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## **Contemporary Innovative Poetry by Women in the UK: Revoicing in the work of Holly Pester, Sophie Robinson and SL Mendoza.**

### Abstract

Until recently women's position on the British innovative poetry scene has been difficult to say the least, often risking being "doubly excluded," as an anonymous writer is quoted in the introduction to Maggie O'Sullivan's crucial 1996 anthology *Out of Everywhere*. Thankfully, women's experimental writing now seems to be in a healthier state than ever, although the refusal of key figures Geraldine Monk and Maggie O'Sullivan to be included in Carrie Etter's 2010 anthology: *Infinite Difference: Other Poetries by UK Women Poets*, reveals the need to be cautious about the gender label. As Monk and O'Sullivan declared as far back as 1984:

The most effective chance any woman has of dismantling the fallacy of male creative supremacy is simply by writing poetry of a kind which is liberating by the breadth of its range and innovation . . . to exploit and realise the full potential and importance of language.

This article reflects on the risks entailed by identifying poets as 'women' poets in its examination of the work of three younger British writers working in the innovative 'tradition': Holly Pester, Sophie Robinson and SL Mendoza. The article uses a theoretical approach adapted from David Kennedy and Christine Kennedy's recent study *Women's Experimental Poetry in Britain 1970-2010* (2013), proposing a modification of their key terms 'voicing and unvoicing' to 'revoicing'.

The innovative poetry scene in the UK is a more vibrant and accessible place for women writers than ever before. By *innovative poetry*, I refer to the poetic writings which have appeared in Britain and Ireland under a host of guises: avant-garde, experimental, formally innovative, linguistically innovative, neo-modernist, non-mainstream, other, post-avant, postmodernist, and the parallel tradition. Of these multiple epithets, *linguistically innovative* is used in one of the most

comprehensive critical studies of the field: Robert Sheppard's *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents 1950-2000* (2005), although the title of the first UK journal devoted to the area (co-founded by Sheppard and myself) decided to drop the word 'linguistically' to form the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. Carrie Etter's 2010 anthology, *Infinite Difference: Other Poetries by UK Women Poets*, collected the work of a number of established innovative poets alongside younger writers who had yet to publish a first collection or had only published one collection. The younger generation included: Sascha Aktar, Sophie Mayer, Rachel Lehrman, Emily Critchley, Frances Kruk, Marianne Morris and Sophie Robinson. Etter's introduction notes the tensions between mainstream and innovative poetry in the UK and various initiatives to promote the work of non-mainstream women poets such as a forum on *Jacket* magazine,<sup>1</sup> the 2006 Cambridge Experimental Women's Poetry Festival organised by poet and academic Emily Critchley (followed in 2010 by the Greenwich Cross-Genre Festival)<sup>2</sup> and the activities of poet-editors like Zoë Skoulding and Andrea Brady with their work on *Poetry Wales* and *The Archive of the Now* respectively. Etter also mentions Maggie O'Sullivan's 1996 anthology *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetries by Women in North America and the UK*, which collected more established women poets.

Etter builds the case for women-only anthologies of innovative work via her reading of Eva Salzman's introduction to *Women's Work: Modern Women Poets Writing in English*, which, although it "argues convincingly for the continued need for women's anthologies" is nevertheless "limited to the more Mainstream end of the spectrum" as well as extending beyond UK poets to include many American writers (Etter 10). In *Out of Everywhere*, only nine out of the thirty writers represented were from the UK. Whilst there are strong ties between innovative poets in the UK and North America, far more innovative women poets have risen to prominence in the US for reasons discussed below. Important outlets for the US work have included the *How2* web magazine, founded originally by US poet Kathleen Fraser as *How(ever)* and focusing on women's writing from the US and UK. *How2* was, until recently, edited by British poet Redell Olsen.<sup>3</sup> Etter also cites Emily Critchley's remarks on the UK Poetry listserv in 2006:

There may be a dearth of women writing experimentally in Britain to begin with (especially compared with America). [...] This would seem to be down to historical and environmental conditions that have excluded women, or put them off being part of the scene, until very recently. The cliquishness and vocal dominance of men at past poetry readings surely repelled some from even attempting to be part of such a collective [...] because of the peculiar mix of sociability and self-promotion such events demand. (Etter 10)

There is a complex intersection of gender with aesthetic and national affiliations here which isn't reflected upon in Etter's introduction. Etter mentions that Geraldine Monk's contribution to the UK poetry list discussion argues that the dearth of innovative women poets had less to do with male poets' conduct and more to do with the fact that fewer women were interested in experimentation, but does not explore the reasons that Monk gives for this. In the original discussion, Monk argued as follows:

According to statistics women are more conservative than men. They are more likely to vote conservative. Liberalism is a luxury. Decadence is a rich man's dream. Women have always been socially disadvantaged, having less money than men and the responsibilities of childcare and often looking after elderly relatives. When life itself is precarious *safety* not experimentation is a refuge. This I think is a much more valid reason to explain the dearth. Generally speaking the homeliness of mainstream poetry with its domestic agenda and familiar constructions was a bigger draw for women poets but things are changing. (Wagner)

This is a challenging position but one that nevertheless reinforces Monk's awareness of how women are otherwise well-integrated into what she refers to – with many qualifications – as the 'mainstream' poetry scene in the UK, referring to the profiles of poets such as Carol Ann Duffy, Jackie Kay, Wendy Cope, Anne Stevenson, U.A. Fanthorpe, Sophie Hannah and Gillian Clarke as evidence. In this Monk therefore occupies a similar position to Etter regarding the position of innovative women poets.

