Words, Writers, Women

Michele Kort

Editors' Introduction:

Although literature is not always characterized as belonging to "the arts," the literary arts were a core part of the Woman's Building's artistic programs. Under the initial tutelage of poet and writer Deena Metzger, the writing classes offered through the Feminist Studio Workshop took as their mission to locate or invent new language and new forms by which to communicate the shifting consciousness and experience of women. These structures and lexicons would not be based in the historical myths of western patriarchal culture, but would strive to articulate the possibilities of a female-centered society.

This approach emphasized process over product, content over craft, and relied on a process of supportive and constructive criticism to nurture the development of the work. Students were encouraged to delve deeply into the imagination, to explore the mythic and the sacred, to utilize the content of their own experience as the means to elucidate larger social and cultural concerns.

In addition to its educational focus, the Woman's Building also engaged with the larger local and national community of women writers. The first feminist bookstore in the United States, Sisterhood Bookstore, opened a branch in the Woman's Building when it premiered on Grandview in the MacArthur Park neighborhood of Los Angeles in 1974. This fostered increased awareness of and access to the burgeoning body of feminist literature and theory from across the United States and around the world.

A signature conference, "Women's Words," sponsored by the Woman's Building in 1975, propelled the quest for female forms and structures in writing—the journal, the letter and similar nonlinear forms geared more toward inner exploration than to the neat contrivances of plot. From that time on, prominent feminist writers made their pilgrimage to the Woman's Building—Margaret Atwood, Meridel Le Seuer, Kate Millett, Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, among many—to share their work and further dialogue with the women of Los Angeles.

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Through proximity to the Women's Graphic Center (also housed at the Women's Building), women writers were encouraged and given means to publish themselves, and gain experience in actively cultivating an audience for their work. Given control over "the means of production" of their work—often right down to painstakingly setting their own type, character by character—encouraged writers to take risks with their work, knowing that it would not have to fulfill an outside publisher's agenda to find its way to a readership.

To develop this essay, journalist Michele Kort conducted interviews with six women writers—Gloria Alvarez, Wanda Coleman, Eloise Klein Healy, Deena Metzger, Terry Wolverton and Mitsuye Yamada—who participated at the Woman's Building in various ways—as authors, teachers, and/or students. One of the interviews, with Deena Metzger, was conducted by Terry Wolverton.

When the Woman's Building came into being in 1973, its focus was on making art not words: Visual art, graphic design, art history. Yes, co-founder Arlene Raven's art history and criticism required words, and certainly co-founder Sheila Levrant de Bretteville's approach to graphics was very much concerned with using words—in a "conversational tone," as she put it. Even co-founder Judy Chicago used words in her early-70s paintings, such as "The Rejection Quintet," and wrote an autobiography, *Through the Flower*.

But Deena Metzger, a poet and novelist who taught at CalArts at the same time de Bretteville was there, remembers,

> We were coming to understand that women were different, certainly different from the predominant society, that they had cultural vision that was completely different, that it contained certain values that were no longer respected by the society, that this was exceedingly precious, brilliant, had its own genius and that it needed to be nurtured. And we knew we had to have a language for what we were perceiving and understanding and hoping to create. It needed a language to hold it just like it needed a building; that was one structure and language was another structure.

Deena Metzger. (Photo by Jessica Shokrian.)

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Metzger continues,

> I was teaching a class in women's literature, teaching Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, and I was literally mesmerized by the lighthouse going around. I gathered that this was an image of women's sensibility expressing itself in a literary form, that the lighthouse was the form. Certain segments of light or consciousness came and then they faded, and there was a kind of egalitarian response to the circumstances of life.

But it wasn't until the Women's Words conference in the spring of 1974 that these explorations blossomed into public expression at Woman's Building.

It was de Bretteville who asked Metzger to organize the conference. "It meant," Metzger recalls, "that we had to enter even more deeply into the question, 'What is women's literature?' And what was the history? And were there forms? We felt there were forms that had come up, like this lighthouse form of Woolf's. We felt that there was a legacy, there was a lineage, and we had to find it and then we had to find what was being done now."

And soon Metzger, along with poets Holly Prado, Martha Ronk Lifson,[1] journalist Marcia Seligson, and others, was contacting some of the most prominent and powerful women writers of the 1970s. "It was like we were weaving the literature together, the body of literature," says Metzger. She particularly remembers the "extraordinary letter of refusal," she received from novelist Doris Lessing.

"At the end of it, Lessing said, 'You must understand that all a writer has is time,'" Metzger recounts. "So it was a no, but it was a yes, you know?"

