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Meridians 4:1

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MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY

Wage Peace

Editor's Introduction

It is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it. . . . With so close a relationship between fear and corruption, it is little wonder that in a society where fear is rife, corruption in all forms becomes deeply entrenched.

—Aung San Suu Kyi, Burmese Human Rights Activist, “Freedom from Fear”

This issue of *Meridians* was born during a long, harsh, and gray New England winter. Nestled in the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts, so named for the early colonists who sought either riches or freedom from religious persecution as they left European shores for the unknown, our offices are housed in a pristine college town where it would be easy to lose oneself in the flamboyance of the autumn foliage, the daily chirping of birds at the break of dawn during any season, the lush green of the rolling hills and verdant forests, the soft trickle of old, worn rivers, a land redolent with history, thick with the poetry and puritan themes of Dickinson and Hawthorne. But with the stripping cold of the long winter winds, even this hamlet could not remain untouched by world events, events that *Meridians* seeks to highlight as they relentlessly impact the dispossessed, here and on other shores, women of color chief among them.

Silence could be no adequate response to the history-forging events of the last several months—from the U.S. war on Iraq, to the earthquake devastating an already devastated Algerian populace, to the suicide bombings in the Middle East and military retaliations, to the ambush of Noble laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, with no news at the date of this writing on whether or not Suu Kyi survives unscathed the 30 May waylay of her motorcar as she and associates attempted to cross a bridge in Northern Myanmar—to name but a few of the truly dismal lows to which the world community has been witness these past months. And yet, at the same time, the conscious global community seeking solutions to war, to violations of human rights worldwide, spoke loudly on all continents, during this time, against war and for peace. Finally, those who have been waging such

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struggles unassisted for far longer than the present crises have found themselves popularly supported cross-nationally. As Indian writer Arundhati Roy, recipient this spring of the Cultural Freedom Prize from the New Mexico based Lannan Foundation, stated in her acceptance of the award: "In these times, when all over the world democratic spaces are being usurped and violated in the name of corporate globalization and the 'war against terror,' when fascism is staring us in the face (in India, it is beating down the doors), it is a sign of great hope that there are so many people's movements and individuals who see through the charade and are committed to resisting this process." Seeing through the charade, committing to resistance—both entail facing down fear and the chains of power that render so much of the populations of the globe either apathetic or hopeless (depending upon their relative states of wealth).

In this issue of *Meridians* readers will find an encouraging report on the activities of MADRE, a leading women's organization in the field of global women's rights and human rights in the Western hemisphere. During the last year, Vivien Stromberg and her colleague, Dr. Fathieh Saudi, a Jordanian physician who has been lending her energies to MADRE's campaign, traveled the United States to educate the American public on the U.S. war on Iraq while also providing assistance to the women and children of Iraq—the most adversely affected segments of the Iraqi population as a result of over decade long sanctions. Both stress the importance of remaining informed on world events and of contesting media representations so as not to lose sight of the humanity of the women, children, and men whose lives and livelihoods are deeply interrupted by war, sometimes never to be recovered. In particular, Dr. Saudi asserts that distortions regarding the lives of individuals residing in the Middle East have led many outside the region to support armed interventions; were it understood, she argues, that the majority of Arabs and Middle Eastern people are laypersons untrained to take up arms and suffering both physically and psychologically from life led under states of siege perhaps, then, those who advocate war as a means of ending totalitarian regimes, or conversely, as a means of preserving American interests, might reevaluate their positions by taking stock of the human losses wars entail. Dispelling some of the misconceptions regarding Middle East and Islamic peoples is addressed in this issue through the contributions of several writers.

