

Polarity Versus Plurality

Confessions of an Ambivalent Woman of Colour

by Minelle K. Mahtani

À partir de son expérience personnelle, l'auteure, une femme canadienne d'origine indienne/iranienne, examine comment, de diverses façons, le concept femme de couleur limite les individus. Elle analyse l'exclusion propre au concept femme de couleur qui, ironiquement, se veut inclusif. Elle préconise un examen des ramifications politiques qu'entraînent entre autres cette catégorie et elle explique comment les théories féministes ont toujours expliqué l'expérience des autres en les classifiant dans des groupes bien précis.

*It must be odd
To be a minority
he was saying.
I looked around
and didn't see any.
So I said
yeah
It must be.
(Yamada)*

As a first-generation Canadian woman of Indian/Iranian origin, I feel that the tendency to classify me as a woman of colour is highly misleading. I don't picture myself a woman of colour as defined by the academic writings of feminist theorists (see Lorde, Moraga *et al.*, Lazreg, Spivak). I am still in the process of discovering who I am. My position as a woman of colour not only deals with geographic circumstances or an implied visibility; I feel that it also should take into consideration the interconnections

among time, space and change. I choose to explore my position on a map which continues to situate me within an academic discourse of chromatic relations.

I will explore a variety of ways that the construct "woman of colour" frames individuals through a personal examination of my own position(s) and by contemplating the framings through a nationalist (Canadian) location. I do not want to abolish the construct of women of colour, as it has been a particularly productive, emancipatory strategy on the part of feminist theory. However, I do believe we need to look more closely at the exclusions which a category like "woman of colour" creates—even while its aims remain inclusionary.

Tracing the category of women of colour

a cage went in search of a bird...
(Kafka)

The term "woman of colour" was created in feminist theory to provide for the needs of particularly oppressed women to discuss ideas of race and class. Audre Lorde, in a discussion of why white feminists choose not to address the differences between women, called for an examination of the theory behind "racist feminism," which led to the emergence of a sharp critique developed largely by women

of colour. The notion itself seemed to be a very positive, much-needed opportunity to disentangle the various threads of racism, feminist theory, and otherwise submerged voices of non-white women. The construct of woman of colour has since been cited as a "theoretical site in which to locate the struggle for self-representation" (Mathur 2); "[a place where] alternative discourses of womanhood that disrupt the humanisms of many Western discursive traditions [have been constructed]" (Haraway *qtd. in* Butler *et al.* 95); and a way of building an account of the world as seen from the margins, an account which can transform these margins into centres.

One of the earliest examples of this inquiry into the concept of women of colour is Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga's *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings from Radical Women of Colour*. This early interventionist text provided the background from which a number of non-white women brought to the forefront the various struggles that they faced on a day-to-day basis.

However, as a Canadian woman of mixed origin, I have great difficulty in locating myself among these voices, although I do sympathize with a number of them. In my attempt to identify with these voices, I first wanted to address whether I am, in fact, a woman of colour according to feminist theories. I glance at my own skin colour; I know I'm not white as such; but I'm not black either. I'm not really one nor the other. So, I suppose I don't consider myself a "strong" woman of colour. I sense my own difference, but not necessarily on a particular side of the divide between white women and women of colour. I consider myself a fraud in that sense; only my skin colour makes me an honorary member of the women of colour club. Regardless of my own ambiguities about this placement, I have been positioned as a mere bearer of an unexplained label. I want to explore the apprehensiveness I feel about this.

Walking on academic eggshells

*The fear that speaks its name, for some woman these days,
is a fear of other women. But you aren't supposed to talk
about that; if you can't say anything nice, don't say
anything at all (Margaret Atwood).*

In my courses, I have become increasingly engaged in a discourse which situates me as a woman of colour. This is wholly new for me. It interests me how this concept has come to pass. The idea of women of colour being researched and written about by "white" academics is one which has been received with general caution in the social sciences. I have discovered in classes that the majority of

individuals are generally frightened to carry out ethnographic research about women of colour simply because they feel it is not their terrain, and god forbid, if they do not get it right (Bannerji). It is beginning to show itself in academic circles through a kind of guilty, head-hanging business of being afraid to comment for fear of critical examination and being called politically incorrect (Nourbese-Philip).

