

Introduction

by Martina Kohl

The *American Studies Journal* 55 is an unusual edition if we compare it to all its predecessors. It is a collection of memoir pieces, a reflection upon a specific theme, a look back at a significant moment or moments by six women: art historian and writer Moira Roth, novelists Nahid Rachlin and Güneli Gün, poets Pireeni Sundaralingam and Lisa Suhair Majaj, and artist and writer Mindy Weisel. All of them were inspired by the topic “Women’s Voices from the House of Time,” which comes from the title of a poem by Moira Roth now serving as the gate through which the reader approaches this journal.

The idea for this edition was born before I knew this poem, though. It goes back to the *American Studies Journal* 54, which includes a reflective piece by writer Howard Wolfe among all the scholarly papers. I chose this piece to be part of the edition because it offered access to how it actually felt growing up in a city and in a time to which a younger reader would not have easy access. So Howard Wolfe’s piece inspired me to pursue the idea of a separate edition focused on memoir.

The terms “memoir” and “autobiography” are almost interchangeable, but memoir serves this purpose much better because it allows for more freedom in terms of timeline and length, focus and the use of storytelling techniques.

All six contributors have several things in common: They participated at some point in the U.S. Embassy literature and lecture series. This is how I met and got to know them, appreciate their creativity, their energy, and their charisma. Only one of these women was born in the U.S. yet spend her childhood in her father’s country. All of them found the U.S. to be a place where they were able to pursue their love of learning and where they found fertile ground to develop their enormous talents.

Moira Roth, born in England in 1933, visited the U.S. in the early 1950s for the first time, and a little later settled in the country to live because she found American universities to be places of her calling and because she was “deeply attracted to the wide range of ethnic and cultural differences” in American society. Her curiosity and creativity were the seeds for a lifelong pursuit of artistic expression, which she found (and still finds) in all corners of the world and among fabulous talents like African-American artist and storyteller Faith Ringgold, Vietnamese-American multi-media artist Dinh Q. Lê, California-based feminist and multi-talented Suzanne Lacy, and the Irish feminist painter Louise Walsh. Roth’s memoir pieces span seven decades. They reflect upon early encounters with refugees in her mother’s London home in World War II, the Bohemian culture in Northern California in the 1960s, and the impact on her of various feminist inspired art projects in the 1970s and 80s in California, Berlin, and Derry, Ireland, and Judy Baca’s vast unfinished project, *World Wall: A Vision of the Future without Fear*. We, her readers, find ourselves exploring these decades in the virtual presence of Moira Roth who starts every reflection in a café in Berkeley that she visits daily.

When I invited Persian-born writer Nahid Rachlin to contribute to this journal, she pretty much told me that she was not going to write a memoir piece since she had already done so. She had written a whole book on her childhood in Iran under the Shah regime, her family history, her mother’s and sister’s fates and her final successful attempt to convince her father, a strict yet modernized Muslim, to let her go to college in the United States in the late 1960s. So she and her publishing house granted us permission to reprint parts of her memoir *Persian Girls*. It was a challenge to limit my selection to only a small part of this moving book, so I picked two chapters that are interlinked by one theme: the love of books and the desire to learn. One chapter is set in her home country, the other in her adopted country. In an essay published by the *Los Angeles Times* in 2009, Nahid Rachlin said:

I was drawn to books, hoping to find answers to what I could not make sense of. The desire to read led to a desire to write. I found that writing, giving shape to what seemed chaotic and incomprehensible, made me feel

peaceful, even happy. As soon as I came home from high school, I went to my room, changed from my gray uniform to a skirt and blouse, and began to write.¹

Nahid in *Persian Girls* continues to write, risks her own safety when purchasing forbidden books in a small bookstore that she one day finds boarded up and its proprietor vanished, yet she does not let any warnings discourage her. When she finally manages to attend college in the U.S., she finds herself in a society where books are freely available, yet people are bigots, too.

Meeting Nahid Rachlin, I knew that inside this petite, soft-spoken woman was enormous will power, dedication and deep love for the power of writing. How else would she have managed to convince her father to let her go, learn a new language, adjust to reality which in many ways deviated from the imagined America that Hollywood movies and popular culture had created in her young mind, and become such a strong and successful writer and teacher? I can only recommend everyone to read the whole memoir *Persian Girls* to experience the beauty of Nahid Rachlin's prose and the touching story of her life.

Güneli Gün came to Germany in the fall of 2008 as part of the U.S. Embassy's Book Fair series. The Frankfurt Book Fair's honored country was Turkey that year, and we invited her together with author Maureen Freely to talk about literature as a bridge between cultures and to read from their own works. Güneli Gün, who was born in Izmir, came to the U.S. as a student—just like Nahid Rachlin. Just like her, she had to convince a concerned father that this was going to be her future and not marriage to a young Turkish architect who favored a western lifestyle, yet strongly held on to traditional male-female relationships. His objection to the young high school graduate accepting a two-week scholarship to Stratford-upon-Avon means the end of the engagement. Although Güneli Gün's memoir piece has a lighter tone than Nahid's, reflecting the humor of a mature narrator and the excitement of the young traveler about the impending adventure, her concerns are the same: breaking out of a traditional society, being torn between the home country and the imagined new home, and finding comfort in the arts, especially in writing. "Flight to America" captures all this as well as Güneli's great gift as a storyteller.