However, in a more recent paper "To Have Done With Women Only Anthologies" (written in 2008

but not delivered until 2014), Monk reflects on her acts of turning down both Salzman and Etter's invitations to contribute to their anthologies. Unfolding a brief cultural history of the twenty years since she was first invited to contribute to a women-only anthology, Monk argues for the necessity of such anthologies in the seventies and eighties, but claims that the objective was always for such publications to become obsolete, as women became more fully integrated into society and culture. As she describes:

What began as an artificial device to highlight the work of significant but neglected women poets and redress the gender imbalance soon evolved into poetry as self-help groups and personal catharsis around specific issues concerning women and their social and biological conditions. [...] Therapeutic poetry began to colour the expectations of what 'women only' anthologies contained: no longer were these anthologies exploring the poetry of women poets and their explorations of their art – they were becoming the prosaic mouthpiece of gender-driven issues in short lines and rhyming couplets. (Monk)

As a result of this perceived therapeutic turn, Monk's account argues that the women-only anthology became a "subgenre rather than a catalyst for change" and resulted in a new kind of gender separation within culture: "Women, it seems, have fully embraced their status as 'other.' In trying to rid ourselves of our chains we knitted much stronger ones. Stronger because it is of our own doing" (Monk).

Etter acknowledges Monk's refusal to be included in *Infinite Difference*, alongside that of another major figure in innovative poetry, Maggie O'Sullivan, because of "the focus on women and the desire not to be categorized" (Etter 11). In fact Monk and O'Sullivan produced a co-authored statement published in *City Limits* magazine as far back as 1984 in which they argued: "the most effective chance any woman has of dismantling the fallacy of male creative supremacy is simply by writing poetry of a kind which is liberating by the breadth of its range and innovation . . . to exploit and realise the full potential and importance of language" (Sheppard 163).<sup>4</sup> These remarks emerged in

a much more unequal context than now, but one in which these two poets were already wary of the potential risks of an explicitly gendered poetics. Although this must be partially qualified by O’Sullivan’s editorship of the women-only *Out of Everywhere*, the anthology’s focus on innovative writing means that it is readable as a strategic intervention which still felt necessary in the late nineties, whilst also going beyond gender to some extent. Monk and O’Sullivan’s statement nevertheless begins to articulate a more radical response to the predicament of gender inequality which makes an explicit link between an emancipatory politics and a poetics of innovation which emerges out of an engagement with the potential of language. This will be explored further below.

Monk’s argument in “To Have Done With Women Only Anthologies” has far-reaching implications picked up by Zoë Skoulding in the introduction to her *Contemporary Women’s Poetry & Urban Space: Experimental Cities* (2013): “defining a genre of ‘experimental women’s poetry’, [...] would replicate the kinds of exclusion I want to address” (Skoulding 1). Although Monk’s agenda is clearly a feminist one, the struggle for equality is currently being fought on many fronts in an increasingly complex gender landscape, and the word ‘woman’ is a term that not all persons and/or poets, who might otherwise be biologically female, would necessarily identify with, as we shall later see in relation to the work of SL Mendoza. These issues remain pressing, as a new women-only anthology of innovative poetry – presented as a sequel to *Out of Everywhere* – is currently being edited by Emily Critchley for publication in 2015, and a list of twenty-one out of a total of forty planned contributors named on the publisher’s website (Reality Street) already includes ten names of British-born or British-resident poets.<sup>5</sup> As Monk recognises, social and cultural changes in the UK and beyond such as “the World Wide Web, women’s higher education and poetry as an academic module” have led to women “significantly becoming a vital force on the creative writing courses in universities and colleges where poetry now lives” (Monk). Although Monk refuses the notion of “ghettoised anthologies”, it is these developments that the *Out of Everywhere* sequel is clearly responding to, rather than a ‘women’s issues’ agenda. Since the original anthology, and even since Etter’s anthology, new innovative women poets have been appearing in the UK at an incredible rate. To those names mentioned above one could add the following: Emma Bennett, Leanne Bridgewater, Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, Rachel Lois Clapham, Lucy Harvest Clarke, Jennifer Cooke, Becky Cremin,

Sarah Crewe, Amy De’Ath, Sarah James, Sarah Kelly, Laura Kilbride, Jo Langton, Agnes Lehoczky, Francesa Lisette, Lisa Mansell, SL Mendoza, Camilla Nelson, Tamarin Norwood, Sandeep Parmar, Holly Pester, Nat Raha, Hannah Silva, Anna Ticehurst, Samantha Walton, Rachel Warriner and Chrissy Williams. A large number of these writers have developed within the context of higher education courses of one kind or another, and many of them now also work within higher education. Given this context, it is somewhat surprising that no full-length critical study has appeared of the innovative work until very recently, despite important work by Wills (1994), Huk (1997), Tarlo (1999, 2000), Mark (1997, 2001), Marsh (2007), O’Sullivan (2000) and Watts (2000). Indeed when an earlier version of this article was originally given as a paper at the Women’s Experimental Writing conference at the University of Manchester in October 2013, the first book-length study of the field: *Women’s Experimental Poetry in Britain 1970-2010* (2013) by David Kennedy and Christine Kennedy (who also presented at the conference), had not yet been published, although Zoë Skoulding’s study cited above, which covers mostly non-UK innovative women writers, was published in the same month as the conference.

In their book, Kennedy and Kennedy favour the term *experimental* to refer to this body of work, arguing that: “‘Innovative’ can be dismissed out of hand. It is altogether too generic: all poetry is already innovative by virtue of line breaks and jagged right edge. It is also too closely tied to context” (Kennedy and Kennedy 23). This seems a rather limited definition of what might be meant by innovation – line breaks in themselves do not signify innovation, and there is nothing inherently radical about experimentation as creative practice that is not also tied to context. One might instead see these terms as usefully compatible with one another, innovation emphasising the newness of a creative strategy and experimentation emphasising the risk of an open-ended creative process.

