

# *Infinite Difference*



# Infinite Difference

*Other Poetries by UK Women Poets*

edited by

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*for my nieces—*

*Katelyn, Kaylee, Lindsey, Sara and Josslyn—*

*in all their possibility*





## Introduction

This anthology gathers poetries not readily found in the pages of Britain's broadsheets or larger-circulation literary journals. More implicitly, *Infinite Difference* makes the case that Britain's tendency to divide poetry into the categories of "Mainstream" and "Experimental" or "Avant Garde" undermines our sense of the rich array of poetries being written. While this range might place at one end a linear narrative poem, and at the other end a fragmented, associative one, the land between is rich and various. The expanse might be further evidenced by suggesting different extremes as points of reference, such as the degree of engagement with the natural environment. The poetries being written in Britain today might in fact be regarded as being on a spectrum holding infinite points of difference, and this anthology as bringing to a larger audience work on that spectrum that has had limited, if not quite ultraviolet, visibility.<sup>1</sup>

While it is beyond the scope of this introduction to survey the reception of this division as it operates in the United States and the UK, one indicator is telling. A significant difference between the poetry culture of the United States and that of the United Kingdom is that work regarded as Other to the Mainstream, in the UK, never receives established prizes.<sup>2</sup> The most recognized awards for poetry in the UK are the T. S. Eliot Prize, the Costa Prize, and the Forward Prize, for individual books. Even those Other poets who have gained international acclaim have never made the shortlists for these prizes, and now, certain it will merely waste time and money, some publishers forego sending their non-Mainstream work for prize consideration at all.<sup>3</sup>

With these prizes and their shortlistings come review articles in national newspapers such as *The Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Independent*, invitations for readings at festivals and universities, and commissions, among other forms of critical and financial support. A poet whose work is regarded as of the Mainstream has a far greater chance of obtaining these opportunities than one whose poetry is not. This is to say that in Britain, poetry's cultural capital remains squarely with the Mainstream, or the most commonly written poetries.

While this account begins to explain why the work herein has not received much notice in this country, a further question remains: Why focus on women? Isn't a women's anthology unnecessary, particularly

in British poetry where one can easily name prominent women writers such as Moniza Alvi, Carol Ann Duffy, Selima Hill, Sinéad Morrissey, Alice Oswald and many more?

In her introduction to *Women's Work: Modern Women Poets Writing in English*, Eva Salzman argues convincingly for the continued need for women's anthologies, by reviewing the surprisingly low proportions of women to men in even the most recent anthologies and by recounting the still dismissive and gendered critical language often used to describe women's poetry.<sup>4</sup> In the second part of her essay, focusing on the work in the anthology and the scope of modern poetry by women, Salzman notes that many of them have been inspired by the Black Mountain Poets, the New York Poets, and Language poets. While a few such poets are acknowledged and included, such as Lyn Hejinian, Fanny Howe, and Lorine Niedecker, Salzman's choice of comparatively normative poems by these women obscures the extent of their variety and range. *Women's Work* provides an array of poetries and numerous fine poems, but its scope is limited to the more Mainstream end of the spectrum, with unrepresentative poems from poets who tend to work outside it; it also extends beyond Britain to include other Anglophone poets, especially American.

Looking specifically at the position of Other women poets in the UK, in its October 2007 edition *Jacket* published the forum "Post-Marginal Positions: Women and the UK Experimental/Avant-Garde Poetry Community," moderated by Catherine Wagner.<sup>5</sup> Here such poets as Andrea Brady and Geraldine Monk offered possible explanations for the relative absence of women outside the Mainstream in the UK, as compared to the States. As Emily Critchley remarks, "Andrea Brady and others that I have asked raise the important point, with which I concur, that there may be a dearth of women writing experimentally in Britain to begin with (especially compared with America). Again, this would seem down to historical and environmental conditions that have excluded women, or put them off being part of this scene, until very recently. The cliquishness and vocal dominance of men at past poetry readings surely repelled some from even attempting to be part of such a collective, not only because of the peculiar mix of sociability and self-promotion such events demand and indeed rely on (marginal to mainstream culture as they are) but also 'because it was implicitly made clear [...women] weren't welcome' as Robert Hampson has suggested (in an email to the UK poetry list, 26 Sept 2006)." Alternatively, Monk

avers that this dearth comes not from male poets' conduct but "just because there weren't that many women interested in experimentation" and suggests several reasons for this.

