Rachel Blau DuPlessis
(photo: Robert S. DuPlessis)

“Poetry is a Practice of Critique”

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Interview with Rachel Blau DuPlessis by Dubravka Đurić[1]
(Conducted by email between January 1 and June 6, 2025)

Rachel Blau DuPlessis is an American experimental poet, scholar, and critic. She has written extensively on gender, poetry, and feminist and objectivist poetics. Her gender trilogy consists of the following books: – *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* (Routledge, 1990), *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work* (The University of Alabama Press, 2006) and *Purple Passages: Pound, Eliot, Zukofsky, Creeley, and the Ends of Patriarchal Poetry* (University of Iowa Press, 2012). These books, along with *Gender, Races and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908-1934* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), and *A Long Essay on the Long Poem: Modern and Contemporary Poetics and Poetries* (University of Alabama Press, 2023), are fundamental for studies of modern and contemporary poetry. Her experimental, innovative long poem *Drafts* has been collected and published as *The Complete Drafts* (Coffee House Press, 2025). Her books of poetry have been published in French, Italian, and Russian. The following essays by DuPlessis have been translated into Serbian: “Family, Sexes, Psyche: An Essay on H.D. and the Muse of the Woman Writer” (Porodica, polovi, psiha: Esej o H.D. i muzi žene pisca, *ProFemina* 21-22, 2000, translated by Ana Gorobinski), “For the Etruscans”, (Etrurkama, *Genero* 1, 2002, translated by Dubravka Đurić), and “Pounding Modernist Maleness: How Pound Managed a Muse” (Razmatranje modernističke muškosti: Kako se Paund izborio sa muzom, *Polja* 461, 2010, translated by Nataša Karanfilović). Her poetry is included in the *Anthology of American Experimental Poetry after 1970* (Antologija američke eksperimentalne poezije nakon 1970, ed. by Dubravka Đurić, OKF, Cetinje, 2023), and in the book by Dubravka Đurić, *Poetry Theory Gender: Modern and Postmodern American Female Poets* (*Poezija teorija rod: Moderne i postmoderne američke pesnikinje*, OrionArt, 2009), one chapter is dedicated to Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ work. Her website is www.rachelblauduplessis.net; all *Drafts* are available as audio recordings at PennSound.

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Let's start this conversation with a brief overview of how and when you entered the feminist movement.

At this moment in 2025, the U.S. (my country of citizenship) is in very great danger, from internal authoritarian functioning despite law and our founding document—the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights, that all officials are bound by oath to honor. This unfolding issue (ongoing) involves a strong and ugly attempt to cancel and annul women's rights—the gains of about 50—even a hundred— years of various positive aspects of feminism. This crisis needs to be understood as the contemporary background of my comments here, in 2025.

To answer your first comment, there is never one kind of feminism, so I'd like to say feminisms in the plural. My particular entrance occurred as what I would now characterize as a positive but incomplete form of feminism: white middle class, professionally-oriented, in an urban and university context.

I became what I call a feminist in 1968 in New York City while I was a graduate student in literature at Columbia University. It is vital to understand that feminism had not "really" existed for several decades as an active and engaging force. There was no feminist "political party" in the U.S and no official politics with any pro-woman's rights ideas.. Policies and laws about women, thinking about women was dormant, not active. But suddenly—inspired in part by the burgeoning Civil Rights movement in the U.S., women began to articulate some parallel questions and grievances.

Looking back to that time in the U.S, [circa 1967-1968], class, and racial distinctions and differences could be seen in general outline (though these were only generally or loosely acknowledged), and there was prejudice, disgruntlement, and heavy repressive kinds of socialization of girls and women, differentiated by race and class and region, as well as by attititude and ideology. Yet in other ways, it was a pleasant enough historical period, because many things seemed possible, doable.

There were politically active women even in the government often as civil servants, but no particular visible politics about women's issues. There were also some distinctive voluntary organizations. For example, Women Strike for Peace and other organizations concerning the destructive potential of nuclear warfare. There were articulate civil rights movements (first for Blacks also then, historically involving homosexuals and women). Out of the 1930s, there was a beleagured left and worker orientation that has been actively repressed in the post-World War II period. These are only quick examples of what (now available) histories of contemporary decades of U.S. would tell researchers.

The largest and most drastic poetry movement during the mid-1950s through the radical feminist and anti-war movements in poetry was named The Beat Generation, very compelling, populist, and quite male oriented, even if women identified with its outspoken counter-normative thinking and particular liberation claims.

Circa 1966 after a popular book by Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystique*, published 1963) roused a self-conscousness about post-war repressions of women and about the friction between a rosy picture of middle-class female lives, and some realities, women began to discover contradictions in their social roles, their social importance, their socio-political stakes. Many lively organizations of women were invented and began being active to change some of the problems that women began to see in the post-War period.

I have written about my personal "conversion experience" (realization of gender issues and discrepancies) and their long, defining, professional aftermath in *Blue Studios: Poetry and its Cultural Work*. This is particularly in an essay called "Becoming a Feminist Critic: Reader, I married me." This essay offers a reader a summary of one typical trajectory of sudden realization of feminist social critiques. There are many narratives for researchers, and some very good histories of this second wave Womens Movement that can supplement my brief account here.

