



Ipinyomi, F. (2016). Levitt, Jeremy I. (ed.), Black Women and International Law: Review. *African Journal of International and Comparative Law*, 24(1), 168 - 172. DOI: 10.3366/ajicl.2016.0146

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Levitt, Jeremy I., ed. *Black Women and International Law*. Cambridge University Press, 2015. 360 pages. £64.99. ISBN 9781107021303

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In a world swirling with conflicting narratives about people of colour, the need for the legal and academic context contained in this book is welcome and essential. The expurgation of black women from history and literature is a worrying trend that receives insufficient global attention. On the other hand, academic and non-academic literature highlighting the concept of intersectionality are gradually becoming mainstream topics in the US. Furthermore, it is often suggested that black women should tell their own stories. This is because the validity of particular narratives about lived experience is doubted when the subjects of these narratives do not author the narratives. However, as this book alludes to, quite frequently, opportunities for black women anywhere and everywhere in the world are relatively sparse; black women therefore are regularly the voiceless and invisible subjects of international law. We then face a conundrum of giving voice to the voiceless by speaking for them, and bringing forth the invisible faces of black women by drawing from external perspectives. These are some of the challenges this book attempts to overcome.

This edited volume is a collection of articulated presentations given at a series of meetings organised by the editor, Jeremy Levitt in 2010 [p.38]. These meetings addressed the issues facing women of colour in international law and people of colour generally. The book is divided into three overarching parts and has 13 chapters. The first two chapters do not come under the tripartite partitioning and are focused on the life, times and thoughts of African-American Judge Gabrielle Kirk McDonald. The first, written by the editor, details the life and career of McDonald. The second chapter, written by the judge herself, illuminates the '*bold and unforgiving*' colour line that confronts ambitious black women. She also gives an indication of achievable possibilities despite the colour line.

Part I contains five chapters that explore black women's roles globally as subjects, actors and victims in international law and international politics. Part II has three chapters detailing activities of specifically black women groups, which have resulted in international and national policy changes. Finally, Part III titled Female Sovereignty, in three chapters, strikes at the very heart of black womanhood in international law. This part addresses such topics as reproductive rights, sex work and objectification. At the core of this section is the dehumanisation that is simultaneously the cause and result of objectification of black women. Overall, the contributors make use of various levels of interdisciplinary critical race-feminist theories that acknowledge and address intersectionality.

It is in the face of the achievements of someone like Judge McDonald that the book engages with the narrative of contextual invisibility of Black women. Boyce-Davies' Chapter three specifically details the ways in which historical records either do not account for the leadership roles of black women or needlessly retell the story of their contributions through the intersecting prisms of gender and colour [pp.26-27]. However, McDonald earlier alludes to it in her chapter when she writes '*it is to Black men that we turn for the story of Black America, and it is White women who are listened to on issues of gender equality.*' [p.9]. In the last chapter Karen Bravo tells the story of two black women Saartjie Baartman and Truganini, who, though

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their existence was extremely visible, had their true selves erased by continuous external acts based on presumptions of dominance. New Zealander Truganini was subject to abuse, became the last of her 'tribe', and had her corpse was publicly displayed. South African Baartman was the subject of a living display across Europe of the '*exotic, wild peoples of Africa*' [p.297]. Baartman's true name is lost to history and she will always be remembered as 'Saartjie' a derogatory diminutive pseudonym. [p.291]. In that sense the challenge of erasure runs through the book itself, while simultaneously informing the need for this book. Notably Camara's chapter examines the retelling of the story of a whole continent (Africa) and its people through the forces of colonisation and unending external interference [p.65]. Camara examines how history and contemporary academia ignores accounts of African women who have been social entrepreneurs, African feminists (before 'feminism' was even coined), political leaders and warriors. Levitt contributes to this viewpoint by citing how pre-colonial African women were '*revered as gods, ruled and built nations as pharaohs and queens, led vast armies, pioneered in science and technology, fashioned law and religion, established vast enterprises, and served as peacemakers*' [p.98]

One of the results of erasure is exclusion. As long as it is believed that black women had no impact in the past, there would be no reason to seek their input in the present. Chapter six considers the negligible role that women have played in power-sharing schemes in post-colonial Africa. Here, Levitt suggests that the exclusion of women has contributed to the intractability of African conflicts and the rise of gendered violence [pp.94-97]. This is despite the fact that African women form an integral part of conflict as victims and actors [pp. 98-99]. In Chapter seven, Spain outlines effective peace-building measures that have been specifically developed by African women that are either not included in mainstream academia or are considered contrary to accepted epistemologies on conflict resolution in international law [pp.129-139]. George in Chapter ten suggests that the exclusion of women in Africa is merely a replication of colonial attitudes. As long as African states try to replicate their colonial forebears they will always be a step behind current international legal trends and fail to forge an independent path. She cites the concept of Ubuntu as an example of a cultural concept capable of linking African environmental practices back to its pre-colonial heart and soul [pp.219-220].

