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Meridians 11:1

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Meridians, Introduction II.I

Memory

This issue of *Meridians* is divided into two parts, linked by the politics and pull of memory.

The first part includes an essay that revises the Partition literature around the “honor” suicides of women during the 1947 violence in Punjab; a meditation on Korean cultural memory and its engagement with historical but unforgotten Japanese and U.S. colonial practices; and an analysis of the portrayal of the iconic South African activist, Winnie Mandela, in the U.S. popular press. This section is also graced by three poems: “Memory’s Muse,” by Sonia Adams and “So you Die Slowly” and “For the Lost,” by Kimberly Juanita Brown.

The second half of the issue is a special section on Haiti, edited by Gina Athena Ulysse, a Haitian American. She has gathered narratives, poetry, and photographs: remnants of the Haitian earthquake of January 2010 that come together to provide a moving testimonial.

Part I

In 1947, British colonialism ended in southeast Asia, and over twelve million people moved to and from Punjab, eventually settling into the modern states of Pakistan and India. Known as the Partition, the historical event was accompanied by eighteen months of genocidal violence between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs that ended in 1948 with the Karachi

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Riots and the assassination of Mohandas Gandhi. While feminist historiography has restored the previously under-acknowledged abduction and sexual assault of some 75,000 women that took place during the violence, revisionist scholars have also interrogated the meaning of the contemporaneous mass suicides of women who immolated themselves allegedly for the sake of the honor of their families. In her essay, “The Violence of Memory: Renarrating Partition Violence in Shauna Singh Baldwin’s *What the Body Remembers*,” Deepti Misri builds on the work of such scholars as Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, who see such “honor” narratives as patriarchal misreadings that serve a male imaginary. Misri’s revision is posited through the novel *What the Body Remembers* by Shauna Singh Baldwin, with its allegories around gendered memory and retelling.

American and Japanese colonialism is a subtext of Jennifer Cho’s essay, “Mel-han-cholia as Political Practice in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*.” The author argues, through culturally specific and analytic theories of melancholy, that Cha’s text, with its protagonist’s recall of both Japanese dominion over the Korean peninsula (1910–1945) and of the American role in the Korean War (1950–1953), reveals that the intergenerational memory and grief of the traumatic past—even if suppressed—is clearly present in the diasporic Korean community and has the potential to become the basis of a collective identity.

When I interviewed Winnie Madikizela Mandela in Soweto in the 1970s, her then-husband, Nelson Mandela, was still in prison, and she had recently emerged from confinement and forced exile in the Orange Free State. At that time, as Linda Horwitz and Catherine Squires note in “We Are What We Pretend to Be...,” Mrs. Mandela, though a courageous anti-apartheid activist in her own right, was seen in the U.S. popular media mostly as a “rhetorical widow”: a woman whose authority is derived from a husband who is unable to speak for himself. The authors write about how this nationalistic and gendered identity construction has the potential to provide a voice for women leaders while at the same time disempowering them as mere stand-ins for male authority figures.

Part II

How do you put such a thing into words? When the ground doesn’t hold.
When the back of an invisible hand, unimpeded, sweeps the landscape and

all that is above it. When loved ones, alive and talking and loving a minute, a hour, a day before, slip, suddenly and silenced, beneath the rubble?

It is mainly for them that words must be found. And in this special section of *Meridians*, Gina Athena Ulysse provides her own and those of others affected by the earthquake that struck Haiti on January 12, 2010 when at least 300,000 people lost their lives, thousands more lost limbs, and unknown numbers are now forced to cope with trauma of unfathomable magnitude.

These are words of loss and grief, witness, and anger at a government that never protected the people. But these are also words that glisten into poems, rise as remembrance, revise stereotypes of debilitation. They illuminate the kind of spirit that invents a name for the earthquake: “goudougoudou,” an onomatopoeia that reiterates the sound of the trembling edifices and that siphons enough fear to allow for a healing smile.

We feel the emotions in these narratives and poems, and we also see them in the photo essay that accompanies them. The images, photographed by Regine Romain, are meant to shift the gaze from the images of “inhumanity, disaster, and helplessness,” as Ulysse writes, toward dignity and “possibilities both beyond and through the horror.” In this, both the words and the images succeed.