

Lesbian Poetry Tradition

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Abstract: In the Western context lesbian poetry production outbursts in the late 1960s as part of the emerging lesbian–feminist movement. This literary line, the history of lesbian poetry, can be divided into five periods: the lesbian poetry from the identity politics period (emphasizing the lesbian difference as a tool of political and cultural subjectivization and emancipation); the historization of lesbian poetry (searching and analyzing lesbian contents in older literary works); lesbian literary proliferation (inclusion of ethnic, racial and class perspectives); queer approach (poststructuralist critique of a unified lesbian identity); and reconciliation between identity politics and queer politics. Eastern European lesbian poetry follows a similar developmental line, only it emerged much later, in the 1980s or even later. However, Eastern European lesbian poetry has certain specifics, firstly, because of the national, social or linguistic differences the development is not so linear, and secondly, the socio-political climate in Eastern Europe is quite different from the Western one and this also affects lesbian culture and art.

Keywords: lesbian literary tradition, lesbian poetry, historization of lesbian literature, identity politics, queer critique

In the anthology *Brez besed ji sledim: Sodobna evropska lezbična poezija* (I Follow Her Without Words: Contemporary European Lesbian Poetry), which was published in the Slovene gay and lesbian edition Škuc Lambda in 2015 and edited by the gay poet and activist Brane Mozetič, I wrote an introduction entitled “Poetry is still not a luxury”.

Let me first briefly say something about the anthology itself: it is the first European anthology of contemporary lesbian poetry, an overview of fifty-five poets, covering the period from 1933, which is the year of birth of the English poet Maureen Duffy, to 1994, the year of birth of the Estonian poet Koidula Aidla alias Koits. Therefore, it covers lesbian poetry written after the Second World War.

It covers Western European countries: for example, from Great Britain we have Maureen Duffy, Janet Sutherland and Char March, from Ireland Cherry Smyth, from Belgium Nathalie Gassel, from the Netherlands Elly de Waard, from Germany Jenny Schon and Odile Kennel, from Austria Barbara Hundegger, from Italy Maria Grazia Calandrone and Eleonora Pinzuti, from France Anne Michel, from Spain Maria Xose Queizan, Ana Tapia and Alicia Garcia Nunez and many more.

It extends to Russia, to poets Faina Grimberg, Gila Loran and Jekaterina Simonova, and to Turkey, to poet Birhan Keski.

But its notable value is the inclusion of lesbian poetry from Eastern Europe, this unjustly culturally undervalued area, as its artistic expression contains exceptional vitality, also that critical social expressiveness which is often lacking in the still dreamy European West. Therefore we have Kinga Fabo and Agata Gordon from Hungary, Maria Jastrzebska, Izabela Morska and Ewa Sonnenberg from Poland, Svatava Antošova and Andrea Vatulikova from the Czech Republic, Aida Bagić and Nora Verde from Croatia, Jelena Kerkez and Dragoslava Barzut from Serbia, Kristina Hočevár and Nataša Velikonja from Slovenia, Gabri M. from Romania, Hristja Vengrinjuk from Ukraine and so on.

Europe is a colourful continent, and lesbian poetic expression is rich and developed in some countries, for example in Spain, both in terms of the publication density and themes, but in others it is completely absent. In Italy we find only fragmented lesbian poetic expressions, without publication in specialized anthologies. And many European countries are at an absolute zero point: we cannot find lesbian poetry in Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia, we cannot find it in Kosovo, and it is not present in Albania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Cyprus or Malta.

For the anthology of European lesbian poetry I wrote, as I mentioned, an introduction called "Poetry is still not a luxury". It is a paraphrase of Audre Lorde's famous essay from 1977 "Poetry is not a luxury".

In her essay Lorde declared that poetry is a *questioning and discovering of experiences*, it is the creation of thoughts, it is "the skeleton architecture of our lives", it is "as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are – until the poem – nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt" (Lorde 36). "Poetry is not a luxury", Lorde wrote, it is "not the sterile word play", but "it is a vital necessity of our existence", "it forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought" (Lorde 37).

In short, lesbian poetry has a special meaning for lesbian liberation, for lesbian identities, for emancipating lesbian subjectivity.

In the Western context the beginnings of lesbian poetry date back to the late 1960s as part of the emerging lesbian-feminist movement.

