

Constructing the Enemy: Empathy/ Antipathy in U.S. Literature and Law.

Rajini Srikanth. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012. 218 pages. \$87.50 cloth; \$28.95 paper; \$28.95 electronic.

In 2011, the United States memorialized the seventieth anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor and the tenth anniversary of the attacks on New York City and Washington, DC. Elaborate ceremonies, films, and television specials helped to mark the dates, encouraging Americans to empathize with the casualties of the historic attacks. In the months after December 7, 1941, and September 11, 2001, the state produced victims who would become justifications for war, but it also constructed enemies, resulting in the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and the detention of Muslim men since 9/11. In *Constructing the Enemy: Empathy/Antipathy in U.S. Literature and Law*, Rajini Srikanth considers literary and legal representations of both the Japanese American internment and the detention of Muslim men in order to negotiate and complicate the function of empathy in the United States. Uncritical empathetic gestures can, she contends, foreclose other, more radical forms of engagement and facilitate the production of antipathies from Tule Lake to Guantanamo Bay. Antipathy is the noxious underside to empathy, and affect is not, Srikanth insists, apolitical.

Constructing the Enemy presents a lucid argument against monolithic understandings of empathy. Whereas Jürgen Habermas describes empathy as a coming together of “learning processes,” Srikanth is quick to point out that this definition rests on a careless assumption: that empathizer and empathizee encounter one another symmetrically (6). Instead, she promotes an empathy that depends on the constant interrogation of power relations and, following Slavoj Žižek, the cognizance of one’s “nontransparency” to oneself as constituted in relation to the other (171). Srikanth, emphasizing the intricacies of empathetic engagement, demarcates three intersecting categories of empathy: compassionate, strategic, and ethical. Compassionate empathy occurs when one is able to react to someone else’s hardship or loss as if it were one’s own. It is free of self-interest and “egotistical drift,” in which one loses sight of the actual situation amid one’s own feelings, and it occurs most readily among members of the same socio-economic, racial, ethnic, and religious groups (30). Strategic empathy is empathetic action carried out under the assumption that it will ultimately benefit the empathizer. Ethical empathy occurs when one comes to the aid of the other in order to uphold a principle or belief. Empathy is not, she stresses, pure or immaterial. It must be scrutinized and acted upon in context.

Srikanth makes her case through a careful consideration of American literature and the legal work surrounding the histories of internment and detainment in the United States. Chapter

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One presents a far-reaching account of empathetic writing in the United States, from Mary Rowlandson up to the present, emphasizing the complexity and asymmetry of an empathetic gesture. Chapter Two focuses on Wayne Collins, who fought a protracted battle to support Japanese Americans who renounced their US citizenship during internment, offering a detailed look at his writings and communications in order to discern what compels an empathetic effort of this scale. In Chapter Three, Srikanth continues her discussion from the first chapter, analyzing the empathetic structure of David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1994) and Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002) and comparing them to writings from the 1940s and 1950s. In so doing, she traces the shifting contours of empathy and antipathy for Japanese America throughout the twentieth century.

It is in the fourth and final chapter that Srikanth offers her most compelling and original contribution. In contrast to Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida, who criticize the law for its dogmatism and inbuilt prejudices, Srikanth collects and considers the firsthand accounts of Guantanamo Bay detainees' legal representation so as to complicate this assumption. In this particular case, she argues, the law offers a point of access for more human, material, and sometimes profound empathetic engagement: "[W]hile the law itself is not a radical articulation, it facilitates entry into relatively amorphous spaces where there is no fixity and all relationships are in flux" (149). Srikanth brings to light the inherent entanglements and instabilities of an empathetic gesture. Legal action often begins with ethical empathy—a desire to uphold the sanctity of the Constitution—but can lead to compassionate empathy through the spontaneity of an encounter. The choice to represent and petition for the unfamiliar other can be at once compassionate, strategic, and ethical. Srikanth argues that we must attend to empathetic acts as grounded in material realities and asymmetrical power relations so as to counteract their abstraction into a politics of feeling.

Constructing the Enemy represents a timely contribution to Asian American studies, human rights scholarship, and, in particular, critical legal studies. Srikanth identifies language as the site of empathetic engagement; it is through language that one represents one's feelings to oneself. In so doing, she reorients critical legal studies so as to take into account structures of affect. Empathy and antipathy constitute two aspects of a whole that informs and is constructed through the language of the state and the liminal spaces it sometimes creates. Tule Lake and Guantanamo Bay do not represent identical histories, but the internment of Japanese Americans and the detention of Muslim men represent similar failures to account for oneself and one's affections outside of national and racial constructions of subjectification. It is we who sustain (or transcend) the state's construction of a hostile other. "We like to think of ourselves as pluralistic, secular, and welcoming," Srikanth asserts, "but all of those attributes are fragile at the moment, under attack from our fear of the stranger, our suspicion of the unfamiliar, and our haste in constructing the enemy" (170).

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