

Community Voices

Responses to *Reclaiming the Future*

Reclaiming the Future: Women's Strategies for the 21st Century; Somer Brodribb, ed.; Charlottetown: Gynergy books, 1999; ISBN 0-921881-51-7; 296 pages; \$24.95.

INTRODUCTION

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The publication of this volume provoked the interest of four members of the *Atlantis* editorial panel (Donna Varga, Natalie Beausoleil, Marilyn Porter – and me) for several reasons. *Reclaiming The Future* was produced by an important feminist press. Gynergy Books, sister to Ragweed Press, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, and founded by publisher Libby Oughton in 1987, was at the time the only English language feminist press east of Ontario. Gynergy has made its mark as a brave and creative promoter of feminist writing from its beginnings. Its first production, a visual and tactile as well as readerly pleasure, was a limited edition, bilingual chapbook: Nicole Brossard's lesbian love poem, entitled *sous la langue/Under Tongue* (tr. Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood). The following year, Oughton brought out Elly Danica's *Don't: A Woman's Word*, with an introduction by Nicole Brossard; this feminist narrative had a profound impact on the Canadian women's movement (and it became, more generally, a Canadian *cause célèbre*). Oughton left the publishing business in the early 1990s to pursue life as a poet and artist, while Gynergy has gone on to produce more than sixty titles, including lesbian fiction and non-fiction, and feminist poetry, fiction, and non-fiction (including texts on sexual abuse and women's health). The publication of a visually stylish book on feminism and the future is in keeping with Gynergy's tradition. In a time when academic presses around the world (Canadian publishing specifically) are being starved – the work of such companies is crucial to the women's movement. What does this recent book from Gynergy offer?

The book's very title, of course, which stirs hope and promises a sense of direction, draws

feminist attention – and Diana Dabinett's cover illustration is very beautiful. On the back cover, Charlotte Bunch refers to the book as "a welcome antidote to feminist pessimism," while Rita Arditti praises it as an antidote to "the usual white male fantasies about the millennium" The editor, Somer Brodribb, has brought to her project diverse experiences as a feminist scholar and activist. So, what's in the book?

The table of contents furthers the promise. The authors represent a range of academic disciplines (and ranks) and activist organisations. Of sixteen contributors, one writes from a First Nations perspective; a second identifies as an American Aboriginal; of the rest, eight others are located in Canada, one in Latin America, and five in the United States. No particular overarching themes or patterns or conflicts emerge from this diversity, however; the book, in this regard, is, by and large, a rather conventional collection of academic essays spiced up by creative pieces. Given that – what does the book contribute to the conceptualising of feminist politics? The reviews, as you will see, are mixed. Perhaps this is an indication of the need for more astute direction from publishers.

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Somer Brodribb introduces this collection as one meant to fuel women's agency for self- and social change. She refers to the breadth of contributions: the "creative and critical work, manifesto, poetry, analyses and plans of action" - as encompassing "strategy and speculation" (14). Those claims, along with the volume's title, create an expectation of encountering meaningful direction

for change that unfortunately remains largely unfulfilled.

The scope of topics in the volume includes emerging issues and those not often included in feminist critiques. Thirteen submissions focus on urban planning; homelessness; immigration policy; the effect of the "New World Order" on Aboriginal peoples; the portrayal of lesbians in mainstream print media; representations of reproduction in science fiction/horror films; questions of identity formation in the use of electronic technology; feminist alternative radio communications; women in the university; feminist anti-violence activism; feminist activism as a response to the Global Economy; and (at that time) the intended 2000 World March of Women. These contributions are eloquently framed at the beginning by "A Woman's Creed," and, at the end, by Paula Gunn Allen's poem "Some Like Indians Endure."

Aside from the creative piece, three contributions in the collection deserve notice because, in contrast to the others, they provide hope for change directed by feminist action in the present and strategies for the future. In "Giving Women a Voice in the Face of Globalization," Margaret Thompson and Mariá Suárez Toro describe the role of FIRE [Feminist International Radio Endeavour] in providing an alternative media voice to and for women, particularly those of Latin American and Caribbean regions, and the role FIRE has taken to engage women in organizing and participating in both local and global activism. Based in Costa Rica, the English and Spanish language broadcasts of FIRE over international shortwave radio have spanned much of the planet. Situated within the context of structural adjustment programs undertaken in developing countries as an aspect of that tragedy called globalization, this is a case study of women developing and performing change for the immediate and long term.

Marina Morrow's "Feminist Anti-violence Activism: Organizing for Change" is a superb analysis of the social structural impediments to eliminating abuse against women. Thoughtful, carefully written, and grounded in data gathered through her extensive research, the article offers breadth and depth. Of all the articles in this volume, Morrow's deals best with the complex inter-relationship between class, gender, sex and culture. Included in that complexity is the problematic role

that some aspects of feminism have in reproducing the patriarchy that creates/sustains women abuse, or at the very least limits the possibility of change. Her piece traces out changes that have occurred within the anti-violence movement, pointing out the strategies of solidarity that create a promising path for structural transformation.

