

Passage to Manhattan:
Critical Essays on Meena Alexander

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Edited by

Lopamudra Basu and Cynthia Leenerts

Afterword by

Amritjit Singh

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P U B L I S H I N G

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We dedicate this book to our parents,
Jayasree and Kantilal Bhattacharjee,
Helen Leenerts, and Bud Leenerts

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	1
Chapter One.....	20
Violence and Belonging: The “Fault Lines” of Language and Identity Stella Oh	
Chapter Two	33
<i>Fault Lines</i> and Fictions of the Body: Meena Alexander’s Feminist Revisioning of Salman Rushdie’s <i>Midnight’s Children</i> Proma Tagore	
Chapter Three	51
The Stone-Eating Girl: How a Text Keeps Its Secret Kazim Ali	
Chapter Four	69
<i>Rize</i> over <i>Fault Lines</i> : Comparative Creativities Jacqueline Wigfall	
Chapter Five	87
An Interview of Meena Alexander Roshni Rustomji	
Chapter Six	98
Re/Citations of Romanticism: Postcolonial Genealogies and the Sites of Reading in John Stuart Mill and Meena Alexander Anindyo Roy	
Chapter Seven.....	121
Romantic <i>Phenomenopoeisis</i> : On Meena Alexander’s Poetic Selves Michael Angelo Tata	

Chapter Eight.....	137
“Sisters and Brothers of America”: Problematized Belonging in the Works of Meena Alexander Nalini Iyer	
Chapter Nine.....	150
Reading Hybridity in Postcolonial Theory and Meena Alexander’s <i>The Shock of Arrival</i> Anupama Jain	
Chapter Ten	171
Still Writing of the Linden Tree: The Role of Nature as Preserver of the Lyric in the Poetry of Meena Alexander Wendy Anne Kopisch	
Chapter Eleven	187
“Our Thrashing Is Not Nice”: Meena Alexander’s Writings within a Contemporary Black Poetics Ronaldo Wilson	
Chapter Twelve	200
<i>Anamnesis</i> as Healing of Memory in <i>Quickly Changing River</i> Cynthia Leenerts	
Chapter Thirteen.....	217
Unspoken Terrors: State-Sanctioned Violence and its Victims in the Works of Meena Alexander Lopamudra Basu	
Chapter Fourteen	232
When the Fragmented Self Remembers and Recovers: Transfiguring the Past and Identities through Memory in <i>Manhattan Music</i> Parvinder Mehta	
Chapter Fifteen.....	250
Liquid Cartographies: Writing the Indian Ocean May Joseph	
Afterword	265
Meena Alexander and Her Lives: “Only the Heart Survives” Amritjit Singh	

Bibliography	275
Contributors	282
Index	287

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INTRODUCTION

LOPAMUDRA BASU AND CYNTHIA LEENERTS

Meena Alexander's creative work lies at the intersection of postcolonial, ethnic American, and women's studies. Like her life, which has included multiple border crossings, her writing crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries and generates interdisciplinary dialogues. In *Passage to Manhattan: Critical Essays on Meena Alexander*, we explore the ways in which Alexander transforms the intimate genres of the lyric and the memoir to forms that further her project of poetry as public activism, while creating a new hybrid poetic form, which fuses the western Romantic lyric tradition with non-western ones of Bhakti and Sufi poetry. In this introductory essay, while reflecting on Alexander's poetry, we also explore the broader question of the reception of postcolonial poetry in North American academia and the kinds of insights a thoughtful engagement with Alexander's work can provide, to issues relevant to postcolonial studies. We also highlight how our broad areas of inquiry will be more closely examined in the scholarly essays in the anthology, in a variety of contexts and through a range of theoretical approaches.

Meena Alexander is one of the most important contemporary South Asian American poets. Alexander's biography, intimately connected with her literary output, has spanned four continents and is marked by myriad passages across oceans and borders. Born in Allahabad, India in 1951, she accompanied her parents at age five to Khartoum, Sudan, later attending the University of Khartoum. She continued her doctoral studies in Nottingham, England and then returned to teach in Delhi and Hyderabad in India. After her marriage, she moved to New York City and has made Manhattan her home since the 1980s.

Alexander's literary career has traversed over three decades. While her earliest poems were published in Arabic translation during her university days in Sudan, her first poetry in India was published by the Calcutta Writers Workshop. In the United States, Alexander's first book of poetry to be published was *House of a Thousand Doors* in 1988. Since then, she has published several anthologies of poetry, including *River and Bridge* (1996), *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience*

(which also contains lyrical essays), *Illiterate Heart* (2002), *Raw Silk* (2004), *Quickly Changing River* (2008), and *Poetics of Dislocation* (forthcoming, 2009). Of these collections, *Illiterate Heart* won the PEN Open Book Award in 2002. Alexander's writing in other genres has been prolific during the same period. In 1993, she published her memoir *Fault Lines*, which was selected as one of *Publishers Weekly's* Best Books of 1993. Ten years later, she published a revised version of *Fault Lines*, with a coda titled *Book of Childhood* and a preface by the acclaimed Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Alexander's scholarly interest in Romanticism and Phenomenology led to two books: *The Poetic Self: Towards a Phenomenology of Romanticism* (1983) and *Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley* (1989). Alexander has also written two novels: *Nampally Road* (1991) and *Manhattan Music* (1997).

