

# Book Reviews

## THE CURIOUS FEMINIST

Cynthia Enloe  
Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004

REVIEWED BY VANESSA OLIVER

Reading Cynthia Enloe's latest contribution to the world of Gender and International Relations the enduring words of Lewis Carroll returned to me: "Curiouser and curiouser!" cried Alice, 'now I'm opening out like the largest telescope that ever was!" Indeed, *The Curious Feminist* is Enloe's most telescopic volume yet. From her own childhood in suburban America to Serbian militiamen to Vietnamese war museums, her search for women explores nationalism, militarism and a new age of empire from an innovative, distinctly feminist, set of lenses. Eschewing standard academic writing, Enloe underscores her content with experimental forms that rely on personal narrative, literature, film, interviews and legal testimony—the unconventional channels of public policy discourse. Employing the lessons of feminist pedagogy, she blurs the distinctions between researcher, reader and subject, ultimately proving that we are all complicit in creating and destroying the troubling dynamics of "masculinity" and "femininity." In deciding who to take seriously, Enloe muses on the importance of accessibility, mainstream readership, and, strikingly, unveils the stifling culture of careerism inherent in academia. Questioning traditional notions of authority and expertise, she begins to distinguish the sounds of silence. Throughout this collection, Enloe reminds her readers

that there is power in the margins that can only be liberated when we are curious enough to question the naturalness of men and militaries in the middle.

Enloe's engagement with her Western readership is entirely strategic in *The Curious Feminist*. She seeks to demystify the myths of alterity that are so fundamental to American policy implementation, and in so doing, she seeks to unsettle those readers whose complacency allows militarization to seem unproblematic. Enloe's collection depicts the connections between corporate accountability (Nike), global accountability (the United Nations), state policy (particularly American), feminized respectability (the global creation of feminine myths), daughters (herself and others) and militarization (especially in its most insidious forms). Enloe's strategic maneuvering first positions the reader in a scene of domestic familiarity. As is the case in her sneaker essays, once she has created an alliance on the homefront, she swiftly ties the familiar space to Asia Pacific and exploitative labour practices, making it impossible for her audience to wriggle out of their own complicity. Enloe capitalizes on these discomforts in order to make her reader aware of social locations and their tremendous importance. In fact, Enloe devotes much of her analysis to the events that transpire, often literally, in her own backyard. *The Curious Feminist* is at many points an exercise in autobiography. Enloe traces her own feminist transformation while simultaneously mapping the dangerous history of American foreign policy and its militarized masculinity; however, it is her mother's "normal" feminized life that she returns to as explanation for much of her own curiosity. Enloe

ends the collection with an almost poetic (troublingly, despite her earlier privileging of creative forms of expression, she denies that the last chapter is poetry) recounting of her mother's domestic experience of World War II. This is, of course, the perfect uneasy conclusion to a book that has concerned itself with making important the lives of women whose narratives have been naturalized to seem mundane and inconsequential. Characteristically tongue-in-cheek, Enloe comments that she is "pretty interested in bland people."

Here, as in her other recent work, Enloe demonstrates that the powerful cannot exist without the marginal—men in command construct their identities in negation: not female, not silent and not pacifistic. Her intense scrutiny of the construction of femininity is born of this recognition and its accompanying mythologies. Enloe cites numerous examples of the militarization of women's rights that occur when gender issues suit the agendas of powerful men: creating a more modern seeming state, justifying military intervention, or mobilizing women's votes. She reminds us that individual actors, not monolithic states, make the choices and create the rhetoric that confine women to roles of silence and oppression. This collection, however, is not about to admit defeat to a group of tyrannical men. Enloe's book is largely concerned with recognizing the multiple sites of feminine resistance. She advocates for transnational political and politicized organization among women, denying essentialized categories or homogeneity among women. Instead, she says, women around the world are militarized, and although they experience militarization in diverse and innumerable ways, they all have something to gain from

one another's experience. In Enloe's slightly romanticized coalition politics there exists the possibility of collaboration without the presumption of homogenous identity or even shared experiences. As long as women are constantly interrogating their own masculinized assumptions, there will be space for listening, understanding and advocacy. *The Curious Feminist* charts the global efforts of feminist groups contesting militarization and examines the creation of unorthodox spaces of resistance. From Enloe's childhood living room to an Iraqi hair salon, Enloe reminds her readers that "a feminized space is not the opposite of a political place."

