

Black Body: Women, Colonialism and Space by **Radhika Mohanram**.
Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1999. Pp. xx +250; \$35.00 (paper).

Radhika Mohanram's *Black Body: Women, Colonialism and Space* commences full of promise that it will tap a rich vein of scholarly enterprise. Mohanram states that her purpose is to:

read the discursive nature of blackness which is constructed in order to function as a binary opposite to whiteness and to bring the latter into meaning. My analysis underscores quite insistently that blackness is a discursive practice exercised by the confluences of history, culture, economics, geography and language, which conditions the enunciative function. In this work I will attempt to show the links between the body, geography and the enunciative function of blackness. (xiv)

Mohanram approaches this task from a number of directions. Her methodological *modus operandi* is to select "fragments" of texts and weave her observations of these fragments together with theoretical "fragments." Mohanram has read widely but not deeply, and the book is therefore unable to overcome the fragmentary nature of her chosen texts. This melange of texts are taken out of their context (a methodological virtue validated by reified theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin) and used in an abstract exercise which ultimately does not advance the reader's understanding of the "black body." This book is useful for its summation of post-colonial and post-modern theory, yet it would have benefited from more contributions from Mohanram herself on the theoretical issues discussed rather than reiteration of the theoretical contributions of others.

That this book does not deliver on its rich promise is not the most lasting impression of this work. The cavalier use of theory and fragments of decontextualised texts produces, at times, quite alarming results. The stated purpose of the book to deconstruct blackness becomes subordinated by the methodological need to take texts out of their context, which results in conclusions that, rather than deconstructing blackness in colonial discourses, instead reinforce the colonial tendency to trivialise the colonised. Chapter Four "The Memory of Place: Maori Nationalism and Feminism in Aotearoa/New

Zealand” and Chapter Five “Place in My Place: Embodiment, Aboriginality and Australia” suffer most in this respect. The discussion of Maori nationalism is replete with problems stemming from unsubstantiated claims and extrapolations based on thin evidence concerning, for example the gendering of the Maori nation (110). However, it is the treatment of Sally Morgan’s *My Place* which most clearly suffers from Mohanram’s approach.

Mohanram’s use of theory as a solvent, leaching the text of its pre-existing meaning thus liberating it and allowing it to “burst forth” with new meaning of Mohanram’s choosing, has implications which I wonder whether Mohanram contemplated. In her quest to “rehistoricize” *My Place* Mohanram claims that:

Morgan’s text is haunted by the presence of a number of other texts on Australia. And I want to underscore that, regardless of whether she was aware of the hovering presence of these references, all these texts negotiate the meaning of *My Place* and the meaning of Australia for me. (128)

One might think that these “haunting texts” might be other examples from the rich heritage of Aboriginal autobiography of which Mohanram appears to be unaware. Her citing of Albert Facey’s *A Fortunate Life* does bear some comparison as an account of a poor rural Australian boyhood, but Mohanram’s claim that *My Place* is replete with references to Enid Blyton (of *Famous Five* and *Noddy* fame) would no doubt have passed the notice of Morgan, as it has this reader of *My Place* and several others I questioned on this point (129). A claim such as this requires a great deal more explication than it received here. Mohanram does not share with us what the other Australian “haunting texts” that she claims unknowingly directed Morgan in writing *My Place* might be.

Rather than dwell upon more closely related literary works, Mohanram chooses to compare *My Place* with Victorian novels, specifically Dickens’ *Great Expectations* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Mohanram sees the links between *My Place* and these English masterworks as profound. Indeed the life story of Morgan’s mother, Gladys Milroy, (that documents one of the most punitive dimensions of colonisation perpetrated against Aboriginal people, that of the Stolen Generation) for Mohanram “mimics” that of the fictional Jane Eyre:

Jane Eyre functions as a template for Gladys’ early life; in its simultaneous articulation of race and class, *My Place* also functions as the excess and slippage of the Brontë novel. Gladys’ life might mirror Jane’s upward mobility but simultaneously questions it because it ignores the centrality of colonisation in its positioning as master-text. (139)

Mohanram’s assertion that *Jane Eyre* “functions as a template of Gladys’ early life” is not only hollow in meaning, but may well cause offence to some readers, not least the living subject whose life Mohanram is using as a text onto which she seeks to assign “new meaning.” Her inference that Aboriginal experiences are comparable to white ones, and fictionalised ones at that, not

only belittles Aboriginal people's lives, but takes us no closer to understanding the subject of the book – the black body, women, colonialism and space. Instead, blackness and colonialism are negated here as influential factors.

Ultimately, what appears to be of primary importance in this book is the authorial self and its quest for authority. This purpose, which traces the shifting identity of an Indian-born, US-educated New Zealand-employed female academic within these different contexts, wins the day. This subject is interesting. However, the approach taken leaves the reader both wanting more meaningful conclusions and questioning the ethics of her methodological outcomes, particularly in relation to *My Place. Black Body*'s greatest value is as a study of academic subjectivity.

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