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Book Review: Black Body: Women, Colonialism, and Space

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Black Body: Women, Colonialism, and Space. Radhika Mohanram. 1999. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota. 250 pages. Three photos; index included. \$18.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Stephanie Y. Evans⁶

In *Black Body: Women, Colonialism, and Space*, Radhika Mohanram interrogates black women's life stories through multidisciplinary analysis in a way that changes the relationship of a story's character to a story's setting. Her interpretation of black women foregrounds *place* and she argues that location is as important in a story as the characters themselves. She insists that in life, each character's identity--thus each character's rendition of her story--shifts with location. Thus, a person tells different stories when in different settings. Mohanram demonstrates this argument by tracking her own shifting experiences of "blackness" as an Indian woman in India, the United States, and New Zealand. *Black Body* is an exploration of the changing meaning of women's blackness in relation to nation. The author unveils black women's stories to contrast identity characteristics of "black" and "woman" in various settings and challenges theorists to re-define their notion of identity in terms of geography.

If life is a story, politics is a power struggle over who gets to tell their story, how stories get told, what is the criteria for assigning value to characters, and which characters control access to resources in the story setting. Laws, then, are social mores that some characters have decided all characters should abide by. Capitalism is the idea that accumulation of property and money are more important than the existence of characters who produce "things" for a "market." Imperialists and colonialists suggest that only one group's story is worth telling, namely their own. Activism is the radical insistence that muted characters get to tell their own stories. *Black Body* furthers the discussion of post-colonial theory by complicating the identity of black women characters in different national settings.

Black Body consists of three parts: first, a theoretical exploration of terms such as "native," "body," and "nation"; second, a historical situation of "native" and "settler" in the Antipodes (New Zealand and Australia); and third, a treatise to dislocate black identity from static Western binary interpretation. This work is a rejection of simplistic interpretations of black identity as "Other" which is the premise in much post-colonial discourse.

Mohanram convincingly argues that "black" is a shifting part of identity construction, not static, as some have supposed. She demonstrates that black is not concrete as implied in "African Diaspora" because "diaspora" clashes with thorny indigenous debates (xv), conflicts between members of a supposedly homogenized "Third World" (91), and realities of historical miscegenation (123). Mohanram complicates notions of universal Black identity. However, her complication of Black identity does not negate the reality of Blackness as universally regarded "Other." While challenging a singular fixed meaning of blackness, she shows the varied settings in which women's blackness impacts their ability to tell their own stories. Including her own story, she explores women's blackness in India, United States, New Zealand, and Australia and

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explains that blackness is at once an indicator of oppression and a means of resistance. Though all black women are “Other,” their otherness is defined by unique geographical and historical elements.

In addition to considering the shifting meaning of blackness, the author uses blackness to interrogate the construction of whiteness as the worldwide invisible norm. In part one, Mohanram engages theorists such as Franz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, Edward Said, and Chandra Mohanty to deconstruct the likes of Claude Levi-Strauss, Sigmund Freud, and John Locke. Additionally, her use of Judith Butler and Carol Pateman to link body to citizenship and nation constructs ties between race, gender, body, space, and property ownership. She then argues that each of these theorists addresses a piece of the puzzle, but it is not until all pieces are put together that one realizes the impact of colonialism on black women’s bodies internationally. Mohanram argues that with an interrogation of place, we see the global pervasiveness of exploitation and appropriation to which black women are subjected, the particularities of their domination, and the uniqueness of their empowerment strategies.

