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Meridians 5:1

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MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY

Editor's Farewell:

Still in Search of Safe Places

"Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be formed in concrete, historical and political practice and analysis. . . ."

—Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes"

"Comment avons-nous réussi à donner à Histoires d'elles un ton particulier, sans uniformité, avec toutes ces différences? Nous n'avons pas été dans la voix unique, mimétique, la voix du maître—c'est ce qui a fait l'intérêt du journal, je pense—ni dogmatique, ni précieux, ni pédant. Je me réjouis chaque fois de la distance absolue qui existait entre Luce et Rosi, ou Barbara, entre Yesa et Ruth, ou bien encore entre Catherine et Dominique Pujebet, ou entre Dominique Doan et toi . . . entre Hélène et moi aussi. On ne cherchait pas la fusion, la sonorité à tout prix. Il n'y avait pas de modèle à quoi se conformer."

—Leïla Sebbar to Nancy Huston, *Lettres parisiennes: Histoires d'exil*

[How did we arrive at giving Herstories a particular tone, one without uniformity, with all her differences? We were not situated in a unified voice, mimetic, the master's voice – that is what gives the journal its uniqueness, I believe – not dogmatic, not precious, not pedantic. I rejoice each time I remember the absolute distance which existed between Luce and Rosi, or Barbara, between Yesa and Ruth, or even between Catherine and Dominique Pujebet, or between Dominique Doan and yourself. . . . between Helen and me as well. We were not seeking fusion, a unified voice at any cost. There was no model with which to conform.] Ed. translation

The time has come to offer my parting words as the editor of *Meridians* as I close the final issue of the journal under my supervision on a warm spring day in the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts. In many ways, this closing issue symbolizes for me an emergence from the long winter in which the first of the four issues I oversaw was produced, a coming to fruition of a vision I pursued since assuming my post to revitalize the journal both in terms of its visual presentation as well as its content and transnational outreach. In my time here, I have traveled with the journal from North-

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ampton, Massachusetts, to Hartford, Connecticut; Amherst, Massachusetts; Washington, D.C.; San Francisco, California; Colchester, Vermont; San Juan, Costa Rica; Antwerp, Belgium; Cairo, Egypt; San Diego, California; Claremont, California; Manhattan, New York; Atlanta, Georgia; San Juan, Puerto Rico; and Thessaloniki, Greece, in that order! And I have traveled to many more places around the globe through virtual queries and author contributions from various sites of the African continent, Eastern Europe, the Caribbean, Canada, and South Asia. I want to thank the many individuals who entrusted their work to our care, whether or not their pieces were ultimately accepted for publication. I also want to thank the numerous individuals and institutions who invited me to share both my work as a writer/scholar and as Editor of *Meridians* with their faculty, students, and outlying communities. It was through these gracious invitations that I was able to spread the word regarding *Meridians* and through these that I found out the degree to which the journal is seen as an invaluable space for communities of women of color who might otherwise not have a venue in which to interface and in which to see their words, issues, and thoughts reflected.

Such travels and exchanges, often over e-mail and other correspondence—sometimes over months with prospective authors—also revealed to me the great responsibility shouldered by the editorial bodies which govern publications such as *Meridians* that profess to offer a feminist, visionary, and inclusive space in which women of color transnationally might find their identities actualized and supported, especially as it exists in an academic environment which could stifle its difference as so many women of color are stifled within the ivory tower. Given my own work on the journal these past two years, I would have to say that the challenge that faces *Meridians* at this point resides in whether or not those of us who have lent our names and energies to the project as editors and advisors will be able to safeguard the space the journal offers to liminal voices around the globe, protecting it as a safe space which can dwell in academia without being destroyed by it, indeed, in order to help women of color and their supporters have more safe spaces in academe. The challenge resides in our ability to come together in solidarity in support of our differences rather than in the erasure of these differences, in our ability as senior faculty and senior staff members to safeguard the interests of junior faculty and staff, in our ability to make use of our authority to enable progress rather than to

thwart it, putting aside our own prejudices and perhaps desires for our own inclusion in academic circles behind our roles as midwives to others whose journeys are more perilous than our own. The challenge resides in being able to hear differences of opinions and outlooks without condemning or suppressing them, to give them a fair hearing and a place in the pages of the journal for others to join in the cacophonous conversation which might then arise from constructive conflict, from what I have otherwise preferred to call “productive contradictions.”¹ This said, this final issue of my editorship also marks the end of my journey as an academic after a ten-year career as a professor of English at three very different institutions. Having given up the security of tenure, I fling myself out into a new universe confident that it will catch me and confident that I will be joined there by many sonorous voices, some of which have found their way across my desk at *Meridians*. I leave in the knowledge that many younger women of color scholars follow in my wake, ready to take up the space I have left behind and with the hope that my passage will have made it a safer journey for some who will tread behind and beyond me.

