PART I

Mappings and Chronologies

CHAPTER 1

Critical Mapping I
The Category of the "Woman Poet" – An Introduction, by Way of Mapping

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The twentieth century in America spans a period tumultuous in its changes, multiplicitous in its populations, and effusive in its poetic and critical voices. How women have absorbed, commented upon, engaged with, defied, celebrated, and contributed to the varied cultures of poetry emergent alongside American modernity offers rich material and raises many questions in *A History of Twentieth-Century American Poetry by Women.* Indeed, questions motivate much of the literary history told here, beginning with fundamental questions of who, when, why, and how – questions of visibility and record are inseparable from questions of analysis and interpretation. Taken together, these chapters map ways of thinking about and through a particular, central set of questions compelled by the project itself and its defining terms: what does the category of "American women poets" mean, and how might it be understood (and justified) through the telling of many necessary, but necessarily incomplete, histories? How is history told, to what purpose, by whom and for whom? How can histories remain open to multiple narratives, voices, or critical engagements? What do we mean by "woman"? What do we mean by "American"? What do we mean by "history"? The chapters that follow address these questions from many directions and through myriad lenses, and uncover a rich panoply of responses.

As a starting point, it is accurate to say that the category of "women poets" has relentlessly coursed through discussions of poetry since well before the twentieth century, often for the purpose or with the effect of defining the woman poet as separate, different, and usually inferior to her male counterparts. Through much of the century and prior, she is most often presumed white and heterosexual. Value-laden language consistently places women poets into a lower sphere, endowed with lower faculties of feeling and fancy, and capable only of a limited scope and craft. Within the

cultural binaries that hold through much of the century, women poets are associated with popular mass culture rather than art, with expressions of emotion rather than higher thinking. Historically, women are positioned in poetry as either objects (not makers) of culture or, if the rare maker, far less capable than men, or not really "womanly." The idea of "woman" and the idea of "poet" have, through much of Western poetry's history, seemed utterly incompatible, even, at times, to women poets themselves.

Such categorization, for many years, has alternated with erasure and invisibility. Although the first book of poetry in the colonies was by a woman, Anne Bradstreet, and the first volume of poetry published by an African-American poet was also by a woman, Phillis Wheatley, the first anthologies of American poetry, intent on promoting nationalistic claims for a distinctively American literature, did so primarily through the poetry of men, while reserving a moral function for women's poetry through separating poets by gender. When Rufus Griswold published the first anthology of American women's poetry, *Gems from American Female Poets* (1842), which followed his anthology of the same year, *The Poets and Poetry of America*, he drew a line between women's poetry of feeling and men's poetry of intellect, reflecting his culture's distinctions.[1] By the 1870s, Griswold's popular anthologies divided men and women into completely different collections, based on and furthering gendered categories of poets and poetry, with men culled under the universalizing label of "Poets" while women's anthology titles remained marked by gender.

Such qualifications endure well into the twentieth century. Almost a hundred years after Griswold separated American women poets under the banner of "feeling," John Crowe Ransom's 1938 essay "The Poet as Woman" attributed poetry of the intellect to men, relegating a diminished poetry of emotion to women. An essay on Edna St. Vincent Millay, this critical piece stands as a classic example not only of classifying women poets in terms of gendered deficiencies but also authorizing the male critic as the ideal reader, explicitly because of his maleness. Endowed with intellect, the "hardened male observer" (77) presides over the body of women's verse, invoking an end directive, couched as a piece of poetic wit, that the excesses of that body (here, a metrical excess) might best be resolved if "he [the critic] lops off her feet" (110). The problem with Millay and her body of poetry, Ransom announces initially, is that Millay the poet "is also a woman. No poet ever registered her-self more deliberately in that light" (78). For Ransom, her womanhood shapes the poem, not merely through the poet speaking as a woman, but more damningly through the poet's "lack of intellectual interest," which "the male reader misses in her poetry"

and sees as a clear "deficiency in masculinity" (98). A poet of the heart, "Miss Millay is rarely and barely very intellectual, and I think everybody knows that" (78); indeed, the "intellectual adult male" has a "feeling of guilt" (98) in reading Millay – especially her "little girl-things" (for women are rarely adults, it seems) (82) – for although his "heart wants to be in it," it cannot be, because "his intellect is not in it" (98). This "deficiency" mars her poetic craft, for she "is not a good conventional or formalist poet . . . [S]he allows the forms to bother her and push her into absurdities" (103). Ransom extends his critique of this one woman's formal inadequacies into generalizations about women as a group, intoning "I imagine there are few women poets of whom this is not so, and it would be because they are not strict enough and expert enough to manage forms, – in their default of the disciplines under which men are trained" (103).[2] Women's messiness – too much poetic body with too little control – demands that feet be lopped off and male critics do the lopping.

