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Meridians 6:1

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Editor's Introduction

All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again.

—Lewis Carroll

The cover on this issue of *Meridians*, *Hundred Surprises*, by Philemona Williamson (one of my favorite artists), speaks to a theme within this issue of the journal. As is true with much of Williamson's work, the painting captures a precise moment of recognition in the lives of young girls. The message, on the surface, seems straightforward enough. What, just a "frame" before, was an idyllic scene of childish pleasure has suddenly become haunted by the awareness of the fallen (toy?) soldiers in the background. The moment is marked by the expression of the two girls, especially the one in the foreground, which defies her doll-like innocence and the comfortable familiarity of the storybook pastels that suffuse the canvas. The eyes of the girl, and the title of the painting, take us a step further. She seems to be mindful that the figures lying askew have something to do with her, her manner of play, perhaps, representative of an era that promises libratory spaces and peace. But she has been stopped in her tracks, momentarily at least, by an outbreak of reaction and the particularly unsettling notion of having to confront unintended consequences: a hundred surprises that can be as challenging—and often more demoralizing—than the realities that mobilized us in the first place.

Unintended consequences. The contested positionality of women and the poor in newly independent states that bravely fought colonialism; the new burdens of women's representation calculated to stabilize cultures disrupted by postmodernity; mobilities accompanied by the need to reintegrate diasporic fragments of self; the appropriation of radical movements by well-intended international agencies; the necessity to address the patriarchy of consciousness-raising nationalisms; the deflating experiences of non-Western faculty women in departments founded on progressive ideals; and the aching nostalgia for a home that can no longer be one are all addressed in this volume.

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Nevertheless, the demoralizing power of the above is losing its hold, as it becomes addressed, named, and turned into a new, and exhilarating, front of thought and action. Unintended consequences have forced us to look back at beginnings, analyze the unexpected turns in the road, come up with fresh strategies that can be as simple—and profound—as organizing women to, literally, seed a continent with the possibilities of new growth. The current twofold struggle is clear: to resist the efforts of the “king’s men/women” to put back together a world with the adhesive of circumscribed traditional roles; and to forge a new politic in which women and disenfranchised members of newly imagined communities can benefit from the forces that its revolutionary changes have unleashed.

Patricia McFadden’s “Becoming Postcolonial: African Women Changing the Meaning of Citizenship” falls under a new category in *Meridians*: the editorial essay. In it McFadden focuses on the positionality of women in independent Zimbabwe as a model for the struggles—and possibilities—of African women contesting various postcolonial discourses around class, traditional male-inspired notions of “authentic” African women who are expected to eschew public sphere leadership and autonomous ownership of property. These women, with their children, make up a significant proportion of the rural, peasant class whose feudal roles remain unrelieved by both the internecine and white settler–black elite armed struggle over land. If fully realized, McFadden argues, a radical feminist movement by Zimbabwean women—among the most educated in Africa—creates the path for a new and progressive notion of citizenship throughout the continent.

One approach to fulfilling this potential is demonstrated in Kenya’s Green Belt Movement led by Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. In another departure, *Meridians* publishes here Ms. Maathai’s Nobel acceptance speech accompanied by an interview conducted by Amy Goodman on her Democracy Now! program. As verdant as the movement, which has planted over thirty million trees that provide fuel, food, shelter, and income, is the transforming effect that it has had on the politicization of women through their environmental activism that has challenged the class and male hierarchies of Kenya. Interviews of such activists who have had this kind of fundamental impact on society will be a regular feature in future issues of *Meridians*.

“Feminist Negotiations: Contesting Narratives of the Campaign against

Acid Violence in Bangladesh” by Elora Halim Chowdhury offers an astute lesson about the need to anticipate what can happen to feminist mobilizations when they succeed in gaining international recognition. Narripokko, a woman’s advocacy group, launched a campaign against the growing and particularly gruesome practice of throwing acid (easily available from car batteries) onto the faces and bodies of victims—many of whom are noncompliant women who have little access to proper medical treatment. The movement eventually materialized into a comprehensive service entity called the Acid Survivors Foundation, founded and funded by the United Nations. However, Chowdhury argues that the institutional practices of the international donor agency, while extending the reach of services, also “erased” the agency of Bangladeshi women and compromised Narripokko’s radical agenda that had sought to transform survivors into activists and leaders of the campaign. Chowdhury emphasizes the need to historicize and validate the movement’s origins and core values as a first step to remedy the situation.

