

## Introduction— Twentieth-Century Poetry: Expanding Archives and Methods

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THIS CLUSTER OF ESSAYS IS AN ASSEMBLAGE RATHER THAN A REPERTOIRE OF SOLICITED SCHOLARSHIP ON A GIVEN TOPIC. THE EDITORIAL

Board of *PMLA* discovered among the accepted manuscripts a group of essays on late-twentieth-century United States poetry and two documents of historical importance to it: the transcript of an interview with the poet Maxine Kumin conducted by Diane Middlebrook for her biography of Anne Sexton and an exchange of letters between Lola Ridge and Harold Loeb in which they debated the future course of American modernism as Ridge fought to retain editorial authority over *Broom: An International Magazine of the Arts*. Two of the four essays deal with canonical confessional poets, one by attending to the readings and recordings of Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Allen Ginsberg, and Robert Lowell, the other by exploring Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell's embrace of traditional marriage and patriotic nationalism through the realist novel; one essay reads the poetry of contemporary male disabled poets as they attempt to deconstruct normative masculinity; one identifies a subgenre of twentieth-century poetry, that of passenger flight, and explores the insights into globalization it provides. At first blush, the unifying elements of this cluster can only be periodization and genre: twentieth-century poetry, with a particular interest in confessional poetry. Because it was not solicited, the editors had no obligation to cover the other so-called movements in poetry of the late twentieth century or to capture subtypes of experimentation or patterns of historical or lateral influence, all subjects of most critical attention for the past forty years. The cluster's serendipitous coalescence then relieves us of having to consider once again what Christopher Grobe calls the "factional skirmishes" of the period and allows speculation about the persistence of questions generated by confessional poetry and its sibling arts without too much reading into the tea leaves of coincidence.

By involving poetry in fields to which it is typically eccentric—performance studies, disability studies, gender and sexuality studies (and something like intimacy studies), and studies of glo-

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balization<sup>1</sup>—all the essays attempt something other than or in addition to the study of twentieth-century poetry, deriving their motivations from outside the genre and its habits of criticism while also preserving the practice of close reading and the engagement with the poetic tradition characteristic of the field. These essays make the case for poetry's value to other areas of inquiry, not merely as one more object that displays their concerns but as one that contributes new paradigms to the intersecting field. While the cluster may only represent a new episode in the poetry critic's unrequited love for other practices of knowledge formation, late-twentieth-century poetry in the United States was hardly siloed from the major forms of artistic innovation, the groups of artists who carried them out, or the politics that fueled some arts practice. More importantly and in their own practice, these scholars insist on the strong relation between poetic experimentation and the forms of intellectual inquiry that evolved in the late twentieth century, stimulated as both were by changes in everyday life, like the increased availability of passenger flight or the new technologies of sound recording; by political upheavals like the civil rights, antiwar, and feminist and gay liberation movements; and by the radical pluralization of the public sphere, one of the most momentous phenomena of the last seventy years, however much it remains a work in progress.<sup>2</sup>

Both historical documents carry on the unfinished business of feminist literary criticism by revisiting several of its earliest concerns: the exclusion of women from literary production and from the later histories of it, anxieties of female authorship, and the material conditions of women's writing. The exchange between Ridge and Loeb reminds us of the forms of exclusion that elided, where they did not entirely block, women's contributions to literary culture. Finding such examples is not news, but the never complete project of recovery enriches the histories of literary culture

and provides additional perspectives from which to view the what-ifs of canon formation. Kumin's narrative begins with her account of Anne Sexton's anxiety of authorship, provoked by her vexed relationship to her teacher, John Holmes, who had vehemently criticized her use of her biography in her poems. The question of whether confessional poetry was art or life, which plagued its early reception, lingers in Middlebrook and Kumin's shared insistence on Sexton's craft. The interview also describes the material conditions of their writing. Kumin and Sexton's solidarity, essential to their success as poets, was mediated by the phone line they kept open while both wrote and took care of their young children. (This dyadic relationship is the female equivalent of or analogy to Michael Davidson's male coteries in *Guys like Us*.) That Kumin's story of writing poetry in the late 1950s and early 1960s sounds like an episode from Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* suggests why confessional poetry had a ready audience in the coming second-wave feminist movement.