Alexander's creative and theoretical works have attracted a lively and enthusiastic critical interest. Several distinguished postcolonial, women's studies, Asian American, and cultural studies scholars, including Roshni Rustomji Kerns, Susie Tharu, Deepika Bahri, and Mary Vasudeva, have published critical interviews with her. Scholarly articles were written about Alexander by critics like John Oliver Perry and Sumita Mukherjee in the early 1990s. More recently, scholars like Sneha Gunew, Lavina Dhingra Shankar, Rahul Krishna Gairola, and Reshmi Dutt Ballerstadt have published on Alexander's work in journals like *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*; *Literature, Interpretation, Theory*; *Jouvert*; and *South Asian Review* respectively. Several doctoral dissertations in the US and India have also focused on Alexander's work. Among them are those of Anupama Jain and Reshmi Dutt Ballerstadt, which deal partly with Alexander's work. A very few others, such as Jaspal Kaur Singh in *Representation and Resistance: South Asian and African Women's Texts at Home and in the Diaspora*, have published chapters on Alexander's texts as part of a larger book. However, no anthology of critical writings on Alexander's work has been published yet. It is this gap that our anthology, *Passage to Manhattan: Critical Essays on Meena Alexander*, seeks to address.

The 1990s saw a tremendous growth in the fields of postcolonial literature and theory, as well as in the field of US ethnic studies, which includes Asian American and more specifically South Asian American studies. This was also the period which saw the development of transnational feminist studies. Meena Alexander's work is of interest to these diverse academic fields. Although these fields have proliferated with publications, a lot of attention has tended to fall on postcolonial theory

exclusively, with anthologies focusing on critical essays on Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Along with the interest in postcolonial theory, influenced heavily by French poststructuralist theory and deconstruction, the creative genre that has received the greatest critical attention has been the novel. Novelists of the South Asian diaspora, on whose work anthologies of critical essays have been published in the US and India, include Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, R.K. Narayan, and Bapsi Sidhwa, among others. Even scholarly books focusing on the subject of Indian literature in English, like those written by K.D. Verma (*The Indian Imagination*), Josna Rege (*Colonial Karma*), Deepika Bahri (*Native Intelligence*), and Anuradha Dingwaney Needham (*Using The Master's Tools: Resistance and Literature of African and South Asian Diasporas*), have focused on novelists exclusively.

Jahan Ramazani in *The Hybrid Muse* has offered a perceptive analysis for this neglect of poetry in postcolonial scholarship. He argues that poetry of formerly colonized countries has been neglected when compared with novels from the same countries, both in postcolonial studies and in studies of contemporary American poetics. Postcolonial poets have been marginalized in the discussion of postcolonial literatures because the overarching paradigm for reading postcolonial literature has been that of mimesis. Literary works have been largely read as representations of the social and political realities of their societies of origin. Ramazani argues that one of the reasons for the relative neglect of postcolonial poetry in the field of postcolonial studies is because poetry is “less favorable than other genres for curricular expeditions into the social history of the Third World; and consequently it is harder to annex as textual synecdoche for the social world of Nigeria, Trinidad, or India.”¹

Ramazani's analysis connects with Frederic Jameson's controversial argument in “Third World Literature in an Era of Multinational Capital,” which claims that third-world novels are largely allegories of nationalism. Although Jameson's analysis has been widely criticized by Aijaz Ahmad and others as a Eurocentric homogenization of non-western literatures, the connection between postcolonial novelistic production and politics is fairly irrefutable. Like Ramazani, we believe that although postcolonial poetry is a less transparent medium than the novel, it mediates experience through a “language of exceptional figural and formal density,”² leading to more subtle and complex insights about postcolonial societies. Ramazani advocates for a more productive relationship between postcolonial theory

¹ Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 4.

² Ramazani, *Hybrid Muse*, 4.

and poetics. This is what is being attempted by many essays in the present volume. As a collection, *Passage to Manhattan: Critical Essays on Meena Alexander* focuses on a single postcolonial poet, but in offering careful insights on various aspects of her work and dwelling more on her status as a poet, the collection is implicitly engaged with the larger question of expanding the field of contemporary poetry beyond restrictive national and locally bound traditions and infusing the field of contemporary poetics with a productive engagement with questions raised by postcolonial studies. These include questions of cultural decolonization, the aesthetics of hybridity, and the task of expanding the genre to give voice to public concerns, even while rooted in deeply personal experiences.