This title was a suggestion that alluded to the end of the 19th century British novel *Jane Eyre*. It referred to the hard won end to the marriage plot after suffering and many complications with their narrative costs. However, the witty me pretended I was marrying myself by thinking seriously about women, gender and feminist insights as interpretations of what I saw socially and in literature. My title about marrying was influenced by my first critical book, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). That book addressed the familiar 19th century convention ending of many novels about women – marriage (a normative success) or death (as a punishment for transgressions, often sexual—and for not fitting easily into the sex/gender-system).

Our feminist thinking was based on a sense of the specific contradictions we encountered as female graduate students—we were being prepared for a professional status mostly closed (by custom) to us. Further, in our higher (university) education, we had as a generation, barely ever been asked to study women writers (nor Black writers—a significant cadre in the United States), had been trained or encouraged to ask no gender questions of any text. In that late "New Critical" era, any analytic or aesthetic questions seen

as "social" were not part of the approved analytic and interpretive agendas. Women writers were not treated (if read at all in a curriculum) with the same seriousness as male writers—they were also often downgraded and shrugged off. Suddenly all this ideology shadowing the study of literature became visible to us, even shocking, and the intellectual implications were very startling and ripe for change and critique. An upsurge of scholarly and literary activity followed from that shift in assumptions so powerful that it was like a paradigm shift.

Your questions all come from the same literary and textual space that our work built up over these years. But the kinds of feminist acts that I have done are not only in the zone of textual study. To follow up on my feminist activities immediately after 1968 and in the long decades: these activities involved writing, editing (and helping to edit) journals. These journals had been invented and sustained during this sudden opening to and curiosity about women in history, economics, and society, not only in literature and art—everywhere, in fact. A feminist intellectual context was being created and sustained in such scholarly journals (as *Feminist Studies*—on which I served with others on the editorial board for at least fifteen years). This journal was new, just begun; it was being created and sustained by the labor of academics who were also creating, evaluating and sustaining major paradigm shifts in our fields. One university with far sighted vision eventually housed it with limited but vital support, (University of Maryland, College Park) but it had been generated originally by a tiny group feminists, identifying an intellectual need—and starting to do this work with a small editorial board around 1972. A Wikipedia summary of the journal reports (accurately) that it is difficult now to remember how rapidly feminist activities encouraging scholarship and studies of women and gender grew exponentially in all fields. In my particular way, I made my editorial contributions to this journal and eventually with several books of scholarship. The women of that generation were simultaneously creating that scholarly field and contributing to it. The revealing joke is we were building and flying that airplane simultaneously.

My feminist activities deeply involved my profession—teaching—as well as promoting gender analyses (analysis of the sex-gender system) through my research and editorial work. My works (among many other many people's) have helped to expandand enliven the school and university curriculum. This was another accomplishment of this generation of 68-ers.

What was Women's Studies in the curriculum as I experienced it for me? First, studies of some contemporary women's writing—for me poetry (poets like Adrienne Rich, Lucille Clifton, Sylvia Plath, Muriel Rukeyser)

led to university courses with gender analyses of literature and the exciting cultural work of discovery of poets, attitudes and literary canons. This in its turn entailed texts, bringing books back into print and in circulation, editing anthologies, and researching to "recover" underknown women writers from several literary eras well into the past. This involved the invention of also earliest general survey courses like introduction to WHY women's studies. Thus emphasis on women in the curriculum, the topic of gender in my field led to keen moments of putting newly read but existing literary and social works on the syllabus—like Mary Wollstonecraft, and discussing their importance to Western Civilization. It was heady work. We implicitly felt that knowing more about gender issues would allow people to see the social and literary context more critically than before—a goal of education.

Social change is a vital part of feminism—struggles for gender justice in the context of social justice. There have been many struggles against laws limiting female education, study of society and law and custom to hold women and girls to second-class citizenship, which are as important to the practical, central social change that women seek. There are observations and claims about women in any religious and philosophical tradition. Acts in women's health care must demand that difference is respected but not disabling. Struggles solidifying women's human rights are necessary to maintain. Proposing and maintaining attitudes of gender critique are crucial. In wanting to talk about the sex-gender system, economic equity, the right of all women legally to earn and keep their own money is vital. Depending on the national contexts that we know, there are many places where one could see (and still sees) distinct social inequality between male and female citizens.

