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TIONALITY

Origins, Contestations, Horizons

ANNA CARASTATHIS

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS | LINCOLN & LONDON

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To my sister, Katerina
and to my yiayia, Katerina

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PREFACE

At its core, this is a book about reading and listening. At times, as I wrote it, I was not sure I wanted to advance an argument to the extent it required me to shift from reading and listening to writing and speaking, and in a sense—since the argument centrally concerns the politics of interpretation and representation—to speaking for others. But since I have now done that, I want to preface what I have written with a story about the "locus of enunciation" of its author. The Cherokee-Greek writer Thomas King has said that "the truth about stories is that that's all we are." I tell this story with trepidation, vulnerability and apprehension, knowing that stories are "dangerous" as much as they are "wondrous"; we can become "chained" to them, and they cannot be called back; once told, they are "loose in the world" (King 2003).

I was born in 1981, the same year Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa first published *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, across an ocean, on a different continent, probably in a different world. A decade later I would fly above that ocean and arrive on northeastern Turtle Island an "immigrant." Still another decade would pass. In my early twenties, attending graduate school, I would come across this book for the first time in a university library (it would be none the worse for wear) in an attempt to educate myself with respect to women-of-color feminisms in an academic context where, to my disappointment and frustration, they were institutionally, disciplinarily, and phenomenologically underrepresented. Becoming absorbed in its

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pages, while still standing between the stacks, sweating in my winter parka (it would be winter in Montreal, Kanien'kehá:ka-Mohawk territory), I would come across a passage. As my eyes passed over its lines, I would let out an audible gasp. It would be the first (and last) time I saw my ethnicity mentioned within a women-of-color feminist text. This was not an act of self-representation; neither was it, straightforwardly, an inclusionary gesture in the category. But it was a fleeting moment of visibility. In an essay titled "I Paid Very Hard for My Immigrant Ignorance," which instantly captured my interest, Mirtha Quintanales writes with a lot of empathy and nuance about her Greek friend, a woman who does not quite fit, a queer figure whose ambivalent, ambiguous racialization—white by U.S. Census standards, yet "loud," "aggressive," and "very Greek identified"—renders her an outsider to both hegemonic and minoritized racial groups. Quintanales reports: "The Greek woman's many attempts to 'connect with Third World lesbians and Women of Color' . . . have been met with outright rejection," rejection she faces "in white, mainstream lesbian/feminist circles as well. Clearly she does not fit there either" (1983, 150–51). I would slam the book shut, and then quickly open it again, reading and rereading these lines with astonishment, incredulity, confusion, and a strange mixture of pleasure and pain—the pleasure of recognition, the pain that this recognition is one of rejection. I would never speak about it with anyone.

I would write a dissertation on intersectionality, questioning its efficacy as a multi-axial theory of oppression. The next decade, which brings me into the present, would be one of more relocations and dislocations, which entailed a great many opportunities to learn about what had become my object of study even if I would feel unable to avow it, at least aloud, as my subjective experience. This was a decade during which my NAFTA-facilitated crossing of the Canadian-U.S. border would transform me into a nonresident alien, who would be granted the privilege to teach philosophy and women's, gender, and sexuality studies at the "Other" state university in Los Angeles. Since my "object" is critical race feminisms and postcolonial, anticolonial, and decolonial thought, I would have many conversations about intersectionality, primarily with interlocutors who were positioned as my "students"—even though I was

