

Racialized Bodies, Disabling Worlds: Storied Lives of Immigrant Muslim Women Parin Dossa (2009). Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 192 Pages. ISBN: 978-0-8020-9551-0

What is it like to have a racialized body in a disabling world, asks Simon Fraser University anthropology professor Parin Dossa in *Racialized Bodies, Disabling Worlds: Storied Lives of Immigrant Muslim Women*? Weaving together narratives shared by South Asian Muslim women from East Africa and Iranian Muslim women living in Canada, Dossa's book is a timely, compelling contribution to academic scholarship and social justice activism which lays down some important groundwork and challenges for further research and action.

We learn of the experiences and daily struggles of Mehrun, Tamiza, Firouzeh, Sara; one, a woman living with polio and post-polio syndrome, another, a mother, raising two children with disabilities, and two women who have been disabled by car accidents. Central to the accounts of their lives, manifested in everyday interactions, are struggles to go beyond merely navigating daily dilemmas between when one is "to be seen and pitied, or to be not seen and dismissed" (p.142). Many of these dilemmas are illustrated in struggles for access, dignity and equity with transit, benefits, education, and employment - often painful and humiliating negotiations over basic matters that most people take for granted.

Using narrative ethnography, Dossa's richly layered book brings forth the everyday experiences of women who are rendered socially invisible, stigmatized, and yet who struggle to assert their dignity both in their dealings with "mainstream" Canadian society, and within their communities. For Dossa, "disabled people of color are especially disadvantaged: exclusionary Canadian immigration policy; an insensitive social services sector, and negligible research attention" (p.70) all contribute to this.

Locating her argument in an understanding of the 'disability business' - a capitalist enterprise where services and goods are made available to people with disabilities which must be economically viable - Dossa's explication of the women's encounters with social services, immigration regimes and other state agencies raise fundamental questions about the claims and inequities of liberal democracy, and associated rights and notions of citizenship which many overlook or take as given. She seeks to understand the interlocking inequalities of power - race, gender, and disability within a "complex configuration of structural violence, anchored in and perpetuated by liberal democracies and neoliberal restructuring" (p.24).

Emerging from the women's accounts and Dossa's analysis of various state institutions and processes which regulate/dominate their lives, are insightful critiques of the community integration movement, independent living movement, and dominant ways in which disability is conceptualized and addressed in policy and practice. She illustrates how these frameworks and impositions are resisted through more pluralistic, complex understandings about living with disability.

The narratives, interwoven with Dossa's contextual framework for situating the women's lives, turn the gaze back on forms of domination and oppression which illuminate broader, systemic issues of power and domination in Canadian society. She suggests, "(t)he more we enter into the marginalized recesses of our society, the sharper is our understanding of the fault lines of the system and how these can be addressed. Disenfranchised people do not speak from faraway discrete spaces. What they have to say concerns society as a whole" (p.8).

"Faced with a system that does not accommodate or address their needs and aspirations, people on the margins of society seek out multiple ways to survive within, in between, and outside the system. In the process, they return the gaze and categorize back. Their points of intervention may be observed in the many ways they rebuild their worlds. At the same time, people on the margins of society critique the system and suggest avenues for change, conceptual and otherwise" (pp.16-17).

Dossa's book also writes back to academic literature, policymakers and social service organizations that impose homogeneous identities on Muslims (and Muslim women) in a totalizing and often *orientalist* fashion. Dossa's work is also important for its contribution to talking back to the culturalist, totalizing understandings of Muslims in Canada. All of the women in Dossa's book, in different ways, draw strength and meaning from aspects of Islam in their everyday lives and struggles.

Sherene Razack (1999) warns that "there are landmines strewn across the path wherever storytelling is used, ...it should never be used uncritically, and that its potential for social change is remarkable, provided we pay attention to the interpretative structures that underpin how we hear and how we take up the stories of oppressed groups" (p.37). Building on such concerns, and critical of how "voice" and narratives can be appropriated in ways which overlook structural systemic injustice/power, and reify them as accounts of victimization, Dossa takes care to contextualize the women's stories, drawing in particular upon the work of anti-racist feminists such as Razack and Thobani (2007), and some critical strands within disability studies.