"Feminism: the Antidote to the Global Capitalist Economic Agenda" is Joan Grant-Cummings' passionate contribution. Well-written, and largely free of rhetoric, it identifies the devastating effect globalization has had on local economic systems, and its human rights and economic violations of women and workers. The author argues for the interrelationship of women with others for "challenging the capitalist beast" (268) of globalization. Strategies for change are posited: challenging governments to divest trade agreements and putting forward alternatives; forming feminist human rights think-tanks; reclaiming local markets. Grant-Cummings argues for women to work in solidarity with labour, peasant farmers, educators, gay and lesbian organizations, and environment, human rights, anti-poverty, health care, and anti-violence activists, and to engage in activism not only at local and national levels, but also internationally (in this recommendation, Grant-Cummings stands on its head the futurist mantra of the 1980s: "think globally, act locally"). I do wish that the strategies put forward received more discussion rather than being limited to an admittedly meaningful call for action.

Another contribution of note, although of a more minor scale, is "2000 good reasons to march," which describes the rationale behind the organization of the year 2000 international women's march, and lists the eleven demands to end poverty and violence against women that provided its ideological framework. Useful as a historic document, it would have been a stronger contribution in the context of this volume had the list of demands been further developed so as to discuss strategies for working toward their achievement. For example, how might we work toward having States guarantee "as a fundamental right, the production and distribution of food to ensure food security for their populations" (276); or, having "States adopt and implement disarmament policies with respect to conventional, nuclear, and

biological weapons" (281)?

Aside from these, there is little in the volume to provide hope and strategies for a better future for women. Throughout, historical details help explain the current state of affairs, but the present is conceived as only dismal for women, with not much in the way of ideas for a brighter future. The authors rely on simplistic dualisms: female/male; good/bad; power/oppression; men who are white and heterosexual, are middle-class and bad/women are all inherently feminists, and all feminists are good. In pointing to men as responsible for women's past and present woes, there is a failure to acknowledge how women contribute to problems for other women. For example in "Women and the University As Corporation" Krouse ignores the vast gains made by women academics in North America over the past fifteen years and how they have used their positions of power and privilege to oppress women and others. Another problem in the volume is that nebulous analogies - such as "The desire to create VR [virtual reality] technology that allows an illusion of disembodiment may be interpreted as yet another effort to evade the troubling reality of female reproductive power and place the role of subject-creation in the hands of male technicians" (175) - strain credibility.

For a volume purporting to be about the future, there is a substantive lack of meaningful discussion about the future or strategies for change. Such discussions consist of one or two short paragraphs at the end of each contribution as if tacked on to already conceived material. Strategies consist primarily of truisms: "As we move into the 21st century, we must not forget the history of activism that has brought forth the current media acceptance of lesbianism..." (121); "The challenge for us in the next millennium is to watch carefully where battle lines are drawn, to discern whose fight it is and what role we, as women, are expected to play. We need to remember while enjoying ourselves at the movies that daily battles over reproductive control continue worldwide..." (144). A lack of critique, evaluation and discussion of the limited strategies that are presented leaves the impression that all feminists envision the same future, and that such a vision is unquestionably good for all.

Greater depth to discussions, sophistication

of analysis and focus on future strategies would have made for a volume that more accurately represented the current state of feminist thinking and a better plan for action.

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Natalie Beausoleil

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I have chosen to focus on three chapters from two different sections in this collection - on one essay devoted to popular culture and two to women and cyberspace - because of my interest in feminist analyses of the production of knowledge and power and of the social construction of the body. Each of the authors deftly analyses popular, scientific and medical discourses around the body and articulations of power in contemporary Canadian and American society. The authors have in common concerns about cultural appropriation and the appropriation of women's bodies, as well as the erasure of women's voices. Related important foci of analysis include the problematizing of "playing with" gender, race and sexuality and examining contemporary male panic and backlash against women.

Annette Burfoot's popular cultural analysis, in "Technologies of Panic at the Movies: Killer Viruses, Warrior Women and Men in Distress," unravels the gendered and racialized construction of horror in both documentaries and fictions in the form of viruses and diseases which attack and invade the human body. The author examines the cultural construction of "the body as a problem" (125) in the age of biotechnology and genetic engineering. Burfoot shows how the metaphors and language used in both documentaries and science fiction are about war through/in the body, where microscopic beings can become the ultimate nightmare. Burfoot also underlines how diseases and killer viruses are presented as coming from the South/Third world (to endanger, for instance, the White House) to the North/the Western world. Racist imagery of the dark and dangerous are (still) permeating both fiction and documentaries on these issues.

