

Editor's Introduction

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"we the scapegoat in a land built
from death. no longitude or latitude disproves
the truth of founding fathers' sacred oath:
we hold these truths like dark snuff in our jaw,
Black oppression's not happenstance; it's law."
—Ashley M. Jones, "All Y'all Really from Alabama"

"Black women have been writing, joking, and 'me too'ing themselves into
existence."
—Constance Bailey, "Signifying Sistars: Black Women's Humor and Inter-
sectional Poetics"

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As a scholar of Afro-Latinidades, it is a particular pleasure for me to offer *Meridians* readers this issue devoted to "Black Feminisms in the Caribbean and the United States: Representation, Rebellion, Radicalism, and Reckoning." This curated conversation about Black feminist liberation strategies, which vary and move across time and place, is aptly illustrated with cover art by Haitian artist Mafalda Nicolas Mondestin, *Ann fè on ti pale* (*The Meeting*). *Ann fè on ti pale* is a Haitian Kreyol expression that means "let's chat about it" or "we should chat" (pers. comm., August 29, 2021), and, apropos of that invitation, we open the conversation with "Vodou, the Arts, and (Re)Presenting the Divine: A Conversation with Edwidge Danticat," an especially timely and insightful interview that Kyrach Malika Daniels conducted in January 2020.¹ As our readers well know, a global COVID-19 pandemic emerged just after this interview took place and dramatically

changed the course of all our lives, but it has been most unforgiving in much of the global South and its diaspora. Simply stated, the United States and Europe have the highest quality and most resourced health-care systems in the world, but there, as throughout society, institutional racism produces devastating and deadly outcomes for Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) communities. After a brief period of seeming relief due to the development of several effective vaccines, a COVID-19 mutation into the “Delta variant” emerged in June of 2021, and in January 2022 the “Omicron” variant also emerged, testing the effectiveness of the vaccines and claiming new demographics as victims, including children who were previously largely untouched by the virus. As of this writing,² more than 80 million people have contracted COVID-19 and 977,000 people have died in the United States (Worldometer 2021), with BIPOC folks disproportionately represented in both counts.

To make matters worse, US mainstream media and Republican Party-elected officials such as Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick routinely blame BIPOC folks for COVID-19 surges due to their supposedly lower vaccination rates, despite recent polls indicating that BIPOC vaccination rates are higher than Whites, even with the greater structural barriers they face and despite their historically grounded, sociologically sound distrust of the health-care system (Starr 2021). Indeed, it is right-wing media that continues to promote anti-vaccination propaganda to its largely White audience, including bizarre claims that Ivermectin, a veterinary deworming treatment, is preferable to the now fully FDA approved vaccines as a preventative measure and/or treatment (USDA 2021). Similar ideologically driven patterns appear globally, in which right-wing and nationalist leaders and other elements across the world blame vulnerable populations for the virus’s spread and promote dangerously ineffective alternative treatments.

In Haiti, if these universal pandemic-related challenges weren’t difficult enough, the summer of 2021 also brought the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse on July 7, another devastating earthquake on August 14 that took two thousand lives, and the brutal tropical storm Grace on August 17. With this context in mind, Edwidge Danticat’s reflections on the perennial assaults on sovereignty, peace, and well-being that Haiti and Haitians have suffered and overcome thanks to their spiritual traditions and practices are critical counters to persistent anti-Haitian attitudes and discourses in the media and public sphere. This engaging and focused Interview—conversation, really, as Daniels’s insightful comments position her more as interlocutor than interviewer—offers a rich and

revealing window into Danticat's thinking about and connection to Haitian spiritual traditions and practices and their relationship to the natural world; ruminations about various faiths' rituals of death, dying, and honoring ancestors; and poignant comments on her own experiences of losing and keeping a connection to loved ones through dreams and creative work. As Danticat succinctly puts it in closing the interview, "We're not just rectifying old narratives, we're writing our own narratives, fully within ourselves."

In her Essay "Beyond Tragedy: Black Girlhood in Marlon James's *Book of Night Women* and Evelyne Trouillot's *Rosalie l'infâme*," Annette Joseph-Gabriel exemplifies Danticat's perspective with her analysis of two novels about enslaved Black girls' coming of age in Jamaica and Saint Domingue. These "resistive tragedies," Joseph-Gabriel argues, narrate the chipping away at slave societies' social orders because, "even if they do not overcome the forces of slavery," the girls "exceed the limitations that slavery places on their bodies, their imaginations, and their futures." These novels also exemplify the "spiralism" characteristic of Haitian and other Caribbean narratives. Unlike linear (read Eurocentric/White) notions of time and tragedy, spiral theories of historical and social change hold that stasis, and progressive and regressive shifts, can—and often do—occur simultaneously, allowing for "a continuous, dynamic engagement between past and present."

