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MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY

What Our Grandmothers Knew

A Few Words of Greeting from the Editor

When they torture your mother

plant a tree

—Alice Walker, “Torture”

To assume the editorship of *Meridians* is to assume stewardship of a venue for creative and scholarly exchange long in the making; it is, in my mind, to assume the position of a midwife of sorts to deliver the voices and visions of women of color whose works in progress reflect the lives of other women, though no longer of this earth, who have provided the sacrificial blood for each our own making. I am speaking here of our grandmothers, those we may have known and those we may not have known, my grandmother and yours, yes, yours, a world away on the other side of the globe, meridian lines separating us into hemispheres, and then into fractious borders delimiting nations, cities, paved and unpaved roads. The lives of women of color are defined by borders, those imposed, and those self-created to buffer our exclusions. This journal, I believe, offers an opportunity for opening up zones within which we might communicate the fabric of women of color’s lives, the texture of our experiences and theorizings. It is my hope that in my time as editor it will be possible to make this a venue in which not only our predecessors’ lives but also those of women who do not have easy access to academic forums, might be given light, even if—as is often the case—by proxy. Such a venue might potentially offer a ground that in its ability to shift, to stretch to another’s reality, to recognize and take in that which is not recognizably or comfortably what or who we (the readers) might assume ourselves to be, a ground which does not shift, a safe ground for exchanges that may be confrontational at times, comforting at others, but always challenging and progressive, opening up doors onto fields of knowledge that can inform each of us about how various societies are actively shaping the tenor of women of color’s lives in these unstable times. What our grandmothers knew, of course, is that there have never been stable times for women of color.

This issue marks a transition in the growth of the journal—a new look, a hopefully more expansive outlook. My thanks go to our designer, Maureen Scanlon, for helping myself and managing editor Liz Hanssen to implement changes already envisaged by the founding local editorial board and previous editor, Kum-Kum Bhavnani. We hope this and ensuing issues will meet with the vision of the original creative energies behind *Meridians*.

The image that graces the cover of this issue bespeaks the necessity of claiming and reclaiming the fire that has galvanized women of color's lives. In her painting, *Piedade*, Mexican American artist Gabriela Muñoz brings to life one of Toni Morrison's characters in *Paradise* and, in so doing, connects her own heritage to that of African Americans; she makes visible the agony and strength of an earthly life transcended, only to be born again to make other lives possible in the tree-like Medusa of her image. I am thankful to her for allowing us to make use of this image as the first piece of cover art for *Meridians*, for through it she bridges both cultural worlds and material/spiritual worlds. As Muñoz writes in her artist statement, her *Piedade* is the tangible manifestation of “hope [for] a future rooted in strength and remembering.”

At the heart of this issue is the intent to remember those who have cleared the paths on which we walk presently, as scholars, as poets, as artists (artists in all senses of the word, as it takes heart and art to live well in a difficult world). Our issue begins with a tribute to the late June Jordan and others recently departed, including Claudia Tate, Toni Cade Bambara, and Barbara Christian. We are grateful to Jill Posener and to the estate of June Jordan for permission to reprint her memorial photo here along with one of the essays that revealed June Jordan's desire and will to confront borders of race, gender, and class magnified by shifts in national identifications. Her essay, “Report from the Bahamas,” reveals her own coming to terms with her relative privileges as a Black woman from the U.S. in a third-world context and parallels that coming to consciousness with her witnessing of the bridging of difference between a South African woman and an Irish woman battling their own respective struggles for national and personal actualization. We give thanks to Lucille Clifton for pointing us in the direction of poems to include in this tribute, and Angela Davis for allowing us to reprint a recent tribute

to June Jordan; we also give thanks to Nikky Finney, Gina Ulysse, and Ruth Forman for new work honoring literary forebears.

In keeping with this tribute, Neluka Silva's essay, "Shameless Women: Repression and Resistance in *We Sinful Women: Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry*" and Nikol Alexander's essay "We Shall Have Our Manhood': *Black Macho, Black Nationalism, and the Million Man March*," respectively retrieve archival works of note for our reconsideration. Silva contends that the 1991 publication of an Urdu feminist anthology of poetry presents a case "in which cultural production becomes a tool of resistance in a climate of social repression" as "a group of women poets from Pakistan...refuse to conform to both sociocultural and literary traditions...by calling attention to the way in which female experiences are policed and controlled by the State." Similarly, Alexander examines the legacy of Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, published in 1978, arguing that Wallace's work "is a book of great vision" and "that the recuperation of Wallace's analysis of 1960s Black nationalism could aid in our understanding of dominant forms of black nationalism at that time and today." Although situated in different cultures and geographical locations—Silva in Sri Lanka and commenting on Pakistan, Alexander in the U.S. and commenting on African American politics—both essays contribute to retrieving literary intellectual legacies that might inform a wider feminist readership about the importance of resistance narratives. As feminist theorist Angela Putino once wrote, "the importance of disobedience lies not in what has been denied, but in what one has tried to say." This sentiment is clearly invoked in Kristal Brent Zook's memoir essay, "Dreaming in the Delta," in which Zook reveals the struggles of union organizer Sarah White and the women of Local 1529 in Indianola, Mississippi. The piece serves at once as a reminder of working-class struggles that have taken place in the South and that continue, without fanfare, for the benefit of an entire community. When asked about her dreams, White responds that she would like to build a Worker's Rights Center: "Because I know we need that education here in the Delta more than anything else. Girl, if we only had that. The barriers it would break down. I could go out on those [gambling] boats right now and win a million dollars. But I couldn't sleep at night if I didn't buy some books for the school."