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keenly aware they were surely teaching me as much as, if not more than, I was them—as well as with colleagues and friends who would either look upon me as a three-headed monster or as amusingly naive when I would question the self-evidence of the racialized perceptions and ideologies that, somehow, always seemed ready to hand. I would learn to distrust the most "innocent" of encounters, which I found myself constantly plumbing for undercurrents and blatant statements of racism, homophobia, misogyny. I would learn about the history and reconstitution of slavery in and through the prison-industrial complex; about the U.S. version of genocidal settler colonialism (no "worse" than the Canadian version that I had already encountered but to which I could never become "accustomed"); about internally colonized groups constructed as "minorities" on their own ancestral lands, even when they numerically predominate; about the criminalization of migration and the struggles to survive of people rendered "illegal"; about the naturalization of permanent war and the state of terror it inflicted on racialized religious groups within the national territory and abroad; about the solipsistic, assimilative arrogations of whiteness, and the ambitions of some to be absorbed within it. I would begin to "deal with" my own queerness, both sexual and "racial." I think about the figure of the "Greek woman" in Quintanales's text. I do not experience rejection from women of color, but neither do I experience belonging. I feel I do not belong. I feel I do not have the right to belong. I begin to question my desire to belong, to distrust my thinking about my own identity; could the experience of "ambivalence" and "ambiguity" be just another instance of white evasion of responsibility? From what enunciatory location can I speak authentically and responsibly, and in what language? What am I doing on this continent? When I think of who and where I am, the words "dislocation," "displacement," and "dispossession" weigh on my mind. I start to feel that my very presence on these appropriated lands is untenable. I start to remember the first days after my arrival in a small city in northern Ontario, traditional territory of the Anishinaabe-Ojibwe people. I remember us silently sitting on the monkey bars with Thelma, a Native kid and an immigrant kid, the Anglo/white students spitting hatred at us, and feeling then, and now, that I should not want to belong

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here, that belonging was a trap. I wanted to go home. Almost twenty years later, though, a home place had ceased to exist for me.

After losing my home, I gradually lost my tongue. Unlike the "Greek woman" in Quintanales's essay, I was never very Greek-identified. Of mixed roots, born to an Irish mother—herself three times an immigrant—and a Greek father, whose parents were Egyptiot Greeks, like that poet of diasporic nostalgia and cosmopolitan queerness, Constantine Cavafy, with migratory roots from the islands and mainlands of what became the Greek nation-state. My relationship to "Greekness" was always mediated by a persistent ascription of inauthenticity. I remember, as a child, my elder relatives in Greece observing that I looked "European, not Greek." Outside Greece, I have heard countless times from acquaintances moments after meeting them that I do not "look Greek"—their perception is confirmed by hearing that my mother is Irish—and they almost always seem to mean it as a compliment. In Greece, I am often perceived as an immigrant, not an emigrant. In the diaspora, Greek identity is overdetermined by religion, nationalism, heteronormativity, and a shared language. As a queer secular anti-nationalist, losing my tongue and the fading of my (sort of Irish, sort of Greek) immigrant accent meant losing the last, tenuous claim I had on this identity. If my experience in the first decade of living in Canada was characterized by estrangement, alienation, and overt cultural racism, by the end of the second I could feel myself ever more assimilated into the Canadian settler state, a process exacerbated by migrating to the United States to work, where "Americans" would seek to define me as "Canadian"; if this is a true description of my naturalized citizenship, it made me cringe as a characterization of my ethnic identity.

Then the "crisis" occurred. Suddenly I am re-membered as Greek in the diaspora; I am asked my opinion about the profligacy of "my" government, the indolence of "my" compatriots, and the violence of their protest. I feel a need to relearn a lost language in order to read and understand, if from a distance, how austerity capitalism is being resisted in Greece, where historical experiences of war, occupation, dictatorship and imperialism are being reanimated in the present conjuncture. This is a history that my leftist parents had never allowed us to forget; yet,

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returning to Greece amid the crisis, I notice how one of its effects is the dispelling of a prevalent forgetting that enabled the rise of "European" aspirations along with the entrenchment of consumer capitalism. Now, as Greece is reminded that Europe is a continental, racial project to which it peripherally belongs, my own sense of belonging and desire to retrace roots in the place of my birth is reignited. I begin to relearn what I have forgotten, and for the first time in nearly a decade (and only the second time since we emigrated), return. Walking in my godmother's neighborhood on the outskirts of Athens, where asphalt roads have since been laid, I get lost and stop a neighbor to ask for directions. He looks at me suspiciously, calls me an "illegal immigrant," and sneers that I'd do better to return from whence I came.