Kennedy and Kennedy describe the increase of women poets as a turning point, suggesting that “a wider shift in the economics and socialities of the experimental writing scene as well as [...] significant changes in women’s experience and opportunities” are the causes (5). This analysis refers to the increased number of experimental poets finding employment within higher education and fostering new writers through PhD programmes, as noted by Monk. This in itself is a consequence of the maturing of Creative Writing provision in UK universities. Academic employment is attractive to

innovative writers who have received an undergraduate training in literary theory that informs their practice, and provides an alternative to the paucity of paid work for experimental poets. Kennedy and Kennedy point to new models for a poetic career partly adopted from the US Language Poets, that is, the concept of the poet-critic who also functions in various ways as an editor, event organiser, publisher and so on.

In their study, Kennedy and Kennedy offer a theoretical framework set in the context of the affective turn in literary studies, that explores the relationship between women's experimental writing and the notions of body, time and locale. The use of the term 'affect' is a way of critiquing culture's tendency to oppose feelings and thoughts – body and mind – often along gendered fault-lines. As Kennedy and Kennedy explain:

Feeling becomes affect or emotion becomes articulated desire because the individual [...] comes to the awareness that feeling is not merely – or perhaps not even – something personal that we possess but something that is produced in us and/or given to us by forces (cultural, economic, social, political) working on the body. (8)

This realisation is empowering because it avoids treating emotion as something outside the bounds of social awareness and makes it available as a basis for political discussion and action. It involves locale and time, because these forces “position the individual body in a particular spatio-temporal matrix” (8) and help us to see our place in geography and history as not simply given, but constructed.

Kennedy and Kennedy explore the aspect of time in relation to Denise Riley's sense of the *temporalities* of women and to Julia Kristeva's famous essay “Women's Time” with its contrast between linear and cyclical time. Tracing Kristeva's call for women to “break the code” of the symbolic contract and “to shatter language” in order to “find a specific discourse closer to the body and emotions” (11), Kennedy and Kennedy declare an interest in how experimental women's poetry produces “different or new types of bodies” (13). In terms of form, they note a process of “simultaneous voicing [...] and ‘unvoicing’” (13) in experimental work, where a poet rapidly adopts and discards different positions or voices from which to speak and/or write, in accordance with



Riley's sense that identity positions are necessarily temporary and as a means to take a critical stance on those positions, i.e. the "social fictions of femininity" (14). As Kennedy and Kennedy explain: "a particular voice [...] is never in play for very long. Whatever voice is established quickly gives way to another" (13). They go on to argue that voicing and unvoicing may be a response to "the possible impossibility of a female voice that is distinct from all of the other voices that produce and work the signifiers 'woman' and 'women'" (14). Aside from the problematic slippage between female and woman/women in this passage, the particular advantage of this view of technique is that it constructs formal experimentation not as a negative refusal of meaning in favour of a "non-place" but as a process which "redefines what can be considered content by forcing reconsideration of what can be considered voice" (14). It also might be read as "a continuing search for a language in which, and with which, to be acknowledged" (14).

Kennedy and Kennedy are acutely aware of the risks in "discussing women's writing in terms of women's bodies," and of constructing innovative poetics as focused on form rather than content (11, 14). However, their notion of voicing and unvoicing begins to suggest a useful way in which we might describe how certain pieces of poetic writing enact an innovative poetics at the level of word choice. That said, Kennedy and Kennedy's term appears to give equal weighting to what is 'unvoiced' in a poem, whereas it is perhaps hard to imagine what 'unvoiced' material might be, except for the moment of movement *between* voicings. One might instead, it is proposed, suggest *revoicing* as a way of describing two characteristic features of textual dynamics found in innovative poetry. One feature is that of the appropriation and juxtaposition of found materials that is akin to collage in visual art, whilst the other is a more generalised form of parataxis – a placing of un subordinating phrases side by side creating a fragmentary effect and disrupting the illusion of a consistent narrative voice. Kennedy and Kennedy declare that the process of voicing and unvoicing is "even more marked and self-conscious in the work of younger poets" (13) and therefore it is worthwhile to employ this notion in discussing the work of three younger innovative writers: Holly Pester, SL Mendoza and Sophie Robinson.<sup>6</sup> In accordance, however, with the reservations explored above about the construction of women's poetry, innovative, experimental or otherwise, the following examples illustrate quite

diverse responses to the problem of an emancipatory gender politics as it criss-crosses innovative poetics.

Holly Pester's poetry has its most substantial showing in *Hoofs* (2011) and she is a highly accomplished performer of her work, appearing on Radio Three's *The Verb* in 2013. Pester performed the poem "HEAP" from *Hoofs* at The Other Room poetry reading series in Manchester in 2010, where she introduced the piece as "Post-apocalyptic Heap."<sup>7</sup> The notion of revoicing is pertinent to discussing a poet whose work is fascinated with the human voice and the transformations and dislocations it undergoes via various media – Pester having pursued this interest as an academic researcher as well as a practitioner in the field of Sound Poetry. The voice in which "HEAP" is narrated is constructed as if sending a radio message from what appears to be a destroyed civilization:

HEAP!  
SOME LIVE  
ARE ALIVE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE  
SOME HEAP  
THE FISH ARE DEAD  
HEAD NORTH HEAVE  
THE DEAD  
:  
DIG  
IN FEEDING HEAPS ---  
SOME LIVE IN HEAPS  
DIG  
BY THE SEA (*Hoofs* 46)