The worrisome collapse of art and life was resolved in favor of art in the ensuing decades, or, to borrow from Robert Lowell, the raw was slowly cooked as critics paid more attention to the artifice required for the successful appearance of sincerity, spontaneity, or authenticity. Christopher Grobe's brilliant essay restores the split and the aggravation it causes by remixing the printed poem with its live or recorded performance. In "The Breath of the Poem: Confessional Print/Performance circa 1959," Grobe rescues sincerity, crucial to the arts and politics of the period, from the either-or that makes little sense of confessional poetry or any of the autobiographical arts of the late twentieth century. Performing sincerity, he argues, is not another way of saying hypocrisy but rather a commitment to sincerity in a public mode. By making the art-life distinction a broader category encompassing happenings and method acting, Grobe gestures toward another way to view

confessional poetry. Of course, it belongs to a vertical tradition of memoirs, autobiographies, and the lyric, themselves staples of print culture in the late twentieth century and now, but it also belongs to a tradition of raw art. Andy Warhol's film *Sleep* and documentary poetry, New Journalism (particularly by Norman Mailer and Michael Herr) and found art, offer gobbets of the raw material of experience, the psyche, and the world, whose mediation is both transforming and not. In this tension lies the fascination—or boredom—of seeing the world sort of made new.

Susan Mintz's discussion of male disabled poets in "Lyric Bodies: Poets on Disability and Masculinity" takes for granted the confessionalism of their work and the exposure of the body that confessional poetry and other arts of the twentieth century pioneered. This exposure propels the search for a masculinity that is inhabitable by disabled poets, who seek to dismantle normative masculinity and participate in more fluid and unstable versions. Likewise, in "Conventions of Closeness: Realism and the Creative Friendship of Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell," Hugh McIntosh makes Bishop and Lowell into a queer couple, demonstrating their deep attraction to traditional marriage and patriotic nationalism, no matter how much Lowell did to dismantle a traditional marriage in *Life Studies* and *The Dolphin* or how little the expatriate lesbian Bishop seemed to care about the fate of the nation-state. The fields of gender and sexuality studies, the insights of disability studies and performance studies, all make confessional poetry look more *and* less like what we have taken it to be. While the queer embrace of marriage has become commonplace in the twenty-first century, it is surprising to see it in the poems and letters of Lowell and Bishop.

"One World? The Poetics of Passenger Flight and the Perception of the Global" might look like an outlier to this grouping,

and in many ways it is. Nonetheless, Marit MacArthur begins with James Merrill's "Flying from Byzantium," a poem of sexual tourism that organizes her analysis along the vector of intimacy and distance, or, more accurately, the unearned intimacy of the privileged passenger fleeing the site of contact. The claims of the global other are, she argues, always discounted in the regime of privilege facilitated by passenger flight, which makes this neglect all the more apparent and painful to watch when it is not being critiqued for the oppression it allows.

In a field that is as newly historical as the late twentieth century, the habits of professional specialization by genre are perhaps more debilitating than in other, more well-defined historical periods. This cluster offers the welcome opportunity for studies of poetry to find conversations beyond the history of the form and to insert the genre into the cultural histories of the period that often overlook it. The stories we tell of the late-twentieth-century United States can all too easily sound like an endless loop of the era's iconic moments. Only through aggressive rethinking of both macro and micro histories will we begin to know what just happened to us.

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## NOTES

1. I mean not that poetry is a stranger to these fields but only that a cluster on performance poetry or the poetry of globalization would be read primarily by those interested in poetry, not in the two other fields.

2. See the retort Rita Dove makes to Helen Vendler's review of *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, which Dove edited.

## WORK CITED

Dove, Rita. Letter. *The New York Review of Books*. NYREV, 22 Dec. 2011. Web. 5 Mar. 2012.