

Book Reviews

Themed Book Reviews: Exploring Transnational Feminist Practice: Heather Merrill's *An Alliance of Women: Immigration and the Politics of Race*

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Heather Merrill's *An Alliance of Women: Immigration and the Politics of Race* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006) was the subject of a provocative, inspiring, and sometimes contentious 'Author Meets Critics' session at the 2007 AAG meeting in San Francisco. This was the second in a series of sessions sponsored by the Qualitative Research Specialty Group that highlighted the first books of authors who advance the field of qualitative research in innovative ways. The panelists in the session—Patricia Ehrkamp, Linda McDowell, Katherine McKittrick, Heidi Nast, and Alison Mountz—acknowledged in quite distinct ways how Heather's research raised difficult questions regarding the agendas, politics and practices of transnational feminisms in (postcolonial) Europe. As there was not enough time to discuss the remarkably diverse set of responses and insights raised by the author, panelists and audience, we decided to continue this conversation through the pages of this review forum.

An Alliance of Women is an ethnographic study about an inter-ethnic grassroots political organization of female migrants and local feminists known as *Alma Mater*, a coalition established in Turin, Italy, to respond to the needs of recent immigrants from largely African, but also South and Central American, Eastern European, Asian, and the Middle Eastern countries in the 1990s. Within a changing socio-demographic context, *Alma Mater* stood out as the only Turinese organization that explicitly sought to include an anti-racist agenda in their feminist political project. Merrill focuses on the complex political dynamics and difficulties that shaped *Alma Mater*, and richly describes the sometimes successful, but often volatile and painful, working relations of an organization defined by the needs and goals of women with distinct national, religious, class, political, and generational backgrounds.

Merrill situates *Alma Mater* within various international, national and regional contexts, including the perceived social and political Italian 'crisis' over immigration in the early 1990s (when Italy had transformed from a country of emigration to one of immigration), the increase in nativist and anti-immigrant sentiment in Western Europe during the 1980s and 1990s, and the economic restructuring and changing labor relations in Turin. Four of the book's seven substantive chapters (Chapters 1, 2, 6 and 7) address the ways race, class, gender and power played out contentiously among Italian feminists and new migrants in Turin. Known both for its post-World War II Fordist economy of automobile manufacturing dominated by Fiat, and its history of strong labor unions and leftist politics, Turin is a city of complex class-based and racial formations resulting from regional, linguistic, religious, and social differences. By providing detailed

descriptions of the changes happening in the city—including the effects of Turin's dramatic economic restructuring from manufacturing to decentralized high tech production, Merrill acknowledges, but does not justify, recent tensions between locals and new migrants due to increased unemployment (Chapter 3). Other chapters provide in-depth examination of the divisions of labor, particularly addressing migrant women's work in domestic service and the informal economy (Chapter 4), and the conflicts that erupted related to more recent migrant patterns and flows, including a case study of the series of conflicts and protests in the neighborhood of San Salvario (Chapter 5).

Merrill argues that most contemporary immigration studies examine the impact of new migrants on Italians, rather than focus on the agency of migrants themselves. For this reason, *Alliance* offers a compelling account of the constant struggle to find common ground amongst women who identify with distinct national, ethnic, racialized, and gendered roles in local and diasporic settings. Unlike other feminist organizations in Turin that largely focused on labor struggles due to their political histories within the communist movements of the interwar and post-World War II period, Alma Mater was unique in setting as its goal an anti-racist agenda. Established in 1993 as both a work site and a place for intercultural mediation, Alma Mater was located in a three-story building that housed offices, meeting rooms, the theater group *Almateatro*, and a number of social services for women and the local population, including a Turkish bath, laundromat, seamstress shop, and emergency housing. It also offered cross-cultural communication courses and sent 'cultural mediators' when needed to hospitals and birthing centers. As Merrill explains, '[a]ll of Alma Mater's initiatives for empowering migrant women are geared toward bodily practices and representations, including health, birthing practices, sexuality, clothing and hair, dance, and food' (p. 25). In addition to describing these innovative initiatives, Merrill examines the difficulties in establishing a shared feminist project defined by the diverse needs of Italian feminists and recently arrived migrant women. In describing the structure, funding, and programming of Alma Mater, Merrill pays considerable attention to the controversies and politics involved in building an inter-ethnic feminist organization across generations. The protagonists of *Alliance*, moreover, interact with the state, economy, and local society in diverse ways, and Merrill is careful to describe how social hierarchies were reflected in the structures of Alma Mater itself, despite claims to feminist equality. Conflict erupted, for example, over the delegation of cleaning duties within this cooperative facility, with new migrants not wishing to reproduce their relegation to domestic work.

Alliance thus speaks directly to many of the issues and problems of transnational feminist praxis that many feminist scholars are debating today (e.g. Mountz, below; Nagar, 2002). Many scholars question the hegemony of Anglo-American feminisms as the basis of organizing networks of diverse women, and trouble how language and writing styles can quickly become the (un)official lingua franca for defining such alliances. Feminists also question whose political agenda gets put on the table, and why, and what constitutes useful theory for challenging power and material inequalities. The 'critics' invited to respond to *Alliance of Women* drew specific attention to these concerns, in particular raising questions about feminist methodologies, inter-subjective and inter-racial formations, and situated knowledge productions. Some panelists, for example, wanted to know specific details about how Merrill met and decided to

work with her informants, as well as how she communicated with them. Others wanted to know more about how the various ‘speaking positions’ of Alma Mater members developed over the time of the study: was ‘misrecognition’ necessarily part and parcel of the cross-cultural relationships that Alma Mater sought to develop? The panel also discussed authority and authorship, noting the ways any author is restricted by her interactions with and descriptions of individuals and social groups. How can the ways that individuals experience themselves and their life stories be captured in any ethnographic text? A number of theoretical questions were raised about how racism and racialized hierarchies in Europe operate through Alma Mater and, indeed, their representations in the book. How are racial hierarchies—that are themselves constantly shifting—negotiated not only among participants in the organization, but also between the author and her subjects? Can these be avoided, and if so, how?