The gendered divide of intellect and feeling translates into modernism's – and New Criticism's – articulations of form as a male province. While Ransom's quip about feet ostensibly draws a metaphoric relation between poetic body and material bodies, the biological differences of men and women usually lurk in the background of such articulations and sometimes brightly light up the stage. Perhaps most infamously, Ezra Pound, writing his own theories of gendered creativity in the "Translator's Postscript" penned in June of 1921 for his translation of Remy de Gourmont's *The Natural Philosophy of Love*, described the "power of the spermatazoid" as "precisely the power of exteriorizing a form" (207). Pound, influenced by Gourmont's ideas, imagines the "brain itself" as a "sort of great clot of genital fluid held in suspense or reserve" (206). Postulating that "man [is] really the phallus or spermatozoid charging, head-on, [and] the female [is] chaos," Pound locates this "integration of the male in the male organ," proclaiming potently that "Even oneself has felt it, driving any new idea into the great passive vulva of London, a sensation analogous to the male feeling in copulation" (207). The "individual genius" is the "man in whom the new access, the new superfluity of spermatozoic pressure . . . upshots into the brain, alluvial Nile-flood, bringing new crops, new invention" (217–18). Not wanting to write an "anti-feminist tract," Pound concedes a role for woman as "the conservator, the inheritor of past gestures, clever, practical, . . . not inventive, always the best disciple of any inventor" (217). She is the perfect apprentice, muse, mentee, and rarely the individual genius. Not wanting, however, to claim "disproportionate privilege for the spermatozoid," he

imagines, "for the sake of symmetry," a "cognate role to the ovule," in which the "ovular bath could still account for the refreshment of the female mind, and the recharging, regracing of its 'traditional' aptitudes" (208). Like Ransom some years later, he warns of the dangers of excess when it comes to the female body and the body of poetry that might be produced by women, for a "flood is as bad as a famine," and, ominously, "where one woman appears to benefit by an alluvial clarifying, ten dozen appear to be swamped" (208). Beware the swamp, the slither, and the softness he condemns over and over in discoursing on modern poetry.

As a rare woman poet considered exempt from such accusations by powerful midcentury male voices evaluating poetry, Louise Bogan entered the gendered conversation from her post as poetry editor for the *New Yorker* (1931–1969) and author of the history *Achievement in American Poetry, 1900–1950*. Noting as an aside that "the whole involved question of the woman as artist cannot be dealt with here," her 1951 history identifies and values, if ambivalently, a "line of feeling" that women poets have fostered and men largely abandoned from the nineteenth century forward (23). For Bogan, this "warmth of feeling" is valuable when practiced with "[f]reshness and sincerity of emotion, and economical directness of method" (22, 27), but too easily abused and contributing in a "large measure to the general leveling, dilution, and sentimentalization of verse . . . during the nineteenth century" and "a redoubtable and often completely ridiculous record of sentimental feminine attitudinizing in verse" to the present day (23, 24). Nonetheless, a "reinforcement of the line of feeling" in the twentieth century, "again chiefly due to a feminine vein of lyricism," has been "reinvigorated by the *addition of intellectual qualities*" (78, emphasis added). The "new subtleties of emotional nuance" in Sara Teasdale's work, for example, mark "a declaration of personal revolt [that] is striking when uttered in a woman's voice" (79), and the feminine lyric has reached more "mature emotional richness" in Elinor Wylie's "brilliance of craftsmanship" (80). Poor, anti-intellectual, and immature handling of emotion, however, characterizes what elsewhere Bogan condemns in much midcentury verse by women, writing in 1944 that

> the sentiment of a given period is nowhere so well distilled as in the contemporary verse . . . by women either as a serious literary exercise or merely to get something off their minds. The fashionable attitude, the decorative emotion, the sweeping empty enthusiasm, the sigh that is not yet a tear come through in the works of female versifiers so vividly that we are at once carried off into a 'period' mood of one kind or another.[3]

Bogan's comments grace a review of Muriel Rukeyser's *Beast in View*, which she disliked. Her compulsion to pun on a "'period' mood," suggesting women's poetry as abject bodily excess, also casts "female versifiers" as hopelessly out of date.

