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Meridians: 22:2 Mosaic

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Ginetta E. B. Candelario

Editor's Introduction

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Solidarity needs to be renewed between the others, between and among the marginalized and exploited.

— Sreerekha Sathi, “When My Brown Got Colored”

Moreover, such critique has the potential to reveal the political intimacies that can develop among differentially racialized groups, expose colonial pseudofeminisms, and help forge more robust intersectional and transnational feminist solidarities.

— Zeynep K. Korkman, “(Mis)Translations of the Critiques of Anti-Muslim Racism”

I believed that my path to healing had to incorporate all of life's experiences so as to create the mosaic that makes up the picture of my life. My challenge was to add enough beautiful pieces so that this mosaic eventually sparkled.

—Doris H. Gray, *Leaving the Shadow of Pain*

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According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a mosaic is “a variegated whole formed from many disparate parts,”¹ which perfectly captures this issue's geographically, historically, intellectually, and artistically wide-ranging, and diverse yet interrelated contents. Each piece—whether poetry, *testimonio*, essay, creative nonfiction, or interview—touches on key themes iterated in unique ways depending on the context. Featuring work focused on Afghanistan, Canada, Haiti, India, Mexico, Tunisia, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Puerto Rico, and the United States mainland, this *Mosaic* issue reveals a

broader picture of the complex, contradictory, and challenging nature of enacting transnational or intersectional feminist solidarities within and across borders, whether physical, political, ethno-racial, or ideological. Coincidentally, I write this introduction as each of the countries, diasporas, and issues examined here are prominent in the current news cycle: the politically exacerbated impacts of natural disasters (Turkey, Puerto Rico); religious fundamentalism's impact on women and girls (Afghanistan, India); civil unrest and the repression of civil society (Haiti, Mexico); ethno-nationalist violence against ethnic minority populations (India, Sri Lanka, Tunisia); nativism, xenophobia, and anti-Blackness (Canada, United States); and authoritarianism's resurgence in states claiming to be democratic (Afghanistan, India, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Tunisia). As always, women and feminists of every stripe are at the forefront of organizing nationally and transnationally in response to these upheavals, adding their "beautiful pieces" to the mosaic of their locale's story.

We open this issue with Devaleena Das's "What Transnational Feminism Has Not Disrupted Yet." This *Counterpoint* succinctly summarizes key moments in and debates within and about transnational feminist scholarship in the United States, offering an alternative paradigm and praxis inspired by African American women's quilt-making methods and aesthetics, which Das calls a "quilted epistemology" and argues is exemplified by Indian-Kenyan poet Shailja Patel's performance *Migritude*.² Das argues that *Migritude*'s "quilted epistemology acknowledges . . . that migrants are challenged not only to communicate via translations that distort information and meanings, but that they are forced to translate themselves—their sense of self—into unfamiliar societies and cultures" as they confront, challenge, or contend with historical and contemporary power relations, whether those that they carry with them or those that they encounter on their journeys.

Continuing with the theme of challenges inherent in translation, Zeynep K. Korkman's *Essay*, "(Mis)Translations of the Critique of Anti-Muslim Racism and the Repercussions for Transnational Feminist Solidarities," analyzes "the travails of transnational feminist solidarity with 'Black aka Muslim Turks' who appropriated globally resonant progressive critiques of anti-Black and anti-Muslim racism while featuring a racist, neo-imperialist, and misogynist political agenda." This brilliant piece deftly explains the history and contemporary deployment of race, religion, gender, and sexuality by competing political factions in the long

aftermath of the Ottoman empire's end, and it elucidates how Turkey's current regime accordingly "complicates our transnational feminist reflexes" toward solidarity with projects that ostensibly enact "Black" power. Simply stated, Turkey's AKP government and the Erdogans have been able to recruit the support of progressive transnational feminists such as the Somali-American representative Ilhan Omar and the University of California, Berkeley, Pakistani-American anthropologist Saba Mahmood for their repressive regime under the guise of transnational feminist solidarity against anti-Muslim/anti-Black racism, even as the Erdogan regime stepped up its violent repression of Kurdish ethnic minorities, the poor, secular women and feminists, LGBTQ+, dissident scholars, and other progressive civil society actors. Korkman writes, "Such intricacies are revealed as central and constitutive when we approach the terrain of transnational feminist analysis and struggle with a double consciousness, such as that which comes from being a subject of and being subjected to, on the one hand, the academic and political hegemony of the U.S. empire and, on the other, the neoimperial and authoritarian ambitions of the . . . state."

