

The Aunt Lute ANTHOLOGY
of U.S. WOMEN WRITERS

Preface

I.

The last thirty years have seen an enormous revision of the U.S. literary canon as it has expanded to include more works by women, working class people, and people of color. The kind of American literature survey course that many of the editors of this volume experienced as undergraduates (yes Emily Dickinson, maybe Anne Bradstreet, maybe Langston Hughes, no women of color writers) is, happily, a thing of the past (though perhaps unevenly so). The institutional success of that curricular transformation was perhaps best embodied in the publication of the now premier anthology of U.S. writing, *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, which debuted in 1989 and has since set the standard for inclusiveness. Its reconstruction of the U.S. literary landscape with each succeeding edition both enlarges and destabilizes that landscape, helping students to see how fraught its major categories, “American” and “Literature,” truly are.

What need is there, then, for the anthology you hold in your hands? What is still to be gained by considering U.S. *women’s* writing as a separate tradition, apart from men’s writing, given the increased representation of women? Part of the answer to that question lies in the fact that for the better part of the twentieth century, women writers were burdened by the repression of a women’s tradition of writing. While there was an extraordinary amount of women’s writing in the nineteenth century, most of that writing was either forgotten or dismissed as trivial (local, sentimental, domestic) by the emergent profession of American literary study. In the absence of that tradition, most women writing in the first several decades of the twentieth century experienced the category of “woman writer” itself as contradictory, and many women writers have felt compelled to take a position for or against themselves as women, whether it is to reject that categorization, as Laura (Riding) Jackson did, or to embrace it, as Amy Lowell did. From the vantage point of those of us writing and studying now, the history of American women’s writing might appear to be an unbroken conversation stretching across generations and centuries. But that is to a great extent an illusion produced by the very success of women writers and feminist scholars in recovering, reconstructing, and joining in conversation with the lost voices of earlier women writers, a process we can see occurring up through the 1970s and 1980s in the works of such writers as Adrienne Rich and Alice Walker.

Apart from the historical significance of gender as a defining condition of women’s writing, it is also the case that gender persists as an important axis of social and political identity, and thus remains a crucial lens through which to view cultural production. This is not to suggest, of course, that all women experience their gender in the same way. Indeed, it is to suggest quite the opposite: One of the reasons to assemble a women’s tradition is to show precisely how complicated the category “women” is, a

complexity which might be obscured in a non-gender-based anthology. While in the past few decades there have been many anthologies of U.S. women's writing published, those have been largely devoted to specific genres, themes, periods, or identity-based traditions. These anthologies have been and continue to be crucial in constructing and reconstructing important subfields in American literary study. However, we believe that it is also important to place these women's traditions side by side (by side by side). It is only when we place women writers in dialog with each other that we come to see how race, class, sexuality, ability, and other social determinants unsettle our thinking about what it means to be a woman or a woman writer. Women experience gender differently in relation to their cultural and social locations, and the nuances of those are rendered more apparent in a comprehensive anthology.

In keeping with Aunt Lute Books' founding mission, the works of women of color writers are squarely at the center of our vision of U.S. women's writing. That decision allows us to forward many of the primary issues these writers take up as crucial issues for the U.S. in the twentieth century—race, "race," racism, and racialization; difference, multiplicity, culture, and "culture;" diaspora, migration, immigration, and emigration; translation, code-switching, dialect, and creole. Additionally, it has allowed us to situate histories of oppression and resistance, violence and internalization, achievement and celebration, and heroism and collaboration at the center of U.S. history. Of course, other issues conventionally understood as "women's issues" (pregnancy and childbirth, domestic violence, marriage, romantic love, families, work, education, writing), also sit at the center of work by women of color, just as they do for white women. And issues not conventionally understood as "women's issues" (war, economics, medicine, labor, to name a few) are also at stake in works by women writers of all backgrounds. In making our selections, we have sought to convey to readers the amazing breadth and variety of women's contributions to the critical conversations of the twentieth century.

In addition to forwarding women writers of color, we have also included such little read white women writers as Edna Ferber, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Fannie Hurst, and Zona Gale. Ferber and Hurst in particular were widely read and wildly popular writers, each lauded in her time as the most popular woman writer in America. One of our surprises in compiling this volume is how quickly (some) women writers have disappeared from critical conversations, even after the pervasive sexism of the earlier twentieth century has dissipated to some extent.

As with Volume I, we have been particularly interested in tracking the ways in which women writers "enter the conversation," which is often not by way of traditional literary genres. Thus we have included some samples of journalism, autobiography, and essay. We have also included a thread of music—from blues lyrics to protest songs to opera libretti. Blues, of course, are an important part of the poetics of Black women's literary tradition, and a significant resource from which contemporary African-American women writers draw. Like the blues, protest songs and women's folk music have often provided women with access to a public voice in a way that the institution of literature has not. And, given the rootedness of those genres in performance, they represent a form of women's writing that transcends the limits of literacy. Finally, it can be difficult to draw a bright line in contemporary practice between

poetry, spoken word, and lyrics, and so we felt it important to include a strong offering of the more performative genres. In choosing opera libretti to represent two of the major writers of the twentieth century—Gertrude Stein and Toni Morrison—we mean to emphasize how important performance is and has been to the tradition of women’s writing in the U.S.

Another line that can be difficult to draw is that between periods. All periodization of writers is arbitrary—Charlotte Perkins Gilman could have appeared in either volume, for example, and several of the turn-of-the-century poets from Volume I might have been in this volume along with Ella Wheeler Wilcox. Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” we felt, resonated better with the concerns raised by writers in Volume I; those turn-of-the-century poets helped pave the way for the discovery of Emily Dickinson, and so we wanted the majority of them to be in her volume. This general problem in literary scholarship is exacerbated in the women’s tradition(s), not least because some women writers simply outlive their period designations. Thus, for example, Kay Boyle and Dorothy West—Modernist and Harlem Renaissance writers, respectively—wrote and published long after their movements or moments had ended. Literary history, it turns out, is messy, and its messiness is perhaps most obvious at the volume break.

This, then, is our vision of twentieth century U.S. women’s writing: multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-genre, transnation, transsex, sometimes in translation, the well known and the obscure, the fallen-out-of-favor and the Nobel Laureate. Once again, as we did in Volume I, we’ve omitted excerpts from novels, making room, we believe, for the most diverse collection of U.S. women’s literary work ever assembled. We hope students, teachers, and scholars can find here—as we did—new works, new writers, new conversations, and new questions.



Note on Texts and Dates

Nearly every text in this volume has been previously published in some form. Where possible, we used the earliest published version of each text to assure greatest accuracy. Where there were obvious typographical errors, we corrected them silently (and, when possible, in consultation with the authors). We did not, however, “correct” archaic usage, spellings, or punctuation. The dates for fiction, non-fiction prose, and drama are the dates of first publication. The dates for poetry reflect the poem’s first publication in a collection. Where there is a substantial difference between the time a text was written and the time it was published, we have noted that gap in the annotations. We welcome any corrections or additional information about dates and versions that readers wish to supply.

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