

BOOK REVIEW

Cautiously Hopeful: Metafeminist Practices in Canada

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In *Cautiously Hopeful: Metafeminist Practices in Canada*, Marie Carrière introduces herself and her project: “I am a feminist setting out to decipher and depict the internal and external plurality of feminism, as well as the sometimes messy, paradoxical metadimension and metaconsciousness of feminism today and its fundamental intervention in our neoliberal, late capitalist, unevenly globalized, patriarchal, colonial and androcentric times” (15). For Carrière, feminism “is the belief in gender and racial equality and in the importance of lives of all women, Indigenous people, racialized individuals, and other socially marginalized groups” (10). Carrière’s project weaves together four threads: a review of major debates and currents in metafeminist writings and practices in Canada; an in-depth examination of some of the key literary writings; an experimental writing style that both challenges academic conventions and makes more viable engagements with contemporary literary works; and her cautiously hopeful insights into feminist possibilities for more equitable social change. As a professor of English and director of the Canadian Literature Centre at the University of Alberta, Carrière offers insights into the ways in which feminism is articulated in literature and the ways in which such literature offers hope for contemporary feminism.

The book is organized around a review of what Carrière considers the major debates and currents in metafeminist writings and practices in Canada. Metafeminism is a reading practice of feminist writings that draws on and builds on earlier works and offers new insights and visions for current and future practices. She starts by insisting that “if a sort of internal messiness has always characterized feminism, then metafeminism provides a critical understanding and terminology, and transforms it into an always intersectional praxis that remains self-aware of its past, present, and possible futures” (6). She identifies the core elements of feminist thought today: “Intersectionality (the analysis of race, gender, and other overlapping elements of social oppression), alliances, affect theory, ethics of care, and feminism’s own internal differences” (6–7).

Carrière’s most important contribution in this text is an in-depth examination of some of the key literary writings: Anglo-Canadian, Indigenous and Québécois texts. It provides readers with a thoughtful evaluation of an impressive range of literary writing. It may well introduce many readers to impressive writings by authors they haven’t yet read. Carrière notes that these three genres are often considered distinct; instead, this text examines their periodic engagements and their often-shared interests. In one of the most compelling aspects of this book, she shows the potential strength of bringing them into conversation with one another, while also showing the writers’ engagements with

the concepts she has identified as central: intersectionality, alliances, affect theory, and the ethics of care. The strength of the book is Carrière's detailed examination of the literary works she has selected. She relies on lengthy excerpts from those texts, which she interprets through the lens of analytical feminist scholarship, particularly philosophy. The result is a series of insightful commentaries that reveal the feminist concerns that inform and shape them, showing how deeply feminism has penetrated contemporary literature.

Carrière states explicitly that to present her discussion of metafeminist reading/writing practices requires a different form of writing than conventional academic-theory-writing. Carrière advocates for an experimental writing style that both challenges academic conventions and makes more viable engagements with contemporary literary works. Two tactics stand out. Carrière rejects the use of chapters, enabling the 173 pages of discussion to flow from one idea to the next, indicated by section heads but not constrained by chapter formations. She also concludes the text with "un essai," which is "an attempt to figure out how my ongoing scholarly learning can breathe life, or let life breathe, into forms of expression beyond standard academic writing" (182) and in which she explains her "resistance to monographic exhaustiveness" (180), concluding instead:

As an open, blended, unsettled practice with a desire to give academic discipline the slip, and on the cusp of things so much like cautious hopefulness itself, the subjectivized essay pushes back against the exhaustive ambitions and polish of academic rigidity. Perhaps, then, only *un essai* will do. (183)

The cautious hopefulness Carrière enjoys is based on a belief that "Ours is a time of important renewal where feminism is concerned" (4). The book draws on insights from literary scholarship into feminist possibilities for social change. In particular, Carrière notes the widespread acceptance of basic feminist demands even by those who do not identify with feminism and the importance of feminist opposition to "inter-related systems of gender and racial oppression that cause sexual discrimination and render colonial, racial and sexual violence normative" (5).