Next, we turn our attention to the U.S. context of Black girlhood and survivance beginning with Nia McAllister's poem, "Consort of the Spirits, after Ntozake Shange." Although the term *survance* emerges from Native American Indian studies in the United States rather than from Black studies, it effectively captures the affect and vision of this richly evocative poem. "Survance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry" (Vizenor 1999: vii). McAllister builds on Ntozake Shange's evocative assertion that "a woman with a moon falling from her mouth, roses between her legs and tiaras of Spanish moss, this woman is a consort of the spirits," to narrate survivance as more than mere survival, as her repeated refrain "They call this survival"—followed by refutations to that hegemonic framing—illustrates.

Similarly eschewing hegemonic conventions and notions of survival, Kenly Brown, Lashon Daley, and Derrika Hunt's collectively written, transdisciplinary, and multi-methodological Counterpoint essay, "Disruptive Ruptures: The Necessity of Black/Girlhood Imaginary," coins the

term “‘Black forward slash Girlhood’ to signal both an abstract configuration and a lived embodied experience of Black girlness that is in dialogue with global imaginings.” Through three different case studies, Brown, Daley, and Hunt center both fictional and real Black girls’ narratives and understandings of their girlhood experiences. By documenting the fictional Judy Winslow’s (and/or actress Jaimee Foxworth’s) unacknowledged disappearance from *Family Matters*, valorizing the poetry of a demonized Black girl enrolled in a California continuation school who asserts “the only demon in me is this crooked society,” and the testimony of a sixteen-year-old girl working in a Jamaican resort, this Black feminist collective text showcases “the kaleidoscopic mosaics of Black girls’ knowings . . . across time, space, and geographic boundaries.”

We follow this with an In the Archives feature that departs from our usual archival document and research note. “Carlota’s Hum: An Archive Fiction” by interdisciplinary poet and scholar Alana Pérez is, as the author explains in her introduction, an attempt “to retell” the documented true story of Carlota *lucumí* of the Triunvirato sugar mill in the province of Matanzas, Cuba, who organized a “traveling rebellion that freed over three hundred enslaved people” in 1843. Pérez offers our readers a retelling of this story that centers the “queer relationship” between Carlota and Fermina, another enslaved woman with whom Carlota was evidently in love with, while also “referencing Yoruba and Cuban Santería practices” from which they drew strength and support. The Cuban context of and contributions to transnational Black feminism is also taken up by Laura Lomas in her Essay “Afro-Latina Disidentification and Bridging: Lourdes Casal’s Critical Race Theory.” Lomas’s title also references the recent targeting of critical race theory by right-wing ideologues in the United States who have launched a disinformation campaign to prevent the teaching about the long history and ongoing social fact of racist interpersonal and structural violence at home and abroad.

Lomas recounts Casal’s personal and political biography, one in which Casal elaborated a “radicalized” Cuban (im)migrant commitment to global freedom struggles in the 1960s and 1970s. This commitment was rooted in her experiences as an Afro-Asian, tacitly lesbian, Hispanic-Black-identified feminist who moved across and through worlds and geographies recovering and recounting the central role of Blackness, anti-Blackness, and Blacks in Cuban history, society, culture, and politics. Moreover, through Casal’s case, Lomas offers an important contribution to our understanding

of how Black women from the “Hispanic” Caribbean played active roles in the development of transnational Black feminisms; pushed White feminist projects to address imperialism, capitalism, and racism; and held their own societies similarly accountable. This under-recognized story offers a useful contemporary reminder to be aware of the ideological framings embedded in recent U.S. media coverage of the unprecedented mid-July protests against food and medicine shortages that broke out in Havana.

While it appears that the “leaders of this new movement are ‘a cross-section of Cuba and they are younger, darker, and female’” (Ellis 2021) and that the genesis and outcome of these dramatic public challenges to the Cuban revolutionary regime remain to be seen, what is already clear is that, as with Haiti, mainstream U.S. media readily replayed its old narratives about the island and unhesitatingly echoed the anti-revolutionary sentiments of Miami’s conservative Cuban exiles. “Propelled by the ‘#SOSCuba’ hashtag, the *New York Times* and other usual suspects rushed to report, aghast, on a Cuban security crackdown in response to the protests, characterised by the jailing of dissidents and alleged human rights violations,” noted Belén Fernández (2021), *Jacobin Magazine* contributing editor. “While such critiques are not in and of themselves invalid, they would surely hold more moral traction were they not issued by the media mouthpieces of a country that has long operated an illegal prison-cum-torture centre on Cuban soil” (Fernández 2021). Tracing a similarly complex tangle of national history and family genealogies, Elizabeth Pérez’s poem “Remittances” conveys the painful inability of those bound by blood ties—“relatives with whom they share intimate racialized and gendered histories”—to overcome the legacy and ongoing denial of Cuban anti-Blackness, and instead find themselves “debating the relevance of revenants” in post-Soviet revolutionary Cuba.