I met Pireeni Sundaralingam in the summer of 2011 when she held a fellowship at the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin. She gave a reading at the annual conference of the German Association for American Studies which held her audience spellbound. Not only the beauty of her poems, the brilliance of her mind as a trained neuroscientist, but Pireeni the person who embodied the theme of the conference "Transnationalism" turned the evening into an unforgettable event. As she so eloquently expressed it in an interview:

My writing describes my experiences living in different countries, and my experience of war, but beyond this, I think that people are interested in reading about how one person might attempt to cross a cultural divide. We live in an era in which community is, increasingly, something that we need to create for ourselves rather than something into which we are born. As a result, I think there is a great hunger to discover how others have walked between worlds.²

Born in Sri Lanka, educated in England, married to an Irish composer and musician, she now calls San Francisco her home and enjoys the creative atmosphere of the place. Several inspiring conversations over lunch followed and the resolution that her work should be included in the revised version of this journal. So my wish expressed in the introduction of the first issue has come true: my hope to attract further contributions and to expand our *Memoir Pieces*.

Lisa Majaj is the only American-born contributor to this journal. Yet she shares the role of a negotiator, of an explorer and of a mediator between different cultural hemispheres with the others. Lisa Majaj spent most of her childhood in Jordan. Her deep connection to her childhood home is reflected in most of her work:

Much of my poetry has been inspired by the ongoing human tragedy of Palestine, and of Lebanon, from which I evacuated amid the 1982 Israeli invasion. My poetry also arises out of having a mixed identity, Arab and American; living my life in Jordan, Lebanon, the U.S. and now Cyprus; and raising multicultural children.³

I met Lisa Majaj in the fall of 1985 when we both attended a training session for new teaching assistants. We were being trained to teach English composition at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor while working on our

dissertation and doing graduate work. One of our assignments that day was to write down a term, hand the piece of paper to the person sitting behind us who would add another term or sentence, etc. Through this exchange we found out that in some ways we were both “foreigners” in this group and saw the world around us with slightly different eyes than our colleagues. It was the sense of not quite belonging which made us bond that day.

Since then Lisa Majaj has become quite a prolific and much respected poet. Her poetry reflects a deep sadness and yearning one senses in her person as well. It is the sensitivity of the poet that makes her not only open to tragedy, but also to profound beauty in this world: “Poetry bears the longings of individuals, and of nations. Poetry gives us something to hold onto in the midst of despair. If it does no more than this, it is enough.”⁴

Mindy Weisel is known primarily for her beautiful art work. The images used in this journal give an impression of the deep blues and the lucid lightness of her glass work. Seeing these pieces and knowing Mindy Weisel’s story is deeply moving. The essay “Memorial Candles: Beauty as Consolation” was first printed as an introduction to a book edited by Mindy Weisel that includes the often troubling, always emotionally challenging accounts of twelve daughters of Holocaust survivors. All of them managed to transform their “legacy of loss” through creative work, which has become a lifeline and a life saver. Mindy Weisel is one of them. As she was born in Bergen-Belsen Displaced Persons Camp, near the former concentration camp Bergen-Belsen, Germany, Mindy’s official documents with her place and year of birth reveal her legacy. This much loved only daughter of Holocaust survivors is torn between being a good daughter, an artist, a young mother and a loving wife. She finds consolation in artistic expression, struggles through a dark phase and arrives in brightness as expressed in her beautiful artwork.

Mindy Weisel first came to Berlin for her 60th birthday in 2007. The idea of an exhibition was born then, and—finally—in 2009, this wish came true. It was a triumph for Mindy Weisel to exhibit some of her work in Germany. She felt she had come “full circle.” A vivid and creative e-mail exchange ensued and found its way into this essay. Again, it was the beginning for a new project: Mindy Weisel is now writing a memoir.

My special thanks go to my beautiful contributors. I feel privileged to have encountered them, to have worked with them, and to be able to call them friends. We have formed a virtual community through this project. I hope we will all meet as a group at some point. By the way, Güneli and I have adopted each other as cousins. It seems I have a *Doppelgänger* in her family.

My final expression of gratitude goes to the only male contributor to this journal: Slobodan Dan Paich, who has had a most creative daily e-mail exchange with Moira Roth for several years and whose beautiful drawings illuminate her two-part “House of Time” poem. I am sure he feels comfortable in our virtual mostly female community.

This is a very personal introduction to a personal edition of the *American Studies Journal*. It is my hope to attract further contributions and to expand our *Memoir Pieces*.

Dr. Martina Kohl, Berlin, December 2011

Notes

1 Nachid Rachlin, “A Room of her Own. A Writer Remembers her Childhood Writing Room in Iran,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 2009, <http://www.latimes.com/features/books/la-caw-off-the-shelf10-2009may10,0,7286061.story> (accessed December 5, 2011). 2 “Walking between worlds: a conversation with Pireeni Sundaralingam,” Interview by Michelle Johnson, <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Walking+between+worlds%3A+a+conversation+with+Pireeni+Sundaralingam.-a0195523006> (accessed November 30, 2011)..

3 “Lisa Suhair Majaj: Poet and Scholar,” Institute for Middle East Understanding, <http://imeu.net/news/article006808.shtml> (accessed December 6, 2010).

4 “Lisa Suhair Majaj: Poet and Scholar.”