In this short article I would like to sketch a developmental line of lesbian poetry which is proved to be also a developmental line of lesbian epistemology itself. I divide this developmental line in five parts, five timeframes.¹

The first is *the lesbian poetry from the identity politics period*, starting in the late 1960s mostly within lesbian-feminist collectives. The intonation of this early lesbian poetry was in accordance with the revolutionary period in which it emerged. It expressed a political stance and was an inseparable part of the emerging lesbian movement. The lesbian poets transferred their rebellious anger into poetry which was therefore explicitly political, even anti-poetic, it had an anti-assimilation sharpness: it strictly established and explicitly emphasized the lesbian difference. Due to the outstanding density of lesbian poetry at that time, we can even say that poetry meant the preferred political expression, with which lesbians within the lesbian movement and lesbian collectives began to declare a public lesbian presence. Regarding the literature or poetry itself, there was a strong definitional consensus: lesbian literature is written by lesbians; lesbian literature speaks about women who are sexually attracted to other women; lesbian literature describes lesbian characters and lesbian existence, in short, it contains explicitly lesbian topics. If I mention just a few classics of this lesbian poetry: Judy Grahn, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde and Pat Parker.

The second period is *the historization of lesbian poetry*. Parallel with lesbian poetry production lesbian researchers, for example Jane Rule or Lillian Faderman, began to develop lesbian literary criticism, they started to analyze lesbian elements in older or historical literary works, interpret them from a lesbian perspective, classify literary works according to lesbian themes and lesbian images, revise literary history and include into it the presence and influences of neglected lesbian authors, identify certain literary works as lesbian, discover earlier and overlooked women poets, starting with Sappho, Katherine Philips, Aphra Behn, Anna Seward, Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti, Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein, H.D., Willa Cather, Colette, Elizabeth Bishop and many others. This literary history researching actually led to more complex questions – mainly about what exactly is lesbian. All these extensions of the scope of literary works which were regarded as lesbian extended the definition of lesbian, too. But as the historical determinism of lesbian was entering more and more in the forefront of research work, and the action-oriented, political or identity concept of lesbian was drawn more and more into the background.

The third period is *lesbian literary proliferation*. Despite the diversity of lesbian poetry, the very definition is always conditioned by how a particular culture constructs lesbian identity. In the West, lesbian identity was almost always defined through the Western construction, namely, through sexology, feminism and the lesbian movement. That

1 I discuss this topic more widely in my text "Poetry is still not a luxury" (Mozetič 211-227).

is why, in the emerging canon of lesbian poetry the majority of lesbian poets were white, English-speaking middle-class women. Precisely because of the recognition of the definitional bias in the 1980s the postmodern approaches to lesbian poetry appear which correct this white picture also within the very Western construction of lesbian identity. The so-called sexual wars in feminist and lesbian communities revealed the problematic unified definition of lesbian, unified lesbian identity, they cut into it with the inclusion of ethnic, racial and class perspectives and with the extension of sexual, and thus showed how lesbian experience works differently in different cultural contexts and therefore also in various literary traditions. In 1981, the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour*, edited by Latino-Americans Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, was published. In 1983, Cherrie Moraga published *Loving in the War Years*, which is considered as the first poetry collection of an out Latino-American lesbian. In 1982, the anthology of Jewish-American lesbians *Nice Jewish Girls* was published, etc.

The fourth is the *queer approach*. Another decline of identity politics poetry was caused by the queer approach at the end of the 1980s. Queer studies forcefully challenge the basic assumptions of identity politics: lesbianism is part of overlapping identities, not just the one and only; the category of a lesbian as a stable, unified, essential concept is rejected, and lesbian identity is completely disassembled; categories of gender or sexuality are not a sufficient basis for the construction of identity, especially because they are, as Judith Butler argued in *Gender trouble*, published in 1990, performative, they are cultural fictions and therefore neither expressive nor stable nor unified. Any attempt to determine the lesbian difference and thus the lesbian identity is rejected as a reductionist and sexually repressive. Queer studies, rather than about identity, prefer to talk about sexual non-normativity or subjectivity or subject position that is formed by many factors, not just sexual orientation. This lesbian poststructuralist, queer critique, which rejected the expressive realism as an effective type of lesbian literature, promoted different types of texts, it focused on literary structure rather than on content, pointed to nonlinear, fragmented works of art, for example, to the writings of Gertrude Stein or Djuna Barnes, or to the novel *Written on the Body* by the English writer Jeanette Winterson, or to the poetry of the Canadian poet Nicole Brossard. The notion of lesbian is a metaphor, a signifier of absence, not presence, and this very radical position of absence should, in fact, unbind the existing dominant discourses. This approach was completely opposite to the classical, pioneering, some even say the heroic phase of the lesbian art and theory of the seventies that positioned the lesbian in society. Poststructuralist, queer lesbian theory refuses this concept of lesbian and it also refuses the imperative of forming the lesbian difference and identification of a lesbian.

