Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women’s Rewriting. Liedeke Plate.
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Liedeke Plate’s Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women’s Rewriting makes a timely contribution to what has long become a familiar and densely populated critical territory for scholars of contemporary women’s writing, feminist literary theory, and postmodern literature and culture. Addressing works by some of the most prominent contemporary women authors, the study mostly covers well-known novels by the usual suspects, such as Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Jean Rhys, Michèle Roberts, and Jeanette Winterson, but it is also concerned with texts by Maryse Condé, Sena Jeter Naslund, and Christa Wolf.

Part I of Transforming Memories establishes a critical context for these works and identifies women’s rewriting as a transformative feminist strategy that has played a pivotal role in “the atomization of History into histories” (34) and contributed to the past becoming a “prime commodity, sold on the cultural market for consumption and profit” (34). It is this attention to the relationship between women’s rewriting and the politics and economics of the literary market that distinguishes the study from existing explorations of female writers’ returns to the past. Although Plate clearly sets out to construct a new framework for this literary area – a framework rooted largely in cultural memory studies – the lack of critical engagement with the term “historical fiction” is a rather striking one, considering the genre’s centrality to debates surrounding the literary and financial value of female-authored works.

In Part II, by largely omitting references to recent studies on women’s writing and its intellectual and market values, Plate relies first and foremost on conceptualizations of feminist rewriting by Hélène Cixous, Adrienne Rich, and Virginia Woolf in order to tease out and address in detail the relationship between women’s (re)writing and (re)reading, and the social, cultural, and economic circumstances that inherently shape these acts and their interconnectedness and consumption. From here, Plate proceeds to an intriguing discussion of women’s rewriting of works under copyright as acts of literary theft, focusing specifically on Kathy Acker’s The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec: By Henri Toulouse Lautrec (1978), Pia Pera’s Lo’s Diary (1995), and Alice Randall’s The Wind Done Gone (2011).
These texts, she argues, produce counter-narratives and counter-memories that challenge traditional notions of authorship, originality, value, and intellectual and textual property, thus undermining “male power as ultimate authority and rightful ownership” (93).

The chapters of the study’s penultimate part are dedicated to the connections between women’s writing, silence, and decanonization. In relation to Condé’s *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1986), and Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Plate considers silence as “a *topos* in women’s writing . . . [and] a motive for writing and for rewriting,” drawing attention to the fact that the narratives that women’s rewriting produces are “the result of the productivity of silence” (104), while, at the same time, they also produce silences through the “selective forgetting effected by (re)writing” (120). Drawing on textual analyses of Ursula Le Guin’s *Lavinia* (2008), Naslund’s *Ahab’s Wife: or, The Star Gazer* (1999), and Wolf’s *Cassandra* (1983), she goes on to highlight the paradoxical fact that the canon and canonicity are “vital to the functioning of women’s rewriting as an intervention in cultural memory” (131).

In the final part of her monograph, Plate turns to Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent* (1997), Roberts’s *The Wild Girl* (1984), and Winterson’s *Weight* (2005) and *The Stone Gods* (2007) to discuss the convenient adaptability of myth to modern consumer cycles. Yet, she argues that women’s rewriting can function as a powerful practice of remythologizing that is directly connected to social change, “[resists] resignification by neoliberalism and refunctioning by capitalism” (160), and is ideally suited to the “liquid condition of late modernity” because it provides a “means to self-assertion, self-determination, and self-creation” (181).

In exploring contemporary women writers’ engagements with and utilizations of the past and of cultural memory, Plate certainly (and perhaps, by now, inevitably) covers well-trodden ground regarding the very topic of her study, and many — though not all — of the texts discussed. Yet, the wider cultural and consumerist contexts she explores — and in which she situates her analyses of many a well-known contemporary female novelist — render her work an original addition to the field of contemporary women’s writing and the wider area of memory studies.

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