H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nancy Hewitt, Jean O'Barr, Nancy Rosenbaugh, eds. *Talking Gender: Public Images, Personal Journeys and Political Critiques.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. 205 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4597-4; $55.00 (library), ISBN 978-0-8078-2288-3.

Reviewed by Laura A. Belmonte (Oklahoma State University)

Published on H-Women (January, 1998)

Personal, Political, and Powerful

Roman scholars. Israeli soldiers. HIV-positive women. Nike sneakers. *Talking Gender* covers quite an array of individuals. Original, passionate, and certainly never dull, this anthology commemorates the tenth anniversary of the Duke University Women's Studies program. The volume itself is cause for celebration.

Drawn from a lecture series highlighting recent work in feminist theory, gender, and women's studies, *Talking Gender* is not constructed around a singular theme. Instead, the contributors explore the diverse ways in which gender, race, sexuality, and class have affected not only their academic pursuits, but also their personal lives. Taken together, the essays provide a rich illustration of the current vitality and future promise of women's studies.

Classics scholar Amy Richlin opens *Talking Gender* with a fascinating account of the Roman *scholae*. In these institutions, boys learned the skills of public oratory required of most upper-class Roman men. Teachers sketched a "case" in wildly illogical–and highly gendered–terms. Students were then expected to use these facts to weave intricate and persuasive speeches. "These young men," Richlin argues, "in learning *how* to speak, learned also *what* to speak" (p. 17). Furthermore, the absence of women from the *scholae* spoke volumes about *who* deserved to speak. Learning to "speak like a man" required using gendered rhetoric. Orators attacked one another's masculinity while some of Rome's most famous citizens watched. In both written and spoken texts, Roman men told "stories that offered a particular version of gender, stories that took pleasure in exposing the female body, stories that express deep hostility toward women." Men constructed images of women in exclusively male environments.

Pointing to Anita Hill and Lorena Bobbitt, Richlin believes Roman rhetorical skills live on in our courtrooms and legislatures. Men are still speaking in terms which silence or sexualize women. The *scholae*, Richlin concludes, attest not only to the historical roots of sexism, but also affirm the vital importance of women's studies. While men may still speak in terms evocative of the *scholae*, they address a profoundly different audience: an audience of women fully aware of the importance of speaking for and about ourselves.

Art historian Kristine Stiles provides a more modern examination of gendered representations. Focusing on visual representations of "cultures of trauma," Stiles examines French women condemned as Nazi collaborators and contemporary Romanian performance artists protesting political oppression. During World War II, women's heads were routinely shaved as punishment for both "vertical" and "horizontal" political crimes. In a sweeping analysis, Stiles demonstrates the shaved head as a "visual manifestation of a supralineal condition of domination and power that joins war and violence to the abuses of rule by the phallus" (p. 41). She then explores Romanian artists who marked their bodies to protest the tyranny of the Ceausescu regime. The shaved head and the marked body, Stiles argues, transcend both time and region as visual symbols of "the aggregate forms of suffering" (p. 53). Stiles insists that these symbols cannot be divorced from the repressive contexts in which they originated.

In a fascinating afterward, Stiles recounts several audience reactions to her work. She is repeatedly confronted by women who insist that they appropriate shaved heads, tattoos, and body piercings as explicit rejections of classical norms of female beauty. They see these markings as indicative of personal liberation. To the great chagrin of members of the audience (three of whom claim Stiles could be "shot" for her opinions), Stiles dismisses the notion that representations may be detached from "the overdetermined meaning and legacy of these signs" (p. 55). The attempt "to posit agency outside of history, to escape history," Stiles asserts, yields "a spurious kind of independence…" (p. 56). Only through decoding the complex cultural heritage of these representations, Stiles concludes, can we rectify the sufferings which spawned these symbols in the first place.

Initially, I dismissed Stiles's article. Confronted by a barrage of students with a bewildering variety of metallic items hanging from various locales, I was not persuaded these individuals adopted these symbols for any reason other than to mirror some Banana Republic ad. Indeed, I even have on my office door a Matt Groening "Life in Hell" cartoon satirizing the piercing phenomenon. A shaved Bart Simpson with a tongue stud exhorts, "Wear your abused childhood as a fashion statement." I found the cartoon rather amusing.