The presentation of the poem in columns of short verses in capital letters separated by colons or full-stops adds to the illusion of a transcription of a speaking voice that appears to be calling for help. One can begin to construct a fractured narrative from these transmissions which includes references to war,

weapons and bacteria but the cause of the apocalypse remains unclear. There is a hint of insurgency with the lines: “IF YOU R LISTENING / YOU ARE THE / RESISTANCE” (46) but later the phrase “DISORGANSIE [sic] THE HUMANS!” (48) appears, as if we may even be dealing with an alien invasion. This possibility is hinted at playfully by a later passage which repeats the phrase “NO CURE” fourteen times before ending with “FOR MARTIANS” (50). There is a potential reference here to the demise of the Martian invaders in H.G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* (1897) from microbial infections, itself a reference to the deaths of indigenous peoples coming into contact with colonisers from bacteria otherwise relatively harmless to their hosts. The alien theme is also found in phrases like “HAVE U SEEN THEM FEEDING? / . . . ABSORBING SUN RAYS THROUGH / SUCTION FINGERS,” “THEY’RE IN THE MUSEUM / DECODING THE SPECIES” (48-9). Throughout the poem the word “HEAP” is used as an exclamation, but also to refer to heaps of dead fish, “feeding heaps,” heaps of blankets, even heaps of money. It is also used as a kind of substitute verb in several cases: “HEAP WEST” (49) “HEAP ME” (50). As the poem draws to a close, there are hints at further disaster: “THIS IS THE LAST / BROADCAST,” “THIS IS THE END NOW” and a kind of countdown as if something is closing-in on the narrator: “30 FEET -- / 2 FEET -- / 1 STEP / (HIT THE GROUND)” (50).

Witnessing Pester’s voicing of this piece in performance, however, introduces some important elements which are not scored on the page. She pronounces the word “HEAP” each time in a strange voice, reminiscent of the Gumby characters in *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*. In addition she blows on the microphone at each point where a colon, fullstop or sequence of hyphens appears, creating an effect suggestive of an electronic interruption or interference. These elements act as a revoicing agency in the text. Other more random phrases in the piece such as “SMOKE A GOAT” or “CIDERCIDERCIDER” achieve a paratactical revoicing, the effect of which is to prevent the reader’s absorption in the fiction created here. At one point the poem insists:

IMAGINE A WORLD

IMAGINATIVE

IMAGINE IMAGINE

## IMAGINE A GROUND

### IN HEAPS (47)

Here the repetition of ‘imagine’ opens the gesture to question, or at least makes it more conspicuous. Although Pester’s technique with the microphone adds an effect in keeping with the illusion that we are hearing a broadcast voice, its abrupt intervention also adds to the humour of the delivery in simultaneously reminding us that we are listening to a constructed, mediated, but also embodied voice.

A later text by Pester develops her interest in what she calls the “radio voice,” but this time in the context of an actual disaster. *Katrina Sequence* (2012) comprises three texts derived from online mini-documentaries about the role of ham radio operators during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005. To propose a further link between these two pieces of Pester’s, Orson Welles’ famous 1938 radio adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* features a ham radio operator calling: “2X2L calling CQ... New York Isn’t there anyone on the air? Isn’t there anyone on the air? Isn’t there anyone...” (Welles 14). Pester has written of Welles’ adaptation as “an event that signalled the impact of the radio voice and gave a new definition to radio as a medium, and a new relationship between media and the voice” (Pester 94). In an introductory note Pester explains how during Katrina all official emergency communication networks failed and only ham radios were operational, leading to large groups of volunteer radio operators fielding distress calls. Pester describes how she composed the pieces by listening to the audio of the documentaries on headphones whilst reciting what she heard into a voice recorder – later transcribing the recital. She describes the resulting three texts, or “script” as a “file compression” – which suggests a kind of editing in the form of condensing the material (*Katrina Sequence* 5).<sup>8</sup> Presented in continuous lines, although with different amounts of lines on some pages, the poem utilises the line break partly to separate the different voices in the interactions:

i’m going to come and check and see if i can raise you guys

still on the air  
yea, this is the only communication that's not down  
just because of the wind  
because of the wind  
where are you millions and millions of dollars are spent on  
communication  
when it gets down to it  
when you can expect  
expect some relief we're doing all we can (8)

This technical device creates some interesting effects of continuity and discontinuity where the repetition of “because of the wind” can be read as a reiteration by one of the speakers, as can “when you can expect / expect some relief.” However, the line beginning “where are you millions and millions” appears to show two voices, if “where are you” is read as the first voice and the rest of the line as a continuation of the previous thought about communication. One might also read “when you can expect / expect some relief” as the words of one speaker as well as two. By not attempting to reproduce the dialogue in a precise way, Pester creates a more unpredictable revoiced texture and one which also mimes the complexity of communication in the original context. Pester’s decision to use a vocal means of selecting material from the source is also in keeping with the nature of her source material, and the arrangement on the page suggests a productive tension between the oral/aural nature of the broadcasts and how they arrive as transcribed text, again in keeping with the revoicing process. The inclusion of elements such as a whole line of capital letter Bs – which may or may not stand for the “sound of the wind” that Pester describes as opening the script – is another reminder of the mediated nature of the translation/adaptation process. As Pester has stated in the context of her critical work on intermedia: “I seek to test the interlocutory role of media in poetry and the various dynamics of voice and speech” (New Definitions 93). For her, Sound Poetry can be seen as “poetry making parasitic interruptions on, for example, technology, the body, speech and language, and song” (93).

