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Published online: 16 Sep 2010.

To cite this article: Kate Lilley (1997) Between Anthologies: Feminism and genealogies of Australian women's poetry, Australian Feminist Studies, 12:26, 265-273, DOI: 10.1080/08164649.1997.9994866

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08164649.1997.9994866

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Between Anthologies: Feminism and Genealogies of Australian Women’s Poetry

KATE LILLEY

The first women-only anthology of Australian writers was Harriett Ann Martin’s *Coo-ee: Tales of Australian Life by Australian Ladies* (1891), but remarkably, Kate Jennings’ *Mother I’m Rooted*, published in 1975, was the first anthology of women’s poetry published in Australia. Its exclusive focus on contemporary writing indicated Jennings’ sense of the collection as an activist document of second wave feminism, comparable to other kinds of politicised aesthetic engagement such as the Australian anti-Vietnam anthology, *We Took Their Orders and Are Dead*, published in 1971. Like *We Took Their Orders*, the texts in *Mother I’m Rooted* are interlaced with uncaptioned documentary photographs. The title and editorial apparatus of *Mother I’m Rooted* positions it as an inaugurating text and a turning point in the history of Australian poetry, which finds its immediate impetus and legitimation in the texts and discourses of second wave feminism—especially the privileging of questions of women’s writing and feminist literary history in the work of key figures such as Millett, Greer, Rich and Firestone. Edited by a 26 year old woman who had recently graduated from the English Department of Sydney University, the publication of *Mother I’m Rooted* did indeed mark a critical juncture in the promulgation of an essential relationship between Australian feminism and aesthetic practices. In particular, it took as axiomatic the significance of women’s writing as a necessarily gendered, affect-laden and evidentiary medium of critique and proof. Poetry, especially, served for this account as a generic model of formalised but potentially intimate, even transparent, disclosure and exchange, hospitable to autobiography, and in urgent need of reclaiming.

Conceived of in epochal terms, *Mother I’m Rooted* effectively suggested its own iconic potential as a kind of one-off intervention indicative of its moment, the effects of which would be unpredictable. When, a decade later, in the *Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets*, Hampton and Llewellyn edited what they called the first ‘overview of the traditions, the voices and the range of women’s poetry in Australia’, they were doing something quite other than simply following in the tradition of Jennings. They conceived of their task specifically as ‘a history of women’s writing and of cultural politics’ in recuperative and revisionist terms. Whereas for Jennings there was a direct link between contemporary American anthologies of women’s poetry and her own project, her frame of literary historical reference was comparatively weak and canonically overdetermined, gesturing...
towards the authority of an already recuperated tradition of nineteenth-century English and American women writers.

As Hampton and Llewellyn acknowledged, the broad populism of *Mother I'm Rooted* was of its moment, as they were of theirs in actively researching what they call 'a suppressed tradition of left and feminist writing in Australia'.

They comment in their 'Introduction':

> the major influence of feminist ideas on the poetry of the 1970s has not been recorded in current anthologies. Our record exists in *Mother I'm Rooted* ... It was a collection of voices, many unknown, of women writing in the early 1970s. In mainstream literary circles, it was generally thought to be embarrassing. It was meant to be. It was meant to be said. And some of it was the best thing that had happened to modern women's writing in Australia. Outback Press printed 4000 copies and they sold out.

Instead of the scandalous impact so successfully courted by Jennings in *Mother I'm Rooted*, Hampton and Llewellyn staged an effective mediation between feminist theory, literary history and poetic practice: in the decade since its publication the *Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets* has been reprinted at least five times and it has become a ubiquitous and useful pedagogical resource in schools and universities around the country.

