

The Intellectual Promised Land: Negotiating Racial Hypervisibility in the Cultural Studies

Classroom

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[First Picture] This is Mona Chang. In 1968, in the upper-middle class town of Scarshill, New York, Mona Chang, the teenaged daughter of Chinese immigrants Ralph and Helen, is converting to Judaism. It is this event that opens Gish Jen's 1996 novel, *Mona in the Promised Land*. In 1968, at the dawn of what some historians call the age of identity politics, Mona, the novel's protagonist, attempts to negotiate her cultural identity in a space of hypervisibility. In the Jewish community, Mona is known as the "official mascot of the Temple Youth Group". To her parents, she fails at achieving upward mobility, and the kind of respectability expected from Chinese immigrants. To Alfred, and other black employees at Ralph and Helen's pancake house, as they negotiate their *invisibility* and relegation to the kitchen, Mona's class privilege affords her the benefits of whiteness. To the neighborhood's white residents, Mona is a cause, a charity case, or the object of their curiosities generated by world traveling and intellectual stimulation. And from her sister Callie's roommate at Harvard-Radcliffe, Naomi, a product of black middle class parentage and a New England boarding school, Mona learns she is a yellow girl, a colored person.

The intersecting social movements of the narrative (namely white liberalism, Jewish activism, black liberation, and Chinese immigrant rights) become an intellectual space for Mona's internal negotiation of her own social, cultural, and political identity. Although these social movements are highly oversimplified to make them palpable to the narrative's young adult audience, this oversimplification highlights Mona's introspective space of uncertainty, a space that I am all too familiar with. Which is why a young adult novel lies at the center of this essay. I am both the author

and subject/object of my research and sometimes the subject/object of my colleagues academic inquiries. As a queer woman of color, and a historian of black women, the relationship between public and private negotiations of my own identity is something that I grapple with often.

I wrote this essay to attempt to answer the following question for myself: what does it mean to negotiate one's cultural identity in the space of the cultural studies classroom, to experience representations of oneself in scholarly literature, in classroom exchanges, in one's own work and that of one's peers. The history of racism in the academy (on an institutional level) has been well documented by scholars. The inquiries, however, leave little room for the experiences of the individual in favor of an examination of representations of the collective. This is where I find value in turning to a novel not written for academics. Its focus on one character's developing sense of her own cultural visibility is highlighted by the flat and sometimes archetypal characterizations of novel's the secondary figures.

In Jen's bildungsroman, Mona becomes aware of her racialized body for the first time in the classroom. She describes the experience of being the only Chinese family in her community as analogous to “being a permanent exchange student.” From her rabbi, Rabbi Horowitz, Mona develops a language for understanding this experience as the result of her lack of white privilege, or WASP privilege to use the Rabbi's language. From her Jewish community, Mona also begins to understand herself as part of an axis of oppression. Her status as a Chinese convert to Judaism, she was told, made her more Jewish than her peers. In other words, being both a person of color and a religious minority, made her more connected to a history of persecution.

The Jewish community in Scarshill represents a particular network of historical suffering that supposedly connects all marginalized communities. In the promised land, a term I am using here to refer to graduate school, this intellectual framework was new to me. I began my academic career at a historically black university. The philosophy of HBCUs (or historically black colleges and universities) is one of achievement and prosperity in the face of suffering. Analyses of race are rooted in both theory

and practice, in intellectual exchange coupled with institutional ritual. I chose a graduate program with a focus on gender and cultural studies to escape from the centrality of the black heterosexual male leadership model of black history, to see if I could find a narrative that better suited my experience. And in many ways, through reading and writing, I did.

When I entered the promised land, I was one of four people of color in a department of over thirty, three graduate students and one professor. The preferred school of thought as it relates to the examination of blackness, was one of suffering. This is a recurring message in *Mona* regarding the Jewish community. Rabbi Horowitz and the members of the temple tell Mona repeatedly, “Nobody knows how to be a minority better than the Jews.” The idea that one has to learn to “be” a minority suggests that there is a performance associated with being oppressed. That being marginalized is a choice, or a legacy bestowed upon a person at birth. It is a source of pride and inspiration.

The overuse of the term minority, does date the novel slightly, but, it also sheds light on the way that scholarship sometimes dictate the way a person is expected to perform a version of themselves in the classroom and in print. Thus, I began to identify as a queer Marxist woman of color, which I also discovered, from my colleagues and sometimes professors, was filled with mutually exclusive experiences. Marxist feminism found little room to make sense of my experience with racism. Scholars of imperialism and colonialism, like those written by esteemed member of the cultural studies canon, Frantz Fanon, made no room for women, at times, let alone feminism. And while queer theory is certainly a part of a longstanding feminist legacy, the black queer body is all too often underrepresented. I developed a strategy, as many people do, of interdisciplinarity, borrowing from each field and piecing together a set of politics for myself. It became a part of my academic training, if you will. But, for some reason, I found it troubling that I could sit in a classroom, pick up a book, and read myself in it.

