

The Politics of Appropriation: Writing, Responsibility, and the Specter of the Native Informant.

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The Politics of Appropriation: Writing, Responsibility, and the Specter of the Native Informant

Sharareh Frouzesh

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Politics of Appropriation **Writing, Responsibility, and the Specter of the Native Informant**

Sharareh Frouzesh (bio)

In a 2006 article published in *Al Ahram*, Hamid Dabashi stages a vitriolic criticism of the surge in publications of memoirs written by individuals from Islamic backgrounds since 9/11, taking Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as an emblematic case.¹ He points to these memoirs as a site for the formation of selective memory wherein particular accounts by individuals lacking any formal credibility, except for the blood-ties to the nation they critique, frame "legitimate concerns about the plight of Muslim women in the Islamic world and yet put that predicament squarely at the service of the US ideological psy-op, militarily stipulated in the US global warmongering."² **[End Page 252]** He argues that these "native informers turned comprador intellectuals" perform the labor of constructing totalizing narratives of oppression that facilitate "public consent to imperial hubris." By cultivating the very selective memory US Empire needs to justify its imperial designs abroad, these memoirs, selectively drawing upon personal accounts divorced of history or context of any kind, occlude genuine sites and histories of (local) resistance by providing simplified and entertaining stories of oppressed masses passively awaiting their rescue by benevolent forces from without. Specifically, Dabashi accuses Azar Nafisi's text of denigrating the history of revolutionary resistance in Iran by offering a totalizing and de-contextualized condemnation of the Islamic revolution and especially by provoking the "Oriental fantasies" of her readers by foregrounding the "liberatory" power of "Western Classics" for the exoticized figure of the native in desperate need of Western intervention. Perhaps most importantly, Dabashi notes that the "comprador intellectual speaks with the voice of authenticity, nativity, Orientalized oddity. He is from 'there,' and she 'knows what she is talking about,' and thus their voices carry the authority of a native informer."³

What I take to be one of the more interesting aspects of Dabashi's polemic is the anxiety it rightfully expresses about appropriation—one that bears upon a certain kind of subject whose account is made to stand in for an imagined monolithic and homogeneous Other. Though Dabashi's concern is limited to ways the authors of these memoirs

masquerade as the “authentic” [End Page 253] voice of the Other, I think his critique also presents us with the broader concern of how the voice of the diasporic individual (or post colonial migrant) is made to represent or is read as an authentic perspective from which an Other becomes thoroughly knowable. There seems to be an intimate connection between the imagined Other whom the diasporic writer is *read* (or pretends) to represent and the rhetoric of paternalistic salvation which takes this imagined Other as its object.

In this paper, I will approach the question of how this Other is continuously constructed against invocations or narratives of the Self, particularly in the memoir. Using Gayatri Spivak’s notion of the native informant from her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, I would like to make a case for how the memoir can be read as an inflected representation for how the diasporic or post colonial migrant is continuously interpellated⁴ as the voice of a homogenous and transparent Other. Without the façade of fiction of the novel, the citational demands of historiography, nor the methodological pretense of ethnography, the memoir that represents territory deemed unfamiliar or foreign is the medium *par excellence* through which the imagined and static Other is inscribed. What I would like to suggest is that Dabashi’s indictment of the memoirist as the intentional site of appropriation misses a more important and disturbing implication of the memoir that is read as referent for an Other: namely, that this Other is already always assumed as a passive and transparent site. It is precisely because of this assumption that the partial, particular, and limiting representations of structures of violence and oppression in sites such as memoirs can be read/appropriated as authoritative, and deployed as justifications for imperial intervention.

The Specter of the Native Informant

It seems that Dabashi’s turn of phrase from “native informant” (used in linguistics and anthropology to...

THE POLITICS OF APPROPRIATION WRITING, RESPONSIBILITY, AND THE SPECTER OF THE NATIVE INFORMANT

Shanareh Frouzesh

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Editor's Note: This article was written in 2007, and won the Horst Frenz Prize the following year. Due to unforeseen circumstances at YCL, it was not published in 2008, and is being published here for the first time. Although the article responds to debates from several years ago, the larger argument of the essay remains just as relevant today, and it is presented here largely unchanged.

- 1 It should be noted that though there has been an increase in publication and certainly popularity of memoirs of individuals from Islamic backgrounds since 9/11, there were also quite a few published in the two decades before 9/11. Among those written by Iranians alone are Ashraf Pahlavi's *Faces in the Mirror: Memoirs from Exile* (1980), Shusha Guppy's *The Blindfold Horse: Memories of a Persian Childhood* (1988), Sanareh Farman Farmaian's *Daughter of Persia: A Woman's Journey From Her Father's Harem Through the Islamic Revolution* (1992), Pazi Couzand's *A Persian Childhood* (1990), Mehry and T.R. Reid's *Snake's Marble: A Persian Memoir* (1996), Abbas Milan's *Tale of Two Cities* (1996), Roudhi Shafiq's *Scent of Saffron: Three Generations of an Iranian Family* (1997), Tara Bahrampour's *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America* (1999), Mamicher and Roxane Farmanfarman's *Blood & Oil: Memoir of Iran – From the Shah to the Ayatollah* (1999), Ge-larsh Asayesh's *Saffron Sky: A Life Between Iran and America* (1999), Nasta Ramazani, *The Dance of the Rose and the Nightingale* (2002).



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