Randall Jarrell, carrying forward the New Critical banner in the 1950s, similarly relies on pejorative language regarding female flesh worthy only of the briefest attention, its decorative quality soon passé. Also reviewing Rukeyser, he bemoans, in *Poetry of the Age*, that "[o]ne feels about most of her poems almost as one feels about the girl on last year's calendar" (163). Her "worst and most commonplace lines" chime with advertising rhetoric, feeling like "one is listening to the Common Woman of our century, a siren photographed in a sequin bathing-suit, on rocks like boiled potatoes, for the weekend edition of *PM*, in order to bring sex to the deserving poor" (165–66). Her poems, like a confused adolescent, are "all flesh and feeling and fantasy," while "the poem keeps repeating . . . that it is a *good* girl" (166; original emphasis). In another essay from the same period, writing on the role of the (male) critic and echoing Ransom, he complains about receiving the "worst" books to review, describing them in a metaphor linking their disposability to women's bodies and cosmetic vanity, "as if the writers had sent you their ripped-out arms and legs, with 'This is a poem' scrawled on them in lipstick" (176). Like Ransom's lopped off feet, there is something quite violent about these gendered images of the poet and the critic, reinforcing superior masculine values.

The complex web of gender associations suggested by these few examples says much about the self-regard of the critic (or poet/critic) and the critic's perceived role, particularly as framed to bolster a gendered hierarchy establishing the authority of the male poet and critic that reigned for much of the century and defined canons of reading. Often, this hierarchy finds justification in critical moves that place the woman poet firmly in, and only in, a male poetic tradition. There, she is found to be deficient, or, in the rare exception, differentiated from the pack of women poets by virtue of expressing restrained or no emotion (as in Pound's 1918 praise for Marianne Moore and Mina Loy)[4] or in refraining from faults, most famously, perhaps, delineated by Theodore Roethke in 1960. In his review "The Poetry of Louise Bogan," Roethke saves his fellow poet from the swamp threatening to drown American poetry, for she is "something else" other than most women poets. The review opens by specifying the "charges most frequently leveled against poetry by women," including "a lack of range – in subject matter, in emotional tone – and lack of a sense of humor." For the edification of the reader, Roethke chooses to go further and enumerate "other esthetic and moral shortcomings" (13). These include

> the spinning-out; the embroidering of trivial themes; a concern with mere surfaces of life – that special province of the feminine talent in prose – hiding from the real agonies of the spirit; refusing to face up to what existence is; lyric or religious posturing; running between the boudoir and the altar, stamping a tiny foot against God; or lapsing into a sententiousness that implies the author has re-invented integrity; carrying on excessively about Fate, about time; lamenting the lot of the woman; caterwauling; writing the same poem about fifty times, and so on. (13)

Even women poets garnering praise and awards at midcentury were subject to gendered standards. Stanley Kunitz warns Gwendolyn Brooks in 1950, for example, away from any "cultivation of the early Millay inflection" found in her more "sentimentalized" lyrics and ballads, heralding her sonnet as a more "disciplined organization of her thoughts and feelings."[5] Brooks, as an African-American poet, also invited versions of a certain uplift discourse defining black womanhood in respectable, middle-class terms. Arna Bontemps, himself a veteran poet of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance (where such language of Negro womanhood was both prolific and debated), expresses proud amazement in 1950 that this winner of Guggenheims and the first African American to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize garners such honors "while keeping house for her husband and son in Chicago."[6] Attending to home and family, Brooks at midcentury seemingly poses no danger of excess.

The circumscribing language of domestic femininity, couched here as praise, could also be a handy weapon for pejorative assessments. Adrienne Rich, lauded in the 1950s as a poet of formalist control, suffered attacks for her loosening of form, focus on women's experiences, and adoption of a woman-identified voice distinguishing her 1963 *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* from earlier work and foretelling the feminist directions of her subsequent poetry. In a series of reviews from an almost exclusively male cadre, reviewers bristle at her assertion of a woman's voice and her turn away from formalism, suggesting that the gendered markings of the poetry reveal a regrettable amateurism, the housewife playing at poet. Edgar Robinson, in "Four Lady Poets" (which includes Marianne Moore as one of the "ladies"), complains that Rich's "metaphors crackle hard, like *cereal* stepped on. . .. [There is] No real metaphor or the enlivening of one text by another. So reality is as flat and as understood as an *ad for wheat chex*" (115, emphasis added). The promising young poet has become stale housewife, serving up stale nourishment. Similarly, with a nod to her quick rise to poetic fame beginning with the Yale Younger Poets Award in 1951 for her first volume, R.W. Flint mourns the decline he perceives in Rich's

poetic career, using a clichéd depiction of the ingénue become middle-aged matron: "Once the poet has slipped off her coming-out dress and donned the homely, melodramatic smock, we are as much on guard against an over-neat house as once we feared the party manners" (26). Perhaps most telling is Conrad Pendleton's criticism of Rich's poems, complaining that they communicate "homely experience with merely predictable exactness, unremarkable competence, and dull propriety." Slight as "imagistic vignettes," the poems are "little more than slightly imaged editorials of housewife intelligence to be recited iambically over the fence of a suburban backyard" (32). Not only in light of Rich's accomplishments but also in their display of unexamined heterosexual assumptions of "woman" – weighted as they are here with insulting stereotypes of the domestic – the irony of these comments remains stunning.

