

Margaret Henderson. *Marking Feminist Times: Remembering the Longest Revolution in Australia.* Bern: Peter Lang European University Studies, 2006, 268pp.

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I read this book in manuscript form and found it to be an intensely interesting, timely and intelligent reading of the way Australian second-wave feminism is remembered and represented in textual forms. On reading it a second time to review for *JASAL*, I'm struck by how important this text is, not only in bringing together the textual forms of cultural production of Australian feminism, but also in highlighting how crucial writing and text has been for what Juliet Mitchell has called "the longest revolution". It is also crucially timed: in a period when women's studies has largely transmogrified into other studies if not mainstreamed back into disciplines, when pioneers are retiring, and a decade of conservative federal politics has left its mark, it is important to look at how feminism is being narrated as a historical movement.

Most of the primary sources Henderson reads are textual, because of the crucial role literature has played in the making and narrating of Australian feminism. She structures her reading of feminist times through genre, so that the first chapter examines the proliferation of feminist histories in the late 1990s, particularly those by Gisela Kaplan, Marilyn Lake, Jean Curthoys and Chilla Bulbeck. Then another form of history-making is put under an adjacent microscope in the chapter on activist autobiographies by Anne Summers, Zelda D'Aprano, Susan Ryan and Wendy McCarthy. Chapter Three looks at the form of the historical novel, specifically *West Block* by Sara Dowse, *Speaking* by Janine Burke, *Remember the Tarantella* by Finola Moorhead and *Mad Meg* by Sally Morrison with reference outward to other novels and inward to how the form contributes to particular narratives about Australian feminism. While the histories as a collection are often politically pessimistic, the autobiographies focus on the success of individuals as political activists. It is the historical fictions that focus on collectives and their dissolution, thereby narrating the strong emotional tensions between individuals and groups, and often involving loss, grief, crisis, anger and mourning. The reliable tenor of social realism favoured by the historians is also tentatively offset in the fiction with a questioning of narrative constraints, language and generic conventions.

Henderson is both reflective and critical, being a self-identifying Australian feminist but finding in the emergent narratives of the 1990s “strange tales” that she hardly recognised. In comparison with the US and British women’s movements, Henderson comments that texts remembering Australian feminism and its cultural production are relatively belated, but emerge at the same time as a media backlash intent on demonising feminism as an outmoded and irrelevant concern. At this point in the 1990s, Henderson explains, “the feminist past was now a site of political struggle”. She enters that political arena as a literary critic analysing how feminism is represented as cultural memory, what sorts of plots and generic conventions, myths and topoi are employed, and to what end. As Henderson reminds us, Australian feminism is a critical social force that remains anti-institutional: it does not have its own professional archives, memorials, museums or group rituals. Its collective cultural memory is either personal or textual, which is why Henderson’s assessment of those texts as cultural narratives is so critical and timely.

Henderson’s argument is anticipated in the selected epigraphs to the book: Theodor Adorno is cited claiming longing in art works as a form of remembrance; and Meaghan Morris speculates that feminism is not easily amenable to “heroic *progress* narratives” because of the strain of critiquing but also working with the social in order to change it. For Henderson, Australian feminism can only ever be remembered with longing, as either a failure or as only mildly successful. Such are the narratives of memoir, history, autobiography and even novels on Australian feminism that she examines. Indeed, how else can feminism be remembered in this time of postmodernism, *posthistoire*, even postfeminism? What is pivotal to Henderson’s argument, however, is that this longing is most intensely focussed on the early radical and revolutionary form of women’s liberation. This spectral and evocative presence is remembered as both “pure and authentic” but also “dangerously excessive”, especially in its relation to lesbianism and its critique of heteronormativity. Henderson figures this revolutionary form of feminism as the mourned love object, the “object of desire, disavowal and ambivalence” in the texts she reads, texts which exhibit both desire and anger, performing a psychodrama of mourning and melancholia. Henderson is much more eloquent than this brief summary, and her brief but lucid psychoanalytic readings are dazzling and provocative. Indeed, it is this metanarrative of the psychic dramas within the telling of Australian feminism that transforms Henderson’s text from a perfectly adequate reading exercise into a compelling social drama.

