
4-1-2021

Meridians 20:1

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Recommended Citation

Candelario, Ginetta, "Meridians 20:1" (2021). *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*. 3.
<https://scholarworks.smith.edu/meridians/3>

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Editor's Introduction

I write this in mid-November of 2020, after one of the most contentious presidential elections in my lifetime. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many states began allowing and even encouraging the use of absentee voting/ mail-in ballots to reduce the risk of infection during in-person voting. Although he himself votes by mail, the outgoing president began a systematic and sustained campaign of maligning the legality and validity of absentee ballots, claiming without evidence that they were more vulnerable to “illegal voting” and fraud, and encouraging his constituent base to vote in person on election day. He also undermined the United States Postal Service’s capacity to deliver absentee ballot applications and absentee ballots themselves by engineering the naming of one of his mega donors, Louis DeJoy, as Postmaster General. DeJoy immediately set about instituting policies that included removing mailboxes, “cuts to overtime . . . limiting mail delivery trips . . . curtailed postal hours . . . [and] ‘mail left behind’” during a moment of heightened reliance on the postal system (Vogel et al. 2020). An angry public response decrying these changes and the seeming politicization of the postal service forced DeJoy to suspend the changes, although the removed mailboxes—many from low-income urban and rural communities—have yet to be replaced. At the same time, US intelligence agencies issued public reports alerting the public that hostile actors from Russia, China, and Iran among others were attempting to hack voting systems and were engaging in racially and politically divisive social media campaigns to undermine confidence in the

mainstream media, journalists, and our election system. Followers of QAnon, this generation's most bizarre right-wing conspiracy theory monger, moved from the fringes of the World Wide Web to the campaign trail and mainstream media (Steck, McDermott, and Hickey 2020). Meanwhile, the president's re-election campaign filed dozens of lawsuits, many summarily dismissed by the courts, attempting to prevent or halt ballot counting in hotly contested swing states such as Arizona, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Nevada, often using contradictory logics to press whatever case would benefit their cause of preventing the counting of votes cast for Democratic candidates, many of these by people of color (Parks 2020).

Despite all of this, after a history-making election "season" that ran for several months rather than the conventional single day in November, and five days of nonstop mail-in ballot counting, on Saturday, November 7, 2020, just before noon EST, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris were declared by the Associated Press to have surpassed the requisite 270 electoral college votes needed to win the election. Sadly, although unsurprising, the loser refused to concede the election and instead ramped up his false claims of electoral fraud, illegal voting, and of a multistate conspiracy to "steal" the election from him. As of this writing, the General Services Administration director who was appointed by the current president has refused to "ascertain" President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris as the winners, effectively preventing them from accessing the resources they will need to install their transition team in preparation for their January inauguration (Collins 2020). More ominously, the current president fired Defense Secretary Mark Esper via Twitter, as well as other top Pentagon officials, replacing them with his loyalists while he continues to stoke his base's anger at the election's outcome (Myers 2020). Given that the Electoral College didn't meet to vote until December 14, 2020, it was one more month before the election results were certified (Reichmann 2020). This, of course, also hampered the Biden-Harris administration's ability to operationalize their COVID-19 response, one of their stated priorities.

In the meantime, COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc on thousands of people every day, and the rate of infection and death is increasing as we enter the winter season in the United States. As of this writing, 579,000 people have died, and 32.6 million have been infected, a large number of these survivors facing the prospect of long-term aftereffects (CDC 2020; Gavin 2020). Even the good news that vaccines with over 90 percent effectiveness have been developed by Pfizer and Moderna must be tempered by

the fact that the previous administration did not developed a federal distribution system to get the vaccine delivered efficiently and to priority populations (D'Urbino 2020).