What follows, then, are five short reviews of *An Alliance of Women*, followed by Heather Merrill’s response. We extend our thanks to the panelists for sharing their ideas in print and wish to acknowledge especially our highlighted author, Heather Merrill, Associate Professor of Geography and Anthropology at Dickinson College, and Executive Director of the Clarke Forum for Contemporary Issues, who wanted to continue a conversation with individuals who closely scrutinized her work. We anticipate that Heather’s book, along with this special review essay, may begin a series of difficult, but necessary, debates about the politics of researching, representing, theorizing, and building transnational and antiracist feminist alliances.

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Racialized Spaces, Connected Lives

An Alliance of Women is set in the context of Italy’s recent and rapid transition from being a major sending state for post-World War II labor migrants to Europe’s northern and western countries, to becoming a major recipient of migrants from different parts of the world. Rapid industrialization and socio-economic change brought about a drastic reduction in fertility rates that increased the need for migrant labor at the same time that unease about the influx of ‘difference’ into the country, especially from former colonies, has been growing. It is against this backdrop that Heather Merrill makes several important contributions to our understanding of diasporas and race, the feminization of migration, and the politics of immigrant incorporation in contemporary Europe.

Merrill’s rich analysis sheds light on the notion of ‘diaspora space’ (Brah, 1996, p. 208), a space that includes not only migrant, diasporic populations, but also those populations that have not migrated and whose lives are affected by the influx of migrants. In this framework, the connections between migrants and non-migrants, in relation to historic and political processes such as colonialism, create gendered and racialized diaspora spaces. Heather’s focus on *Alma Mater* makes obvious the positive potential of thinking about the connections between migrant and

non-migrant women, not in an attempt to homogenize or gloss over differences, but to see what might be gained when difference is acknowledged without foregrounding otherness. This is one of the most fascinating aspects of *Alliance*. While her book is optimistic and emphasizes how a feminist alliance may produce positive outcomes for migrant women and Italian feminists alike, Merrill takes great care to also highlight the struggles and difficulties that such endeavors involve.

Women of Alma Mater, despite their best intentions, are not always successful in achieving their progressive goals. Although expressly attempting to counter the racism of Italian society, Italian feminists also perpetuate racial hierarchies. For example, migrant women working in Alma Mater's co-operatives commented on being relegated to low-end cleaning and domestic positions similar to those they found in the wider Turin labor markets. Merrill's research thus raises the question of whether there are ways of more explicitly disrupting such racial hierarchies when middle class non-migrant women rely on migrant women's labor to achieve their own socio-economic goals. Another question *Alliance* raises is how 'feminists can talk across worlds' (Staeheli & Nagar, 2002). Such a question might be answered in focus groups in which members of Alma Mater discuss their understandings of feminism, racism, and Alma Mater's successes and failures. But that would be, and indeed hopefully will be, another future research project.

Merrill's ethnography highlights the tremendous diversity of migrant women of different origins and with very different biographies, motivations, and connections to Italy. Postcolonial migrants from Italy's former African colonies, Eastern European migrants, Filipino domestic workers, and a highly educated lawyer from Brazil illustrate women's varying migration experiences. Merrill shows that migrant women may well be educated and politically active, and that assumptions about subservient gender roles ascribed to them may be wrong. Focusing on Alma Mater and the women linked to this organization brings out the multiplicity of reasons why women migrate, and how their migration is (or is not!) linked to that of men. Making these differences visible allows us to refine constructions of gender in the processes of migration and immigrant incorporation. Hence, Merrill's research enriches our understanding of the growing diversification of migration flows and the increasing feminization of international migration as it plays out in Turin, Italy.

The diversity of migrant women's experiences in Italy, as discussed by Merrill, challenges homogenizing and racist discourses that universally portray migrant women as prostitutes and not fit for participation in Italian society. *Alliance* contextualizes and links this racism to the ways that Northern Italians have traditionally discriminated against those from the *Mezzogiorno*, which allows a more in-depth story to emerge of the ways that Catholic and communist groups are implicated in perpetuating racist notions of Italian and Turin identities. At the same time, the book also shows that Catholic, feminist, and leftist groups are working against racism and are actively trying to better migrants' lives. This analysis complicates generalizations and simplistic assumptions about the homogeneity of groups, and demonstrates how necessary it is to look more closely at the ways that different groups in society, and the state—local or national—work in sometimes contradictory, conflicting, or surprisingly complementary ways when it comes to migrants' incorporation into and/or exclusion from receiving societies.

The migrant women quoted in the book, as well as Heather's analysis of newspaper coverage, portrayed 'Turin' and Italian society at large as racist. Yet the

'racist subjects' seemed rather distant in the book and they predominantly speak through written texts. There is a priest whose letter, published in a newspaper, calls for more 'order' and legality (to rid a neighborhood of slumlords and the immigrants they house). Then there is a racist and sexist hairdresser attempting to extort sexual favors from an African woman applying to be his apprentice who recounts her experience in the book. But for the most part Heather explores racist expressions through textual analysis rather than through ethnographic research. This approach raises the question of how we study various expressions of racism in the context of immigration. Given the nuanced insights that ethnographic research allows, I wonder what we might learn from those distant Turinians if they were also interviewed for this research instead of speaking through textual sources. Of course this is a broader question about how we investigate socio-spatial relations in immigrant receiving societies where migrants and non-migrants make sense of their changing lives and homes in relation to one another. And it shows that there clearly is a need for more research that—as the present book does—makes racialization and racism integral elements of studying immigration and immigrant incorporation.