In an assessment of writing about women of colour, Gayatri Spivak addresses that first world women and western-trained women tend to contribute to the continued "degradation" of third world women who they interpret, often without access. So then, in the truly academic manner of walking on eggshells around delicate issues, women of colour have constantly been told by recent studies in feminist theory, that no-one (especially a western, white academic) ought to appropriate *our* voices! As a result, I am asked, as a member of this minority, to speak about being a woman of colour (in spite of the ambivalence I have expressed about the category). However, as Audre Lorde asks:

Is it my responsibility to educate white women in the face of tremendous resistance, as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival? This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought (100).

It disappoints me that academics seem so afraid to cover the terrain which so desperately needs a more "privileged" voice.

So, the category of woman of colour, which was originally designed as a label for liberation, continues to tangle my ethnicity further in its roots. What are the repercussions of locating me/my identity within a category which I have not created?

It is not unusual to encounter cases where the sense of specialness which comes here with being the "first" or the "only" woman is confused with the consciousness of difference. One cannot help feeling "special" when one figures among the rare few to emerge above the anonymous crowd and enjoys the privilege of preparing the way for one's more "unfortunate" sisters. This creates a division distance (Trinh-Minh-ha 86).

I almost think that it is fashionable, within academic circles, to say, "As a woman of colour..." I actually found myself doing that during a presentation in class, but those words didn't sound like my words in my own voice. Afterwards I felt that presenting my ideas within that framework lacked authenticity and I was only fooling myself. Even people in the class seemed surprised that I would classify myself that way. In all honesty, I experience doubt in my ability to comment as a woman of colour. I have already mentioned that I don't feel worthy of the

label. I have always felt like the superior Asian-Canadian in class, thriving under the smug illusion that I was not the stereotypical image of the Indian woman. I took advantage of the category that day by attempting to reproduce it. So while one can use the term woman of colour as a lamp from which to shed light upon issues, the shadows it casts may reproduce further oppression.

I express ambivalence about my position as a woman of colour because rather than liberating me (which seems to be its original aim) the classification instead burdens me with all sorts of expectations. If I am a woman of colour then I feel I am ill-equipped to comment upon most issues regarding women of colour. I cannot be expected to be an expert for all women of colour. The only aspect of my identity that I can be relatively certain of is the difficulty I experience in trying to articulate it. My identity is ambiguous; I am constantly opening up my identity, and discovering it. It is constantly shifting, continually relational.

In part, I suppose I find speaking on behalf of all women of colour an uncritical, lackadaisical, tolerance in academe. By appointing me as a *carte-blanche* (pun intended) representative for the entire constructed category of woman of colour, are we not reproducing the major elements of the prevailing paradigm of social sciences by creating a few more diversions and more unwarranted generalities?

The problematic nature of collapsing categories

We are made out of oppositions; we live between two poles...you don't reconcile the poles, you just recognize them (Orson Welles).

I would like to address how the category of women of colour seems to encourage the idea of choosing a side. Its very polarity seems to encourage an identity which is immediately visible, revealing a binary conception of relations. If I am labeled a woman of colour, it is already a given that I am not white. The category of women of colour acknowledges that women labeled as such are definitively coloured (whatever that means). White is seen as the norm. This is highly problematic, as the category of whiteness is itself a highly contestable term and as much a socially constructed category as black (Ware). It is also interesting to note that while a number of authors have recently traced the political context from which a category like black has emerged (Gilroy), no one has of yet unraveled the complexity of a category like woman of colour. "Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak" (Trin-Minh-ha 94).

This "leakage," as Minh-ha describes it, is worthy of address. I am concerned with the limitations of the concept of women of colour and the way it emphasizes a white versus colour dichotomy in academic debates. This kind of binary opposition is nothing new in academia.

There has always been a tendency to divide the world into finite sets of social categories—like black and white, bourgeoisie and proletariat, male and female, and urban and rural (Jackson).

We are beginning to recognize that every discourse of power has its boundary effects (Hall) and we are being conditioned now to keep in mind the politically correct behaviour of drawing away from chromatic relations. However, academic feminists are not yet completely removed from this tendency to collapse white versus “other.” For example, according to the majority of readings dealing with third world women, South Asian women’s gender

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oppression is seen as being mainly determined by either capitalistic patriarchy or by racism (see Coontz and Henderson, Lerner, Fox, Dua). Feminist theory has generally understood the gender oppression of these women through these two concepts emphasizing a dualistic approach towards the “other.”

