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Book Review: Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism

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Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism. Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rehman (eds.). 2002. Forward by Cherrie Moraga. Emeryville CA: Seal Press. 320 pages. \$16.95 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Susan Harper-Bisso¹

It is admittedly somewhat ironic that I, a white woman over 30, should be reviewing a collection of essays by young women of color, essays intended to critique the very academic and activist feminism from which I come. I approach the task with some trepidation. Surely, being a working-class GenXer rooted firmly in the Third Wave gets me some street cred, right? Or is my review of these women's work simply another attempt to colonize the voices of women of color – one of the main accusations leveled at white feminism by the editors and contributors of this volume?

It is exactly these types of issues the creators of *Colonize This!* intend for their readers to consider, and precisely these types of existential questions they encourage their readers to ask of themselves and of the enterprise we often refer to somewhat monolithically as "feminism." In giving voice to young women of color and their myriad experiences of feminism, this volume forces readers to consider (and reconsider) their perceptions of feminism as a unified concept, and to examine the diverse ways in which women can come to and live out their feminism(s). The end result is an enlightening and sometimes unsettling look at the diversity and self-contradiction that exist within a social movement (feminism) and academic discipline (Women's Studies), which at their heart claim to be about unity and equality, but all too often create new divisions and disenfranchise the very people they seek to give voice.

The subtitle – *Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism* – is somewhat of a misnomer, in that the majority of the contributors are responding to Second Wave feminism rather than Third Wave. Common to the essays in this volume is the experience of feeling disenfranchised or marginalized in Women's Studies classes in various college settings. The feminism to which students were being exposed in these classroom settings is predominantly Second Wave, and it would be interesting to see more of the writers' responses to more recent Third Wave writings such as Amy Richards' and Jennifer Baumgardner's *Manifesta*. This disconnect aside, however, the essays in *Colonize This!* provide a valuable critique of Women's Studies courses and the feminism they teach. Central to many of the authors' feminist awakenings is the experience of taking such courses in college – Women's Studies majors are heavily represented among the contributors – and being exposed for the first time to the central ideas of academic and (to a lesser extent) activist feminism. Perhaps more important than the course material, however, the authors articulate the role of the challenges they faced in Women's Studies classrooms – from racial marginalization and the "white guilt" of their classmates, to classism, to heterosexism – as pivotal in shaping their own identities as feminists. The theories put forth in the classroom were and are incredibly important to awakening

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feminist consciousness in the authors, but the experiences of negotiating the borders and margins of those same theories are what truly "made" them feminists.

In common with other feminists of color such as Joan Morgan (in *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*), the authors of *Colonize This!* reflect on the differences between the feminism they were taught in the classroom and the feminism they saw lived daily by their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. This "lived feminism" is seldom called feminism – it is simply life, being lived by predominantly working-class women of color. This sense of feminism as something that is lived, and lived without a lot of fanfare or statement-making, permeates the essays in *Colonize This!* It is in recognizing the ways in which feminist thought and action surrounded them that the authors take on academic (read: white) feminism. Few of the contributors take on feminist theory or white feminism in a direct sense by critiquing specific authors, ideas, and schools of thought. More important, and central to the essays, is the experience of being a young woman of color looking for feminist consciousness and living out feminist ideals, and realizing that that consciousness and those ideals had been present in one's upbringing and environment all along. Indeed, realizing that their own mothers (and aunts, and grandmothers) had been living feminism while they were simultaneously marginalized from the feminist movement is cited by many of the authors as a watershed moment. And out of that watershed realization came the recognition that many of the causes that the women's movement was fighting for – working outside the home, for instance – were things women of color had been living all along, and were not nearly as glamorous or liberating as white feminists made them seem. As one contributor puts it, while many white feminists were working outside the home, their children were being cared for and their houses maintained by women of color – and no one seemed to see the irony.

Colonize This! is a multilayered cultural critique of white, and primarily academic, feminism. Readers looking for a point by point refutation of central theories of feminism, or a clearly outlined theory of "women of color feminism" will walk away unsatisfied. *Colonize This!* has much more in common with Morgan's *Chickenheads* than with Richards and Baumgardner's *Manifesta*. However, *Colonize This!* is an excellent example of feminism as a verb – as an experience, as a life and a lifestyle. Readers interested in seeing the myriad of ways in which one can "be a feminist" will find a vast array of examples in the essays contained in this volume.

Like many edited volumes, *Colonize This!* is at times uneven. The quality of the essays varies. While none of the essays is poorly done, some of the contributors are clearly more comfortable and talented writers. Gwendolyn Pough's "Love Feminism But Where's My Hip Hop?" and Cristina Tzintzun's "Colonize This!" (from whence the book's title comes) are clear standouts. Others, such as Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarashina's "browngirlworld," are distracting in their use of alternative spellings and slang. The diverse writing styles, however, reflect the incredible diversity of the contributors themselves: African-American, African, Indian-American, Muslim, Hispanic, Vietnamese, Filipino, queer, straight, and in-between. This diversity is the greatest strength of *Colonize This!*. Readers are able to access a wide variety of perspectives and experiences, and to see them in context of other perspectives and

experiences. The editors clearly cast a wide net in defining "young women of color," and have successfully created a wonderful introductory tour to "women of color feminism." (Now, if subsequent writers can just find a less unwieldy term....)

Colonize This! would be an excellent choice for advanced undergraduate or graduate classes in feminist theory, gender studies, or race/ethnicity studies. It could easily be taught as a whole, or specific essays could be assigned in conjunction with other classroom materials. Because the contributors themselves are close in age to the average college student, students will readily identify with many of the experiences painted in the essays and the cultural (pop culture and otherwise) contexts in which the writers live, work, and write. The strong feelings apparent in each of these essays are sure to serve as fodder for lively and spirited classroom discussions. It would be especially interesting to teach *Colonize This!* alongside writers such as Cherrie Moraga (who wrote the Forward), Angela Davis, bell hooks, and Gloria Anzaldua. *Colonize This!* is positioned as the heir(ess) to legacy of these writers, and to teach their works alongside a volume of works inspired by them would make for a stimulating class environment.

Colonize This! is a natural successor to works such as *This Bridge Called My Back*, and is likely to be as influential on young women of color reading it as the works of Moraga, Anzaldua, Davis, and hooks were on the contributors. In a growing field of works on, for, and by young feminist women of color, this volume is worth reading, considering, and sharing.

References Cited

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