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Ginetta E. B. Candelario

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Ginetta E. B. Candelario

Editor's Introduction

Exemplifying *Meridians's* mission to bring race and transnationalism into feminist conversation, the pieces in this issue illuminate what is at stake in our quests to grapple with settler colonial and imperialist legacies that flow through us. Like rivers, at times these legacies carry us along, at others they pull us under or require that we gather all our energies to swim against the current, and oftentimes these legacies demand that we remedy and protect them from the toxic wastes of earlier generations. As a group of indigenous midwives at the Dakota Access Pipeline resistance camps cogently explained, water—whether amniotic fluid, drinking water, or rivers and oceans—must be a core aspect of feminist freedom struggles because “we’re all downriver at some point.”¹ From ending forced sterilization or forced pregnancy alike, to naming and preventing obstetric violence to intervening in the blithe disregard for the health of the Cheyenne River and Standing Rock nation, feminist water protectors make visible the legacies connecting birth-mothers, other-mothers, motherlands, and mother earth. Thus this issue’s cover art by Elizabeth LaPensée, *Our Grandmothers Carry Water from the Other World*, by Elizabeth LaPensée, honors the legacy of (grand)mothers who remind us that we are “simultaneously separated and united by” water, as poignantly phrased by Lily Mabura in this issue.

Similarly, Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s poetic memoir, “Whale Songs,” brings together the legacies carried across the waters by her Ashanti, Shinnecock, and Irish grandmothers from their Caribbean, New York, and British island homelands. Together, these disparate legacies engender new

“songs of oceanic longing” that sustain their “shipwrecked granddaughter.” Here, too, in their seemingly unquenchable thirst for profits and for what they deem . . . “progress,” settler-colonists prioritize access to oil over life-sustaining water. Along the way, Gumbs’s speaker notes the cruel irony that the descendants of settler-colonists “who forced the whaling indigenous into sale instead of ceremony” later decided upon finding “other sources of oil” that “they could save the whales once they knew they didn’t need them” (emphasis added, Gumbs, 10–11).

Following the ocean current across the Atlantic, we arrive at Gabeba Baderoon’s poem “The Law of the Mother.” In it, Baderoon presents a Moroccan speaker whose parents offer divergent maps for a sexual coming of age. The “law of the mother” calls for lovers who are “gentle with each other and take [their] time” nudging aside, rather than breaking, the membrane that stands between virginity and experience, much as a swimmer moves through and with water. In the father’s world, however, loss of virginity is a “breaking” that sentences the speaker to a life of shame within a “bitter body.” After a lifetime of nearly drowning in this legacy, the speaker maps a return to her body and a self that “enters again each knot and hollow” of her being with the help of a woman who loves women. (Baderoon, 16).

From one mother’s “deep-souled” affirming legacy, we arrive at another much less so in Marie Sarita Gaytán’s essay on the *madre abnegada*/selfless mother. The *madre abnegada* is “a martyr-like maternal figure” in Mexican culture that submerges class, ethnoracial, and gender inequities as well as violence in order to sustain the “fantasy of national unity.” Gaytán argues that the *madre abnegada* ideal portrayed by Spanish-heritage actor Sara García was central to the development of a new postrevolutionary national identity that emphasized a “sentimental relationship between . . . nation and citizen” that cast mothers as vessels for, rather than members of, the Mexican body politic (Gaytán, 20). By contrast, Emily Lederman argues in “Queering the Chicana/o Archive in Felicia Luna Lemus’s *Like Son*” that the novel’s trans-man protagonist, “Frank. Born Francisca,” rejects the *madre abnegada*’s destructive legacy in a Mexican diasporic landscape (Lederman, 44). Lederman argues that in so doing, texts like Lemus’s “open up space for moving toward a queer future that is nevertheless grounded and informed by messy and often traumatic inheritances from the past” (59).

Likewise, in “Illustrated Connections: Family, Memories, and Imagination in *The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam*,” Sally McWilliams considers how

graphic memoirist Ann Marie Fleming “craft[s] a family history as part of the larger Asian archive . . . reimagining . . . the Chinese diaspora by centering the tension between remembering and forgetting” (64–65). McWilliams convincingly argues that Fleming’s archive of “trans-oceanic family relations” ultimately maps the legacies of racism, sexism, sinophobic colonialism, and settler-colonial violence across China, Austria, England, Hong Kong, Australia, Switzerland, Canada, and the United States and its territories. Thus, this diasporic “memory is a lot like magic” in that it allows us to “see what we [have] in common with each other” across time, space, and place even as we grapple with the toxic legacies that work to keep us on different shores (81).

