

Rev. of Anne Brewster and Sue Kossew, *Rethinking the Victim: Gender and Violence in Contemporary Australian Women's Writing*, 2019, Routledge, ISBN: 978-1-138-09259-4.

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Anne Brewster and Sue Kossew's timely monograph on gender and violence in the works of contemporary Australian women writers invites reading in the context of the current global debate on the topic. Since the MeToo movement set the mainstream media aflame in the year 2017, energised by the social networking sites, the sexual harassment of women, among other forms of gendered violence, has become more and more visible in Australia and worldwide. It is definitely the right moment to deepen the awareness and understanding of the aggressions women face in private and public environments, a social evil that urgently needs to be prevented and stamped out. As Brewster and Kossew's book belongs in the academy rather than in the fickle world of media events, I would first like to assess their contribution in the light of Virginia Woolf's classic essay *A Room of One's Own*. There, Woolf famously contests the prevalence of masculine values and how it has made its way into literature: "This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in the drawing-room" (2130). *Rethinking the Victim* succeeds in challenging the perverse dichotomy and provides a solid and wide-ranging study of the feelings of women both in the midst of war and political violence and the privacy of the home. And, yes, it is, indeed, an important book.

Rethinking the Victim is ground-breaking on several accounts. As the authors note, it is the first monograph to tackle in a systematic way the topic of gender and violence in contemporary Australian fiction by women, as well as some poetry, covering not only mainstream texts—mostly by white Australians—but also the works of Indigenous and, as they put it, minoritised women writers (1). Besides, it constitutes a magnificent and comprehensive archive of texts that testifies to the enormous richness, depth and craft of female authors from Down Under. In line with intersectional feminism, Brewster and Kossew take into consideration other systems of oppression that inform gender, like "sexuality, race, ethnicity, disability, class, age, mental health, regional isolation and citizenship status" (2). Significantly, the common thread of the texts Brewster and Kossew analyse is the rejection of the classic victim paradigm in favour of an array of women's agencies, offering fresh and revealing insights into the thorny issue of victimhood. This makes the book a welcome addition to the fields of gender and postcolonial studies, where the rigid divide between victim and perpetrator sometimes precludes the possibility of acting for the traditionally passive victim. All these preliminary issues are delved into in the book's Introduction, structured around short sections that provide overviews of minoritised and Indigenous women's literatures, the ways women write about violence, and the connection between reading and violence. The Introduction also includes a statement of the authors' position as settler literary theorists, a note on terminology, and a section on Charlotte Wood's 2015 novel *The Natural Way of Things*, which the authors consider paradigmatic in representing women's relationship to violence, both as victims and as victimisers, in the context of Australia.

It is in the in-depth reading of the novels, life-history writing texts, short stories and poems that Brewster and Kossew are at their best. The analyses are grouped into four chapters, mainly thematically arranged, except for Chapter 1, which takes a literary generic stance on intimate partner and sexual violence against women. The works that illustrate this first chapter draw on the conventions of the gothic and the romance, double-edged tropes equally able to undermine or buttress traditional gender roles, deployed here to provide a fuller, less stereotypical image of women in the face of domestic and sexual violence. After two introductory sections—one on gender and genre and the other on the need to decolonise Australian feminist gothic, the authors analyse a series of texts, namely, three novels focusing on gendered violence in the white middle class—Evie Wyld’s *All the Birds, Singing*, Emily Maguire’s *An Isolated Incident* and Anna George’s *What Came Before*—alongside the short story “Pearl” by Indigenous writer Ellen van Neerven and two novels by diasporic women—*Handpicked*, by Siew Siang Tay and *Anguli Ma*, by Chi Vu. Some of the insights to be gained from the study of these texts are the cultural diversity of intimate partner and domestic violence, which affects women across the social and racial spectrum but presents specificities in the case of Indigenous, immigrant and refugee women; the role of literature in promoting cultural change and balancing the uneven exposure in public discourse, with this form of violence often “naturalised as ‘typical’ of Aboriginal communities” while it is “exceptionalised, hidden and relegated to the private sphere” in the case of white middle-class women (37); and the various roles women can take up when experiencing domestic violence, supported by the fact that the female protagonists are portrayed as “survivors and even as avengers” (75) in their respective stories.

In Chapter 2 Brewster and Kossew turn to Indigenous women’s activist poetry in order to explore racialised sexual violence against women and girls. Activist poetry, they argue, “enables women to deploy the political heft and the emancipatory potential of the category of the victim” (83), shaking off the stereotype of enforced passivity it often evokes. In the case of Indigenous women, their poetry proves that even if they are disproportionately subjected to violence, they have “many cultural, spiritual, political and aesthetic resources” (83) to confront it. The chapter touches briefly upon the poetic production of Yvette Holt, Anita Heiss, Jeanine Leane and Charmaine Papertalk-Green, and features full sections devoted to Lisa Belleair, Kerry Reed-Gilbert, Romaine Moreton, and Elizabeth Hodgson. The analyses highlight how Aboriginal women poets dissect the many ways racism impinges upon their lives and denounce the failure of state policies in curbing systemic violence against Indigenous females. They furnish historical silences around racialised violence with images and situations that intimate the terrible consequences of child removal and child abuse in the Stolen Generations. The role of female anger and protest is addressed as a counterweight to the prevailing public mood of reconciliation, often failing to accord due recognition, if not reparation, to native Australians. Importantly, although white feminism receives its share of critique for its complicity with the unfair treatment of Indigenous females, solidarity across women is not dismissed. By the end of the chapter, Indigenous women poets emerge as “the creators of art and knowledge and as agents within their own lives” (83).