Brinda J. Mehta in her essay, "Geographies of Space: Spatial Imposition,

Circularity and Memory in Malika Mokkedem's *Les Hommes qui marchent* and *Le Siècle des sauterelles*" and Jennifer Steadman, in her essay, "A Global Feminist Travels: Assia Djebar and *Fantasia*," present two critical perspectives on Algerian women's lives as revealed by two novelists, Mokkedem and Djebar, both of whom presently reside in France. Mehta's detailed contextualization of Mokkedem's writing in terms of her complex origins in the "settlement of Kenadsa on the imperceptibly-traced border between Morocco and Algeria" and ancestry, including "the mixed-race Saharan tribes of the Doui Menia nomads from the southwestern region of Kenadsa," makes clear from the onset that Mokkedem's representation of Algerian women's identities is layered and requires attentive reading. The essay focuses on "the treatment of space" in the novels in light of exilic and cultural dispossession, coming to rest on spiritual, architectural, and narrative forms to demonstrate how the author reclaims her past, integrating "the weaving of [nomadic] women's subjectivity" into "the specifics of the postcolonial present." Similarly, Steadman explores figurative and actual travel in Djebar's *Fantasia*, a complex narrative employing both memoir and fiction, arguing that the author makes use of travel and travel-writing "as a trope for her recovery of Algerian women's history, which involves literal and metaphorical journeys through archives, Algeria's battle-scarred countryside, and through her own experience of her homeland as both colonized and newly independent." Interestingly, Steadman posits that the narrative creates a model for what she terms, "global feminist praxis" in that the author makes use of a reworked travelogue and the bending of a linear narrative to tell the multiple stories of Algerian women in order to break the silence that cloaks Algeria and its women. Noting that like gender cannot result in assumed coalition as the differences among women are great, Steadman posits that Djebar's movement between archival and living texts, between First and Third Worlds, for instance, in her interviewing of women resistance fighters, "suggests the necessity of moving from silence to speech and the role that global feminists can play as facilitators." She concludes, "Travel becomes a metaphor for this kind of work and a vital practice—moving figuratively away from disempowering stereotypes, from the relative comforts of class and educational privilege toward interactions with various women, respecting difference and using the benefits of mobility, education, literacy to bring their stories to the world."

Along these lines, Elif Shafak, a Turkish writer whom we had the privilege to interview and who has contributed an excerpt from her new novel, *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* and Joyce Zonana, in her memoir essay, *Chez Les Arabes*, eloquently give voice to the experience of migratory women of color whose identities shift with movements from one nation to another. In describing a childhood migration from Turkey to Spain, Shafak speaks of how she “learned about the hierarchy of nationalities, about an unwritten hierarchy even children knew about and were perhaps more cruel in expressing. Being Dutch or English, for instance, was most prestigious. An Indian girl and I in the class were in the lowest ranks. I’ll never forget these children shouting, ‘Pope Killers’ when they had heard that I was Turkish. It was just after a Turkish terrorist had intended to kill the Pope. There are lots of other examples but the underlying pattern is the same: you are associated with your nationality.” Shafak’s novel excerpt treats with dry wit and incisive satire issues of national identification, gender, and sexuality. Zonana similarly gives voices to migration in recalling her Jewish Egyptian experience of living between worlds. Zonana enunciates what it means to be of Sephardic Jewish ancestry, to grow up among Arabs with food and culture as common bonds while language remains an almost tangible barrier as Jewish Egyptians of the middle classes seek to maintain cultural distinction through a French rather than Arabic education. Interestingly, re-accessing her dual heritage comes in the form of a merging of two arts, cooking and writing, in the United States. Visits to Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y., become a ritualized return to the home country: “They know that I was born in Cairo, and that my family is Jewish. We look directly into each other’s eyes when we talk about events in the Middle East and I ask for news of their families on the West Bank.” She explains further, “It seemed clear on Atlantic Avenue that I was Middle Eastern, Egyptian. For a moment, I knew who I was.” Eventually, Zonana finds that only by learning Arabic with the same fine attunement with which she has learned to simmer and season chickpeas for the filling of stuffed grape leaves will she complete her return home, to wholeness. “I will study Arabic,” she declares.

The desire to know one’s own and the “other’s” culture runs through Brazilian Jené Watson-Aifah’s “Escrava Anastácia Speaks” and accompanying art work by Clancy Caverner. Caverner writes of the painting: “I first saw the image of Anastacia Escrava on a medal for sale in a market in Rio in

1992. I was shocked at the image, and I bought it as a curiosity. Later, I asked my Brazilian friend [Watson Aifah] who she was. Her story and the disturbing icon together moved me deeply and so I painted this piece.” Watson-Aifah’s short piece and Cavner’s artwork powerfully demonstrate the necessity of reclaiming forgotten ancestral figures from the recessed silences of official narratives of history. In the piece, Watson-Aifah assumes Anastácia’s voice so that we might better hear her words: “This muzzle and thick gold ring around my neck wed me to silence and rub my skin bloody raw./ Não meu bem, I don’t sing or speak with tongue against teeth and am not sure that I ever will. I have learned that silence can be turned into its own language, and I dance my story in the *congada*, embroider it onto shawls that Sinha wears to mass, mix it into *canjica* porridge and sprinkle it on top of *couve* leaves like toasted manioc.” Here, silence, like travel in Djébar’s work, is retooled and redefined as a commanding narrative of resistance, a mechanism for empowerment that recruits the abjected body into taking part in other forms of cultural liberation.