A major focus of black women's movements has been individual female self-determinism of body and mind, free from gendered and racialized influences and their intersections. Consequently, although Part III concerns female sovereignty generally, it is imbued with a hefty dose of criticism of objectification and questionable thinking about black women's sexuality. This is indeed a refrain that echoes throughout the book. Judge McDonald recounts how on resigning from the Bench, a white male colleague hands her a pink nightgown as a parting gift. [p.11] Wing, Levitt, Camara and Spain all touch upon the use of sexual violence as a weapon of conflict and domination, a means by which the bodies of black women become contiguous with conquered land. Chapter 11 explores how the influence of race and economic status on reproductive practices has had a disproportionately negative effect on black women in a number of African countries, the US, Israel and in diaspora generally. Here, Scully is of the opinion that black women were not given the freedom to make informed choices about their bodies, and were coerced into accepting the use of contraceptives with particularly long-term fertility implications, as a form of population control [pp.236-242, 245]. International law is implicated in this process because international population control objectives were initially

aimed at preventing the poorest women in the world from having more children; black women are more likely to form a high proportion of this demographic.

In Chapter 12 EML Brown discusses black female sovereignty further by exploring the economy of black Caribbean women who travel transnationally for 'sex work.' Brown questions why 'sex work' is not considered to be proper work and examines the different ways in which various jurisdictions regulate 'sex work', ranging from the protective to the restrictive. Brown juxtaposes the laws which seek to control how these women use their bodies with the 'appeal of the exotic' that arises from deeply racialized and gendered objectifying fantasies about black women. [p.258-259]. Brown examined the theories of Radin which suggest that women in this position are either dehumanised by poverty and all its attendant negatives or by 'sex work' and its racialized and gendered overtones. She suggests that international law is reluctant to confront this 'double-bind' [p.287] – 'exotic appeal' simultaneously dehumanises and provides an escape from poverty and abusive relationships.

The book ends on a rather mournful note. Bravo's tribute to Baartman and Truganini in the last chapter reminds us that some wrongs can never be righted, as the victims and actors are lost to history and the damage almost irreversible.

Nevertheless, throughout this book we are confronted with stories of black women, individually or collectively, who have prevailed despite the odds they faced, or for whom the odds eventually became their victory. Portia Simpson-Miller, Queen Nzinga, Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, Wangari Maathai, Emem Okon, the Rwanda parliament (56% of whom are women), fighters of the Aba Women's War, organisers of the Abeokuta market women's riots, Queen Tausret, Yaa Asantewaa etc. Arguably, the most prominent of these is Michelle Obama who symbolises personal strength and intelligence, style and concern for community, in a role not traditionally constructed for black women. Boyce-Davies implies in Chapter three that Michelle Obama breaks the mould because she obviously does not fit into collective constructed reality, she thus transcends the mould both horizontally and vertically [pp.32-35].

Despite the book's overall achievements, Chapter five stands out as the only chapter to specifically address the experience of black African women from the perspective of a black African woman. A significant portion of the book is dedicated to the African-American woman's experience in a way that is not representative of global demographics of black women. Voices of black women in legal practice and academia across other continents would have enriched this book and fit in with the title. Hence, the limitations of the book arise from the same issues that dictate the need for it – the invisibility of the black woman, as such. African women thus seem to be the ultimate victims of erasure and intersectionality, the appendix to someone else's story. In the lives of many African women, race, gender, status and the idea of the 'Dark Continent' intersect, resulting in definitive anonymity, imperceptibility and invisibility, such that in a story that should ideally have African women as the starring act, they are reduced to a supporting part.

It is the above paradox that results in relatively insignificant but rather telling inconsistencies in the text. Of particular note is the list of African 'civil wars' on page 127. Souaré,<sup>1</sup> is of the opinion that the international media gives a false impression of the frequency of civil wars in Africa by labelling every violent clash or riot as "another African civil war." This he finds

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<sup>1</sup> Special Advisor, Head of Mission AU Mission for Mali and the Sahel

strange because similar race-based or ethnic violent clashes in the developed world are never labelled civil wars, yet many violent clashes in Africa are perfunctorily labelled 'wars' when they do not amount to such.<sup>2</sup> Many of the supposed 'civil wars' listed on page 127 illustrate Souaré's opinion. This faulty categorisation highlights the problems inherent in retelling other people's stories. Furthermore the use of 'Africa' as synonymous with Black is problematic. While Algeria and Egypt can properly be described as African states, they are not strictly black African states.

In a world where justice, fairness and equality are measured, among other things, by gender parity, research in international law needs to focus on this significant cross-section of the world's population. As long as the issues specific to black women in international law remain unaddressed, effective implementation of international human rights law will remain a dream rather than a reality. As Levitt states, these issues should be addressed from the perspectives of the black women facing them [pp.101-115]. This book is a step towards realising a dream of effective international justice and equal human dignity – giving voice to the voiceless, naming the nameless and bringing the invisible into focus.

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<sup>2</sup> Souaré, Issaka K. "Civil Wars and Coups d'Etat in West Africa." *New York: University Press of America* (2006). p.25