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FEMINIST COLLECTIONS

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In addition to these and other strong "survivor" stories, there are a few essays that address the central theme from *To Be Real*, the multiplicity of identity. In "Ruminations of a Feminist Aerobics Instructor," Alisa L. Valdes reconstructs her lucrative career as an aerobics instructor, which she ultimately abandoned for a more meaningful journalism career. Valdes stresses that while she liked the notion of the aerobics room as a female sanctuary where women could "summon the very core of their strength" and "move, really move," she had to admit all that movement was going in the direction of women's unhealthy obsession with dieting and fitness (p.18). She goes on to say that "anorexics fill my classes like worshippers in a church" and "instructors starve themselves and do cocaine for energy" (p.19). At twenty-three, Valdes could take no more; she left the profession she'd fallen into rather accidentally, gave up her steady paycheck, and went to graduate school. While understanding that her decisions stemmed from "second-class citizenship and economic disadvantage," (p.19) she laments that the world chose

to reward her "not for being a writer or musician, but for being an aerobics instructor" (p.15).

Another pair of striking essays on the multiplicity of identities are "One Resilient Baby" by Cheryl Green and "You're Not the Type" by Laurel Gilbert. Green recounts a difficult experience growing up as an African American "cripple" and attributes her coming to feminism to a foursome of feminist mentors, some also African American and disabled. She wishes that "all girls and women could have loyal mentors like the ones I finally have" (p.147). She also expresses a wish that "nondisabled women, especially feminists, will become more committed to do more than simply accommodate the disabilities of women and girls at events" (p.147).

In a memorable essay, Gilbert offers her own story as a feisty "lesbian-feminist-single-mother" (p.108) constantly confronted as not "the type" to be a teenage mother, to be a dyke, and asks us to "define, please *the type*" (p.103). She remarks that while many people assured her that "you can do it," few believed it (p.111). She surprised them all by graduating high school and going to college, all the while raising a

child. With the strength and fire of young feminists everywhere, she proudly asserts herself: "I am doing things with my life I didn't know were possible. I'm a student. Teacher. Writer. I ride horses and bake banana bread. I read *Ms.* and listen to Nine Inch Nails and the Violent Femmes. I'm a twentysomething, thirteenth-generation 'slacker' with an attitude. I am a young mother with alternative body piercings that attract questions in the mall. *I'm just the type*" (p.112).

The writers represented in *To Be Real* and *Listen Up* bear passionate witness to the fact that, despite the media's allegations, we are not living in a post-feminist era. The feminist women and men in these collections are proving that they are just the type to shake things up and make all of our futures a little brighter and more interesting. These collections are just a taste of the power and potential of the Third Wave of feminism — as Ellen Neuborne remarks in *Listen Up*, "get used to the noise. The next generation is coming" (p.35).

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Exiles, Immigrants, and Refugees: Women Making Choices

by *Ivette Valdés*

Mahnaz Afkhami, *WOMEN IN EXILE*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1994. 210p. \$35, ISBN 0-8139-1542-2; pap., \$12.95, ISBN 0-8139-1543-0.

Jill M. Bystydzienski and Estelle P. Resnik, eds., *WOMEN IN CROSS-CULTURAL TRANSITIONS*. Bloomington, IN: Phi Beta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1995. 132p. \$24, ISBN 0-87367-463-4. (Address:

408 North Union, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402-0789).

Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, *GENDERED TRANSITIONS: MEXICAN EXPERIENCES OF IMMIGRATION*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994. \$45, ISBN 0-520-07513-7; pap., \$16, ISBN 0-520-07514-5.

Beatrice Nied Hackett, *PRAY GOD AND KEEP WALKING: STORIES OF WOMEN REFUGEES*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1996. 169p. \$27.50, ISBN 0-7864-0089-7.

Exiles, immigrants, and refugees all undertake the perilous journey of crossing borders. If we examine the specific circumstances that have forced people to flee their homelands as in Bosnia, Cuba, or Haiti — it becomes

quite obvious that exiles, immigrants, and refugees are most often portrayed as powerless victims of macro-level forces. Rejecting such negative stereotyping, feminist scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa (*Borderlands/La Frontera*),¹ Carol Boyce Davies and Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (*Moving Beyond Boundaries: International Dimensions of Black Women's Writing*),² and Carol Boyce Davies (*Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*)³ have proposed moving across borders and beyond boundaries as a means to cope with alienation and disempowerment in our modern society. For these feminist scholars, the act of crossing borders involves making choices that in turn can be sources of empowerment for women.

The four volumes reviewed here attest to the fact that even under the most dismal circumstances, women find the strength to make choices and in so doing become active agents in reclaiming their present and their future. *Pray God and Keep Walking: Stories of Women Refugees, Women in Exile, and Women in Cross-Cultural Transitions* are collections of personal narratives and life stories of women who made the decision to cross national borders. *Gendered Transitions* interweaves personal narratives of immigrant women and ethnographic research to explore the relationship between gender dynamics and migration.

