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MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY

Globalizing Home

Editor's Introduction

If you want to know me,
Look inside your heart.
—Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching

We are living in an age when it is now more possible than it ever was to overcome barriers of language, culture, distance to communicate both to strangers and to loved ones. Information proliferates and is disseminated at light speed in a dizzying zigzag of advanced Internet and telecommunications. And yet, at the same time, the global community is perhaps more divided today than it ever was and those who suffer most are not surprisingly the poor and the dispossessed. How can we bring to bear increased access to information in the diffusion of the escalating imperialism exacted against the global South by the global North? The offerings in this volume suggest that change must occur on multiple levels, through activism as well as through ideological shifts, shifts that must occur, ironically, on the local levels before they are mapped onto the global. In many ways, what the collective works of this issue suggest to me is that substantive transformation will occur only when we begin to look into our own hearts and see there a reflection of the faces of our "others"—whether we regard those others as enemies or more banally as strangers. By looking deeply into our own natures, our own selves, we may begin to apprehend how self-change might ripple out from the local to the global and participate in the worldwide movements for social change that day by day counteract the march toward the desecration of the human spirit so well-engaged by our governments on our behalf.

In this light, the special section coordinated by Laura Roskos and Andrea L. Humphrey, "International Feminism, Human Rights and the Women's Studies Curriculum: A Conference At the Nexus of Pedagogy and Activism," which reports on the activities of the New England Women' Studies Association meeting held in March 2003 (and partially sponsored by *Meridians*), is *à propos* since both Roskos and Humphrey contend that the

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conference itself and the essays collected here by Barbara Schulman, Mary Bricker-Jenkins, Leslie Hill, and Andrea Smith, along with an interview with the conference keynote speaker Annanya Bhattacharjee, "grapple with the problems of holding the U.S. government accountable to international norms and standards." Roskos concludes by asserting that current feminist pedagogy and activism focused on the issue of human rights should emphasize innovations "in the direction of internationalizing women's studies . . . bound by a coherent conceptual framework that decenters the experience of U.S. women, which is still too often taken as the yardstick against which other women's movements are measured." Though most of the offerings in this section do focus on the experience of women in the United States—centering on activist organizing in the United States, the rights of the poor, AIDS-organizing but also on South African women's struggles for human rights—they do so in an attempt to claim accountability in the local in order to decipher how struggles for human rights within the United States might translate on the international scale.

This move toward transmutability is addressed in a number of contributions to this volume. For instance, the essays of Wendy Kozol, Megan Sweeney, Suchitra Samanta, Harryette Mullen, and Juliana Chang each in some way addresses how symbolic or visual representations perpetuate false notions of subjects and their others—"subjects" being those who dominate and "others," the dominated, often represented by the United States vs. those oppressed by U.S. subjectivity. In her essay "Domesticating NATO's War in Kosovo/a: (In)Visible Bodies and the Dilemma of Photojournalism," Kozol asserts that "[i]n American culture, photojournalism maintains the cultural authority to depict war and its consequences through claims of authenticity, transparency, and veracity." The pretense of objectivity in U.S. news reportage, she claims, has the effect of distorting the particulars of the victimized populations portrayed through images of war in order to satisfy a universalized notion of war and victims that correspond with the needs of those disseminating those images; with respect to Kosovo/a, U.S. news coverage has concentrated on effacing racial and gender categories in order to advance a particularized notion of U.S. foreign policy. Kozol goes on to demonstrate how war images produced by mainstream U.S. photojournalists were unable to reconcile the violence that has taken place in Kosovo/a through the domestic sphere since it is that sphere and notions of heteronormativity and the (white) mother-child dyad that they were exploiting in order to legitimize U.S. foreign policy in the region by also transfiguring Muslim women of color in the region as “white”; in contradistinction, she analyzes the work of Melanie Friend, who in photographing the “homes” and “gardens” of Kosovo/a “renegotiates the lens of domesticity” and in so doing brings “alternative ways of seeing” to our attention as consumers of mass media. Along the same lines, but within the U.S. context, Juliana Chang’s essay on Kimiko Hahn’s *The Unbearable Heart* seeks to examine how constructions of femininity are reproduced in order to productively objectify Asian American women in the construction of a non-Asian (and presumably male) modern subject. With reference to the late Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, Chang argues that “[c]itizenship would seem to produce the Asian American female as a coherent, modern subject of the U.S. nation-state, but national racialization as well as the legacies of colonialism result in a remainder that disrupts this coherence.” That disruption results in the Asian American female’s location within the U.S. context as an “other,” but more than this, as a “specter” of colonial otherness that enables the use of the Asian American female body as a counterpoint to that of the Euro-American male. Chang concludes that the “melancholia” invoked in Hahn’s work is “an acknowledgment of the traumatic secret of U.S. nationalism—the histories of imperial violence that unbearably haunt hemisphere and heart” (25).