*Mother I'm Rooted* may have ‘meant’ to embarrass—and it may continue to embarrass in unintended as well as intended ways—but its populist reputation is nevertheless somewhat misleading. It is true that only a handful of the women in *Mother I'm Rooted* had already published widely, and that a number of then prominent women poets, such as Judith Wright, Rosemary Dobson, Gwen Harwood, Dorothy Hewett and Kath Walker, did not appear in it. But what is equally striking in retrospect is that about twenty contributors, including Jennings herself, mostly born in the 1930s and 1940s, published first books close to the time of the anthology’s launch: Stephanie Bennet, Lorain Roche, Joanne Burns, Lee Cataldi, Christine Churches, Anne Elder, Katherine Gallagher, Sylvia Kantarizis, Antigone Kefala, Jennifer Maiden, Carol Novack, Jennifer Rankin, Judith Rodriguez, Colleen Burke, Sylvana Gardner, Barbara Giles, Helen Garner, Vicki Viidikas. So did a number of other women, now well known, who did not appear in *Mother I'm Rooted*: Jan Harry, Dorothy Porter, Jennifer Strauss, Fay Zwicky, Ania Walwicz, Gig Ryan and Susan Hampton. The mid-1970s to 1980s was a boom time for small press poetry lists such as University of Queensland Press’s Paperback Poets, Prism, Gargoyle Poets, and Rigmarole of the Hours, in which women featured significantly though often marginally. Tranter’s influential 1979 anthology, *The New Australian Poetry*, for instance, featured only two women in its list of 24 poets: Vicki Viidikas, and Jennifer Maiden. At the same time a range of new and specifically feminist journals (such as *Hecate* [1975–] and *Lip* [1976–]) and publishing imprints (such as Sisters, and Sybylla) were beginning to consolidate a proactively subcultural and politicised ‘separate sphere’ of formally diverse women’s writing, cognate with the growth of Australian academic feminism, and the rise of revisionist courses on women’s writing and feminist theory. *Mother I'm Rooted* and the *Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets* emblematically book-end a crucial decade of Australian publishing for both poetry and feminism, and exemplify very differently motivated responses to the shared project of anthologising poetry by Australian women.

The frontispiece or envoi to *Mother I'm Rooted* is a poem by Sylvia Kantarizis, ‘By their poems you shall know them: poem’:
All I know about poetry is that it has
something to do with sex,
something very close to sex,
polarized sex—
all the words erect and pointing
in one direction—urgent—
or not urgent in the least but
ponderous and heavy with
slow rhythms and long, deep sighs.
Others prefer craft,
making an art of it, delicately and with
fine workmanship interweaving
bodies in words
lovingly.
Some poems fall anyhow,
all of a heap anywhere, dishevelled,
legs apart in loneliness and
desperation,
and you talk about standards.

Oriented by the implicitly gendered, lyric polarisation of ‘I’ and ‘you’, the speaking subject identifies ‘All I know about poetry’ with a primal scene of sexual difference and heterosexual complementarity—‘words erect and pointing in one direction—urgent—or not urgent in the least but/ponderous and heavy with/slow rhythms’. In this familiar allegory, the metonymic proximity of ‘poetry’ and ‘polarized sex’ is syntactically distanced from the undifferentiated conjugality of what ‘Others prefer’—‘fine workmanship interweaving/bodies in words/lovingly’.

‘Interweaving’, understood as the undoing of ‘I’ and ‘you’ by consummate ‘craft’, is nevertheless tied to the effects of sexual ‘polarization’ by the rhetoric of preference and variety: we are asked to read both scenarios as alternative instantiations of the truth of ‘polarized sex’. The final lines stage a turn away from questions of finesse and negotiated agency between authors and texts, and between subjects, only in order to return to them. The abject possibility of the poem on its own—‘all of a heap anywhere, dishevelled/legs apart in loneliness and/desperation’—is displayed to the implicitly hostile, masculinised reader as a riposte: ‘Some poems fall anyhow/... and you talk about standards’. Rather than ‘something very close to sex’, this incontinent and indiscriminate body represents sex itself, poetry itself, using synecdoche, the substitution of part for whole, to carry the logic of metonymy to its furthest extent: poetry as sex; woman as ‘legs apart’. This picture of ‘loneliness and desperation’, posed as the pornographic object of a gendered interlocution between author and reader under the tautological title: ‘By their poems ye shall know them: poem’, works syllogistically to demonstrate that all women are poems, but not all poems are women. The ostensible critique of collective ‘standards’ on behalf of individual variation and authentic self-expression—the non-standard—works to reinstall the interlinked polarities and hierarchies of aesthetic and sexual difference.