Following this thread, Tina Hernandez’s short memoir “Legacy Dysphoria” is “implicitly about epigenetics and explicitly about the oral tradition” of a multigenerational, matriarchal Cuban American family living across Florida’s shores, from Key West to West Palm Beach, linked together in the embodied present and the ancestral past. “Heirloom stories, passed down like an inheritance” frame and showcase her maternal family’s “white, white, white, white” racial identity, and like the “almost-funhouse mirror” in her grandmother’s hallway, offer a preferred if inaccurate image of the author’s full ancestry (Hernandez, 155). By contrast, her school pictures evidence that she looked brown not because the “photographer had done something wrong,” but because her father’s Afro-Cuban heritage was apparent in her looks (Hernandez, 159). The unasked yet driving question woven through the vignettes Hernandez narrates is: How does one live simultaneously with racialized unease and filial loyalty to a family legacy marked by loss of babies, flesh, and motherland? Perhaps by recognizing, as Hernandez ultimately does, that the dysphoric legacy they embody doesn’t result from their mixed heritage as such, but from racist frames that not only refuse to acknowledge their black heritage but more so, violently stigmatize it.

Happily, our In the Archives feature—Joyce C. Follet’s “Making Democracy Real: African American Women, Birth Control, and Social Justice, 1910–1960”—corrects these distorted understandings of Black legacies in the United States. Follet’s work was born of the “Voices of Feminism Oral History Project” at the Sophia Smith Collection (SSC) and of the Steinem Initiative (SI) piloted at Smith College. Together, the SSC and the SI committed to make visible and available the extensive historical record of women of color working toward reproductive justice, class justice,

and indigenous sovereignty movements in the United States. Thus, “Making Democracy Real” not only narrates a history of Black women’s organizing—from access to contraception and reproductive health more broadly to their understanding of the ability to control their own bodies as fundamental to their full enactment of their citizenship rights—it also embeds primary documents as archival evidence within the piece.

A first for *Meridians*—and, I daresay any academic journal—this piece is being published in three formats simultaneously: in print; on-line through Duke University Press’s e-Duke journals portal and Project MUSE; and as a digital repository hosted on our website so that readers and activists beyond the academy and U.S. shores can easily access the primary documents referred to and pictured in the other formats.² “Making Democracy Real” links anti-racist feminist historians, archivists, activists, and social justice workers by projecting the archival materials themselves beyond the repositories that house them or the scholars who historicize them. *Meridians* is thrilled to be part of that broader project and legacy of putting “history into action.” We are thankful to Duke University Press for facilitating this innovative dissemination strategy.

In our Media Matters selection, Lily Mabura and Ronak Husni’s “Polemics of Love and the Family in *A New Day in Old Sana’a*,” documents how Yemeni British filmmaker Bader Hirsi’s creative blending of media forms in his 2005 feature film, *A New Day in Old Sana’a*, also works to recover and represent Yemen’s complex heritage, including legacies from the Horn of Africa and Western colonialism. Mabura and Husani argue that the use of photography, filmography, song, and mirroring reflections allow Hirsi to ask, “what would happen if . . . love or desire were given a chance across race, religion, culture, and class” (169). Making visible the simultaneous proximity and distance between Arab-Yemenis, African-origin Akhdam, Indians, and Europeans in Yemen, the film “highlights the city and Yemen as a cultural contact zone with Africa and the west . . . to provide a more complete picture of the country and its people even within the context of its current turmoil” (177).

As *Meridians* readers likely know, Yemen is now in the midst of a devastating, war-induced famine that at last count has put 8.4 million people at risk of starvation. Were it not for the fact Yemen is on the strait linking the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden, “through which much of the world’s oil shipments pass,” one could reasonably imagine that “the rest of the world” would care little more about this genocidal crisis than it does about

other ongoing conflicts fought over access to oil.³ In addition to causing some 10,000 deaths directly, four years of unrelenting US-backed war has destroyed an already weak water and sewage infrastructure system, which in turn has destroyed the food system and triggered malnutrition and unsafe drinking water crisis, one borne most brutally by women and children.⁴ Here too, the pursuit of control over access to oil has triggered “genocide of Mother Earth, and . . . the genocide of the river and the water that feeds us all, that nourishes us all, just as it did in the womb.”⁵

Though not referring to water precisely, the theme of colonizing attempts to control life-sustaining fluids—in this case, breast milk—is central to Nicole M. Morris Johnson’s, “Liquid Echoes: The Breast and Voice Transmission in Maryse Condé’s *Windward Heights*.” In this essay, Morris Johnson argues that, in the context of a story that moves across turn-of-the-century Guadeloupe and Cuba, “a clear, [white] male-led hierarchy” reigns, even postemancipation; yet breast milk “becomes a liquid catalyst which enables an ever-slippery, ever-morphing creolization, the process that . . . [allows] women [to] subvert and re-imagine origin myths” (183). Having suckled at the same breasts—and sometimes having emerged from the same wombs—“black” and “white” creoles shared mothers, yet were not necessarily kin. Condé’s narrative asks the reader to consider what gets passed along in a/nother mother’s milk? What do we take in from our own mother’s body, spirit, and archive? How do we think about the other embedded in m/other?

