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## Meridians 20:2 Transnational Feminist Approaches to Anti-Muslim Racism

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Ginetta E. B. Candelario

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## Who's Terrorizing Who?

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"I cannot undo what education did to you," she said, "how it makes people unaware why they are oppressed, of the causes in history, in the past, in the present."

"So transnationalism is to work and to fight and to struggle for justice, freedom—transnationally."

—Nawal El Saadawi

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This issue coincides with the twentieth anniversary of the United States' initiation of the "war on terror" launched in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. On that day, al-Qaeda operatives destroyed the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan by flying two hijacked planes into the twin towers; a third hijacked plane hit the first floor of the Pentagon's west wall; and a fourth plane crashed in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania when passengers successfully thwarted the hijackers. Ironically, that September 11 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the CIA-engineered military overthrow of Chilean President Salvador Allende in 1971. Although at the time "the extent of U.S. covert action against Allende's Popular Unity government was . . . a well-documented subject of public discussion," this blatant violation of Chilean sovereignty was not only justified by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger as "in the best interest of the people of Chile," but summarily forgotten by a US public long taught to consider Chile as "beneath" the United States, if they consider it all (Schultz 1998: 361). Educating the public not only into willful disregard for, but condescending racialization of the victims of US settler-colonial and imperialist political

violence as inherently inferior and subordinated has obtained throughout the country's history.

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that

Even before the first of the Trade Center's towers had collapsed, the 'news' media, as yet possessed of no hint as to who may have carried out the attacks, much less why they might have done so, were already and repeatedly proclaiming the whole thing 'unprovoked' and 'senseless.' Within a week, the assailants having meanwhile been presumably identified, *Newsweek* had recast the initial assertions of its colleagues in the form of a query bespeaking the aura of wide-eyed innocence in which the country was by then, as always, seeking to cloak itself. 'Why,' the magazine's cover whined from every newsstand, 'do they hate us so much?' (Churchill 2003: 5).

In other words, with a few notable exceptions such as Representative Barbara Lee (2001), instead of considering the geopolitical and historical contexts for the attacks, the media, elected officials, and the general public alike deployed the well-established White supremacist logic that insists against all facticity on US (read: White) political innocence and Middle Eastern (read: Muslim) irrational barbarism. After all, was the country not founded precisely on the premise of Anglo-Americans' God-given supremacy and their inherent entitlement to dominion over all the land, resources, and laboring BIPOC bodies that they claimed as part of their manifest destiny? Not surprisingly, therefore, when that history is called to account, whether through political violence, peaceful protest, culture work, or critical scholarship, White supremacist outrage ensues. As James Baldwin succinctly put it, "They are unable to conceive that their version of reality, which they want me to accept, is an insult to my history and a parody of theirs and an intolerable violation of myself" (Baldwin 1969).

To be clear, I am not arguing that the al-Qaeda attacks on US targets were in any way justified; rather, I am decrying the long-standing refusal in the United States to be held accountable for the country's "imperial arrogance and criminality" (Churchill 2003); the steadfast unwillingness to engage in a political process of truth, reconciliation and reparations (Coates 2014); the trenchant rejection of the historical truth and social fact of White supremacist violence as the recent right-wing attacks on *The 1619 Project* (Messer-Kruse 2020) and Critical Race Theory exemplify (Gluckman 2021);

and the decades-long racialization of Islamophobic violence, ideology, rhetoric, and policies (Razack 2008).

Thus, this guest-edited special issue of *Meridians* focused on “Transnational Feminist Responses to Anti-Muslim Racism” purposefully coincides with the twentieth anniversary of 9/11 and is intended to counter the hegemonic Islamophobic framings that have resurged. By now well established globally, Islamophobia is not simply ethnocentrism nor discrimination based on religion, nor is it typically negative political characterization of “the enemy.” Instead, as the guest editors Zeynep Korkman and Sherene Halida Razack argue, Islamophobia is better understood as Anti-Muslim racism that is simultaneously global and local, and a type of racism that accordingly demands transnational feminist solidarities in response.

In light of that, I dedicate this issue to Egyptian feminist, activist, physician, psychiatrist, educator, and writer Nawal El Saadawi (October 27, 1931–March 21, 2021), who was a member of the *Meridians* Founding Advisory Board and who passed away earlier this year. I agree with El Saadawi that undoing what hegemonic “education” has done to people in the United States is the work of the people themselves as she explained in the 2018 interview excerpted above, and that our work at *Meridians* is to carry forward the transnational “struggle for justice, freedom.”<sup>1</sup> Also in that spirit of searching for solidarities, both visible and subterranean but thriving, we present to you the winner of the 2021 Elizabeth Alexander Creative Writing Award, Gwendolyn Maya Wallace’s “To Forage.” About “To Forage,” the Creative Writing Advisory Board said:

The narrator of “To Forage” is an old soul inhabiting the body of a young, black woman: a forager of mushrooms, memories and stories that when woven together promise a “self” who is culturally grounded and spiritually whole. She is a gatherer: of the mother wit of her grandmother in South Carolina; the church women whose pastel suits and kitten heels tell you who they know themselves to be; the mother wit that carries the sounds and values of home no matter where she happens to live. She may be an old soul, but she is also incontestably of this moment: a girl-child of the city whose fascination with the growth cycles of plants is part scientific, part philosophical, and entirely the worldview of a black girl whose life is “unfolding” in call-and-response with her ancestors. She foraged for mushrooms, ancestors, and memories and for the power to conjure a world into existence (Andrea Harris, pers. comm., February 22, 2021).

Finally, appropriately wrapped around these features is our beautiful cover art, “When the World Sleeps” by the Palestinian artist Malak Mattar, who explains that “this piece was created from a space of trying to find tranquility through painting and sleeping . . . hoping to achieve peace.” Like Wallace, Mattar reminds us that connecting with the peace deep within is made more difficult by the distorted “waking reality” we live in. Achieving any kind of peace requires imagining its possibility, painting it, writing it, and foraging for its traces wherever we may find ourselves. In the midst of all the deadly confluences we are currently living through simultaneously, that feels especially important to remember.

### Notes

- 1 The text quoted in the epigraph comes from Crowcroft 2018 and *Meridians Editorial Collective* 2000: 15.

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