At a theoretical level, this book is a significant step forward in bridging antiracist feminism and disability studies, yet avoids wandering into levels of abstraction far removed from women's daily experiences. Dossa contends, "[W]hile disability studies have begun to recognize gender to some extent, this field has yet to deal with the issue of race. Likewise, antiracist feminism has yet to give adequate space to disability and to accommodate it conceptually as a field in its own right, rather than as a subfield within existing bodies of work" (p. 156).

Moreover, her book makes a significant contribution to work on knowledge production. "Through their experiences of crossing territorial and social borders, these women bring to light the not-quite-articulated knowledge that exists in between systems" (p.27). For example, we encounter Mehrun's critique of specialized social services programs – "they are so specialized that sometimes you get put into a category that you don't belong in, like, for example, people are treated as though they have developmental disabilities to a large extent, whereas they may only be borderline and need a little bit of assistance. There is no in-between" (p.62).

The politics of knowledge production arising in, and from, the struggles of socially and economically marginalized for justice and dignity within contemporary Canadian society have also been discussed in recent books such as Church, Bascia and Shragge (2008), Choudry, et al (2009), which attend to the specific structural forms of marginalization and resistance, individual and collective, and the relation between knowledge and social action. Indeed, Dossa's book resonates with our approach in *Fight Back: Workplace Justice for Immigrants* (Choudry, et al, 2009) which draws upon interviews with immigrant workers: stories which revealed complexities of their lives, tensions between survival and adaptation, and fighting back, whether in small everyday acts of resistance, or collectively. Parallels and great differences exist in overcoming forms of social isolation and challenges to mounting struggles for dignity between the women in Dossa's book who contend with the ways in which they are treated by social services and other state agencies, and, for example, migrant workers in Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program or Live-in Caregiver Program workers who contend with terms, categories and conditions of racialized temporary foreign worker programs.

Written in a clear, accessible and engaging style, Dossa's book deserves to be read by a wide audience within – and outside – academia. For activists and broader publics concerned with social justice, this is a valuable book, not least for its critique of the Canadian state intersected by its explication of the realities and struggles of racialized women living with disabilities in Canada today. For those interested in policy issues, the book highlights disjunctures between policy on the one hand and the enshrining of rights of people with disabilities to work and live (including the lived experiences of women), on the other. I have recommended Dossa's book to school teachers, immigration justice activists, friends and colleagues overseas interested in the “darker side” of liberal democracies' claims to deliver justice and equity for all, and I am incorporating it in my teaching on education and social justice.

Dossa suggests that “rather than being an end point, let this book be read as the opening of a dialogue on a just society” (p.9). In terms of future research, and building on *Racialized bodies, disabling worlds*, more work which attends explicitly to, both, the political economy of the ‘disability business’ and the intersections of race, gender, disability and class/socio-economic and immigration status are needed in the Canadian context. I am thinking here of Marie Campbell's (2006) work on healthcare and people living with disability using institutional and political activist ethnography. I wonder in what ways this methodology might begin with the experiences of, and contribute towards the struggles of women like Mehrun, Tamiza, Sara, and Firouzeh to investigate (and confront) the social organization of the disability industry and associated intersections of race, gender, disability, immigration status/regimes from a place outside a framework of ruling relations.

One enduring question remains from reading this book-- how can such experiential knowledge be used for political action and social change? Specifically, how might one build on visions and critiques advanced by the women, and how would/could such accounts inform

collective struggles? Listening to stories of marginalized people is not sufficient to bring about change. While I agree with Dossa's contention that "stories have the potential to effect social change, provided they form part of the larger sociopolitical and literary landscapes of societies" (p.26), how can the changes envisioned by the women occur without organized collective struggles? Dossa's book is a valuable resource for informing the organizing initiatives which seek to transform the social relations which triply oppress and render invisible many like Mehrun, Tamiza, Firouzeh and Sara in Canadian society. Their challenges and critiques not only deserve to be heard, and deployed for further research – they should lead to action.

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