Poet Meridel Le Seuer at Women's Word's Conference, 1975. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)

The conference ended up featuring Jill Johnston, Kate Millett, Meridel Le Seuer, Kathleen Fraser, and Barbara Meyerhoff, and the thread running through all their writings was an emphasis on the autobiographical and personal—an undertaking often degraded at the time for being

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too "confessional."[2] Metzger remembers the injunction that to be a gifted writer, "you must never talk about your life and [to do so] is completely degraded. The fact that women were doing this was a 'terrible' thing that we were willing to honor. It was, like, personal writing was shameful and women were terrible, and here we were honoring them."

I attended the conference as a young writer-to-be, and what is most memorable to me were exactly those confessions. The famously confrontative Johnston, for example, held a public dialogue—right in the middle of her talk—with an ex-lover seated in the audience (the dialogue was about them being ex-lovers). Meyerhoff, the late anthropologist who brought a loving intimacy to her research, shared aloud with Metzger the letters they wrote each other each day, despite only living a mile and a phone call apart. Artist Susan King, who, along with myself, was the Woman's Building co-administrator, was so inspired by Meyerhoff's and Metzger's presentations that she insisted we start our own frequent correspondence, although we, too, saw each other nearly every day at work. Things could be written, Meyerhoff had seemed to suggest, that could not be spoken or, at least, never would be spoken. There could be some depth of intimacy attained in that congress of pen and page. Feminists of the time period craved this intimacy, not only with one another, but with their own minds, and hungered to discover parts of themselves that had never before been allowed expression.

Deena Metzger and Barbara Myerhoff at Women's Words conference, 1975. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)

The women writers who attended the conference in the Woman's Building's small, packed auditorium, remember it as the beginning of a new sense of community and possibility. "I was totally isolated from all of that women's art world stuff," says poet Eloise Klein Healy. "I didn't know another woman poet. And suddenly I go to this conference, and there are 300 women writers there. Literally, it was other worldly."

Poet Eloise Klein Healy. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank. Photo by Nancy Rosenblum.)

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This whetted Healy's appetite for further involvement. She recalls,

> It was the first time that I had ever found any kind of community that had to do with art or feminism. I remember one of the hardest decisions of my life was to be able to say that I was a poet, even though I had already published a book at that time. But the reason it was so hard was always that notion that women were somewhat second-class poets; you could do it but you might not ever be really good. There was no room for you in the big ball game. Really. You could be a bench player. But you were never going to start first string.
>
> It was like Edna St. Vincent Millay. You know, I have this picture: Edna St. Vincent Millay is sitting down there holding a bat waiting to go on. But she is not going to be one of the people who runs out onto the field after the Star Spangled Banner.
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> So [the Woman's Building provided] a really pivotal understanding, that I wasn't alone, I wasn't isolated, I wasn't the only person who was trying to figure out how to do this. There were lots of other people who had the same desire and the same interest and, not only that, they were interested in helping each other. What a concept!

Out of Women's Words grew an ongoing Women Writers' Series at the Woman's Building, featuring famed authors and poets from all over the country (plus the stellar Canadian, Margaret Atwood). Pages from the growing body of women's literature came alive at the Woman's Building on Grandview and, later, Spring Streets. You could listen to one of your literary heroines read, then purchase her book at the pioneering Sisterhood Bookstore, which maintained a branch at the Building. "That was the first place I saw Judy Grahn and Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde," says Healy of the writers' series. "I wouldn't have had the same intersection with those people without the Building being there. It wasn't just *book* learning."

Eloise Klein Healy introducing the Women Writers Series, 1985. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)

The Woman Writers' Series also nurtured the talents of local women writers. Poet Mitsuye Yamada recalls, "The Woman's Building asked me to read there, and they were the ones who first recognized my poetry once it was

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Poet Mitsuye Yamada. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)

published. I was totally ignored by the Japanese groups and the Asian groups until later."

Poet and fiction writer Wanda Coleman concurs. "I did a lot of readings [there]. I read with Audre Lorde. I read with Kate Braverman. In fact that reading was famous for my earrings flying off." She laughs, "Charles Bukowski wrote it up in one of his novels about my earrings flying off at the Woman's Building."

Metzger joined the faculty of the Feminist Studio Workshop and, shortly after, Healy began offering workshops through the Extension Program, and thus words became even more tightly woven into the arts fabric being created.

The educational programs of the Woman's Building offered a unique approach to learning in the arts. Metzger recalls,

> [We were] speaking to women about their lives and encouraging them to poetic writing and internal writing and their own vision and their own stories and their right to speak, trying to create a fiction with characters who were more independent, substantial, aware of their circumstances but not crushed by them.
>
> We were always inventing new forms and the question in terms of making literature was always: 'What do you want to say? What's the form that will hold it? Don't be limited by the forms that exist.'

Poet Wanda Coleman. (Source: http://www.beyondbaroue.org/bigpicture/gallery/wanda_coleman.html. Photo by Mark Savage.)