At the same time, despite all of this somber news and distressing state of affairs, the fact remains that Kamala Harris, a woman of color, specifically a Black-identified woman of Jamaican and Indian descent, broke through the nearly 250-year-old barrier to women occupying the highest office of the land. Vice President Kamala Harris made history, and her victory was celebrated around the world, from her father's Jamaican homeland to her mother's Tamil Nadu village of Painganadu, to the streets of villages, towns, and cities across the United States (Associated Press 2020; Loop News 2020). Over the course of weeks following the Biden-Harris win, we saw countless social media postings by girls and women of color proclaiming their joy over the fact that a woman “who looks like [them]” would become vice president of the United States. Even as we acknowledge the undeniable limits of representation politics, *Meridians* also recognizes the psychically and spiritually significant importance of this win for women, especially women of color, Black women, and South Asian women. Serendipitously, many of the features in this issue focus on South Asian countries, including Harris's heritage country of India, and our cover features the art of Upasana Agarwal, an artist and illustrator based in Kolkata. As Upasana explains in her artist's statement, *Shazia's Dream* honors her friend's ability to experience playfully “her various identities in the paradoxical South Asian space,” and in so doing, they transform the wall from a quintessential aspect of a “carceral landscape” to a surmountable—perhaps even a border crossing—vantage point that embraces the “mosaic of colors” that comprise the wall (Mehta, 78).

The conflicts, violence, and spirited will to survive ever present in the “paradoxical South Asian space” is a thematic thread running through all of this issue's features. Whether “contesting,” “reckoning” with, or “rethinking” the violence enacted against ethno-racial, religious, sexual, and gender minorities, especially in South and East Asia and their diasporas, all of our authors take up the work of narrating these complicated histories and their representations. By way of illustrating exactly how diverse yet coherent this terrain is, we open the issue with Ramya Sreenivasan's incredibly comprehensive and thoughtful “Diversity of Women's Studies and Women's Histories: Reflections from South Asia.” This masterful “State of the Field” article considers six recently published books

from four different fields that cover a broad range of topics across the vast geographic territories of South Asia and its diaspora in the United States and the United Kingdom. As Sreenivasan deftly narrates, from marriage and family to faith and religion, from political representation to the presentation of self, these texts make evident the ever-present fact of religious and ethnic heterogeneity despite nationalism's ideological insistence on homogeneity as a necessary precondition for unity and development.

Shifting from scholarship to creative writing, Sri Craven's short story "Clean and Green" neatly narrates the hidden yet crucial work done by women, often behind the scenes, to sustain the tidy fiction that is nationalism and neoliberal "progress." The protagonist, Rani, is a mother and wife who works nights as a custodian cleaning the cubicles of Indian IT workers. Most days Rani also works in the tailoring shop of a "young Muslim lady" who, although a religious minority, is better educated, lighter skinned, and financially better off than Rani. Although "Rani sees the smiling face of Modi telling India to clean up! Pick up! Get up! Up! up! up! That's where we are all going," the facts of her life as a Dalit woman/mother/wife make clear that only a very few will go "up." Instead, as happens with the two scooter-riding men whose death by lorry becomes no more than a bump on the road of Rani's commute home, the most vulnerable disappear or die with little acknowledgment. Indeed, under Modi's ultra-nationalist rule, anti-Muslim and anti-Dalit violence have increased dramatically, this pattern of ethnic cleansing violence sullying India's "clean and green" (self)image and belying its claims to democratizing modernity (DeSouza 2017).

Moving from fictional truth telling to analyzing the power of women's testimonial poetry, Brinda J. Mehta's essay, "Contesting Militarized Violence in 'Northeast India': Women Poets against Conflict," considers how women poets produce an archive of the gendered harms caused by India's neocolonial governance of eight "sister" states in the subcontinent's northeastern region. Trauma, sorrow, and eco-devastation are left in the wake of internal neocolonialism. Mehta argues that women poets such as Temsüla Ao, Monalisa Changkija, Mamang Dai, and others "have played a leading role in exposing and denouncing this violence." Uddipana Goswami is a prolific Indian sociologist whose work on Northeast India Mehta draws on; she is also a well-published creative writer. Coincidentally, last year we received and accepted Goswami's short story "Body, Bones, and All" and were awaiting the right issue in which to feature it; we are

particularly pleased that we waited and are able now to include it here as a “Cultureworks” feature with Mehta’s critical contextualization. Goswami’s story viscerally if obliquely narrates the linked together violations women suffer—incest, rape, assault, invasion, colonization, death—at the hands of “militarized and domestic patriarchies in the region” that Mehta discusses in her essay.