When thinking about the place of ethnic "minority" women in women-of-color feminisms, who were assimilated as groups (if not as individuals, given the particularities of phenotypic ascriptions, class immobilities, and linguistic, geographical, generational, and other factors) into whiteness sometime during the mid-twentieth century in the United States and Canada, there is often an assumption that assimilation constitutes privilege, that it is a volitional, unidirectional, permanent, and unproblematic transformation. This is naturalized with reference to dubious claims about the phenotypic proximity of ethnic whites to hegemonic whites—eliding the diversity of embodiments and reproducing a reifying realism about racialized perception. Moreover, Quintanales argues that "the 'social privileges' of lighter-than-black-ethnic-minority lesbians in this society are almost totally dependent on our denial of who we are, on our ethnic death" (1983, 153). While skin color "*may* confer on some ethnic minority women the option of being 'assimilated,' 'integrated' in mainstream American society," it comes at the price of "having to become ghost-like, identity-less, community-less, totally alienated" (154). She speaks eloquently of being torn between the "primary emergencies [of] race and culture" (154), of fearing that the expansion of the concept of racism—and of "women of color" as its subject—will mean its dilution, and particularly the displacement of historical experiences of enslavement, colonization, and imperialism as ontological anchors of the phenomenology

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of racial oppression (153). What is to be done with ethnic minority women who—at least according to late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century demographic taxonomies—are perceived as "white" and accorded at least some, if not all, of the privileges of whiteness, and may even be racists (153)?

The contradictions and ambivalences in my experiences of racialization and racism are in part a function of the fact that the process was neither instantaneous nor coherent. My experiences of racialization constitute a diachronic process that involved the imposition of institutionally racist ascriptions ("landed immigrant," "visible minority," "naturalized citizen," "nonresident alien"); it has occasioned intersubjective racializing encounters in different optic economies of "race"—for instance, in the sun-soaked ecology of the traditional territory of the Tongva and Chumash peoples, now colonized by the United States and renamed "Los Angeles," I am often "mistaken" for Latina. My racialization often makes me "visible but not legible" (Mendieta 2012, 152). This causes consternation in the subject of racialized perception whose intentionality is frustrated. Sometimes it has been Angla/white women who sought to fix my identity, conflating my "white privilege" with their own. Sometimes it has been women of color who have accused me of inauthenticity or pointed out the privilege which the "ability" to assimilate affords me. Usually, I tend to agree with both and only silently disagree. The idiosyncrasies of my experience hardly seem to matter in the grand scheme of a global system of white supremacy, in which my skin color and Canadian/European Union citizenships garner undeniable institutional privileges, and protect me from state violence and premature death. My body relatively easily crosses borders that render other people's crossings illicit, it enters spaces that are foreclosed to others, it is fed and sheltered and safe from mortars, land mines, drone missiles, stray and aimed bullets. My migratory travels were by airplane; not by boat, by dinghy, or on foot. I think about this as I cross the Aegean sea from an island in "Greek" territory to the mainland of the "Turkish" state; my identity card and a ticket bought with ten euro garners me safe passage over what has become a watery graveyard for thousands of migrants crossing in precarious vessels in the other direction. Given

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this necropolitical/biopolitical divide, any ambiguity seems superficial and the binarisms of racialization intractable.

In one of my classes I asked students to read Cherríe Moraga's 1979 essay "La Güera," and I was struck by how many of us identify with her words, how many of us seek a language to "understand the meaning of being and yet not being, of 'merging' and yet remaining utterly alone and in the margins of our society" (Quintanales 1983, 154). Moraga writes:

> In this country, lesbianism is a poverty—as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor. The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. *The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression*. The danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base. Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, nonhierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place. (1983, 44–45)

Quintanales warns of a deeper problem of which the figure of the Greek woman is a symptom: "We are still seeing radical differences when they don't exist and not seeing them when they are critical" (1983, 154). Which differences matter, and which are immaterial?