Picking up on this theme, Dia Da Costa's Essay, "Writing Castelessly: Brahminical Supremacy in Education, Feminist Knowledge, and Research," intends to make clear the particularities of white supremacy and racism in an Indian postcolonial context where official castelessness operates alongside the social fact of casteism. Da Costa narrates how the "caste terror, humiliation, segregation, [and the] sexual violence needed to secure [the] caste endogamy" central to sustaining and naturalizing Brahminical supremacy is systematically elided in Indian higher education but has become clear and visible thanks to Dalit-Bahujan and Adivasi critiques at home and globally. At the same time, Da Costa argues that, similar to white feminist impulses to solidarity with their others, Brahminical feminist impulses to solidarity with Dalit-Bahujan peoples can quickly become politically, professionally, and morally self-serving. Thus "we [must] ask[,] . . . Do we know what it means to be prepared, or worthy of teaching Dalit-Bahujan scholarship?" As Meena Kotwal, feminist Dalit journalist and founder of *The Mooknayak*, pointed out in a recent *New York Times* interview, thanks to increasing Hindutva violence spurred by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, these questions are as urgent today as they were a century ago when the Dalit scholar Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar contested Mahatma Gandhi's implicit support for Brahmin caste-dominance (Singh 2023). At the same time, the evolving nature of

this issue is also why Da Costa asked that we include the original dates of submission and final acceptance published at the end of her piece.

Not surprisingly, these questions travel with Indian (im)migrants as well, as feminist Brahmin scholar Sreerekha Sathi narrates in her *Testimonio*, “When My Brown Got Colored: Living Through/In the Times of white and Brahminical Supremacy.” Sathi explores the connections between her experience of racialization as nonwhite in the United States and her caste privilege, writing, “ironically, while the Indian/South Asian diaspora in the United States experiences racism and may even resist it, few have tried to recognize and unlearn their own caste practices and privileges which they transport from India.” Yet the experience of arriving in Trump-era United States and living in Charlottesville, Virginia, during the white supremacist invasion of the city and university inspired by the president moved Sathi to reflect on the connections between her Brahminical caste privileges at home and abroad, and her simultaneous racialization as nonwhite in the United States. Sathi eschews simplistic claims of solidarity based on a shared experience of subordination, as well as the impulse to recruit Dalit appreciation for her efforts. Given that she had “found it suffocating to be forced to listen to progressive white members of the Charlottesville community talking of the dangers and the threats they had to face in fighting white supremacy,” Sathi acknowledges that she is “uncomfortably placed in the process.”

Similarly, Grace L. Sanders Johnson’s *Media Matters* piece, “Picturing Herself in Africa: Haiti, Diaspora, and the Visual Folkloric,” offers an empathetic yet critical analysis of Haitian feminist anthropologist Madeleine Comhaire-Sylvain’s complex positionality as an elite, Afro-descendant feminist critic of the U.S. occupation in Haiti who spends years working and living among the white Belgian colonizers of the Congo because of her marriage to white Belgian anthropologist Jean Comhaire. Sanders Johnson’s sophisticated “close reading” of Comhaire-Sylvain’s photographic archive of her time in the Belgian Congo is an innovative contribution to our understanding of “alternative imaginings and framings of national and global Black belonging” that avoids simplistic presumptions of race or gender solidarities in the context of intersecting and competing imperialisms, settler-colonialisms, and nationalisms. Serendipitously, in analyzing Comhaire-Sylvain’s photography, Sanders Johnson draws on the work of our cover artist, Haitian-American anthropologist Gina Athena-Ulysse, whose piece “Indigo” offers a “meditation on

aesthetic identity” as part of the “Tools of the Trade or Women’s Work” Kwi series (Athena-Ulysse 2024).

Cherise Fung’s “In the Name of Sovereignty: Rethinking the ‘Tiger Bitch’ and the Terrorist Bomber in Nayomi Munaweera’s *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*,” turns our attention to the challenges of teasing out the meaning of agency for protagonists whose subject positions are multiply paradoxical. To that end, she draws on Jasbir Puar’s theory of “queer assemblage,” which makes intersectionality’s internal and external contradictions and conflicts visible. Through a close reading of the novel’s central protagonist, Sarawshti—a Tamil woman navigating competing Sri Lankan nationalist patriarchal terrains, politics, cultures, and ideologies in the aftermath of her rape—Fung homes in on two moments in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* in which to offer the possibility of a way out of the dual dead ends presented to Sarawshti by competing patriarchies. Fung argues that life after social death becomes fleetingly possible in two moments of solidarity between Sarawshti and other women, each instance of which alludes to a path that might allow for the subaltern protagonist’s transformation from victim to survivor. Although that possibility is not ultimately realized, “an alternative understanding of cross-ethnic and transnational feminist solidarities that move beyond normative sovereign subjectivity . . . to focus more on how various social forces ‘merge and dissipate time, space, and body’ against the fiction of a stable, coherent identity across linear space and time” is signaled.