Similarly, Megan Sweeney addresses U.S. domestic policy toward crimes and criminals with attention to the fallibilities of representation in her analysis of the work of Toni Morrison. Concentrating specifically on Morrison’s novel *Paradise*, Sweeney argues that the novel indirectly makes a contribution to prison abolitionism as the latter “foregrounds the historical and ongoing ways in which racial and economic inequalities contribute to highly disproportionate rates of incarceration for poor people and people of color.” The novel, of course, goes beyond a facile critique of the U.S. prison system in examining the psychological realm of racial constructions that lay behind such policies while also critiquing the manner in which African American males may fall prey to such constructions while women, of varying races, become the ultimate victims of the racial logics permeating U.S. culture. Argues Sweeney: “By interrupting the logic that paves the way from the racial house to the Big House, Morrison’s novel generates imaginative possibilities for constructing a far more spacious and hospitable social home" (10). As a counterpoint to this essay, Eunice Tate's poems, "on the wings of morning," and "holding back" speak powerfully to the necessity of preserving languages born of enslavement and the need to heal from the travails of history. As she writes: "now here i am/ compiling the flesh/ of the ones left behind/ i did try to fit/ the pieces together/ side-tracked only/ by my own healing." Along these lines, Harryette Mullen's essay, which repositions African-American writers Alison Mills and Ntozake Shange as active participants in the Beat movement of the 1970s, thus as "black bohemians," demonstrates that women of African descent have actively participated (and continue to) in the imagining of "other possibilities"; the presence of Mills and Shange in bohemian circles of the time signifies to the construction of a racial house in which women had more active voices. The fact that their legacy is historical should also have us reflect on how textual memory works. Taken with Sweeney's essay, Mullen's essay suggests that, rightly remembered, the legacies of Mills and Shange, so adroitly remapped by Mullen, could further the project of countering the binary racial (and anti-female) constructions at work in the U.S. today.

In her essay, "The 'War on Terror,' and Withdrawing American Charity: Some Consequences for Poor Muslim Women in Kolkata, India," Suchitra Samanta addresses the effects of foreign policy on the ability of Muslim women in India to construct their own home spaces. Arguing primarily that the U.S.-led "war on terror" post 9–11, combined with anti-Muslim sentiment in India, has had devastating effects on the ability of a private American donor agency to continue its work in a Muslim slum area in Kolkata, Samanta's somewhat speculative essay asks us to examine the degree to which ill-conceived foreign policies that argue on the one hand for the liberation of third-world peoples—in particular, Muslim women (as in the case of the intervention in Afghanistan)—has had, on the other, the exactly opposite effect in other parts of the world indirectly connected to the United States and to U.S. foreign policy in areas where its main political and economic interests lay.

In her interview with Indian artist Zarina Hashmi, Ranu Samantrai comments further on such themes of home, loss, and displacement and conflicts between West and East in her aesthetic inclusion of Moghul architecture in her artwork in light of the persecution in 2002 of Muslims in the Gujarat region of India. Samantrai comments within the layered interview that Zarina's work "suggests that by engaging critically with one tradition and proceeding through it, we can reach another," thereby leading viewers to acknowledge that "[p]erhaps aesthetic traditions and experiences are not incommensurable to each other, despite our habit of separating them into distinct geographic and cultural zones" (10). Images of houses or homes in Zarina's work function as mnemonics or as cartographies, recalling for the memory both the artist's autobiography and aspects of her culture shared by others as is reflected in her use of Urdu in various prints that also serve as reminders of home and home spaces (such as those prints that operate as reflections on the artist's childhood home and her father's death). Coincidentally, the creative writings included in this issue also reflect preoccupations with home and home spaces, with the need to preserve a sense of a distinct cultural space within and sometimes in contradistinction from the United States.