This fixation upon a dualistic discourse disturbs me. Is this the kind of stifled, pointed discourse we want to encourage? For example, how am I, within this increasingly two-tiered discourse, expected to articulate the multiple tensions which surround my ethnicity? I found little in these articles about woman of colour to help me situate my own position. Where do I fall within these broad categories? I am neither black nor white, yet I am still marginalized within the broader social context. By furthering a binary opposition (white women versus women of colour) feminists are choosing an ancient, male-dominated, white-ruling discourse as the language from which to examine current issues—issues which deserve an innovative approach. Isn’t a multi-logue more appropriate?

How could someone be both one and something other? How could the unity of identity have more than one face or name? If I am a [product of a number of cultures] which one am I really? Which is the real “self” and which is “the other?” (Radhakrishnan 63)

My own identity is embodied through a series of tangled knots. The tensions pulling on these knots shift and change daily. If ethnic identity is a strategic response to a shifting sense of time and place, how can we begin to develop a theory about ethnic identity for people like me, individuals who are a product of mixed/mosaic parentage? We need to discuss ways to acknowledge and expand the category for people experiencing this ambivalence.

Positioning my own ethnicity within polarities

*People keep asking me where I come from
says my son
Trouble is, I’m American on the inside
and Oriental on the outside
No Doug
Turn that outside in
This is what America looks like
(Yamada)*

I’d like to explain why I feel like a fraudulent women of colour by communicating how I negotiate my ethnicity on a daily basis. I can’t commit myself to either side of the dichotomy of woman of colour and white woman, or third world woman and western woman, or the “other” and the majority. Instead, I feel like I’m constantly in between the two—almost like there is a body of water between the two continents and I am constantly trying to grasp one or the other, trying not to drown in the overpowering sea between them.

In my attempt not to choose a side, I find that I negotiate my ethnicity by behaving like a chameleon—choosing a side whenever it suits my purposes better. By mixing with both cultures in this way am I not only a fraud in my own origin, but also in white circles? Indian circles and Iranian circles? I certainly can’t choose one side from which to examine my shifting perspectives.

I can choose to be considered white, Iranian, or Indian if I want to be. I have that look about me which cannot be specifically located in any one culture. The only thing that sometimes gives me away is my name—but then again, people constantly call me Michelle. I must admit that I sometimes find it safer to identify with the dominant group. Is this, in part, due to my multiple identity as a Canadian-Iranian-Indian? Or is that Indian-Canadian-Iranian? Iranian-Indian-Canadian?

I never know how to respond to a question about my heritage without launching into a whole history of explanation. I certainly am not wholly South Asian and I know I don’t fit neatly, like a puzzle piece, there—I don’t even speak Hindi. I know I’m not completely Iranian—I can’t cook a single Iranian dish, or speak a word of my mother’s native Farsi (except for “goodnight” and “good morning”). If I don’t want to classify myself as a woman of colour, how can I begin to identify myself?

The one aspect of my culture that I feel completely comfortable with is my “Canadian-ness.” I am as Canadian, as snow and ice. I can speak fluent French and have traveled all across Canada. I am proud to say that I am Canadian when I am abroad. But perhaps a deeper, dangerous current lurks below here. I am always asked, “You’re Canadian? But you don’t look it! Are you Spanish? French? Italian?” It’s not enough to say that I am “Canadian.” I have even been jokingly compared to an Oreo cookie—black on the outside, white on the inside (and actually, vice-versa as well). I, too, laugh at this compari-

son, but deep down inside, my anger and resentment burns. Even in what I consider to be "my" homeland, I am considered different.

I suppose I consider myself an honorary member of the woman of colour club because I am accustomed to names, labels, categories, and cages. I am aware of being called "Indo-Canadian," "exotic," "ethnic," even "paki" and "nigger." However, I like to think my few experiences of out-and-out racism have been isolated. For me, these include being called hateful names and being refused admission to exclusive places. However, I am constantly aware of an invisible construct, not unlike a boundary

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As for me, I just position myself into the self-help
group of "Ethnic Drifters Anonymous."*

separating countries on a map, between myself and individuals. These boundaries may seem invisible, but I am ever aware of their presence. I often feel like I am being judged solely based on my appearance. This attitude becomes clear when individuals question me about my background. "Where are you from?" they ask. "From Toronto," I say, secure in the knowledge that Toronto has always been my home. "No, no, no," they answer impatiently. "I mean, where are you from?" adding emphasis. So although I feel "Canadian," I am often not perceived as one in what I see as my own country.