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Place, Scale and Complexity: Doing feminist geographical research

Italy has recently witnessed remarkable shifts in the structure and nature of its population. Settled in the European imagination is an idealisation of Italy as the producer and provider of migrants. Images of high birth rates, large Italian families, and a deprived rural south that fuelled large-scale emigration are hard to change, and yet, as Heather Merrill documents in this stimulating book, Italy is no longer a migrant exporting country but a migrant receiving nation. In the last two decades or so, not only has the Italian birth rate fallen below replacement rates but the composition of its population has changed. The proportion of Italian born residents has declined and the ethnic composition has altered as in-migration, from Africa in particular, has become significant.

In this study, Merrill explores global patterns of labour movement and their consequences through the lens of a specific case study, while ranging across disciplinary boundaries and juxtaposing a number of different analytic perspectives. Her lens is the wonderfully named *Alma Mater*—an inter-ethnic organisation working for migrant women's rights. Merrill seeks to understand the everyday practices and politics of the organisation as well as 'the broad contexts of power, inequality and racism' in which they work and live. She draws on geographical ideas about the global constitution of the local, referring to the ways in which larger-scale contexts 'affect the construction of social and

political subjects' allowing her to explore 'patterns of behavior in everyday life in a place in relation to a broad and sedimented historical context' (p. xv).

While I support this general aim, I feel slightly uneasy with the use of the terms such as 'context' and 'sedimented' as a means to constitute the local as set within the global, rather than as concepts that reflect the mutual constitution of social relations across interconnected spatial scales. Later, in her discussion of the spatial politics of scale (p. 7ff), the notion of scale is presented as a hierarchy, expanding outwards from the body, the neighbourhood, the city, to the nation, rather than as a set of interconnections. However, while Merrill does not explicitly address interconnectedness and mutual constitution across spatial scales as part of her theoretical contribution, it seems to me that she nonetheless comes close to providing a complex and interconnected analysis of how new migrants in Turin challenge and contest the racialised and gendered assumptions in Italian society. She uncovers the ways that particular groups of women access and are excluded from different spaces in the city, including the home, the clinic, the local labour market and neighbourhoods. Indeed, in her discussions of the consequences of industrial restructuring in Turin, and of the changing international division of labour and associated flows of labour for women's urban lives, she does more than set local change in a global context. She actually demonstrates their connections and two-way effects.

So, six reasons why I like this book:

First, it focuses on women and on an organisation for women's rights. Almost half of all migrants within Europe now are women, many of them moving on their own. There are still too few studies that focus in detail on the specificities of migrant women's experiences. Secondly, using the lens of Alma Mater as a way into questions about the construction of racialised identities and their consequences was an inspired choice of approach. Workplace-based studies or analyses of specific community-based organisations are more typical. This case study adds something different to studies of migration, exploring in detail the social relations between both migrant and non-migrant women, and between migrants from different parts of the world with different backgrounds, religions and experiences. *Alliance* addresses those difficult questions of differences between women—especially between white and Black women. Thirdly, it is a sensitive analysis and empirical demonstration of intersectionality, showing how racialised differences intersect with gender, class position, sexuality, and religion. I think intersectionality is a concept more often explored only theoretically, whereas Merrill provides here a wonderful example of how intersectionality works in practice. Fourthly, I liked it for the evident political commitment by the author to feminist anti-racist struggles in Turin in general and to the work of Alma Mater in particular. Fifthly, the wonderful photos—unattributed but presumably taken by the author—are almost all of women; some of them are really moving. Buy the book to see what I mean. Sixthly, I have seldom seen an acknowledgement that being pregnant helps in empirical research.

So what might have been done differently and what is missing? I should have liked more information about actually doing the research, on how relationships were established with migrant women, for example, especially given language differences. Graduate students, as they start their own empirical work, continually ask methodological questions: How many women to interview? How to know when that's enough? How to judge the significance of different narratives?

Perhaps too there might have been a little bit more about other feminist organisations in Italy, something on the particularity of Turin that allowed Alma Mater to flourish, and some speculation on the transferability of the experience elsewhere, within and beyond Italy. These issues are touched on in the conclusion but they might have been given more space.

The final substantive chapter (chapter 7) ends with a restatement of the aims of feminist geographical research. It reads as follows:

The intersecting identities within Alma Mater, based on class, gender, race, caste, ethno-national background and age, cannot be subsumed within any simple model of feminist politics established on common experiences in relation to state and familial organisations. Nor can overlapping differences of position be understood through a model of locally-constituted cultures, ethnic groups, neighbourhood or organisations with particular class or other identities. Alma Mater is far more complex than this, requiring an accounting for vast and continually shifting differences in a world of broad and intersecting relations on multiple spatial scales. (p. 188)

I think—to return to my opening comment—this is what most feminist geographers hope to achieve in their research. But I am still left wondering exactly how we put it all together. One of the most urgent tasks, in my view, is to think again about how to theorise the geographical complexity Merrill recognises, while, at the same time, providing some methodological guidelines.

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The Politics of Racism: Thinking beyond the black body

Heather Merrill's *An Alliance of Women* focuses on the ways in which the particular experiences of migrant women in Turin are simultaneously structured through racism, political alliances, and their daily struggles to survive, to get work, and to humanize themselves in the face of a community that perceives them as promiscuous (p. 78), criminal (pp. 103–106), and 'other-than-human' (p. 81). Merrill argues that black/neri phenotypical and bodily difference (pp. 79, 98) is fundamentally constructed as deviant, making particular neighborhoods 'unlivable' (p. 82) and 'unbearable' (p. 83) for white subjects, because these spaces are filled with unclean and loud migrants (p. 92) who threaten 'the collapse of the known world' (p. 91). The racist construction of migrants is ongoing, even though the women analyzed in the text foster important economic and political roles: they do the work no one else will do, often as underpaid domestics and seamstresses, and contribute to inter-ethnic feminist strategies through their presence at the activist organization, Alma Mater, the central analytical location in the text.

