

STEPHANIE ANDERSON

An Interview with Patricia Spears Jones

In the 1970s and 1980s, poet, playwright, editor, and educator Patricia Spears Jones published a mimeographed magazine titled W. B. #1 (1975), coedited an anthology of writing by New York City women called Ordinary Women (1978), and worked on the editorial staff of the Heresies Collective, a group of feminist artists and critics that published the journal Heresies from 1977 to 1993. Stephanie Anderson interviewed Jones via email in July and August of 2015, touching on the landscape of New York City poetry in the 1970s, and how the situation of feminist, anti-racist literary work has—and hasn't—changed in the decades since.

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SA: *Your mimeo mag W. B. came out in 1975, and the title page thanks The Poetry Project “for the use of their facilities.” Will you talk a little bit about the magazine’s context and why you started it?*

PSJ: I was going to workshops and hanging out at The Poetry Project. It was the mimeo magazine time, and Maureen Owen and others urged me to develop a journal. I am proud of it. Lee Breuer, who is one of the founders of Mabou Mines, contributed, as did Levi Frazier Jr., one of my college classmates, who also happens to be a Black American. Indeed, as with many of my projects, race and gender diversity were very much in the midst. I think I was multicultural in my focus long before it became a convention.

Did you have any models, at the Project or elsewhere, for this kind of multicultural endeavor? What were some of the challenges to diversity in 1970s New York art scenes?

I think I was basically the start of that in many ways—the Project was for the most part white and male. So anybody who was not

white or male was a diversity. Ha! Downtown was much smaller and there was a lot of mixing it up in the loft jazz scene, in some experimental theater. But for the most part, then as now, New York City was hypersegregated. Because I was not a native New Yorker, I pretty much talked to everybody: Jews, Puerto Ricans, Asians, etcetera. And because of the rise in cultural feminism, there were many opportunities to work with poets and artists: June Jordan rounded many of us up for a protest against *The American Poetry Review* (APR); the “Sisterhood,” which was for Black women writers, met on the Upper West Side and in Brooklyn. The Basement Workshop was the closest to having a multicultural ethos, even though it was located in Chinatown and was actively engaged in improvements for its citizens. Fay Chiang, who later coedited *Ordinary Women*, was an early member of the Basement Workshop. And of course, almost anyone with a hankering to showcase their talents (whether they had any or not) could check out the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. The remnants of the Umbra workshop were seen in Ishmael Reed, Steve Cannon, and Joe Johnson’s Reed, Cannon & Johnson imprint, which CUNY Grad Center folk are documenting with the help of David Henderson, one of the poets still active in New York City. Sometimes these various groups came together, but mostly not. Of course, we were all so very young.

What was the protest against APR, and how was it important to you?

June Jordan, who wrote columns for *APR*, pointed out that she and Alice Walker and other poets of color never had their actual poems published in *APR*, and at that time most of the poets published were white and male. It was fascinating to participate in a protest run by poets who were successful and who still faced serious discrimination. The irony was that one of the younger poets who I asked to send work to *APR* and who was published by the magazine was white and male!

What is the significance of the mimeo mag’s title, W. B.? And the subtitle “(short works)”?

I can’t remember why I called it *W. B.*, but it was some kind of talisman—those two members of the alphabet. “Short works” was just

that: the pieces were not long. Remember, I had to type out each of those darn pages and then run them off and then get friends (yeah) to help me collate and bind them. The mimeo scene was full of fun, camaraderie, and support. But it still cost more than I could do, despite all the volunteer efforts, so I only did one issue.

Did you produce them at The Poetry Project?

Yes. And it was fun.

Ordinary Women is obviously a fairly different endeavor from W. B.—Ordinary Women is an anthology, offset printed, perfect bound. How did the idea for this collection come about?

It came about from conversations with other young women poets writing and working in New York City who wanted to see our work presented. We wanted an anthology that was intentionally diverse, because most women's anthologies were white with token writers of color. We had heard of the *Third World Women* anthology from the West Coast, and we wanted something that came close to that. Sara Miles and I asked Fay Chiang and Sandra Maria Esteves to join us, and we did outreach to white, Black, Asian, and Latina poets. Cynthia Kraman and Lois Elaine Griffith, who is an artist and a poet, were also extremely important to the success of the anthology. Adrienne Rich was a supporter and granted us funds for the publication, and she wrote a wonderful introduction. We wanted to show that NYC women poets were like all the other young women in the city—making our way in our world the same way that actors or designers or political activists were making their way. Ultimately, I think we found a way to show autonomous women poets with varied life experiences who walked these sometimes mean, sometimes wonderful streets.

How long did it take to put OW together? The “Foreward” [sic] describes an intensive manuscript solicitation: “We solicited manuscripts through notices in women’s papers, poetry newsletters, community centers, friends....”¹ How did selection and production work, and what were some of the hurdles?

About a year from outreach to production. As with any collection, we had the usual issues: some women poets objected to a gender-based anthology; our desire for diversity was paramount, but many felt like it might be tokenism; there were aesthetic differences among the editors. But in the end, we were satisfied with our list and the poems that we selected.

What was your favorite part of making the anthology?

Getting that wonderful range of poets in print; many have gone on to produce books, develop new organizations, teach, etcetera. We did not request permission to do this. We did not ask for grants. It was our limited funds, our ideas, our time on the line. I feel like we gave women poets a great model for how to avoid tokenism. There were criticisms, as there should be. But we cast a wide and cleverly made net across this city and came back with some interesting young women poets and their work. And I am sure others took that as a sign to do something similar—at least I hope so. And I am grateful that as of this writing, Sara, Fay, Sandy, and I are still breathing and still making great work in different ways. We all respect the ability of women to make a world we want to live in, and we continue to try and make that world.

