

Review Article

Antipodean postcoloniality, mosaic style.

A review of Black Body: Women, Colonialism and Space.

Radhika Mohanram. St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1999.

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The blurb on the back cover promotes *Black Body* as a book that “interrogates theories produced in the Northern hemisphere and questions their value and significance for the Southern hemisphere”. Such a book would indeed be a very useful addition to the rather limited corpus of books and articles produced within New Zealand Studies that are unafraid of tackling theoretical questions and explicitly situate themselves as postcolonial. But is *Black Body* that book? Does its analysis of theoretical issues manage to shed much-needed light on the postcolonial situation of the Antipodes? Or does it not rather leave the Antipodes where they have been for far too long — at the fringe of important theoretical discussions and in the shadow of other (more prominently ‘postcolonial’) countries?

In an analysis of key texts by writers as wide-ranging as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Alfred Crosby, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, John Locke, Sigmund Freud and Frantz Fanon in part I — “In Theory” — Mohanram traces how Western discourses establish the marked (black) body as the binary opposite, the Other, of the unmarked (white) mind. She highlights the ways in which this binary opposition finds expression in anthropological and colonial discourses (chapter 1) and discourses of identity (chapter 2). Within anthropological and colonial discourses, she points out, the ‘native’ has become associated with a situatedness — or “incarceration”, as she calls it with reference to Arjun Appadurai — in a specific location, while the European has been granted the freedom to move. Europeans have thereby become “detach[ed] from their indigenous status” and have instead turned into “citizen[s] of the world” (14). Similarly, both liberal democratic and psychoanalytical discourses “deman[d] the expunging of the body for the construction of subject status” (49). The ‘universal subject’ thus comes into being by escaping all forms of embodiment. This dematerialisation, or unmarking, of the body, however, “is possible only for a select group of subjects” (49). Excluded from this select group, the black and/or poor and/or female body comes to function as the highly visible Other of the unmarked (white, middle-class and male) Self.

In these two opening chapters Mohanram thus establishes that within Western discourse the (black) body has become associated with paralysing

immanence, whereas the (white) mind has become synonymous with transcendence, the freedom to transcend a materiality that is thought of as necessarily specific and therefore limiting: "The Caucasian is disembodied, mobile, absent of the marks that physically immobilize the native" (15). By displacing the notion of materiality, Western theories of identity construct a notion of Self which is framed entirely in temporal (developmental) rather than spatial terms. Mohanram, on the other hand, wishes to argue for a theory of identity that is spatially bound and therefore committed to re-instate "the sense of place, the influence of its landscape in the construction of identity, and the materiality of place" (52). This re-emergence of materiality — of both places and bodies — Mohanram sees realised in *postcolonial* theories of identity, for, as she says, "postcolonial theory seems to represent the lost body" (55).

But what exactly is this "postcolonial theory" Mohanram refers to? It would have been very useful at this point if she had made use of her third 'theoretical' chapter for a brief account of the *various* postcolonial theories of identity that are in circulation and then situated her own approach within that discourse. What she offers, instead, is a case study of female identity in colonial Algeria. Mohanram argues that identity is established along national as well as gender parameters and that therefore "[a]n analysis of the woman's role within the nation should interconnect her history with that of the nation while simultaneously examining the specific constructions of gender and sexuality within that nation/culture" (86). Part II — "In the Antipodes" — follows that line of thought (though Mohanram herself does not make this link explicit) and offers a further three case studies of (fictional and non-fictional) female identities that are constructed along the competing parameters of gender and nation.

Of the three chapters that comprise part II, I found the first one — Mohanram's discussion of Maori nationalism — the most interesting. She argues here that international feminist theories (which she — rather narrowly — takes to be represented by influential articles by Chandra Mohanty and Ella Shohat) privilege one parameter over the other. In their attempt to formulate an overarching female identity rooted in a shared experience of oppression, these critics thus homogenise the experience of colonised women and disregard "patterns of identity formation based on landscape and place" (96). Mohanram points out that in the New Zealand context Michele Dominy's article 'Maori Sovereignty: A Feminist Invention of Tradition' falls into the same trap of privileging gender over nation in its account of the construction of Maori women's identity. Mohanram wishes to make amends for this failing by re-instating the significance of the national parameter. She argues that the "assertion of a female identity among Maori women ... is a requirement of the

mobilization of the nationalistic struggle for sovereignty” (108) and not, as Dominy suggests, an outcome of the feminist movement in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

In this chapter — as throughout the entire book — Mohanram is keenly aware that her suggestion of a “naturalized relationship between one’s place and one’s self” might appear to “set the clock of scholarship back” (98). Yet it is not a theoretically outmoded essentialism she promotes. She argues, instead, that Maori, when they “reconstruct and re-evoked their native identity through their relationship with the land” (98), are “deliberately mimicking the identity demanded of them by Pakeha”. Arguable though I might find her claim that this should constitute an act of “deliberat[e] mimicking”, I do think her reading of the contemporary derivation of Maori identity through land as a postcolonial strategy is appropriate. It is this reading, then, that protects her from the charge of essentialism, for it allows her to insist on a formulation of Maori identity along (traditional) parameters of place and nation — which might easily be regarded as an essentialist strategy —, while at the same time maintaining that “the indigene is a deliberate retroactive construct rather than someone locked in her past” (95).

