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MELUS: A Community of Intellectuals, Scholars, and Teachers for Forty Years

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It is unclear to me now precisely when in the 1990s I read my first issue of *MELUS*. I do know that the journal was on my radar before I had become aware of *MELUS* as a literary society. My return to graduate school in 1988, after realizing the limitations of my Master's degree in allowing me to pursue the type of scholarly writing that I had wished to do, resulted in my introduction to the journal. I believe that the first time I read the journal I was very likely in the M. D. Anderson Library at the University of Houston, although I also might have borrowed the volume from the library and read it elsewhere. Someone had told me that my scholarship might be welcomed in *MELUS*. And it was.

I imagine perhaps skimming volume eighteen, but I vividly recall issue 19.3, "Intertextualities." The cover displays a crossword puzzle interlocking names of ethnic US writers linking to the name Shakespeare prominently displayed in boxes near the center of the puzzle. I do not know whether my current feelings about that image were conscious to me in the 1990s, but now that image seems to make a powerful statement about the politics of the linguistic and literary results of colonialism, imperialism, settlers, displacement, migration, diaspora, ethnicity, and reconfiguration. In 1994, at the time of the *MELUS* 19.3 publication, I had been reading Native American and Asian American literature in addition to my primary scholarly interest in African American literature. That volume of the journal includes an article on writings by Rudolfo Anaya, whose *Bless Me Ultima* (1972) had enchanted me with its language and the power of its narrative. The issue also includes an article focusing on women's voices in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and Isabel Allende's *The House of Spirits* (1982). Kingston's novel already had contributed to my pleasures in complex narratives. Novels by Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor are the focus of another article connecting their writing to Shakespeare, and to round out the intellectual pleasures in the issue, Jack Kerouac is the subject of another scholarly article. Where else could I have found all of that? I was a fellow traveler and have remained so since that time.

I probably joined *MELUS* in 1996 (although it could have been 1995 or 1997), as I recall wishing to attend the conference in Hawai'i yet not being able to do so.

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My first MELUS conference was in 1998 in Washington, DC, at Howard University. My article on Gwendolyn Brooks appeared in the Fall 1998 issue of the journal. Joseph Skerrett was the editor-in-chief. While my article in *MELUS* was not my first actual scholarly publication, I was genuinely pleased that I had been published in *MELUS*. Because of that publication, a few years later I was asked to serve *MELUS* as a consultant reader. Adding *MELUS* to the journals for which I was beginning to provide peer reviews solidified my connection to this scholarly community. I liked that the MELUS Society operated as a community, and I enjoyed and continue to enjoy being a part of it. I would like to pause briefly here to say how important it is to me to accurately position the work I do in and for MELUS as professional service and not volunteerism. I have gladly provided my professional skills to meet the needs of MELUS, and I have benefitted greatly from others who have done the same. The relationship is reciprocal rather than hierarchical. That is how I like to view MELUS; it is a scholarly community involved in reciprocity to the good of the community and to the larger universe of literary studies.

By the Spring 2003 issue of the journal, Veronica Makowsky had invited me to join the editorial board. I felt honored to be able to provide the service to others that multi-ethnic literary scholars in MELUS had made possible for me. Looking back at the theme of that special issue—"Multi-Ethnic Literatures and the Idea of Social Justice"—where my name is listed on the *MELUS* editorial board along with guest editors Gaurav Desai, Felipe Smith, and Supriya Nair now seems quite appropriate and completely emblematic of what made and continues to make MELUS and the journal one of my important intellectual homes. I have found in MELUS and the journal a forthright statement of inclusion in its name and in its praxis. The view that the United States and its literatures—both on their own terms and together—are multiply constituted yet valuable in that multiplicity and rich because of the interactions made possible because of our differences is invaluable to me. That we can be different while undivided, which does not mean always in agreement or unified, challenges false notions of homogeneity and forces us to do the hard work of respecting difference, living together, and expanding our knowledge of humanity, as well as discarding ideas, attitudes, and beliefs that we no longer need (or perhaps never needed). Yes, sameness is easier than difference (particularly if you are in power or wish to align with it), but the inevitably never-ending battle to make everything the same is more destructive than respecting and growing through difference. This sense of community in difference is what happens in the pages of *MELUS*.

For me, literature and literary scholarship are among the important sites for engaging the United States through its numerous rich and resonant voices: Indigenous / Native American, immigrant, Latina/o, African American, Irish American, Indian American, Arab American, Italian American, Asian American, Jewish American, US Caribbean, Puerto Rican, and any number of

other ways the United States makes “us” the US. Again, from my perspective, in MELUS and through the journal, we recognize the dispersal of the center, its diffuse reality, and in doing that we embrace the literature of the United States and the nation in all its beauty and its ugliness, too (to paraphrase Langston Hughes). MELUS members, having seen the need to publish this journal for forty years, have now established a legacy that I hope will continue for many years to come. I am honored to have benefited from both the MELUS Society and the journal and to have had an opportunity to serve both. Revising the words of Sojourner Truth, it has been rewarding for me to contribute my half measure to the honored legacy of *MELUS* and the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States.