U.S. women had many semi-invisible political walls inhibiting them (but not decisively preventing them) from joining the general realm of full adults – like holding a job, being paid serious pay, joining professions – MD, lawyer, pharmicist, professor – having their own bank accounts and credit cards (if yet married), as well as possibilites for motherhood and increasing bodily choices. There were unwritten limits (even quotas) about women's active presence; for example, in medical schools (circa 1970). There are, now, only sporadic numbers of formal preschools for chidren to help women join the workforce. (This contrasted with very different availability during World War II.) Many of these earlier barriers have been inoperable for decades, but now (in 2025) are again under high risk. Already in 1967 and for many years since, there have been laws and customs that limited women rather efficiently. Thus, to summarize, the general feminist movement in the U.S. was a civil rights and economic rights set of movements and organizations that has had many cultural iimplications. The situational studies of these limiting laws

and customs often led to movements for change. This political pulse began perhaps in late 1950s (after a hiatus), and picked up in many realms after 1968, continuing even now into 2025. These realms included literature and the arts. Feminism implies social, political and cultural movements, which are not one thing, nor finished things, so feminisms are plural.

Let's now talk about the cultural work you've done in literary criticism and poetry. You are known as the author of three books of essays that contribute significantly to feminist theory. The first is The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice. The other two are Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work and Purple Passages: Pound, Eliot, Zukofsky, Olson, Creeley, and The Ends of Patriarchal Poetry.

You have referred to these as a TRILOGY, indicated by key color names (The Pink Guitar; Blue Studios; Purple Passages) *and all center on gender and poetics, often through studies of modernist and contemporary poets. With early essays like "For the Etruscans" from* The Pink Guitar*, you seem to engage closely with French feminist thinkers – is that the case?*

Your emphasis on French feminist theory in some of your address to me should be noted as not fully encompassing my situation. So your interest in what is the 'relevance of' "French feminism at this point of my theoretical work [and] also of my poetry." I would say first that I am more inductive and rarely apply materials or a thought systems to generate my writings or findings. I explore observations and a feeling-based critique from my own experiences and reading and these go into play empirically and analytically. That is an inductive point of view and the "Etruscans" essay began there. I also would not call myself a theorist, but just a person engaging in thinking as a process of interpreting my worlds. Thus my reception timetable of French theory makes it unlikely that this was a direct influence on my earliest essays.

At the time you are talking about, France, Canada, the U.S.A., Australia, and certainly the UK had serious, active, lively and autonomous feminist movements of many kinds, some of which knew about the movement (activism) elements, and the intellectual work going on in other places. Priority is always interesting, but not at issue—that is "who was first" is not that germane. This intellectual climate was really a nexus not a genealogy. It is appropriate to trace networks of knowledge as they formed.

From what literary context did your essays emerge?

I actually wrote my first essay influenced by two Anglophone writers, the U.S.poet Robert Duncan and his *The H.D.Book* a work in manuscript that had been circulating in little magazines like *Caterpillar* in the late 1960s. The second active influence were the essays of the British novelist, Virginia Woolf especially *A Room of one's Own* (1929) , and essays in general including some by Adrienne Rich in the early 1970s, like "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1972).

Let me talk about dates of publication and of translation into English of the essays you ask about from French feminism. I am certainly not in the field of French philosophy / cultural comment. So I received these French essays no earlier or later than most Anglophone literary people. The second essay I wrote was "For the Etruscans" in 1979. The French feminist you refer to is Hélène Cixous whose "Laugh of the Medusa" was written in 1975 and translated into English in 1976. It appeared, and I read it in the anthology *New French Feminisms,* edited by Elaine Marks in 1980, with a significant review by Carolyn Burke in 1981, a review that helped propel the whole set of these French feminist thinkers in English. The other two very important French thinkers who appeared in that collection of theorists in English were Julia Kristeva (a multipronged thinker) and the third was Luce Irigaray, the author of *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 1985 (generally appeared first as a psychoanalytic thinker).

What is my specific relationship to this plathora of thinking? Gratitude, but no specific indebtedness.

Particularly with Cixous, the *rhetoric* on which "For the Etruscans" rested—was *collage*, made up of several voices/ writings, involving multiple authorship as a metaphor and in part an actuality. The paper was based on a conference seminar that I delivered or led in 1978 at a conference series then occurring once a year called The Scholar and the Feminist. The topic was *is there a "women's writing" special to women. Is there a "female aesthetic.?"* It was a fraught and interesting topic at the time.

My contribution was not prewritten but was a folder of "teaching notes", with me as seminar leader. When asked to "write this up for publication," I then asked for responses from seminar participants—who were like myself younger feminist cultural workers. Once I got letters back after the seminar, I committed to using all responses (with everyone's authorship attached to her resposive letter).

With an emphasis on establishing female difference from men (as if women in general as a socio-psychological group had one cultural position). This kind

of question or topic drastically de-emphasized divisions among women, the history of women, differences (such as race and sexuality, language, nation, and region) among women. Such emphasis on this fundamental juncture of all women later in its extreme, was characterized as essentialism. My position articulated in that essay was that middle class women were "(ambiguously) hegemonic." This phrase tried to get at the interesting, pertinent alternation between feminisms of difference and particularity, and feminisms of sameness and humanity as a whole—that is difference and sameness [in relation to males]. No need to deny situational, historical and faceted complexity! This has always been my attitude.