But then I reconsidered the Stiles piece. If one accepts Stiles's argument about the larger cultural context of these signs, the fact that these symbols are now considered "fashionable" is enormously disturbing. Even more upsetting is the fact that most young people flocking to piercing and/or tattooing parlors have little awareness of the cultural legacy of these signs. I would imagine a close reading of Stiles's work might dissuade a few people from appropriating these symbols in the name of personal style. Maybe I'll take down that cartoon.

There is, however, another dimension of Stiles's argument which is troubling. Throughout her piece, Stiles adopts an intractable view of history. She appears not to consider the subjectivity of history itself. In Stiles's view, there is one historical interpretation, fixed in time. But what of the interplay between individual will and representation? Does Sinead O'Connor's shaved head send the same message to contemporary society as that disseminated by "horizontal collaborators" in Vichy France? Stiles believes it does. And though I support her call for a more empathetic response to signifiers of suffering, I reject her conception of historical imagery.

Media scholar Mandy Merck is also concerned with questions of gendered representation. She bases her argument in the contentious debate about pornography. Rather than take a side in this battle, Merck assesses one of the most common rhetorical tropes in antipornography literature–the image of men unable to control their bestial sexual desires.

Merck begins with a discussion of Catherine MacKinnon's *Only Words*. In this text, MacKinnon argues that because pornography fuels male masturbation, it is not speech worthy of constitutional protection. Rather, it is sex itself. Brought to arousal by pornographic images of subordinate women, men easily progress from solitary pleasures to violent, misogynistic acts including rape and murder.

It is this Pavlovian representation of men which most interests Merck. According to Merck, both MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin point to erection and ejaculation as "the index not simply of arousal (as in the obscenity test,) but arousal by gender subordination" (p. 74). But neither MacKinnon nor Dworkin impart the same meaning to the physical reactions of *women* aroused by pornography. Both argue that female arousal is signified by more than the mere presence of vaginal fluid. Men may be subject to Pavlov's doctrine, but women apparently are not. "Despite both Dworkin and MacKinnon's reiterated description of male sexuality as a social, political (and thus potentially changeable) phenomenon," Merck asserts, "they simultaneously stress the unvarying domination on which it is said to be predicated." The result is that the antipornography activists "represent male sexu-

ality as dangerous both by nature *and* nurture" (p. 76).

Merck rejects this construction of male sexuality, as well as the argument that a pornography-induced erection segues into physical abuse of women. The penis must have the cooperation of the man to whom it is attached. In Merck's view, both sides of the pornography debate "are caught in the old tourniquet of agency and determination" (p. 79). She suggests that both factions stop employing simplistic dualisms (man/beast) and acknowledge that *any* man can be defined as "a dog" if one stretches the term far enough.

In the next three essays, Kathy Ferguson, Deborah Gray White, and Karla Holloway consider the role of personal narratives in constructing cultural identities. Drawing upon either their own personal experiences or those of the individuals they are studying, each offers salient commentary on how the personal affects perceptions of the world and its cultures.

In an excellent essay about identity, Ferguson recounts her four-month stay at a kibbutz in south-central Israel. Far more than a travel narrative, the essay describes Ferguson's growth as a political theorist attempting "to write *through* theory rather than *about* theory" (p. 85). By bringing together her personal recollections with her theoretical training, Ferguson constructs a fascinating treatise on the relations between the individual and the state.

Ferguson's kibbutz journals resound with cogent insights about mothering, religion, nationalism, and gender. Ferguson beautifully interweaves analysis of the multiple facets of her personal identity (non-Jew, mother, theorist) with compelling interpretations of the diversity of Israel. Throughout the article, Ferguson speculates on the meanings of identity for states and those who inhabit them.

Ferguson is particularly interested in the role of militarism in Israel. She laments that the invocation of patriotism conceals the subordinate status of female soldiers in the Israeli armed services. She considers the centrality of military prowess in the construction of Israeli national identity. An incident at the Wailing Wall prompts Ferguson to evaluate the connections between ethnicity, religion, and citizenship. She explores how gendered tropes are used to delineate "masculine" Jews from "effeminate" Arabs. She suggests nuanced constructions of collective identity which transcend territorial and patriarchial boundaries. Ferguson echoes other contributors in her call for representations which reflect differences between men and women and between nations and states.

