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# REVIEWS

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Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. 526p.

SUSAN HENDRICKS SWETNAM  
IDAHO STATE UNIVERSITY

In *Women, Autobiography, and Theory: A Reader*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson offer a rich overview and sampler of the tremendous amount of work in the theory of women's autobiography which has appeared in the past few decades. Characterizing their volume as a "map," or "guide" to "the complex interplay of multiple theoretical critiques" which "have motivated a discussion of women's autobiography" (4) recently, Smith and Watson have selected essays by 39 writers on the subject; they also offer a substantive introduction, and they provide extensive bibliographies of primary sources and of theoretical/critical work. Rather than presenting one set of assumptions about what theory or women's autobiography means, the voices represented in this volume thus challenge and critique each other, presenting a multitude of perspectives to represent the "contested" (37), evolving dialogue in the field. The result is a lively volume which will interest serious students, as well as experienced critics in autobiography, feminist and cultural studies, and genre studies.

Smith and Watson's forty-page introduction provides an extremely helpful overview of the study of women's autobiography. A blurb on the book is justified in calling it "a course in itself," indeed, for it offers readers a clear sense of debates in the field as well as providing an overview of several decades of approaches to literature in general. Tracing the development of theory from early feminist critics to very recent work, the editors first suggest the wide variety of approaches that have been brought to bear on women's autobiography. They summarize key contributions, and, while they critique gender essentialist arguments, they convey respect for all of the writers whose work they describe. The editors then discuss theories of subjectivity relevant to women's autobiography. This section, which relates work in the field to more general work in literary theory, would be especially useful in the classroom; readers will find brief but helpful and clear discussions of Foucault, Lacan, postcolonialism, theories of difference, queer studies, and other perspectives. The introduction also suggests a dozen directions for future work in women's autobiography theory, including the exploration of auto-

biographical ethics and the relationship between national identity formation and autobiography.

As suggested above, the forty selections (two are by Smith) anthologized in this volume cover a wide range of ground, and summarizing them in any detail is obviously beyond the scope of this review. Foundational work in the field is represented in classical essays like Domna C. Stanton's "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" (1984) and Mary G. Mason's "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers" (1980); very recent work also appears, like Helen M. Buss' "A Feminist Revision of New Historicism to Give Fuller Readings of Women's Private Writing" (1996). Writers discuss a range of autobiographical modes, including diaries (the volume reprints the introduction to Margot Culley's *A Day at a Time: Diary Literature of American Women, from 1764 to 1985*), confession narratives (Rita Felski's "On Confession"), and trauma stories (Janice Haaken's "The Recovery of Memory, Fantasy, and Desire in Women's Trauma Stories: Feminist Approaches to Sexual Abuse and Psychotherapy"). They explore autobiographical practice by a range of ethnic and racial groups (including Black, Latina, Asian, and Native American), nationalities (including Third World prisoners and British), classes, and historical periods. A number of the selections concern complex, abstract issues of subjectivity, identity, and authority (including Shari Benstock's "Authorizing the Autobiographical," and Smith's "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance"). Others explore issues of body and sexuality in women's autobiography, like Watson's "Unspeaking Differences: The Politics of Gender in Lesbian and Heterosexual Women's Autobiographies," or issues involved in teaching autobiography, like Nancy Miller's "Teaching Autobiography."

Given this sort of breadth, it is fair to predict that every reader concerned with women's autobiography will find at least some essays that speak to particular interests. Given my own focus on the ways that narrowly-defined subcultures inform choice and structure in autobiography, for instance, I turned immediately to the essays which discuss autobiographical performance in specific contexts. Two which I found especially interesting were Hertha D. Sweet Wong's "First-Person Plural: Subjectivity and Community in Native American Women's Autobiography," and Regenia Gagnier's "The Literary Standard, Working-Class Autobiography, and Gender." Wong uses two recent collections of Native women's life stories (one containing three accounts by Athapaskan/ Tlingit women elders living in a stable, traditional community; the other containing accounts by Native people, mostly academics, who have suffered displacement of some sort) to qualify the easy stereotype of "relational subjectivity" in Native and women's consciousness. The particular way that sense of community manifests itself in individual

Native women's autobiographies varies, Wong demonstrates, depending on each writer's experience; scholars "must resist positing a generalized female or Native relationality or a monolithic community," she concludes (177). Gagnier describes varying autobiographical practices among English Victorian working-class women and men, demonstrating how individual autobiographies deconstruct when writers try to superimpose middle-class autobiographical patterns on working-class lives. Both essays raise interesting theoretical issues as well as suggesting primary texts with which few readers will probably be familiar, offering, as so many essays in this book do, direction for further reading and thinking.

*Women, Autobiography, and Theory* would make a marvelous reader for use in a classroom of advanced undergraduates or graduate students. It also promises to provide stimulating reading for scholars. While some of the essays are a bit jargon-filled for this reviewer's taste, they do represent trends in recent theory, and their inclusion in a collection whose aim is to suggest variety of practice is appropriate. At any rate, they are balanced with many selections in a more immediately accessible style. For its breadth, for its suggestion of reading strategies, and simply for the number of primary and secondary works listed in its bibliographies, this volume certainly belongs on the shelves of anyone working in autobiography, recent literary theory, and women's/feminist studies. ✨