The emergence of feminist criticism in the contemporary period has been essential to challenging the kinds of gendered assumptions cited in these few examples above, all drawn from the years prior to contemporary literary feminism but powerful in defining, shaping, and receiving poetry of the twentieth century. When Amy Lowell opened her 1922 poem "The Sisters" with the wry observation that "we're a queer lot / We women who write poetry," her lines carry the imprimatur of her culture's assumption that a poet writes "man-wise," and the woman who writes fails to fit either the notion of poet or of woman, queering the equation (21).[7] Lowell's poem, yearning for a lineage of women poets and gathering some "few" and "sparse" foremothers, redeploys images of woman customarily excluding her from the ranks of poets to suggest distinct creative strengths in the "fragments of ourselves" retrieved from a masculine-centered culture and revalued: "Already mother-creatures, double-bearing, / With matrices in body and brain" (21, 22). As this volume of essays strives to make clear, American women poets throughout the century, like Lowell, have spoken back with force and articulation, although all too often in forums or forms ignored, forgotten, or never in print circulation until the latter part of the century, if at all.

A look back to the earlier modern period is instructive. From those first few decades, we now know that H.D.'s posthumously published *Notes on Thought and Vision*, written in 1919, developed gendered theories of poetic creativity linking body and mind that insisted on the female body as a cite of artistic creativity, echoed in Lowell's "matrices of body and brain," and suggesting a strategic essentialism challenging male models of creativity. H.D. posits two kinds of vision or consciousness: "vision of the womb and vision of the brain" (20).[8] The womb-vision is "centered in the love-region

of the body or placed like a foetus in the body," a vision she links with women's actual reproductive capacity, although it is a vision available to men also (19). Creativity, unlike Pound's penetrative model, involves "receiving centres" and a "receiving brain," where "knowing" and "feeling" come together rather than stand opposed (26–27). Adopting a more constructivist viewpoint to also challenge male models of creativity, Lola Ridge lectured in the Midwest in 1919 on "Woman and the Creative Will," a talk unpublished until 1981. She debated "critics, scientists, and philosophers the world over" who have "generally decided among them that woman has NO creative will – except the physical urge to continue the race" (5). As in H.D.'s essay on a woman's poetic tradition, "The Wise Sappho," Ridge identifies women's lack of a tradition as a hindrance but also part of much wider socio-economic patterns denying women a past and keeping them subordinate to men. Heartened by the woman's movement and its rejection of "old manufactured femininity," Ridge faults interactive constructions of gender and class as holding back women's creativity, a condition she announces in 1919 is and will be changing as the parallel movements of feminism and labor dismantle outmoded and essentialized structures of female subjectivity (18).

In poems by black women of the 1920s, race joins class and gender to evoke history as a creative force for women. Admitting but defying the doubled oppression of African American women as black and as female, these poems imagine what Elise Johnson McDougal, in her 1925 essay "The Task of Negro Womanhood," calls the "traces of the race's history left in physical and mental outline on each" black woman's "differently endowed" skin.[9] Anne Spencer's "Lady, Lady," addressing a washerwoman whose "face" is "Dark as night" and has "borne so long the yoke of men,"[10] observes the traces of her race's history overlain with gender. Spencer's poem, exemplifying a cross-historical move practiced by other black women poets at the time, acknowledges the two-fold prejudices of racism and sexism but calls upon a deeper history, figured by the Lady's "altared" [sic] heart as a richly "darksome place" enlivened by the "tongues of flames the ancients knew."[11] Georgia Douglas Johnson, in "The Octoroon," finds miscegenation's history in the "One drop of midnight in the dawn of life's pulsating stream" marking this woman "an alien from her kind, a shade amid its gleam."[12] Anita Scott Coleman's "Black Baby" intervenes in cultural scripts of motherly devotion, coded white, by insisting on a long history of black women's labor, for "The baby I hold in my arms is a black baby," yet "I toil, and I cannot always cuddle him."[13] Gwendolyn B. Bennett turns the lyric gaze upon the female body into a meditation