No doubt Kate Jennings chose this poem to introduce her ‘non-standard’ feminist anthology of Australian women poets not because it thematises the contest of knowing women and men for the prerogatives of value, choice and agency, but because it claims to defend the spectrum of writing women, from delicate craft to dishevelled heap, against masculinist orthodoxies. Kantarizis’ editorialising poem does suggest a model for what
follows: that is, an anthology in which an editor at pains to assert that she is well-versed in aesthetic proprieties, chooses instead to assemble material for inclusion on liberal feminist lines. If the anthology is meant to establish Jennings credentials as an equality feminist, a certain anxiety nevertheless attaches to this project; for without her assurances in the brief 'Introduction', there would be no way to know how determinedly she has set aside her proper training. She writes:

I've tried in the editing of this book to get away from the concepts of rejection and acceptance. I would have liked to have published all the poetry I received. I had only the space of one book ... I don't know any longer what is 'good' and 'bad'. I have been trained to know, in a patriarchal university, on a diet of male writers ... I have chosen the poems mainly on the grounds of women writing directly, and honestly. Many of them have never been published before.

Jennings' preferred strategy of self-authorisation is the citation of famous nineteenth-century women writers as the 'mothers' of a genealogy of transgressive but circumscribed women writers which is becoming ever more liberated, honest and egalitarian. She begins with a well-worn quotation from Charlotte Bronte, unsourced but dated 1850:

Without at the time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what was called feminine, we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice.

Jennings' comments:

Nothing much has changed ... It's the same old story. A woman writer has to be ten times better, ten times more persistent, and so much stronger than any male with equivalent talent to overcome the usual obstacles to reach publication ... The literary world is for the most part controlled by a small backslapping backbiting group of men and a few male-identified women whose, as my Dad would say, blood isn't worth bottling ... The educated dinkum feminist styles herself as her true blue father's daughter, denouncing the forces of bourgeois, misogynist, homosocial aesthetics. The unthematised and probably unwitting homophobic implications of her polemic against 'backslapping backbiting' men and 'male-identified women' suggest the ways in which the liberal feminist critique of misogyny and discrimination in the 1970s sometimes colluded—wittingly or not—with the homophobic structuration of discourses of homosociality.

Styled after an anthology of American women poets, Rising Tides, Jennings claims to have canvassed for 'women poets of all sizes and shapes, most of whom would never be able even to do an Emily Dickinson'. The puzzling idea of 'doing an Emily Dickinson' notwithstanding, for Jennings this comparison seems to invoke a woman who writes and preserves a body of poetry outside the usual mechanisms of publication. From 'over 500 replies', Jennings chose to publish the work of 152 women. Since there are no biographical details of any kind supplied in the book (and no page numbers or index), what we know about these women depends solely on other kinds of public record or private familiarity. About a third of the contributors already had some history of publication; others published subsequently; and some, like Barbara Creed, Jackie McKimmie and Margot Nash became well-known in fields of cultural production. It is a curious irony for a book premised on uncovering the hidden talents of diverse women, that its technique of editorial decontextualisation guaranteed the continuing obscurity of those women who were not already known. Though the anthology is subtitled, 'An
Anthology of Australian Women Poets', the collection's claim to heterogeneity can only be inspected at the level of authorship in terms of the hierarchical distinction between previously-published and never-before-published women. Clearly, the book's alphabetical format was designed to suggest a democratic editorial policy in which the juxtaposition of familiar and unknown women's names was unremarked, so that the poems could represent seemingly unmediated diversity. According to the ideology of poetry as the self-expressive autobiographical vehicle par excellence, the poems speak for themselves and communicate directly with their readers, without editorial imposition.

Like the 'male-identified woman' whose 'blood's not worth bottling', Jennings diagnoses the boutique market for poetry as a symptom of its degeneration and exhaustion. She sees the lack of a popular market not as a sign of any intrinsic generic propensity, but rather as a symptom of poetry's contamination and appropriation by elite men:

A lot of people write poetry, and some people read poetry. Many more people wouldn't touch poetry with a fifty foot barge pole because most poetry they might happen across is, for the want of a better term, male poetry. It is posturing, in-group, obscure, tricksy, mystified bullshit. Poetry need not be trivialised ... I think the women in this book, most of them writing in isolation, and uncontaminated by trends, fashions and the politics of the poetry world, write because they need and want to express themselves, and they have something to say, in their own voices. No oughts.

These women poets 'Out There', as Jennings puts it, represent a fantasized final frontier of uncontaminated experience and desire, and a way to 'revitalise' the degenerate stock of a 'unique art form' by returning it to political and linguistic instrumentality and vitality.