One of the distinguishing features of Alexander's *oeuvre* is her ongoing engagement with the question of the cultural legacy of colonialism and its continuing effects in the aftermath of decolonization. Alexander's memoir *Fault Lines* provides through the generational sweep of the Alexander and Kuruvilla families, the relationship of Alexander's ancestors, particularly her maternal grandparents, to the struggle for Indian independence against British colonial rule. Her parents represented the first generation to enjoy the political freedoms and opportunities ushered in by decolonization. However, political decolonization does not efface the psychic and cultural wounds of colonialism which Alexander's generation has to face. Alexander's creative work constantly grapples with the continuing burden of the colonial legacy. This is explored dramatically in her fraught relationship with the various languages she grew up with, particularly English, the language of her creative work. *Fault Lines*, Alexander's memoir, explores her ambiguous relationship with the formal literary script of Malayalam, her mother tongue: her refusal to learn it, while at the same time being deeply drawn to the oral poetic traditions of the language, through her exposure to wandering singers and poets. Her relationship with English, the language of her education and creative expression, is depicted in her memoir as an equally fraught and ambiguous one. *Fault Lines* depicts Alexander's initiation into the colonial languages of English and French while in Khartoum with her parents. She is trained in English elocution by a Scottish teacher, Mrs. McDermott, and the exercises imposed on her to strip the Indian accent from her tongue produce in her a sense a physical and psychic violence. Not only in *Fault Lines*, but in later poems like "Illiterate Heart," anthologized in the collection of poems bearing the same name, Alexander recreates this sense of epistemic violence that a harsh introduction to colonial language and pedagogy engenders in her sense of self. This sense of dislocation, alienation, and fracture is intensified further during the course of

Alexander's long educational career leading to a doctoral dissertation on Romanticism. While immersing herself in canonical western and British colonial poetry, she is increasingly unable to find any relationship between the experiences of a poet like Wordsworth, whom she admires deeply, to her own realities as a postcolonial female subject.

However, Alexander's literary output does not just record the lingering burden of colonial epistemic violence: it charts a creative transformation of the experiences of alienation and fragmentation of languages and cultural legacies into a unique hybrid aesthetic that combines the intellectual, linguistic, and cultural traditions of both her colonial education and the indigenous traditions of her Indian and particularly Kerala roots. In fashioning this hybrid poetics, Alexander is following in the footsteps of her poetic predecessors in the postcolonial world, including poets like A.K. Ramanujan, Okot p'Bitek, and Derek Walcott, who have been studied by Ramazani in *The Hybrid Muse* as early examples of the creation of a postcolonial hybrid aesthetic. In discussing these poets, Ramazani argues that "because their relation to the English language is mediated by a vexed political history, by other languages, and non-standard forms, postcolonial poets transform literary English—both angrily and affectionately in an astonishing variety of ways."³ Like the poet Okot p'Bitek, who uses Acoli words in his poetry without translating them, "forcing," as Ramazani opines, for "the English language reader to puzzle them out by context,"⁴ Alexander adopts a similar strategy in her poem "Illiterate Heart." In the following excerpt, she weaves letters of the English alphabet seamlessly into Malayalam letters and words. By recreating the process of introduction to both languages, Malayalam, her mother tongue, and English, the language of her creative expression, Alexander offers us an insight into her hybrid literary lineage, which is responsible for an innovative poetic form that juxtaposes words from two of her most intimate languages. However, as the poetic passage develops, it is obvious that this hybrid poetic form and this innovation exist intimately with the alienation produced by the colonial experience of loss of a native language and culture and a violent imposition of an alien language:

How did I come to this script?
 Amma taught me from the Reading Made Easy
 books, steps 1 & 2 pointed out Tom and Bess
 little English children

³ Ramazani, *Hybrid Muse*, 15.

⁴ Ramazani, *Hybrid Muse*, 16.

sweet vowels of flesh they mouthed to perfection:
aa ee ii oo uu a (apple) b (bat) c (cat) d (dat).
Dat? I could not get, so keen the rhymes made me,
 sense overthrown. [...]

aa I ii uu au um aha ka kh
ga gha nga cha chha ja ja nja

njana (my sole self), *njaman* (knowledge),
nunni (gratitude) *ammechi*, *appechan*,
veliappachen (grandfather).

Uproar of sense, harsh tutelage:
aana (elephant), *amma* (tortoise),
ambjuan (lotus).

A child mouthing words
 to flee family.