This is a fascinating paper and I particularly appreciate that the author makes the linkages between popular discourses and scientific

discourses about diseases and epidemics. Scientific discourses are constituted through and through by the same relations of power which constitute the popular. Burfoot rightly points to scientific and medical discourses about the spread of AIDS and of the filo virus Ebola as current examples of racist politics and representations in the production of diseases.

This article also attends to the contradictions in representations of the feminine in horror movies in the current context of genetic research and engineering. While strong heroines have appeared in *Aliens*, *X Files*, and so on, the representation of what is to be feared - the ultimate horror - remains the (M)OTHER. Thus, according to the author, the strength and image of the mother, as well as what is "foreign" to white male western/northern dominance are perceived as the forces of evil and destruction. Burfoot sees here white male panic at work about the Other and a backlash against any gain women may have made, particularly in the areas of control of the body and reproduction. The author explains that the representations and logic of the horror movies reflect white men's attempts to appropriate reproduction, information, codification and all technologies of representations. Interestingly, patriarchal control in genetic research aims at "shedding the body as flesh" (128). In eugenics and in genetic engineering the stakes for women and all those considered Others are very high. This paper makes a very valuable contribution to feminist critical analyses of the politics of reproduction in science and in popular culture.

In another fascinating article, m.c. schraefel explores identity construction on and for the Internet and the place of women in Internet activities. The author contends that the Internet forces users to construct an identity and that social control is exercised through that identity construction. While the Internet seems to offer a bodiless environment, schraefel demonstrates that, on the contrary, the body does not disappear in cyberspace or cyberia. Internet culture is produced and oriented toward white privileged men and overall it is an environment marked by racism and aggression toward women. The Internet is not a neutral territory nor is it safe for women. Women may resort to denying their bodies and sex/gender in order to survive on the Internet. Men who deny

their male bodies and pretend to be female on the Internet do not do that for safety reasons. The gender play white privileged men engage in has more to do with appropriation and the perpetuation of stereotypical categories of what it is to be a woman or a man. The author notes that the redrawing of stereotypes about women is crucial to maintain the domination of women. For the author, gender play is therefore not necessarily revolutionary nor liberating. She warns about the naivete of some authors who view gender-bending by men on the Internet as a sign of inclusion. Instead, schraefel sees yet more forms of women's appropriation by privileged white men. She observes the same dynamics in the cultural appropriation of racial and ethnic minorities by privileged white men on the Internet.

schraefel's critical analysis of gender play on the internet is well-taken and very timely. As in other forms of cultural production, men who want to engage in gender play, while maintaining their own power and keeping social relations as they are, in fact do appropriate femininity. British feminist Susan Moore (Moore 1991), for instance, observes that same phenomenon when white male intellectuals build the postmodern self out of fantasies of a very abstract femininity, a femininity without flesh, blood or power. The structure and culture of the Internet need to be changed. Feminist critique and activism are crucial for women who want to shape the future of the Internet and reclaim their voices and bodies.

Virtual Reality (VR), another technology, is also gendered through and through, argues author A. Whitney. VR is inscribed in the gendered tradition of the mind/body split where technology is of the (male and superior) domain of the mind - which can "transcend" the (female and inferior) domain of the body. Whitney calls for feminist vigilance and critique of the reproduction of power imbalances and stereotypical categories of gender through VR. Whitney's critique of VR is along the same line as schraefel's: under the guise of both neutrality and fantasy, only men have access to subjectivity. Disembodiment is available to a select few in VR's sexist, racist and classist cultural codes.

However, resistance may come from cyberfeminist artists who explicitly address issues of the gendered body and the body/mind dualism in their own works. Whitney provides a very insightful

discussion of the primacy of visual and auditory senses in western society and male-dominated VR, pointing out that touch (haptic response) is still relatively ignored. She analyses some important works by cyberfeminist artists. One such artist is Canadian Char Davies, who created an installation called *Ephémère*, where women's experience of VR centres on breathing rather than visual or auditive stimuli. Like schraefel in the previous chapter, Whitney stresses the need for changes from within, through the collaboration of feminist activists and engineers. Furthermore, Whitney sees a central role for feminist artists in challenging white male supremacy in the appropriation of women's bodies through technology. I very much appreciate Whitney's examination of feminist artists' works, as I strongly believe that these artists have a crucial role to play in a radical critique of dominant discourses of femininity, masculinity, racialization and the production of the body. Activism through art and feminist art activism are fundamental strategies of subversion and resistance.

REFERENCES

Moore, Suzanne. *Looking For Trouble: On Shopping, Gender and the Cinema*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1991.