By contrast, in “La Reina de Fusión: Xiomara Fortuna Coming of Age in the Dominican Republic,” Rachel Afi Quinn helpfully contextualizes Fortuna’s *Testimonio* about the evolution of her leftist Black feminist race consciousness; her experiences of Blackness and anti-Blackness in the Dominican Republic and abroad; and how she made these manifest in her music and performance. Fortuna, who grew up in Monte Cristi, Dominican Republic, as the darkest child in a large light-skinned, middle-class family, had established herself early on as a “willful girl” insistent on getting the best education she could and on accessing every opportunity available to her—but these were circumscribed in a country that, despite being the

“cradle of Blackness in the Americas” (Torres-Saillant 1999: 55), continues to promote negrophobic ideologies, policies, and practices (Candelario 2007, 2016). Nonetheless, “rather than a story of childhood trauma and marginalization because of her blackness,” a trip to Jamaica and revolutionary Cuba fostered a clearly articulated antiracist feminist consciousness in Fortuna whose “clear-eyed take on what it has meant for her to navigate Dominican society as a rebellious Afro-Dominican woman of her generation” infuses her culture work.

This was most recently exemplified in Fortuna’s decision to perform and receive the *Medalla al Mérito en el Área de las Artes* (Medal of Merit in the Arts) barefoot. This powerful symbolic gesture evokes not only another transnational Black queen of world music who signaled class-consciousness similarly—Cape Verde’s “Barefoot Diva” and “Queen of Morna,” Cesária Évora (August 27, 1941–December 17, 2011)—but also Fortuna’s identity as a Black Dominican woman who rejects the racism, classism, sexism, and heteronormativity of Dominican power elites, even, perhaps especially, when receiving presidentially bestowed awards of national recognition. As one supportive commentator put it, “Es una mujer de la raza negra que se ha caracterizado por defender las causas sociales y tener siempre presentes sus antecedentes y el sufrimiento a que fueron sometidos los esclavos traídos de África” (Quiñones 2017).³ Arguably, Fortuna’s cheeky response to elite outrage—that she lacked the appropriate footwear for the event, a fact belied by her meticulously styled hair and attire—also exemplifies what Constance Bailey brings to our attention in “Signifying Sistat: Black Women’s Humor and Intersectional Poetics.”

In this *Cultureworks* essay, Bailey examines texts that range across time from the eighteenth century to the present, and across genres—from poetry to speeches, and novels to television comedy show—to argue that these exemplify “black comedienness’ intersectional consciousness” and use of “wit to subtly differentiate their lived experiences from those of White women” and Black men. Whether signifying and satirizing White women’s racism, or “symbolically castrating” Black male aggressors, Bailey argues that Black women’s comedy moves beyond documenting their “specific bodily experiences of racism” to metabolizing them critically and defanging their perpetrators publicly, even if to an “audience [that is] often oblivious to the intensity of their critique.” This oblique yet powerful signifying strategy is also evident in the visual poem by S. Erin Batiste,

“Longer, Love,” which mocks (up) an advertisement for hair products featuring a light-skinned Black woman with smooth, wavy hair above whom the rhetorical question “do you want love” floats. The poet rejects the original advertisement’s misogynoirist (Bailey 2013: 26) message that natural Black women’s hair must be made to conform to White aesthetics by visibly erasing/whiting out text such that the anti-Black message is transformed to one affirming Black women’s self-love, asserting, “You are . . . your mirror” so “reflect love.” As I read them, together the title, visuals, and text of “Longer, Love” enact Black femme disidentification, affirming the universal human desire to be loved, while rejecting the racist-sexist basis on which Black women’s lovableness is premised and creating something new for those who want it: “Mail coupon now.”

Also concerned with the complex politics and poetics of Black femme self-love, Jennifer Williams’s Media Matters essay, “Apologizing to Chavers: #Blackgirlmagic’s Resilience Discourse and the Fear of Melancholy Black Femme Digital Subjectivity,” delves into the contentious debate unleashed when Linda Chavers’s 2016 article criticizing the #BlackGirlMagic hashtag was published in *Elle* magazine. Chavers (2016) argued that, rather than empowering Black girls and women, the hashtag not only reproduces the trope of Black women’s superhuman strength and imperviousness to pain but also harms them by disavowing their flawed humanity, imperfect bodies, and abjection. Simply stated, Chavers argued that “#Blackgirlmagic does not change the regularity of Black death and destruction.” This did not sit well with many Black women who took to social media to reject Chavers’s argument and to attack Chavers herself, going even so far as to question her Black identity and her mental health. Williams explains that, although she too initially joined the chorus of “vitriolic” critics, she now stands with Chavers in noting that, while there is an understandable appeal to the hashtag’s celebration of “the overcoming actions of” individuals, that celebration implicitly reinforces contemporary respectability ideologies and allows “the misdeeds of the state and society” to remain unexamined and naturalized. Thus, Williams concludes, “Black people must envision other techniques and tools” that “generate Black liberatory possibilities” by allowing Black women to “identify with the whole of their humanity and emotions—including the sacred, the profane, and the abject.”