Metzger elaborates,

> In my teaching, when we listen to each other read, we are really invested in each other's excellence and we don't do that kind of cutthroat critique. We ask ourselves, 'Is there anything I can say here to help that person get to the next step?' and that's what happened at the Building. So it was a sanctuary where your intelligence was recognized and encouraged, your work was supported and sent out into the world. The Woman's Building is where those values were practiced. We left CalArts because CalArts could not house the Woman's Building, couldn't house the values of non-competition.

What made the Building unique as a writing venue wasn't only its feminist outlook, however, but the presence of the Women's Graphics Center. Not only could one write a book,

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but typeset, print and bind it—an immediate and concrete realization of one's efforts that was both inspiring and mind-expanding.

"The idea of making your own book was fascinating to me," says Mitsuye Yamada, who was drawn to the Building for the emotional support it gave her at a time when the higher education system still denigrated women's art. "We made our own paper and sewed our own books," says Yamada. "It was quite exciting. And I learned typesetting for the letterpress. It was so much fun to pick up the tweezers and set type, to get hands-on and feel how a book is made."

Mary Lou Hughes printing on the letterpress during the "Postcard Project." (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)

"It was definitely the aesthetic of the place that if you were a writer, you better learn about typefaces, because it mattered," says Healy. "I think that came directly from Sheila Levrant de Bretteville . . . saying, 'You can't depend on publishers to get your work out. If you really feel like you're not going to get yourself published, learn letterpress, learn offset, learn whatever it takes so that you can make it in multiples.' That was what she was always promoting for the writers. *Make it in multiples.*

"I know that when I've had things published in books," Healy continues, "I've really been a stickler for what kinds of typeface my poems get set in. Most poets don't have a clue about that. Nobody ever said anything to them about that, so they don't know." The intersection of writers with de Bretteville and other's design sensibilities taught writers that a work's visual presentation on the page conveyed another layer of meaning that might support, contrast, or deepen the meaning of the words themselves.

Words integrated with graphics, as well as with the other art forms percolating at the Building (including performance art), so writers became artists and artists became writers. Susan King had come to the Building as a potter, but soon began making artists' books, using text and images in her work. Similarly, one of the first things Terry Wolverton

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did when she came to the Building from Michigan was create a book combining her poetry and prose.

"I wanted to self-publish," says Wolverton, who had previously been involved in feminist theater as well as writing, "and by the end of my first year at the Feminist Studio Workshop [FSW] I had done it. All the women from the FSW came to a party and celebrated with me, and it was a huge moment in my life to have that. All these people *cared* that I had made this thing.

"There was always an emphasis on audience," Wolverton continues, "to whom are you speaking, and what are you saying, and how are you reaching them? This wasn't about private little things you keep in a drawer somewhere, although of course you were free to do that. But because we were feminists and wanted to change the world, we saw our work as the vehicle to do that. So of course we had to think about how to get it into the world."

Although artistic product was the overt goal for writers at the Building, it was the process that became paramount, Wolverton says. She learned from Metzger, one of her mentors, that, "one was on a journey, and the journey was more important than the destination.

"You could start on that journey and not know what the destination was," Wolverton continues. "The process would be a process of discovery—you would write about what you didn't know, rather than writing about what you already knew."

Terry Wolverton. (Photo from Woman's Building Image Bank. Photo by Mary Whitlock.)

In those early years at the Building, more emphasis was placed on content and experimentation than on craft. "We weren't taught a lot of rules. Partly that was because we were trying to discover our stories and validate our life experiences," says Wolverton. "That had been forbidden, really, prior to the women's art movement."

Yamada agrees: "I went through the whole American educational system without ever being in touch with who I was, as a Japanese-American or a woman. When I was writing

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in college, the writings were never personal. They were always about something . . . but not about myself. At the University of Chicago [where she attended graduate school] we were all trying to write like men. The worst kind of thing that could be said was, 'You write like a woman.' Women writers weren't recognized as real writers."

Coleman had a similar experience. "I was always paid this compliment: 'You're as good a writer as a man.' And I was looking forward to the day when someone would say, 'You're one hell of a writer.'"

For Deena Metzger, the Building provided a space to flesh out women's experience, women's dreams, women's erotic lives, and women's language. She says, "I was very concerned then, and still am, that women would be called into the public room, but they would be called in as *men*, to work with male ideas and in male forms."

There were other reasons why content took precedence over craft in the Building's early days, Wolverton suggests: "There was a great suspicion across the women's movement about notions of quality. Standards of quality had always been used to exclude women, and there was a kind of tendency to reject that altogether. Also, I think there was the idea that form had confined or restricted women, and women writers were trying to throw off that form and discover what would be a female form—a kind of circular form instead of the arc, or the hero's journey, that characterized male formal structures in writing. So there was a kind of deliberate rejection of some of the traditional forms, and an investigation of what else form might mean."