Evident in Watson-Aifah’s piece is the power of poetics to convey a political message in sparse, imagistic language. Such is the work of poetry as is explored in Angela Bowen’s archival revisit of an Audre Lorde poem, “Blackstudies,” which encapsulated Lorde’s battles in establishing a Black studies program in 1968 while teaching at Tougaloo College in Mississippi and later on at John Jay College, CUNY, where she was shunned even by African American colleagues for her feminist and lesbian political identities. Following up on a 1984 discussion of the poem by Lorde in an interview with Adrienne Rich, Bowen explores how the poem delves into multiple levels of concealment, reevaluating codes of “blackness,” authenticity, inter-racial love with both genders, African mythologies, the dangers of white supremacy, and the difficulty of forging feminist coalitions across difference. Quoting Lorde as saying to Rich, “I’m not going to be more vulnerable by putting weapons of silence in my enemies’ hands,” Bowen reveals Lorde’s courage in the face of her own uncertainty within academia during turbulent years in U.S. history. Such a work revisits an archival piece of writing that remains current, for the racism, homophobia, and general intolerance Lorde faced in the late 1960s and early 1970s are with us still.

Similar to Lorde’s poem but addressing other themes, Ambreen Hai, in her personal essay, “Departures from Karachi Airport: Some Reflections on Feminist Outrage,” offers her own narrative of resistance as she examines

the politics undergirding an encounter with a male airport official at Karachi airport in Pakistan. Literally traveling, Hai, who is belittled in function of her gender and interrogated by the official, tells and retells her story before producing this reflection in which she comes to understand that her own outrage belied her class privilege, that as the official has used “gender advantage to fight a class battle,” she has used class to battle gender inequity. She notes that “while some women can be privileged by patriarchal systems, some men can actually be burdened by them” and concludes through a careful and deft analysis of the episode that: “we are always enmeshed in the conflicting dynamics of different lines of power that constitute our identities not only in the terms in which we perceive ourselves, but also in terms in which others perceive us.”

Bowen’s reading and Hai’s narrative are cautionary tales, for we cannot assume, especially in these times, that coalition across difference exists without persistent attention to those differences. Both caution us to examine our own lives and the ways in which we may participate in shutting down the more vulnerable among us, even within ostensibly feminist enclaves. For instance, with respect to Lorde’s experience, how do we treat untenured faculty in our own halls? Women of color, tenured and untenured, of different backgrounds, nationalities, citizenship? Women and men disadvantaged by class or disability? Are we as ready to listen to those marginalized within our own ranks as we are to speak over their voices seeking redress? Are we willing to risk losing certain levels of privilege by siding with the disfavored or risk losing face by admitting to our lapses in judgment, our internalized prejudices or blind spots? Not silencing the more marginalized within marginalized groups, not becoming subject to fears of either losing power or being subject to its crushing force, are indeed monumental but necessary tasks if we, as engaged feminists, are to remain faithful to our stated politics to achieve redress for all women and oppressed groups. Such fear is the topic of Marilyn Anderson’s poem, “Change Places,” in which a young African American woman is faced with the scathing judgments of a white American teacher, judgments which deny her her humanity and ignore the material limitations imposed upon her family. The accused young woman wishes to “change places” so that the white teacher might feel how her words inflict pain, disillusionment, and fear in a mother doing the best she can to educate her child in diminished circumstances.

In her acceptance speech for the 1990 European Sakarov Prize for Freedom of Thought, “Freedom from Fear,” Aung San Suu Kyi described four kinds of corruption to which human beings are prone. She writes:

Chanda-gati, corruption induced by desire, is deviation from the right path in pursuit of bribes for the sake of those one loves. *Dosa-gati* is taking the wrong path to spite those against whom one bears ill will, and *mogo-gati* is aberration due to ignorance. But perhaps the worst of the four is *bhaya-gati*, for not only does *bhaya*, fear, stifle and slowly destroy all sense of right and wrong, it so often lies at root of the other three kinds of corruption. Just as *chanda-gat*, when not the result of sheer avarice, can be cause by fear of want or fear of losing the goodwill of those one loves, so does fear of being surpassed, humiliated or injured in some way can provide the impetus for ill will. And it would be difficult to dispel ignorance unless there is freedom to pursue the truth unfettered by fear.