This last question animates Moon Charania’s counterpoint, “Making Way for Ghosts and Mothers: Storied Socialities, Sexual Violence, and the Figure of the Fugitive Migrant,” an engaging rumination on the fraught connections between mother’s and daughter’s bodies, memories, and stories. Moving through homelands east and west—within Pakistan and from Pakistan, Europe, the United States—Charania excavates family stories long buried to “speak to the specter” that haunts her—“the intimacy of necropolitics in the everyday” quotidian of her mother’s life, and therefore, of her own (216). Rather than reifying a clear dichotomy between living and dead, Charania points to the haunting and ghostly shadows of violence present among and within us. The dead are not actually gone, nor are the living simply alive. That is, family legacies are simultaneously past, present, and future.

Our final essay, Cheryl R. Hopson’s “Breaking Silences: A Contemporary Black Feminist Reading of Rebecca Walker’s *Baby Love: Choosing*

Motherhood after a Lifetime of Ambivalence,” also takes up the mother-daughter relationship as a window into larger concerns regarding the inheritance of a family legacy. *Baby Love*, Hopson notes, is Rebecca Walker’s second memoir; the first having focused on her coming of age as the biracial daughter of a Jewish father and famous African American mother, novelist Alice Walker. Ironically, the dissolution of the younger Walker’s relationship with her mother coincides with her chronicling and claiming biological motherhood as primordial over “chosen bonds (e.g., step/adoptive/other-mothers)” (229). According to Hopson, Walker reconciles this paradox by considering her own “motherhood as representing a definitive break from the infantilizing position of daughter” (230). Hopson argues that because the younger Walker underappreciates the profoundly trying social, psychological, material, political, and historical circumstances in which Alice Walker became pregnant and parented, she reads Alice Walker’s memoir of the challenges of mothering while being a writer as a lack of love for her daughter, Rebecca. Although personalizing how the legacies of racism, sexism, capitalism, and heteronormativity trouble the waters of mother-daughter relationships is understandable, Hopson concludes, that drawing on a long legacy of Black feminist politics would have carried Rebecca Walker across the waters toward, rather than away from, her mother.

It is fitting, then, that we close this issue with Gabea Baderoon’s poem, “No Name.” The speaker is a woman whose South African childhood is seemingly defined by her parents’ intense focus on saving for the future by rejecting the seductive lure of name brands. Her mother’s constant refrain of “these are only earthly things,” while true, belies the fact that some have presumptive rights to these earthly things with valued “names” while others must live with “no name” brands, with “not matter[ing] at the level of what we wore and ate” (Baderoon, 244). Living under apartheid, these therefore were not just personal sacrifices; they reflected and reproduced “the power of that negative [non-white], that emptiness, against the fullness of white” (Baderoon, 244). Moving from simple inversion to a richer frame in which “Black offered a new home, a fullness,” the legacies of privation live on within the speaker as lack despite her political consciousness because she, like her mother facing life’s end, is nonetheless “on this earth” (Baderoon, 245).

These are the legacies that capitalism, settler colonialism, and their companion apartheid would bequeath us. But we can navigate these rough

seas, mark the changing tides, drink from purer waters. From Dakota to Yemen, from China to New York, from Mexico to Flint, Michigan, we must dive in and protect our waters, our mothers, our planet. “For all future generations, for all the babies to come, we need this water, we need this earth to be healthy, to be beautiful for them to live in.”⁶ That must be our legacy.

Notes

- 1 Melissa Rose (Mohawk), “Midwives at Dakota Access Resistance Camps: We Can Decolonize, Respect Women and Mother Earth,” *Democracy Now*, October 16, 2016, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rboJyCOI14>, last accessed December 3, 2018.
- 2 See <https://sophia.smith.edu/meridians/on-the-line/>.
- 3 “Yemen Crisis: Why Is There War?” BBC News, November 20, 2018, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29319423>, last accessed December 5, 2018.
- 4 UNICEF, “Deepening Water Crisis in Yemen amid Severe Fuel Shortages,” available at <https://www.unicefusa.org/press/releases/deepening-water-crisis-yemen-amid-severe-fuel-shortages/33784>, last accessed December 3, 2018.
- 5 Carolina Reyes, “Midwives at Dakota Access Resistance Camps.”
- 6 Reyes, “Midwives at Dakota Access Resistance Camps.”