The Woman's Building became a place for women to test their wings as writers. "The Woman's Building was one of the campuses of my University of the Streets, as I call it," says poet Wanda Coleman, who considered herself a "gadfly" around the Building and did a number of readings there. "I was driving this little '73 Pinto, and I used to tear across town from South Central and Hollywood to the Woman's Building on Spring Street, where it was dark and spooky and there was always a problem parking. But I really found it exciting that inside the darkness there was this wonderful welcoming warmth."

The warmth gave permission for Coleman to provoke discussions, which she found stimulated her work even when they became testy. "I was constantly learning, and I would engage people in argument—it was useful to me," she says.

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Although she was one of the few African-American women involved at the Building, Coleman says she didn't feel like a "token" (although she did feel frustrated by the lack of discourse about working-class economics). Mitsuye Yamada did feel tokenized at the Building which, like other politically correct cultural institutions, gained diversity points for supporting the work of non-white writers, but she took advantage rather than umbrage. "I knew at the time I was being asked to be the token American-Japanese/Asian woman," she says, "but that was OK. It was better than not being recognized at all! I really do owe a lot to the Woman's Building simply for being there."

Poet Gloria Alvarez, who at the time was a student, Latina activist and single mom in her early 20s, took the lack of non-white women at the Building as a personal challenge. She had been excited by the existence of the Building, and encouraged in her writing by Mitsuye Yamada, but wanted to bring more Latinas into the programs. "I felt there was a need for the Building to do outreach, but I had to do my part also," she says. So Alvarez established the writing program *Taller Espejo*,[3] which held classes for Mexican and Central American women at both the Building and in the Pico Union district. "It merged the different communities and different languages and brought everybody together," says Alvarez. "There were women with little or no education, and women with doctorates. It was wonderful. We did an artist's book and some radio programs in Spanish; we did readings. Out of that some women started their own groups to perform and publish."

Poet Gloria Alvarez. (Source: http://www.ncrr-la.org/news/1_19_06/GloriaAlvarez.jpg)

If dedicated women at the Building were successful in overcoming racial barriers, gender barriers could be harder to circumvent. At a time when a more separatist atmosphere was pervasive, men could feel excluded at the Building—as subject matter and even as allies. "I found that my love poems, paeans to black men—to men, period—were usually not welcome," Coleman laughs. "It forced me to really examine these various issues as I was living them. Because ironically when I was most active in the Woman's Building I

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was involved in an abusive relationship with an alcoholic man." She came to understand that, "If I was to strengthen my work I had to really get some perspective on the issues it raised."

Yamada experienced an even more fraught situation when, because she was suffering serious back pain, she prevailed upon her husband to drive her to a Building-sponsored women's writing workshop she was leading in the Mojave Desert. He remained for the weekend, helping with tasks such as building campfires, and thus drew the unspoken ire of some participants.

"People were so rigid back then," says Yamada. "I think now they would think it was totally cool that a man would be serving the women. But then, I heard that some of the women were very upset that I was permitting a man to wait on me. In retrospect, the whole trip was to teach us to be independent from male domination, so I understand what the problem was. And it's a thing about all women's groups, not only the Woman's Building, that somehow all of the trauma we collect from the outside world we bring into the group and kind of unload on each other."

The world outside the Woman's Building was not always welcoming of the processes entertained within. Eloise Klein Healy remarks, "I know in my academic jobs there were sometimes judgements made about me because I did come out of an activist arts background, because I was a feminist activist. I remember one time I was standing at the elevator and a senior faculty member in the English Department, a woman, said, 'I hear you're going to go down and teach in women's studies. What is wrong with you? Emily Dickinson didn't need feminism.'

"And I said, 'Yeah, and without feminism, we wouldn't know about anybody *but* Emily Dickinson, would we?'"

In retrospect, other pillars of Woman's Building philosophy of the time (early 1970s-mid 1980s) no longer seem necessary for the structure to hold. "We've evolved beyond the idea that we should only read women writers, or only learn from women writers," says Wolverton. "At that particular point in time, most of us had been through a traditional education where we encountered almost no women writers. Maybe Charlotte Brontë, but that might be it. So we needed that kind of insularity then, a kind of corrective education—I was right there on the bandwagon. But if that's one's only input, it too is self-limit-

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ing. Certainly the people who were teaching us, such as Deena, hadn't come from that space of only reading women writers."