As Suu Kyi’s current detention attests, there is such a thing as willed ignorance or cloaked knowledge. To access the truth, those oppressed by ignorance, real or willed, must dig deep in order to find the strength to resist, to see the beauty in themselves and in each other. Four offerings in this issue speak well to this subject—the poems of Tracie D. Hall and Nelly Rosario, our cover art by Miguel Zafra, and an essay by Huma Ahmed Ghosh.

Zafra, a photographer originating from Oaxaca, Mexico, has been recording the lives of migrant workers as well as the Zapatista movement for some years. He is also creating a photographic archive of (what Zafra terms) the Afro-Mexican presence, of which, *Mama Lacha*, figured on our cover, is a part. Here, Zafra captures living history, living beauty, as well as *Mama Lacha*’s enduring strength over generations, conveyed through her steely but humored glance at the photographer. Similarly, Nelly Rosario, makes use of signifiers of Black and mixed-race beauty in poems about African rituals, writing, birthing, and wine: “A gem like her set in a copper ring” (from “Vintage”), but it is beauty of a different kind addressed in Ahmed-Ghosh’s essay, “Writing the Nation on the Beauty Queen’s Body: Implications for a ‘Hindu’ Nation.” Here, the author addresses the frequency with which Indian women are crowned in international beauty pageants and the implication of this global “celebration” of Indian beauty

on Indian national identity. Ahmed-Ghosh asserts that though beauty pageants are one way in which women are manipulated by the State to construct limiting possibilities for women, she demonstrates that they may also be a forum in which “‘modern’ women [transcend] caste, class, and religion, and hence [legitimize their] participation in the global agenda of international politics and consumerism.” This essay should engender fruitful debates on the nature of female representation in both traditional and alternative forums while the poems of Tracie Hall should embolden us to recognize the beauty of African American women of different ages, generations, and class status. In “dream of the soft-shell crab,” Hall writes, “will i eat this dream alone,” while in “kneading: zhang yu,” the persona muses, “see, i am afraid of distending/ of growing bigger than i am.” In her other poems, Hall reclaims the worn bodies of African American predecessors, but in “third and main,” she reclaims a contemporary elder, a woman begging on the streets, “old enuf to be my grand-mamma/ and she got on red suede pumas, old ones, garbage can kind/ with socks rolled down like fat donuts around her ankles.” Ashamed of the old woman, ashamed, perhaps, of her own origins, the persona attempts to throw her a dollar and to make as little contact as possible but she is compelled by the woman to note her humanity: “she look me right in the eyes/ she look at me and touch her face and she say, ‘sista . . . sista you . . . pretty’.” “i turn to walk away,” hall writes, “but she touches her cheek and points to me again/ ‘sista..you pretty’/ the tears come hot and quick on my face as i run for the bus/ because i know/ i’m not the pretty one.” These offerings are powerful invocations of self-love and redemption.

As I pen these words on the campus of Smith College, it would seem so easy to forget that the surface wealth of my surroundings (what some might too facilely think of as “beauty”), hides many who live beyond the college walls in poverty, begging on street corners and busy intersections, still seeking their moments of redemption. It might be easy to turn a blind eye to the many women (of color and white) seeking refuge from domestic violence and shelter for their children. Beneath this surface calm and serene surrounds, New England is no more immune to human strife than other parts of the world, however its more privileged inhabitants might wish: as Hai notes, our privileges are often the result of a dearth elsewhere. The more conscious we are of this fact, the more privilege can be put to the use of redressing such imbalances as did Arundhati Roy when she chose to

redistribute her \$350,000 Lannan award to “50 remarkable people’s movements.” Roy’s act of generosity is inspiration for us all. For those of us without such material wealth, we might begin by acknowledging how our lives intersect, as does Arlene Zide in poems like “Punya for the Angel Gabriel” in which she blends Indian and Jewish folklore. Or, as Zide writes in “Imagine Yourself Happy”:

Give up your portion—
the one you didn’t get

. . . .

If the phone frowns sullenly
on its hook
forget it
and don’t keep waiting for the postman
keep on working

We might, indeed, begin by taking stock of our blessings . . . and keep on working.

June 17, 2003, Northampton, Mass.

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