Pray God and Keep Walking presents the personal narratives of twenty-eight women refugees from a broad spectrum of historical, geographical, and political backgrounds. Beatrice Hackett, an anthropologist in residence at the American University in Washington, DC, dedicates her book to all those who have fled their countries and perished with their untold stories. Hackett's primary goal is to celebrate these women whose

courage and determination to survive rises above the media accounts of refugee tragedy and destruction.

Arranged by country, the stories in each of the thirteen chapters are made more accessible to readers with brief introductory sketches of each country's historical/political situation. I very much appreciated the Bibliographical Notes at the end of the book that provide suggestions for further reading. An index allows readers to explore intersections and convergences between stories. My only caveat is that the chapter on women internally displaced in Germany during World War II did not seem to tie in smoothly with the rest of the book, perhaps because of the time elapsed since the German women's refugee experience.

A refugee is broadly defined as someone forced to flee their home due to a calamity. Hackett interprets the refugee phenomenon — eighteen million forced to flee their homelands and another twenty-five million internally displaced — as a direct result of the mass destruction our century has seen due to weapons and wars. Of this displaced population, seventy-five to eighty percent are women and children. This volume goes a long way toward filling the void that is the absence of women's voices in recent media coverage of refugees.

Most striking and compelling for me is the complete refusal of these women to see themselves as passive victims. J. Meo Chten (the women do not use their real names for reasons of privacy) of Cambodia chose the possibility of death over certain death. "I knew if I stayed with the Pol Pot soldiers, I would die. At least I was not sure that I would die if I went with the Vietnamese. I decided to get out and find the Vietnamese" (p. 18). Even in the face of their ambivalence towards the future, these women accept responsibility for their choices. As Mahasay P. of Laos so poignantly expresses, "I try to accept life, to face

life as a person who is homeless with no future. But then again, the future is in front of us. The future belongs to us; you build it yourself today — it's not too late" (pp. 42-43). For the women in this volume, the ultimate choice was the one to tell their stories.

Extremely compelling and deeply moving, *Women in Exile* is a more focused and cohesive collection of life stories, decidedly more political in tone. Each of the thirteen women who shares her story, including the author herself, was forced to flee her native country due to her political activities and philosophies or those of the groups to which she belonged. Mahnaz Afkhami's sharp and insistent critique of the inhumanities that political systems have brought about through abuse of power is echoed by each woman as they make their collective journey away from mass movements and towards grassroots activism.

Each chapter is the result of a taped interview, which Afkhami transcribed and edited with the approval of each woman. Because of her experiences as an exile, Afkhami shares a deep bond with each of the women, as is obvious from her very personal introduction to each chapter and her description of the work as a "collective biography of exile" (p. x). As she states in the introduction, "[W]e shared too many experiences and feelings for an objective oral history project.... Each story is thus the product of a dynamic interaction between two women" (pp. viii-x).

For Afkhami and the other women, exile is about struggle, fear, violence, chance, choice, loss, dislocation, puzzlement, restructuring, adjustment, and rebirth. As Alicia Partnoy of Argentina so poignantly describes, "The effects of exile are with you all your life. They are like things hidden in a closet. They suddenly jump out at you, like jack-in-the-box

toys" (p.108). Breaking the silence to tell their stories is part of the healing process for these women. Healing brings empowerment, which manifests itself through the very words they choose to tell their stories, as in these moving poetic lines from Marjorie Agosin of Chile: "Don't conspire with/oblivion,/tear down the silence./I want to be/the appeared woman/from among the labyrinths/come back, return/name myself./Call my name" (p.140).

In exploring the political causes of their exile, the women begin their individual stories by examining how society has shaped women's personalities to fit the patriarchal world. Paradoxically, though exile means losing one's culture, the loss of the traditional patriarchal culture has given these women the chance to move beyond the limitations culture had imposed on them. Like the women in *Pray God and Keep Walking*, their journey into exile has simultaneously been a journey towards articulating their feminism.

Women in Cross-Cultural Transitions is the result of a one-day conference held at Franklin College in Franklin, Indiana. The narratives of fourteen "cultural commuters" are divided into two main sections: "Reflections of Mature Women" and "Perceptions of College Women." Bringing these two seldom-heard groups together would have worked much better framed in the context of

an intergenerational dialogue. As it is, the two sections show little connection. The mature women's narratives are by far the more interesting. Because of their age and the time elapsed, they have processed their cross-cultural transitions and do a better job of contextualizing their experiences.