The fifth period is the *reconciliation between identity and queer politics*. Queer studies were hit by the accusation that with the theoretical undermining of the politics of difference, they depoliticised lesbian sexuality, and that, in fact, they contributed to

maintaining hetero-normativity. British theoretician Sally Munt writes that we do need a dream of a lesbian nation, even though we are aware of its fictionality, and draws attention to the lack of political energy in queer postmodernism, because, as she says, fragmentation led to alienation. Despite the conflicting relationship, the identity-oriented lesbian politics and the post-identity queer approach coincide, writes Judith Roof, as both rejected meta-narratives and opposed centralized identity. Literary theorist Lee Edelman suggests that we should no longer participate in affirming the cognitive stability of gay identity, but endorse the deployment of gay identity as a signifier of resistance, an identity of resistance.

If I at the end return to European lesbian poetry: its course is in accordance with the developmental line, drawn in this text. The European lesbian poets, too, emphasize the constitutive link between the poetical and the activist: for example, the British poet Maureen Duffy acts also as a lesbian activist. María Xosé Queizán is one of the leading figures in the Spanish feminist movement. The Dutch poet Elly De Waard, another pioneer of European lesbian poetry, is also active in the feminist movement. Poet Izabela Morska is the first out Polish lesbian. European lesbian poets, like their American colleagues, care for the lesbian poetry production also as editors: the Serbian poet and lesbian activist Dragoslava Barzut edited an anthology of lesbian short stories. Since 2000, Jelena Kerkez has been the editor of the Serbian lesbian-feminist publishing-house Deve.

The forming of distinctive identity is present also in European lesbian poetry: here too we find lesbian poems, acting as anti-assimilation manifests: for example “The Chronicle of Revenge” or “The Amazons of Love” by the Spanish poet Ana Tapia, or the poem “Woman, the New Hymn” by the Belgian poet Nathalie Gassel. We find lyrical hymns to lesbian love, so very typical of the first introductions of lesbian into public space: lesbian love and lesbian sex are almost the most common topics, so very inspiring, so self-sufficient, they are so complete that they are located outside of the social context. We find lovers in a Sapphic, idyllic environment, in the nature, in the city, in the gardens, near the water, near the sea, surrounded by waves, by tides, in the sanctuaries and, of course, on Lesbos; poets are wondering about the mysteries of love, the miracle of love, they are questioning the language, they are describing love’s approaching and departing, they are addressing love pleas to their lovers, they are Amazonas, Sapphos, Aphrodites, Venuses, Calliopes, Narcissuses, sultans, knights, guerrillas, titans, princesses, conquistadores, Barabbases, Apaches. Love is “Nirvana, Utopia, Dreamland”, as Maureen Duffy writes. And lesbian love is also a source of anxiety and conflict, as in the poem “Entre nous” by the Polish poet Izabela Morska: “Do not meet her, do not allow her to talk to you, do not approach her, don’t be naive, You do not know how and when she will abuse you, intentionally, rob you your dowry, shoes, salary, coldly, prune you, suck your bone after a bone, swallow your brain still fresh, and throw the remains away”.

And, at last, especially in Eastern European lesbian poetry we find that special critical sharpness, the political contextualization of love, recognition that lesbian love is surrounded with hostile and violent environment, for example in the poetry by the Hungarian poet and activist Agáta Gordon or in the poem “Natural methods” by the Croatian poet Aida Bagić. Maria Jastrzebska, born in Poland, writes in a poem “Granddad’s wall clock”: “What does, asks Mom, a Polish girl do among all those faggots?” We rarely find a lyrical immersion into a harmonious nature, but most often claustrophobia in a society, in a nation, in a state, and a community – and also on the lesbian scene, as the Czech poet Andrea Vatulikova writes.

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