starace** is a poet and visual artist living in Massachusetts, United States. She apprenticed in feminist collaboration and process at The New York Feminist Art Institute in the early 1980s. See her writing and art at [rosemarystarace.com](http://rosemarystarace.com)

**Lesley Wheeler** is the author of *Scholarship Girl* and *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present*. She teaches at Washington and Lee University in Virginia, United States.