I am heartened in this departure by the fine works gathered in this volume which speak of migration, definitions of home, representation, hope, activism, and art. In her article “She Was Returned Home: The Narrative of an Afro-Guyanese Activist,” Kimberly Nettles “explores the significance of race, place, and imaginings of ‘home’ in Caribbean women’s political engagements” through a close reading of the life history narrative of a woman named Andaiye—an activist in the Red Thread Women’s Development Organisation of Guyana. In so doing, Nettles reconsiders the role of forced and voluntary migration in women of color’s lives. Similarly, in exploring “tropes of mobility and home” in her essay on Hualing Nieh’s *Mulberry and Peach*, Yu-Fang Cho explores how the Asian female body acts as a site “where the confrontation of multiple intersecting relations of ruling is staged and subversion emerges” thereby reconfiguring the national body through women’s bodies in Chinese nationalist discourse. Shameem Black, in her essay on Japanese American author’s Ruth L. Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats*, examines the issue of the transfiguration of the Asian female body further, arguing that Ozeki “exploits specific tactics of transnational political activism and extends them to shape a powerful cosmopolitan feminist rhetoric.” And in Luz Calvo’s essay “Art Comes for the Archbishop: The Semiotics of Contemporary Chicana Feminism and

the Work of Alma Lopez” as well as in Melinda Luisa de Jesús’s “Of Monsters and Mothers: Filipina American Identity and Maternal Legacies in Lynda J. Barry’s *One Hundred Demons*,” issues of representation through art are taken up in order to examine how a new generation of women of color artists situated in the United States are taking hold of the reins of active self-representation in visual art. Calvo contends in her essay that Chicana artist Lopez reconfigures the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* with reference to “postmodern, *rasquache*, and queer sensibilities” while de Jesús shows how Filipina artist and storyteller Barry creates cartoons that “contribute to the process of decolonization through their probing [of] the alienation and deracination that characterizes the Filipino/American experience.”

If both these latter essays push readers to think through issues of migration and displacement in terms of what I could call a “re-racination” as a product of loss, poets Sheila Maldonado and Arisa White offer poignant yet playful invocations of the power of voice in their respective contributions “New World Babylon Remix (Honduran punta)” and “On the Ferry to Staten Island” in which the Americas take on a new flavor, an appropriation that is both cognizant of loss but empowering in a “new world order” of the poets’ own fashioning. This is elucidated further in Regina Rheda’s playful short story “Miss Carminda and the Prince,” a rather fanciful retelling of the princess and her frog myth in which Miss Carminda’s prince is a reptile escaped from Domingos Jorge Velho Public School! Rounding out the issue on a Caribbean note is a special *Counterpoints* section entitled “Voices from Hispaniola” which commemorates a historic gathering of women writers from Haiti and the Dominican Republic in October 2003 under the auspices of Smith College in order to celebrate Haiti’s 200th Anniversary of Independence in 2004 in a unique form, one which would respond to the unrest in Haiti as well as the discord between Haiti and the Dominican Republic in a hopeful and constructive way. Ginetta Candelario coordinated a roundtable with participants Edwidge Danticat, Loida Maritza Pérez, Nelly Rosario, and myself. I am grateful to *Meridians* and to these three women for allowing me to take part in their circle and to lend my voice as a novelist to the endeavor of coalition building across national borders. In this section, readers will also find two engaging essays on Haitian/Dominican issues and a memoir piece. In the first essay, by Lucía Suárez on the work of Julia Alvarez, Suárez argues that Alvarez’s ambiguous status as a Latina in the United States is one reflected

in the identity of Dominicans in general, proving, as she says, that “the diasporic condition is a rich and vital way of life that encompasses the Dominican Republic, the U.S., and every other imagined and/or real community and memory in between.” Similarly, Valérie Loichot in her essay “Edwidge Danticat’s Kitchen History” argues that Danticat’s diasporic female characters create through cooking and ingesting food, actions which are “a venue for aesthetic creation and a site of memorialization.” The section is closed out by Kathleen Balutansky’s reflections on growing up the product of a Haitian and American union on American-controlled Dauphin Plantation on the northeastern coast of Haiti, close to the Dominican border, in a piece entitled “The Gate to Phaeton.” I am pleased that this final issue under my supervision contains such a strong section in the face of the unrest being experienced by Haitians and at this particular time, and I thank the many scholars who sent work on Caribbean themes during my tenure; hopefully, that space will continue to exist for you here.

Finally, I want to thank the many people who made my time at *Meridians* an important stop on my journey. I want to thank the cover artists who entrusted their images to us: Gabriela Munoz, Miguel Zafra, Mariangeles Soto-Diaz, John Bidwell, and Yovannah Diovanti.² I want to thank those at Smith College without whose opposition and challenge neither I nor the journal could have grown. I want to thank the members of the local and advisory boards who gathered at Smith College in the fall of 2003 in order to assist in the continuing work of keeping the journal afloat and accountable to its constituency, especially Amina Mama and Caroline Sinavaiana-Gabard. I want to thank my friends both in and out of the profession who supported my work when it seemed that the isolation of the editorship would see me leave earlier than I have: they know well who they are. I also need to thank the staff of *Meridians*, in particular, our Managing Editor, Elizabeth Hanssen; our Administrative Assistant, Trinidad Linares; our designer, Maureen Scanlon; and talented Smith interns. Finally, and most important, I want to thank both the contributors and readers of *Meridians* without whom this venture would have no purpose. I hope that your voices and faces will always be represented with grace and dignity in the pages of the journal.

As I continue on my own search for safe spaces in the world, perhaps here, now, it might be true to say that there exists a safe space of our own

making in which we might find each other beyond differences of caste and class, color and nationality, beyond the lines that seek to separate us but also in the fissures which make us who we are, whole in our uniqueness, and in the discordance of our many-hued voices.

Farewell.

May 13, 2004, Northampton, Massachusetts

NOTES

1. See my *Searching for Safe Spaces: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile* (Temple University Press, 1997).
2. Yovannah Diovanti's work will grace the cover of 5.2, Paula Giddings's first issue as incoming editor.