

1 **Book Review**

2 **A personally reflective review of Avtar Brah's**
3 **Decolonial Imaginings: Intersectional conversations and**
4 **contestations**

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9 edges

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11 Growing up in Britain, one can easily go from primary school to university and
12 beyond without encountering many Black tutors. I use 'Black' here in its 'political
13 colour' sense, which encompasses all Black and Brown people. Before embarking on
14 an MSc in 'Race' and Ethnic Relations at Birkbeck College, University of London, I
15 had been taught by two Black teachers – one Indian and the other Moroccan. One of
16 my professors at Birkbeck was Avtar Brah, an East-African Asian. The Masters was a
17 first of its kind in the UK, and she was one of its developers. The Masters programme
18 is now called Culture, Diaspora, and Ethnicity, and Professor Emerita Avtar Brah has
19 retired, having joined Birkbeck in 1985.

20 In this book of essays and interviews, Brah's identity as an East African Asian –
21 she was born in Punjab, India, and grew up in Uganda – is fundamental to her writing
22 and research on decoloniality, anti-racist feminism and intersectionality. She writes
23 that the book's contents "highlight the imbrication of the personal with the political,
24 thereby underlining the importance of the longstanding feminist slogan 'the personal
25 is political'" (pg. 2). Given the theme of this special issue is 'Resistant Knowledges,'
26 Brah's work aptly fits this modality.

27 In 1972, Brah came to the UK as a refugee after the then president, Idi Amin,
28 expelled all Asians. Before this, as an Asian woman in Uganda, Brah experienced a
29 racial hierarchy, positioning White people at the top, Asian people in the middle, and
30 Africans at the bottom. She explains how she came to academia 'accidentally' after
31 having taken a research post at Bristol University requiring her two languages – Urdu
32 and Panjabi.

33 The development of her sense of political consciousness started from her early
34 teenage years when she read Malcolm X's autobiography as well as the work of
35 two radical intellectuals: the Panjabi male novelist, Nanak Singh, whose work was
36 critical of British colonial rule in India; and a female poet, Amrita Pritam, who wrote

37 the important poem on partition titled Aj Aakhaan Waris Nu (Today I Invoke Waris
38 Shah). Brah's other influences range from Gramsci's concepts of common sense and
39 hegemony to Stuart Hall, Edward Said, and postcolonial feminism. She also speaks
40 of the tenets of her Sikhism with its commitment to gender equality, social justice,
41 and anti-caste politics.

42 Brah describes her undergraduate days in the USA in the late 1960s, where she be-
43 came involved with the Black Power movement (Leonard, 2021). Similarly, when she
44 came to Britain in the 1970s, she became involved with the early feminist movement
45 as well as various social movements. In 1979, Brah was one of the founding members
46 of Southall Black Sisters (SBS), a seminal, secular, not-for-profit women's organisa-
47 tion, which stills exists to this day. SBS was formed after a National Front (a White
48 British neo-fascist, racist organisation) march on Southall – a predominantly South
49 Asian neighbourhood in London – resulted in the death of an anti-racist protester and
50 teacher, Blair Peach, who was killed by police.

51 Brah was one of the earliest thinkers to write about intersectionality and diasporas,
52 which she sees as 'intimately interconnected'. This was demonstrated in her book,
53 *Cartographies of Diaspora, Contesting Identities*, published in 1996, which examined
54 questions of gender, 'race', ethnicity, class, culture and belonging. Brah writes of her
55 acknowledgment of the 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement (pg. 104) – a US
56 Black lesbian collective – seen as a major precursor to the intersectional debate.

57 "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that
58 we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual and
59 class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated
60 analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are
61 interlocking." Combahee River Collective, 1977 via BlackPast.org

62 In today's world where the politics of the neo-right is on the resurgence and the
63 movement of peoples is so politically contested, *Decolonial Imaginings* is an essential
64 read from a thinker and scholar whose life and work are so closely intertwined. It
65 traverses many aspects of Brah's research and formulations on decoloniality, anti-
66 racist feminism, migration, borders, and intersectionality. As someone who studied
67 under Brah, I felt immensely privileged to have done so while reviewing this book,
68 which highlights how relevant her thinking is in a fractured world. Brah's teachings
69 have aided my own writings and research as a politically conscious library worker and
70 scholar-activist and my pursuit of intersectional justice over the course of my career
71 in higher education libraries in the UK. Until we piece together the intersections
72 outlined by thinkers like Brah and apply them to our decolonial social justice praxis,
73 our struggles will not find their place in the politics of hope that we all crave as agents
74 of change.

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