As well as books of history, autobiography and fiction, Australian feminism is also traced through more popular cultural media. The chapter on journalism

presents tables that organise feature articles into decades and issues, and then analyses a representative selection from each decade. Feminist journalists like Anne Summers, Wendy Bacon and the continually provocative Germaine Greer feature, but overall the story of feminism in the news differs from its academic and fictional narratives by being characterised as a success for women and not very threatening for men. This is largely measured by feminism's public legacies such as legislation, and through the lens of a strictly liberal feminism. If journalism tells a different story from monographs, then radio, television and film narrate feminism's legacies through what Henderson terms postfeminist hysteria. Postfeminism is used here to describe the sense of feminism having passed; these texts situate themselves as coming after the women's movement, and so they become exemplary for reading feminism's past. The films *Waiting* (1990) and Helen Garner's screenplay *The Last Days of Chez Nous* (1992) are discussed alongside television's *Simone de Beauvoir's Babies* (1997) as ambivalent rather than melancholic in their relation to and remembrance of feminism. Again the dilution of a radical politics is apparent, perhaps not surprising in mass media forms, although, as Henderson points out, there are a number of highly-acclaimed Australian feminist film directors and producers. The domestic plots of all three visual forms re/align women with babies, maternity and heterosexual relations. Henderson astutely comments:

Through the largely apolitical, middle-class, liberated women who characterise the women's films, the feminist legacy is seemingly everywhere, and yet it is nowhere as a political project or movement. And although some mournfulness arises from a sense that feminism did not work out quite as expected . . . another source of mourning is the loss of pre-feminist certainties. (201)

Alongside these, *The Coming Out Show* broadcast on ABC Radio for over two decades sits oddly, both as a media form and in its radical politics, but there is no way a critical reflection on Australian feminism could afford to miss this important avenue and medium. While Henderson ranges over the *Show's* wide interests and material, and situates it as part of a broader scene of community radio, she concentrates on two particular episodes that document feminism as an historical narrative: one as early as 1977, and the other in 1995 on third-wave feminism. Acting as a barometer of feminist issues in Australia, this case-study mode works well, and recovers a wealth of names and personal histories in its wake.

The last chapter of *Marking Feminist Times* examines the ways in which men have remembered or forgotten feminism and their relation to it, and is concomitantly interested in the gendering of memory. Published collections

of interviews with men on women and feminism, and texts of the men's movement form the primary sources here. While this might seem a curious topic on which to end, it works beautifully to address the kinds of mythmaking involved in remembering particular kinds of feminism and feminists. It also nicely underscores Henderson's thesis, that revolutionary feminism was a vital originary moment of Australian grassroots feminism that has been diluted, discarded, mourned, but made manifest in her counter-readings of narratives about feminism's history. As she forewarns in her introduction, "the women's movement was the bearer of hope for fundamental social transformation in late twentieth-century Australia. Thus it seems almost unavoidable that the women's movement will be intensely marked as a failure" (26).

While this might seem pessimistic, Henderson's text resonates so strongly that it practically calls for new ways of documenting, archiving and remembering feminism. Indeed, the concluding paragraph gives us a taste of what that might involve. Titled "Remembering the Brisbane Women's Movement 1970s–1980s: Repetitions of Activist Courage While Working through Conservative Idiocy", it lists events, song titles, images, slogans, ideology and a sense of movement and intensity. It sits outside the dominant sites of Melbourne and Sydney, as it sits outside dominant narrative modes. She calls this "a short fragment of collective memory" and I hope there will be much more. In pointing out the kinds of narratives currently available to read, Henderson reminds us that the revolutionary intensity of the past is easily lost, and that stereotypes of feminists will continue to define the movement unless there are alternatives circulating as cultural memory. This book is a timely and original literary reading of the texts that are actively producing an Australian feminist past, and a reminder of the restrictions of genre and narrative that help to define those stories.

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