Notably these "historical and environmental conditions" include the fact that the preponderance of publishers of non-Mainstream works and organizers of events by their poets have been men, yet in recent years this has begun to change. In 2006 Critchley organized the Contemporary Experimental Women's Poetry Festival at Cambridge, and in 2008, Zoë Skouilding took over editorship of *Poetry Wales* and has since broadened the magazine's scope. Brady founded Archive of the Now in 2005, a text- and audio-based online collection of poetry "committed to supporting non-mainstream poetry which may be excluded from similar projects."<sup>6</sup> Reality Street Editions, a merger of Wendy Mulford's Street Editions and Ken Edwards' Reality Studios, maintains its commitment to the publication of women's poetries, best known in this regard for its 1996 anthology *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetries by Women in North America and the UK*, edited by Maggie O'Sullivan. In addition, *Damn the Caesars*<sup>7</sup> and Shearsman Books have publicly declared their desire to receive—and so to publish—more work by women.

Toward this end, it is important to keep our understanding of the range of Other poetries as broad as possible. Other should not simply replace "avant garde" or "experimental"; it should cast beyond those exhausted categories. As Caroline Bergvall remarked at the London launch of the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* last year, "Can one hope that this is also opening the door for the recognition and study of poetic forms that have hitherto had an erratic, marginalized presence within English. I'm thinking here about the expanded poetics that have emerged for the past say, twenty years and that are radically redefining the terms by which poetics overall will function. Some call it 'expanded writing', 'literary arts', 'performance writing', 'performative writing', 'off-page writing', etc. They are inseparable from the changing writing, publishing and dissemination modes through which we're encountering text in social culture."<sup>8</sup> Other poetries—no, *poetry*—should be as inclusive as possible.

This anthology does not purport to provide a balanced representation of recent Other poetries by women born, or resident in, the UK, so much as the best such work available. Solicitations to the admirable O'Sullivan and Monk, already widely anthologized, were

respectfully denied, on account of the focus on women and the desire not to be categorized; a few other requests for work were ignored altogether. This anthology does, however, provide a vibrant snapshot at a time of burgeoning poetic activity. Five of the twenty-five contributors (arranged in this volume by age) have yet to bring out their first full-length poetry collections, while another five have only published one. This is an exciting time for women's Other poetries in the UK, an advance it is hoped this anthology will further.

For advice, assistance, and in some cases emotional support, thanks go to Andrea Brady, Matt Bryden, Claire Crowther, Ken Edwards, Robert Hampson, Sophie Mayer, Richard Price, Scott Thurston, Catherine Wagner, and the Pussipo listserv. Editor and publisher Tony Frazer has devoted innumerable hours to this project, and for that I am most grateful.

Carrie Etter  
Bradford on Avon, England  
February 2010

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> My use of the word Other to denote a range of non-Mainstream poetries, while similar to Richard Caddel's and Peter Quartermain's use of the word in the introduction to their anthology, *Other: British and Irish Poetry Since 1970* (Hanover, NH & London: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), does not suppose those Other poetries as necessarily oppositional.
- <sup>2</sup> Recent winners of significant American prizes, who would not be considered as belonging to the Mainstream, include Fanny Howe, 2009 winner of The Poetry Foundation's Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, Nathaniel Mackey, 2006 winner of the National Book Award in Poetry, Keith Waldrop, 2009 winner of the National Book Award in Poetry, Alice Notley, 2007 winner of the Academy of American Poets' Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize—et cetera.
- <sup>3</sup> As the editors of Reality Street Editions and Shearsman Books attest.
- <sup>4</sup> Eva Salzman and Amy Wack, eds. *Women's Work: Modern Women Poets Writing in English* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 2008). See also Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young, "Numbers Trouble," *Chicago Review* 53:2/3 (88–111), which focuses on the situation in the United States.
- <sup>5</sup> <http://jacketmagazine.com/34/wagner-forum.shtml> Accessed 10 January 2010.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.archiveofthenow.com> Accessed 11 January 2010.

<sup>7</sup> While situated in the US, *Damn the Caesars* has maintained a steady interest in Other British poetries. On the problem of receiving submissions from women poets, see the entry for November 20, 2007, titled 'Considering the Body Count'; [http://damnthecaesars.blogspot.com/2007\\_11\\_01\\_archive.html](http://damnthecaesars.blogspot.com/2007_11_01_archive.html)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.scribd.com/doc/22924473/Journal-of-British-and-Irish-Innovative-Poetry-Birkbeck-Launch-Event-2009-Selected-Papers>, page 21. Accessed 10 January 2010.