Carrière's book is interesting and provocative, and here I want to raise some cautious critiques and questions that I encourage readers to consider when they read the book (and I encourage them to do so). Her analysis of feminism is often ambiguous and sometimes contradictory. She is clear that her focus is primarily on feminist academic and literary writings in Canada, but her discussion sometimes makes more global claims. Despite her recognition that feminism has always encompassed a wide variety of political and social perspectives, there is a confusing back and forth between recognizing the diversity of feminisms and positions held by feminists and a tendency to hold feminism accountable as if it were a homogeneous movement or equated only with liberal feminism, for example, the insistence that "feminism still has a lot to answer for, particularly in its hostile treatment of trans women and its whitewashing of issues of race, class and social privilege" (6).

Carrière's methodology produces some problems with her presentation. The book is an essay that explores "the reflected and deflected relationship of theoretical and literary texts to feminisms past and present" (15). This enables her to assert her positions both about what literary sources are most significant and about the topics she focuses on without having to make the argument supporting her assertion that those choices are significant. Why these sources and not others; why these topics and not others?

She draws for analytical insights primarily on feminist philosophy and US African American and women of color writers. There are few references to writers about feminist activism in Canada, which may partially explain the absence of any discussion about the feminist politics of working-class women and of socialist feminism, both strong tendencies in Canada. There is no engagement with feminist anticapitalism, and, though she mentions class and capitalism occasionally in passing, neither is considered seriously. Class is not mentioned in her understanding of intersectionality; her definition of feminism “is the belief in gender and racial equality” (not mentioning class) “and in the importance of lives of all women, Indigenous people, racialized individuals, and other socially marginalized” (not exploited) “groups” (10). She says that Euro-Western feminism focuses on “the problems that confront settler, middle-class women” (79), obscuring the extensive political organizing and analytical writing by and about working-class women (see, for example, Cobble 2005; Brenner 2014; Rowbotham 2014). Given that work is the predominant daily activity for most women and that unionized women are the largest collective of organized women working for improvements to women’s lives, why is care, and primarily the ethics of care, the only reference to work in this study? Why does the labor aspect of care warrant only one sentence (144)? Why is employment, the main focus of unionists’ organizing efforts, ignored completely? If, as Carrière’s selection suggests, current literary scholarship apparently ignores this topic, why is that?

Carrière’s commitment to metafeminism starts with her insistence that “the only fundamental truth about feminism [is] that it has no single beginning, no single definition, no single end, and thus no single history” (5). However, the book also starts with the assertion that “ours is a time of important renewal where feminism is concerned” and that backlash, antifeminism, and racism “are at an all-time high” (4). I suggest both claims are problematic, probably indefensible, and possibly contradicted by Carrière’s subsequent claim that “the ways in which Western feminism narrates its history can determine its future” (7). What measure could determine the relative dangers of misogyny, racism, and colonialism faced by feminists, especially of left-wing and anticolonial movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of the working-class housewives striking in the 1940s, or the women studying engineering in 1989 compared to now? (see, for example, Guard 2019; Sangster 2019; Boileau 2020). There is a popular history of feminism, expressed in the notion of first- and second-wave feminism with a decline in-between, that overlooks extensive, ongoing women’s collective efforts of the early to mid-twentieth century “between the waves.” Whenever women have organized collectively for greater equality or for liberation, there has been resistance and hostility. One outcome of the hostile response is the silence around their initiatives and their successes in earlier periods. There is often a tendency to consider current circumstances unusual or most significant; that assumption becomes tricky when it obscures the history of women’s resistance and their aspirations. The more important question is what are the central political struggles currently facing feminists, and what organizing capacities and knowledge are they developing and looking for? For academic feminists, a key question is how our work can contribute to those concerns. Carrière’s book is a contribution to those efforts and deserves attention and engagement.

References

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