Moving westward across India’s northern border, our “Media Matters” feature considers the ongoing conflict in Kashmir. Sreyoshi Sarkar’s “Engendering Protest and Rethinking ‘Azadi’ in Kashmir in Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Haidar*” examines *Haidar*, a Kashmiri cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. *Haidar* highlights “women’s lived experiences in the conflict zone at [the] intersections of everyday and extraordinary violence” engendered by the Indian occupation of Kashmir. Sarkar argues that the *azadi*—a particularly Kashmiri notion of freedom and self-determination—articulated as part of a nationalist liberation project is also pursued by the nation’s women as feminist contestation to patriarchal nationalism. The film documents the violence women experience at every level—geopolitical (military), categorical (gendered), and interpersonal (relational)—and through its protagonists, Ghazala and Arshia, lays claim to “nonviolence, equality, and justice” for all.

Shifting our focus to South India, Rumya S. Putcha’s essay, “The Mythical Courtesan: Womanhood and Dance in Transnational India,” traces how “the mythical courtesan was called into existence through film cultures in the early twentieth century to provide a counterpoint against which a modern and national Brahmanical womanhood could be articulated,” arguing that the figure of the courtesan works as a powerful nationalist trope that makes visible the “affective triangle between three mutually constituting emotional points of womanhood: pleasure, shame, and disgust” within Indian modernity. Putcha, who is a self-described non-resident Indian (NRI) dancer-ethnographer of classical dance, coins the term *sexual praxis* as a device for capturing the mythical courtesan’s sexed-gendered body as simultaneously field-site and habitus. Putcha does this to explicate the multiple worlds implicated in the courtesan’s performance and her incorporation into Indian ontologies and epistemologies experienced both by particular subjects—such as Putcha—and the national body politic. In doing so, Putcha reminds us that the putatively hegemonic center of (Indian) nationalism always already relies on a mythical woman figured as its internal other.

Similarly, our second “Media Matters” feature, “Ethical Reckoning: Human Rights and National Cinema in Bangladesh” by Elora Halim Chowdhury argues that the experiences of *birangonas*—rape survivors considered iconographic Bangladeshi victims of the Pakistani army—paradoxically are both narratively centered and politically erased as flesh-and-blood subjects in nationalist narratives. By contrast, Chowdhury says that Muktijuddoh films ethically insist on the need to acknowledge, address, and avow the genocidal violence enacted by the Pakistani army against Bangladeshis seeking independence in 1971 and, in particular, the humanity of the women who experienced the violence in their flesh and blood. Further, contemporary films such as 2011’s *Guerilla* that attempt to “explore the possibility of healing and reconciliation within the realm of intimate and interpersonal relations” should be considered part of broader social and political justice movements seeking redress for survivors of the 1971 crisis.

Picking up the theme of redress and solidarity, our “In the Archives” feature for this issue is the “AAPSO Presidium Committee Nairobi Preparations Draft” document. As Destiny Wiley-Yancy explains, a meeting in Cairo was held in January 1985 in advance of the United Nations General Assembly of the UN Decade on Women, which in turn purported to uplift the status of women throughout the world. Given the ongoing fact of Western colonialism and imperialism, as well as the intraregional violence discussed by this issue’s authors, the AAPSO refused the notion that “women” were monolithic, opting instead to center the struggle against the aggressive and bellicose policies of imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism, which are simultaneously women’s, peace, and security issues.

Shifting from political to poetic solidarity across difference, Sasha A. Khan’s “Letter-Poems to Shauki Masi: Diasporic Queer/Trans Desi Muslim Reflections on the Five Pillars of Islam” is at once an intensely indexical missive to a loved one who has passed on as well as a seemingly transparent meditation on the scattered identitarian traces that Shauki Masi left behind, in and through the writer. Moving seamlessly between engagement with cultural studies theories and texts, evocation of the tastes/sounds/smells of their Pakistani homeland, and idiosyncratic storytelling that gives flesh to the conceptual, Khan invites the reader to join them on this journey that is both anchored in “the five pillars of Islam” and allows for the unbound movement central to being a “diasporic queer/trans desi muslim.” In Shauki Masi’s ability to weave together a coherent, culturally

and religiously grounded self while also allowing herself license to contradict that very ground in order to be truly *her* self, Khan's narrator sees a kindred queer ancestral spirit.