In the face of the ongoing discrimination that demoralizes migrant workers within a white European setting, I want to suggest that racism (rather than race) does a lot of work in Merrill's text. And, because racism is so central to the analysis of the migrant women's lives, the analytical *work* of racism hides the humanness these women embody precisely because race is being framed as Manichean

(racially detached: black/white) rather than migratory (border spanning/crossing activism, hierarchically situated in but complementary to new locations) (Fanon, [1952] 1967; Trotz, 2007, p. 5). This means that the text brings into focus a familiar white and western feminist project that is cast as universal, with the racial other constructed as victimized and apolitical.

As the title indicates, one of the central concerns of the text is the 'politics of race'. These women, Merrill argues, face racism daily: racist beliefs revolving around black female servitude, criminality, and promiscuity haunt their lives inside and outside the feminist collectives. These women and their Italian feminist sisters, of course, resist this: they critique racial hierarchies; they seek out employment and educational opportunities; they organize 'ethnic' dinners; they make alliances with immigration and government agencies. Yet over and over again discrimination and racial dependency are centralized. Thus, the politics the migrant women articulate is produced through racism, where their bodies and skin are positioned as a source of the trouble that needs to be 'fixed', that is, corrected *and* perpetually put 'in place'.

While the text touches on the experiences of women migrants from Central and South America, Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe, Merrill's primary concerns are with women of African descent, mostly from the continent of Africa. The language in the text, many of her observations of the migrant women, and the racism of the Turin community, implicitly or explicitly directs us to the question of blackness or Africanness. The racial framework she utilizes is also informed by questions of racism against black women—because the racial violence and everyday racist acts depicted within the text itself are directed, by the white community, toward what some Turinese describe as 'black skin' (1996 CISENE report, cited on p. 89), signified by the African/black/neri migrant body. This is not to say that non-black skin is never discussed! Many other instances of how 'black' is the ultimate racial signifier of deviance-difference (based on phenotype) can be found throughout the text (references to slavery, fear, the racial division of labor, uncleanliness, and so forth). Merrill does, though, attempt to unravel ethnic diversity (pp. 171–180). Yet even here the black woman is primarily identified and constructed as the migrant who complains, cleans, cooks, while *all* of the migrants are cast as dependent on Italian feminists and lacking both 'class-consciousness' and therefore also viable political strategies.

Meanwhile, the history of the region positions a European past as the only legitimate spatio-temporal context where inclusive politics can be cultivated. More specifically, historical and contemporary labor struggles in Turin and a legacy of Italian feminism are the sites through which activism is fostered; racial-transnational politics are not explored as liberatory strategies. Or, because migrant women are bound to a history of racist discrimination based on denigrated blackness, their politics are bodily and thus sealed into the ethno-cultural construction of the 'average third world woman' (Mohanty, 1991, p. 56); it follows that 'more inclusive' politics emerge out of a white, apparently more modern and progressive, European framework.

The text therefore provides lengthy histories of the labor struggles and feminism in Turin, but does not attend to the politics migrant women would necessarily bring to this space; their transnational worldviews and particular political histories (and humanness) are concealed by their racial-sexual skins. Meanwhile, Turin feminists plead for a multicultural dialogue through which they might 'discover this new world' that migrant workers open up through their racial

presence (p. 147). What happens here points to the limits of our present commitment to both feminism and anti-racism: nonwhite women's politics remain rooted in race and racial difference; the Turin feminists decide they want to 'discover' this 'difference' and politicize it; while whiteness, privilege, and European rationality in fact frame, define, and structure what liberation means in this context.

This is to simply say that Turin women are clearly *not* working toward a transnational (or an African or Muslim) dialogue. Turin feminism demands that the migrant women work toward Italian (read: white) feminist politics while the migratory workers suffer in their black bodies, the source of trouble, leaving no place for indigenous or diasporic black knowledge to be acknowledged as a politic. It follows that nonwhite knowledges are not understood as serious *philosophical and intellectual* contributions to how we might rethink our present form of life.

The Italian feminists do not dismiss the lives of migratory workers, or inter-ethnic collectives, outright. But the text allows stable racialized binaries to do all of the political work, thus erasing the politics that migratory workers bring to the region. This points to the workability of racism—*of course* this is what these women are understood to be grappling with, racism *is* violent and dehumanizing—but the text left me wanting more. What of the spaces these women came from, and did they bring any anti-racist strategies with them? What of a *migratory* class-consciousness or diasporic feminism? What of diaries, poems, texts, fabrics of resistance that may not be identifiably feminist, but change the landscape of Turin? What of the memories, conceptions of freedom, and political expressions that have always loved black skin on human terms?

The staging of the play *Luna Nera*, for example, performed by a theater group that Merrill describes as the most widely circulated cultural-political artistic and anti-racist actions in the region, begins to point towards a different understanding of race, difference and geography. This is a play that, she notes, highlights local struggles within Turin from the perspective of the migrant workers. Yet the play is described as staging racial/Somali differences in 'contrast' to Italian whiteness (pp. 183–185). It seems to me that creative texts such as *Luna Nera* might also be a way into understanding how expressive cultures point to an ongoing racial presence that allows women to articulate a politics that is not, in fact, simply bodily and oppositional. Attention should also be paid to the hair salons that are referred to throughout the text—these locations are not, in the black community, simply sites of embattled oppression and strenuous labor (although salon work is difficult work); they are locations of collectivity, politics, and safety, where black and other nonwhite women can discuss their pasts, share strategies, and work on what bell hooks (1992, pp. 9–20) calls 'loving blackness as political resistance'.

It seems to me that the politics of migration and displacement these women bring to the region might offer much more than a reactionary disappointment with racism and integrationist options. Indeed, *Alliance* tells me quite clearly how quickly we can revert to the seeable black body as a 'problem' and the invisible white body as something to be strived for and seems to utter the only solution to this problem. But this story, which hinges on the naturalization of difference and various academic critiques of hegemony, does 'not automatically provide the maps for an inner life, for redefining the grammar of the mind, for adjusting the climate of the soul' (Alexander, 2006, p. 325). Thus, might the lives of these women not only open up a space to identify race and racism—as Merrill rightly notes—

but also how academic queries can reify a stable understanding of race and actually marginalize those bodies we are seeking to humanize?

