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## Book Review: Gone Feral: Unruly Women and the Undoing of Normative Femininity

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## Book Review: *Gone Feral: Unruly Women and the Undoing of Normative Femininity*<sup>1</sup>

Reviewed by Ali Saha<sup>2</sup>

A call to the feral is a dare to embrace our authentic selves in the face of intense scrutiny and a recognition that if we were not such a threat, there would not be such a need to confine us. (O'Reilly & O'Reilly-Conlin, 2025, p. 18)

*Gone Feral: Unruly Women and the Undoing of Normative Femininity* is a bold and multi-vocal edited collection that challenges entrenched patriarchal and heteronormative constructions of femininity by exploring what it means to “go feral.” Anchored in feminist theory, critical cultural studies, and intersectional analysis, the collection provides a transnational and interdisciplinary examination of how women who defy, evade, or are expelled from normative scripts of femininity come to embody ferality. While feminist literature has often portrayed women’s agency in reclaiming their spaces and identities, this book provides a powerful way to conceptualise these agencies as feralities. In addition, it brings attention to rarely discussed aspects of motherhood by addressing the maternal through a feral lens. The collection is organized into two sections with contributions from scholars, artists, poets, and activists across several continents, including Australia, Canada, China, Ireland, Norway, Scotland, and the United States. The first section, “Enactments,” explores how unruly women undo normative femininity and how it is lived and enacted. The second, “Representations,” examines how these enactments and lived experiences are represented through art, media, poetry, and literature. The paths chosen by those who are feral are often nonconventional, nonlinear, and resistant to traditional categorizations and binary thinking. Drawing upon historical examples, literary analysis, and contemporary case studies, the collection argues that feral femininity is not a rejection of womanhood but a reclamation of autonomy outside oppressive structures.

In the introduction, editors Andrea O'Reilly and Casey O'Reilly-Conlin frame ferality as both a metaphorical and material undoing of domestication and social containment. Drawing on the work of theorists such as Clarissa Pinkola Estés, Susan Fraiman, Kelly Struthers Montford, and Chloë Taylor, the editors argue that the feral woman is not merely a figure of resistance but a liminal subject who occupies and reconfigures the borders between civilization and nature, submission and sovereignty:

On the one hand, we can celebrate the freedom of ferals from human [or male] domination and control, but on the other hand, we should recognize that ferals are often abandoned, desperate, and highly vulnerable...[and] suffer from the stigma of being seen by the dominant population as illegitimate, alien, contaminants, trespassers, or invaders. (p. 5)

To be feral, then, is to be acutely vulnerable and extraordinarily brave.

The first section, “Enactments,” dives into lived experience, portraying ferality as not just an imagined concept but embodied through women’s choices, rebellions, and refusals to be tamed. The section opens with “Taken by the Others” by Martina Cleary, who reinterprets

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<sup>1</sup> O'Reilly, A., & O'Reilly-Conlin, C. J. (Eds.). (2025). *Gone feral: Unruly women and the undoing of normative femininity*. Demeter Press.

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the historical murder of Bridget Cleary in Ireland through the lens of ferality, myth, and postcolonial critique. Cleary deftly weaves folklore, feminist theory, and Jungian psychology to demonstrate that fears of feminine transgression can produce deadly consequences. She argues that this action taken against ferality was a result of “sociopolitical and religious repression” (p. 35) where tactics were used to systematically create alternative perspectives. Emily Wolfinger follows with a socio-historical analysis of single mothers in Australia in “From Harlots to Irresponsible Economic Citizens,” mapping how discourses have shifted while retaining a moral panic around feminine deviance. Wolfinger positions the single mother as a type of feral mother who exists outside the bounds of normative femininity, threatening patriarchal and neoliberal ideals of self-reliance and domesticated motherhood. Adding to this, “Gone Spielreinian” by Jessica Spring Weappa mentions “suprahumanities,” a concept that bridges biology, psychology, and feminist philosophy to better understand the symbolic and creative force of motherhood. Her analysis characterizes “the maternal not as a static role but as a transformative force” (p. 77). She introduces the reader to Sabina Spielrein’s overlooked psychoanalytic contributions and argues that her work is foundational to the idea of maternal ferality.

The section continues with Hillary Di Menna’s allegorical short story “Three Little Witches,” Joy Domingo’s emotionally charged poetry on incest and postpartum trauma, and Caroline Carey’s introspective essay “Feral Itch,” which chronicles her lifelong estrangement from normative gender roles. Teela Tomassetti’s “Mothers Born Feral” interrogates the cultural silence surrounding birth trauma and the radical potential of social media as a space of collective healing and resistance. The final chapter in the first section is Batya Weinbaum’s “The Mess House,” which blends memoir, theory, and photography to explore domestic disobedience and the radical ethos of rejecting patriarchal cleanliness. These narratives continue to reflect on the normative prescriptions of femininity and motherhood that justify surveillance, control, and punitive policies, while demonstrating how feralties work against those norms. Together, these works are dialogic, each offering a distinct lens on feral resistance yet collectively mapping a spectrum of unruly embodiments that challenge, subvert, and reimagine the boundaries imposed on women’s lives.