My somewhat difficult to discern argument in this essay is that there is (at least) an expository, informational mode in writing, and a more essayistic and even a collage-argued mode, and both together, and then other modes as well. The use of any of these modes was a situational choice that different authors, writing formations or groups made, based on the socially-situated ways that each rhetoric was read by that group and other groups at that time. Rhetoric is always situational. The two rhetorics (expository and essayistic) could be used by either gender depending on their sense of the moment. This socially located and flexible point got misunderstood by binarist readers to postulate wrongly that I held a gynocritical, even female-first and essentialist position. No—not at all. I have been upset at the narrowed ascription of what I thought, since it was not what I thought then nor what I think now. My interest was in an interesting stylistic enterprise to investigate—the essay usable by women, not binarist gender thinking.

Thus "For the Etruscans" (1979) was widely taken to defend "feminine" language, although what it actually said is that all language use, all use of discourse is situational, chosen, and relational in historically unfolding ways. As I argue in *Blue Studios*, the terms "personal, autobiographical" and "feminine" are a cover story for collectivity, heterogeneity, positionality and materiality. To me, any call for the "feminine" in discourse is interesting only when crossed with a feminist, or otherwise liberatory, critical project; rhetorical choices are only part of a politics.

My rhetorical tropes of collective authorship and collage are different from Cixous' *maenadic* rhetorical trope. I am sure I had read her essay by 1981, but in origin, they were parallel. My essay was not informed by hers or by her thinking when my seminar was first delivered and conceptualized. Like many things that occur in a cultural realm, they essays were simultaneous in impulse or necessity—*she is enshrining a female maenadic voice; I was foregrounding the essay/collage form as non-static, process writing, like thinking aloud.*

As I said, the Cixous appeared most accessibly in the anthology *New French Feminisms*, and I am sure I read it there. As for the three people whose names are most mentioned in these years, Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva—of course, eventually I read (and taught over the years) some key essays. But at the point of inception, I had Anglophone sources for my essays. The appearance of "Etruscans" was self-generated. I had heard about the cities and mysteries of Etruscans from a classicist I knew. I used my trope of "Etruscans" as being parallel to women because at that point little was known about the Etruscans. Similarly, Women had not been studied as a significnt topic! And incidentally, a good deal more is known about the Etruscans now, 50 years after. Hence, in my later essay,"*f*-words: an Essay on the Essay" in *Blue Studios*, I offer a footnote (*BS,* pp. 257-258, N. 24,), updating information about the actual Etruscans and how I was deploying that ancient peoples, who were simultaneous and contemporaneous with the Romans, as a metaphor for the mystery of women as a topic of actual curiosity and investigtion.

How have your interests in feminist theory and interpretation changed over time?

Feminist thinking was and is also a rich social and political praxis. I was as much interested in applied feminisms as theoretical feminisms. In fact, *feminist theory is built on feminist practice not the other way round.* The deep fascination of feminist theory/ gender thinking in philosophy and psychoanalysis, managed to have some neuralizing effect to block interest in feminist praxis—activism around social change. Theory is not as dynamic and discussion oriented as praxis or social struggles became. Theory has had fewer results, one could say, although it can inspire. In many ways a mix of applied and theoretical feminisms were appropriate for serious agitating for necessary social change. A person had to defend a position in the real world of social jostle and resistance.

So my work in general was transformed by general feminist feelings, and some of the interpretive questions that resulted. Here are some examples.

Much of my literary critical work enters the realm of becoming, that is, of poesis, of making things different. It can be visualized as a Venn diagram where three sets of practices meet. *The first are institutions of poetic practice—editing, mentoring, declaring allegiance (with manifestos, poems and the like), following (and being construed as a follower), and studying muse-artist relations. These have long been components of poetic careers and*

affiliations, and they take some specific contours in the US twentieth century. These contours are all inflected by gender.
Second, all writers implicitly or explicitly take up relationships to the gender materials of culture and society in their work and in their self-creation as writers. I have studied some and scrutinzed some interactions in modernism. These relationships can be studied even if the writers did not comment directly upon such issues or commented only intermittently. So the second circle of the Venn diagram consists of a reading lens emphasizing practices of gender. The book that I wrote with this topic in mind was *Purple Passages: Pound, Eliot, Zukofsky, Olson, Creeley, and the Ends of Patriarchal Poetry.* This book shows a particular curiosity about what maleness, male subjectivity, manhoods of several varieties, homosociality, and sexualities brought into poetic formation and affiliation. My play with pink, blue, purple shows the interactions of gender "colors" (amusing to me). This Trilogy third book wrote a good deal about something (male subjectivity) that I can only be next to, not really inside of (but so what of that?), and something that was variously unnoticed, under-scrutinized, or over-generalized in some feminist thinking until about thirty years ago, when the first anthologies and studies of maleness emerged into the field of gender studies.

Because these first two "sets of practices"—the practices of the poetic career, and of gender—are multiple, polymorphic, changeable, malleable, and always in play, and because they are proposed, drawn upon and staged variously, I try to exemplify "research as encounter" (Pollock 2007, xiii and xv). Griselda Pollock intended by this term a multi-disciplinary encounter, using concepts from one discipline to illuminate another. This encounter between gender studies and poetry studies has always needed to be methodologically alert to resist overly stolid social readings, and to encourage attentiveness to how poetry works. Any call for "analysis that make us appreciate even more the complexity of language, subjectivity, symbolic practices, affects and aesthetics" has my attention (Pollock 2007, xiv-xv). With all my work, including poetry I reveal my interests in a culturalist poetics.