While my discussion of *Black Body* thus far might paint the picture of an interesting and intellectually stimulating read, Mohanram’s study is not without flaws. Some of these are no fault of Mohanram’s herself, but are rather due to a sloppy editing job. Various errors in punctuation go equally undetected as do a number of typos. Some of these typos, such as “hstory” (193), create no more than a little irritation in the reader. The lack of an apostrophe in “Raymond Williams version of ...” (vi) or the repeated misspelling of Paul Ricoeur’s name as “Ricouer” (139) is slightly more annoying. Other oversights, such as the lack of capitalisation of the author’s name in “For young, feminine bodies experience phenomenal space different to that which masculine bodies experience” (19), are downright confusing. Yet while irritating, none of these errors are too grave. There are other lapses, however, that are more severe, for they call Mohanram’s academic credibility into question. When the series editor mistakenly refers to *Black Body: Women, Colonialism and Space* as *Black Body: Femininity, Indigeneity and Discourse* (no doubt an earlier title), for example, is the reader to assume that the change of subtitle was a last-minute decision? If so, can we attribute any significance to the subtitle at all or was the choice of words arbitrary? Similarly, Mohanram’s erroneous definition of the *marae* as “a *building* which symbolizes the tribe” (108, my emphasis), though no doubt a very common misconception, makes the reader wonder whether, if one cannot trust Mohanram with her definitions of Maori cultural concepts, one can trust her with her analysis of Maori culture.

What seems to me the greatest negligence on Mohanram's part, however, is her failure to inform the reader that both chapter 4 ("The Memory of Place: Maori Nationalism and Feminism in Aotearoa/New Zealand"), and chapter 7 ("The Postcolonial Critic: Third World (Con)texts/First World Contexts") have been published previously. An earlier version of chapter 7 appeared in 1995 in a collection of essays called *Justice & Identity: Antipodean Practices* (ed. Margaret Wilson and Anna Yeatman (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1995), pp.172-194). Earlier versions of chapter 4 appeared not once but twice (at least) in slightly different versions: 'Postcolonial Maori Sovereignty' (published in *Women's Studies Journal* 11, 1-2 (August 1995), 63-94) excludes the first section of chapter 4, while 'The Construction of Place: Maori Feminism and Nationalism in Aotearoa' (published in *NWSA Journal* 8, 1 (1996), 50-69), leaves out the last section. Chapter 4 thus blends, with only minor editorial changes, two earlier articles.

While it might be standard academic practice to recycle material, not to acknowledge a previous publication of material is not. Not only is it frustrating for a researcher to have her interest in Mohanram's work met with forever the same article in yet another disguise; with regard to *Black Body*, it also makes her wonder how many of the remaining chapters might have appeared previously in other books or journals. From there it is only a small step to becoming suspicious about the whole *Black Body* project — if the individual chapters were not actually written for this book, what are the odds that they hang together arbitrarily, rather than logically?

And indeed, with regard to the logical links between the individual sections of the book several questions arise. *Black Body* comprises three main sections which, by way of the linguistic parallelism visible in their headings — "In Theory", "In the Antipodes" and "In Conclusion" — promise coherence of argument: a first part introducing (Northern hemisphere) theoretical concerns is to be followed by a second part outlining the Antipodean situation; the gap between the two, so the headings insinuate, is to be bridged in a concluding third chapter. And yet this overall coherence is nowhere to be found in *Black Body*. If Mohanram is after "us[ing] the theoretical approaches described in the first part to discuss identity formation ... in New Zealand and Australia", as she claims she is, why does she not utilise her account of the (First World) theories of *identity* for the context of the Antipodes? Why does she, instead, begin her analysis in part II with the introduction of a different set of First World theories — *feminist* theories. This seems especially puzzling, since she dismisses both sets of theories as equally unproductive for describing indigenous identity in the Antipodes. Outlining complex theoretical approaches in great detail only to then dismiss them wholesale seems to me to be a rather questionable move in terms of

overall argument and logical coherence. Similarly, why does Mohanram set up a comparison between First World theories and Antipodean — ‘Fourth World’ — contexts in the first two sections, only to then discuss First World theories with reference to Indian — ‘Third World’ — contexts in her concluding third part? Both the Antipodean countries and India are formerly colonised countries; both are in the Southern hemisphere — but surely that is as far as the similarities go? How can a chapter on Indian postcoloniality possibly "conclude" a discussion about the relevance of First World theories in the Antipodes? This question becomes even more pressing if we consider that this “conclusion” was already published years before the book it is meant to be concluding was actually written.

