

realities of our world and it drove him towards a reassessment of his future as a bourgeois Argentinian doctor. The belief in the power of human struggle and in the impossibility of capitalism to solve its crises, pushed Che towards the ragged band of Cubans who waited in Mexico under the able command of the baseball champion — Fidel Castro. With such gems as the motorcycle diaries hidden in the archives of Havana, one can only hope that we will soon be offered the diaries of Castro: with bated breath ...

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Himani Bannerji, *Returning the Gaze: Essays on Racism, Feminism and Politics* (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1993).

one learns that without trust in one's experience, expressed as a willingness to find words for it, without thus taking an interest in it, one is without authority for one's own experience. I think of this authority as the right to take an interest in your own experience. (Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*)

The right to take an interest in one's own experience seems such a humble cousin of that basic demand for equal civil rights. But, lived lives are slow to improve even where these grander rights have been "granted." Rapid momentum toward such abstractly sanctioned change is gained with the sudden speaking from and of those everyday lives, and is maintained by the internal combustion that accompanies such a directed insistence on self-enunciation. The refusal to be directed away from one's own interests, or perhaps more accurately, the refusal to accept a prescription of one's interests, is a healthy sign of this humbler yet substantive right having taken root.

Returning the Gaze: Essays on Racism, Feminism and Politics, edited by Himani Bannerji, is just such a speaking from, a talking back, a selves-authorization. As Bannerji promises in her introduction, these twelve essays make a unique noise against a background

silence in their willingness to speak *critically* from and of personal experience. Previously, Bannerji notes, the Canadian writing and reading public was selectively receptive to “creative voices” emanating from non-white female experience. Furthermore this selectivity tended to textually re-embody non-white females’ emotionality or physicality rather than constructing them as rationally-endowed critical thinkers. Or, where the critical voice was heard, it was more often solely a *voice against*, framed within a combative zone occupied by the “We” and the identified (rather than identifiable) Other. Presented as a singularity, as a shared note, this critical voice often subverted internal disharmonies to political goals which seemed to have required essentializing as part of an effective strategy. But, the public promotion of a smooth and unbroken sisterhood ignores complexity and attenuates the personal and political productivity of multiplicity and contingency. *Returning the Gaze* is particularly acute exactly where it allows its own “internal contradictions” to sit on the surface, to be seen, and thus in an important sense, to be trusted. Witness the condensed and charged exchange between Anita Sheth and Amita Handa, “A Jewel in the Frown: Striking Accord Between India/n Feminists,” on the unconscious yet aggressive and exclusionary process of locating oneself as India/n via a layering of “Otherness” — a building up of identity through the denial of Indian/ness in other Indian women. Various essentialist axes are mapped from one’s own experience: geographical location as a child or as an adult; skin shade; devotion to religions; and the purity of family/blood history. Sheth and Handa, enunciating their own biases with brutal honesty in each Other’s presence, discover how their personal frameworks force the other asymptotically away from securing any identity; they eventually discover how to navigate multiplicities without this annihilation. Sherene Razack’s excellent essay, “Storytelling for Social Change,” ruthlessly and yet with a fundamental sympathy, holds folklore or narrative-as-truth-bearing-methodology under the strong light of critical pedagogy. This speaking out and from and to experience, particularly the experienced of oppressed persons, has begun to take up space. This is, Razack insists, as a

pedagogical approach, both good and necessary, yet preliminary. Stories must *also* be met by critical examination. To fail to do otherwise is, in Razack's words, "to unproblematically conceive of [stories] as suppressed knowledge," and to see language itself "as simply representing reality rather than constructing it." Moreover, a lack of willingness to critically examine emotional sharing invites the same danger of disempowerment, the same tired dichotomies, that Bannerji warned us about

the brilliant suggestion of Uma Narayan, that we grant epistemic privilege to the oppressed, falls apart when the subject positions are so confused. Unless we want to fall into the trap of demanding that the oppressed speak in a unified voice before we will believe them, we are still left with the difficult task of negotiating our way through our various ways of knowing and towards political action.(113)