I will never enter that house, I swore,
 I'll never be locked in a cage of script.⁵

Alexander expresses in these lines her ambiguous relationship with her mother tongue Malayalam, her refusal to learn its formal script, even when the music of her poetry in English is indelibly marked by the rhythms of the oral Malayalam traditions that she grew up amidst. Her relationship with the English language is also marked by a profound sense of racial and cultural alienation that she feels as a child when introduced to the characters of Tom and Bess in the Reader. As an adult, pursuing a doctoral dissertation on British Romanticism, she is often filled with the same sense of alienation from the English landscape, from the Romantic poetry she reads, feeling their disconnect from her life in India and her experiences as a postcolonial and female subject. However, even though she feels an uneasy tension between the languages and cultural traditions that colonial and postcolonial realities expose her to, in the lyric poem, Alexander is able to transform the lived reality of alienation and conflict, the uneasy relationship between the colonial pedagogy that she is forced to experience and the tradition of formal classical Malayalam that she rejects, into an innovative and moving poetic form, that while expressing her personal autobiographical experience, also becomes symbolic of a whole range of

⁵ Meena Alexander, "Illiterate Heart," in *Illiterate Heart* (Evanston, IL: Triquarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 2002), 63-68.

similar experiences of postcolonial subjects, who in the wake of global migrations are placed at the borders of distinct cultural zones.

Like the poem “Illiterate Heart,” Alexander’s poetry often employs the lyric and gives voice to personal experiences recaptured through the workings of memory. Yet, this intensely personal exploration also impinges on many very public and political concerns. Thus, Alexander’s poetic work exemplifies the refashioning of the lyric as a genre which while it embraces the deeply personal experiences, functions as a form in the public sphere. In a conversation with her in January 2002, which was published in a special issue of *Social Text*, Alexander theorized about the lyric poem:

It seems to me that the lyric poem is a place of extreme silence, which is protected from the world. To make a lyric poem you have to enter into a dream state. Yet, at the same time, almost by virtue of that disconnect, it becomes a very intense place to reflect on the world. [...] In the composition of poetry, something that is very difficult to face is brought within the purview of language, into a zone of images and is crystallized. And that act of crystallizing the emotion through the image actually has its own peculiar grace, which frees one, if only momentarily, of the burden of the experience. This seems to be the great gift of poetry.⁶

While Alexander has spoken and reflected on the theme of the lyric in the public sphere in the aftermath of 9/11, when she returned to the lyric to grapple with the very public nature of terror and violence that had affected Manhattan, her hometown in the US, she employed the lyric form to express many other public concerns even before the traumatic incidents of 9/11. She used the lyric form in the poem “The Art of Pariahs” to portray a variety of violent episodes in the US and in the world outside its borders. The poem begins in the intimate domestic space of Alexander’s kitchen, where Draupadi, the legendary queen of the Pandavas, enters and begins singing. The poem provides a kaleidoscope of violent images in the public sphere. These images of spray-painted kids and the burning of Beirut are juxtaposed against the evocations of mythical women, the Rani of Jhansi and the Queen of Nubia: images of powerful women from diverse traditions, women who can reverse the trend of senseless and savage destruction. Alexander’s lyric ends with an expansive movement out of the circumscribed space of the kitchen to a vision of “Manhattan’s mixed

⁶ Lopamudra Basu, “The Poet in the Public Sphere: A Conversation with Meena Alexander.” *Social Text* 72 29.3 (Fall 2002): 31.

rivers rising,”⁷ an image of the multiracial composition of her island home. She thus employs the lyric poem to advocate for ending racial violence in the US and wars in the Middle East. More recently, in her collection of poems *Raw Silk*, Alexander has used the lyric poem to lament the violence experienced by the Muslim minority in India, particularly in Gandhi’s home state of Gujarat. The lyric poem becomes both a record of the shameful history of organized violence against Muslims and an attempt at the creation of a historical record through the lyric, when the writing of history itself is under siege by Hindu extremists. The lyric also becomes a mode of forcing a reflection and introspection on the changing reality of Indian nationalism and its commitment to secularism. In *Raw Silk*, Alexander creates a series of poems on the bitter aftermath of the Gujarat violence. In the poem “In Naroda Patiya,” she compresses the inhuman carnage of targeted violence against Muslims into a few short lines. Their brevity and simplicity throw into relief the colossal horror of the violence faced by Gujarat’s Muslim population:

Three armed men.
Out they plucked
a tiny heart
beating with her own.
No cries
were heard
in the city.
Even the sparrows
by the temple gate
swallowed their song.⁸

While this poem simply crystallizes in a vivid image the horror of the savage brutality that has been unleashed in recent years on religious minorities in India, in other poetry, such as the group of poems titled “Letters to Gandhi,” Alexander uses the lyric form to advance beyond the recording of horrific episodes of contemporary Indian history. By using the lyric poem to enter into an imaginary dialogue with Mahatma Gandhi, the founding father of the nation, Alexander contrasts India’s culturally pluralistic and secular past with the shameful transformation into religious extremism and violence in the present and the erosion of the founding ideals of Gandhian nationalism. In “Slow Dancing,” the lyric voice of the

⁷ Alexander, *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (Boston: South End Press, 1996), 9.

