[*The Pomegranate* 14.2 (2012) 325-328]
doi: 10.1558/pome.v14i2.330
ISSN 1528-0268 (print)
ISSN 1743-1735 (online)

Kristy S. Coleman, *Re-Riting Woman: Dianic Wicca and the Feminine Divine* (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2010), 257 pp., $35.00 (paperback).

> *But if the female imaginary were to deploy itself, if it could bring itself into play otherwise than as scraps, uncollected debris, would it represent itself, even so, in the form of one universe? (Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One* [trans. Catherine Porter; New York: Cornell University Press, 1985], p. 30.)

Re-Riting Woman: Dianic Wicca and the Feminine Divine is a snapshot of Kristy Coleman's dissertation work and an excellent resource on feminist Witchcraft. From 1998 to 2002, Coleman studied Dianic feminist Witches in the Los Angeles area. Specifically, she focused on Circle of Aradia (CoA), the organization founded by Zsuzsanna Budapest, succeeded in leadership by Ruth Barrett. (Ruth Barrett resigned as high priestess during Coleman's research, adding to the complexity of information Coleman would receive.) Coleman conducted open-ended interviews with women members of the organization and its priestess-leaders. She participated as a "ritual facilitator," an initiate in the initiation rite, and as a "facilitator for initiates," as well as attending "community forums and various meetings" (5). In this 257-page ethnography, Coleman records the stories and rituals of CoA Witches and compares their spiritual-political beliefs with the theories of Luce Irigaray. She also comments on conflict within the community and the conversations that surround it.

Coleman's thesis is that CoA Dianic Witches bring to life the theories of Luce Irigaray. Specifically she focuses on Irigaray's "Divine Women" in *Sexes and Genealogies*, "that women must imagine the Divine in their own form to obtain emancipation" (123). Coleman finds the CoA practice very similar to Irigaray's recommendations, as "the Dianics create an alternative symbolic structure in their rituals that affects a shift in the interpretive lens of reality and in particular re(w)rites the valuation and meaning of *woman*" (2). Luce Irigaray, in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, argues that women need to separate themselves and form a women's culture in order to revalue *le féminin* and attain freedom. "Dianics," Coleman reports, "teach that until the patriarchy has ended, in order for women to be secure and therefore free to imagine, practice, speak, and dance a different

reality, they need a space of their own, a place for freely envisioning *their* highest ideal" (44). Coleman finds a parallel in the need for women-only space and female imagery of the Divine, expressed by both Luce Irigaray and Dianic Witches. While Coleman notes that Jone Salomonsen and Kathryn Rountree have also called upon theories of Luce Irigaray in interpreting feminist Wicca (228, note 3), she is uncertain if Dianic Witches are informed directly by Luce Irigaray or simultaneously inspired.

Of many scholarly publications, *Re-Riting Woman* finds a related precedent in Jone Salomonsen's *Enchanted Feminism* (Routledge, 2002), as they are both ethnographic studies of feminist Witches in California. Together, these texts recount stories of feminist Wiccan women of the American West Coast and the origins and development of two feminist Witchcraft communities. Both works provide fertile thick description of feminist Witchcraft in California in writing accessible to those new to Goddess and Pagan Studies. As such, both books are helpful for teaching about contemporary feminist Witchcraft in introductory college courses. While Salomonsen focused on the Reclaiming movement, Coleman's work adds a companion focus on the *Dianic Circle of Aradia* Witches. Unlike Salomonsen's explicit thealogical focus, Coleman emphasizes the connection with Luce Irigaray while engaging with other critical theorists such as Freud and Bourdieu, and represents a more recent study.

This ethnographic study of a Goddess-worshipping women's community in Southern California has come at an interesting time. Pagan practitioners and queer theorists are radically challenging notions of male and female. A substantial number of Pagans identify as transgender or genderqueer, a word that denotes neither male nor female or *both* male and female. Inclusion or exclusion of trans people has been a subject of controversy since the 1991 Michigan Womyn's Festival, recently coming to head over the exclusion of transwomen at a Dianic skyclad (clothes-optional) ritual at Pantheacon 2011 (San Jose, California).