It is in part III and its *repeated* attempts to conclude, in fact, that Mohanram’s unwillingness (or inability?) to draw together the disparate elements that comprise *Black Body* becomes particularly obvious. Entitled “In Conclusion”, this part is expressly dedicated to concluding the issues raised in the former chapters. And yet within these concluding words a further section is set aside — entitled “Conclusion”— to bring about the conclusion to which the entire part was committed. The conclusion within the conclusion is then followed — in yet another attempt at unity — by a coda. Yet to see how very unsuccessful even that final attempt is, the reader does not have to dig very deep; the style of writing alone is clear enough an indicator. Mohanram’s writing is fluent and readable throughout the book; in the coda, however, her style suddenly changes. What before was appealing academic writing, now becomes disjointed, repetitive and abrupt:

The body also grants the subject a sense of personal identity, a sense of belonging, of being the other. The body is perceived as origin and signifies the place of origin. ... The body is also a message board. ... Place, too, intersects with the meaning of the body Place is of tremendous importance within postcolonial discourse. ... Body, place, ownership and race are central to an understanding of identity as well. ... Finally, race. (200f.)

In the coda, logic gives way to enumeration; hypotactically arranged sentences are replaced by a preference for parataxis — indicating Mohanram’s difficulty in drawing together the disjointed strands of her argument in a meaningful way.

Mohanram herself admits that “[t]here is no linear argument contained in this work” (xx). She calls her work a “mosaic” with “individual pieces with integrity intact in a larger pattern” (xx) to indicate its in-between status between, on the one hand, isolated glimpses or ‘snapshots’ of disparate elements and, on the other, a picture comprised of parts no longer distinct but

merged in their contribution toward pictorial unity. The metaphor of the mosaic points towards a hybridised form of two conventionally accepted forms of academic writing, the (shorter) essay and the (longer) treatise. An essay is a distinct and tightly argued piece of work usually published in journals or collections and surrounded by other equally distinct pieces; a treatise, on the other hand, is usually published on its own and depends on all of its parts for its overall meaning. Referring to *Black Body* as a “mosaic”, Mohanram seems to suggest that the elements in her book are neither as loosely connected as they might be in a collection of essays, nor form as tight a unit as they would in a conventional academic treatise. The “mosaic” proves to be a fitting metaphor for the type of academic writing she pursues. A mosaic avoids all the dangerous closures of meaning that postmodernism has warned us lie at the heart of oppressive modes of thought and it — quite literally — leaves the gaps that are meant to be liberating in their permanent suspension of fixed meaning.

The challenge — or inherent contradiction — for any postmodern academic writing is that in order to be taken seriously it has to follow the rules of logic and meaning, while at the same time suspending its own meaning(fulness). Mohanram meets that challenge successfully; her “mosaic” produces pockets of closure and meaning, yet holds them suspended by avoiding an overall closure of argument. The question arises, however, whether the current (theoretical) preoccupation with suspension of meaning, hybridity, in-betweenness, etc. has not in itself become a cliché and thereby lost some or most of its power to challenge established meanings. If, on the other hand, the liberating power of these concepts is assumed, then we need to ask ourselves whether — if the closure of meaning is continuously deferred — we will ever produce anything that contains meaning — that is meaningful enough to challenge the power of established systems of meaning.

These are crucial questions not just for Mohanram and her *Black Body* project but for anyone currently working in the field of cultural studies. Mohanram follows what is currently theoretically *en vogue* and thereby chooses the path of least resistance — an easy path that more often than not is unproductive in terms of cultural criticism. It might come as no surprise, then, that none of the big review journals in Aotearoa/New Zealand — *Landfall*, *New Zealand Books*, to name only the most prominent ones — have reviewed Mohanram’s book to date — too diffuse, it seems, is its contribution to the local discussion. Arguably, if Mohanram had not just pointed out the gap between theoretical concerns in the Northern hemisphere and the situation in the Antipodes, but had attempted to bridge it, as both blurb and structure suggest she would, her study would have had more of an impact. A self-consciously but unashamedly meaningful picture outlining the significance

of theoretical notions of identity for the postcolonial situation of the Antipodes, rather than a mosaic, might have proven to be less TC ('theoretically correct'), but it would have undoubtedly made a more valuable contribution to the slowly emerging discussion about the idiosyncrasies of Antipodean postcoloniality.