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Review of *Feminine Agency and Transgression in Post-Franco Spain: Generational Becoming in the Narratives of Carme Riera, Cristina Fernández Cubas and Mercedes Abad* by Maria DiFrancesco

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Maria DiFrancesco. *Feminine Agency and Transgression in Post-Franco Spain: Generational Becoming in the Narratives of Carme Riera, Cristina Fernández Cubas and Mercedes Abad*. Newark: Juan de la Cuesta-Hispanic Monographs, 2008. 217 pp.

Maria DiFrancesco successfully argues in this book that contemporary Spanish authors Carme Riera, Cristina Fernández Cubas, and Mercedes Abad inscribe powerful female figures that transgress and renegotiate conventional roles to thus challenge dominant representations of women in Western culture. Progressing from the first to the last to launch her literary career, DiFrancesco employs psychoanalytic theory, interprets Christian and Greco-Roman mythology, and considers Mikhail Bakhtin's *carnivalesque* to illuminate her discussions of female agency in the following texts: Riera's "Te dejo, amor, en prenda el mar" (1975), "Y pongo por testigo a las gaviotas" (1977), *Una primavera para Domenico Guarini* (1981), and *Tiempo de espera* (1998); Fernández Cubas's "Mi hermana Elba" and "Los altillos de Brumal" from a collection that combines these titles (1988), "Mundo" and "Ausencia" from *Con Agatha en Estambul* (1994), the novel *El columpio* (1995), and the narrative-drama *Hermanas de sangre* (1998); and lastly, Abad's *Ligeros libertinajes sabáticos* (1986) and *Sangre* (2000). DiFrancesco argues that these authors redefine mother, daughter, and sister in ways that "disrupt mythologized constructions of femininity" (15-16) and highlight women's creative agency and freedom to speak in post-Franco Spain.

One might consider Christian and mythic symbology tangential in some of these stories, yet the book's development of these references is one of its strengths. In her analysis of Riera's "Te dejo, amor, en prenda el mar" for example, DiFrancesco contends that the attribution of the epigraph to an unwritten Sapphic text signals not only transgression from the dominant heterosexual model, but also the absence of mother-daughter and lesbian relationships in Western texts. On occasion, DiFrancesco's readings of Catholic typology push associative limits; for instance, she suggests that in "Y yo pongo por testigo a las gaviotas" the roses that replace Marina's drowned pregnant body—itsself a denial of motherhood—connect her to the Virgin Mary, a primordial mother made absent in the Holy Trinity. Most often, however, attention to myth enhances the argument that these authors reshape Western cultural texts. In one such case, DiFrancesco argues that the female protagonist of *Una primavera para Domenico Guarini* critiques sexual assault and substitutes female masturbation for conjugal and motherly love in feminist retellings of Greek legends Chloris, Flora, Zephyrus, and Venus. She also contends that a connection Riera makes in *Tiempo de espera* between Lacan's theory on erotic pleasure during pregnancy

and the mythological Hera's blinding of Tiresias disempowers a male gaze that objectifies women, especially during sexual fantasy. These reinterpretations of myth exemplify the central argument of DiFrancesco's book: Riera, Fernández Cubas, and Abad make present female experiences largely absent from literary history and urge women to resist self-censorship, recuperate lost female genealogies, and incorporate maternity into feminist perspectives.

DiFrancesco's use of psychoanalysis to consider female agency is particularly effective when she attends to feminist revisions of this male-centered theory. Her reading of *El columpio* cogently reveals a mother's assertion of self within the confines of male dominance and her unconventional, somewhat violent encouragement that her daughter distance herself from a patriarchal family. Similarly, a focus on the female gaze in *Hermanas de sangre* successfully suggests that one woman's sacrifice leads other women to transgress traditional scripts. Though DiFrancesco's use of psychoanalytic theory to read protective spaces in Fernández Cubas's narratives proves a valuable means to understand searches for autonomy that break from traditional gender and family roles, the analyses would be more effective if they recognized the conflict that emerges when Freudian perspectives, which are patriarchal, inform feminine agency. One example of this tension is when Elba's sister in "Mi hermana Elba" easily turns her attention to a boy after Elba dies when transgressing the domestic space. In another instance, DiFrancesco asserts that Adriana of "Los altillos de Brumal" performs a subversive act when she renounces her familial ties and ultimately embraces an identity linked to cooking and other feminine activities. In her analyses of Fernández Cubas's stories, DiFrancesco effectively explains that play addresses parental absence and that when play ends, fragmentation remains; however, she disregards that these transgressive characters ultimately conform to conventional gender roles. Further, when DiFrancesco argues that play constructs an identity "beyond any gendered category" (160), she does not engage the broader question of whether identity may be construed outside gender.

In the final chapter, DiFrancesco successfully brings together feminist psychoanalysis, biblical references, and Bakhtin's theories on the *carnavalesque* to read three stories from Abad's *Ligeros libertinajes sabáticos* and the novel *Sangre*. DiFrancesco's particularly astute reading of "Pascualino y los globos" revises both Freud's Oedipal complex and Bakhtin's patriarchal-based theories. The corpulent female character's vaginal lips consume the male protagonist, enabling him to create a new self on terms that subvert a Freudian-inspired separation from the mother's body. In her study of biblical roots in Abad's "Malos tiempos para el absurdo o Las delicias de Onán," DiFrancesco's use of Bakhtin's *carnavalesque* informs male and female performances that defy sexual and narrative expectations. Referencing Bakhtin's banquet and Ionesco's *La cantatrice chauve*, DiFrancesco productively argues that banal narration of sexual ta-

boo subverts pornography's subjugation of women and adverts pornography's violent potential. Analysis of *Sangre*, the last in DiFrancesco's book, effectively brings together her thematic arguments. Though a daughter cannot overcome her mother's rejection and thus her own abjection, bodily communion affected through consumption of her mother's blood ultimately frees Spain from Franco's patriarchal authority and changes the course of Spanish history.

As cross-generational coupling in *Sangre* liberates the Spanish state, so, too, do Riera, Fernández Cubas, and Abad empower women to create their own stories. In these rich close readings, one might wish that DiFrancesco had situated her analyses more thoroughly within existing criticism on these authors or that the numerous typographical errors in the book had been corrected; however, these issues do not subtract from the substantive critical reflection on three formidable female writers in democratic Spain and their creation of female voices that challenge patriarchal conceptions of the self and social roles.

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Jennifer Wawrzinek. *Ambiguous Subjects: Dissolution and Metamorphosis in the Postmodern Sublime*. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2008.156 pp.

In this analysis, Jennifer Wawrzinek examines the problematics of the sublime as well as its corollary, the grotesque. She explores its historical evolution and defines it within the Western tradition of the hierarchical sublime. After looking at the sublime from a woman's perspective throughout the book, the author chooses three examples from novels by Nicole Brossard and Morgan Yasincek and finally the performance of the Women's Circus, Melbourne, Australia. Three sub-themes foreground the critical discussion throughout: nuclear conflicts, immigration debates and women's experience of sexual assault. The feminine form of ethics presented counters traditional views of the sublime, relying instead on feminine writing and the female body. It favors also the concept of translation, the recognition of difference in communication between self and world. In conclusion, the author argues that, beyond a single sublime, there exist valuable multiple transcendences that extol ambiguous consciousness, mutation, fluidity and the projection of openness.

The introductory chapter, "Sublime Politics," focuses on the rhetoric of modern debates about the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and immigration. Wawrzinek sees the masculine sublime as a vertical/binary structure that tends to promote aggressivity and war or other historical human behaviors such as domination,