⁸ Alexander, *Raw Silk* (Evanston, IL: Triquarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 2004), 75.

poet does not merely create and preserve an image of traumatic violence for posterity, but the voice is much more insistent, demanding a response from Gandhi:

Dear Mr. Gandhi
 please say something
 about the carnage in your home state.⁹

Even though the poem, true to the form of the lyric, is a powerful expression of personal anguish, by incorporating the epistolary and dialogic form and attempting a conversation with the very public figure of Gandhiji, Alexander is transforming the lyric poem from its intensely private origins to a much more public form.

Alexander and Feminism

Alexander's poetry is deeply engaged with political questions. Along with grappling with issues of the mixed legacies of colonialism, language, violence, and trauma, many of these questions intersect with the question of gendered identity in postcolonial societies. What does it mean to be a female postcolonial subject and a writer? These questions surface in her memoir *Fault Lines* and in her novels *Nampally Road* and *Manhattan Music*, as well as in many of her poems and reflections on the poetic process in *The Shock of Arrival*.

For Alexander, feminism is not an inevitable inheritance of her western education. Unlike her relationship with the English language and particularly Romantic poetry, feminism is not something she enters into from a metropolitan location and intellectual framework. Instead, she attempts to trace a deliberately indigenous genealogy of a third-world and specifically Indian feminism. The question of tracing a literary tradition of women writers is a project that began in the west with authors like Virginia Woolf imagining the artistic life of Judith Shakespeare, a hypothetical sister of William, and charting through her life the possible trajectory of female genius in the Elizabethan Age. However, Alice Walker responds to Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" in her essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," by mapping an alternative tradition of black women's writing that departs from the genealogy of the woman writer that Woolf had been attempting to trace. In a vein similar to Alice Walker, Alexander tries to consciously trace an Indian feminist tradition within which to locate and ground her own involvement with women's

⁹ Alexander, *Raw Silk*, 78.

issues. In her essay “In Search of Sarojini Naidu,” anthologized in her collection *The Shock of Arrival*, Alexander embarks on precisely this task. The title of the essay deliberately echoes Walker’s essay and Alexander is attempting in this piece to locate her literary foremothers.

The first woman writer that Alexander examines in this essay is Sarojini Naidu, the great political activist, freedom fighter, and lyric poet. Naidu’s prolific poetic life and political career offer Alexander an interesting site to ruminate on her own concerns about poetry in the public sphere. In studying Naidu’s life, however, Alexander notices that there is a curious disconnect between the radical nature of Naidu’s political campaigns recorded for posterity in her speeches and the fairly conventional, Romantic lyric poetry that she wrote in her youth. Alexander argues that Naidu’s poetry reverted to the iconic and mythological images of Indian women like the long-suffering Sita of the *Ramayana*. In her poetry, Naidu was unable to envision a world wherein women could claim their own rights and reverse the condition of their abjectness. In her political life, however, she was much more radical, demanding justice and equality for women and not accepting the traditional constraining feminine roles. In Naidu’s case, the genre of the lyric poem could not accommodate her radical and progressive political vision. Eventually, she abandoned poetry and devoted herself completely to working as a political activist for India’s struggle for decolonization.

In addition to Naidu, Alexander also traces the careers of two other women writers in the essay. They are Nalapat Balamaniamma and Lalithambika Antherjanam. Both are women writers from Kerala, Alexander’s home state in India. While reflecting on them, Alexander dwells on the issue of female sexuality in the national imaginary of India. In the foundational myths of India, women have to bear the burden of female sexuality. In narratives of figures like Parasurama’s mother and the epic Sita, women’s bodies are punished for their power to incite desire. Alexander juxtaposes these myths with the incident of Gandhi cutting the hair of young girls in Tolstoy Farm because of their power to incite desire in the boys of the ashram. Alexander argues that even while Gandhian nationalism ushers women into the public sphere of the nationalist struggle, there is a problematic denial of women’s sexuality in the nationalist discourse.

While tracing a genealogy of women writers in India, Alexander finds a particular affinity with writers who have sought to explore the complex issues stemming from the embodied nature of female sexuality. Like the epics and stories containing Sita and Parasurama’s mother, Alexander’s own writing is peopled by female bodies that bear the shame and

punishment of sanctioned and illicit sexuality. *Fault Lines* includes the character of the stone-eating girl, who is subjected to public shame. Alexander's own connection with this girl highlights her own repressed history of sexual abuse, trauma, and buried shame. In *Manhattan Music*, after the coruscating affair that Sandhya has with Rashid, she is left with a sense of bodily shame which brings close to the verge of self-destruction. Like her literary foremothers, Antherjanam and Nalapat Balamaniamma, Alexander explores the issue of female sexuality in the newly emerging patriarchies of South Asian diasporic communities. But she does not stop merely with the recording of female bodily trauma. In *Nampally Road* and *Manhattan Music*, as well as in *Fault Lines*, Alexander suggests a path of recovery and healing through female solidarity and friendship. This vision possibly stems from the influence of various Indian women's movements that she witnessed in her formative years. Returning to India in the mid-1970s, Alexander was exposed to many progressive grassroots people's movements like Chipko, in which Indian women played a leading role and inspired other struggles for environmental justice worldwide. The backdrop of these movements would have had at least an indirect or unconscious impact in shaping Alexander as a third-world or postcolonial feminist, a feminism which brings the intellectual legacy of 1970s French and American feminism into a productive dialogue with many struggles for social justice organized by women in India.