The form and content of *The Curious Feminist* point to Enloe's constantly evolving understanding of political theory and feminist pedagogy. Her espousal of a uniquely feminist curiosity will, undoubtedly, change the way first-time Enloe readers think about the intersectionalities of gender and politics; however, one wonders when feminist curiosity will be re-envisioned as feminist action. While Enloe points to coalitional strategies for change across the globe, she has yet to outline what effective demilitarization and anti-militarization policy might look like or how it might be implemented. This is a minor criticism of what it is overall a refreshing and provocative feminist analysis, but as Cynthia Enloe reveals, "a conclusion should never sound too satisfied."

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## **PEDAGOGIES OF CROSSING: MEDITATIONS ON FEMINISM, SEXUAL POLITICS, MEMORY, AND THE SACRED**

M. Jacqui Alexander  
Durham, NC: Duke University  
Press, 2005

### **REVIEWED BY ILYA PARKINS**

M. Jacqui Alexander's collection of essays assembles the important work, written over the last ten years, of this transnational feminist theorist. *Pedagogies* confirms Alexander's status as one of the most rigorous and innovative thinkers in the field, as it artfully brings together meditations on contemporary and historical operations of imperialism, the mobilization of heterosexuality as a nation-building project in the Caribbean and the United States, the challenges of a politically engaged feminist pedagogy, a revisiting of identity politics for women of colour and indeed all feminists, and the place of the sacred in political praxis and everyday life.

Alexander is a theorist, to be sure—she offers articulate defenses of the need for theory at several key points in the collection – but she remains committed to the grounding of theory in everyday life, and many of the essays in this collection begin from her own life as a Caribbean immigrant, a scholar-activist, and a spiritual practitioner. Perhaps it is this willingness to excavate and critically confront experience that convinces this reader so deeply of her central point about the inalienable interdependence of individuals, collectives, ideologies, and times. It is her task to make visible this interdependence in a culture that denies it, and to use this visibility to prompt a rethinking of the terms by which we know history and politics; this is, at its core, an epistemological project.

Alexander's theoretical apparatus reveals its lineage in the Gramscian theory of hegemony: many of these essays, such as "Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: Feminism, Tourism, and the State in the Bahamas," trace instances of domination achieved through the state's institutionalization and de-radicalization of feminist and anti-colonial frameworks. It seems clear that Alexander also works in the debt of Foucault's theories of the discursive production of identity categories through their simultaneous articulation in institutions and everyday lives. Indeed, one of her major accomplishments in this collection is to offer detailed and convincing analyses of the material effects of discursive and ideological frameworks. Three essays on the state's codification of heteropatriarchy in the 1980s and 1990s—accomplished, in two Caribbean nations, through legislation that simultaneously toughened penalties for violence against women *and* criminalized homosexuality—effectively reveal the lived consequences of the state's sexual engineering, as well as their insidious relationship to militarization, global capitalism, and neoimperial strategies.

The essay that stands out as the centerpiece of the book and, I think, best accomplishes Alexander's aims, is "Anatomy of a Mobilization." This long piece details the activities of the Mobilization for Real Diversity, Democracy, and Economic Justice at the New School for Social Research in 1996-97. Alexander was herself contractually appointed at the New School at the time; she and other members of the Mobilization protested the ways that the institution, despite its founding in and historical commitment to a politics of social justice, continued to marginalize faculty, students and staff of colour and offered no intellectual space to emerging interdisciplinary fields that took seriously the historical and contemporary facts of transnationalism. Alexander's ac-