Your book Gender, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908-1934, *was extremely important to me. I was especially struck by the term social philology – could you explain what this methodological approach to poetry means?*

That critical work discussed three subjectivities crucial to U.S. modernism—New Woman, New Black (or Negro, as they said then), and New (or Enlightenment) Jew—and poems generated within those subjectivities.

So this book continues my interests in a culturalist poetics by its building of reading strategies called social philology or sociopoesis (DuPlessis 2001, 11-17).[2] This means looking at small poetic categories (like word choice, line break, punctuation) and finding a poetic particularity that could be seen by the critic as a place in which the poet reveals a historical attitude or position in a contemporaneous social debate (such as Black-White relations, or women's rights or sexuality). With social philology, I pursue some key readings using this analytic leverage. It is a form of socially-inflected close reading.

I am very glad you found that close reading position engaging. It came as a result of a general cultural studies approach to poetry. This context needs some sketching.

Poetry has — in recent conventional thought — been exempted from any kind of socially inflected criticism, as one of those very personal (individuated) or original things — this strangely overlooking poetry's saturation in its own assumptions and practices of subjectivity and representation. Or poetry has been viewed as one of those higher things, transcendent, lofty, just too (note the tautology) "poetic" to be grounded in (tainted by?) social representations or debates. Some people call this exclusionary attentiveness by the term "the aesthetic"— and that's unfortunately become a prim little self-congratulatory term in recent years. I affirm the aesthetic, without question, yes, but sometimes that concept has become too pious, and exclusionary. Such an analytic position can be crudely idealizing and keen to separate "higher planes" (like form) from "lower things" (like content of all dimensions), not to speak of material issues of text, versions, and transmission. Such assumptions about the specialness of poetry reassert hierarchical binaries for literary study.

There have also been many cultural studies and socio-historical examinations of poetry, but from "the outside" not from "the inside" of the poetic text, (on the other hand, without acknowledging poetry as an art form, any poem might as well be considered as only sending a message, just like prose. Obviously artistic choices in each art form are vital! And these need analytic scrutiny). By the outside I mean very valuable studies concerning the production of artists, the social production of artworks (groups, coteries), social norms and historical crises with differential pressures on different artists; cultural institutions and institutions of artistic practices; dissemination and reception of artists and artworks. To choose an example: a woman writing may have different relationships to the institutions of cultural practice (how and what and where to publish, for example). However, these differences and samenesses are not categorical but are modified and placed in active relationships with

[2] Social poetics, socio-poesis, a social philology, cultural poetics, social formalism are terms indicating critical positions intent on analyzing social and aesthetic issues together.

material forces other than gender. The kinds of gender claims, with other social claims and observations, are more analytic and mobile than many people saw at first.

This encounter between gender studies and poetry studies has always needed to be methodologically alert to resist overly stolid social readings, and to encourage attentiveness to how *poetry* as a practice works at different eras. Any call for "analysis that make us appreciate even more the complexity of language, subjectivity, symbolic practices, affects and aesthetics" has my attention (Pollock 2007, xiv-xv).

In your book Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work, *I found important definitions of what you call the "feminism of production" and the "feminism of reception". Could you elaborate on these concepts?*

I am not sure how I can explain this more, but I will try. Gender analysis is a secular tool of critical understanding, not a religious or quasi-religious structure of feeling.

Yet in any socio-cultural moment of importance, there is a period is a time when authors and artists have an urge to depict themselves or depict a certain group in a positive light. This positive or ennobling depiction occurs for reasons of inspiration, hopefulness, utopian yearning, models for group values, inter-personal behavior, or behavior of characters in books, offering of model for (or fantasy of) choices applicable to "the real world," offering emotional support and clarity, a desire to push back against negative depictions of the unfavored group. Feminism of production is affirmative, up-lifting, a way of wanting women to be seen in the best light, justifying their tribulations and choices, and explaining their activities, presenting their lives and emotions in the most positive way, "taking the woman's side" in debate. This position is sometimes necessary and useful, but as a habit of mind, it can be too limiting.

This is a *feminism of production*. It shows artistry, audience desire, and marketability. This can be a very nice and useful literary attitude. However, the disparaging and hostile term for this cultural behavior is "political correctness," and in another mockery of a social goal "DEI" [diversty, equity, inclusion]. With an idealizing perspective the feminism of production might be a very powerful proposal for groups. With "representation" at stake, one has seen many artistic moments that are affirmative. This choice of a powerful and positive depiction of a group is a recognized moment or element in art. Good and engaging art can emerge from this moment. This *feminism*

of production is the desire to make plots, use notable, memorable (perhaps allegorical) images emphasizing depictions and arcs of responsive insight that have a hopeful, affirmative flair.

I found it interesting how your approach to the poet H.D. has changed over time. Her work was clearly important to you – but in one of your texts, I came across a critique of her work – I'd appreciate if you could explain that.

