

May-2009

Book Review: Shout Out: Women of Color Respond to Violence

Katie White

Lisa Covington

Jenna Stephenson

Esther Rothblum

Follow this and additional works at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

White, Katie; Covington, Lisa; Stephenson, Jenna; and Rothblum, Esther (2009). Book Review: Shout Out: Women of Color Respond to Violence. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 10(4), 327-330.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol10/iss4/26>

Shout Out: Women of Color Respond to Violence. Maria Ochoa and Barbara K. Ige (Editors). 2007. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press. 413 pages. \$16.95 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Katie White, Lisa Covington, Jenna Stephenson, and Esther Rothblum¹

Shout Out: Women of Color Respond to Violence is a call to action. It is an emphatic declaration that violence against women is a universal problem, yet one shrouded in a silence that must be broken. Each chapter title begins with appropriate tools and actions meant to accomplish this goal: strength in the service of vision, articulating a global ethic, speaking truth to power, messages of pain, defining a principled peace. In the initial Introduction, as well as the opening of Chapter Four, the editors credit Gloria Anzaldua as the inspiration for the composition of the text, which draws on “creative nonfiction, poetry, visual art, and critical analyses” (p. xiv) with some groupings intended to “surprise the reader with a hybridization of form and content that disrupts a familiar reading” (220).

We found *Shout Out* to be a roadmap for awareness and transformation. The text consists of over fifty articles and poems written by women of color about violence in their lives. When co-editor Barbara Ige was teaching literature at the University of Hawai'i in the 1990s, a well-meaning colleague told her: “We don't talk about certain things; it isn't good for the community”(227). Nevertheless, Ige persevered, and soon her students were writing about personal pain and violence in response to the course readings. Ige would meet with each student in order to “explore her writing history, which was inexorably entangled with an anguished past” (231).

And in many ways *Shout Out* follows that same format, with each author writing about her own personal and theoretical approach to violence as a woman of color. Very few of the pieces have been published previously, and so this is in fact an anthology of women of color speaking out. In a poem dedicated to Toni Cade Bambara, Aishah Shahidah Simmons unapologetically declares, “This is NOT an objective piece. I said...This is NOT an objective piece. I am in a STATE OF RAGE I said. I am. I am. I am. I AM IN A STATE OF RAGE ABOUT THE RAPE AND SEXUAL ABUSE OF WOMEN OF AFRICAN DESCENT IN THE united states of ameri-kkk-a” (221).

The purpose of *Shout Out* is to eradicate violence by making the invisible seen. As the editors state in their introduction (xii), “what these works share in common is the demonstration of how collective agency is a powerful force that refutes and resists the

¹ Katie White, Lisa Covington and Jenna Stephenson are graduate students in the Women's Studies Department at San Diego State University, and Dr. Esther Rothblum is a Professor of Women's Studies at the same institution.

violence perpetrated by individuals and institutions.” According to the editors, they received hundreds of responses to their call for submissions, and they accepted pieces by women who were African American, Asian American, Indo-American, Chicana, and Native American, as well as women from Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, the Pacific Island nations, and Eastern Europe. Authors range in age from those still in high school to elders.

Shout Out contains vivid descriptions of domestic violence, rape, and incest, but also sexual trafficking, violence inside prison, and war-related trauma. The poems and essays describe how economic conditions restrict the options that women of color have to leave abusive situations, how immigration serves to isolate women, and how colonialism remains a painful legacy. One of the articles, written by Hosai Ehsan, also points out that White Americans “presume that ‘other’ cultures, especially people of color, are far more accepting of domestic violence than the U.S. culture” (69).

In “The Way We Do Things in America,” Alissa Bierria uses a play on words from George Bush to further challenge the position “of the United States as a ‘model country’ for the world to emulate” (150) Specific attention is given to how U.S. society is permissive of violence against women and how violence is sustained by representations in the mainstream media, as well as actions taken, yet denied, by the U.S. government, particularly in the War on Terror. Sexual torture is a powerful force of the U.S. military and a component of military culture. Bierria argues that what will ultimately end rape is the undermining of this institutional endorsement and embodiment of the principles of rape culture (152).

As Elena Shih says about trafficking in Thailand, “the trade of women is an ideal economic undertaking, for there is very low investment, very low chance of being caught and prosecuted, and a very high return” (88). She compares the trafficking of women to the drug trade, where drugs can be used only once whereas women can be used repeatedly. Trafficking in women becomes a transnational corporation, involving the sex tourist industry, internet matchmaking organizations, arrangers and investors, recruiters of women, debt collectors, and transporters. But Elena Shih also describes women’s sense of agency—they get involved in migrant sex work in order to support their families and to obtain economic independence. Some sex workers have also discovered or founded grassroots feminist organizations and then prosecuted their persecutors. Agency is also a central theme of the entire book. The editors argue in the Introduction to Chapter One, “Peace begins with each individual, and the stories in this chapter teach us how to move from the personal to collective agency in the effort to end systemic violence” (3).

Invoking Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of borderlands (1987), Sharmila Lodhia describes how U.S. media distort reports of violence against women of color in the U.S. and in other countries. When an Indo-American woman was shot and killed by her husband in California, media reports emphasized “the so-called ‘status of women in

India' and the motivations for violence committed against them" (110). Lodhia states (111): "In these storylines, 'culture' is presented as monolithic, and religious diversity is disregarded in favor of distorted versions of what gendered violence signifies within the Indian community."

In the book's final section, women describe their liberty and imagine a world free from violence. Lakshmy Parameswaran explains how they found each other and discovered "diversity in unity" (55). Leticia Manzano and Deborah Okrina write about using poetry to reduce shame and promote healing. As Lily Yeh states, "My story is a look into how personal endeavors can become a catalyst for community actions, and how an inward journey can manifest in social change" (337). YK Hong writes that her "entire life's work is based on the knowledge that we, as oppressed beings, are working toward something much larger than us" (306). In fact, the authors of *Shout Out* are not just making peace with their own experiences of violence, but they are inspiring the readers to become activists as well.

We, the reviewers, represent a diversity of backgrounds but only one of us, Lisa, is a woman of color, whereas Katie, Jenna and Esther are White. As Lisa commented:

I find myself in an interesting situation. I felt comfortable and agree with many of the concepts discussed in the book. For example, in the poem *Sixteen* by Aya de Leon, she said, "...a chronic case of aggressive makeup and thoroughly systematized hair." After reading this poem, I wondered whether my White peers understand the concept of hair in the Black community. Do they understand how hair is not only a commodification but is also valued more if it is straight, long, and ultimately maintaining Eurocentric characteristics? Do they realize hair is not the only way women of color are colonized? While reading the book I found myself not only in solidarity with the women of color but also in the awkward position of being the only woman of color reviewing this book. I wonder if this book could be analogous to Leticia Manzano and Deborah Okrina's concept of sharing poetry. Manzano and Okrina state, "Teach the audience not to critique poetry, but to listen to the feelings behind the words." Although I do not think my White peers will completely understand colonization regarding women of color; there is much information that we can read and learn but actually being in solidarity with women of color are two different concepts.

Nevertheless, *Shout Out* will be read by women of color as well as White women, and transform their ideas about violence and how to prevent it.

Works Cited

Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.