In recent years, there has been significant interest in the writings of Voltairine de Cleyre (1866–1912), with a number of authors attempting to reassess her work, in some cases drawing increased attention to the perspective that her ideas constitute a form of feminism. Remembered also as a poet, anarchist, and atheist, de Cleyre was born in Leslie, Michigan, a small town south of Lansing. Her parents, who were impoverished tailors, left Leslie when Voltairine was about one year old, following the accidental drowning death of another daughter, Marion, at the age of five. The family moved to St. Johns, Michigan, a town on the north side of Lansing (Avrich 1978, 19–20; Havel [1914] 2005, 7). Despite the objections of Voltairine’s mother, her father, an atheist and admirer of Voltaire, created her distinctive given name to commemorate his own beliefs (Avrich 1978, 19; Havel [1914] 2005, 7; Palczewski 1955, 54; Sartwell 2005, 4).

Schooled at the Convent of Our Lady of Lake Huron, in Sarnia, Ontario, de Cleyre rebelled against the physical and intellectual rigidity of her training and rejected religion, although some commentators feel that she retained a somewhat clerical demeanor, which DeLamotte (2004, 35) refers to as “an emotional kinship to the religious sensibility.” Her ally in anarchism, the better-known Emma Goldman ([1932] 2005, 39), believed that these formative years undermined de Cleyre’s confidence, a condition that would last for the rest of her life. Called Voltai by people who were close to her, de Cleyre spent a sizable part of her existence in Philadelphia, where she taught English to Jewish immigrants, as a consequence acquiring some mastery of Yiddish herself (Streeby 2007, 420). Goldman (35) speculates that the many hours a day occupied teaching pupils, which she terms “drudgery,” contributed to her friend’s constant condition of exhaustion. A prolific speech-giver, de Cleyre was sometimes able to travel, and she visited Britain, where she met the Russian anarchist prince, Peter Kropotkin, as well as Norway, where she was trailed by police. She wrote articles for both Liberty, the journal of the American Anarchist, Benjamin R. Tucker, and for mainstream anarchist Goldman’s Mother Earth. In 1902, she was shot by one of her students, Herman Helcher. Unbalanced and malnourished, Helcher portrayed himself to
police as a jilted lover of Voltairine, whom he felt was now persecuting him, and this appears to be the motive for the attack (Avrich 1978, 173; Sartwell 2005, 7).

Characteristically, and in the tradition of some other revolutionaries, de Cleyre declined to prosecute her assailant. Her health never fully recovered from this incident, and sometimes her impaired condition caused her to contemplate suicide. However, she lived for another decade, eventually being buried in Waldheim Cemetery in the suburbs of Chicago,¹ where Goldman would later also be interred (Avrich 1978, 9, 20, 29; Hogeland and Klages 2004, 1342; Sartwell 2005, 3).

De Cleyre’s literary writings were proficient, although they never concealed her political motives. Pateman (2004, iii) points out that one of the purposes of de Cleyre’s stanzas was to show her “support of those who have used violence, and her desire to memorialize and celebrate their courage.” Franklin Rosemont, the surrealist bard, called her “a remarkable poet – indeed, probably the greatest poet-activist in U.S. anarchist history” (5), observing also that “readers of her essays and speeches can tell at once that they are reading the work of a poet” (10).

A number of scholars who make reference to de Cleyre say she was an anarchist, but do not call her a feminist. For instance, Fidler (1985, 107) refers to her as “the American Anarchist Voltairine de Cleyre.” Bright (2006, 20) calls her an “individualist anarchist.” Oberdeck (2007, 436) refers to her as a contributor to a “circle of anarchist papers.” Brouwer (2004, 209) describes her as a writer of “anarchist rhetoric.” Kensinger (2003, 3) speaks of “the anarchist Voltairine de Cleyre,” and Weir (1997, 139) calls her “the American anarchist Voltairine de Cleyre.” In one place, McElroy (2000, 110) refers to “[t]he individualist anarchist Voltairine de Cleyre,” though in another article, she tags her as a feminist (2001, 16), and, in a more recent work, she calls her an “Individualist Anarchist and feminist” (2003, 38).

Similarly, Meltzer (1996, 378) includes her “among the anarchists of the past such as the Chicago Martyrs, Lucy Parsons, Voltairine de Cleyre and Harry Kelly.” Martin (1970, 261) portrays her as “part of the native anarchist movement.” In a letter written by Eugene Debs (1990, 265) and dated May 1908, the leading socialist wrote, “Of course you know that I am not an anarchist and do not agree to the anarchist philosophy, but I can none the less admire such a comrade as Voltairine de Cleyre.” Elsewhere, she is referred to as one of “such pivotal anarchists as Emma Goldman,

¹ Now part of Forest Home Cemetery.