

“We Who Are Not the Same” in Times that Are/Not the Same

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IT IS NOW SOME TWO DECADES since Adrienne Rich delivered “Notes toward a Politics of Location” (1984), to a Conference on Women, Feminist Identity, and Society in the 1980s, at the First Summer School of Critical Semiotics (Utrecht). Her “Notes” remain, for me, an eloquent, moving, and useful confession of the limits of white liberal feminism as well as an honest and astute call to continued and differentiated action for a global good. I take seriously her admonishment, to herself at the time but with continued relevance for her readers today, that “[t]his is the end of these notes, but it is not an ending” (231). It cannot be an “ending” insofar as the interlocking systems of opportunity for some, oppression for others—interlocking systems that go by the name of modernity—continue to be foundational to identity- and subject-formation, for both “the individual” and “the institution” in all their mutual constitutiveness. It should come as no surprise, then, that not only has a dominant form of feminism failed to change the terms of “progress,” it could never be expected to change those terms on its own nor when it spoke for only one constituency, and only a part of that constituency, too. The “simultaneity of oppressions” (218) from which Rich is partially freed by her white, middle-class location, a “simultaneity of oppressions” about which she was learning from

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feminists of colour and from international environmental, anti-nuclear, and anti-imperialist activists, is also a “simultaneity of oppressions” that in its variedness, tenacity, and resilience requires a flexible and vigilant ensemble of tools for analysis and action. To Rich’s still invaluable essay, I would add Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (1985) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” (1991) as key documents in identifying how feminist work still needs to be done.

Learning more recently from Dionne Brand to be wary of stories about (white middle-class) women’s and Canadian literary and colonial “survival” when my own class mobility has been made possible by my ready access to the “grant” of “whiteness” (Brand 175) and by my concomitant inheritances from and participation in “cognitive imperialism” against First Nations peoples, as indigenous students Carole Leclair and Christine Lenze first taught me and as Marie Battiste reminds me (193), I try to teach Canadian literary studies rather like (I hope) Rich taught herself to extend, refine, rethink, and reconfigure her projects as a feminist; that is, from “the geography closest in” (212). By this phrase, Rich meant most immediately her “body,” but she also knowingly and explicitly spoke from a place of geopolitical power, too, behind “that raised boot” of the U.S.A. (220). So located, she found herself unable to say, after an earlier feminist, “as a woman I have no country” (Virginia Woolf, quoted in Rich 211). The Famous Five who won the vote for white propertied women in Canada knew a different sense of the geography closest in, and they knew it very differently from women (and men) whose racial and economic circumstances were not their own. Himani Bannerji, Linda Carty, Hiromi Goto, Sherene Razack, and many others know this geography differently yet again, at the intersection of their bodies, racist pasts and presents, and the ideological and repressive apparatuses of the Canadian nation-state.

The simultaneity of oppressions for feminists to unpack includes, then, in/accessibility to citizenship, to national, civic, and legal identities as much as to gendered freedoms. These take particular forms and have particular histories in Canada as an invader-settler colony, fueled by and fueling nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century imperialisms, but they also have particularities in more recent histories and practices of globalization for the sake of the unfettered movement of capital into fewer and fewer hands. “Canada,” given that it is a creation of modernity, is no more immune to neo-imperialist pressures and practices than to any other of modernity’s manifestations of “progress.” As a result, the discourse of the nation-state in relation to “others” both within and out-

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side its (only sometimes porous) borders is not so much a patriarchal one as a paternalistic one. A shift from patriarchy to a paternalist systemic does not mean that feminist work is done; rather, it means that feminist work must continue but with consciousness, especially for those most privileged by this paternalistic state, that analysis of and action against forms of oppression must be carefully articulated to multiple forms of work and awareness. The power that some of us *do* have must be hitched to the collaborative leadership of those with less, to build forms of equity from multiple locations.

Another “geography close in” for a feminist literary studies professor is the publicly (provincially) funded university, where the Canadian nation-state has, until recently, only indirectly (though not without effect) stepped. The introduction of the Canada Research Chairs program (CRCP) was “at the centre of a national strategy to make Canada one of the world’s top five countries for research and development” (govt.ca website), and a sign of the historical shift from a former colony’s resource- and communications-based economy to a world-class “knowledge” economy. The CRCP is premised on the same principles of economic competitiveness that permit paternalistic government statements about Canada in the world to stand as both domestic and foreign policy (see Pennee, “Looking”).

At least four things are operative, then, for academic labourers under the CRC national umbrella (as they are under the tri-council programs and under most university administrations) that demonstrate systemic inequities. One, securing research funding has become more important than developing and sustaining pedagogical and administrative competence and capacity (never mind deferred maintenance) in post-secondary education. Two, individual “star” or soon-to-be star faculty are expected to compensate for deep and prolonged deficits in public funding to universities, by attracting media attention, funded graduate students, and matching dollars. Three, simultaneously (if unintentionally) both morale and opportunities are diminished for those faculty who are not repeat grantees because they subsidize others’ research through bearing the colleague-deficit in teaching and service. And four, social sciences and particularly humanities disciplines are diminished as likely or equal sources for research income for universities—or for contributions to the knowledge economy of Canada and the world. This means that equally necessary facets of the profession are pitted against each other, individuals compete against each other, disciplines compete against each other, and none of this competition begins from a level playing—or working—field. The 2002 Bégin-Heick evaluation of the CRCP claimed that while “overall,

the *Chair selection process* does not discriminate against female nominees,” “they are less likely to be nominated for and, therefore, receive prestigious awards” (Bégin-Heick 23, 18; emphasis in original). The 2004 Malatest evaluation of the CRCP confirmed this finding in recommending that the CRCP Secretariat “[i]ncrease the monitoring of the gender distribution among Chair awards, including monitoring the expected number of female nominations (through the actual university report) and the actual number of female nominations by discipline group and tier” (Malatest 47). Neither the 2002 nor the 2004 evaluation called for action on any form of equity other than “the gender imbalance” (see Pennee, “Response”). The November 2006 success of the Human Rights complaint against Industry Canada, which calls for the CRCP to abide by the same federal requirements for equity as other institutions, comes when all but a few of the two thousand CRCs have been filled. As of November 2006, women held 22 percent of the CRCs, and no statistics were available for any other designated groups chairholders (“Canada”).

When the CRCP went through the legislature, the SSHRC disciplines were defined from the beginning as worthy of contributing to Canada’s global research and development to the tune of only 20 percent, compared to 45 percent for the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council and 35 percent for the Canadian Institute for Health Research—even though “SSHRC disciplines represent more than 50% of faculty in Canadian universities,” have the highest teaching loads but the lowest costs for their institutions, and, in hiring trends between 1995 and 2003, constituted “approximately 50% of faculty hired ... compared to approximately 35% in NSERC disciplines and 15% in CIHR disciplines” (Malatest 29, 31, 41). The SSHRC disciplines also historically and currently have the greatest potential for understanding and transforming socio-cultural and political systems for equity on multiple fronts. But deficits for education, like other economic “drivers,” produce systemic resistance to systemic change, compounding interests such that a “simultaneity of oppressions” becomes, for some, just too difficult to think or to work with.

More than ever, it is imperative that “[w]e who are not the same. We who are many and do not want to be the same” (Rich 225) work and study, teach, research, and serve together, to (make) change.

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