

*You were
the fishes red gill to me
the flame tree's spread to me
the crab's leg/ the fried plantain
smell replenishing replenishing
Go to your wide futures, you said*

Read, enjoy and *teach* from this grand anthology — its glossary of unfamiliar words is a splendid aid to teaching — and thereby support the series of literary anthologies which CAFRA plans to follow this one.

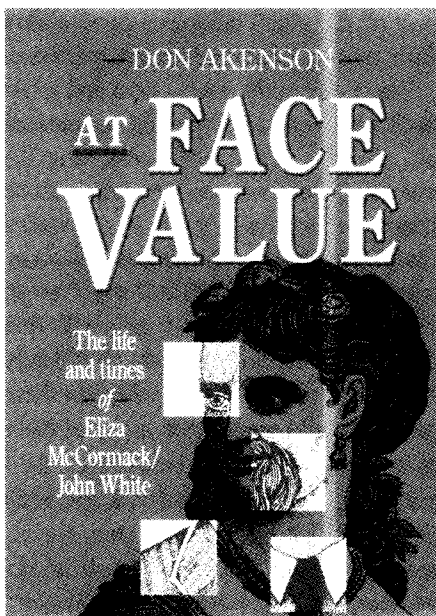
**AT FACE VALUE:
The Life and Times of
Eliza McCormack/John White**

Don Akenson. Kingston and Montreal:
McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990

By Allison MacDuffee

At Face Value presents an intriguing hypothesis: that Canada's first woman M.P. was Eliza McCormack White, a female transvestite who took the name of John White, served in Parliament from 1871 to 1887, married another woman and raised eight adopted children. The book challenges the conventional view that Agnes Campbell MacPhail became Canada's first woman M.P. in 1921.

The author, Don Akenson, a specialist in Irish history at Queen's University, became interested in John White while



researching Irish immigrants in Canada. He found a curious gap between John White's arrival in Canada from County Donegal in 1846, and his re-emergence in the mid-1850s as a prosperous cheese-factory and foundry owner near Belleville, Ontario.

Then Akenson came across an 1847 newspaper account about one Eliza McCormack, a woman who had been arrested in Hamilton for disguising herself as a man. He realized that "the best way to make sense of the career of John White in Canada was to recognize that he was actually a she: that Eliza McCormack had taken on the deceased John White's name and much of his persona."

According to his hypothesis, Eliza McCormack White, John White's sister, assumed her brother's identity after his death from fever in 1846. By adopting male clothing and mannerisms, and sometimes wearing false facial hair, she was able to carry off her deception successfully.

Those who expect *At Face Value* to prove that John White was a woman will be disappointed. In the Preface, Akenson explains that his point in writing the book was not to prove the gender of his protagonist. Rather, he wanted to make the reader question gender stereotypes.

At Face Value is written largely in the first person, from Eliza's point of view; there is also much invented dialogue. So it seems fair to judge the book as a historical novel, rather than a conventional biography or history book.

The most successful chapters are those which describe Eliza's childhood in Ireland. Drawing on his knowledge of Irish history, the author creates a vivid picture of a country ravaged by famine and disease. The scene in which young Eliza convinces her father to let her learn the blacksmith's trade is especially moving.

The part of the book describing Eliza's life in Canada is more uneven. The description of her years as a prostitute in a Toronto hotel may seem gratuitously shocking to some readers. On the other hand, the chapters about her political career provide an interesting picture of politics in nineteenth-century Ontario, and the story of her marriage to Esther Johnson is touching and insightful.

By creating a character who is in many ways androgynous, Akenson makes us question our preconceptions about gender. Eliza is presented as a mixture of

"masculine" characteristics — business acumen, political shrewdness and sexual adventurousness — and more "feminine" traits, such as modesty and gentleness.

Despite some faults, such as an unfortunate abundance of typographical errors, *At Face Value* is a thought-provoking and often moving book. While Akenson does not prove that John White and Eliza McCormack were the same person, he does demonstrate that taking on a man's identity in the 19th century might have been a very sane and sensible way for a woman to achieve power in a male-dominated society.

**THE OPPOSITIONAL
IMAGINATION: Feminism,
Critique and Political Theory**

Joan Cocks. London: Routledge, 1989

By Ian D. Thatcher

This is a good book in that its aims are clearly stated and its arguments are pursued both cogently and persuasively. Cocks' subject for examination is power, specifically the regime of masculine/feminine:

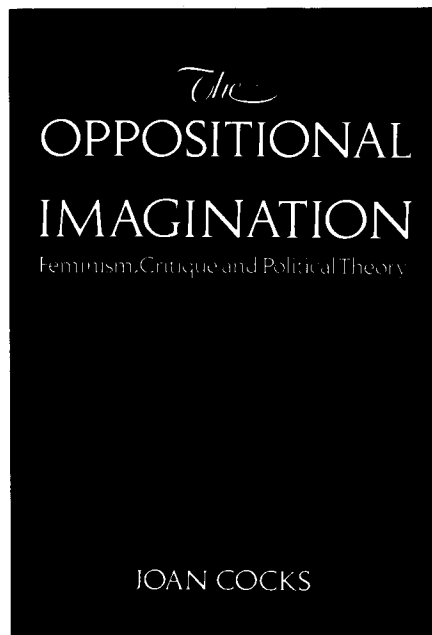
an order of sex and gender inclusive of the established phallogocentric discourse on the meaning of the body.... the elaboration of the "masculine" and the "feminine" personality, the sexual division of labour, the social orchestration of biological reproduction, the assignment of public and domestic power and subjection made on the basis of genital type.