Alexander and US Ethnic Studies

Although Alexander's work originates in the very specific location of her Kerala childhood and is shaped by the context of postcolonial Indian history, it also simultaneously inhabits the realm of transnational and migrant experience. From the age of five, Alexander experienced multiple and continuous border crossings, from Kerala to Sudan at first, followed by traveling to England and returning to India, and culminating in her migratory journey to the United States. In tracing her intellectual and poetic genealogy in the essay "Piecemeal Shelters" in *The Shock of Arrival*, after acknowledging her Indian literary foremothers, Toru Dutt, Lalithambika Antherjanam, and Sarojini Naidu, Alexander goes on to catalogue another set of literary influences. She names Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Leslie Marmon Silko as US writers who have been important for her, and she follows with names of writers outside the US who share a postcolonial intellectual legacy with her. These include Edward Braithwaite and Edouard Glissant from the Caribbean; Tayib Salih, Alifa Rifaat, Nawal el Sadaawi, Assia Djebar, and Tahar Ben

Jelloun from North Africa; and Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o from sub-Saharan Africa. While reflecting on this diverse group of writers with whom she feels a kinship, Alexander writes:

And so the questions of colonialism bleed into an era of decolonization, into the complicated realms of American ethnicity. [...] Then too, walking down a crowded sidewalk, descending the subway, there is always one’s own body, which is marked as Other in this country. Ethnicity can draw violence. And this is part of the postcolonial terrain, part of the sorrow and knowledge of our senses.¹⁰

Alexander’s work therefore brings into a productive synthesis the lived connections between the experience of postcolonial subjectivity, carrying the burden of the colonial past and the fractured present, along with the experience of being a racial and ethnic minority in the US. Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States* have argued in favor of a more productive dialogue and mutual exchange between Postcolonial and US Ethnic Studies. It is not surprising that they highlight Meena Alexander, along with Trinh T. Minh Ha, as examples of writers working at the intersection of the two fields.

While determinedly transnational and cosmopolitan, Alexander’s work does not neglect to focus on the problematic nature of racial politics within the US. As a woman of color, marked by a foreign accent, Alexander faces racial slurs and verbal violence in Minnesota, very early in her life in the US. This is a painful and jolting reminder of her gendered and racialized body. In negotiating her ethnic identity in the US, Alexander does not subscribe to the notion of the US as a melting pot, into which ethnic minorities must relinquish their ethnic specificity to adopt an American identity. Alexander chooses to retain the particularities of her ethnic identity even when there is pressure to conform to a different standard. She continues to wear a sari during her visits to the CUNY Graduate Center. However, the ever-present threat of violence in the aftermath of 9/11 forces her to wear western clothes on the street, changing into the sari in the ladies’ room of the Graduate Center, where she teaches. This incident is captured in the lyric “Kabir Sings in a City of Burning Towers,” anthologized in *Raw Silk*. The racialized otherness experienced earlier intensifies during the racial profiling of South Asians and West Asians in the aftermath of 9/11. Alexander’s work provides a launching pad to reflect and act on these problems in US society. In her new book *Poetics of Dislocation*, Alexander creates a rich tapestry of literary

¹⁰ Alexander, *Shock of Arrival*, 5; 7.

influences that have been crucial in her own poetic life. While reflecting on Indian and other postcolonial poets with whom she shares an intimate literary kinship, she dwells in equal measure with her American poetic kin. Among the American poetic figures that she reflects on are Joy Harjo, Gloria Anzaldúa, Theresa Cha, Toni Morrison, Yusef Komunyaaka, and Myung Mi Kim, among others. While reading Joy Harjo's poetry, Alexander writes:

Colonialism has dispossessed her people, rendered them exiles in their own land, and Harjo is a griot of this forced exile, one who sings the body and soul that must survive passage.¹¹

Alexander thus makes an explicit connection between her own cultural inheritance of colonialism and Harjo's distinct but comparable experience of the loss of Native American culture and the survival of that culture, in spite of the genocide it has repeatedly encountered. She also finds a common theme of survival in the works of African American writers like Morrison and Komunyaaka that connect them to the theme of cultural loss and survival that emerge in Harjo's poetry. In Komunyaaka's poetry, Alexander witnesses the experiences of a black man growing up in segregated Louisiana and fighting in the Vietnam war, recording the irony of a person belonging to a racialized minority participating in an imperial war against a people of color. Through her reflections of the works of these American writers, Alexander consciously creates a bridge between the experiences of a postcolonial Indian woman writer and the peculiar burdens of being a writer from a minority group within the US.

