

Coiled Tongues: A Critical Reading of *Thinking Class: Sketches from a Cultural Worker* by Joanna Kadi.

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Contemporary minority women's autobiographies have significantly altered, over the past few decades, our understanding of the social and political basis of identity formation. In their articulation of their own subjectivities, minority women autobiographers expressed an urgent need to conceptualize issues relating to women's place and writing and traditional forms within patriarchal systems in conjunction with issues of race, class and gender.

Current social structure in the U.S. portrays various degrees of inequality where race, class, and gender form a complicated web of power relations. As an instance of this, minority working class women often suffer from a triple marginalization based on their concurrent gender, class and racial inequality.

Noticeably, minority women writers have made that triple discrimination one of their main thematic focuses. *Thinking Class: Sketches from a Cultural Worker* by Joanna Kadi, comes with the urge to write history 'from below', from the perspective of ordinary working class women, making them central to historical interpretation and to the writing of the collective biography of subclasses. In the preface to her autobiography, Kadi remarks: "I didn't write this book alone... Without discounting the incredible amount of work I did, I am focusing here on communal aspects of working-class experience reflected in my life and writing." (Kadi, p.5) Kadi emphasizes the group effort that marks the pages of her book, mirroring thus, the working-class tradition of barn raisings and quilting bees. This could account for the multi-faceted and multi-layered structure of the autobiographical discourse adopted by the author.

Autobiography has long been considered the literary expression of individualism, of a belief in an integrated and coherent personality central to the narrated experience. At the outset of her narrative, Kadi projects a different view and rejects this notion of writing as an individual experience, 'Don't imagine a lone rugged individual fixedly concentrating in her study with the door firmly closed against any intruders –human, feline, or canine.' (Kadi, p.5) For her there are no myths about triumphant figures pursuing fame and fortune, and most importantly,

‘We weren’t raised to believe we could do it alone, and I’d never trade this dependence on and interaction with community for any fictitious rugged individualism.’ (Kadi, *p.5*) Personal histories that link the individual with particular communities at given historical junctures, as Caren Kaplan states, can be read as cultural autobiographies, ‘The link between individual and community forged in the reading and writing...deconstructs the individualism of autobiography’s Western legacy and casts the writing and reading of out-law genres as a mode of cultural survival.’ (Kaplan, *p.213*) This notion is also emphasized by Susan Friedman who asserts that, “The emphasis on individualism as the necessary pre-condition for autobiography is thus a reflection of the privilege, one that excludes from the canons of autobiography those writers that have been denied by history the illusion of individualism.” (Friedman, *pp.34-62*)

Kadi goes beyond the traditional (auto)biographical convention of verifiability or attempted objectivity, as she models for the reader a consciousness that is intent on questioning its own assumptions, and constantly redefining itself, as, and apart from ‘the other’. That is why writing for her becomes a resistance:

My writing results from this desire to resist; it stems from deep feelings of love and caring – for people in my communities, for dogged survivors who refuse to succumb to forces wearing them down day after day, for the ones who’ve generated beauty in spite of incredible hardship, for the wise, articulate, sweet people I grew up with who disappeared quietly into the night because they were too yellow and too poor. (Kadi, *p.14*)

What results is a narrative strategy that links past and current events, past experience with present understanding, and past self with present self-construction. Listening to public radio where Edward Said is introduced as an ‘Arab-American intellectual’, Kadi, elated at the combination of the words, ‘Arab’ and ‘intellectual’, contemplates the American cultural scene and the power of words; contrasting her own past experience, as she recalls the stereotypical racist language used against her as an Arab, “people enjoyed hurling word combinations at me – Arab whore, greasy Arab, crazy Arab – and bowling me over, day after day,” (Kadi, *p.11*) Kadi’s memories bring to the forefront Edward Said’s claims that “practically the only ethnic group about whom in the West racial slurs are tolerated, even encouraged, is the

Arabs.” (Said, p.26) Kadi herself argue in *Food for Our Grandmothers*, the first anthology of Arab-American feminist writing, that Arab Americans are “the Most Invisible of Invisibles.” (Kadi, p.xix)

Notwithstanding, Kadi realizes that if words can hurt, they can also heal, and it is the healing power of words that keeps her writing, “If I can keep my understanding of the power of words front and center while I devise my own wild mixtures, maybe I can open up worlds for people like me, maybe I can offer my writing for healing and resistance.” (Kadi, p.12)

In this way, Kadi uses her own life to lay bare the psychological and political consequences of living on the margin, in-between cultures, of being an insider-outsider, in its insidious dailiness: the cumulative and generally unquestioned creation of a seemingly coherent identity through layers of every day’s events, experiences, and impressions. *Thinking Class*, communicates the difficulty of breaking down and breaking through these layers of socialized consciousness and exposing their contradictions; and it finds its appropriate expression in the dismantling of form.

