

SPECIAL SECTION

TWENTY YEARS AFTER KANEHSATÀ:KE: REFLECTIONS, RESPONSES, ANALYSES

BOOK REVIEW

Valaskakis, Gail Guthrie; Madeline Dion Stout and Eric Guimond, eds.
2009. *Restoring the Balance: First Nations Women, Community
and Culture*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press. ISBN
9780887557095. Paperback: 27.95 CAD. Pages: 379.

Reviewed by Celia Haig-Brown
York University

The promise of the future lies in restoring the balance, continuing to dismantle barriers to full and equitable participation of women in community life, and creating the conditions where male and female gifts can come together to make powerful medicine and heal individuals, families, communities, and nations.

Marlene Brant Castellano, 231.

This timely text, directed to policy-makers, educators and community members, presents a wide-ranging collection of papers all of which address the task of restoring gender balance in terms of both the representation of and the reality of First Nations¹ women's participation in various social contexts. Importantly it also documents some of the outstanding work women have been doing over the last several decades in this regard. Four sections provide a loose organization for the pieces: Historical Trauma; Intellectual and Social Movements; Health and Healing; and Arts, Culture and Language. The contributors, all First Nations women with connections to Canada, have one or more university degrees and include policy makers, practitioners, university and community-based scholars. In both the content and the authorship of the chapters, the publication of this text takes all of us a long way along the path of understanding what it means to restore balance.

¹ The authors grapple variously with terms for naming people who are descendants of the original occupants of these territories now called Canada. Each makes clear that, unless specifically delineated, terms used are meant to be inclusive rather than divisive. Usage differs according to region. For this review, I will use the term First Nations as all encompassing in keeping with the title of the text.

In addition to the substantive issues explored through story, demographics, history, personal narrative, philosophy and art, the text presents readers with a sound introduction to a number of the major contributions made by First Nation women over recent decades. The authors, themselves pathmakers in First Nations scholarship, include Emma LaRoque, Marlene Brant Castellano and, of course, the late Gail Guthrie Valaskakis. Within the chapters, we are introduced to scholars such as educationalist Verna Kirkness, linguist Freda Ahenakew, and historian Olive Dickason; to leading literary figures from Pauline Johnson to Jeanette Armstrong; to twelve female chiefs; and to artists such as Susan Point, Jane Ash Poitras, Shirley Cheechoo and Daphne Odjig. I expect to be using this book as a reference work. That being said, the text's major contribution is the many ways it takes up issues of the disruption of, and restoration of, gender equilibrium in colonial and First Nation contexts.

One of the inescapable tensions in this book is that between Western feminism narrowly defined and the possibilities for gender analysis that lie with cultures whose traditions have focused on gender complementarity. As Vivienne Grey comments on the artists whose work and lives she discusses, they 'defy the common notions of Western feminism' (281). While never losing sight of the impact of colonization in disrupting efforts for balance, the authors very self-consciously bring in the importance of keeping men's welfare front and centre in any work specific to women. At the same time, they mince no words in addressing the need for more female representation in decision-making spaces from the treaty table to self-government. As one chief says, 'If the majority of male leaders would get rid of the fear that women leaders will outshine them...they can spend more energy time focusing on what is important, [as] opposed to how to hold back the women leaders' (113).

Another tension negotiated throughout the book is one between essentialized Western and Indigenous worldviews and a more complex relationship between the varied dimensions of each as they manifest, intersect and repel in people's lives and work. For example, in the first section, Wesley-Esquimaux draws on an earlier co-authored paper for the RCAP to move readers from a place of death and destruction wrought by colonization to the contemporary scene based in resilience, decolonization and survival. She concludes by pondering the possibility of reconciling her academic and First Nations 'voices.' Two other papers, one by Cleo Big Eagle and Eric Guimond and the other by Mary Jane Norris move squarely into the positivist social science of demography for a fascinating look at Census Canada data and what it reveals about First Nations women and

their contributions to culture, language maintenance and community. Acknowledging both the strength and the limitations of the facts and figures, the authors use them to consider the future impact of self-identification, the reproductive and sexual health of Aboriginal youth and 'the radical hope' of passing values embedded in languages to a new generation. Clearly there is no one way to approach redressing the imbalance.

If I were to choose a favourite chapter, it would have to be that of Gaye Hanson, a nurse consultant working in communities across Canada. She chooses to focus on a somewhat discredited concept 'cultural competence' in ways that breathe new life into it. Gently insisting on coming to her work as a 'spirit-led scholar' (240), she demonstrates the meaning of such a claim. She asks us to consider with her, 'How do we teach people not to be afraid?' and gives us a response, 'by helping them open up to compassion and mutual understanding' (242). While her work focuses on a palliative care project and other health initiatives, she demonstrates its applicability 'to many fields, including research and policy development' (261). Her genuine respect for the work of others, for the insights that personal experience and oral tradition offer become palpable as one reads. She does indeed walk her talk.

No text can be all things to all people. I have little patience with critics who tell us what a book doesn't do. But, if there is a shortcoming in this rich collection, it lies in the unproblematic rendering of gender into biological categories of female and male, women and men. I looked in vain for any reference to a more complicated rendering of gender to include two-spirited people and those of other less visible genders. I await that collection. In the meantime, I highly recommend this one to scholars in Sociology, Women's Studies, Native Studies and Canadian Studies. Community-based scholars and policy-makers in all levels of governance will also find these works a useful addition to their libraries and their subsequent deliberations.