While the philosophy and practice might change and evolve, many rue the demise of the Woman's Building in 1991. When Gloria Alvarez heard it was going to close she says, "I was shocked. I felt like, this can't be true, it can't happen. This was the only place specifically for women. I keep dreaming that something like it will happen again, but that this time it will involve everyone, including women of color at the base."

And Healy talks about the struggle to make known its legacy. Recently, an organizer of a week-long festival of women in the arts had said to her, "'What's the Woman's Building?' And I realized, you know, it's the same old story. Whole big chunks of cultural history just go plunk."

Still, she takes comfort in the fact that women

> keep reinventing it at the cultural level, at the level of some kind of arts. It wasn't the dentists who put that festival on. It was a bunch of wacky women poets. Definitely grass roots, young women, feminists, whatever.
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> And that made me feel both amazingly happy about it and amazingly troubled that we couldn't keep the Building going, we just couldn't. There was just no way. And I'm wondering why these things happen. But they do. And luckily some other gals get the bug and they decide it has to be done, for there is nothing for them in the regular culture. They look around and they say, 'There's nothing here that interests me.'

Many of the writers trained and nurtured at the Woman's Building incorporate the process and philosophy of the Woman's Building into their current teaching. In 1997 Wolverton founded an independent writing center, Writers At Work, where "creativity thrives in the context of community" fostered by several ongoing weekly workshops. These workshops utilize processes of constructive criticism that Wolverton first learned at the Building.

Healy promotes feminist values within an academic context at Antioch University Los Angeles, where she founded an MFA program in creative writing. "The Woman's Building still is alive here in my writing program. We pay very good attention to the ethnic mix and the racial diversity of the faculty. We do a lot to make sure that under-served communities get taken care of. We look to hire people who are going to participate in a more community-based notion of how to teach people, how to be with people, how to get people to learn."

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Woman's Building alumnae have also created an impressive body of work during and since its demise. Just a smattering of their many publications includes Healy's poem collections *Artemis in Echo Park*[4] and the recent *Passing*[5]; Coleman's poetry book *Mercurochrome*[6] and her novel *Mambo Hips and Make Believe*[7]; Wolverton's novel in poems, *Embers*,[8] and prose novel *Bailey's Beads*,[9] along with numerous gay and lesbian fiction anthologies she has edited; Alvarez's writings for theatrical pieces directed by Peter Sellars; Yamada's poems collected in *Desert Run*,[10] and Metzger's most recent novel *The Other Hand*.[11] Other Building-involved writers of note include Bia Lowe, author of the essay collections *Wild Ride*[12] and *Splendored Thing: Love, Roses, and Other Thorny Treasures*[13]; poet Aleida Rodríguez whose recent poetry collection is *Garden of Exile*[14]; Jacqueline de Angelis (who, with Rodríguez, published the literary magazine *rara avis*[15]), and Michelle T. Clinton, author of *Good Sense and the Faithless*.[16] These women remain teachers, activists, and keepers of the flame for women's writing.

Deena Metzger offers an explanation for why Woman's Building writers have gone on to achieve so much. "I think the confidence that we have now in the creative genius of women—of course not entirely, but to a great extent—can be traced back to the Woman's Building. Everything in me that does things in unconventional ways, that feels supported and that feels right to do it came from the Woman's Building."

Wolverton agrees. "The most important thing the Woman's Building taught me as a writer was to take risks. That's more important than trying to please or impress someone else is to discover something for yourself."

The Woman's Building served as a *Taller Espejo* of its own, providing women with a mirror in which they could see themselves and reflect themselves back to others. It brought women writers face to face with other women writers, who became their mentors or role models. It turned students into teachers and leaders. Most of all, the Woman's Building gave weight and import to the power of women's words.

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Excerpt from *Tree*

I am sitting in a hospital room, crosslegged on a hospital bed, typing a new book at 11:30 p.m. No, I will not have a sleeping pill. I can't afford to lose another dream. The moon rose at 9:30 p.m. and appeared in the window like a plump fruit. She did not look like a woman. Now, it glances down at the paper from the roof top. Hidden as by a veil of purdah. Only the eyes showing. She does not look like the man in the moon either. "For years you have wrestled with death," Jane said. Oh yes, I was brave and I came close, but I have decided to reverse the journey, to go back the other way. I am about to wrestle with life and discover what that means. Having faced the lesser demon, I feel ready to take on the greater power. Almost everyone is afraid to live. I am not saying, "I am not afraid," as I am also trying to give up arrogance. But I am going to try to look fear square in the eye.