The overall effect of these texts is to provide glimpses into the human situations that took place within the disaster:

they're so shook up  
because there are so many people in there with buildings  
with roofs off  
there are people in there  
they're scared  
and there's children (9)

The immediacy of the work arrives as a direct result of its processes: the lack of an organising narrative or other controlling device reflects something of the truth of the unfolding situation. This becomes politically charged in the piece "he's in texas" which reveals how the hams became engaged in relaying official messages from President Bush (who remained on vacation in Texas for more than a day after the disaster struck): "i have an urgent message from the president of the united / states to the mayor of new Orleans" (16). The subtle but telling line-break after the word 'united' reflects the controversy around the Bush administration's appalling handling of the crisis: a delayed and mixed response which cost many lives, and which came in for direct criticism as a form of racial and class discrimination towards the people of New Orleans. As the hams themselves discuss towards the end of Pester's poem:

why have they closed the emergency  
i don't understand  
that's right  
in the middle of an emergency  
[...]  
they don't give  
a jerry about it (18-19)

Placed alongside the previous poem, one can see an intriguing development of a poetics of the radio voice which exhibits a rhythm of revoicing. If in “HEAP” this achieves the effect of a playfully fractured, if at times chilling, fictional voice, in *Katrina Sequence* the effects of the dislocated language of many appropriated voices seems organised towards a more critically-engaged end. As Pester argues of her hybrid poetic practice:

To not separate human subject and technological objects in the first place makes the relational networks between them more dynamic than a joining or even re-joining. I am body like an analogue sound wave. I am node on a multi-dimensional network. (New Definitions 96)

Pester’s writing, as represented here, seems unconcerned with any explicit engagement with gender or the “possible impossibility” of women’s poetry. Perhaps she is a beneficiary of the previous struggles that Monk recounts, which, if nevertheless still ongoing, have liberated her from the need to write to a strictly feminist agenda. That said, Pester’s writing might certainly be seen as attempting to force “reconsideration of what can be considered voice” (and therefore content), if voice can be thought of as including both the oral and textual aspects of poetry, and her concern with the subject/body’s relationship with technology suggests a potential link with more established feminist writers such as Donna Haraway.

SL Mendoza’s work operates an analogous challenge to the limitations of social norms for gender and subjectivity in preferring to use the gender-neutral pronouns ‘their’ and ‘they.’ As Mendoza has written:

I identify as neutral, though this is not a fixed point because this is constantly in flux where the neutral identity may be more dominant than either male or female or the male or female identity may be more dominant than the neutral. I don’t strongly identify my gender as female and neither do I see my gender identity as male but as something between the two or incorporating elements of both or sometimes incorporating neither. But in any case what

informs a gender identity is not limited to socially constructed ideas of gender. (Email correspondence with the author, 7 June 2014)

‘SL Mendoza’ in itself remains gender neutral and is complemented by their use of a number of pseudonyms such as Linus Slug, Tommy Peeps, Elffish John and Elgar Funk which restage gender in various ways – not least through the hermaphroditic emblem of the slug. Mendoza’s position is therefore close to Monk’s refusal of the ‘women only’ position, but goes further in rejecting the term ‘woman’ itself. Their multifarious project of small press publication, journal and anthology editing and the organisation of events celebrating poets like Barry Mac Sweeney and the Salford post-punk band The Fall is vibrant and energetic. Unlikely obsessions with the number nine, moustaches, flies (Mendoza worked for many years at the Insect Library at the Natural History Museum in London) and Simon and Garfunkel thread through a poetics which dynamically exhibits the revoicing process identified by Kennedy and Kennedy.

In a short statement of poetics that accompanies a piece called “ninerrors or, 9 experiments in 9,” Mendoza discusses their interest in the formal constraint of nine, which they use variously to determine line, word or syllable count: “each poem is connected and dis-connected by self-imposed constraint; intermittent images in our peripheral vision impose upon, without obscuring our reading of the text. ninerrors are patterns, an interlude to urban life – fleeting, isolated, disjointed and fractured” (ninerrors 27). Although this formal approach makes its presence felt only indirectly, it becomes a key technique in the revoicing that takes place in Mendoza’s work. Their identification of their poems as an “interlude to” urban life that is “fleeting, isolated, disjointed and fractured” seems to speak as much of the existential experience of living in a city like London, where Mendoza is resident, as of the effects of the poetic form itself.

Mendoza’s pamphlet *die Fliege* constitutes one of their most dynamic publications to date – a nine-page poem in equal-spaced font (reproduced below in order to illustrate the effect this has on layout) which moves between short prose paragraphs to impacted verse fragments and back again. This writing refuses to settle into any sustained narration, revoicing diverse found materials in a phrase by phrase movement that is elusive and energising:



hung like Christ thin young girl with slender  
 arms speaking of I am fly which brought crook-  
 ed pins and first made her swallow and 2<sup>ND</sup> made  
 her. then there came from her head a blistering  
 - BRIGHT (ffly) cant & hypocrisy pale & crimson (die Fliege 5)

The unsettling opening image gives way to an image of a “thin young girl” whose “slender arms” might be the basis of comparison with a Christ figure if held in a cruciform pose. This image gives way in turn to the declaration “I am fly” with its possible puns on various slang meanings of “fly” as sexy (US English) or unfair/cruel (Northern Irish). “die Fliege” means both fly and bow-tie in German, so this ambiguity also energises possible gender connotations around the masculine bow-tie. A possible allusion to the nursery rhyme of the “Old woman who swallowed a fly” is conveyed in the context of the uncomfortable image of “crook-/ed pins” and being made to swallow and, more ambiguously, simply “made.” This is followed by an image of a kind of utterance which seems both visionary (“blistering / - BRIGHT”) and problematic (“cant & hypocrisy”). Nevertheless, the enabling tension of this revoicing procedure is that the text sustains an enquiry into a set of concerns about identity – both in terms of gender and Mendoza’s roots in Northumbria. A key passage is found on page six:

Mise mi fein as me myself as me myself  
 I saw him.  
 And so I can not doubt it. This poetic I  
 do not name me call me self.  
 I do  
                   [EMPHATIC FORM] call me self  
 whether they observe  
 Mute    [-]

Mutilate

Deform and change the Pronoun is

I, I she, I he, I s/he itself. I am Jack

sss sss sorry. They never learn do they? (10)

This passage opens with a possible cross-linguistic pun on the French word “la mise” – which can have many idiomatic uses such as involvement, make-up and leg-pulling – and “fein” which can be interpreted as Irish slang for a male person. This sets up a rich context for a sequence of pronoun-driven phrases in which different identity positions appear to be named and put into question: “me myself / I saw him.” The declaration “This poetic I / do not name me call me self” and the following critique of pronouns: “Deform and change the Pronoun is / I, I she, I he, I s/he itself”: stands as a powerful refusal of the gender binary. This critique potentially connects with other strongly literary statements about the first person ‘I’ such as Arthur Rimbaud’s oft-cited “Je est une autre” (in his letter to Georges Izambard of May 1871) or Monique Wittig’s use of “J/e” in her book *Le Corps lesbien* (1973). Threading through the rest of the poem are various references to the gender coding of clothing and the breaking of these codes through cross-dressing, again accompanied by cross-linguistic punning: “Hosenschlitz. she is my dress is she. here my trousers split. my slit,” “I am / all young bois / dressing like sailors”<sup>9</sup> and “1417 – WOMEN ARRESTED FOR DRESSING AS MEN”<sup>10</sup> (9,7, 10).

What initially seems a more abrupt shift into the unusual image of the *minomushi* – Japanese for bagworm – in the lines: “I Minomushi<sup>1</sup> hidd in cherry blossom<sup>2</sup> here / she is my dress<sup>3</sup>” (6, footnotes in original text) also signifies within this discourse of gender and clothing if one notes that the female of this moth does not transform from a larval state but remains cocooned inside a self-constructed “straw raincoat” (translation of *mino*; *mushi* means bug) celebrated in a haiku by Basho which these lines seem to approximately translate: “bagworm’s place / it seems to be inside / the cherry blossoms” (Reichhold).

The *minomushi* also appears in Mendoza’s 2011 chapbook *Of Cells and Mutation* which comprises seven nine-line poems derived from Henry David Thoreau’s journals. Four of the poems begin with the same two lines (see below) and three poems begin with the same first line. Other

phrases also reoccur, and are transformed, throughout. Thus the poems not only revoice Thoreau, but revoice their own selections in turn, presented in an equal-spaced font which creates uniform blocks of text on the page (reproduced below). The first section reads:

but its belly is not white.    only whitish.  
in certain light I am interrupted.    in  
certain light I can make / I can make  
tension between:    COPPER-coloured devils  
needle. darker spots on wings, a gluttonous  
maggot who becomes a fly who becomes a fly  
quite possibly common. I caught a handful.  
Lackey    moth    on    cherry    tree.  
Pea    green    with    maple    keys  
*(Of Cells and Mutation 3)*<sup>11</sup>

Here the dislocated but precise observations of Thoreau's journal acquire a further, more mysterious urgency, not least because of the repetition of phrases like "in certain light" "I can make" or "becomes a fly": the fly in turn suggesting a connection back to *die Fliege*, which also briefly mentions Thoreau at one point. The second line of the second poem: "I understand this and long for the spring" returns as "I understand this and listen for birdsong" and "I understand this and walk in a clockwise / direction" (4, 5, 8). This pointed revoicing of material generates subtle effects such as rearticulating "Rather I cut myself on the barbed wire" as "Rather I cut myself. on the barbed wire" (4, 6) where the interposed full stop momentarily hints at a declaration of self-harm. Mendoza's professional interest in the observations of insects that predominate in this selected material – the opening observation describes pondskaters, and references to maggots, flies, moths, bees and worms follow – sets the stage for a series of subtle metaphors about struggle and transformation. The expression: "more binding confines" (6) is suggestive of the female bagworm's fate, unlike the "gluttonous / maggot who becomes a fly" (3). Elsewhere, images of judgement and constraint: "domestic bees are imperfect /

creatures” or “The HONEY BEE has lost her wings” also take on the connotations of gender politics. Phrases containing pronouns become uncannily reconfigured to articulate these complexities: “I can make / tension between,” “I am interrupted,” “Interiority / reflects the next transgression” (3, 3, 4). The lines: “If I move in a simple and primitive manner I / can move less awkwardly than he can stand / still” are repeated and varied in the final poem: “if I move / in a simple and primitive manner / If I yield to this impulse^ the tension / between” (9), where the repeated phrase “tension / between” might stand as a figure for the overall poetics of revoicing discourses of gender that is active here. The circumflex accent that appears after the word “impulse” also reads as a subtle interference in the pattern – both pointing up and backwards to previous text as well as adding extra emphasis to a resonant word.

As with Pester’s desire to be “a mode on a multidimensional network,” Mendoza’s implicit critique of binary models for sexed and gendered identity utilises a process of revoicing in order to creatively and strategically deploy a number of insights without falling into a new kind of dogmatic orthodoxy. If Mendoza’s project is not committed to the “possible impossibility” of women’s poetry, it certainly opens for reconsideration what constitutes voice in poetry and also enacts an ongoing search for a language “in which, and with which, to be acknowledged” in all the complex instability of one’s (gendered or otherwise) identity.

Although Sophie Robinson’s poetry is considered by Kennedy and Kennedy, they focus on an early elegiac piece of writing and do not explore specifically the revoicing aspects of her work. Robinson is the author of four chapbooks and appeared in the Bloodaxe anthology *Voice Recognition: 21 Poets for the 21st Century* (2009) and *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets* (2008) as well as *Infinite Difference*. After completing a PhD in Queer poetics, she took up a lectureship in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia in 2013.

