

reviews



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on missing the revolution

MARGARET HENDERSON

*Marking Feminist Times: Remembering the
Longest Revolution in Australia*

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Margaret Henderson's *Marking Feminist Times: Remembering the Longest Revolution in Australia* prefaces its opening chapter with a quotation from Meaghan Morris's *Too Soon Too Late: History in Popular Culture*:

Feminism is not easily adapted to heroic progress narratives ... To act, as I believe feminism does, to bring about concrete social changes while at the same time contesting the very bases of modern thinking about what constitutes 'change' is to induce intense strain, almost a kind of overload, in historical articulation—and sometimes, in feminists' lives. (11)

The use of Morris's description of feminism's complex relationship to the concepts of change and progression suggests, promisingly, that Henderson's book will contribute to a much needed rethinking of the historical categories which periodise feminism into generations or waves. It promises as well a consideration of how feminism necessitates a requisite complicating of historical thought and Henderson spends some time in her introduction describing the complexity of feminist cultural memory.

Despite these promising indications, and although *Marking Feminist Times* is timely in its questions about memory and feminism with an explicit focus on Australia, the book squanders its opportunities for a thoroughgoing rethinking of history and memory, and actually serves to cement generational schisms. Henderson's focus is on representations and remembrances of the 'revolutionary women's liberation movement in Australia'. Henderson defines the

revolutionary women's liberation movement as 'an early version of second wave feminism, whether socialist or radical (but not liberal) that aimed at a total transformation of society'. (21) *Marking Feminist Times* draws upon novels, journalism, film, radio and television to articulate how feminist cultural remembrance operates. Each chapter focuses on a cluster of examples that utilise a particular genre or medium. The first chapter introduces the framework of feminist cultural memory, which is followed by a chapter focusing on the juncture of feminism and memory in histories of feminism by Gisela Kaplan, Marilyn Lake, Jean Curthoys and Chilla Bulbeck. The third chapter turns to the genre of autobiography and looks at how feminist activists have written their own pasts. The fourth chapter looks at journalism's representation of the women's liberation movement and the fifth chapter looks at radio, film and television in the 1990s to consider post-feminism and its approach to feminism and the past. Chapter Six considers the men's movement and its figuration of the women's movement.

These examples are also read as psychoanalytic 'symptoms' of wider cultural conditions. Henderson gives her reason for choosing to frame her study of memory with Freudian psychoanalytic theory as follows:

Given the centrality of the mechanics of memory to Freud's work, psychoanalysis's powerful conceptual apparatus of memory—as in the concepts of repression, displacement, and repetition—and the potential Freud offers to literary and

cultural analysis, I have found aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis useful to explore cultural memory, based as it is upon a nexus of individual and collective memories, and cultural forms more generally. I read these texts symptomatically, as enunciations and symptoms of a historical consciousness and unconscious, and which therefore gesture towards a larger cultural condition. (19)

Using Freud thus, Henderson makes the bold assertion that the 'revolutionary women's liberation movement is the (lost) primary love object of Australian feminism'. (21) This seems to me to be a strange claim on a number of levels. First, while the mechanics of memory might be central to Freud's work, the same claim can be made of many theorists, and given the breadth of work that falls under the banner of 'memory studies' Henderson's explanation for using Freud is under-theorised and does not do justice to the range of feminist theorising around memory. Second, in a book which is explicitly feminist it seems odd to utilise Freud without reference to the complex and rigorous critiques that feminist theory has made of Freudian psychoanalysis. Third, I'm not convinced that Freud's theories about the human subject can be simply laid on top of an entire social movement like feminism. To describe a social movement in the same terms as human subjectivity suggests a level of cohesion that I don't wish to claim for Australian feminism. Hence, I don't think that Australian feminism *has* a (lost) primary love object.

I don't want to suggest that Henderson describes Australian feminism in cohesive terms. In fact, Henderson leaves her reader with a series of impressions of an Australian feminism that is divided in a number of ways: between generations or waves, between activism and academic feminism, and between the inside and the outside of the women's liberation movement. *Marking Feminist Times* offers a crude representation of Australian feminism as divided between a dynamic women's liberation movement and a complacent third wave/younger generation. This is most marked in the chapter 'Postfeminism Emerges: Radio, Film, Television'. Here Henderson compares a three-part series 'Mother I Can See the Light' aired on Radio National's *The Coming Out Show* in 1977 with a program aired in 1995, 'Surfing the Third Wave'. Henderson describes the anecdotes in 'Mother I Can See the Light' as containing 'humour, energy and defiance' (174) and characterises the program as a whole as providing a sense 'of women moving, women in a movement and why, rather than a static sense of dates and events on the page'. (174–5) While 'Mother I Can See the Light' is described in dynamic terms, 'Surfing the Third Wave' is decidedly less appealing to Henderson. Using a more conventional form of radio presentation (as opposed to what Henderson describes as the 'feminist montage' of the 1977 program), 'Surfing the Third Wave' is described as lacking the passion and sense of immediacy of the earlier program:

The great strength of, and a significant factor in, the passion and immediacy of

'Mother I Can See the Light' is that most of the narrators were participants. In contrast, the version in 'Surfing the Third Wave' is described through the eyes of younger feminists who were not actually there, and who are from academic settings. In creative and ideological terms, these factors construct a much 'flatter' remembrance. (177)

My concern with Henderson's description here is her tone of derision towards younger feminists and feminists from academic settings. While Henderson is quick to point out how 'third-wave' feminism—as represented by a single radio show—is 'marked by an air of superiority', 'defensiveness', 'compression and neat dichotomies', (179) she is just as fast to take on a similar tone in her articulation—and celebration—of second-wave feminism against a seemingly ungrateful third wave.

Henderson's sarcasm in the following comment, for example, is entirely marked by an air of superiority and defensiveness:

The young feminists repeat, with slight variations, the mantra of difference feminism: the emphasis is on diversity; feminists are now wary of speaking for someone else; the third wave is aware of a supposedly Marxist-derived 'ethnocentrism' of the earlier women's movement; they are coming to grips with the gaps in the women's movement (which I suspect refers to the silencing of the Other). (178)

These remarks read as cheap shots—at young feminists, at academic feminists—and they

don't further attempts to think about how Australian feminism might be marked or understood outside of periodising 'waves'.

Given Henderson's obvious investment in debates around feminism and alleged generational difference (I've never been convinced that thinking about debates within feminism as generational is particularly helpful) it seems odd that she doesn't discuss Jenna Mead's edited collection *Bodyjamming: Sexual Harassment, Feminism and Public Life*.¹ While Henderson might understandably not want to rehash the debates around the *The First Stone* controversy, Henderson's topic begs an exploration of how feminism and post-feminism are constructed along generational lines. Elspeth Probyn's article in an issue of *Australian Feminist Studies* themed around the historicising of academic feminism points out that:

debates about generational difference within feminism are undergirded by an extremely static sense of temporality and, moreover, given the political situation in which feminism must operate, they are evidence of bad timing . . . [G]eneration as a trope stalls movement and, I think, is a major element in stymieing attempts to come to grips with the present.²

It is this sense of stasis that Henderson's book produces in its description of how third-wave feminists remember the women's liberation movement. *Marking Feminist Times* is themed around the question of *how* feminism is remem-

bered in Australia, but it is also, in itself, a remembrance of feminism, and is marked by its own sense of stalled time.

Henderson's attempt to outline how the past of feminism is marked in various cultural forms is an important task, and her book raises the question of how to productively think about the past in the present. Morris's preface to *Too Soon Too Late: History in Popular Culture* illuminates the difference between a backwards looking memorialising and a reactivation of the past in order to act in the present. Morris identifies a mode of criticism present in Claire Johnston's writing, and which I would extend to describe Morris' own projects, one that sees:

memory . . . as a practice, not an inheritance, as a way of acting relative to place as well as time . . . [Johnston] saw the past as a 'dynamic' vital to any struggle, but she also assumed that this dynamic must have nothing to do with lost heritage, and everything to do with creating effective ways of action in the present.³

On this approach, one which I had hoped to find—but didn't—in *Marking Feminist Times*, history and memory bear on the present, not simply as its precursor, but as enabling practices for engaging in contemporary critical practices. *Marking Feminist Times* tackles an important and timely task of questioning how Australian feminism is remembered and forgotten. However, in addressing narratives of Australia feminism, and constructing her own

remembrance and narrative of Australian feminism, Henderson presents a version of feminist memory which requires expansion.

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1. Jenna Mead (ed.), *Bodyjamming: Sexual Harassment, Feminism and Public Life*, Random House, Sydney, 1997.
2. Elspeth Probyn, 'Re: Generation. Women's Studies and the Disciplining of *Ressentiment*', *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 13, no. 27, 1998, p. 135.
3. Meaghan Morris, *Too Soon Too Late: History in Popular Culture*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1998, p. xx.