This is a warm-up. Bare prose. A woman alone in a room. It could be a prison. It could be a cell. It could be the bare room of a nun. It could be the widow's bedroom or the tiny bedroom of someone's maiden aunt, the one who never married—you know who she is. But I don't want to stop in these rooms, only to point out to you that they exist, that we have always known about them, have always suspected that they are created especially for us, that the rooms where men live alone are noisier, are full of newspapers and brown paper bags and stiff jeans and textures, which rub and crinkle. Women's rooms are quiet. So we do not know what goes on in them. I have written about silence since 1965. Now I want to write about noise. But I am not interested in just any noise. Keening, for example, which always fascinated me, keening and laments and dirges—I am not interested in these. If I am going to come out of silence—and I am determined—then it will be with a big noise. A woman's noise. But not to exclude the man's noise. But of that later. Alida says this time we must go out into the world together. But then every one of us must be ready and everybody must put on party clothes and everyone must change their noses and collars and transform. And there are dancing lessons to be had—oh yes—dancing is required.

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This is a book about the kinds of silences that must be broken. Some I know and some I don't know. And it is also a book about the kind of stillness which must be preserved. And the confusion which exists between these. But first I would like to sing a little song, because not knowing how to sing, I have always maintained a silence here. So I think we shall have a little ritual silence-breaking. And I will do what is difficult to do—and you can hum along if you like. Now I assure you I have never been able to sing "Happy Birthday" and knew only two lullabies to sing to my sons and those I sang poorly. When I sing this song now it is with a flat and

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shaky voice and without knowing what words will come . . . the song created as quickly as my fingers can record it and the tune itself also improvised, but that is the best kind.

— *Deena Metzger, 1977*[17]

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Poem in support of the Woman's Building

yo & yo & yo girlfriend/the world is like a spinning impulse to do art/from the heart wrapped by the bindings of the body & culture/so if you're a woman & you got a vagina & so what?/except if it's now/america what ever year/& maniacs prowl the streets of dirty cities & leave baskets of fear/& maybe you got a problem with that/or you got somebody to love in a closet/okay/where you gonna do your art/ where you gonna howl & spit & crawl/out that hammered down spirit/where you gonna dance & dream the steamy hope that pounds like a heart/that hammers like a pretty smart muscle/where you gonna find other bitches with a problem/ with the problem that dirties the air or our world?

one time i was on a panel to witness judge to some poems by humans mind you we wasn't talking about no women's nothing but human poetry & these nice boys, boys i had fed dinner in a past life, boys claimed to be hip to the feminist cultural movement, i'm talking the fringe of caring men, and also literate male poets & me was judging the work of humans who turned out to be women who used words like wishbone & pussy & blood & these good boys, ones we don't got to worry about weird touchings of small daughters or fists in the faces of their wives, these boys was strangely & coincidentally not impressed with our wish-bones & our bloody wine, my goodness i thought ain't this a bitch.

& so yo & yo & yo girlfriend/so once i got to write a poem with a jewish woman's visual art about the holocaust/& parallels with negroes who drown down into the white bones of the sea that didn't love them/i pin racism & cultures of domi-nance on leadership of men/& our silly circles of women wanna do art about it/oh yes/okay so it was the woman's building binded me to the pulse of this jewish woman/ain't we bold/ain't we talking on the hardest art/ain't we taking on the most dangerous shit/the wounds of our pussys/our color/the color of our blood always red/call me radical/call me red & black/& always counting on the woman's building to count me in/& give me space/to spread out a wild women's trip/

so i'm grateful

— Michelle T. Clinton, 1988[18]

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Excerpt from *Insurgent Muse*

The Woman's Building. A public center for women's culture. In that terse descriptor spins a universe of ideas, of history: the way you, as a woman, searched in vain to find yourself reflected in the mirrors of culture. What did you find? Dull-eyed beauties whose gaze evaded yours; mounds of flesh arranged like bowls of voluptuous fruit; evil temptresses, corrupters of men. More often, you found nothing at all, a curious silence. Culture proved to be a funhouse mirror, distorting and diminishing, a surface into which you walked and then disappeared.

Still you kept searching until one day your eyes caught the glimmer of refracted light, a spark in the night sky, and like all such luminosities it drew you, lured you all the way across the continent to its very edge, Los Angeles. That spark lodged in your imagination where it burned for years. Where it smolders still.

The Woman's Building. What other city but Los Angeles could have given birth to such an edifice? City of extremes, pressed against the brink of the Pacific, the endpoint of our restless explorations. City of dreams, where multitudes flock to reinvent themselves, to live out their personal myth. City that has slipped from the yoke of tradition, eluded the burden of history. City that levels and starts anew.

You came here to do that too, left behind the constricted fictions of the Midwest, its constipated possibilities, the cold, the drab, the predictable gaze that would not see you in your full dimensions. You came to put the fragments of your life together, following that spark, to re-knit the woman to the artist, the body to the brain, the spirit.