Poetic and political efficacy will be generated by privileging what Jennings calls 'women's subject matter. Whether we like it or not, women are stuck with childbirth, babies, menstruation, housework, feminine conditioning and female perceptions'. Jennings' editorial procedure means that we can know nothing we don't already know of how or where the women included are located—but on her account it doesn't matter. The contributors are tied together by 'women's subject matter', by their decision to offer their work for inclusion in the anthology, and by virtue of being selected. How many of the women poets assembled correspond in any way to Jennings' rhetoric of discovery is very doubtful. Certainly much of what is anthologised is spectacularly 'out there', for instance the untitled opening poem by Colleen Allen, from which Jennings takes the book's title:

Mother, I'm rooted.  
Can you help find me?  
I've lost my identity.  
Does love exist?  
People who are not people!  
Faces that are not what they seem.  
I am an iceblock,  
people eat me.  
I'm frozen to a Colleen duplicate  
until when eaten up. Melted,  
perhaps I'll shape to the unique being.  
Sorrow,  
what be joy without sorrow?
When will I become me?
Will I melt before I'm digested by society?
Is friendship worthwhile?
Is it real?
Or a passing distraction to bite me?
In my cozy womb I'm lonely.
Is it time to be born?
Why am I?
They think I'm a hole to fuck,
they think I'm a clay to mould, finger and shape,
to be screwed up.
But,
cunt or me?
I've yet to see.

Jennings' wholly bourgeois ambition as editor is to reaffirm the threatened value of poetry as 'an important means of communicating, with a useful social function'—that is, the preservation of the truth of experience and affect—and to extend the privileges of the bourgeois subject to women in the abstract. On this argument, anyone can and should write and read 'real' rather than fake poetry because any kind of contact with true poetry affirms the nature and sensibility of the authentic liberal subject. Hence, the anthology becomes, on its own account, a compelling venue for the demonstration of what Jennings calls 'the full humanity of woman and her right to define herself'. It comes as no surprise, then, to find that her selection overwhelmingly features free verse autobiographical lyrics with their characteristically poignant micro-narratives of women's experience and first person address. Far from representing diversity within a specific collocation of gender, genre and history—contemporary Australian women's poetry—everything seems like more of the same, 'a Colleen duplicate'. For Jennings, this sameness offers documentary proof of the truth and coherence of women qua women, and women's shared oppression, and thus demonstrates the need for a gender-specific anthology of this kind:

I tried to include poems about many and varied subjects, poems in many and varied styles, and poems from women of all ages groups and classes. When the editing was finished the one persistent statement was, to me, MOTHER I'M ROOTED. And I am rooted too. I am sad, tired, spooked and gone a slight bit loopy.

More than 'disparaging comments' and threats of hoax submissions by men passing as women, Jennings laments the betrayal of herself and her peers by the previous generation of women poets, metonymically figuring her own poetry and that of her feminist sisters as 'melancholy babies':

Comments (and lack of response) from established women poets who did not want to be included in an all-women's anthology was discouraging. It would be nice not to have to put out a segregated book on the grounds of sex. At this point in time it is necessary.

Jennings could not have predicted the rise and diversification of the segregated and thematic anthology, and its naturalisation as a marketing practice such that a decade later Hampton and Llewellyn (neither of whom had appeared in Mother I'm Rooted) were able, it seems, to include any poet they wanted.

A second historical survey of Australian women's poetry, Susan Lever's Oxford Book of
between anthologies

australian women's verse (1995), now competes with hampton and llewellyn against other traditional and revisionist anthologies, chiefly tranter's and mead's penguin book of modern australian poetry (1991), for the progressive education market. tranter and mead share with hampton and llewellyn a preference for a poetry of formal engagement and self-conscious modernity: not surprisingly, all the women represented in tranter and mead previously featured in hampton and llewellyn. lever, on the other hand, claims that her collection 'has the aim of all good anthologies—to publish poetry that the editor believes will delight readers', adding, 'i would like to think that some of my contemporary choices will be considered worthy of inclusion in anthologies compiled in fifty years' time'. she offers a kind of reprieve from what she identifies as a now superseded rhetoric of special pleading, special interest groups and causes, and harks back to the genteel nineteenth-century model of martin's coo-ee: australian life by australian ladies.

after the distinctly different but unmistakably feminist anthologies of jennings, and hampton and llewellyn, lever in the 1990s sees her task as a return to the aesthetic decorums of enduring quality, enjoyment and taste in the context of a commonsense and explicitly post-feminist appeal to the self-evident, experiential connections between women. her commitment is to a conservative but, on her own terms, historically responsible mainstreaming of women's poetry as a professionalised and specialized academic field with limited, but not negligible, cross-over potential. as she writes:

this oxford book of australian women's verse marks a further stage in the recognition of australian women's poetry, which has now become a focus of mainstream interest and study. so many australian women poets have been publishing and receiving critical attention in the past ten years that they can no longer be considered marginalised.