Social historian Deborah Gray White also focuses on the tensions between public identities and private realities. Exercising what Darlene Clark Hine calls "dissemblance," black women hid their personal thoughts and actions from public scrutiny. This "self-imposed invisibility" enabled them to endure the psychological torment of openly challenging racism and sexism (p. 107). Publicly viewed as selfless exemplars of black womanhood, the clubwomen rarely reflected upon the contradictions between their private lives and public activism.

Drawing upon letters, diaries, and reports, White uses feminist theory to examine these tensions in ways entirely alien to the clubwomen. Going beyond the public personae, White asserts, enables us to view these women as "real people instead of icons" (p. 108). Privately, women like Margaret Murray Washington and Mary Church Terrell acknowledged the disjuncture between their public adulation of domesticity and their private disdain for housekeeping chores. While Ida B. Wells and Charlotte Hawkins Brown disobeyed segregation laws, other club leaders avoided Jim Crow entirely by staying with friends and preparing their own meals. Several other prominent spokeswomen deliberately passed for white in order to avoid the indignity and discomfort of segregated accommodations. While acknowledging the paradox between private passing for white while publicly defending black womanhood, White believes these acts defied racial stereotypes. "What better agent of equality was there than a black who could be taken as white?" she asks (p. 112). But, of course, not all African Americans could pass as white. Privately, Brown and Jane Edna Hunter voiced deep insecurities about being black.

Sadly, the racial, class, and educational differences among African American clubwomen often precluded the formation of significant friendships between leaders. Beneath the surface image of perfect black womanhood lurked petty jealousies and frustrations. In the racist world of Jim Crow, the clubs offered too limited an environment to accommodate the talents of all their leaders.

But it is precisely in these tensions where White finds the humanity of the clubwomen. White's exposure of the personal costs of public heroism makes the achievements of the leaders even more impressive. Able to empathize with the average black woman in a way no speech could convey, the leaders and their listeners were bonded in secret resistance to a white world hostile to the realities of

black women's lives.

Like White, literary critic Karla Holloway addresses the connections between the public personae and private lives of African American women. In an impassioned essay, Holloway urges the academic community to foster environments in which we speak *with*, not *for*, our subjects, our students, and each other. Because we have allowed our scripts to cloak our differences in a fictitious shroud of sameness, Holloway asserts, we have lost touch with the cultural and ethnic distinctions among our voices.

Using literature as well as personal narrative, Holloway makes a poignant plea that we learn to listen to the inner voices of black women. Examining Zora Neal Hurston, Anita Hill, and Phillis Wheatley, Holloway shows the tensions between the "visual, verbal, and scripted moments" of these lives (p. 126). In each case, the imposition of racial and gender stereotypes overwhelmed the women's words. Our culture focuses more on *who* is speaking rather than upon *what* they are saying.

Holloway believes this same cultural blindness occurs in our classrooms. We must nurture voices, especially those of women and people of color who are the first to "get silenced, disrespected, challenged, and disbelieved" (p. 133). Only if we listen to women, Holloway concludes, can we harness the cacophony of our individual voices into a challenge against those who would silence us.

Physician Barbara Ogur shares Holloway's passion for listening to the silenced. Medical director of the Cambridge Neighborhood Health Centers, Ogur works with a multiethnic population whose humanity is lost amidst cultural stereotypes, including that of drug addict and person-living-with AIDS. Frustrated by Centers of Disease Control (CDC) definitions of AIDS which obscure the impact of the epidemic upon women, Ogur began interviewing HIV-positive women. In listening to their stories, Ogur speaks *with* her patients. She allows them to record the life stories and the effect of HIV in a way no doctor's chart or statistical graph could ever capture.

Ogur claims that despite the fact that heterosexual women are the fastest-growing group among the HIV-infected, most women do not consider themselves at risk. She asserts, "We have seen the science, the epidemiology, and it's not *us*. It's the prostitute's disease, the drug user's disease, the poor, lower-class woman's disease, the woman of color's disease, with perhaps the implicit suggestion that it is because of her drug use and promiscuous behavior that she contracted HIV" (p. 138). But, as Ogur's subjects powerfully attest, when it comes to AIDS, we are The Other. No stereotype can shield us from the reality of HIV.

Certainly, Michael Kimmel is no stereotypical man. Kimmel explores what men can learn from feminist scholarship. A sociologist noted for his ground-breaking work in the history of masculinity, Kimmel also recounts his personal experiences as a male scholar in the field of women's studies.