It was a journey worthy of Ulysses, a mythic voyage: departing wizened expectations, resigning from the family, the clan, abandoning the marble fist of culture that had closed against you, traveling two thousand miles to arrive at the home of women's culture, founded in the city of dreams. What could you have expected? Gleaming columns, a vast expanse of lawn, carved fountains spouting sparkling streams of water that glimmered in the afternoon sun? Anything, perhaps, except this neglected red brick building in a dour industrial district, an iron gate across the door bolted with a padlock.

In one way the site was perfect, no accident at all, a seamless representation of women's place in culture: a once-grand, now run-down structure on a remote street in an obscure part of town where toil goes unrecognized, pushed against the margins of a river choked in concrete; hard-to-find, down-on-its-luck, a derelict part of town. It was anger at this circumstance that had struck the spark, anger that provided the fuel. That, and the ether of imagination.

And imagination is keener than broken glass, tougher than pavement, wider than the smog-filled vistas you can see from the top of the bridge. The truth is, there was not one, but *two* Woman's Buildings: the one that squatted mod-

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estly beside the railroad tracks and the one that blazed, like an idealized lover, inside your brain. Entering the first, you inhabited the second, the parallel home of women's culture, the one with wide hallways and open courtyards on a sunny, tree-lined street, a city landmark wherein every woman's act gained its deserved significance.

Women all over the world knew this second Woman's Building, women in Tokyo, in Mexico City, in Amsterdam, women who'd never set foot on North Spring Street still walked the vast rooms of this other Woman's Building, seized it as their Mecca, their "room of one's own."

You could never understand when others failed to see this second Woman's Building, so brightly did it shine for you. Walking newcomers through the edifice on North Spring Street, you'd puzzle at their dismayed glances, their diffident enthusiasm, and wonder at their failure of imagination. For you it was never a question—you dwelt in both buildings, each as real to you as the scent of your own skin. Huddling in winter in the unheated corridors of the first, you warmed yourself by the glorious fire in the second. And sometimes, when the art was brilliant and the rooms were full of women who were happy to be there together and the words were spoken from the deepest place in the heart, those twin images would blur, begin to swim together, two architectures becoming one.

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No one could ever describe the Woman's Building. It would require a language of multiple dimensions, of texture, a language that could encompass the passage of time as well as contradictory points of view. Perhaps no language could accomplish it. Perhaps only music would be capable of sounding those myriad notes—the harmonies, the dissonance, syncopation, counterpoint—to arrive at a composition of the whole.

Like the blind men in the parable, groping sightless at the surface of their elephant, each woman's grasp of the institution was fragmentary, partial and particular. The Woman's Building was a place. An institution. A gathering of women. It was an eighteen-year experiment. It was a collision of history and politics and art. It was poetry, painting, performance. It was the one night you went there for a dance and it was the thirteen years you spent trying to keep it ablaze.

It was the day you showed up with hennaed hair only to find that five other women had hennaed their hair the night before too. It was the rope straining in your hands as you hoisted the ten-foot-tall sculpture of a naked female figure onto the roof of the building, from which vantage point the entire city was her domain. It was a field of crosses planted on the lawn of City Hall by women dressed in nuns' habits the colors of the rainbow, in protest of nuclear arms. It was a wall made of bottles, a tree of dolls' heads. A circle of women who stared unflinching into the video lens and told the stories of their sexual abuse.

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It was the dope you smoked on the fire escape, the Friday nights you stayed late trying to figure out how to pay the bills. It was the first book you self-published on the antique printing press; it was the consciousness-raising group you hated.

Language splinters under the complexity, the immensity, the tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of women whose imaginations and emotions and lives touched and were touched by the Woman's Building. All their stories, their dreams. And it was the art that was made within its walls, yes, but also the art that was made by some woman in some little town, work that came into being because she'd heard that the Woman's Building dared to exist.

The Woman's Building offered up a spark, and this was the message in its glow: that you, a woman, could be an artist too, and that your woman's life—whatever its particulars—could kindle your art, and that in turn, the act of making art would ignite that life, and finally, that a community of women, engaged in the twin acts of making art and making a new life, would transform the mirrors of culture into windows through which you all would fly, like sparks, into the night sky.