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'Concerning Masochism': Fanon and the de-centering of whiteness

Heather Merrill's *An Alliance of Women* conveys skillfully how neoliberal profiteering produces racialized and gendered labor market segmentations that, in Turin, Italy, have created an underclass of variously 'colorized' women relegated largely to reproductive labors. While Turin feminists struggled historically against inequitable gendered divisions of labor and for the rights of women to work for equal pay, the socio-economic fabric of Turin and of Italy remains knitted by gendered inequities. Merrill shows how new immigrant streams into Italy, pushed out of home countries by poverty produced through colonialism and post-colonial initiatives of wealthy capitalist countries, and pulled by low-paying employment opportunities that the Italian populace disdains, bring with them profound challenges to Italian society and Turin feminism. Immigrant women, in particular, resent the low-paid domestic labor opportunities to which they are restricted, 'Italian' women's racial privileges, lighter skinned women's preferential access to dismal employment prospects, and Italian society's trenchant racism and sexism, wherein colorized women are hypersexualized and their human value reduced, justifying their low pay. Ironically, Turin feminists' historical shunning of the state today renders them largely impotent in obtaining gainful employment for migrant women. Merrill communicates these and other empirical and theoretical insights through a detailed study of a remarkable feminist center in Turin dedicated to improving the lot of immigrant women, Alma Mater (AM).

Alliance is provocative, beautifully written, and adept at elaborating the dilemmas of counter-hegemonic organizing in a world rife with contradictions. I found Merrill's documentation of racialized frictions between 'whites' and persons of color particularly affecting: 'colored' women resented Italian women's control over the few resources the state provided to AM and the gendered and racialized work offered them through Italian feminists' scant employment contacts; they were offended by expectations that they take primary responsibility for cleaning and maintaining the AM center; and the women operating the

laundromat in the basement of the center opted out of AM's collective to develop the enterprise in situ as a separatist 'black' initiative.

Merrill's documentation enjoined me to re-imagine how 'whites' working for anti-racist change might intersubjectively engage with racialized anger. In my own experience, it has not been uncommon for racially privileged persons to get angry when they believe that those not so privileged have misrecognized or questioned their work in critical racial terms. I have likewise felt stung by racialized accusations and been reactionary and resentful. On the surface, it could be conjectured that white defensiveness occurs because it is assumed that the counter-hegemonic endeavors with which many of 'us' engage place us beyond question. But how can that possibly be when the very nature of symbolic-material orders is to invisibilize relations of power, rendering them to some degree part of the commonplace, unconscious and/or unintended (Belsey, 1980; Amadiume, 1993; Pulido, 2000)? I would argue that white racialized anger is symptomatic of the depths to which the 'race' of whiteness has been structurally buried.

If so, perhaps the need to defend or run from racialized accusations comes from a kind of terror within; from a recognition that 'we-whites' are not simply individual-representatives of the 'human', but instead those born into an order that 'naturally' makes us (calls us to be) psychically, hegemonically 'white'. 'Colored' anger, in this sense, is productive, bringing to 'white' consciousness manifestations of whiteness' continuing power. This productivity is realizable, however, only when 'whites' move beyond defensive postures and into a place where they can meaningfully engage with those most familiar with supremacy's systematically denigratory effects.

The intransigence of 'race' comes from the fact that racial privilege in the 'west' is rooted in the dichotomizing ontologies of slavery and colonialism, operationalized through sado-masochism (SM). The modern-day colonizer (and, previously, the slave-holder) was the sole agent or interest recognized (subject), while the colonized was presumed (expected) to accept or, even, take pleasure in her/his own effacement and subjection. Colonial SM was overdetermined and invisibilized through physical violence (or its threat), which moored the continual re-enactment of conquest across time and place; and through the violences of 'white' language and law, which negated violence's presence. Both violences were immanent in one another. Thus, colonial projects (including slavery) could be cast as instantiations of moral benevolence intended to elevate and civilize the colonized, the colonized's animality 'naturally' making for low expectations and the necessity of force.

Naturalizing praxes of *misrecognition* shielded the 'conscious' colonizing mind from realizing that it was hard work to commit and legitimate race-violence: the colonizer purposefully (if unconsciously) misrecognized the colonized, asserting the latter's inferiority innocently, as blind truth. In so doing, the colonizer gave 'himself' the moral right to deposit and anchor the misrecognitions in denigratory sociospatial relations, representational acts, systems of value, and discourse. 'White'/colonial commonplace and common sense (truth) were thereby fashioned, praxes of *misrecognition* effecting an epistemology devoid of the intersubjective and shored up through 'unconsciously' defensive measures. Within this world, the realities, intentions, and enunciations of the colonized, along with violences done to them, naturally held no place. All of these repressions meant that colonial brutality and the hyperexploitation of lands

and lives could be experienced with a degree of comfort and, even, moral satisfaction.

Fanon (1963) realized that, for the colonized to regain psychical integrity and subjectivity, the dyadic colonial world of SM had to be violated. The white/subject could not do so, since such acts would eliminate the substantial material gains it enjoyed, remove the ontological and epistemological ground upon which it assumed (singular) subject-ness and agency, and alienate it from the means through which it was psychically and morally centered. Only the 'native', fueled by resentment and material need, and living a life de-centered by misrecognition's violence, was so capable.