"Women's studies," Kimmel asserts, "has made men visible" (p. 154). Granted, this was not an objective of many feminists. Men are ubiquitous in positions of power. They rarely find themselves subordinate. Consequently, they do not usually view themselves as gendered beings. In Kimmel's opinion, men have "the privilege of invisibility" (p. 155). They are not victimized by sexism and therefore ignore the social importance of gender.

Kimmel believes that women's studies offers a forum in which men are forced to see the connections between gender and power. Yes, men *as a group* are in control of institutions. But Kimmel has discovered that men *as individuals* quite often feel powerless. The social construction of masculinity as a drive for power notwithstanding, Kimmel's research indicates that "manhood is actually more about the fear of others dominating us" (p. 162). Using this standard, men gain insight into how women respond to sexism. Just as we address the multiple diversities among people (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc.), Kimmel asks that we also recognize the differences between powerful and powerless men. He, like White and Holloway, calls for attention to the public and private voices and images. He, like Ferguson, notes the complexity of group identity and individual reality.

In the final essay, Cynthia Enloe places women's issues in a global context. She posits that commercial rivalries are replacing military posturing as the hallmark of the post-Cold War world. No longer impeded by communist/capitalist dichotomies, multinational corporations have gained unprecedented access to international markets. Yet Enloe believes that gendered representations play as vital a role in the new world order as they did in the preceding Cold War.

Enloe aims to elucidate how ideas about masculinity and femininity are being affected by changes in the global marketplace and shifting political systems. She reminds us of the poorly-paid, usually female, workers who stitch

these shoes while Michael Jordan and Shaquille O'Neal earn millions endorsing them. During the Cold War, owning a pair of Western sneakers signified a freedom to choose–and to consume–absent in communist states. Now, in their quest to emulate Western styles and yield to materialistic impulses, women in formerly communist nations feel pressured to provide their children the shoes, clothes, toys, etc., most closely identified with the United States. When such purchases may entail sacrificing necessary household goods, consumerism no longer appears a freedom.

Enloe also notes changes in global labor politics. In the Cold War era, authoritarian regimes justified their exploitation of workers by stressing the dictates of "national security." In a world fraught with danger, governments had "the right" to suppress unions, to overlook substandard working conditions, and to pay pathetic wages. In many communist states, women were urged to serve as full-time patriots, workers, and mothers. Firmly grasping the multipolar dimensions of the Cold War, Enloe stresses that fervently anticommunist states also invoked this image. The expectation that women would bear a double burden has fueled both industrial and social changes.

Most studies of women factory workers in developing nations have focused on foreign-owned companies. Yet, in the 1980s, several major corporations adopted a subcontracting system. Foreigners now buy licenses to manufacture U.S. products. This strategy frees American executives from foreign labor disputes and government rules. Instead, they focus on marketing and design–the most lucrative facets of the corporate world.

Surprisingly, factory workers have also reaped benefits from these changes. Amidst the global furor for demilitarization and democratization, women workers have unified and demanded improved working conditions. No longer protected by either Cold War dangers or American corporate executives, local government and business elites are more frequently compelled to meet their workers' demands. These officials and entrepreneurs are also finding it harder to transfer their factories to other Third World nations. In the past, they could easily relocate and escape a troublesome labor and/or political situation. But Enloe cites evidence that women workers are building organizing networks which transcend national boundaries. They are sharing strategies on labor organizing, on overcoming cultural prejudices against working women, on speaking publicly, and on balancing family and community needs with workplace demands. In the face of these events, factory executives ignore or mistreat their women workers at their peril. In Enloe's ideal world, the women workers will someday exercise as much freedom in making sneakers as consumers do in buying them.

Throughout *Talking Gender*, the contributors have clearly listened to the many "voices" singing through their essays. The intellectual rigor, clear writing, and emotional depth of these pieces gel into a fine collection. *Talking Gender* would fit beautifully into almost any women's studies course. I would also encourage assigning specific essays to compliment readings in a variety of other disciplines. Duke University is truly blessed to be able to marshal such a formidable array of first-rate scholars. I'm sure their next decade will be as successful as their first.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-women

Citation: Laura A. Belmonte. Review of Hewitt, Nancy; O'Barr, Jean; Rosenbaugh, Nancy, eds., *Talking Gender: Public Images, Personal Journeys and Political Critiques.* H-Women, H-Net Reviews. January, 1998.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1613

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.