In Part One, Cocks discusses the works of Said, Williams, Gramsci and Foucault. From her exposition and comparison of the ideas of these critical theorists she constructs a series of assumptions about the nature of power. First, power imposes itself through culture. Second, the messages emanating from any power regime will be a selection from descriptions of reality which are infinite. Third, there will be several regimes of power which, although one will be dominant, will coexist and intersect. Fourth, no single system of power determines all others. Fifth, no power regime can incorporate all thoughts

and possibilities within itself. Sixth, there is no conscious author behind the construction of a power system. Seventh, power flows from the micro to the macro and vice versa. All of these assumptions are important in that they underpin the examination of the regime of masculine/feminine, perceptions of opposition and liberation, and the critique of radical feminism.

The importance of culture is stressed in Cocks' analysis of the development of the patriarchal right as a traditional form of power to phallic right as a contemporary manifestation. Economic and cultural development, with the concomitant increase of opportunities for women and children outside the home, are primarily used to explain the erosion of the family and a fixed hierarchical order which underpinned patriarchal right. Ideas of individual freedom and satisfaction of desire combined with capitalism's interest in commodification are seen as the prerequisites for the triumph of phallic right, that is, an order which is concerned with the satisfaction of masculine desire (based upon assumptions about bodily difference) and which transmits its message through mass communications. However, for Cocks, the possession of a male or female body carries no additional meaning. This, combined with the argument that power has to engage in a partial representation of reality, prepares the ground for the claim that: "men's domination over women... does not issue out of... essential male and female identities fixed in male and female bodies... but on the harsh, systematic fashioning of brute bodies into masculine and feminine selves."

The combination of the claims that reality can be interpreted in a variety of ways, and that no regime can subsume all possible viewpoints, raises the possibility of the formation of counter-cultures, of which Cocks identifies four representative types: the eccentric, the critic, the traitor and the rebel. However, the theoretical foundations of this section, together with the claim that a power regime presents reality within a particular discourse, set definite limits to notions of liberation. For Cocks, one constructing discourse replaces another. However, the possibilities for new oppositions remain, so that "as soon as the elements of disorder coalesce in a new way, critical theory should reappear... to agitate on behalf of the exuberance of life against a too-avid fixing



and freezing of things." Given the experiences of twentieth-century attempts to apply doctrines of liberation to practical life, Cocks' conclusion seems particularly apposite.

In relation to existing feminist theory, Cocks' conclusions drawn from political theory are used to launch an attack on radical feminism. First, radical feminism accepted the phallicentric partial description of reality as reality itself, thus remaining blind to the variety of heterosexual encounters. Second, it took an instrumentalist approach to the masculine/feminine regime, claiming that men were its conscious creators. It thus engages in a simplistic explanation which, when faced with a more complex reality, can only result in disillusionment. Third, it has a fixed notion of male and female nature which is wrong, and denies that men and women can have a multiplicity of eroticisms.

However, there are problems with Cocks' assumptions. First, there is the notion of a "regime without a master," that is, a situation in which individuals are born into a discourse already defined by past generations so that "there are tendencies of practice for no reason that anyone ever devised." However, it is possible to attribute importance to past generations without falling, as Cocks does, into a non-explanation of what she refers to as the "metapower." Thus, Marx wrote of tradition weighing "like a nightmare on the minds of the living," while simultaneously supplying an explanation of the driving forces of the metapower by reference to the first creation of a surplus and the division of society into classes. Radi-

cal feminism would refer to male and female nature in its retrospective explanation for why previous generations behaved as they did.

A second problem with the work is that while I found Cocks' critique of radical feminism well-written, clear and sensible, it is not a refutation and provides no special reasons why radical feminists should stop being so. Thus, Cocks writes that radical feminism could gain insights into understanding power if only it were "not adamant that all established ways of understanding anything were not intrinsically 'male.'" The radical feminist could reply, "Yes, if I change my suppositions and share yours, then I'd write what you write," that is, radical feminism would dissolve itself. The issue thus comes down to whether one wants to accept the radical feminist or Cocks' view of male and female nature. I prefer Cocks' and agree with her conclusions; but the radical feminist could point to Cocks' claim that there is a dominant discourse and argue that hers remains within the male — thus *The Oppositional Imagination* works to the advantage of the "enemy."

STRONG MOTHERS, WEAK WIVES

Miriam M. Johnson. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988

By Christel Hus

In the 1960s the women's movement minimized gender differences in order to stress the similarities between the sexes as an argument for equal rights. In recent years we have observed the opposite tendency: to emphasize the characteristics of females and to value their special qualities. These two contrasting tendencies face the same underlying question: What causes gender inequality?

Miriam M. Johnson, a professor of Sociology at the University of Oregon, has searched through a wealth of different theories to answer this central question. Her intention is not to provide new material, but to analyze the existing theories. She calls hers "a book not of discovery, but of interpretations." From the beginning Johnson states her underlying beliefs: Inequality is not inherent or inevitable in heterosexual relations. Therefore,