
Reviewed by Jeanne Armstrong, Ph.D.

*Women of Color and Feminism* by Maythee Rojas, Ph.D. is one of the books published by Seal Press especially for academic course use, similar to two other titles, *Men and Feminism* and *Transgender History.* Maythee Rojas, an associate professor in women’s, gender, and sexuality studies at California State University, Long Beach, describes herself as a “Latina from a working-class background whose family and friends are still largely removed from the academic world” (p. ix). In her prologue, she explains her decision to use “women of color” although some women prefer to identify with their specific ethnicity such as Latina or African American. The book is organized into chapters on five broad topics: “Defining Identities;” “Embodied Representations;” “Social Struggles;” “Creative Expressions;” and “Loving Selves.” Each chapter is divided by several subheadings relevant to the broader topic.

For example, the chapter on identities discusses the complexity of multiple identities; the problem of an identity not being easily recognized by the dominant culture; and identities imposed by the dominant culture through stereotypes or prejudices. Rojas explores the hegemony “that holds most forms of oppression in place [and] works to ensure that we accept binary relationships” (p.7). According to the author, this results in the double consciousness described by W. E. DuBois, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Audre Lorde, bell hooks and others. Rojas was prompted to examine the society’s discomfort with discussing racism, slavery and white privilege when her students questioned the term “people of color.” The first chapter provides background on the various liberation groups which emerged through the inspiration of the early civil rights movement, including the American Indian Movement, the Chicano Movement, the Asian-American Movement, the Black Panthers and Young Lords. Rojas mentions the Third World Liberation Front, a coalition formed by students and faculty at San Francisco State and University of
California Berkeley to develop Third World Colleges. In the “Conflicting Alliances” section of this chapter, she discusses the development of conflicts between women and gays and lesbians with the heterosexual male leadership in these movements. The chapter concludes with a section on “Bridging Identities,” which describes the 1977 founding of the National Women’s Studies Association. During the early years of NWSA conferences over 90% of participants were white despite efforts to make the conference more inclusive. Rojas mentions works by early feminists of color, especially Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* and the anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back; Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa which argued for a feminism that would acknowledge cultural difference and address racism in the women’s movement.

Chapter 2, “Embodied Representations,” addresses the challenge of overcoming the stereotypes about their bodies and sexuality, which tend to impose polarities of good girls versus bad girls on African American, Asian American, Latina and American Indian women. In the “Legacies of the Past” section, Rojas mentions stereotypes of the mammy and jezebel assigned to African American women as well as the effect of slavery on the sexual exploitation and violation of black women’s bodies. Because of this legacy, black women had to become early advocates for legal protection against rape through the National Association of Colored Women founded in 1896 and the National Council of Negro Women founded in 1935. In the “Politics of Sexuality” section, Rojas discusses the ongoing challenge of addressing the sexual politics within the African American community when prominent black men often defend a black man’s abuse or rape of a black woman. The Colonizing Bodies” and “Body Counts” sections describe the history of Native American women during and after colonization. She mentions the “supposed Pocahontas-Smith romance” as a symbol of the European man’s desire for Indian women who would submit to them and contrasts this to the violence enacted against Indian women who were derogatorily referred to as squaws. “Body Counts” provides data showing that Native Americans are twice as likely to be victims of violent crime as any other group. Domestic violence on reservations is a
major problem and Amnesty International reported homicide as the third highest cause of death among Native American women in 2005-2006. This chapter explores Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said, and the perceptions of Asian women as “innocent, docile and eager to be saved” by American GIs (p. 57). The chapter gives an overview of the low immigration rates for Chinese and Japanese women compared to rates for Chinese and Japanese men and discusses concepts of the “model minority.” The image of the quiet, invisible, Asian American woman has prevented openness about domestic violence in the Asian American community. Finally in “So Many Gay All over the World,” Rojas describes Mexican culture’s misogynist concept of La Malinche as the woman who allowed Cortez to possess her and ultimately the whole of Mexico. Rojas concludes with the challenges for Asian American lesbians or Chicana lesbians to be accepted in their communities due to cultural and religious biases about homosexuality. It is difficult for women to own their sexuality when they have historically been sexually exploited or stereotyped.

The chapter on “Social Struggles” similarly covers a variety of issues, which have galvanized women of color to organize and resist, including health care, reproductive rights, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, high rates of imprisonment, and being victims of violence. Rojas mentions some significant examples of legal cases or groups which succeeded in challenging injustices. The Mothers of East Los Angeles were working class Mexican American women who successfully fought plans to place a waste incinerator and prison in their community because this was a community of poor people of color. INCITE! Women against Violence, originally organized in 2000 at a conference in Santa Cruz, is an organization of women of color antiviolence activists. INCITE has grass roots groups around the United States and has published two anthologies, Color of Violence and The Revolution Will Not Be Funded.

In the next chapter, “Creative Expressions,” Rojas mentions the significance of pop culture in providing an opportunity for creative expressions by women of color. Cartoonist Lela Lee began her career with a
cartoon about the “angry little Asian Girl,” later named Kim. A Chican@ subculture called *rasquache* has been embraced as art that “reimagines the use of inexpensive, commonplace materials” such as colorful religious calendars, low-rider cars and black velvet paintings (p. 113). Rojas considers the stereotype of the “angry black woman” as problematic for African American woman who are viewed as fitting this angry stereotype regardless of the complexity of their emotions. She uses the example of Billie Holiday’s song about lynching, “Strange Fruit,” which Holiday said caused her to cry every time she performed it.

This chapter includes an overview of “publishing from the margins,” which mentions former feminist of color presses, such as Kitchen Table and Third Woman Press as well as ongoing presses such as Aunt Lute Books and South End Press. Rojas concludes by discussing women artists who reclaim the male gaze through their varied genres such as the photography of Laura Aguilar, the multi-media of Ana Mendieta, the films of Lourdes Portillo or the silhouettes of Kara Walker.

The final chapter, “Loving Selves,” is framed as the conclusion. Referencing Audre Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Rojas describes the erotic as the transitory moments of bliss, the flutter we feel when touched by a moment of physical and emotional intimacy. She also mentions bell hooks chapter, “Love Heals,” in *Sisters of the Yam* as an example of how self love and loving other women as friends, lovers or as partners in struggle can heal the generations of oppression, violence and dysfunction experienced by women of culture in America. In conclusion Rojas notes that Maria Lugones points to the alienation of women of color from mainstream feminism as a failure of feminists to lovingly welcome women of color. She encourages the reader to consider Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of mestiza consciousness as a counter to dualistic thinking and Maria Lugones’s concept of playfulness and world travelling as a method of cultural understanding through crossing borders.

Throughout each chapter, Rojas includes sidebars on events, groups, blogs or individuals which provide examples of the concepts or issues she is explaining in the chapter. These examples, which are useful
supplements to ideas in the chapter, include Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash, Alma Lopez’s controversial painting, “Our Lady”, the Hottentot Venus, Tracy Chapman, the Mothers of East Los Angeles, INCITE!, Sarah Jones’s rap poem, “Your Revolution,” Josefa Loaiza and women of color blogs.

*Women of Color and Feminism* has a detailed index; a “reader’s guide” section with questions for discussion and topics for research; and a comprehensive bibliography. The bibliography has sections on books, films and websites, with each section organized alphabetically. Rojas also provides a list of sources listed alphabetically under the subsections in each book chapter, which is helpful for students interested in pursuing research on these topics. As a book designed for use in courses, *Women of Color and Feminism* would be an appropriate overview text in a women’s studies or gender studies survey course, possibly even as one of the assigned texts in a survey course on people of color.

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