The importance of dissent is omnipresent in four other contributions to this volume: Violet Eudine BARRITEAU's essay "A Feminist Theorizing of Gender in Commonwealth Caribbean Societies"; Katherine SUGG's "The Ultimate Rebellion': Chicana Narratives of Sexuality and Community"; Coralynn DAVIS's "Feminist Tigers and Patriarchal Lions: Rhetorical Strategies and Instrument Effects in the Struggle for Definition and Control Over Development in Nepal"; and Judith BYFIELD's "Taxation, Women, and the Colonial State: Egba Women's Protest in Abeokuta (Nigeria), 1918–1948." In these four pieces, the authors critique State repression and through such critiques advance models for empowerment. BARRITEAU's essay makes use of her position as a political scientist in the Caribbean to make a substantive contribution "to the ongoing dialogue on rethinking Caribbean culture from the perspective of investigating asymmetric relations of gender." SUGG analyzes queer Chicana texts in order to discuss conflicting narratives of agency and suppression, arguing that the novels and essays she analyzes "attest to their own creative engagement with desire, sexuality, politics, and history [yet] also show the persistence of masculinist models of cultural nationalism." She thus examines the "difficult dynamics of transnational/transethnic feminist coalitions in the face of colonial histories, contemporary social and economic inequities, and the structure of racial identity politics in the United States." DAVIS's and BYFIELD's essays make similar gestures in differing cultural and national contexts. DAVIS's close study of the Lakshmi Women's Development Center aims to "unravel some of the powerful discourses, threads of interest, and unintended effects inevitable under a regime of development aid" connected to the uses and misuses of tourist trade in grassroots organizing for Nepalese women in a state never formally colonized yet subject to colonial encroachment through the British colonization of neighboring India. Whereas DAVIS seeks to examine more subtle shifts in agency in contemporary Nepal, BYFIELD excavates history, more precisely the women's tax revolt of Nigeria in 1947–1948, as a point of departure to examine gender and nationalism. All four essays lay claim to women's agency through various forms of activism, be they textual or physical revolts, reminders that even within contexts of stifling state control, whether insidious or overt, there may be room for dissent and transformation.

Our final four offerings—poetry by Purvi Shah, Margaret Crumpton's

interview with Judith Ortiz Cofer, Jana Evans-Braziel's examination of writings by Edwidge Danticat and Jamaica Kincaid, as well as Suzanne Kamata's short story, "The Beautiful One Has Come"—each contributes to coming-of-age perspectives. Evans-Braziel's essay poignantly reveals the difficulties catalogued in Danticat and Kincaid's writings concerning "adolescent alienation, migration, traumatic uprooting from a childhood in the Caribbean...and the challenges of establishing new relations in the U.S." By focusing on the concept of "transplantation," the essay unravels metaphors of "botanical forms" that reveal the characters' coming-of-age struggles. Crumpton similarly examines "transplantation" in her discussion with Judith Ortiz Cofer, a discussion that sheds light on Ortiz Cofer's transcultural identity. As Ortiz Cofer declares: "Puerto Rican to me is not a matter of location. I don't have to be a Puerto Rican from New York and I don't have to be a Puerto Rican from the island to feel Puerto Rican.... I think that categories are imposed and artificial." Shah's poetry plumbs artificial boundaries by reconnecting us to the body within culture, to ritual, as she writes in "A new garden, her hair supplanted": "She sees herself in me, fated/ victim of American chill. Should I have seeded/ our heads with that home's heat, fertilized/ our scalps with oil...?" Kamata's story asks us to shift to new ground, reflecting as it does on 9/11/01 by recasting loss in global terms, as a young Japanese woman grieves the loss of her sister in a similar bombing in Luxor, Egypt on November 18, 1997. The story is a reminder, I think, to remember that in some way, we are all coming of age at a time where loss does not know national boundaries, though politics and economics continue to divest us of the opportunity to acknowledge that losses are registered daily, transnationally, even as their genesis might be similar at the root.

I began this short introduction to this new issue, one that overlaps work accomplished by Kum-Kum Bhavnani (as some of the above was seen through the editorial process during her editorship) and myself, with a quotation from a poem by Alice Walker, a poem that encourages us to plant new roots where people, human beings, are torn from their ground. I hope that the contents of this issue, and of those to come, will encourage us each to plant new seeds—of hope, of rage, of insurrection, of peace—that might allow all of us to breathe more fully, to claim our ground even in the face of the most difficult challenges that inevitably color the contour of our lives.