It is Robinson’s commitment to a queer identity position that complicates her contribution to women’s innovative poetry, although the poetics statement that accompanies her work in the Etter anthology discusses her view of the relationship between language, identity and politics without explicit reference to gender or sexual identity: “I am [...] interested in my subjective relationship to the world, and finding ways of expressing that relation in non-standard ways (poetically speaking). I

don't believe that an experimental poetics must necessarily be devoid of emotion, sentiment, biography, self-expression &c" (Etter 201). These remarks might be read as addressing a perceived or actual quality of an extant, experimental poetics that eschews more direct modes of affective articulation. This is an issue worthy of exploration in its own right, if beyond the scope of this article, but Robinson is also clear about the disruptive potential of her approach: "I tend to work from those things – the personal, the everyday – and then begin a process of writing and rewriting which untangles those things from habitual language, or complicates them, in order to explore the politics around them and the implications of the given" (201). Robinson also refers to a tendency in her work of breaking with the "language closest at hand" in order to forge "irrational connections," a tendency which she opposes to a more traditional confessional or lyrical approach, and one which she sees as actually bringing her closer to the "concept of 'feeling'" (201). Robinson may be reclaiming the word "irrational" from critiques of women's writing and these kind of connections might be linked to a form of paratactical voicing. In their account of Robinson's early elegiac sequence *a* (2009), Kennedy and Kennedy offer a consideration of the 'thetic' aspects of Robinson's poetics following Anna Smith's definition of this Kristevan concept – "the threshold of language. Neither fully semiotic nor symbolic but a place of articulation [...] a break or rupture in the signifying process" (Kennedy & Kennedy 157). Describing how Robinson's work focuses thetically on positions, the difficulty of speaking and the edge of both play and meaning, Kennedy and Kennedy argue that "desire and loss, queer or otherwise, can only ever be voiced at, and as, thresholds" (158).

Robinson's sequence "She! The Revolution Rooms" stages this voicing of desire at, and as, thresholds through four poems set in domestic spaces: "kitchen," "parlour," "bathroom" and "bedroom." The sequence forms part of her 2012 book *The Institute of Our Love in Disrepair*, which is illustrated inside and out with images of the exterior and interior of a house with text installations of lines from the title poem. The piece unfolds a fractured coming of age/coming out narrative that mixes erotic episodes with the latent and/or actual violence of family and other relationships.

The opening poem "kitchen" immediately signals the discourse of desire that runs throughout the sequence with the phrase "i'm on fire" standing out on the page due to its being printed in red ink. The kitchen, as with the other settings in these poems, becomes a symbolic space which dramatises

subjectivity's encounters with otherness in terms of the objects typically found therein. The poems increase their impact by centring their lines on the page, as in the opening of "kitchen":

coffee nerves, ceramic night lover –  
i've come back for my hands                    [side-glance]  
sunset desert, yr forenoon sigh,  
dry slice of crappiest heaven  
in the oven i'm on fire lie down  
and i'll persist, pour me a little  
empty

(Robinson 22)

The references to coffee, ceramic, a "dry slice" of something in the oven, and the pouring of a drink, construct domestic objects as metonymies for desire and other emotional states through a process of paratactical revoicing . This is intensified towards the end of this poem as the phrase "PRESS RESET," also printed in red ink, starts to take over:

PRESS RESET, slip a little,  
PRESS RESET, profane data,  
PRESS RESET, bake a cake, shake  
the baby awake, PRESS RESET,  
unbutton yr underwear (23)

If 'reset' is a word one might typically find on a kitchen appliance such as a washing machine for example, the way in which the phrase both interrupts and structures a list of further imperatives to perform various (gendered) domestic functions such as cooking, child minding and sex suggests an identification between the addressee and the appliance, implying a critique of the reification of

subjectivity in the consumer age – humans reduced to machines that can be reset at will. The phrases “slip a little” and “profane data” by contrast imply a form of resistance to the preset programme of appropriate domestic behaviour.

The second poem in the sequence “parlour” constructs a scene in which the narrator confronts her mother “in my coat / made of feelings, in the semi-dark / of your smile I run away from naming” (24). This running away from naming might represent a refusal to have one’s feelings labelled, as the space undergoes a steady deconstruction: “*the parlour has collapsed, is filling with snow*” (24). The mother appears at different locations throughout the space – by the bureau, by the door, by the mantle – and her presence is constructed ambiguously at first: “she places her strange head upon / my chest” (24). Later, however, she becomes embedded in an account of object relations:

I’m young &  
I know nothing – I occupy all of your time.  
I like having art poured into me wide-eyed.  
[...]  
I’m freshened by hot bile, this nuance  
of your love’s long guts glued onto me.  
I like having money poured into me  
(24, 25)

The poem ultimately generates a critical account of women’s maturation in which “we fasten ourselves up like girls in parlours” and culminates in violence associated with men: “soft fists tumble onto me like snowflakes / I am now covered in a brotherly blue, / the ultramarine of fresh men” (25). The piece ends with an ambiguous image of “blind / solidarity” in which a revolutionary moment occurs: “A Molotov cocktail sings. This is not love. / This is for no thing– ,” the final phrase offering a rejection of reification and a nihilistic refusal of closure (25).

