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Meridians 5:2

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Editor's Introduction

we prayed for thunder to clear the air

———Chrystos, *Not Vanishing*

“A country like this forces you to find your underground spring to survive,” wrote the late South African-born writer Bessie Head. The epigrammatic words, quoted on the cover of her novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), refer to Head’s adopted home of Botswana; but as is true with all fine writers, her specificity is a loose-fitting garment, a thing that may be worn across a multitude of boundaries.

Head’s words are particularly propitious at a time like this. Above-ground, rain clouds have indeed gathered, and they are accompanied by a rising gale of reactionary forces. The certainties of fundamentalism, the exclusions of globalization, and the militarism of mindless markets push against us. The landscape, however, is too heavily seeded by courageous activism, groundbreaking scholarship, and protest fashioned into art to yield. Historically the thunderclap borne of such tensions portends transformative moments, periods of unprecedented creativity and insight. Revealed are numerous sites of the underground spring with its own inexorable will to rise. As the new editor of *Meridians*, I feel the responsibility—and excitement—of sustaining the journal’s mission to be one of these sites.

I am fortunate to inherit the editorship of a journal whose boards—especially the editorial founding board—as well as staff, peer reviewers, and two former editors, Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Myriam J. A. Chancy, have, with commitment, hard work, and skill, set *Meridians* on such an extraordinary course of excellence. Since its inception under the Smith presidency of Ruth J. Simmons in 2000, they have been remarkable stewards in sustaining the task set out in the introduction of the journal’s first issue: “to provide a forum for the finest scholarship and creative expression by and about women of color . . . enabling women to build bridges between one another’s work, to forge links across different generations, and to make connections among our institutional and social locations.” In December 2004, *Meridians* was recognized by the Council of

Editors of Learned Journals, receiving its Phoenix Award for “Significant Editorial Achievement.”

Building on this strong foundation, I look forward to continuing the tradition of excellence as well as adding to it. We look toward publishing special issues around emergent themes that frame race, feminism, transnationalism, and/ or communities of place and culture to provide a comprehensive, interdisciplinary reading of subjects within a single issue. As an editor who often looks to history and primary sources for inspiration and knowledge, I believe that this is a time to also look back as well as forward, to remember, document, and to pass on the experiences, passions, and revelations that set us on our course, as well as to look toward the revisionist callings of the future. I would like to see *Meridians* be a site for coming-of-political-age narratives; news of archival, oral history, and other primary source material; and state of the scholarship and culture writings. In my own loose-fitting garment as an African American feminist, I also bring to the editorial table a tradition of thought in which gender is foregrounded to connect, rather than separate, communities of men and women trying to make their way within, as James Baldwin prophesied, the “last white country the world will ever know.”

Finally, we will work to make *Meridians* a point of departure to create a palpable sense of community among scholars and writers who are engaged in our mission. Too often we come together over concerns that have more to do with thorny institutional and practical issues and less with sharing our ideas and ideals with one another. I am aware that common political perspectives are merely one lane on the bridges that must extend within as well as across our communities.

This is a “transitional” issue of *Meridians*, as it was the preceding editor, Myriam J. A. Chancy, who either solicited or oversaw the development of the texts and poetry in this issue as well as the marvelous cover by Yovannah Diovanti. I am particularly appreciative of Myriam’s meticulous efforts in preparing the pending materials to make the editorial transition as smooth as possible. I am also grateful to the *Meridians* staff, including the student interns, administrative assistant Trinidad Linares, and especially managing editor Elizabeth Hanssen, for their institutional knowledge and their enthusiasm, patience, and assistance in getting the issue to press. Additionally I benefited from the cooperation of reviewers who, in some instances, were asked to hasten their deliberations to meet deadlines, and from the support of the Smith administrators and staff.

Several themes thread through the scholarly essays in this volume. Written from varied cultural and political contexts, several speak to the issue of privilege and positionality around questions of authority and critical identity. In “Transnational Feminism as Critical Practice” Amina Jamal contextualizes her reading of current feminist practices in Pakistan—practices shaped by discourses of Islam and the West—by utilizing the frameworks of Deniz Kandiyoti and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, among others, to interrogate the ambiguity of her own identity as both a woman-of-color activist and academic in Canada. In *Coyotes, Comadres, y Colegas*” Susana S. Martinez reflects on the 1993 publication of Ruth Behar’s *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza’s Story*. In Behar’s work the Cuban American anthropologist deliberately inserts her own voice and narrative alongside that of the disenfranchised Esperanza Hernandez in the text, provoking heated reaction by scholars about the validity of “theorizing the personal” in the context of power relations.

A further exploration of the meaning of privilege constructed through socially dominant identities is found in “A Praxis of Parataxis.” In this piece Donna M. Bickford makes a case to add the detective novels of Chicana writer Lucha Corpi to the canon of an academic literary establishment that extols Chela Sandoval’s formulation of differential consciousness and the practices that place equality and justice as the touchstone of one’s life.

Essays that further broaden the globalization discourse include “Transracial Adoption Narratives” by Helena Grice and “Shifting Contexts, Shaping Experiences” by Marie Lovrod. Grice explores the relationship between the increasing number of transnational and international adoptions and the proliferation of narratives in the United States addressing the phenomenon. Centering on China, with its one-child policy that has led to an “epidemic of abandonment” of female babies, Grice explores the cultural and gender-specific impact of their availability for adoption on the narratives and how these texts affect transglobal relations and the connecting and meeting of different cultures. Lovrod looks at nineteenth-century and contemporary accounts of childhood trauma within the framework of nationalist and global education projects based on hierarchical differentials of race, class, and gender assigned to children’s bodies. In the essay Lovrod seeks to destabilize models of child abuse as an isolated effect of patriarchal familial relations to a broader construction of childhood vulnerabilities produced by the state.

The social construction of the raced body is the subject of “Keeping Up Appearances, Getting Fed Up” by Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant and “Racial Etiquette” by Miriam Thaggert. “Keeping Up Appearances” draws on interviews and focus group discussions that led Beauboeuf-Lafontant to delineate the relationship between eating disorders among African American women and their cultural representation as “strong black women.” The self gets written out of this performance of black womanhood, and through overeating some women attempt to give voice to the needs, exhaustion, and frustrations deemed inconsistent with this dominant construction of their femininity. Thaggert looks at the implications of the 1925 annulment trial of Leonard Rhinelander, member of a prominent white family, and his wife, Alice Beatrice Jones, a black woman. The Rhinelander family sued Jones for deceiving their son about her race; and the proceedings included Jones having to disrobe in front of the judge, lawyers, and all-white all-male jury to prove that any man intimate with her would “see” the unmistakable evidence of her race. Thaggert uses the mention of the trial in Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* as a point of departure to examine the (il)legibility of the black female body through Larsen’s text, on one hand, and the violent gaze, on the other. Finally, the poetry of Gabeba Baderoon, Allison Whittenberg, and Glenis Redmond in this issue joins the incantation of *Chrystos*—which is being answered.

Paula J. Giddings

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