Ordering the Facade: Photography and Contemporary Southern Women's Writing

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figures in the story “to [expose] the way gender and race are mutually constitutive” (p. 187). Asserting that Parker was influenced by the satirist Jonathan Swift, Ellen Pollak gives a compelling analysis of Parker’s book reviews to make her case (“Premium Swift: Dorothy Parker’s Iron Mask of Femininity”). Pollak makes a striking claim given that Parker left school at fourteen, and there is no hard evidence she ever read Swift. The essay includes many hilarious quotations from Parker, who is merciless in demolishing a book on happiness by a Yale professor of English, who happens to have been a frequent lecturer for women’s clubs and a respected public voice at the time. In the section on teaching Parker, I especially recommend Sophia Mihic’s “Mrs. Parker and the History of Political Thought.” To counter the problem that students are prone to navigate and manipulate philosophical texts without ever really becoming engaged, Mihic uses Parker’s story “Big Blonde” to “read Rousseau with Parker’s aid” (p. 297). With the aim of reinvigorating the study of Rousseau while at the same time gaining greater insight into Parker’s story, she explores the concept of feminist artifice in both writers’ work.

We are fortunate that Pettit has chosen to include some of Parker’s letters and the Paris Review interview because they treat us to Parker’s own witty prose. However, these selections are just the frosting on a very substantial cake. Pettit’s collection will be useful for many years to come.

Charlotte Templin
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Any fiction that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by Northern readers—unless it is really grotesque. Then—it is going to be called photographic realism.

Flannery O’Connor

Flannery O’Connor’s wry observation nicely encapsulates the complex relations of the visual and textual at the center of Katherine Henninger’s outstanding contribution to postmodern southern studies (p. 136). Prefacing her textual analysis with theoretical and historical discussions of photography, Henninger lays out the changing purposes and powers of the South’s “visual legacy,” arguing that “southern culture must be understood as a field of competing representations, an ongoing and, in the broadest sense of the word, political contest to define who and what may represent
in the South” (p. 8). Contemporary southern women writers actively engage in this contest through textual representations of photographs and photographers responding to the South’s “vast, inordinately complex, and often contradictory representational legacy” (p. 9).

Although the stated subject of Ordering the Facade is contemporary southern women’s writing, the book’s most significant contribution may lie in its prefatory materials on visual texts. The introduction, “Visual Legacies of the South,” provides a succinct, brilliant overview of the role of photography in the work of culture-making. Henninger moves confidently through several theoretical approaches from nation-building to the ethics of representation and from formal questions of visual and verbal, literal and figurative to a general history of imaging southerness in American popular culture. Throughout, the text exhibits a sophisticated, self-aware critical stance, moving deftly between abstract theory and concrete politics of place and body, building multidimensional readings of literary and social history, text and image.

The first chapter, “A Short and Selected History of Photography in the South,” lays more important groundwork. Here Henninger traces the photograph’s role in shaping a national imagery of the South, analyzing photographs of slaves and Civil War scenes, the use of photographs in Civil Rights battles, and the significance of photo-essays (best known of these is Agee’s Let Us Now Praise Famous Men) produced for a national audience. The chapter is followed by a remarkable, powerful collection of photographic images.

My opening sentence identified Ordering the Facade as a contribution to postmodern southern studies in particular, acknowledging Henninger’s revisionary position. She works from the now-recognized viewpoint that the “real” South always was “simulacra”—“a place made rather than sprung, visualized rather than seen” (p. 180, 22-23). Photography lay at the center of that making, she establishes; whether the images were of African American slaves, white “trash,” or gentrified white women, they were consciously created and reproduced. Ostensibly more real and true than language, these photographs served and continue to serve as “visual proof” of a fictional South. One of the canonical assumptions Henninger holds to new light is that of the South as an oral culture. Southern identity, she argues, is more determined by visual than oral forms: “In a culture where visual signs—the shape of a lip, a skin’s shade, external sex characteristics, the carriage of one’s body, the condition of one’s clothing—determine ‘place’ (and may literally mean the difference between life and death), surely the visual may be said to reign supreme” (p. 16). Henninger unflinchingly confronts the key question roiling beneath the surface of contemporary southern studies: “[I]f the ‘master narrative’ of the South is exploded to include its historically silenced others, what specifi-
cally Southern remains?” (p. 156).

One thing that remains is the debate about power and control, the legacy of the “master narrative,” and its representations. In the four chapters that follow, Henninger explores texts by six contemporary southern women writers: Josephine Humphreys, Rosemary Daniell, Jill McCorkle, Julie Dash, Alice Walker, and Dorothy Allison, showing how each woman creates fictional photographs or photographers in her work as a way to “answer specific legacies of objectification” (p. 23). By “picturing the picturing,” these women writers are “critiquing and revising the cultural visions that would still and silence them” (p. 24). Henninger’s textual readings employ the same rich array of theoretical and contextual approaches as her prefatory chapters, making *Ordering the Facade* from start to finish a notably strong and stimulating contribution to literary and cultural studies of the American South.

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Ketu Katrak articulates an innovative feminist agenda in *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World* by comparing the works of different authors from regions that were colonies of Britain. What seems at first glance like a review of feminist literatures of resistance is actually a dazzlingly new assessment of women’s texts—both written and oral—to query “resistance to what end?” (p. 2). She examines the portrayal of female subjects through tropes of “exile, including self-exile and self-censorship, outsideness, and un-belonging to itself within indigenous patriarchy . . . strengthened by British racialized colonial practices in the regions of India, Africa, and the Caribbean” (p. 2). To generate such a theory, Katrak deploys critical measures that gesture toward transnational imaginaries. Thus, the book extends a line of intellectual inquiry taken up by feminists to position resistance to patriarchy with and against historicized colonialism and postcolonialism, but it also makes important contributions by threading together key cultural practices (like dowry and bride-price, for example) to explain how the embodied subject functions according to complementary, contradictory, and competing traditions in each respective society.

Using different sociocultural registers to read female bodies imbricated in various postcolonial predicaments is a venture that has been undertaken by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian...*