While creating these connections between the complex legacies of colonialism and the burdens of a racialized identity in the US, Alexander does not shy away from recording the horror and devastation of violent conflict in her poetry. In poems like "San Andreas Fault" and "Art of Pariahs," she crafts images of brutality with an almost journalistic commitment to veracity. Yet, these images of violence have a peculiar restraint and are held in a taut balance by Alexander's unswerving commitment to peace and love. The inspiration for Alexander for a fragile peace comes from her involvement with the tradition of medieval Bhakti and Sufi poetry. Her works are interspersed with a multitude of references to Rumi, Kabir, Mirabai, and Akkamahadevi. Although deeply condemnatory of the excesses of religious extremism in India, she draws on this alternative tradition of mysticism, which is pluralistic and defiant

¹¹ Alexander, *Poetics of Dislocation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming 2009), 23.

of any one orthodox religion. Within this group, it is with the female mystical poets Akkamahadevi and Mirabai that Alexander feels the greatest affinity. In their steadfast devotion to their lords, both Mirabai and Akkamahadevi transgressed many of the established and accepted norms of feminine behavior. Alexander identifies a connection between the bodily transgressions of these medieval Indian female mystics and the female poets of today. Their defiance of social standards and their love for their lords stand in contrast to the violent imposition of religious norms on societies. The mysticism of these women is a source for an alternative vision of the world, one based on love, tolerance, and joy. Alexander seizes this as a repository of hope in a world of suffering and despair.

The essays in this collection explore in related but different ways the relationship of Alexander's poetry to the fields of postcolonial, American ethnic, and women's literatures that we have tried to map in this introduction. A variety of methodologies, ranging from the close reading of individual poems, to feminist, Marxist, phenomenological, and cultural studies perspectives, are adopted by the group of contributors. In addition to traditional critical essays, the volume includes one full-length interview and also a mixed-genre essay which includes excerpts of an interview interspersed with reflections. What follows is a brief summary of the essays that make up this anthology.

We begin with four essays that limn a variety of approaches to *Fault Lines*, which is perhaps Alexander's best known work. Stella Oh's essay, "Violence and Belonging: The 'Fault Lines' of Language and Identity," distinguishes *Fault Lines* as a memoir, as opposed to traditional autobiography. Oh argues that the incorporation of various different forms into the traditional genre of autobiography shakes epistemological and disciplinary boundaries and parallels the uneasy accommodation of race and ethnicity in mainstream American society.

Proma Tagore's essay, "*Fault Lines* and Fictions of the Body: Meena Alexander's Feminist Revisioning of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*," compares *Fault Lines* to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, arguing that while both texts adopt a diasporic lens to critique singular narratives of nationalism, Rushdie seems to unconsciously replicate a heteronormative and masculinist notion of nationhood, whereas Alexander challenges these narratives from a diasporic, feminist perspective. Tagore also contrasts the canonical status of Rushdie's text to the "inassimilable" nature of Alexander, raising questions about canon formation within postcolonial studies.

Kazim Ali's essay, "The Stone-Eating Girl: How a Text Keeps Its Secret," compares the 1993 and the 2003 editions of *Fault Lines* to discuss

the revelation of childhood sexual trauma, which was buried and unavailable to Alexander's memory in the earlier text. Ali grapples with Alexander's complex relationship with her grandfather Ilya to highlight unresolved tensions in the earlier text's representation of the relationship, which prefigure the revelation of sexual molestation in the later text.

In "*Rize over Fault Lines: Comparative Creativities*," Jacqueline Wigfall argues that Meena Alexander's work, in unexpected ways, offers an entry point into understanding dance, specifically Krump, an urban South-Central Los Angeles form. Krump's "poetically assaultive moves," likened by dance critic Ernest Hardy to "dancing on live grenades," illustrate the central tropes of Meena Alexander's theory of identity, art, and survival brought out in her poetry collection *The Shock of Arrival*: "There is something molten in me. [...] There is something incendiary." Postcolonial theory undergirding Meena Alexander's work finds a unique outlet, in this essay, in the interwoven discussion of Krump dance and Alexander's poetry.

Bridging to a discussion that takes many texts of Alexander's into consideration, Roshni Rustomji's interview of Alexander is a continuation of their earlier conversation, which was published in the *Weber Studies Journal* in 1999. In that interview, she had asked Alexander: "Where are you from? Why do you write? Who are you?" She begins this 2006 interview with the same three questions in order to spiral outward or inward toward new questions, as well as to discuss passages from Alexander's post-1999 works. Rustomji's interview emphasizes Alexander's identity as a poet activist. She also connects Alexander's poetry to the medieval Bhakti poets of India, particularly Kabir, who strove to create a more just and peaceful society through his verses.

