

MONTH) IN THE FIRST YEAR OF OUR WORD: 0300 HOURS." Each chapter notes the passage of time precisely: "THE TWENTY-FIFTH DAY IN THE TWO THOUSANDTH MONTH OF THE TWO BILLIONTH YEAR OF OUR WORD: 1000 HOURS." The Traveller's quest is, at first, indefinite, but gradually it becomes clearer to her, figured concretely as a search for the explorer David Livingstone. More important but less tangibly, it becomes an investigation into the meaning of silence and word, her own silence, which is to say, as well and inseparably, her own voice. In her search for Livingstone, the Traveller encounters seven tribes, the name of each an anagram of the word silence. Either through their practices or through the trials they impose on her, each helps her to clarify her understanding and purify her intention. Not until she possesses her silence fully, however, does she meet up with Livingstone. The encounter is wonderfully resonant, comic and poignant, and concludes, quite unexpectedly, with a remarkable peace.

The bold originality of *Looking for Livingstone* cannot be conveyed by setting and plot alone. The Traveller is Everywoman, defined, though in no sense limited, by race and history. The rich mix of genre that this narrative evokes ranges from epic to science fiction, each form interrogated by the Traveller's race and gender. Details of ritual and custom, the various signs and metaphors through which meaning is evoked, are both familiar in their simplicity and connections to various spiritual traditions, and yet private to the seeker, their specific meaning and significance interpreted by her and demanding of readers their own personal journey.

This personal journey is not, however, simply transcendent, for *Looking for Livingstone* firmly grounds meaning in contexts of history and discourse. The work constitutes a critique of Eurocentricity at one of its most literal sites: the British imperial presence in Africa. The Traveller's debate with Livingstone over the na-

ture of his accomplishments comprises a witty and complex summation of the issues related to European mapping of the "Dark Continent."

This is a tale to be read at many levels. The most radical, in many respects, is its investigation of the trope of silence as it has come to represent, in contemporary cultural and feminist discourse, the absence of expression by Africans (of the continent and diaspora) and by women, particularly by black women. Like the trope of centre/margin, evoked by allusions to mapping within the narrative, the antinomies of silence and voice situate and fix in contemporary understanding the possibility for the "not represented."

*Looking for Livingstone* as well mischievously rebuffs appropriative theorizing about that silence and what it promises. For example, just before meeting Livingstone, the Traveller encounters the "Museum of Silence, erected to house the many and varied silences of different peoples." When the Traveller challenges the curators that they were "ours to do with as we pleased—to destroy if we so wanted," she is told that they "were best kept there where they could be labeled, annotated, dated, catalogued...in carefully regulated, climate-controlled rooms."

*Looking for Livingstone* permanently disrupts how we read many texts of both Europe and Africa, not only because, thematically, it appropriates and deconstructs some central icons, but also because of the linguistic simplicity and elegance of the prose and the extraordinary intricacy of its poetry. Philip rarely falters in this work: the poetry evokes the anguish that heralds new insight, and visually suggests both word and silence as, sprinkled across whole pages, it offers a sharp contrast to the visual density of the prose. Her tone ranges: rituals are described with the disruptive vividness of dreams, in language sparse and dignified. In contrast, the Traveller emerges with her own distinctive voice, earthy, informal, witty and troublesome, living within her narrative as well as framing it.

With these most recent works, Nourbese Philip emerges as a powerful presence in Canada; in fact, *Frontiers* records that emergence. Troubled and troubling, eloquent and witty, Philip persistently and courageously strives to clarify conflicts, expand debates, disturb complacency, extend our vision. She makes plain her own longings so we may all be.

*Parts of the review of Looking for Livingstone have appeared in Journal of Canadian Poetry, Volume 8, 1993.*

<sup>1</sup>See M. Nourbese Philip, *Showing Grit: Showboating North of the 44th Parallel*, Second Edition (Toronto: Poui Publications, 1993).

## SHARING OUR EXPERIENCE

Arun Mukherjee, ed. Ottawa: Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1993.

*by Shelagh Wilkinson*

This is a book that is long-overdue. Those of us who teach in women's studies have known that the voices we offer to our students as representatives of Canadian women's experience have never included the many voices of aboriginal women, lesbian women, women with disabilities, old women, immigrant, refugee, working class women; in fact, all those who are marginalized by the social and cultural "norms" of this country have always been counted out. Some teachers, recognizing the loss that such a silence has meant for our students, cringed at the misrepresentation that our course material displayed and scurried around xeroxing articles for hand-out material, hoping that this would somehow help to fill the gaps in our course outlines and resource lists. It has been a "hit and miss" effort at best, doing little to introduce students to the rich diversity of voices that must be included if we are to teach from the experience of women in Canada.