The second section, “Representations,” explores the imagining, performance, and visualization of ferality in art, literature, and popular culture. Alexandra Carter’s “The Mother Shell” and Catherine Moeller’s “Strike a Pose” present works of visual art that reclaim maternal bodies and feminine rage. A striking idea presented here is Carter’s reference to the “monstrous feminine,” which she defines as “the resilience and power of the maternal body” (p. 159). In “From Bold, Going Feral: Xiao Lu’s Feminist Art and Ferality,” Li Yang analyses the radical art of Chinese artist Xiao Lu. Victoria Smits contributes poetry in the following chapter that celebrates feminine desire and political resistance. Editor Casey O’Reilly-Conlin’s “Unfaithful Domestic” examines the horror film *Strays* (1991) to trace the cultural entwinement of women and cats as symbols of uncontrollability and threat.

In “Releasing the (m)Other within,” Else Werring offers a compelling comparative reading of Jeanette Winterson’s semi-autobiographical works as narratives of matricentric ferality. Laura Bissell’s “From Pig to Dog” engages with two novels, *Pig Tales* (1996) and *Nightbitch* (2021), to theorize feral transformations as emancipatory acts of becoming-animal. Bissell powerfully encapsulates her argument with the statement, “The metamorphosis is not a loss of humanity, but a reclamation of it” (p. 253). Finally, editor Andrea O’Reilly analyses *Mothers Don’t* by Katixa Agirre and *An Unusual Grief* by Yewande Omotoso to interpret maternal ambivalence and child loss as sites of feral defiance against normative motherhood. Overall, the chapters in this section reflect how representations are crucial to embody the practices of the feral and normalise narratives of feminine agency and ferality through different art forms such as sculpture, painting, and poetry. Together, these chapters reveal how the

representational sphere becomes a vital territory for ferality—a space where art, literature, and film not only imagine unruly feminine agency but materialize it, making the wild both visible and culturally legible.

The methodologies employed across the collection are as diverse as its contributors, reflecting the book's interdisciplinary ethos. While many chapters engage in close textual, visual, or narrative analysis (e.g., Werring, Yang, and O'Reilly-Conlin), others adopt historiographical, ethnographic, or autoethnographic approaches (e.g., Cleary, Tomassetti, and Carey). Cleary's opening chapter, for instance, employs archival research, cultural memory studies, and myth analysis to reconstruct the symbolic matrix surrounding Bridget Cleary's murder. Wolfinger adopts discourse analysis of policy, media, and political rhetoric to track the shifting social status of single mothers. Artistic and poetic contributions rely on experiential knowledge and embodied storytelling. While not always methodological in the conventional academic sense, these works nonetheless serve as rigorous forms of feminist inquiry. The inclusion of creative works underscores the editors' commitment to showcasing multiple perspectives and ways of understanding ferality.

Several factors make this book an interesting and important read. To start with, some chapters (such as Weappa's "Gone Spielreilian" and Werring's "Releasing the (m)Other within") are deeply theoretical and dense, while others (like Di Menna's "Three Little Witches" and Carey's "Feral Itch") are affective and lyrical. This diversity is intellectually and emotionally rewarding, inviting readers to approach knowledge from rational, experiential, embodied, and artistic angles. The most striking strength of *Gone Feral* lies in its daring eclecticism. By invoking ferality not merely as an identity but as a condition of social unruliness, the volume opens space for examining the lived realities and representational politics of women who do not or cannot conform. The chapters are consistently rich in detail and theory, and the range of global contributors ensures a multi-vocality that resists easy generalizations. The most admirable aspect of the text is its refusal to sanitize or romanticize ferality. The contributors continuously reiterate that ferality often results in vulnerability, stigmatization, and exile, not just liberation. However, despite the seamlessness between the various chapters and their contents, the lack of cross-referencing between chapters or a concluding synthesis may leave readers desiring stronger thematic threads. Given the book's commitment to intersectionality, there is a surprising absence of more direct engagement with queer, trans, and Indigenous feralities.

*Gone Feral* can be situated within a growing body of feminist literature that interrogates normative femininity and maternal regulation. It expands on the themes developed in Andrea O'Reilly's earlier work on feminist mothering (*Maternal Theory*, 2007; *Matricentric Feminism*, 2016) by addressing motherhood in the context of ferality. Compared to Fraiman's *Extreme Domesticity* (2017), which similarly examines the radical politics of homemaking and disorder, *Gone Feral* focuses less on the domestic and more on the symbolic boundaries of femininity. It also complements Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) in its refusal to valorize success, containment, or coherence. Where Halberstam draws from queer theory and anti-sociality, *Gone Feral* is more attuned to feminist embodiment. Its engagement with the monstrous feminine resonates with Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993) but pushes further into embodied, historical, and artistic terrains. In its transdisciplinary structure, *Gone Feral* also echoes *Feral Feminisms*, the open-access journal from which the editors and writers seem to draw some conceptual grounding.

This book is for those interested in feminist theory, gender studies, motherhood studies, and cultural criticism. Its dense style requires sustained intellectual engagement which may be demanding for readers uncomfortable or unfamiliar with ferality. Overall, *Gone Feral* is a provocative, polyphonic, and timely contribution to feminist ferality. Its refusal to define the

feral too narrowly allows it to function as both a critique and a generative framework for reimagining women's lives beyond obedience and order.

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