The next two essays focus upon the strong Romantic influence upon Alexander. Anindyo Roy's essay, "Re/citations of Romanticism: Postcolonial Genealogies and the Sites of Reading in John Stuart Mill and Meena Alexander," interrogates the politics of reading and interpreting colonial and postcolonial texts by juxtaposing Alexander's *Fault Lines* with John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography*. The critical thrust of his essay is to probe how the consolidation of specific epistemologies in coloniality and postcoloniality takes place within the historically variable power asymmetries, revealing the continuities and ruptures in the imagining of the self as "agent" of and "subject" to history.

Michael Angelo Tata, in "Romantic *Phenomenopoiesis*: On Meena Alexander's Poetic Selves," examines the connection between phenomena and Romantic subject formation, bringing Alexander's theoretical work on Romanticism into an interesting synthesis with her creative writing. Tata

argues that the one genre which can best describe and demonstrate the workings of poetic selfhood is none other than the memoir, a genre inhabited by the Alexander of *Fault Lines* (but also by the Dorothy Wordsworth of the *Alfoxden* and *Grasmere Journals*). He draws on Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, among others, to trace a genealogy of Alexander's theorization of the intimate connection between phenomena and subjectivity.

The next five essays unspool Alexander's poetry. Nalini Iyer, in "Sisters and Brothers of America: Problematized Belonging in the Works of Meena Alexander," examines Alexander's prose/poetry volume *The Shock of Arrival*, her poetry volume *Raw Silk*, and her novel *Manhattan Music* to explore and critique the scripting of dominant notions of home and nationalism and simultaneously expose the violence inherent in these normative scripts. Iyer theorizes alternative notions of home and community emerging from a feminist consciousness in Alexander's work.

Anupama Jain, in "Reading Hybridity in Postcolonial Theory and Meena Alexander's *The Shock of Arrival*," traces the theoretical significance of hybridity in postcolonial studies by drawing on various theorists like Mikhail Bakhtin, Homi Bhabha, Robert Young, Jahan Ramazani, Gloria Anzaldúa, and others to tease out the complex nuances of this aesthetic and cultural practice and then uses this critical concept to read Alexander's poetry in *The Shock of Arrival*.

In "Still Writing of the Linden Tree: the Role of Nature as Preserver of the Lyric in the Poetry of Meena Alexander," Wendy Anne Kopsisch reads the post-9/11 lyrics of Alexander in *Raw Silk* to reiterate the need to go back to the lyric form in a world which has lost its innocence and beauty through human carnage and devastation. She restates the need for nature poetry in a post-catastrophic world, drawing on Frankfurt School theorists like Brecht and Adorno to frame her argument.

In "'Our Thrashing is Not Nice': Meena Alexander's Writings within a Contemporary Black Poetics," Ronaldo V. Wilson explores compelling connections between Alexander's poetry and Black poetics. He zeroes in on examples of the fractured, embattled body in Alexander's work and in Cornelius Eady's *Brutal Imagination*. Wilson argues that Alexander's nuanced understanding of the body as a field, a place where it is at once the site of the poem and the source—through a constantly fluid landscape—echoes against the work of several African American writers, particularly those who work through an aesthetic of the violated and often fragmented black body.

In "*Anamnesis* as Healing of Memory in *Quickly Changing River*," Cynthia Leenerts traces Alexander's evolution of image and theme in this

volume as a process of *anamnesis* that builds not only on Alexander's earlier poetic work in *The Shock of Arrival*, *Illiterate Heart*, and *Raw Silk*, but more dramatically from her struggle to recollect herself in *Fault Lines*.

Alexander's novels come in next for nuanced exploration. Lopamudra Basu's "Unspoken Terrors: State-Sanctioned Violence and Its Victims in the Works of Meena Alexander" examines Alexander's critique from her early novel *Nampally Road* of the monopoly of the modern nation-state on the legitimacy of violence. In examining violence of the state in relation to its racial and gendered minorities, in Indian and US contexts, Basu argues that Alexander's work obliterates constructed differences between postcolonial nations and diasporic communities.

Parvinder Mehta's essay, "When the Fragmented Self Remembers and Recovers: Transfiguring the Past and Identities through Memory in *Manhattan Music*," examines *Manhattan Music* as a text that carves a female immigrant identity through acts of remembering through the gendered female body. Mehta also seeks to connect this performance of diasporic identity to Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of *mestiza* consciousness.

Finally, May Joseph's "Liquid Cartographies: Writing the Indian Ocean" traverses Alexander's considerable work with sea imagery, particularly in *The Shock of Arrival*, *Illiterate Heart*, *Quickly Changing River*, and the forthcoming *Poetics of Dislocation*. Joseph brings in extracts blended from two interviews with Alexander in late 2006, revisiting Alexander's growing awareness of place and placelessness, beginning with her first crossing of the Indian Ocean in 1956 at the age of five, deepening with discoveries of ancient trade routes and modern meteorology as a student, and bearing poetic fruit in her adult life as a traveler, a professor, and a literary artist.

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