Obviously, I shared a certain sense of Mona's naivete, which she begins to overcome as she

remembers a piece of advice she heard from one of her parent's employees: "Nobody ever radicalized without an audience." Without my knowledge, I had become "radicalized" in the promised land. My racialized body had given me an audience I was not sure I wanted. I accepted that audience by only engaging with mainstream scholarship by way of critique. My colleagues had also become "radicalized," and I mean radical here in the way that a sixteen year old girl like Mona might understand it. And so, they began to refer to themselves as in solidarity with me, as anti-racist, feminist, queer allies. I was well liked, and like Mona, my peers took an interest in understanding my cultural identity, in the same way that Temple Youth Group, made it their mission to tell Mona what it meant to be a Chinese Jew. In fact, Mona describes her first crush, Andy Kaplan, and his family, in this way: "the Kaplans have been to Taiwan and Japan; his father is a professor of East Asian civilization. Around their house, people say, are *belly many Buddhas*." My colleagues had volunteered in the peace corps, they were scholars of "race," and around their graduate student living spaces were "belly many," as the residents of Scarshill might say, books and poems by Audre Lorde and bell hooks.

Mona's sister Callie, encounters the process of racialization in a different way. She internalizes the representations of her Chinese identity that she learns from her peers and classmates, none of who, are Chinese. After all, it is not until Callie, enrolls at Harvard-Radcliffe, that she learns, from her black middle class roommate, Naomi, that her parents, who identify as Buddhist, Taoist Catholics, arrived at this conclusion from French Missionaries. "They were imperialists," Callie says to her mother Helen over dinner, "That's what Naomi says. They were bent on taking over China and saving the heathens."

What this exchange across generations illustrates is the way in which the institutionalization of cultural studies begins at the level of language. This language is a central part of the performance of scholarship. I encountered the lexicon for the first time during my own journey to the promised land. It began with a set of prescribed narratives for black womanhood, characterized by miscegenation, sexual exploitation dating black to slavery, mammy figures, oppression, imperialism, colonialism, womanism,

etc. I quickly began using academic jargon in my work, even as this language was inaccessible to the many communities that it claims to represent. Communities that I had always been a part of: working class, feminist, and queer communities of color.

Often times what these narratives represent is a mythologized past. Mona's experience illustrates what these "isms" that she encounters in the classroom, mean to her internal life in the present. It is this space, that I suggest, the field of cultural studies would benefit from greatly. What if, alongside religious institutions, ritual spaces, popular culture, political institutions, media, and educational institutions at large, we included in our dialogue the very spaces where we gather to understand and examine the dynamics of these cultural spaces? It might be the only way to truly understand how the "isms" we study as students of culture, enter the classroom space in ways that are not intended. While academics have very different viewpoints on where the author fits within scholarship (and in my own field this debate is quite lively among historians), I have found that my own internal life is a productive space for theorizing. Once I abandoned a staunch refusal to engage the canon, I began to read myself into the spaces between texts and into the silences in the classroom. I resisted what I saw as my absence from scholarship by finding new ways to be *present* in the classroom.

Mona describes her encounters with racism as analogous to being greeted with rocks thrown at her. Despite this, she identifies a historical trajectory that includes her own privilege. "Their group hasn't always been oppressed," she states, "They used to be the oppressors; and that makes them, as a minority, rank amateurs...They don't have their friends' institutions, or their ways of reminding themselves who they are, that they might not be lulled by a day in the sun." I, too, face the institutionalized study of oppression with my own privilege. One cannot simply dismiss the experience of the cultural studies classroom as racism disguised as scholarship. My educational privilege complicates the racialization of my body, especially outside of the classroom. Inside the classroom, it

provides me with a strategy for self-preservation and sometimes for resistance.

In the same way, representatives of various cultural groups in Jen's novel cling to social movements and cultural difference. When the community discovers that one of Mona's classmates is in an intimate relationship with one of the Chang's black employees, the town quickly rallies around their whiteness to preserve her innocence and her femininity. Helen admonishes Mona for being complicit in keeping the relationship a secret by exclaiming that only an American girl would commit such an act. A Chinese girl, she exclaims, “wants to do everything to make her mother happy.” In response, the black male characters develop their own rhetoric, borrowing it from the Nation of Islam, the Black Panthers, and literary figures like James Baldwin. On the one hand, this language perpetuates only negative images of black radicalism. The black male characters use profanity often and objectify the women in their communities for sport. But their newly found political affiliations are also a means of survival, just as whiteness or Chinese girlhood is for the other characters. To Gish Jen, no community is infallible. In *Mona in the Promised Land*, nobody wins the Oppression Olympics, not even the Jews.