Because of SM's immanence to coloniality, the native project was remarkably easy *and* difficult. Whiteness/coloniality could be easily breached simply by speaking the truth of native subjectivity to colonial power. Straightforward intersubjective transgressions, such as looking a white person in the eye, walking through white-identified areas without permission, or being in a 'white' place without obviously serving in a subordinate capacity, would trouble the SM order. Yet whiteness was constitutionally defensive of, and dependent on, SM. Any assertion of native subjectivity would hence be intelligible to it only as a crime against nature, something to be combated by force. While force was ultimately insufficient, post-colonial writers remind us that the invisibilizing praxes of coloniality/whiteness remain, redeployed over time for differently spatialized kinds of material and psychical gain (e.g., hooks, 1995; Kincaid, 1988; Omi & Winant, 1994; Pulido, 2000).

Merrill's documentation of racialized angers within AM made me wonder how 'white' defensiveness is implicated in the contemporary angers manifested in the everyday and to question how this implication might be identified to itself as such. Her work helped me to articulate a sense that 'white' subjects can only overcome 'self'-defensiveness by engaging in a qualitatively different sort of decolonizing process, one that compels 'whites' to become post-colonial, to become subjects that recognize how supremacy's SM manifests itself and that are bent on the intersubjective. Such 'becoming' would require that white subjects be radically repositioned to recognize the structural nature of race-anger; remain attentive to how racial sadism works; and be sensitized to racialized anger, especially their defensive own. This repositioning would involve a kind of masochism, or at least a masochistic subjection of 'whiteness' to several kinds of pain: that resulting *psychically* and *materially* from losing the privileges that anchor (white) subjectivity; that felt when the pain which 'race' has caused is finally, *empathically* realized; and the pain involved in letting go, allowing those upon whom colonialism's invisibilizing sadisms have been revealed, to delineate and violate supremacy's subjective and objective hiding places; angrily, mistakenly, or otherwise. Such masochism would not be a self-flagellating, guilt-filled form of reparation where the positions of 'subject' and 'native' are simply reversed. But a liberatory form that dis-articulates 'whiteness' by opening the 'white' subject up to the possibility of radically intersubjective acts. In this way, anti-racist 'whites' would allow for the violations of 'whiteness', which Fanon saw as necessary for decolonizing and radicalizing 'native' subjectivity, to take greater (intersubjective) hold.

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Bringing Transnational Feminisms into Conversation

Heather Merrill's *An Alliance of Women* does the important work of carefully documenting a local history of feminist organizing across racialized, classed, and post-colonial fault lines. This book tackles topics that geographers have been slow to address in sustained fashion: the racialized and gendered experiences of immigration; the interactions between immigrant and non-immigrant generations of feminists; the projects that take hold betwixt and between their struggles; and the politics of race infusing the experiences of African immigrants in Europe. Over time this will prove an important historical text for its effective documentation of economic, cultural, and political postcolonial subjects: namely the struggles of immigrant and refugee women in Turin, and their encounters with local Italian feminist organizing.

Merrill's methodology brings to life the daily, lived experiences of resettlement in an industrial city with unstructured interviews, participant-observation, and archival work. She provides a rich sense of place alongside the practice and praxis of organizing among feminist, immigrant women. It is clear that Merrill spent years in the field, and these years of friendship, participation, and presence infuse her writing with a depth of knowledge and compassion. By writing well, Merrill not only *communicates* a wealth of information, she also narrates, embodies, shares stories, and historicizes with empirical detail.

As with any good, thought-provoking text, *Alliance* raises as many questions as it answers. While the text offers a fuller picture of Italian nationalisms and their place-specific articulation in Turin, I am left wanting to know more about how they intersect with displaced nationalisms from elsewhere. In daily life in Turin, for example, how are nationalisms deterritorialized and reterritorialized in relation to the politicized, racialized inscription of policies onto the bodies of immigrants? In what ways are the spatialization of racialized identities of immigrant women and their families particular to a city such as Turin, and in what ways do they parallel racialized identities in other national and local contexts, such as within and beyond the European Union? How were feminist perspectives and practices infused, advanced, and sometimes stalled when intersecting with nationalist impulses in their construction of identities and projects? More broadly, how can Merrill's findings prompt critical examination of their very terms of belonging and exclusion, and push our understandings of the operation and performance of gender?

This stream of questions calls on the text to engage with recent important scholarship on transnational feminisms and social movements happening along its margins. Attempts to answer these questions, however partial and preliminary, would facilitate contributions to feminist theories and projects that

confront the very racialized terminologies, tensions, and modes of organizing that Merrill documents. At times, for example, Merrill takes for granted categories of race and ethnicity. Yet how are the very terms of race that she uses, such as 'multiethnic' and 'interethnic', constructed, and how might their deconstruction enable important conversations about the power imbued in speaking positions? Chandra Mohanty (1988) argued many years ago that white feminists and feminisms of the north had overlooked, objectified, othered, and excluded feminisms of the south. In her wake, many scholars have engaged transnational feminism to address the ways that racialized identities and feminist projects are bound to and shaped in complex ways by broader transnational solidarities and postcolonial histories. They struggle over speaking positions and feminist alliances across borders and share a desire to link political struggles globally. These are essential contributions for feminist geographers to make to larger projects: to map local projects and bring them analytically into conversation with feminist struggles happening elsewhere. Such feminist interventions would engage, enhance, and also learn from the history of feminism, race, and immigration in Turin.

To elaborate but a few recent examples of a growing body of work, Cindi Katz (2000) traces feminist topographies of globalization across global terrain, working to connect analytically the struggles of families as far flung as Sudan and east Harlem. Geraldine Pratt (2004) too 'works' feminism across boundaries in her book by joining the projects of a Vancouver-based community group organizing around access to rights and citizenship of Filipina domestic workers (scripted as 'live-in caregivers') in Canada. She looks at how these struggles draw on transnational, postcolonial histories to intervene in nationalist dialogues and policies. Inderpal Grewal (2003) and Bonnie Honig (1998) both challenge nationalist discourses of belonging, contributing, and securitization as common tropes of immigration that invoked violent racialized and gendered forms of exclusion from the United States both before and after 9/11. More recently, the Sangtin Writers and Richa Nagar (2006) collaborate, co-author, and co-present the collective struggles of feminist organizing in India (and the United States). Yet these scholars remain conspicuously absent from *Alliance*.