Well, writers' stuggles and choices are always important to me, and as a literary critic knows, a person may "fall in love" with a writer, a position that empowers their analyses and abilities to read the work. But there is no need to idealize that writer or to let appreciative and sympathetic readings become a version of worship. It is that simple. One needs to have a balanced view of the topic, the text, or of the object of your curiosity.

That balanced engagement would be an example of the *feminism of reception*. Let's say—an ability to discuss in a curious and investigative way, some of the sexism that one finds in thinkers otherwise deemed "geniuses" or to discuss gender ideas, even ones you dislike and would reject critically in a debate. The feminism of reception asks questions inflected with gender ideas (and other social practices) without pre-writing the answer (as always affirmative), but maintaining a clarity, critical investigation, and ethical curiosity. Why something was once thought is an investigative question, and not only a position that we deeply question, something we think is damaging and disfunctional to study.

A feminism of reception does not, for instance, have exclusively to study women writers, it can take the most negative, and ugly depiction in literature and philosophy and interpret that perspective from historical knowledge, ideological understanding, and formal perspectives: always asking the questions why and how this particular [ugly] depiction occurs. Analyzing from a feminist or gendered point of view will always involve intellectual movement and decisions between feminism of production and feminism of reception.

Thus feminist thinking, separating out women authors for separate study, has motivated an on-going revolution in reception.[3] It is one methodological move within literary study—to separate a marked group—gay writers, Black writers, writers who share a cultural formation, a social manifest, a historical ascription. This depends on identifications—made by writers, made

[3] It's one that can have, in 2007, Ann Vickery point out that her book *Stressing the Modern: Cultural Politics in Australian Women's Poetry* is the first major study of modern Australian women's poetry" (3).

by critics. Any writer manifests multiple identifications, and those may be differently evoked at different career moments. One might see this in the career evolution of Adrienne Rich's identifications—from "ungendered" yet female writer, to feminist writer, to lesbian writer, to writer identifying with an anti-Zionist reform Judaism, to writer claiming a global ethos. And as well discussing placing a writer may not involve the identification made by an individual author, but the critical grouping and identification made by a critic as part of the gathering, sorting, and investigating process of literary discussion. This activity in reception has allowed a rewriting of literary history, groups and movements, studies of the differences among women, as well as their differential relationships (from that of many men) to culture and to authority, authorization and authorship. Since main culture may deny or obfuscate or show ambivalence to female agency, feminist reception should try to find evidence of this agency, examine it, investigate it, disaggregate its components, value and study its products.

However, a corollary of the recovery of female cultural agency is that it demands to be viewed coolly. Many—certainly some—women deploy their agency in ways you might not like, might not admire politically, or think is useful culturally. It is a measure now of the strength of feminist scholarship that it can deal with the labor of women even if that labor has been for questionable (to us) ends. That is, to "manifest literary feminisms" we must separate our (temporally limited) ideas of what is good for women from what women actually did and said.

Further it is possible to construct a feminist reception of women writers who are relatively—even verbosely and polemically—skeptical of feminism. Not all women writers are feminists, and certainly "feminist" writers don't pledge allegiance to precisely the same feminisms across history, nor to the same kinds of liberatory projects, even at the same historical era. Not only are all females not universally committed to what used to be called "liberation," neither would they/we necessarily know what that might look like in particular cases, nor would they/we agree on how to "get there." Even those who are committed to changing the sex-gender system may act in self-deceptive, in strategically strange, or double ways. Despite the problematic of this sex-gender bolus, purist separatisms only compound the political and social problematic; they don't help clarify it.

It is not widely known in Serbia, nor in the post-Yugoslav region, that there have been what are known as feminist poetry movements in the U.S. – including experimental feminist poetry. In 1987, in socialist Yugoslavia, I first

became aware of Language poetry [a recent U.S. experimental movement in poetry and poetics] and began translating its poets (Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, Rae Armantrount, among others), but I didn't connect poetry experimentation with feminism until I encountered your feminist theory of poetry. So, this interview is intended to provide context for the existence of these two poetry modes in contemporary U.S. poetry, as well as for literary criticsm done with gender in mind. Could you speak about these two, I will call them feminist poetry formations?

"Women's poetry" is a vital and variable historical heuristic and critical probe. It's a debated category among critics and among poets, some people at various times being deeply committed to it, other people rejecting it, and some who don't like it nonetheless conceding its importance in literary history. Of course, it is, in a lively and interesting manner, thoroughly linked to feminist questions both loosely and generally and in specific. If one has an upsurge of feminist thinking on a historical level, then there will be an upsurge of women's poetry, of the welcoming of women's poetry, and of the writing and critical approaches to women's poetry, and even the disparagements of the very category"women's poetry" as something to consider.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a women's issue of *Others*—one of the key U.S. modernist journals—called for a "women's poetry" issue in an interested but, dare I say, a tad patronizing way, by the general editor Alfred Kreymbourg, "we long to see what women will come up with." Women have always done things in the poetic line of things, books and contributions to periodicals. So how does something become "women's poetry" as distinguished from writing in verse or poetic forms by the female of the species? I point to this as a case study in literary history.[4]

There are a couple of ways, not all convincing but all historically available and testified to in biography. This is a suggestive list. First, female themes are addressed, whatever *that* means, and defining those would involve many qualifications. What these could be is always a discussion topic. Also the question, do women (or some women) bring a special female perspective to poetry.