— *Terry Wolverton, 1995*[19]

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On Lesbian Writing

In the interests of examining the connection

to the lives we are living we must ask does the bond run in the blood or is it as some believe directed by the power of the moon or as others say by the power of a woman effects on your angle of vision but of course some don't bother to say or didn't say but even in casual photos the distinctive tilt of the chin speaks volumes and the incredible glance that lives on in the one standing next to you who has as well included as a personal style just the most impossible shading of arrogance which indicates and welcomes an understanding that goes beyond cultural boundaries as when the lights go off and one fingertip after another gauges the dimensions of sensation on the surface of the naked skin or under cloth or leather or beaded and gathered stuff arranged ever so wonderfully you can't believe in looking at the photographs and the paintings that nobody thought anything of the display and took no opportunity to comment on the most distinctive manner of ornamentation and posture which acts almost but not quite as an affront to the received and applied rules of behavior while making a territory alongside of or just out of reach of the norm in which she and whomever she wanted to be with simply blossomed

— *Eloise Klein Healy, from* Passing*, 2003*[20]

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Drowning in My Own Language

My world is a brain
shaped island encrusted
from decades of crevices
rumblings seethe
without cracking

the open half
of me is
sinking on a small
land mass into the sea

as I watch rows
of animated people in
white suits
converse on dry
land inches away with
out seeing
me single-handed
clawing
my way up grasping
exposed root ends
crying
out
slow
ly
still
sinking

tas-keh-tehhh

wrong language
the line of white heels
in half
moons over my head
fade away
waves scoop
more land
I look
round-eyed fish
in the mouth

helllllllllllp

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still
wrong language

I will come up for air
in another language
all my own.

— *Mitsuye Yamada from* Camp Notes and Other Poems, *1976*[21]

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Ostinato Vamp

i am the daughter of earthquakes
dissonant and disruptive in my reign over Deathland
i stole
from god-slinging hypocrites in chaps, chinos, & spurs
from the sacred tribe of water-headed satyrs
on an abstinence from abstinence binge, shysters given
judgeships, panderers governing media, sanctioned gamblers
sapping the strength of negrodocious communities—there's
the necessity of music cut with blood weepings

i stole it because it was mine
doowopshewopdewop ohsocherry

as committed as murder, i am inspired by heavily
cologned and powdered harridans plum narcissistic
and brain-strained under Kelly green neon in the
throes of supremacy, making
white noise proclamations of inappropriate behavior
syndrome synonymous with and analogous to congenital
boneheartedness

i stole it back cuz twas mine from da get-go
brown thighs meeting white west of The Pacos

in our bed my absence whispers beneath his weight

need to fornicate/blindly penetrate
(a bad season spent chained to a filing cabinet
bosses like dogs barking for important files
the rain of empty talking riving the intellect—no place
to run. work—a necessity in these hind quarters)
all shook up
a rumble mama burped and there i was. take
these rhythms as evidence, my splendid rock-and-roll

— *Wanda Coleman from* Ostinato Vamp

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[1] Currently publishes under the name Martha Ronk.–ED.
[2] "Confessional poetry" was a term coined to describe the work of poets such as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Theodore Roethke and Anne Sexton. These poets reveal intimate details of their lives using the pronoun "I."–ED.
[3] Trans. "Mirror Workshop"–ED.
[4] Eloise Klein Healy, *Artemis in Echo Park*. (Ann Arbor, MI: Firebrand Books, 1991.)
[5] Healy, *Passing*. (Granada Hills, CA: Red Hen Press 2002.)
[6] Wanda Coleman, *Merchurochrome. (*Boston, MA: *New Poems*, Black Sparrow Books, 2001.)
[7] Coleman, *Mambo Hips and Make Believe. (*Boston, MA: *A Novel*, Black Sparrow Books, 1991.)
[8] Terry Wolverton, *Embers: A Novel in Poems*. (Granada Hills, CA: Red Hen Press, 2003.)
[9] Wolverton, *Bailey's Beads*. (Boston, MA: Faber & Faber, 1996.)
[10] Mitsuye Yamada, *Desert Run: Poems and Stories*. (New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color, 1998.)
[11] Deena Metzger, *The Other Hand*. (Granada Hills, CA: Red Hen Press, 2000.)
[12] Bia Lowe, *Wild Ride*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996.)
[13] Lowe, *Splendored Thing: Love, Roses, & Other Thorny Treasures*. (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2002.)
[14] Aleida Rodríguez, *Garden of Exile*. (Louisville, KY: Sarabande Books, 1999.)
[15] *rara avis* was published by Books of a Feather, Los Angeles, California, edited by Jacqueline de Angelis and Aleida Rodriguez. Seven issues published from 1978 to 1984.
[16] Michelle T. Clinton, *Good Sense and the Faithless*. (New York: West End Press, 1994.)
[17] Deena Metzger, *Tree: Essays and Pieces*. (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1997.)
[18] "Poem in support of the Woman's Building" was created for and published in *Fifteen Years and Growing*, a commemorative booklet for the Woman's Building's fifteenth anniversary, edited by Terry Wolverton. (Los Angeles: The Woman's Building, 1988.)
[19] Terry Wolverton, *Insurgent Muse: Art and Life at the Woman's Building*. (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 2002.)
[20] Healy, *Passing*.
[21] Wanda Coleman, *Ostinato Vamps*. (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003.)

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