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I read this book while I was serving as inside scrutineer during the Canadian federal election in November 2000 - the first election of the new millennium. The results of that election were depressing for women, and seemed, in many ways, to herald a move *backwards* - to polarised politics, and the minimising of social issues in favour of "economic issues" - or how to benefit big business. So maybe I was looking for too much in this book - strategies for women to address the problems I saw unfolding before me. It does not do this, although it is still a worthwhile read. None of the papers included here actually describes concrete proposals for future action - how to satisfy the "hungers" named in "A Woman's Creed" that opens the volume, for "rice, home, freedom...clean water and laughter, literacy, love" (9). The most they do is

describe current strategies and struggles and suggest ways that they could and should be continued. I was particularly struck by Margaret Thompson and Mariá Suárez Toro's description of the work of the Feminist International Radio Endeavor (FIRE) in Costa Rica. Marina Helen Morrow performs a useful service in describing various successful methods for addressing the problem of violence against women, as do Kathryn Feltey and Laura Nichols in comparing two efforts to empower homeless women in the US Midwest and in El Salvador. These accounts could certainly inform feminist workers in these areas in the future.

However, most of the rest of the papers focus on analysis of the *existing situation* as it affects women from various perspectives. The topics covered range from Sunera Thobani's superb account and analysis of the racist underpinning of Canadian immigration policy and Joan Grant-Cummings' attack on the global capitalist economic agenda to Kate Campbell's analysis of the way the print media has hijacked "lesbian chic" for its own purposes and m.c. schraefel's description of the sexism rife in Cyberia (cyberspace), especially in MUDs (multi-user domains), MOOs (MUD object oriented) and chat rooms. At the end of the book the Federation des Femmes du Quebec present the ideas behind and the main demands of the World March of Women in the year 2000. While this was a wonderful moment in the annals of feminist organising, it essentially pointed out to the governments of the world just how far we have to go to eliminate poverty and violence from our lives.

In other words, the papers in this book try to cover all aspects of women's lives - from the general to the particular, from the profoundly serious to aspects that some of us might place lower on our list of priorities. And while the descriptions are interesting and some of the analysis is challenging (the papers are somewhat uneven in this respect) - they tell us how it *is*, rather than how we can change it. That's okay - but as such this book joins a plethora of other collections of feminist papers out there. What is different about this one? What gives it coherence? It is not quite clear how the book came about. It did not emerge from a conference or workshop. Instead, it seems that the editor had a good idea, found a publisher and put out a general call for papers. She was then faced with figuring out how it all fitted together. The

result is an ingenious set of sections and an innovative order for the papers. Living in a rural province, it seemed strange to me to start with a section called "Cities of Tomorrow," but given how increasingly urban our society is, it makes sense to begin with an analysis of how city planning has failed women and how women might envisage more successful cities (Mary Ann Beavis). The next section, on the treatment of immigrants and first nations peoples in Canada also makes sense, although having just two papers in each section means that we can only catch a brief glimpse of the complexities of the topic. The next two sections are on "Popular Culture" and "Women in Cyberspace." They encompass increasingly important areas of women's lives, but I am not sure that I would devote a third of a book with such a broad focus to these particular topics. The section on "Knowledge and Power" also tries to cover too much, presenting an essay on how the increasing commercialisation of universities affects women particularly adversely, and one on the use of local radio. Finally, in the section called "The Future of Activism," we have a careful and particular paper about strategies to confront violence against women (Morrow) and a much more general attack on global capitalism (Grant-Cummings). Somer Brodribb's "Introduction" tries to bring all this together, but other than voicing a general commitment to social justice and anti-racism, it is not clear that she has succeeded.

Nor is this book a specifically Canadian contribution to the various analyses and strategies, or a presentation of specifically Canadian experience. It does not, of course, claim to be Canadian as such. Some of the papers are about specifically Canadian examples (Thobani, Morrow, Wabegijig). Some originate in Canada but have general application (Beavis, Grant-Cummings, Federation des Femmes du Quebec). But most of the papers in this book are unproblematically based and focused on the United States, in ways that I find

disturbing in a book from a Canadian publisher. A slight majority of the authors are Canadian, and the vast majority of those are from central or western Canada. With my Atlantic bias, I could find only one (Morrow) who even mentioned activity carried out in the east. (However, the wonderful cover is of a silk painting by a distinguished Newfoundland artist). While there is serious recognition of race in most of the papers, very few (Thompson and Toro, Feltey and Nichols) make a serious attempt to link north and south in their papers.

Having made all these criticisms, I still think that Somer Brodribb has pulled together an interesting collection. It is uneven, and it is strange and unsatisfying in many ways, but all the papers are interesting and all are accessible. It is a book that teachers will draw on for the Women's Studies classes, and it would work as a reader for such classes. And it was an uplifting way to pass a boring day as inside scrutineer in an election that did nothing for us.