Razack insists that the exact inconsistencies which we are tempted to suppress or edit out offer the most leverage, the most empowerment: that paradox and ambiguity push us beyond simply taking turns saying "what we know" into understanding "how it is that we know what we know." This process better equips us for being more critical of our perceptions of our experiences and the commitments we make in expressing them. However, Razack is not without a remarkably compassionate and clear vision of the vulnerability of subjecting what is already vulnerable to such critical processes, and she compensates by shifting the sites of caution or protection, as it were, from the content of the stories themselves, to the circumstances or context of their telling and their listening. She points out a truth that "the risks taken in the course of such critical reflection are never equally shared"; that this speaking-from-one's-experience serves various groups differently and such processes need always to be problematized in order to reveal these differences. Razack's essay is carefully balanced by her placement of the establishment of a respectful and trusting environment for receiving narrative as a goal which goes hand in hand with the establishment of good critical practices for working with them.

The remainder of the essays in this anthology can be divided into two kinds. First, there are a number of very well written critical essays about racism, feminism and politics in the Canadian context, most of which expressly tackle tripartite analysis although Roxanna Ng's "Sexism, Racism, Canadian Nationalism" seems the most substantively committed to calling sexism into her account. Race and class are much more central to the majority of writing in this anthology. By and large, the critical essays identify mechanisms by which, or locations where, operant oppressive systems are sustained and reproduced, as for example Bannerji's acute deconstruction and rejection of the term "visible minority" in "Popular Images of South Asian Women," or Cecilia Green's and Arun Mukherjee's exacting observations of white/black feminist power struggles inscribed in interpretations of "classic feminist texts" like Gilman's *Herland* and Davis' *Women, Race and Class*. Dionne Brand contributes two absolutely excellent essays here. The first, "'Visible Minority' Women A Creation of the Canadian State," co-written with Lindy Carty, takes Bannerji's object of complaint into a concrete setting, the National Conference on Immigrant and Visible Minority Women (1986), and illustrates the co-optation of the already active political agenda of these women by state clientele and class issues through bureaucratically generated procedural inefficiencies (i.e. formulation of any conference or coalition is followed not by pointed public action but by reportage and constitution drafting), and by what they term "state generated conflicts" (215) around meaningless red-herrings like "visible minority." Brand and Carty illustrate how the various "conduits of legitimation" within the present Canadian capitalist state are functionally, if not intentionally, designed to effectively fraction "women's politics" into predictable segments which leave labour and race advocacy disempowered or continually arrested at initial developments.

Second, there are a number of personal critical/creative narratives from the standpoint of the oppressed. Among these are May Yee's "Finding the Way Home Through Issues of Gender, Race and Class," a poetry-laced lamentation on her search for Chinese

roots among her disjointed socially-imposed conception of herself and distorted expectations about this identity's manifestation or geographical location. Lee Maracle, a feminist First Nations author, gives a complex account of "the three mountains" (149) of her own personal oppression "Racism, Sexism and Patriarchy" and the historical interplay between these three which has led, in her words, to a widespread, hidden and even unconscious agenda on the part of white wealth holders to continue to practice the particular style of ruling endemic to imperialism. The last essay of this nature is Makeda Silvera's "Speaking of Women's Lives and Imperialist Economics: Two Introductions from *Silenced*," which is not so much a speaking from a point of oppression as from a vantage point which reports of it on behalf of those who have largely been and continue to be silenced by the system which uses them: here, domestic workers (largely West Indian and Caribbean Blacks). On the one hand, neither of these three papers adopt a self-consciousness sense of limitation toward their narratives such as is displayed by Sheth and Handa, or recommended by Razack. Silvera unblushingly describes her sociological project, the documentation of oral histories of the experiences of Caribbean domestics working in Canada, as "the task of recording the total picture," (261) "of representing a life story or part of one," (255) "of finding a herstory of Caribbean women that was *real*." (265)

Razack's essay has helped to frame the seeming political/ theoretical "unsophisticatedness" of these three papers not as liabilities or point of dismissal, but rather as a necessary source of tension in and against the others in this anthology. Roxanna Ng duplicates the anchoring of "raw" narrative by demanding that "lived" experience not be fractured from analysis. (224) The presence of these push the reader to examine the tensions within her own interpretations of the merit or centrality of these contrasting "accounts" of racism, patriarch, gender and the relations of these evaluations to her lived experiences.

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