In her autobiographical short story, "Bloodlines," Vanara Taing gives voice to lacunas inherent in the preservation of unacknowledged genocides. Born in a refugee camp on the Cambodia-Thai border in 1979, Taing textually invokes the largely unspoken bond between mother and child, both survivors of the Khmer Rouge led Cambodian genocide of 1975–1979. Taing noted in correspondence with me in the process of revising her story for publication that her work on the story overlapped the establishment by Cambodia and the UN for an international court aimed at the persecution of surviving members of the former Khmer Rouge. She noted further that she hoped that her story would "contribute in its small way to the spirit of truth telling and the healing of Cambodians." Without a doubt, such a story should push readers to examine what they do and do not know about history and the contemporary history to which we are witness in which genocides continue under different guises and new contexts throughout the world. In such a piece, the United States is reconfigured as a safe space even as it also constitutes a space in which the past is only partially remembered, in which memory falls prey to the occlusions of mainstream American culture discussed so aptly in Kozol's piece. The story also resonates with the poetry of Frances Kim Russell, who in her "The Telling of Tales" recalls the myths and true stories of Asian "comfort" women in Korea, Vietnam, and Japan at differing historical junctures, women whose bodies were made to "[smooth] the path of diplomacy" between nation-states. In her "Anti-Manifesto, Russell celebrates the body's ability to heal, to begin "its/gradual emergence onto land."

The paintings of Venezuelan artists Mariangeles Soto-Diaz are similarly evocative within this context of the relationship between water and land, between mother and child in states of exile. Her series "Post-Partum Blues" plays with the tension between two cultural norms following the birth of her son. She states: "The stark contrast between extended family models embroidered in childhood memories on [the] one hand and the present limited nuclear family model from this culture on the other, became the crevice in which post-partum blues lingered." Her accompanying piece, "*Consanguinidad Virtual*/Virtual Consanguinity," similarly delves into the notion of cultural exile and the use of cyberspace to close the gap between the space of origin and the new "home" space. Explains Soto-Diaz: "I incorporate personal e-mail or fragments of e-mail that derive from a matrilineal source and that have traveled via cyberspace, mostly from Venezuela given the fluctuating nature of cyberspace—also revealing instability. For me, this instability parallels a larger sense of dislocation emblematic of the person in exile, even if such exile is voluntary." The poems of Cuban poet and scholar Mirta Yañez, translated by Sonia Feigenbaum, and that of Mendi Lewis Obadike similarly invoke themes of history, exile, and possibility. For instance, in "Chronology," Yañez invokes the "history of ancestors" only to conclude that the grace of history should be to allow future generations to change course: "allow others,/ the following generations,/ to be the ones who give it a name." Her three poems included here reflect the instability of history recorded in objects that will one day disappear to time. The poems are a stay against forgetting but even they give voice to that which can no longer be held to as in the final lines of *Credulidad*/Credulity: "yo tambien crei casi en las misma cosas/ y aun en otras que se me han ido olvidando/ [I also believed in the same/ And even in those things that I have slowly forgotten]." In Obadike's poem, historical legacies entwine: "It's a dance about the legacy of Rome./ My mind is on Cape Coast": but the resulting effect is similar to that invoked in Samantrai's reflection on Zarina's art: through one culture, another is reached: "No matter the metaphor,/ you know your story when you see it."

In the end, then, it would seem that this volume is not so much about globalizing home but a multi-layered assessment of the degree to which globalization is reshaping our notion of home, how U.S. foreign policy distorts not only our sense of the global but affects the ability of many Americans and non-Americans to define themselves in terms of nationality and citizenship especially when the crossing of cultures has resulted in physical displacement, in exile, whether chosen or forced. Only in a close examination of the effects of border-crossings, of history, of dissembled truths and reconstructed identities in a world that has never been homogeneous and that we should not strive to flatten in cyperspace shall we begin to understand a reality greater than ourselves individually, and as reflections of multiple nation-states. This is a reality that, ironically, begins in the very composition of our hearts and better selves, hearts that in their humanity are fearful of the dissemblance of borders, the inherent loss of stability, but that in their higher states cannot fail to recognize the others of our selves as our reflections, reflections we would take better care to understand were we not so ready to abandon them to the mirrors of our collective denials. The authors of this volume are, indeed, breaking with denial, and to read them is to rejoice at the plausibility of transformation through feminist awareness and activism in our classrooms, scholarship, arts, and everyday interactions.

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