

CRISS-CROSSINGS, OR INSIDE AS OUTSIDE*

As the title playfully suggests, this collection of essays focuses on the intersections of race and (female) gender in the texts of Canadian women writers of various cultural backgrounds. The essays are collected, edited and introduced by Coomi S. Vevaina and Barbara Godard, establishing a preliminary crossing between India and Canada: “A passage to Canada? Or, a passage to India?” wonders Godard in the introduction, already drawing the reader’s attention to the lack of symmetry between these two syntactically paralleled sentences (3). The two editors implicitly provide in this way the axis of the first cultural crossings: India to Canada. Canada to India. This axis is going to be reproduced, in its turn, by the authors of the essays. They are Canadian as well as Indian intellectuals. There are also Indian critics writing from India as well as Indian critics writing from the Canadian diaspora, marking thus different, and most welcome, visions across the Pacific divide.

There is a clear emphasis, throughout the whole collection, on the possibilities offered by these cultural crossings, the spaces opened up in-between. Additionally, the collection achieves a remarkable interaction between speaking subjects (the subjects of *énonciation*) and spoken subjects (the subjects of the *énoncé*), subjects posited as fluid and always in movement. “*Intersexions*,” write the editors in the introduction, “is both an invitation to this liminal space and site of liminality itself. Positing no point of origin, with no return ticket, ‘we’ meet in transit, in writing and reading” (5).

The essays cover a wide range of positions within the Canadian writing scene in English and French (although French-Canadian writing is clearly [and admittedly] underrepresented). They analyse the works of a good number of the so-called hyphenated Canadians. The writers discussed include Maria Campbell, Beatrice Culleton, Lillian Allen, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Claire Harris, Dionne Brand, Bharati Mukherjee, Himani Bannerji, Sui Sin Far, Sky Lee, Joy Kogawa, Kristjana Gunnars, Aritha van Herk, Hellen Weinzweig, Smaro Kamboureli, Nadine Ltaif, and Monique Bosco.

At first sight, some might be tempted to dismiss this book as one more collection of essays uncritically celebrating female gender and otherness —one more volume to contribute, perhaps unreflexively, to the marketing of multiculturalism and political correctness. This is not, by any means, the case of *Intersexions*, whose editors as well as contributors are well aware of the dangers of essentializing identity categories. The authors are self-conscious about the very terminology they are using, and concepts such as “women’s writing,” “minority writing,” “exile,” even “multiculturalism” are often scrutinized and unveiled as potentially dangerous in their ghettoizing na-

ture. On the other hand, the readings here offered clearly draw on a comparative approach to literature but they break with traditional comparative studies by locating the object of analysis within Canadian territory, forcing the reader to look at the national production as inter-national production. At the same time, the writings and the readings we encounter here seem designed to reorient “the axes of Canadian culture away from the North Atlantic triangle of Eurocentrism” (22).

M.F. Salat, in “Other Words, Other Worlds: Of Ruby Slipperjack,” provides a lively discussion of the articulations of silence in the works of Native women writers, drawing attention to the importance of orality in these traditions. This issue is also discussed by Dawn Thompson in “Typewriter as Trickster: Revisions of *In Search of the April Raintree*,” in which we find an interrogation of the notions of “literary” and “aesthetic value” through the analysis of Culleton’s work. The theme of migration and displacement, of the subject in a literal or in a metaphorical sense, of meaning in language, in the text, is approached from a variety of perspectives: in “In the Third Person: An Interview with Smaro Kamboureli,” Sukhmani Roy explores the textual spaces opened up by the migration of the speaking subject, while Christl Verduyn in her essay “MemoryWork/Migrant Writing: Mediating Me/Moi” deals with the actual loss of meaning through conscious exercises of deterritorialization in a number of texts by English and French Canadian women. The diasporic writings of Bharati Mukherjee are the subject of Bharati Harishankar’s “See(k)ing Differences: Construction of Gender and Culture in the Short Texts of Bharati Mukherjee.” In contrast to the anti-nostalgic tone of Mukherjee’s texts, the writings of Himani Bannerji, as analysed in Roshan G. Shashani’s “Some Kind of Weapon,” and Susan Jacob’s “Breaking the Circle,” seem to look back to Indian history in order to reconstruct a damaged immigrant self.

The archeological work of uncovering and collecting historical data is an important exercise in most of the writings analysed and provides the focus of the essays “Retrieving History: The Poems of Dionne Brand” by Krishna Sarbadhikary and “Celebration of the Black Being in Claire Harris’s *The Conception of Winter* and *Drawing Down a Daughter*” by Susanda Pal. Women’s history is also the subject of Lien Chao’s “As Agents and Perspective: Female Characters in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*,” an essay which posits Lee’s novel as a historical document about Chinese Canadian women, thus criss-crossing the line between fact and fiction. The female body as the site of history and of historical re-membling is the subject of Cecily’s Devereux’s “The Body of Evidence: Re-membling the Past in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*.” One of the essays can be considered historical in a further sense for, in its incorporation of forgotten writers into an ever growing corpus of texts, it constitutes in itself a truly archival exercise: I am referring to Uma Parameswaran’s “Let Us Sing Their Names: Women Writers in South Asian Canadian Literature.” Annette White-Parks’s “Intersections of Gender and Culture Difference as Impediment and Inspiration to Sui Sin Far” can also be considered archival work particularly in its emphasis on recovering this pioneer Chinese Canadian writer.

Barbara Godard’s “A Writing of Resistance: Black Women’s Writing in Canada” offers a very acute discussion of the terminology used for identity categories and exposes thus the limits of identity politics. That is so because identity politics is implicitly based on the workings of the binary pair real/distorted, an opposition which, as Wendy Waring’s “A Reading Woman Is a Moving Site, or, Will the Real Lola Montez Please Stand Up?” wittingly shows, can no longer function as a reliable source of

analysis. There are two important issues that resonate in and are echoed by all the essays. One is directly addressed by Kavita Sharma in “Indo-Canadian Women Writers: Double Alienation”, which deals with the different types of migration, drawing a clear separation between the intellectual diaspora and the displaced immigrant or forced exile. In doing so, Sharma draws the reader’s attention to the varied range of positions available to a particular subject at a particular time and place. The other issue is dealt with in some detail by Coomi Vevaina in “Articulating a Different Way of Being: The Resurgence of the Native Voice in Canada,” which offers an approach to contemporary Native writing with a clear focus on the idea that the object of study is clearly beyond the direct influence of European cultures, or at least, it has a considerable weight of residual culture that remains unreadable from the point of view of Western hermeneutics. These cultural intertexts, present in most of the writings analysed, pose important challenges to our way of knowing and interpreting the world/text and may open new spaces for the reconceptualization of meaning.

Intersexions reads the texts inside out. It is not only a book for those interested in contemporary Canadian literature, but, more generally, for those interested in the questions of identity and representation at the end of the 20th century, in the changing notions of national literature and national culture. It is also a book for those who still believe in the connection between the text and the world, in the possibility of agency within a fluid and ever changing experience of writing and reading. “Crossing back and forth, between India and Canada, the complex perspectives in *Intersexions* (un)hinge the relation of inside/outside,” write the editors. “For, taken up differently from the site of reading, interpretation and criticism become performative and political acts of transformation” (50-51).

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* Vevaina, Coomi S. and Barbara Godard eds. *Intersexions: Issues of Race and Gender in Canadian Women’s Writing*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 1996.