Along these lines of saying one thing and doing another, Malia Lee Womack’s *In the Trenches* essay, “An Intersectional Approach to

Interrogating Rights: How the United States Does Not Comply with the Racial Equality Treaty,” carefully narrates and analyzes the contradictory facts of the United States’ participation in international movements to articulate and promote human rights policies, on the one hand, and its long history of violating its residents’ human rights on the other. Specifically, Womack analyzes how United States’ reservations, understandings, and declarations (RUDs) about the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) claim that “US policies and government institutions are fully consistent with” ICERD yet fail to acknowledge “that its institutions are systematically racist.” Moreover, the United States routinely fails to ratify human rights conventions, exempts itself from norms and obligations that contravene its interests, and refuses to proactively pursue and/or promote its residents’ economic, social, and cultural rights as required by ICERD. It does so because ICERD notions of rights contravene normative US ideologies of freedom and equal opportunity that frame outcomes as resulting from personal decision making by individuals and deny the role played by White supremacist, patriarchal, settler-colonial, and capitalist social structures and systems in producing those outcomes for individuals and communities alike. By contrast, Womack deploys intersectionality theory to narrate how the “profoundly racist/sexist design of US legal and policy frameworks . . . assure[s that] women who are Black experience profound oppression” in and through the health, education, and housing system in explicit and implicit violation of ICERD. Womack argues hopefully that “applying an intersectional analysis to ICERD holds the United States more accountable to the treaty, which can maximize its effects.”

Taking a related but different tack on addressing the legacy and ongoing fact of intersectional violence experienced by “racially minoritized” people internally and relationally, “Sisterhood Birthed through Colonialism: Using Love Letters to Connect, Heal, and Transform” is a joint memoir by Jamaican Raquel Wright-Mair and Puerto Rican Milagros Castillo-Montoya that exemplifies the listen, affirm, respond, and affirming inquiry method for “reckoning with this being a part of our personal history, whether we like it or not.” These US-based colleague-friends, who both identify as racialized minority women, took part in a Black heritage tour of the Netherlands presenting their research on global racial equity in education. The tour included a visit to the Museum Van Loon, which showcased “a powerful exhibit on Suriname” that elicited powerfully disturbing emotions in

the authors even months after their encounter with it. In response, they decided to “unpack this experience with [one] another in the form of love letters” that movingly model “witnessing ourselves in each other.”

Finally, apropos of this call to draw on the power of diasporic (self) love to foment decolonial politics and practices large and small, we close this issue with a poem by Teri Ellen Cross Davis, “Black Berries.” Drawing on the Black anti-colorism adage “the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice,” this poem’s narrator travels from the United States to Ireland and Kenya, “exploring the journey from wonderment to acceptance to love” of Black (er) and dark skin. As with “Longer, Love,” this poem affirms that Black beauty must be appreciated on its own terms, and that sometimes means leaving the United States behind. Freed from the U.S. context, in Mombasa, Kenya, the narrator “chased [her] color, taunted it to come out and play,” sharing her joy and wonder that “melanin [is] a blessing,” a sweet experience indeed. And in keeping with that celebratory sentiment, *Meridians* is thrilled and heartened by the historic confirmation of Ketanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court of the United States on Thursday, April 8, 2022. That the moment came to pass despite the trenchantly misogynoirist efforts of the Republican senators and was presided over by another Black woman history maker, Vice President Kamala Harris, made the occasion even sweeter. Here’s to Black feminisms across the Americas!

Notes

- 1 This is the third interview with Danticat that we publish in *Meridians*; the first one was in 2001 (Danticat 2001) and, as it happens, I conducted the second one for the journal following the October 2003 “Women of Hispaniola” round table organized by then-Editor Myriam Chancy in order to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Haitian Independence (Candelario 2004). That event, *Caribbean Women Writers, Voices from Hispaniola: Haiti and the Dominican Republic*, was held at Smith College and featured Chancy, Danticat, Nelly Rosario, and Loida Maritza Pérez.
- 2 March 2022.
- 3 Translation: “She is a Black woman who has been characterized by her defense of social causes and always being aware of her ancestors and the suffering of enslaved Africans brought to this place.”

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