“Bathroom” includes a framed encounter with an interposed voice, which declares: “we meet in the mirror & in brief panties / of breath we touch each other lightly & / feel sick, awake” (26). That

this meeting takes place “in the mirror”, suggests that both parties are before the mirror (as in a public or domestic bathroom) as well as potentially mirroring each other, and that the awakening is therefore of same-sex desire, as the pun on “brief panties of breath” also suggests. A female character appears “prune-faced, pimpled” and the declaration “she is not a boy” confirms a lesbian/queer poetics, as the poem shifts into a sensual sketch of a love affair:

Gossip in the morning, raised and splayed  
spray recoiling from her, no wish to sluice –  
“*Mine’s an oozing red,*” a sweetheart, a  
perpetual happening (26)

Although this poem articulates an unbridled, libidinal and embodied poetics, it is not without tension, asking at one point: “Whose insides? Whose production? Whose crime?” and concluding:

She is naked, screaming, this is not a  
metaphor. To habituate or  
symbolize this thought is nothing less.  
You think of bathrooms as transitory  
places but people can die there. (28)

The critique of metaphor implied here is extended to the habituation or symbolizing of thought, insisting on the real danger of rites of passage, wherever they might take place.

The final poem in the sequence “bedroom” has an unattributed epigraph: “*I never was asked, never went / To the bedroom—*” but revels in scenes of erotic triumph, if still without entirely ridding itself of tension:

My love is likened to a button  
[stronger it grew & in difficult places]



and with terror she did undo  
me in doorways, in mixed moments (29)

The mixture of excitement and anxiety that accompanies sexual desire is depicted here alongside what reads as a newly confident assertion of a queer identity:

*butt look at those queers,*  
have a sip at semi  
consciousness above me, glazed, coming,  
body just averted to reach  
touch-spot, cheekbones to make yr  
breakdowns seem natural, we'd  
be sick & pointless bobbing  
on adam's apples, HERE is the  
point at which we're alive so leave  
the boys alone. Sorry mirror. (29)

The phrase in italics, with its cheeky pun, suggests both an act of seeing and being seen as queer, in a way which seems empowered, rather than oppressive. The erotic situation that follows sees a potential reclaiming of the so-called Gräfenberg-spot as “touch-spot,” whilst the telling synecdoche of “adam’s apples” foreshadows the imperative to “leave / the boys alone.” The final phrase refers back to the earlier meeting in the mirror and reconfirms that same-sex desire is the basis on which heterosexual pursuits must now be laid aside, as a coming into a lesbian identity.

If Robinson’s poetry is not as formally disruptive as the work of Pester and Mendoza, operating as it does within a zone still recognisable as a contemporary form of lyric writing, it certainly uses a comparable process of revoicing as it negotiates discourses of desire and identity. Although Robinson was included in Etter’s anthology, her concern with articulating a queer poetics both complicates and complements her work’s relationship to a feminist politics.

Taken together, these three writers offer real possibilities, not only of constructing voices that are distinct from those marked by the discourse of “woman,” but also placing under pressure the very concept of voice itself as it pertains to the written and oral/aural discourse of the poem. Pester’s engagement with the broadcast voice explores a position from which to speak which attempts to transcend the body, and gender, altogether. Mendoza’s work offers a rigorous critique of binary constructions of gender, which enables a much more complex situation to come into view. Robinson’s commitment to a queer poetics folds sexual identity back into gender and further complicates the landscape. All three use innovative and experimental techniques, here discussed as forms of revoicing materials, in order to negotiate and articulate their experience of this territory.

The stakes of this search for what Kennedy and Kennedy call “a language in which, and with which to be acknowledged,” and , in turn, to acknowledge *with*, could not be higher. It is a search for identity which might characterise creative activity as a whole, above and beyond any gendered account of it. Nevertheless, despite the complexity of these three poets’ approach to gender and the risks of promoting women-only anthologies discussed by Geraldine Monk, when *Out of Everywhere 2* appears in 2015, it will offer a fascinating opportunity to reassess the state of the art as seen through the lens of a whole new generation. Whether the publication fulfils its strategic potential or creates problems for poets who identify as women or otherwise, it will be certain to make an impact and will hopefully encourage more critical work to be done in mapping, theorising and analyzing this rich and dynamic field of creative activity.

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<sup>2</sup> See 'Post-Marginal Positions: Women and the UK Experimental/Avant-Garde Poetry Community, A Cross-Atlantic Forum – Moderated by Catherine Wagner,' *Jacket* 34 (October 2007). Viewable at: <http://www.jacketmagazine.com/34/wagner-forum.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> See the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (September 2011), which was a special issue devoted to the festival.

<sup>3</sup> North America has also generated a number of significant critical studies such as Blau Du Plessis (1990), Acheson and Huk (1996), Hinton and Hogue (2001), Huk (2003), Kinnahan (1996, 2003, 2004, 2011) and Retallack (2007), some of which consider UK writing alongside American poetry.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Sheppard, Robert. *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2005. 163. Sheppard's note refers to the statement's publication in the July 13-19 (1984) issue of *City Limits*.

<sup>5</sup> The website was checked on 16 September 2014, but these details had been removed by 24 September 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Of these three poets, Kennedy and Kennedy's own study discusses Robinson's early work only.

<sup>7</sup> A video recording of the performance is viewable here: <http://otherroom.org/videos/or-14-rob-holloway-holly-pester-steven-waling-videos/>

<sup>8</sup> *Katrina Sequence* is unpaginated. References in the text are counted from the title page as page 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Boi* (plural: *bois*) is a term used within LGBT and butch and femme communities to refer to a person's sexual and/or gender identities.

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<sup>10</sup> In 1417 Matilda Burgh and Margaret Usher were arrested after dressing as men in order to visit St. Cuthbert's shrine at Durham Cathedral. According to Benedictine rules, women were not allowed to approach the shrine.

<sup>11</sup> *Of Cells and Mutation* is unpaginated. References in the text are counted from the title page as page 1.