Conventional autobiography has long established specific markers in its formation of the genre. This could be seen in the linear narration of a chronologically structured life story; a claim to truth, and the unproblematic use of the pronoun ‘I’ to represent a seemingly continuous past and present self . Kadi disrupts these expectations of the reader in order to demonstrate her own sense of disruption, and also to present a model for a different way of perceiving the otherwise familiar.

In her autobiography, Kadi writes about working-class culture, her Catholic school days, country music and songs, stereotypes of working class people, her Arab-American identity, her sexual identity, pop-culture and imperialism, homophobic workers and elitist queers. Along this, five poems by the author, appear intermittently forming a structural division and a discontinuity in the narrative line. The integration and instrumental juxtaposition of different forms thus become a strategy for revealing contradictions through which the reader may render transparent and go beyond predetermined positions of response.

Throughout ‘*Thinking Class*’ Kadi focuses on telling ‘life stories’, the dailiness of women’s and working people’s lives, mostly narrating those details that would normally escape being recorded in history books, “Dozens of workers move deliberately around the building site at the University of Minnesota... Workers at the university. We’ve built every university that has ever existed, yet we’re shunned and

despised within academia's hallowed halls. Explicitly and implicitly, we've been taught our place – and it's not in a student's desk or the professors' lounge. We are needed to construct the university, maintain, clean, and repair it.” (Kadi, *p.39*) She demonstrates the power of societal forces and institutions – schools, governments, media, and social behaviors, – as well as the acquiescence or resistance to them by represented and representative subjectivities. “But how do we talk about class?” Kadi appeals to the reader, “class differences mark significant splits among, for example, racial/ethnic groups...weakening and division come when differences aren't acknowledged and taken seriously, when our own thinking about art and culture doesn't consider class.” (Kadi, *p.24*) While acknowledging the hard work done by people of colour, women, working class/poor people, and queers who organized and fought to open up the narrow parameters of public cultural expression, establish more community spaces, and gain access to some museum walls and some prestigious stages, Kadi believes that the definitive categories of 'traditional', 'ethnic' art and culture allow the social silence around working-class/working-poor culture to continue as they position class outside the discussion's boundaries keeping the identities of particular artists hidden. The author here breaks with traditional expectations of autobiographical forms to model for the reader an involvement with and assimilation of another's experience and perspective as she questions the narrow categories set up by cultural arbiters or elitist belief systems which insist that poor people have no culture and consequently leave artists like Joe Schmoe, a factory worker, who has spent twenty years using water-colour paintings to document work on the line with little public interest, as he is not creating 'traditional' art and can't be relegated to an 'ethnic' group because he's white. Or as the case with the author's aunt, 'Aunt Rose', whose cultural work couldn't be packaged or defined appropriately. A talented piano player, Aunt Rose, defies the stereotypical images of Arab women in their “suitably modest, traditional Arab dress with intricate embroidery, or the suitably sexy belly-dancing outfit with cleavage showing”, she also defies the characteristics of the quiet, modest, working-class woman smiling sweetly while giving piano lessons to lovely little children. Instead we see her at the piano as, “she dragged on cigarette after cigarette while she taught, and her incredibly long, brightly-painted fingernails tapped cheerily on the keys,” (Kadi, *p.20*) But most importantly, and according to restrictive definitions for ethnic art, “a Lebanese woman singing 'Secondhand Rose' with a full glass of whiskey and water beside her wasn't

doing anything Arab.” (Kadi, *p.20*) Kadi here argues against the misconception held by many, of Arab-Americans as an amorphous, racially and culturally homogenized group. She asserts that this homogenized view contrasts somewhat with the reality that the “Arab-American experience” comprises a complex tapestry of historical experiences grounded in different diasporas. Arab-American identities as Alixa Naff puts it, are not fixed states of ‘being’; they are continually being shaped in their everyday interaction with the social world and thus they are flexible and engaged in a constant, reflexive, process of ‘becoming’. (Naff, 1993) Kadi proceeds to emphasize that “Within Arab-American communities there are a variety of types of artistic expression... This doesn’t mean the art of a [certain] group is less Arab-American – unless we make the mistake of setting up rigid categories of what qualifies as Arab within our own communities.” (Kadi, *p.25*)