In part two, case studies of black women in New Zealand and Australia reveal cultural identity and nation are not simple relationships. She positions Maori feminists as both caretakers of the land and subjects to it. She contrasts bi-cultural New Zealand with multi-cultural Australia and argues that without situating a story in a specific place, meanings of black women’s experiences are conflated, overshadowed, or lost. Lastly, she interrogates the construction of White femininity as the measure of womanhood by analyzing the letters of two 1850s white women in the Antipodes. In part three, she challenges post-colonial theorists to reconsider the importance of place in the human story. Though the significance of place is not new in post-colonial theory, Mohanram effectively demonstrates that location plays a more active and dynamic role in meaning making than most theorists have recognized. In addition to denouncing Eurocentric colonialism and cultural imperialism, she challenges “third world” theorists who oversimplify the relationship of race and gender to move beyond a mythical solidarity base on oversimplified similarities. While she engages work by Fanon, Spivak, and Said, she also shows the failure of their work to address problems created by consideration of place. These and other theorists who advocate “third world” and multicultural movements fail to recognize the prevalence of Western, northern, essentialist constructs in their own arguments. Though people of color certainly constitute a universal “other” internationally, the simplicity of diaspora identity breaks down when one considers relationships mediated by indigenous, settler, immigrant, refugee, or citizenship status. This complexity does not preclude racialized solidarity movements; it simply requires activists to admit difference in order to relate more honestly to one another.

Just as there are many stories, and many ways to tell a story, there are many ways to study how stories are told. Anthropology, psychology, and sociology are ways of studying characters, character attributes, and social relations. History is a way of studying motivations, events, plots, and conflict. Black studies researchers work from an assumption that Black people are main characters, not just supporting characters in White stories. Likewise, women's studies storytellers assert that women are main characters, not just supporting characters in men's stories.

The implications of Mohanram’s arguments impact the disciplines of psychology, anthropology, history, literary criticism, and political economy as well as black studies

and women's studies. Because she engages theoretical paradigms in each of these fields, the potential for application of this work is broad and exciting. The usage of *Black Body* in universities worldwide gives some indication of this work's flexibility. *Black Body* is included in the following courses: "Philosophical Issues in Feminism" at the University of Auckland, New Zealand; "History of Consciousness Seminar" at University of California, Santa Cruz, United States; "Contemporary Cultural Issues" at the University of Sydney, Australia; and "Race, Space, and Citizenship: Issues for Educators" at the University of Toronto, Canada.

There are many texts that would fit nicely with *Black Body*. A relevant contrast would be with Carol Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* (1988) and Charles Mills' *The Racial Contract* (1997). This match would further discussions of social contract theory by addressing race and gender in a way that complicates the notion of blackness. Another interesting pairing would be *Black Body* with Dorothy Roberts' *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (1997). While Mohanram's text provides heavy theoretical frameworks, Roberts' text presents actual policy outcomes that have affected Black women's rights regarding sterilization abuse, birth control, welfare constrictions, health care availability, genetics, and racist reproductive stereotypes.

A cluster of reading in post-colonial feminism that would reveal theoretical contrasts of identity and location would be to match *Black Body* with Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty's edited *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, and Democratic Futures*, Uma Narayan's *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism*, Chris Weedon's *Feminism, Theory, and the Politics of Difference*, and Jennifer De Vere Brody's *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture*. Since these authors reference each other, discussions of convergent and divergent viewpoints would be especially rich. Mohanram's analysis very necessarily depends on deconstructing White, male, heterosexual, Western paradigms. However, at some point it is necessary to move beyond deconstruction, thus using Mohanram's work in tandem with other theorists like Brody, Mohanty, and Narayan would decentralize the focus of European male theory. Women of color need to tell and interpret our own stories. *Black Body* is another crucial step in that direction, particularly because it challenges the notion of blackness by presenting an international scope.

I had certain difficulties in reading this work: Mohanram constructs a "mosaic" rather than a linear progression, thus the chapters are not hierarchical and appear somewhat uneven. Her analyses of race and gender are not delineated by discipline so it is difficult to compare the depth of one to the other. The strength of a mosaic structure is often matched by frustration with lack of marked progression: one part of the research is literary theory, one is historical analysis, and yet another is classical philosophy. The broadness of disciplinary approaches is both a strength and weakness of the work.

I subscribe to the notion that life is a story that the Creator chooses to tell. I also believe we as main characters have the power of improvisation within our own life stories. Mohanram's *Black Body* is a complex theoretical consideration of the politics of narrative and her interpretation of the meaning of story is well told. This work impacts how black women's stories are told and interpreted. *Black Body* broadens the analysis of black women's narratives and re-establishes geographical setting as the center of post-colonial theory.