I name only a few conversations, many of which transpired simultaneously here in the pages of *Gender, Place and Culture*. Conversations between Merrill and these scholars would foster the topographies of which Katz writes, connecting local organizing with global struggles in and through feminist praxis and politics. Feminist scholars must bring the rich, painful, triumphant, tenuous details of the struggles for social change and the constructed, contested identities that nourish these movements around the globe into conversation. Transnational feminists offer essential tools to advance debates about citizenship, legal status, race, gender, and nationalism, and Merrill's text is an important contribution. I look forward to the conversations to come.

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Revisiting Alma Mater: Power and privilege in Turin

By a twist of fate, I find myself working through the responses to my book just when I am in Turin to set up a new ethnographic project on African Diasporic politics. I am faced with the reality that questions of power and privilege, that is, of whose structures of economy, politics and society are dominant, remain as pressing now as they were almost 20 years ago when I first began conducting research here. Italian society is locked up in worlds of closely guarded internal networks, and immigrants—even when their lives are the very topic of discussion—are not invited to participate. The migrant women who created Alma Mater are still struggling to be heard, and they have been joined by thousands of other women and men from various parts of the economically impoverished world who now live in Turin, speak Italian, work in factories, are members of Italian trade unions, own or run small businesses, have children in Italian schools, and contribute to pension funds, but are not counted as 'Italian'. Even those with Italian citizenship are often not considered Italian enough. Who are these women, men and their children who come from Senegal and Ghana, Morocco and Somalia? Are they Italian, or are they African? Does it matter to them that they are not counted as Italian? Or are they so fundamentally different that they have another way of living and therefore don't care how they are treated and counted or discounted by the Italian worlds in which they live?

An *Alliance of Women* argues that African and European spaces are not separate. Africans have been part of Europe for over a century; they know this, they know a great deal about Europe, and they know they have a right to be here. But they are prevented from becoming fully integrated members of Italian society by discursive practices of race and racism, new capitalist projects, and Italian histories of uneven development. The study was conducted to explain and make known the experiences and struggles of female migrants, particularly postcolonial African women who were my primary informants, whose lives as Africans could not be separated from their lives in Italy and the daily racism they experienced there. I tried to make visible the racial structures of thought and practice that so deeply affected the lives of my informants, because, as Fanon suggests, in order to subvert racism, we must recognize the racial formations established under European colonialism and processes of racialization that persist in the present.

The production in western ideology of a belief in significant differences between whiteness and blackness ('Manicheanism'), reproduced in relation to local histories, makes the study of race/ism and identity extremely complex and difficult. But I would argue that there is no singular 'black' way of behaving. Postcolonial migrant women, men, and children from parts of Africa bring their pasts with them and do not have different ways of thinking and behaving that can

be separated from their actions in the present. The city in which they live is as much a part of them as they are a part of it in ever more visible and incisive ways. These are real people, who struggle daily for dignity and rights in Italy. They express their concerns about how they are going to survive and take care of their loved ones in relation to the pressing issues of race/racial prejudices, crime, work, housing, their children's education, and the right to have a place to worship their faith. And yet their lives are discounted, they are an exploited segment of the labor market, and are increasingly positioned at the very bottom of society, because the government and the companies that exploit laborers can get away with doing this—part of the logic of capitalism liberalized and gone wild. In Italy, as in much of the world, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues above, socially constructed racial hierarchies are real; they have real effects on human beings.

In her close reading of my book, Patricia Ehrkamp suggests that although the relationship between migrants and non-migrants is a critical part of my analytical framework, I don't interview Italian racists, and they seem distant in the book. I think this is an insightful observation that led me to reflect upon the way I positioned myself as an outsider especially in the first half of the 1990s, before I began to talk with Turin feminists. I identified with African migrants, not with Italians, and I did not see myself as European, but as an *extracomunitari*, or someone not part of the European Union. When I realized that this was limiting my ethnographic data, I made an effort during the second half of the 1990s to hear the 'Italian point of view', in particular through the views and practices of Italian women in Alma Mater. But which point of view was this? For as Patricia also rightly points out, Italians are heterogeneous and many are actively pro-migrant. Indeed, the Turin feminists that managed Alma Mater's finances, and that my migrant informants spoke so negatively about, were consciously anti-racist, and they committed their lives to helping migrant women.

The relationship between the migrant and non-migrant women in Alma Mater became a central part of my story because migrant women talked about it so often, and because Alma Mater was an alliance of western and postcolonial feminism—an alliance not just theorized in academic texts, but actually lived and practiced. I needed to explain why and how racism could be internalized within such an alliance when feminist, anti-racist solidarity—that is, between postcolonial and women from western feminist groups—was so rare but so badly needed. I explain the emergence of this solidarity in my chapter on Turin feminism, and while I think the Italian left is critical to Alma Mater's development, I also believe it is possible for other alliances to develop in other places. Alma Mater is asked regularly to share its 'model' or secret with people from other cities.