I had several problems with this volume. It is difficult to decipher the aims and goals of the editors, Jill Bystydzienski and Estelle P. Resnik. The section on mature women does not seem to fit with their vaguely stated aim of informing colleges and universities about the difficulties faced by foreign students. Even in the section on college women, there are few concrete suggestions. Somewhat more disturbing was the fact that these narratives are not contextualized within a broader socio-political framework or a particular academic discipline. I was also particularly troubled by the editors' simplistic essentialist assumption that it is necessary for those making cross-cultural transitions to suppress their emotions in order to function on a daily basis. "We are suggesting that it may be more painful for women to do this than for men," they say, "since women may have less experience keeping emotions under control" (p.5). Furthermore, their obviously uninformed statement, "Women frequently have fewer opportunities than do men to become fully involved in the new culture" (p.5), is categorically dis-

proved by the other three volumes reviewed here.

Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration is an exciting and much-needed contribution to the literature on immigration. Using an interactionist view acknowledging the agency of members of both sexes and the fluidity of culture and social structures, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo's incisive study provides a well-written and highly readable analysis of how gender and migration are reflexively intertwined.

More and more women and families are participating in undocumented migration and settlement despite the codified xenophobia of such legislative measures as the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 and more recently California's Proposition 187. In Mexico, this increased immigration, along with urbanization and women's increased participation in the work force, have begun to erode the patriarchal ideals represented by ideological constructs such as machismo and marianismo. In her exploration of these transformations of gender relations, Hondagneu-Sotelo addresses three central questions: How does gender organize migration? What are the implications for gender relations among newcomers? How do women help to establish family and community life in the U.S.?

This study weaves together data gathered through participant observa-



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tion, in-depth tape-recorded interviews, informal conversations, and a group interview with Latina immigrant women in a co-dependency group, creating a textured and multi-layered work. The site of Hondagneu-Sotelo's eighteen-month study was an unincorporated area of a city she calls "Oakview" in the San Francisco Bay area. As a child, the author regularly visited family friends in this area, which has since the 1960's been transformed into a Mexican immigration barrio. Study participants — a heterogeneous group of forty-four "illegal aliens," women and men, having resided in the U.S. for a minimum of three years — are grouped according to their patterns of migration: family-stage migration (men arriving first and later sending for families), family-unit migration (entire family migrating together), and individual migration (men and women).

Though I found the entire volume highly informative, I especially enjoyed Chapters 4 and 5 because of the interweaving of personal narratives. Chapter 4 begins with the premise, "Migration may be conceived of as an individual project or event with origins in macro-political and economic transformations, but at an intermediary level of explanation, its causes are preeminently social" (p.97). Focusing on how gender relations within families and social networks shape patterns of migration, Hondagneu-Sotelo argues against the household-strategies model of migration and instead interprets the household as a contested arena where gender and generational differences are constantly being renegotiated. These renegotiations take place within the broader context of social changes in gender relations in Mexico.

Chapter 5 examines how gender is reconstructed and selectively reproduced through immigration and particularly settlement. Not simply the result of an individual deciding to stay permanently in the U.S., settlement is closely tied to the presence of women, families, networks, and communities. Arguing for a woman-centered model of settlement, Hondagneu-Sotelo explains, "In terms of spatial mobility, household divisions of labor, and the balance of family power and authority as indicated by decision-making processes, women gain in the process of settlement while men lose" (p.146). Through daily activities such as finding and keeping stable jobs (non-seasonal work), using public and private forms of assistance, and building social ties, the Mexican immigrant women in Hondagneu-Sotelo's study helped construct and advance settlement, thus solidifying their own position within the family. Furthermore, the newly reconstructed gender relations give women the incentive to advocate for long-term settlement.

Together these four volumes can help the reader begin to understand how exiles, immigrants, and refugees make sense and create meaning out of their situation.

[Yvette Valdés came to the U.S. with her family in 1967 as a Cuban refugee and exile. She is pursuing her Ph.D. in French at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her dissertation is on transcultural traversals and ideological transgressions in the novels of three contemporary women writers from the French-speaking Caribbean.]

OTHER TITLES OF INTEREST:

- Inger Agger, *The Blue Room: Trauma and Testimony Among Refugee Women: A Psycho-Social Exploration*. Trans. by Mary Bille. (New Jersey: Zed, 1994).
- Jacqueline Bhabha and Sue Shutter, *Women's Movement: Women Under Immigration, Nationality and Refugee Law*. (Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books, 1994).
- Anne Leiss and Ruby Boesjes, *Female Asylum Seekers: A Comparative Study Concerning Policy and Jurisprudence in the Netherlands, Germany, France, the United Kingdom*. (Amsterdam: Dutch Refugee Council, 1994).
- Pearlie McNeill and Meg Coulson, eds., *Women's Voices: Refugee Lives. Stories from Bosnia*. (The Book People, 1995?).
- Sibylle Quack, ed., *Between Snow and Strength: Women Refugees of the Nazi Period*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- Maxine Schwartz-Seller, *Immigrant Women*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).

NOTES

¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinster/Aunt Lute, 1987).

² Carol Boyce Davies and Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, eds., *Moving Beyond Boundaries: International Dimensions of Black Women's Writing* (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 1995).

³ Carol Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (New York: Routledge, 1994).