In “A Conversation with Doris H. Gray on the Power and Limitations of Restorative Justice across History, Culture, and Gender,” education scholar Rosetta Marantz Cohen and Gray offer a less ambivalently hopeful take on the possibility of solidarity between women engendering liberation for all. The interview was inspired by Gray’s recent book, *Leaving the Shadow of Pain: A Cross-cultural Exploration of Truth, Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Healing*, which she worked on during a residency at Smith College in the spring of 2018 where she met Cohen. In the interview, Gray discusses how two different historical traumas—the German Holocaust and the Tunisian Zine El Abidine Ben Ali dictatorship—and two personal traumas she experienced in Morocco, the death of her daughter and the rape and torture she was subjected to just a few months later, “complicate the idea that truth telling and revelation is a universal key to healing” from the trauma caused by state violence against targeted populations. Gray’s personal experience of loss, violation, and trauma afforded her a sense of connection

with the hundreds of Tunisian women she interviewed over the course of seven years, women who “came forward with the truth about their torturous pasts.”³ Gray argues that solidarity between such differently situated traumatized subjects is possible. If we recognize that “all—to various degrees—have been on the receiving and giving end of injustice. . . , [then we can develop] a sense of connection to others.” At the same time, we must also recognize the consequences of not having traumatizing violations acknowledged and redressed.

The effect of not having trauma acknowledged in the aftermath of violence is heart-wrenchingly evoked in Korean-Canadian Nancy Kang’s poem, “Bruise Blue.” This poem obliquely yet searingly narrates a teenage girl being attacked by boys who “had swarmed, expectant, / in the back bleachers, ripping skirt and shirt.” Subsequently refused the solace and comfort of her “Daddy’s retreating shoulders” and subject to the “cold-hard trigger / of [her] [m]other’s tongue” in lieu of the comfort she sought, the girl “vows next time to be vengeful, private, agile, / and kinetic, so as never to be caught, / surrounded again / without weapons.” This is a classic trauma response, one that is central to survival, but it limits our ability to connect with those who come in our lives long after the blue bruises have faded.

The challenges of coping with both Canadian and heritage-country gender and sexual ideologies, norms, and violence are taken up by Saher Ahmed and Amrita Hari in “Young Afghan-Canadian Women’s Negotiations of Gendered Cultural Scripts and Hybrid Cultural Identities.” This *Essay* focuses on “Afghan-Canadian second-generation women’s gendered expectations related to marriage . . . to understand how they interpret and negotiate these gendered cultural expectations within their diasporic community, while simultaneously adapting to more mainstream cultural gender expectations of the society they reside in.” Based on ten qualitative in-depth interviews, and drawing on her status as an insider in the community, Hari found evidence of “agency, autonomy, and independence” alongside “instances of conformity” to both Afghan and Canadian gender norms, insights that she argues were facilitated by her culturally competent rapport with her informants.

The need to develop deep, habitus-based knowledge of (im)migrant communities to understand and advocate effectively for them is also evoked in Michaela Django Walsh’s moving creative nonfiction piece, “Between Skin and Stone: A Letter to My Son, Lienzo.” In it Walsh issues “an invitation into conversations about place and belonging, levity and

resistance” by explaining the meaning of the name she has given her son, whose namesake is a type of stone wall that comprises “heart- and fist-sized stones” woven together (*hilado*) by the builder and that winds its way throughout the Mexican landscape. For Walsh, rather than being a barrier, a *lienzo* is “a” “passage” that offers “a way of embodying space that is connective, intimate, ancient . . . [and imbued with] strength and yield,” and a reminder of her son’s grounded connection to his mother’s people in Mexico and their vulnerable diaspora in the United States. For the author-mother engaged in migrant advocacy—given ongoing policy attempts, to cross the U.S.-Mexico border is as difficult, dangerous, and deadly as possible (see Alvarez 2023)—it is ever-urgent to ensure that her son recognizes his relationship to this land and its people.

