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Feminism and the Politics of Difference. Sneja Gunew and Anna
Yeatman. Reviewed by Martin Bombyle, Fordham University.

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Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman, *Feminism and the Politics of Difference*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994. \$48.95 hardcover; \$17.95 papercover.

Coalescence around common issues and objectives is a delicate collective process. As the coalition encounters itself through its grassroots membership, serious differences usually emerge. What was once safely viewed as clear common ground becomes a murky dangerous place referred to with different names, symbols, and meanings. The differences are not semantic. Who we are and our experiences of marginalization are widely divergent, even as members of the same group. Seekers of progressive social change may share a unifying vision of a society where difference is acknowledged and celebrated through non-hegemonic and inclusive social structures. Yet such ideals are seriously damaged when we find ourselves in polarizing debates and painful exchanges from which we eagerly escape or retreat, alienated. Even in our alienation we are differently wounded and different in our resources and abilities for recovering.

Differences do not necessarily cause divisions. Divisions are not inherently problematic. But disavowed and unexamined differences can seriously afflict social change movements such as feminism. It is in this spirit of commitment to struggle that the editors of *Feminism and the Politics of Difference* have pulled together a series of thoughtful essays from a multidisciplinary group of internationally based feminists.

Editors Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman offer women important insights, creative concepts, and analytic tools to deal with their differences so they can work together for needed feminist social changes. Working with poststructuralist critical theory (including deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and postmodernism) along with postcolonialism, they seek to deconstruct power structures which organize debate into

... binary oppositions that invariably absorbs alterity into the hegemonic and familiar. Whenever such thinking prevails, we are merely in the business of juggling with traditional categories, privileging women rather than men, or some women at the expense of others, without changing the power structures behind

such constructions. Such logic is homogenizing and universalist, built on the principle of exclusion and the tyranny of the familiar. (p. xiii).

Naming and affirming our differences—recognizing them as “incommensurabilities”—is an alternative.

Gunew and Yeatman identify the politics of difference and their dangers through the essay writers, multiple interpretations of several themes. The anthology is a quilt of topics: anti-racist politics in Canadian feminist publishing, migration in New Zealand, Chicanas who traverse the Texas-US Southwest/Mexico border, the boy-boy Japanese comics which present male homosexual liaisons for adolescent female readers, a film by an Aboriginal Australian woman, and women’s access to colonial history (to name several). This panoply of texts with compelling yet disparate foci is a jarring display of difference across gender, culture, time, and place.

The anthology’s authors aspire to transcend “identity politics” that construct self-other binary oppositions because these limit further the possibility of difference. The essays consistently stress the necessity for analyzing both race and ethnicity constructions and dynamics. Another major recurring theme is the necessity of finding ways to open spaces for excluded groups without falling into tokenism or appropriation. Just as it is dangerous to identify representatives of groups, it is risky to represent or designate differences in order to engage with issues of marginally labeled groups. Sentimentally taking on the accessories of difference is a common, mistaken way of showing solidarity when we can more easily learn to join with others instead of pretending to be the other.

The burden of authenticity is also explored for the ways in which it is projected onto the other. The emphasis upon shoring up or justifying structures limits the possibilities for difference. Structures lose their permeability and flow when differences are segregated into bounded categories of authentic and inauthentic; the liberatory potential of subversion is overlooked. The need to legitimize marginal positions and to analyze structures of legitimation are also examined for subversive potential, who authorizes whom to speak and how does this process function?

Who has access to resources in relation to language? Print media? The arts?

The anthology's theoretical stances are grounded in the muck of women's political realities. The authors insights are scattered gems, best mined by readers endowed with a certain affection for poststructuralist discourse and its play. Readers who prefer more direct, concrete narrative about the politics of difference in feminist, social change activism work may still find the book satisfying.

Feminism and the Politics of Difference makes an important feminist, internationalist contribution to our literature an difference. If this dynamic and far reaching anthology is any indicator, uncharted pathways for social change praxis will continue to emerge from explorations in the politics of voice and difference. Certainly, feminists will continue to be among the storytellers and listeners.

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Elliot Liebow. *Tell Them Who I Am: The Lives of Homeless Women*. New York: Free Press, 1993. \$24.00 hardcover.

While writing this review, I recalled the story of Brenda, a homeless woman who died overnight while seeking shelter in a bus stop near the HUD office ("Homelessness Hitting Home: A Death on HUD's Doorstep", *New York Times*, November 30, 1993). As her body was removed, HUD officials and White House personnel were furiously debating funding for homeless programs. Her companions' remembrances were of a woman in her thirties with a "sharp mind" and helpful nature who was afraid of shelters. Brenda's death was not anonymous because of where she died. That we know of her death only underscores how little we know of her life, or the lives of others who are homeless, because of societal indifference and government neglect.

Elliot Liebow rends this veil of invisibility in his compassionate and insightful work — *Tell Them Who I Am*. Liebow's goal is to bring the reader into the world of homeless women;