lever promises a depoliticising pluralism, itself subordinated to the unvarying rule of 'first quality' merchandise, and representative sampling.

in place of the feminist argument for the political 'necessity' of intervention, or transvaluation, lever responds to the perceived 'needs' and opportunities of the boutique market and the academy figured as self-similar and circular. the ideological differences between lever's anthology, and hampton's and llewellyn's notwithstanding, both share a similarly low cross-over with jennings' list of contributors. lever's selection of 60 contemporary women poets has a dozen in common with jennings (20 per cent), while, out of almost 80 contemporary women included in hampton and llewellyn, 20 appeared in jennings (25 per cent). the striking divergence lies elsewhere: from a total of 90 poets represented in both hampton's and llewellyn's, and lever's historical surveys, only 50 are common to both.

i was fifteen when mother i'm rooted came out and my mother, dorothy hewett, was one of those established women poets who declined to be in it. a decade later we were both included in hampton and llewellyn. another decade later we were both included in tranter and mead. she is in lever, i am not. at the launch of tranter's and mead's penguin book of modern australian verse i was invited to choose and read a selection from the anthology, along with the editors and oodgeroo. i read a group of poems by women spanning the contemporary section—harwood, hewett, kefala, cataldi, sykes, viidikas, brown, couani, maiden, walwicz, ryan and myself. many of the poets i ventriloquised, including my mother, were sitting in the audience in the state library of new south wales. at the time, what seemed strangest to me was reading my own poems last, as the most recent in the sequence—not just because this time i identified more strongly as an academic than a poet, but because the poems selected by tranter and mead i had
written when I was about fifteen; that is, at about the time that *Mother I'm Rooted* had come out, twenty years earlier.

I was surprised and pleased to learn that Meaghan Morris had agreed to launch the anthology, and faintly shocked when, on the podium, she staged her own surprise at the invitation, and her pleasure in the task, by referring to my mother as one of her ‘culture heroes’. This was not an unfamiliar sentiment to me—I remember Susan Hampton and a group of other young writers from Melbourne coming to our house sometime in the mid-1970s, saying that they had made a pilgrimage to sit at my mother’s feet. Mum and Dad were out of town so the pilgrims waited in the living room for several days with the door shut. My brother and sister and I could hear them reading poems to each other, while we hung around in the kitchen. I had, however, never heard such a line from one of my own ‘culture heroes’. Proud and disturbed though I was at this unexpected intersection of genealogies and cultures, perhaps I should not have been; for though I was still featuring with mixed strategies and emotions in some kind of literary mother–daughter act begun decades earlier, I was now thirtysomething and bound to find myself both implicated in, and witness to, many such allegories of generational cross-over and recuperation.

To finish the story I have started here: months later, Radio National broadcast a recording of the anthology’s launch and a student of mine, also a poet, thought I had written all the poems I read out myself, as some kind of homage and performance piece. She said how uncanny it was to hear how well I had imitated a representative sample of contemporary Australian women poets. Even as I had tried to mark my literal and figurative relation to a certain genealogy of Australian women poets, it turned out I had been passing: secreting my own name in each name I announced, each poem I read out; inventing genealogies, omitting details, covering and uncovering everything with the sound of my voice in the present.

From a distance what may be most ‘spooky’—to use Jennings’ word—is not so much how things change, but how uncanny and disorienting the terms of difference and similarity can seem. Our ability to read or recognise—even to productively misrecognise—is so contingent and context-bound, so ‘rooted’ in and rooted by historic and generic ‘necessity’, that it is always tempting to respond in terms of schematic generational allegory and identification. Compelling as these allegories are, unless we learn to read them as historical and ideological effects rather than causes, we are destined to repeat: centre and margin, convention and innovation, gender and genre, ‘cunt or me’.

In this analysis of a sequence of iconic texts in and for the history of Australian women’s poetry, I have tried to suggest that a practice of self-consciously reading between can work as a kind of hinge or metonymic link, a mobile vantage point of non-identity or mis-recognition, neither ‘in here’ nor ‘out there’, from which to turn towards and away from the verities of classic narrative, and the claims of self-appointed iconic texts and generations.

NOTES