I try to square my story with Moraga and Anzaldúa's insight that "visibility/invisibility as women of colour forms our radicalism" (1983, xxiv). In this book I discuss a position toward intersectionality that I have developed by reading and listening closely to "plurilogues"—to borrow Shireen Roshanravan's wonderful concept (2014)—staged within (queer) women-of-color feminisms. I understand "women of color" in the coalitional sense it gained in the U.S. context, as a political project, within which I have come to construct my own life trajectory, my affective, ideological, and political commitments, to try to fulfill my "responsibility to my roots" (Moraga 1983, 50), and to dream insurrectionary dreams for future generations. Moraga and Anzaldúa argue that to produce "theory in the flesh" we must struggle to "learn . . . how to live with . . . contradictions," embracing them as the "root of our radicalism" (1983, 5). I situate my scholarship in plurilogue with

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women-of-color feminisms, not because I want to territorialize or arrogate the work of those whose experiences I do not share, but because I want to contest the ease with which we deny our connections (Quintanales 1983, 156). I want to express my identity-loneliness, my lack of community, but also my gratitude to Black feminisms, which for over a decade have challenged and inspired me in ways that this book can only begin to express—this as an act of affirming our interconnectedness. I tell this story while fighting the voice in my head that sounds off rejection or ridicule. I humbly join my voice to those of others who have long suggested that social movements need to imagine identity and identification in radically different ways than those made hegemonic by nation-states, which continue to impose systems of racial classification (and to the extent that all maintain citizenship as a fundamental category of non/belonging, arguably *all* do, even if they disavow explicitly racialist terms). Can we reorient our perception so that lived understandings of identity, solidarity, and community are not totalized by demographic taxonomies of "race" and ethnicity, gender and gender identity, sexuality, nation, and religion? Can we tell stories about who and where we are that do justice and are accountable to the struggles of people who are not "us"? The argument I advance in this book does not claim originality or exactness—both arrogances of a colonial/positivist epistemic paradigm—but it is motivated by solidarity and seeks to contribute to our collective liberation; its condition of possibility is a sincere and profound desire to read and listen. Countering attempts to fix intersectionality to positivist, essentialist categories, to render it amenable to colonial state projects of differential inclusion, diversity management, and social control, in what follows I argue that "intersectionality" understood as categorial critique functions as a distal horizon, powerfully illuminating the urgent conceptual, political, ethical, and affective work to be done in the "here" and "now."

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I have been thinking about the issues that have found expression in this book for over a decade, since I first encountered the concept of intersectionality in a feminist philosophy course during my undergraduate years at the University of Alberta, and tried to square it with experiences of multiple marginalizations crosscut by privileges with which I was grappling. That course was taught by Cressida Heyes, who became my mentor and honors thesis supervisor and without whose encouragement I would not have thought it plausible that I pursue graduate studies. Dr. Heyes introduced me to feminist theory as a potentially socially transformative intellectual pursuit, and inspired me, as she did many of her other students before and since, to think wildly, argue sharply, write clearly, and teach kindly. My dissertation supervisor at McGill University, Alia Al-Saji, encouraged my diffuse interests while helping focus them into a thesis. As generous over the years with her friendship as with her patient guidance, Dr. Al-Saji expanded my intellectual horizons by introducing me to phenomenology—an orientation to philosophical thinking grounded in lived experience that forms the constitutive background of the analytical and hermeneutic arguments I attempt in these pages—and by encouraging me to recruit phenomenology toward race-critical ends; I am grateful for our marathon conversations, her sense of humor, and her ongoing support as I negotiate the vicissitudes of academic life. Marguerite Deslauriers and Hasana Sharp, my other two dissertation committee members, gave invaluable advice,

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> *η γλώσσα*
> *που χρειάζομαι*
> *να μιλήσω*
> *είναι η ίδια*
> *που χρησιμοποιώ*
> *για να αγγίζω* . . . (Moraga 1983, 149, my translation)

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