Accordingly, the author forces constant intrusions, rupturing a comfortable sense of a historical continuum in favor of an alienating discontinuity, in an attempt to capture the experience of Arab-American working class, as they struggle to stay afloat, beset by chronic insecurity, poverty, and family tragedies so common in working-class existence. She models her own confusion as to how that ‘old self’ became the ‘current writer’, “Who ever heard of someone from a general motors city, destined for secretarial work (if a great deal of luck came her way), thinking, saying, she can write books? Who ever heard of a working-class Lebanese writer?.” (Kadi, *p.10*) Both the individual and social histories are summoned through the childhood memories of the adult/narrator, as she struggles in shaping and reviewing their significance within an ever-broadening spectrum of current events and moral values:

Silence is critically important... Inordinate efforts, overt and covert, went into shutting me up. Teachers rewarded quiet children. My mother told me if I didn’t have anything nice to say not to say anything at all. The priests who routinely ripped my body and mind apart held knives to my throat and told me they’d kill me if I ever said a word. My father tolerated me best when he had me muzzled. All systems of oppression – from child abuse to racism to ableism – function most effectively when victims don’t talk. (Kadi, *p.11*)

To Recognize and to accept the significance of childhood experiences and impressions, and to acknowledge the roles played by society in identity formation, is an attempt to understand an earlier self and the simultaneous oppression of patriarchy, class and race. These are power relations that structure all areas of life: the family, education, the household, political systems, leisure, culture, economics, sexuality and so on. It is what renders the position and experiences of ethnic and working class women and people not only marginal but also invisible. These experiences of marginalization create the need for a ‘search for the self’ which involves a critical examination of historical discourses of ‘Otherness’ and social exclusion. The task of asking critical questions about art and culture, Kadi argues, and “insisting [that] the class location of the artist matters, remains with...us – cultural workers marginalized on the basis of our race, gender, sexuality, immigrant status, class, language...we need a strong and critical understanding of all aspects of our identities,” (Kadi, p.24)

Evidently, a transformation of individual consciousness, and ultimately of society is not possible without focusing on the construction of subjectivity, and without seeking to reconcile false separations between the private and the public, the personal and the political. That’s why questioning oppression, silence, and invisibility for Kadi, transcends her own personal experience and is made more complex by intertextuality as she uses actual writings, songs, and speeches by other people and blends these with her words and her own subjectivity. This becomes clear when her recollections of her Catholic school days center around figures like Anthony Dell, Suzanne Beaulieu, and Inez Fournier. It is through these characters that Kadi allows us access to an earlier self, which she contemplates through the act of writing with sympathy but always with a sense of guilt for being spared the others’ fate, “The Dell boys are headed for jail. Suzanne Beaulieu ... will get pregnant and drop out of school ... Inez Fournier will never graduate from high school, and never have a boyfriend.” (Kadi, p.33)

The part on ‘Catholic School Days’ is divided into three sketches; before each sketch there appears a poem by the author: ‘Looking Back’, ‘Halfbreeds’, and ‘Coiled Tongues’. Each function as a bridge to a mass of scattered events impossible to grasp otherwise, reflecting the fear of coming too close to the abysses of memory. In ‘Looking Back’, Kadi states:

They warned us:

Looking back means remembering.
Remembering guarantees
finding stories.
Finding stories translates
into feeling a broken tongue,
Feeling a broken tongue
equals residing with bodily harm.
Residing with bodily harm
is the life of an Arab transplant.
.....
I've always known the life
of an Arab transplant.
The heart is a lonely organ. (Kadi, p.30)

Sketch one of 'Catholic School Days' focuses mainly on Anthony Dell. At the outset, Kadi draws on the physical similarities between the Dell boy and herself in the continuous mirroring repetition of 'short and stocky', 'hands as wide as they were long' and 'tough as nails hard as rocks', pointing to the thin, almost transparent thread linking her to each of the characters she conjures in her narrative. What is the thing that Anthony Dell dared to expose in his short speech about his periodic visits to the woods watching animals, to make him a memorable figure in the author's mind? if not the ability to transcend the 'broken tongue' as he 'unbolted the padlock across his heart and offered two minutes of access' to that 'lonely organ' which Kadi thought "None of us had ever loosened that bolt, none of us except Anthony Dell." (Kadi, p.36) And perhaps, it is that part underneath the rugged appearances, uncombed hair and chapped hands typical of working class children: the suppressed softness, the self beneath the armour, that Kadi, albeit late, mourns for at the end "I cry now, because I can, because I don't have to be tough as nails hard as rocks, I cry for these truths we learned in catholic grade school." (Kadi, p.37)