Modern ethnography strives to describe human research subjects, drawing on their own terms, For her part, Coleman stays true to her discipline and writes responsibly as an ethnographer of a women's spiritual community rigorously identified with second wave feminism. To use Coleman's words, "As an ethnographic study, this book provides an account of the experiences of the women who participated in the organization" (3). Coleman occasionally addresses transsexuals as the topic comes up (46), but because concerns over

adapting for or including transwomen were not high priorities during her Circle of Aradia observation (1998–2002), the subject is not overemphasized in her ethnography. Using an example of Coleman's thick description, she quotes one of her informants (to us known as Taylor) on gendered forms of power:

> I could only see male forms of power; I couldn't see female forms of power as being valuable. The reason is because all of the female models in my family were victims. So it was obvious to me…it was better to be an abuser than an abusee… I kind of skewed myself so heavily to male energy because it seemed like the only way to be and be successful. (70)

Taylor continues, relaying how she feels after discovering Goddess and "female energy," "Not only do I think that our culture needs more female energy, but *I* need more female energy and it feels happy to me to be around it. That's why I'm drawn to it [Goddess spirituality] because that's healthy for me right now personally" (70, emphasis in the original). While the modern queer theorist may be critical of *gendered energy*, one cannot deny that the Dianic Witches of Coleman's study believe in the real power of feminine or female energy Taylor practices Dianic Wicca to develop specifically *female* forms of power. As an example of woman-centered religious discourse, this suggests both fulfillment of the Irigarayian cultural impulse and also an accompanying stratification of power.

In chapter seven, Coleman tackles this stratification, addressing issues of hierarchy and possible favoritism within Circle of Aradia training and leadership transmission. She compiles this information from specific criticisms made by outer members of CoA and summarizes, "Thus a closed, small, and cliquish group of women long in positions of power continues to make decisions about policy and authority without any system of checks and balances in place… many women question if it is a better, or even different, model than patriarchy" (162). This reviewer appreciates Coleman's ability to give voice to dissenting criticisms, but would like to hear more about how such problems relate to the actualization of Irigaray, the foundational thesis on which this book rests. Coleman writes in her introduction, "[Dianic practices and rituals] actually create an alternative symbolic system, a non-patriarchal reality, a woman's culture, that Irigaray attempts to resurrect from Western culture through her writing" (3). Does hierarchy in Circle of Aradia reveal loopholes or problems in Irigaray's theory? How could an Irigaray-ist respond to the problems or make theoretical adjustments to accommodate?

According to Coleman, the CoA community discussed the issues (162), but community members' objections to hierarchical power are oppressed when leadership puts the conversation to rest prior to its full completion (182). *Re-Riting Woman* argues that Dianic Wicca puts in practice the ideas of Irigaray, but does not explain its failures in relation to Irigaray.

I would also like to hear more from Coleman about differences in overall generational experiences in Circle of Aradia. As a third-wave feminist couched between Generation X and the Millennial Generation, I am particularly interested in this subject. Coleman states that her informants ranged in age from mid-twenties to mid-sixties (63). What do women of each generation seek and receive from a Dianic Witchcraft tradition? How has Dianic Witchcraft served women born between 1930 and 1950? Between 1950 and 1970? And after 1970? Are there significant differences?

There is much of value to recommend in this volume. I learned the specific history of the Circle of Aradia Dianic Witchcraft Tradition. I have been guilty, with others, of generalizing the Dianic Tradition. Of course in reality there are different practices and branches of Dianic Wicca, including the Circle of Aradia and the McFarland tradition. A helpful example of this principle occurs in chapter four, where Coleman explains how CoA Dianic Sabbats differ from the Sabbats of other contemporary Paganisms. Differentiating between contemporary Pagan traditions should be a high priority for Pagan Studies, precisely so that we can better educate students of Paganisms.

I highly recommend this book for those interested in tracking both the history and ethnographic research of contemporary Paganism as well as the larger topic of women in religion. Particularly for undergraduate courses in these areas of religious studies, this book would serve well on introductory course syllabi.

Michelle Mueller
Graduate Theological Union