

Book and media reviews

Disrupting colonial myths and false truths: the educative power of narratives

Osler, A. (2023). *Where are you from? No, where are you really from?* London: Virago Press. 206 pp., £10.99 (paperback) ISBN-13: 9780349014616; £20.00 (hardcover) ISBN-13: 9780349014623; £20.00 (e-book) ISBN-13: 9780349014609.

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Audrey Osler's book, *Where are you from? No, where are you really from?* resonates with readers in multiple and educative ways as they engage with her family story, spanning seven generations of British citizens from the late 1700s to current times. Osler presents a meticulously researched family history, raising fundamental and pertinent questions about taken-for-granted conceptions of Britishness and the right to belong. The colonisers' narrative on race, and the 'mixing' of races, shifts throughout the period covered in her book. Degrees of acceptance, verging on respectability, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, become pragmatic and increasingly negative in the late 19th century. By the early 20th century, an attitude of dismissal and contempt emerges. The commonality between these shifting attitudes is the influence of individual, institutional, and national vested interests shaped by notions of white supremacy and economic entitlement to the rich resources accumulated during and after the British Empire. The insidious legacy of colonial policies on contemporary

expressions of racism and discrimination becomes evident through Osler's intersecting themes of race, gender, religion, migration, class, and citizenship.

Two questions make up the title of Osler's book. These are used to explore narrow understandings of migration, typical in country contexts where whiteness is the assumed common denominator of belonging to a nation. Additionally, they provoke her in-depth exploration of family over generations, revealing stories shaped by the workings of imperialism. Osler's father was born in Hertfordshire, England, and her mother in British North Borneo. Their story starts in Singapore in 1947 before moving to post-war Britain, where others' responses to their marriage was 'a miscellany of hostility, scepticism and support' (p. 15). Despite the laws, regulations, conventions, and underlying attitudes of British colonial rule, her parents cross many of the boundaries imposed by imperial power. The capacity to cross racist boundaries is a common theme in the stories of different family members across generations.

Osler's childhood and adult life as a person of mixed heritage in Britain reveal encounters with prejudice and micro-aggressions. The story of Osler's maternal grandparents provides a first-hand account of one family's experience of migration from Madras (today Chennai) to British Borneo and finally Singapore in search of work. The increasing tension around senses of belonging arising from the shifting attitudes of those in power towards the British Empire's citizens is reinforced when the reader meets Osler's maternal great-great-great grandfather. Thiuvankatam Mudali's (subsequently known as William Roberts) is abducted in Madras where he is sold onto an English officer on board an East India Company ship at the age of 16 in the late 1700s. The reader is reminded of the irony of slavery and subjugation of people taking place at the same time as the European Enlightenment and its ideals of rationality and freedom. Despite becoming a free man and founder of the Unitarian Church in Madras in the early 1800s, Thiuvankatam Mudali continues to experience the impact of British policies. As Anglo-Indians, Osler's family occupy a liminal state as they find themselves treated as inferior to Europeans and superior to Indians. Their stories act as a reminder that racism appears in different forms and that there is a need for each generation to challenge its harmful impact. Towards the end of the book, Osler reveals an unwelcome family connection to Frederick Sleigh Roberts (1832-1914), an iconic figure in the late Victorian-Edwardian era of Empire. His apparent whitewashing of his family history illustrates the complexity underlying the two questions that make up the title of the book, which on first read may appear innocuous. In the epilogue, Osler returns to these questions: *Where are you from?* and, *Where are you really from?* Drawing on her exploration of recurring themes over seven generations of family, she highlights how a critical knowledge of history can challenge complicity and complacency that make de-humanisation acceptable.

Osler combines fascinating historical accounts, such as her descriptions of Singapore under colonial rule between 1934 and 1945, with rich family narratives. These personal narratives provide depth to historical events by illustrating the relationship between belonging, ethnicity, and skin colour, irrespective of citizenship.

Osler's book provides a primary source on the shifting attitudes towards race under the British Empire. It serves as a strong reminder of the educative power of narratives to disrupt colonial myths and false truths found in the portrayal of historical events. The Bechuanaland (Seretse Khama and Ruth Williams) side story offers a disturbing parallel with Osler's parents' marriage, confirming the depth to which colour prejudice had sunk in the 1950s, despite the formation of the United Nations and drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Other historical references, such as Enoch Powell's 1968 rivers of blood speech against immigration, illustrate how the assumptions underlying years of overblown imperial rhetoric can be used to harness and further inflame deeply negative assumptions about race and society. These references strengthen the analysis of the impact of the British Empire on people's lives; people who were/are British citizens until the authorities or widespread community attitudes declare that they were/are not.

Osler engages with themes addressed in her previous work, skilfully interweaving these with her own family story, historical events and contexts, current affairs and analysis of international/domestic policy, legislation, and laws. Although *Where are you from? No where are you really from?* is the story of one family/community, the themes are universal and intergenerational, transcending national boundaries. Osler provides an opportunity for readers to rethink how they perceive a world that offers multiple perspectives, offering a rare and genuine 'both ways' pieces of research: i.e., a view of a historical event from the point of view of both the colonisers and the colonised. In contexts of increasing authoritarianism, intolerance, and disregard for the most vulnerable, this book is a worthy contribution to struggles for justice. Osler's entertaining, engaging, constructive, and critical style raises awareness of the moral, legal, and political human right to belong.

This book is for everyone because the story of migration touches us all. The experiences of Osler's family resonated strongly with both reviewers but in different ways because of their own unique associations with migration. As educators, we recognise the power of this book to disrupt colonial myths and false truths. As Osler points out, despite the use of both enslaved and 'indentured' colonial citizens to generate profit for company stakeholders of the British East Indian Company and Great Britain, slavery is not understood as an explicit part of British history in India. The book offers teacher educators and teachers content and context for much-needed dialogues about belonging and the implications of gender, class, ethnicity, skin tone, religion, and geography on claiming the human right to live a life of dignity.