Perhaps the most striking in Kadi's narration of her catholic school days is the account on her childhood sexual abuse. The revelation becomes possible only by touching upon the wounds of the many young girls whose lives were shredded to pieces, "fathers who visited in the night, priests who pried girls open on the altar, expectant girls without boyfriends." (Kadi, p.65)

Kadi tries to tell stories that have not been told, ones that have remained unspoken. As a result she attempts to discover a language appropriate to her own story, rejecting the old 'tongue' of the father and all patriarchs who have sentenced her to the shrine of isolation and silence, "One of the many insidious forms of

violence at our catholic school was enforced silence, and the locks circling our throats were every bit as brutal as rapes and assaults.” (*Kadi*, p.65)

The ‘autobiographical act,’ Elizabeth Bruss asserts, is much less a private deed than a social performance: the placing of a text into a public forum, where it functions synchronically as a link among contemporaries and diachronically as a bridge between past and future communal expressions. (Bruss, 1976) Kadi challenges the autobiographer’s individual voice and private utterance as she unmask the false separation between her own experience and the experiences of other girls in her school. In sketch two of ‘Catholic School Days’, the pregnancy of Suzanne Beaulieu is narrated hand in hand with Kadi’s own pregnancy and consequent abortion as a young girl, pointing hence to the brutal material reality facing poor/working class girls, “How did so many of us get pregnant? I believe that most of us were raped by adult men, some girls got coerced into sex by boys our age...”. (*Kadi*, p.65) In recounting her childhood sexual abuse, Kadi resorts to interpret her life publicly to bring to the foreground the underlying factors which govern such ongoing violence. She becomes overly critical of the absence of sex education in catholic schools despite the increasing number of girls who drop out, “No concern for girl after girl dropping off the face of earth...Only sealed lips.” (*Kadi*, p.65). In addition, Kadi reveals the contradictory nature of her catholic upbringing at home, where her parents, in their urge to emulate the middle class moral code and ethics have worked to deal with facile appearances, “My guess is that they took me for an abortion because of my mother’s burning desire and futile effort to move into the middle class. In middle-class families...drinking, raping, battering, and swearing took place behind heavy, closed doors.” (*Kadi*, p.65)

It is in the sketch that follows which Kadi entitles ‘Making Sense of My Happy Childhood/Creating Theory’, which she divides into six categories: (sexual abuse of children, racism, classism, ableism, docile citizens, and the left) that she speaks of the aftereffects of her childhood sexual abuse and how feminism gave her the strength to leave an abusive marriage and accept therapy to help her overcome this trauma, “I had always hated and been ashamed of my female body, so easily pried open, so easily ripped to shreds...I wanted to be invisible to my perpetrators...” (*Kadi*, p.72)

Kadi clarifies to the reader that by writing about her own childhood experiences and binding them to the experiences of other young girls, she is

describing the experiences of a community of women. It is her way to protest the many violations against women and children which remain undocumented and hence profoundly affect the life of survivors in physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and political ways, “Child sexual abuse teaches us lessons about power – who has it and who doesn’t. These lessons, experienced on a bodily level, transfer into the deepest levels of our conscious and subconscious being, and correspond with other oppressive systems.” (*Kadi*, p.73)

Summoning the grinding experiences of an early self through the machinery of sexual abuse, racism and classism, and the constant interrogation of her identity and position as a working class Arab-American woman in the cultural and socio/political scene in America, Kadi’s sexuality orients itself in the fluid bisexual realm of the female body. Choosing in effect the security of the feminine world and rejecting the aggressive and hostile arena of patriarchal culture which could only relate to her through violence and coercive codes of behaviour. Ultimately, she refuses to obey the prohibitions of the father’s culture with its narratives of sexual difference and heterosexuality. Instead she pursues her own desires, and shatters the feminine portrait reflected in the patriarchal mirror.

Kadi has evidently found in cultural autobiography a validating means for critical and political thinking. Although she might seem at times subsumed by the people and incidents she recalls in a literary act of empathy; yet she herself remains present as a narrating consciousness with the right to speak. She models a subjective stance where the text opens itself up to the words/thoughts of others while not losing its own perspective. Ostensibly it creates ruptures in the public consciousness by writing explicitly about childhood traumas, divorce, bisexual relationships, mental breakdowns and abortions and at the same breath, presents an alternative account of the life of working class Arab-American women.

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