The focus of Chapter 3, entitled “Broken Families, Vulnerable Children”, is family violence, largely having a male perpetrator and affecting women and children. The chapter is structured around three sections: the first on ‘neglectful’ mothers, the second on ‘bad’ fathers and the third an analysis of ‘dysfunctional’ Indigenous families. As the scare quotes show, Brewster and Kossew do not lose sight of the complex causes of

family violence and are keen on poking at the tropes usually associated with it. The texts analysed, some written from the child's perspective, include several novels —Anna George's *The Lone Child*, Anna Spargo-Ryan's *The Gulf*, Sofie Laguna's *The Eye of the Sheep* and *The Choke*, Sonya Hartnett's *Golden Boys*, Michelin Lee's *The Healing Party*— as well as two instances of life-history writing by Indigenous authors —Cobby Eckermann's *Too Afraid to Cry* and Marie Munkara's *Of Ashes and Rivers that Run to the Sea*. The analysis is preceded by some notes on Susan Varga's *Happy Families*, an account that lays bare the pitfalls of the traditional family for women and children at the same time that it opens up the possibility of change. This is also the spirit of the texts Brewster and Kossew explore in depth. The transgenerational transmission of trauma in child abuse and the long-lasting effects of colonialism and more recent state policies on Indigenous families loom large in some of them, providing a historical perspective and blurring the frontiers between family and nation, with “ongoing decolonising implications for the present-day” (21).

Chapter 4 moves the spotlight to Australian women's literature that deals with violence against women amidst war and political conflict, encompassing psychological abuse and degradation besides injury, disability and death. In particular, the authors examine the works of three diasporic writers and an Anglo-Celtic Australian —Merlinda Bobis's *Fish-Hair Woman*, Michelle de Kretser's *Questions of Travel*, Paula Abood's “Stories from the Diaspora” and Josephine Rowe's *A Loving Faithful Animal*— focusing on the Philippines Total War, the Sri Lankan Civil War, the first Gulf War and the Vietnam War, respectively. Brewster and Kossew's transnational approach to the topic aims at expanding the canons of Australian literature, one of the prime purposes of *Rethinking the Victim*. The texts reveal how literature by women is helping shape the commemoration of war in Australia away from glorification, by highlighting the suffering political conflict brings along and positing grief as a “collaborative cross-cultural project” (180). In line with works analysed in previous chapters, the female characters and texts transcend the classic figure of the victim in creative ways. Some women, notwithstanding their vulnerability, are able to respond with violent action to protect themselves and their communities. Others highlight agency through humour and satire in order to expose male and white supremacy and make gruesome and unpleasant material more palatable. Yet some others are portrayed as able to come to terms with their traumas and show empathy for their victimisers.

All texts underline the multidirectional and inclusive nature of the memories of war and political violence in a way reminiscent of Michael Rothberg's thesis on the connections between colonialism and the Holocaust. With a view to fostering understanding between cultures, Rothberg advocates for an ethics of multidirectional memory, in which the commemoration of an atrocity contributes to the remembrance of others in a synergic way. This is precisely, I would argue, the result of Brewster and Kossew's gendered perspective on violence in Australia, which, extrapolating from Rothberg, is also committed to “uncovering historical relatedness and working through the partial overlaps and conflicting claims that constitute the archives of memory and the terrain of politics” (Rothberg 29). Already in the Introduction, the authors advance the “multiple connectivities, convergences and divergencies” they will uncover in their corpus of study, as the following quotation shows:

The mainstream recognition of minoritised people's trauma issuing from war and genocide ... occasions a belated and unconscious remembering of the

trauma of Australia's colonial history of violence, which, for many Australians, remains denied or disavowed Within the transnation, settler history is thus brought into proximity and resonates with other violent political histories. (10)

Brewster and Kossew's thorough scrutiny of gender and violence in female-authored texts can be considered part of the emerging fourth wave of feminism, which, according to Catherine Riley and Lynne Pearce, stems from the realisation that "women, the world over, continue to be denigrated, despite the human rights and equality legislation now there to protect them" (10). However, as Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay note, the fact that women are especially vulnerable does not render them powerless (2). Quite the contrary. For them, vulnerability is a precondition of resistance and political agency (1). In "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," Butler insists on the need to dissociate women's particular identification with injurability from their alleged passivity. "The very meaning of vulnerability changes", she writes, "when it becomes understood as part of the very practice of political resistance" (24). In her view, "vulnerability can be a way of being exposed and agentic at the same time" (24). The authors of *Rethinking the Victim* acknowledge the ideas of Butler et al. in their monograph, which, borrowing from them, provides an examination of literary "modes of vulnerability that inform modes of resistance" (Butler et al., 6). The women Brewster and Kossew analyse across genres and across social and ethnic categories, are both "acted on and acting", as Butler puts it speaking of performativity ("Rethinking Vulnerability" 24). In their writings, they open up the possibility of agency at the same time that they embrace their injurability, showing that women victims can be "resilient, resourceful, and, above all, [... the] authors of their own stories" (Brewster and Kossew, 231).

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