This leads me to Linda McDowell's fascinating questions about theory and methodology. How can we theorize geographical complexity while also providing some methodological guidelines? I would suggest that identity is too complex, shifting from one context to another, to subsume within any simple theory. I recently heard a Moroccan woman arguing about her children's rights in Italian schools, and it was clear that in one social context she stressed that part of her identity that is Muslim while also Italian (in terms of citizenship), and in another, whilst speaking French, stressed her experience living in France and in a country colonized by the French. Another woman, who was Somali, described how she practiced Islam only at home and why she did not believe in worshipping in mosques: she did not want Moroccans teaching her children about Islam, but

at the same time she wanted Italian schools to respect Muslim food rituals and holidays. How can we theorize this? I would emphasize that context and place are crucial to any analysis, and that it is not possible to make sense of the African migration to Turin without taking into account both the political and cultural history of Turin, and the transnational relationships of migrants (not only with their countries of origin, but often with friends and family in different parts of the world). The Senegalese are a good example. Many Senegalese women and men travel extensively as part of their trade work, and others do so to visit family in different parts of Italy. If they are extremely lucky, they can visit their family in France or other parts of Europe and Senegal without worrying about being prevented from re-entering Italy. They also watch Senegalese stations on satellite TV; speak Wolof, Italian, French and often several other languages; and eat Senegalese food made from ingredients they purchased from a Chinese grocery. They hold membership cards in Italian trade unions and have friends from Morocco, Cameroon and Brazil who, like them, are now Italian *Operai*. I think the best approach to this problem of theorizing geographical complexity is through informed participant observation. Our depictions of our research, however, must not reduce the complexity of identities to simple explanation, but allow all of the richness of local histories and individual relations to be explored.

The African women I studied in Turin, for example, have never accepted the negative tropes about them generated by the Italian media. I mention this in response to Katherine McKittrick's comments. Katherine argues that my book racializes the women of Alma Mater and that it discusses non-white knowledges, including Italian history, instead of the spaces these women come from and the anti-racist strategies they bring with them. But at the same time she suggests that diasporic, migratory consciousness might be a singular entity, and that migrant women's pasts are somehow separate and different from their present. These women are together articulating their views and politics through their everyday actions in Europe. There is no separate Africanness. These are people with real concerns about racism and its expressions; they did not have to fight racism in Senegal, Kenya, Cameroon, or the Ivory Coast in the same manner. The criminalization of migrants in Italian cities is today a widely accepted sociological fact, and there has, in recent years, been a diffusion of right-wing daily newspapers that regularly carry anti-immigrant diatribes. Rather than portray African women as 'victims', as Katherine suggests, my intention in writing *Alliance* was to show how migrant women actively struggle to improve their lives within a specifically Italian, European context in which they are now crucial contributing members.

This is not to say that historical or more recent symbolic-material orders that render power relations invisible do not exist within Alma Mater, as Heidi Nast notes in her review. The problem of Italians as the sole agents and recognized subjects of the alliance was a critical concern to the migrant women who created Alma Mater. It was particularly difficult for the Turin feminists, who had spent their lives struggling against patriarchal structures and fought for the recognition of 'home-work', to understand why many African immigrant women accused them of demeaning, racializing practices. This remains a sensitive topic, even 15 years after Alma Mater opened, but some progress seems to have been made not only in terms of attitude, but also in practice, particularly after migrant women voiced their concerns and Italian women began to hear them (around 2000). Nonetheless, Italian women take personal and political networks, and their access

to knowledge, for granted when they organize. Without systematically confronting this assumption, I don't believe the basic power relations will change.

Heidi's comments also gave me the opportunity to address the problems I face as a 'white' American woman writing about people of color, 'race', and racism. I'd like to make clear that I think her comments are aimed at race/ism in the United States, and not in Europe. In addition to being dismissed by the white academic establishment, one is sometimes faced with attacks from 'black' scholars. There is an effort, in other words, to silence my 'white' criticism of my own white privilege. 'How dare I?' these critics seem to suggest. Or, 'don't talk about that, about racism, let's talk instead about the good things disenfranchised people are doing, the positive things and not the social and political structures' that keep those who are not elite from being empowered. Heidi suggests that whites should take pleasure in a kind of revolutionary masochism, allowing those upon whom colonialism's sadisms have been lived to attack and accuse of racism—whether they are correct, or mistaken. I agree with Heidi, because without dialogue or conflict, change is impossible. However, I think it is very dangerous for 'white' academics to cater to critique cloaked as vindictionalist practice of any scholars of color who try to improve their own position by undermining colleagues or students, or who behave unprofessionally and are not held accountable, because of 'white' guilt. Mistreatment is simply unjustifiable even in the face of centuries of 'white' sadomasochism. I, for one, will not be a masochist when I have devoted my life to making racism visible. Certainly increasing the presence of scholars of color in our field might go a long way to enhancing the depth and understanding of a wide range of issues historically relegated to the discursive margins.

This leads me to Alison Mountz's thoughtful questions about how race/ism in Italy might be compared to other parts of the world, such as with practices in the United States. I am glad to have the chance to say that these are very different. In Italy, race/racism is informed by recent European colonialism, and slavery was not directly experienced. This makes for highly distinctive meanings of race/racism that I would suggest in Europe are not tied to 'master-slave' identities and the systematic exclusion of African Americans from access to resources under slavery and Jim Crow practices well into the twentieth century, as is so eloquently and movingly described by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton (1993). In Italy, as I emphasize in *Alliance*, immigration is very recent, occurring at an historical moment of confusion about identity in a country that is very heterogeneous and indeed characterized by different regional and local political cultures. Indeed, Alison's questions about Italian nationalism are very relevant to the current meaning of race/ism there and I hope to explore them more thoroughly in my next project. But I can say here that in Italy nationalism has always been very difficult to sustain because of the country's regional differences and that the issue has become more pronounced in the face of European unification. In Turin, a very 'workerist' city historically and therefore fairly politically leftist by American standards, nationalism was a rather unpopular form of identification. Yet, as I describe in *Alliance*, the presence of newcomers and the emergence of right-wing nationalist and integralist rhetoric have made nationalism as well as regionalism more pronounced in recent years. Among African immigrants, differences across ethnicity (Ibo versus Yoruba, for example), religion (Muslim, Protestant or Orthodox), language (whether the national

language is English, French, Wolof or some other African language) and caste-like distinctions are more pronounced than forms of nationalism.

Finally, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Karen Morin and Karen Till for organizing and editing this special essay, and to the five scholars whose rich and diverse responses have opened what I hope will become a vigorous, critical debate about ethnographic research in geography and, to borrow Alison Mountz's words, the 'racialized and gendered experiences of immigration'.

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