My real inspiration for writing about Jen's novel, is Naomi, Callie's roommate at Harvard-Radcliffe. [Second picture] What you see behind you is a picture of myself shortly before I entered graduate school, for the purpose of illustration. Mona describes her first meeting with Naomi, in this way: “Her facial addenda have a kind of mythic circularity—round glasses, hoop earrings, basketball Afro; if she were an archeological ruin, you would surmise circles to be of central significance to her culture. *Large round eyes too!* You might note, the opening lines of your own thesis typing themselves before your eyes.” She goes on to describe Naomi's love of jazz, bebop, Chinese tea and dumplings, Scrabble, film noir, star gazing and soccer. “She is, in short a statistical outlier and overcompensator, a Renaissance woman such as Mona would have envied mightily had she not been black.”

But it is Naomi's experience as a descendant of slaves that gives her identity meaning. Returning to this idea of a mythologized past that unites people of color through a legacy of suffering,

Callie describes, “Naomi's experience has an import ours just doesn't. After all, blacks are the majority minority. Also they've been slaves and everything.” What Callie describes is, in fact, the process by which graduate students of color, specifically black students become hypervisible. Because, as Callie says, this narrative is “book material.” Yes, the narratives have import, but even more than that, broad categories of academic study become oversimplified giving certain bodies more visibility as objects of inquiry. For instance, “race” becomes “black,” gender becomes “women,” and the acronym/alphabet of what is now known as queer studies, LGBTQQIA, etc., is shortened to only the first two letters. This idea that certain narratives have more “import” than others, renders some cultural groups invisible in the classroom. As a result, even in the promised land, the coexistence of various identities in Scarshell, does not mandate cross-cultural conversation, like the dialogue we have been invited to do here.

So, what do we do? Mona would say this: “In a way she understands that this is how life operates in America, that it's just like the classroom. You have to raise your own hand—no one is going to raise it for you—and then you have to get ready to stand up and give the right answer so that you may gulp down your whole half-cup of approval.” In the academy this is not without risk, particularly when one is dealing with intersecting systems of oppression. For instance, many would say that the genesis for the institutionalization of black women's studies in the academy began in the 1980s with the publication of the iconic collections *But Some of Us Are Brave* and *This Bridge Called my Back*. The editors of *But Some of Us Are Brave* stated in their introduction that their conscious choice to identify themselves as black feminist scholars, to raise their own hands, could equate to career suicide. They ran the risk of being marginalized in black studies and to the feminist movement, they stated, because blackness and womanhood were mutually exclusive categories. Thus, in the space of racial hypervisibility, black feminist scholars took a risk. Some risked their careers, all ran the risk of their work being mapped onto their bodies.

This risk is something that Alfred, the number two cook at the pancake house, would say, that

one can never resist. When Mona naively tells Alfred that through cultural education he too can become Jewish, and therefore reap the benefits of class/race privilege, he responds, “We're never gonna to be Jewish, see, even if we grow out our nose like Miss Mona here is planning to do. *We be black motherfuckers.*” He continues, “Nobody is forgetting we're a minority and if we don't mind our manners, we're like as not to end up doing time in a concrete hotel.” As an HBCU student, and a child of working class black parents, I was taught, that the way to escape various kinds of imprisonment, was through education. Education is liberation and one must put one's community over self.

This is exactly what the secondary characters in *Mona* do, even to their own detriment. What makes them flat characters, is their inability (or our inability as readers), to tap into their internal lives. As a means of self-preservation they attach themselves to social movements and do not complicate their own ways of identifying. This makes it easier for them to similarly oversimplify Mona, who cannot seem to help her own internalized resistance to accepting what is said by her peers verbatim. Her feelings always exist in contrast. In Mona's own words, for instance, “Now that she is Jewish, she feels more Chinese than ever.” Which is very different than her performance of knowledge of Jewish history, literature, and ritual.

Thus, what would happen if we did not see our internal lives and our external performances as existing in opposition. I am reminded of a quote by Jamaican anthropologist, novelist, historian, and spiritual healer, Erna Brodber, from her 1997 novel, *Louisiana*. “Feeling is knowing.” We learn about Mona only through her thoughts, her narration, and not her dialogue. Scholars of culture have all the tools necessary to articulate their internal negotiations of hypervisibility, which, in turn, requires us to adopt other ways of knowing, to understand our feelings as that which gives us access to aspects of our own work that we have yet to discover.