Now Arun Mukherjee has done the work for us: she has edited a book that brings together these previously silenced voices and she does so in a format that is uniquely appropriate to the material being presented. *Sharing Our Experience* is just that, a sharing—through the letters that women write to each other—of the most intimate and revealing experiences. And it is all achieved in an unpretentious form that completely demystifies what could be a very complex and intricate web of cultural ideologies and social practices. Across cultures, women have kept diaries, notebooks and journals; they have exchanged advice and warning, they have asked for help and offered it. And they have done this most often in letters and notes that have gone around the globe and just around the corner. So this epistolary form, so natural and easy for women to use, is the form that the Advisory Council selected when they put out the call for “papers.” We must be grateful for such common woman-sense.

What is impressive about this new volume of cross-cultural voices is the scope and the diversity of experience that Arun Mukherjee has woven together. Not only are the women who write here scattered across Canada, living from north to south and east to west; in addition to women of the first nations, they represent women of African, Asian, Caribbean and Middle Eastern descent who are all Canadians. And the letters also cross the boundary lines of age, boundaries that too often allow only the young and vigorous to have a voice. Instead, we listen to old women talking to each other, to their granddaughters—and to their granddaughters talking back. Sometimes we have a letter written by a daughter for a mother, and we hear the shared voices of two generations of women, their experiences differing sufficiently to invite analysis of societal/cultural changes that have taken place in the lives of women in Canada across several decades.

The letters provide us with a new perspective on Canadian institutions

and on the “rituals” of being a Canadian. We get to see ourselves through the eyes of women who have been marginalized. And not surprisingly, these women have much to teach us, not only about systemic and inherent racism but also about environmental issues, about actions we might take to ensure world peace and about communication, listening to the wisdom of the elderly and sharing the joys of the very young.

One aspect of the book is especially important for women’s studies classes, where I intend to introduce the text. Mukherjee provides a thematic index as an epilogue and here we find the writers listed under 51 separate headings that run alphabetically from Aboriginal Values through Anger and Ritual to Violence and Work.

A category that I find particularly interesting is that of “Language Issues.” Under this heading I find that Anna Woo is writing her therapist. Yet her letter is about language; we are made aware of the difficulty that women from other cultures have when they are forced to conform to our idea of “good English.” Setting up rules and standards makes it easy to eliminate the voices of many women—and these are the very voices that we need to hear. But while this letter deals with language, it also deals with anger and racism. Woo is devastatingly honest in remembering “with guilt about my Indian friends. We grew up as allies because we were outcasts. Yet I always felt relieved when they were picked on rather than me. ‘Thank God my skin isn’t dark!’ I thought. It gave me a sense of being the ‘same’: being white.”

This intersecting of language with issues of gender, race and class will provide an excellent take-off point for class discussions. These topics may be analyzed in other books that we use in women’s studies classes, but I have yet to find them spoken about with such clarity and honesty—and never have I found them interwoven with the life experiences of women in such a way that each specific concept: gender/race/class/language cannot be considered as a separate “problem.”

Each impacts on all of the others This is the sort of integration that feminist analysis works towards. Here we have it in a gathering of letters written by women to each other. We can only be grateful to all of the women for sharing their lives with us and to the editor and the Advisory Council for their work in making this book available to us.

*This book is available, free of charge, from: The Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 110 O’Connor Street, 9th floor, Box 1541, Station B, Ottawa, Ontario, K1P 5R5. Tel: 613-992-4976, Fax: 613-992-1715. Quote no. 93-G-200.*

## **RETURNING THE GAZE: ESSAYS ON RACISM, FEMINISM AND POLITICS**

Himani Bannerji, ed. Toronto:  
Sister Vision Press, 1993.

*by Shirin Kudchedkar*

“These texts begin,” says Himani Bannerji in her introduction to this important book, “from a ‘rift’ or a ‘fissure,’ from a disjunction between what we know ourselves to be and what the social and intellectual environment where we are ‘raced’ tells us.”

Women of colour, whether they constitute minorities in predominantly white societies, or whether they belong to countries in Asia or Africa, have increasingly expressed dissatisfaction with the universalizing stance of a feminist theory which has its roots in the experience of white middle class women. Bannerji refers to the attempts to compensate for this evident lack in “mainstream” feminism through what she terms the “parenthetical” appearance of topics such as race. She points out that terms like “black poetry” situate or construct difference through the very gestures of inclusion and multiculturalism. Even this token presence represents a space seized from an