Second, one may identify women as minor poets. Their poetry stays limited, and in some parallel ways women are considered second-class citizens. Some women writers stay by choice within those limits: that is, decide to be small-scale, charming, sometimes comic, or outspoken and shocking. These are internalized choices for marketability, an interesting issue in both production

[4] See DuPlessis "Critical Mapping II: Reading American Poetry by Women." *The Cambridge History of American Women's Poetry,* ed. Linda A Kinnahan. Cambridge UP, 2016: 26-40.

and reception. Sometimes this poetics is staged as an advantage—an audience-reaching and audience-pleasing role. (This strategy has its limits.)

Or, the poetry is compelled externally, by customs, to be viewed as limited. There is an anecdote from the 1950s about having her husband guarantee the originality of Maxine Kumin's poem before she could get a publication accepted. Some women carve a place for themselves by denying any importance to their gender. Louise Bogan is notably conflicted on this issue—"Women have no wildness in them," she says annoyingly, blaming women for any concessive, low-risk careers, neglecting discussions of the multiple factors contributing to a literary career.

What does it mean to question your gender ascription in cultural relations (not necessarily in sexual relations)? Professionally, you become a denizen of a third place, perhaps a third gender, different from those others who enact the binarist structure of positing two genders exclusively. It is a self-protective, thoroughly explicable, and provoking claim that sometimes their gender is not structuring. They have also experienced a *sauve-qui-peut* position, given their ambitions and powers. For some an allegiance to a third gender, to androgyny, is liberating (this was true of Marianne Moore). This idea resembles the postulate of queer positions today. Some women suspect that identification with women as a group (or as an "oppressed" or a distinctive group) is unappealing and undercuts your poetic career. Clearly in this brief sketch, you can see what a rich and debate-filled zone gender and poetry can propose.

A particular woman writer may deny or discount her relation with women or with any social identification. Such a poet instead wants a relation with poetry, in isolation, with literary tradition, and wants her sex or gender (your pick) ignored as irrelevant to the poetic career. In recent years, this attitude could be proposed by by women writers (Louise Bogan was one, Denise Levertov another) who explicitly refused to be anthologized in the recent (and field defining) anthologies of women's poetry. Or if they were anthologized, they did so without any identification with the "feminisms" that might have gotten them anthologized in the first place. Female issues are alluded to—prejudice, ideas about sexuality and sexual freedom, contradictions experienced in Edna St Vincent Millay and Mina Loy. Both of these poets use the allusiveness of verse—compression, rhyme, evocations of cultural materials— to explore these questions and to make distinctive, sometimes satiric, always judgmental comment.

Female rage is sometimes visible in some literary careers—often it can hurt the figure (Frances Boldereff, Marsha Nardi are evidence) or compromise

them. The role of cultural helpmeet can have annhilating consequences.

I've always held that women have had a historically shifting relationship to artistic and cultural institutions—education, access to schooling in their professions, access to publication, distribution, and evaluation, access, that is, to the cultural memory of themselves, for themselves and on their behalf. This has shifted across modernity in considerable ways, with much literary critical analysis possible of individual cultural workers and their contexts. In what follows, I need to say I prefer the terms "poetry by women" and "women artists" to the phrase "women's poetry" or "women's art."

Thus the critical category "women's poetry" (or "women's art history") is a category of cultural rectification—to study who was there, that they were productive, palpable, and forgotten; or undercut by sexism or by themselves; or active and then erased (and so on). And there are various ways or grids/lenses of reading their work—by a study of "female difference" from "men" taken in over-generalized terms, but sometimes effective ones. Or female sameness with male projects—comparativist studies that also might find differences in terms of production or reception. Or female difference from other females of other identifications (or identities, if you will). All of these projects are both plausible and useful. Here is what these documents and text state or show. This feminism of reception, importantly, is an analytic and critical stance different from seeking exemplary thoughts and affirmative ideas.

Importantly—any text in question (being analyzed) does not have to support current or contemporary feminist ideas to be useful within a feminism of reception. What problematic and prejudicial arguments are used in this text? What do rhetorics and imagery and trajectories of statement attempt to convince the reader?

It is a position within the feminism of reception that a document or text does not need to uphold feminist ideas (whatever they are now) but instead needs to analyze, the nastiest and most horrible writing showing how and why it functions, or how it is damaging to women and girls in its tropes, choices, and positions. That is, a document does not have to produce a consoling, inspiring, or uplifting argument, but any document or literary/cultural text can depict various gender-laden ideas and actions. It is the task of the feminism of reception to exemplify curiosity, showing how these ideas and practice function, or are the result of historical debate.