Interrogating origins is also a subject of “Tending to the Roots: Anna Julia Cooper’s Sociopolitical Thought and Activism” by Kathy L. Glass. Cooper is the author of *A Voice from the South* (1892), the first book-length African American feminist text written during a period when women, newly empowered by social and technological, found themselves having to negotiate with the nationalistic paradigms that were also emerging at the time. Cooper’s strategy incorporated what Glass calls “syncre-nationalist practices”—deploying binaries and hybridities as well as universalisms and essentialisms—in her pioneering efforts to utilize progressive principles of black nationalism while critiquing its racial and gender essentialisms, and to develop an ideological construct that crossed the boundaries of race and sex to create a location for African American women in communities where they were historically excluded or marginalized. Cooper provided one of the earliest foundational texts from which African American and black feminist studies evolved.

A century later Cooper’s intellectual processes are mirrored in the vexed location of African women in the United States academy, including women’s studies departments, which is the topic of “African Feminist Scholars in Women’s Studies: Negotiating Spaces of Dislocation and Transformation in the Study of Women” by Josephine Beoku-Betts and Wairimũ Ngarũiya Njambi. In this essay the authors reflect on their

personal experiences in American higher education institutions and how they navigated, both pedagogically and socially, a panoply of situations—and dilemmas—they encountered as African women intellectuals and faculty members. As the authors conclude, their political struggle and desire to name and resist oppressive conditions found in American academia have shaped their learning of how to see themselves as Africans within the North American context.

Indeed, as Daphne Lamothe points out in her review of *Black and White Women's Travel Narratives: Antebellum Explorations* by Cheryl J. Fish, engaging both the limits and possibilities of “mobile subjectivity” can be a means to see oneself as an empowered citizen of the world. In yet another period of technological advance, the 1840s and 1850s, which facilitated long-distance travel, the three women whom Fish features in the book—Nancy Prince, Mary Seacole, and Margaret Fuller—took advantage of the opportunity to add their presence to the increasingly globalized discourse of the era through critiques around issues of slavery, uplift, and national expansion; through agency to realize reform; and, ultimately, through their travelogues. Prince, a free black woman, traveled to Russia and Jamaica; Seacole, a Jamaican and a contemporary of Florence Nightingale's, to the Crimean front; and Fuller, a white woman and the most well-known of three, to the Great Lakes region—then considered the far western frontier. As Lamothe notes, Fish set out to gender the notion of travel and mobility by including the narratives of women as cultural agents in these discourses.

More than a century and a half later the diasporic movements of women have given rise to the reimaginings of community. “From a Distance of One Hundred and Twenty Years: Theorizing Diasporic Chinese Female Subjectivities in Geling Yan's *The Lost Daughter of Happiness*” by Sally E. McWilliams provides a reading of the novel's deployment of rescue narratives, the politics of interracial love affairs, and the power of the silent female gaze in light of the author's ambivalent attitudes about her Chinese heritage to interrogate the dissonances and complexities that shape neoteric subjectivities. *The Lost Daughter of Happiness*, a postmodern text, rewrites, as Williams asserts, a masculinized nationalism of nostalgia into a transnational diasporic feminist space of agency and potentiality.

A similar dynamic is evident in popular culture, no more vividly than in the crossover, culturally hybrid, female role-dependent phenomenon of

India's Bollywood films, with their unveiled dramas that depict the transition between tradition and postmodernity, consumerism signifying class and desire, and where nationalism relocates and dislocates itself through the sexuality of women. Bollywood is the subject of two essays: "Gender, Nation, and Globalization in *Monsoon Wedding* and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*" by Jenny Sharpe and "Annu Palakunnathu Matthew's *Alien: Copy with a Difference*" by Nandini Bhattacharya. Sharpe analyzes how the films utilize women to both constitute Indian tradition and as tropes for the transnational, cultural hybridities through the desire of a female subject that is at once traditional, Westernized, and Indian. Bhattacharya examines Indian cultural dissonances through juxtaposing two series of representations by the artist Annu Palakunnathu Matthews: *Bollywood Satirized* and *An Indian from India*.

Finally, the five poems by Honorée Fanonne Jeffers speak, as well, to the profound sense of outsidership, the nostalgia of home made unreturnable, the distinctively American form of terrorism called lynching—a trope for not only singular violence but community lessons to be learned—and the memories that attempt to reconstitute connections to indigenous earth and cultures in a world that has been scattered—for better and for worse. In sum, the essays in this volume reflect some of the exigencies that feminists—not the king's men—must put together again.

Paula J. Giddings