I carry a Canadian passport, I therefore, am Canadian. How am I Canadian, though, above and beyond the narrow legalistic definition of being the bearer of a Canadian passport, and does the racism of Canadian society present an absolute barrier to those of us who are differently coloured ever belonging? Because that is, in fact, what we are speaking about—how to belong—not only the legal and civic sense of carrying a Canadian passport, but also in another sense of feeling at "home" and at ease. It is only in belonging that we will eventually become Canadian (Nourbese-Philip 16).

I imagine there must be other Canadian chameleons out there of mixed heritage, of Canadian and something other descent who face similar difficulties in discovering where they belong. But I continue to dichotomize others and put them into specific ethnic groups. I suppose they must find their own homes somewhere. But as for me, I just position myself into the self-help group of "Ethnic Drifters Anonymous." It simply reveals the numerous questions and ambiguity I feel about positioning myself in pre-ordained categories such as "woman of colour."

Perhaps one way of reconfiguring the classification of woman of colour is to change the question from "Who am I?" to "Where am I?" (Bondi). I have mentioned that my identity is one that is continually relational, and geographically and temporally specific. This would effectively shift the focus from a politics of identity to a politics of location, making context a key step towards identity shaping. For me, this context plays an integral role in my chameleon-ness. In turn, this shifting of subject would strategically allow us to look at the positioning of routes on our academic maps towards the discoveries of our own personal roots.

An optimistic final note

Any knife can cut two ways. Theory is a positive force when it vitalizes and enables, but a negative one when it is used to amputate and repress, to create a batch of self-righteous rules and regulations, to foster nail-biting self-consciousness to the point of total block. It's easy to make [women] feel guilty, about almost anything. There are many strong voices; there are many kinds of strong voices. Surely there should be room for all. Does it make sense to silence women in the name of Woman? We can't afford this silencing, or this fear (Margaret Atwood).

Atwood communicates to me an important aspect of feminist theory's works about women of colour. I certainly don't want to dismiss the vital role authors like bell hooks and Audre Lorde have played in bringing to life the voices of marginalized individuals. Their contributions have, in fact, revitalized the terrain of feminist studies and have successfully integrated many voices which might otherwise have been submerged. However, I think that we ought to consider that the discourse within which these voices are being communicated deserves a further disentangling. After all, there may be many marginalized voices which are being further polarized by getting lost and not finding their way, or reaching dead ends through these feminist theories.

It is important to bring women's voices together, not to silence them, or to critique them to the point of silence and marginalization. "No such conflict should exist among women whose consciousness is transforming" (Lazreg). There is room for all. We need to bring to the table these kinds of thoughts, ideas, and questions. Why focus solely on differences when we have so much in common? "I is not a unified subject, a fixed identity, or that solid mass covered with layers of superficialities. I in itself, has infinite layers" (Yamada 94).

Canada is a country with a continuously shifting landscape, thanks to the diverse population it encompasses. The process of sketching out our positions as individuals possessing multiple identities (Canadian and "fill in the blank here") will be laden with ambivalence and shifting relationships. Our sketches may portray a

multiplicity of ways to view our landscape.

Writing this article has demonstrated to me the multiple ambiguities my identity possesses and how it has altered my own passage through the Canadian landscape. It demonstrates to me that we ought to look more closely at the political ramifications of categories—and more specifically, how feminist theory has made sense of “others” experiences by classifying women into specific orders. I cannot emphasize enough that this attempt to critique the classification of women of colour is not meant to censor its use; rather, it is an attempt to release the term into a future of multiple significations, and to give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear (Butler). It is my belief that we need to more fully deconstruct the discourse of woman of colour, and acknowledge the power/powerlessness that is inherent in the category. We need to look at the different kinds of contexts within which it is possible for a chameleon like me to thrive; and within which legends (this includes names, boxes, and categories) of identity are produced. This will allow our research in arenas of hybridity to shift from one which simply celebrates diversity (and then reaches a liberal, pluralistic compromise) towards one which emphasizes the positionality of meaning. By doing so, possibilities for new configurations of identities will open on the horizon of feminist theory.

In closing, I am reminded, in my efforts to articulate my multiple identities, of the Quebec license plate which states, “*Je me souviens*.” I identify with that concept. Translated, *je me souviens* means “I remember”—I remember me, my culture, my identity. It seems to embody and embrace the very ideal I would like to portray. I imagine myself as a mosaic; made up of very different parts. Instead of viewing “otherness” as an opposite (to what? the majority?), perhaps the time has come to discard the idea of placing identities within socially constructed “differences” and consider the concept of flexible, multiple identities, where identity is a matter of rich and complex negotiation.

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