*What was the reception of the anthology like? How did you respond to the critique that, as Eileen Myles wrote in a mixed review for The Poetry Project Newsletter, the “gathering of these poems seems to have sprung from a sociological impulse, not an aesthetic one”?*²

Eileen Myles was doing the usual “poetics” versus agitprop line. They were roundly denounced for that petty review. But this was the kind of mindset that allowed white poets to question the “quality” of the work of poets of color, even the most formal and conventional, because said poets might use words to describe the skin tones of Black people. Racism can be blunt or subtle, simply the status quo. And patriarchal notions, even from those with serious rage against the patriarchy, show up—it’s part of our cultural DNA. Again, there were many women who did not want to be part of gender-based projects. It has always seemed to me that these kinds of critiques are part of America’s difficulty

with marrying very public issues with private concerns in art—and it is a kind of fallout from McCarthyism. That is, political poetry and art were suspect because they dealt with those public concerns—the antiwar poets of the 1960s received similar critiques. I would suggest that Myles has changed their tune given their work with AIDS activism and the LGBT community. But this criticism matters little because the work aesthetically and politically continues to shine.

In the introduction to Ordinary Women, Adrienne Rich writes, “The jazz poetry movement, the mass antiwar readings of the 1960s, the grassroots cultural centers where music and poetry come together, and above all the surge of women’s poetry readings, have created a new oral style, an almost tribal awareness, the poem not as artifact of solitude but as cry of recognition, outreach, accusation, celebration. And so this is often a poetry meant to be spoken and heard.”³ Almost forty years later, do you agree with this assessment of the rise of orality in poetry? Do you think it continues?

Yes, I do. That is why slam poetry and open mics all work. That is why The Poetry Project’s series are still amazing. That is why there are collective programs from Black Poets Speak Out to One Million Poets. While there will always be poets who veer toward monasticism, solitude, the carefully tended garden, there will be others who will speak to, speak of, and speak out about specific communities. The trick is to create work that can do that and reach farther than one’s own tribe.

When did you start working with the Heresies Collective?

1980.

You were on the editorial staff of issue 17, the “Acting Up!” issue (1984). Will you talk a little bit about your experiences with the Heresies Collective and with the collective publishing model of the magazine?

Working at Heresies was complicated. Coming to consensus on anything is difficult, and the range of personalities, ideas, agendas often brought up unexpected conflicts, and there was never enough

money. That said, these women were fierce in their art-making and their commitment to a feminist ideal. The conversations were powerful: Lucy Lippard, Sabra Moore, Sue Heinemann—they gave younger women like me great models of women’s creativity and intellectual rigor. The “Acting Up!” issue was my first foray into that kind of intellectual rigor. We really identified many of the people and trends that would shape or reshape theater and performance—I am pleased with our capture of a feminist moment in that issue.

“Acting Up!” contains excerpts from your collaborative theater piece Women in Research (with Cindy Carr and Lenora Champagne). Was it difficult to move between the media of the stage and the page? Or to translate performance to the page?

Actually, I think our excerpt works on the page because the writing was really good. If the writing is strong, then the themes and concerns in the piece will be conveyed, no matter the medium.

So many of the concerns that motivated your involvement in small press publishing—issues of representation and privilege, and the elision of voices of writers of color—are currently being discussed in the poetry world. In your experience, what are some of the similarities and differences between the discussions as they currently play out versus when you were editing Ordinary Women in the late ’70s?

It is simply larger—the number of people involved in these conversations—and more theory driven. Words like *intersectionality* or *ally* are simple ways in which people are trying to define themselves and others. And there are always “others,” whether we like it or not. The main difference is that whites are now having to confront their whiteness as whiteness. It has taken decades for Black Americans, for instance, to explore a range of ways of being Black, with some seeing this in opposition to whiteness and others who see assimilation into more mainstream culture as the key to success. Now the mainstream is shrinking—whites will no longer be in the majority soon, and, well, not one group on this planet has ever given up power with grace. Not one, and this nation has a very nasty racist history. But while the violence

and anger and missteps taking place now—which spill into the art world—are awful to experience, it also feels like a birth of a different, more complicated, and, yes, shared culture. A culture where Blacks can lead without racist framing, or whites can lead without presumptions of superiority, or mixed-race people are allowed to explore all of their heritages. And finally, privilege is at issue for the children of the upper middle class and super wealthy, and they can be any color. How do they “intersect” with the rest of us? Will they support work that does not mirror their own backgrounds? The poets of the 1960s and 1970s could explore their ideas, leave behind bourgeois convention because the economics was not so damning. Now, that is pretty much impossible. A culture based in lives of privilege is often formal, often static, or overly technological and static. Class privilege can support a new vision or damage one.

What advice would you give a young woman now who wants to publish a magazine or anthology?

My only advice to anyone is to try and do what you want to do to the best of your ability and to find and keep good friends who give you advice, hugs, and support your dreams. And be honest with yourself and with others. The more people who “game” the system, the worse the work is. Go for excellence; that is what lasts.

NOTES

1/ Fay Chiang, Sandra Maria Esteves, Patricia Jones, and Sara Miles, "Foreward," in *Ordinary Women: An Anthology of Poetry by New York City Women*, eds. Sara Miles, Patricia Jones, Sandra Maria Esteves, and Fay Chiang (New York: Ordinary Women Books, 1978), 12.

2/ Eileen Myles, "Ordinary Women," in *The Poetry Project Newsletter*, no. 56 (June 1978).

3/ Adrienne Rich, "Introduction," in *Ordinary Women*, 8.

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