Such reading strategies might display many moments of disunity or contradictions among the critical categories—imagery going one way in a work, resolution (ending) pulling another way, suggest an example.

Contradictions are repressed or under-emphasized, though truly these are points of dynamic interest in texts.

And your poetry? Could you characterize your work as a poet? This is the implicit question behind this interview. Your serial poem DRAFTS is especially interesting – in literature, seriality is usually associated with male experimental writing, although female poets also work in this form or mode. Could you say something about the serial tradition and your engagement with it?

You are asking about serial poems or seriality as a useful poetic structure. This is a version of a medium-length poem with its parts in (often numbered) distinctive sections. Often these sections are not linked by a clear, linear argument, but depend on reader's inferences to grasp the poem's scope. These are sections in which each unit investigates, examines, or possibly advances an argument, but often by indirection. Serial poetry is writing as thinking aloud, (not simply narrating, or embellishing, or singing, or writing in fixed forms).

Serial work, with its modular construction, is a key in modernist structures (that are often non -narrative). Modules examine the "same" item from various positions and at different times. Monet's haystacks are often deployed to trace exacting particularities, and varieties of thing that might be individuated with subtle shades of difference. That is, seriality honors the specificity of things. It is a vital tool against over-generalization, and taking multiplicities and polyphonies into account. Or it is simply invested in thinking in a poetic text, not decorating, but working with social and personal feelings and thoughts.

It is also evoctive as being in sections with implicit or explicity pulse and white spaces between the sections—gaps or juxtapositions with space. An art critic named Chris Lyons recently charaterized some of Nancy Spero's "scrolls" or continuous but section works by this useful observation: The white or empty spaces in her scroll/ serial work shows "temporal pauses, spatial expanses, existential voids." Something like this occurs in serial poems.

Now, to briefly turn to your poetry and poetics within the context of contemporary U.S. poetry: could you explain the context in which experimental feminist poetry emerged? What issues or challenges sparked its development?

One response is this: a problem is—an exclusively short humanist poetry and its naturalized conventions. Solution—a critique of the conventions of poetry, subjectivity, the lyric. That is making a poetry some called experimental or avant-garde (that last is too war-related a term for me). Some say innovative, although the rhetorics are not "new" but are deployed in a focused way. And when you have more people in the zone of experimentaton or inside a critical occasion for using a wider set of conventions, and one has women self-consciously writing poetry, you might get a range of women experimentalists.

Who were the actors?

I cannot give you a short list of actors; the United States is large and has many poets! You might distinguish them this way: one set were poets favored by main publishers, people recognized as poets, often winning some specific prizes in US contexts. Varieties of writers, all well-enough rewarded with grants and residencies. They write a generally narrative, memory-filled, and image-rich humanist poetry. Often the poets show loose poetics of intersubjectivity and well-worked language strategies.

How have your interests in feminist theory and interpretation changed over time? Do you write political poetry? That is, do you write feminist poetry? Do you present works directly engaged with feminist issues?

I do not write "feminist poetry" as that term has been understood, as coming directly out of the opinions or positions of a particular era in the contemporary women's movement. I am known for writing one long poem in 114 separate "odes" or "cantos". This is called *Drafts*. (You have asked if *Drafts* is one serial work, and I think that question is for critics to debate, not for me as its author to categorize.)

I have often said that in my essays, poetry, and literary criticism I am a feminist and a poet, not a feminist poet. I write enriched by and motivated from feminism that I experienced as a dynamic upsurge at a specific time and place. I am known for writing poems, engaging in cultural discussion and critique, for writing a stylistically varied poetry that takes up many genres and dictions in this one large work a poetry of expansive scope and active thinking in process. I do not "write" feminist opinions within my poetry in any straightforward, easily identifiable way.

I feel, as Adorno said, "migrated into" by our current social realities, infused in every cell by an on-going world crisis of global plunder, gender wrongs,

and nationalist malfeasance. The political world infuses everything we are. I express it continuously; I do not have to "decide" to write a "political" poem—I write politically simply by trying to represent all the dimensions of my and our lives. The social world, the economic world, the political world, the gendered world are here, now. The questions is how to face them, how not to "exclude" their force by means of the purificatory, aestheticizing rituals of art.

Being a poet is not simply writing poem after poem, though it begins that way. It is defining a project, or several projects, sending them forth into our world. In general, a poet will make some address to the whole structure of poetic practice and to the histories of the mode or genre "poetry." And from there to thought, philosophy, cosmogony—however you put it.

For me feminism helps construct a critical and resistant relationship to much of hegemonic culture, to its products and to its ideologies. This critical resistance and suspicion is seen in a good deal of my work. Thus it is categorized as "innovative." Genres and conventions of writing often reaffirm social and power relations that already actively exist. Forms may or may not reaffirm those, but are often claimed as a sign of adhesion to tradition. That's why, for me, the cultural acts of critique, torque, resistance, investigation, the invention of structures, the exploration of genres and idioms have had more attraction and interest than acts of affirmation, fitting into genres, reuse of conventions, and the obedience involved in using form uncritically. Poetry is a practice of critique.