Latina advocacy and community organizing is also the subject of “‘We Are Orlando’: Silences, Resistance, and the Intersections of Mass Violence” by Julie Torres. This *In the Trenches* piece documents the formation of “Proyecto Somos Orlando” by a group of mostly Puerto Rican women in the immediate aftermath of the Pulse nightclub mass murder in June of 2016 who realized that the predominantly Latin@ survivors and victims’ families required truly culturally competent support and resources. From translation services to mental health care to the navigation of medical, legal, and financial support systems, the need to invest in deep rather than shallow cultural competence quickly became clear to these women when city and local organizations either failed to provide needed services or did so perfunctorily and temporarily. Torres writes, “Like the discourse of ‘multiculturalism’ . . . and diversity . . . , the liberal move to become ‘culturally competent,’ without any real investment in equity and inclusivity, does little more than reinforce capitalist and racial projects.” By contrast, in demanding advocacy that evidenced “the ability to analyze and respond to the ‘cultural scenes’ . . . and ‘social dramas’ . . . of everyday life in ways that are culturally and psychologically meaningful for all the people involved,” the *Somos Orlando* women honored both the dead and those they left behind.

Uniquely Puerto Rican responses to the dying are poetically addressed in Erika Abad’s poem “Farm of Forgetting,” which recounts the narrator’s complicated responses to her Puerto Rican grandmother’s dying in the aftermath of Hurricane María. She both honors the matriarch’s power to gather her “beloveds” to her deathbed where they accompany her to the end and decries the implicit expectation that the narrator leave behind “all the

secrets, all the unnamed wounds . . . [and] scars,” which that same powerful woman was responsible for. Sadly, however, our narrator reminds us that death does not necessarily bury the wounds that are left behind on the living. Perhaps the attempt to fortify “the roots that bind” even those she “never wanted to love” was the most powerful legacy of the matriarch’s paradoxical life and death.

Picking up on the theme of women’s central roles in the work of properly memorializing the dead, Kami Fletcher’s “Black Women Undertakers of the Early Twentieth Century Were Hidden in Plain Sight” historicizes the central role Black women played in the development, maintenance, and expansion of Black undertaking skills and industry. In the context of white racial terror from enslavement to Jim Crow, and contemporary white supremacy, caring for the Black dead “became an act of resistance, a step toward publicly claiming humanity . . . a form of remembering life” and refusing white power over and after Black death. As Fletcher carefully documents, Black women played a crucial—if often overlooked—role, one that supported Black life by offering the culturally competent spaces and rituals for mourning and memorializing that they were uniquely equipped to undertake.

In a similar vein, Lashon Daley’s “When Diane Tells Me a Story” is a *Testimonio* about how her “othermother”—award-winning storyteller Diane Ferlatte—helped her mourn her mother’s passing. Daley writes: “That is the power of the Black oral tradition: not only does it change lives, creates and solidifies bonds that may not have formed otherwise, it also strengthens the connective tissues that unite Black women. When Diane tells me a story, she’s passing down generations of wisdom, morals, and histories—histories of Black women that have been pushed aside . . . [and] stories of the oppressed, . . . rebellion, . . . and change.” In turn, when Daley tells this story, she honors Diane, her mother, and all the Black women whose solidarity in carrying “Bundles of Worries” yielded awareness of blessings such as a “mother’s unrelenting love” and “ever-growing bond[s]” with othermothers like Diane.

Finally, we close with this year’s winner of the 2023 Elizabeth Alexander Creative Writing Award for Poetry, “American Beech” by Yalie Saweda Kamara. The *Meridians* Creative Writing Advisory Board described this winning submission as “an extraordinary poem, tapping into the latent wordplay of its title, gorgeous imagery like the leaf as raft, and a clean, strong sense of form. It is a perfect example of what a poem can do in a

relatively small space, if one exploits the power of metaphor, sound, and phrasing.” For my part, given what precedes it, I find the poem’s final lines particularly apt final words for this issue, which was curated with the faith that putting widely disparate pieces in touch with one another would yield something beautiful. “How mighty. The God portal of human touch,” Kamara muses, expanding on her earlier evocation of “haptic grace.” I agree—when we are touched by the other’s inherent grace, when we bring our broken fragments into contact, we create the possibility of experiencing the divine mosaic that is humanity in its most authentic form. May we all be so blessed.

Notes

- 1 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “mosaic,” December 2022.
- 2 A video of Patel discussing *Migritude* is posted under the Meridians website’s “On the Line” feature.
- 3 Sadly, little more than a decade after the Arab Spring, Tunisia is ruled by autocrat Kais Saied, who has adopted the United States’s “great replacement theory” together with local anti-Blackness in order to scapegoat sub-Saharan (im)migrants for his regime’s failed economic policies. This has had deadly consequences for vulnerable populations that have been targeted by vigilantes with impunity (NPR 2023).

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