The challenges that accompany the critical task of acknowledging and amplifying suppressed voices—both at home and globally—are also the focus of Min Young Godley's "Feminization of Translation: Gender Politics in the Translation Controversy over Han, Kang's *The Vegetarian*." Godley recounts the story of the international kerfuffle triggered by the awarding of the Man Booker International Prize to Deborah Smith in 2016 for her English translation of *The Vegetarian*, a 2007 novel by Korean author Han Kang. Although both the author and the translator shared the prize money, a debate ensued in which Koreans decried both the translation and the fact that the award was given because of it, rather than because of the untranslated original. Godley argues that although the anticolonial nationalist political motivation of these critiques is understandable, they not only overlook but erase the central point of Han's novel—the subjectivity of the woman at the center of the story—and replicate the violence of domination in so doing.

Likewise, Alden Sajor Marte-Wood's memoir, "Filipinx Care, Social Proximity, and Social Distance," offers an invaluable contribution to the 2020 COVID-19 archive. Marte-Wood seamlessly weaves together his and his young family's first days during the March stay-at-home order due to the pandemic in Houston, where he is an assistant professor at Rice University. Now reliant on his stay-at-home clinical psychologist wife's unpaid maternal labor, he meditates on his extended family's work as part of the larger transnational diaspora of Filipina "waged reproductive laborers"—nurses and elder care providers—recently deemed essential workers but neither protected nor compensated accordingly, in addition to the commercial content moderators in the Philippines who do the dirty work of "sitting for hours in the digital muck of humanity" that is more critical than ever given our increased reliance on the virtual world for our work, social, and familial lives. That most of these workers are women whose labors—whether paid or unpaid—are made invisible, devalued, and often dangerous perhaps goes without saying. Yet, Marte-Wood reminds us—as he does himself—that it must not only be said, but centered and accounted for.

Recentering women's voices, we close the issue with our inaugural Elizabeth Alexander Creative Writing Award Winners (2020). As we note on our website, in addition to being an internationally recognized poet and

memoirist, Elizabeth Alexander was a faculty member at Smith, a founding member of the Poetry Center, and a member of the first *Meridians* Editorial Advisory Board. When we decided to create an award for our creative writers as a complement to our Paula J. Giddings Award for the best essay in every volume, doing so in Alexander's honor made perfect sense. As you will see from the superlatives page, our first two winners—Nancy Kang, for her poem “In Blocks of Light, She Calls Back” and Adrienne Perry, for her short story “Lamaze”—are both women of color scholars whose work was selected double-blind from a very competitive pool of submissions by our newly established Creative Writing Advisory Board. Coincidentally, both of these texts tell powerful stories about “sisters who would save the world and each other” from the ever-present threat of violence, both inside and outside our families, homes, communities, attending to one another's labors, making it back to one another alive.

Finally, although it will be long past by the time this issue is in your hands, it seems especially apropos to note that Diwali—“a holiday that celebrates the triumph of good over evil, light over darkness and the defeat of ignorance through knowledge”—is being celebrated as we await certification of our new president and vice president's election (Chabria 2020). I first learned of Diwali when I was an undergraduate at Smith and several of my closest friends and sisters-in-the-struggle, including Natasha Jafri and Asha Kilaru, who were a Pakistani Muslim international student and an NRI Hindu, respectively, were happily anticipating. Natasha and Asha both belonged to the EKTA, the South Asian students' group that organized a Diwali celebration. The EKTA's Diwali posters featured a swastika, which “has existed for 5,000 years in Asia as a symbol of good fortune” and is “a very common religious symbol in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism” (Shah 2016). Not surprisingly, the posters immediately elicited an outraged response from those familiar only with the swastika as a Nazi symbol, which is to say, the majority of Smith College's predominantly White, Judeo-Christian campus community.

As was our way, the multicultural student group leaders organized a public event held at the Mwangi Center at which EKTA students who celebrated Diwali explained the differences between the Nazi's perversion of the swastika into a symbol of death and destruction, and its original and ongoing meaning as a symbol of hope and joy. They explained that Hitler's swastika is literally turned around, a purposeful reorientation that mirrored his racist resignification and argued that banning *their* Diwali symbol

would be tantamount to accepting Hitler's perverse imposition. Jewish students—and indeed, the majority of those in attendance who weren't Diwali celebrants—argued vehemently that despite this new historical and cultural information, and the logic of EKTA's argument notwithstanding, the swastika was irrecoverable and irredeemable because it continues to do the viscerally provocative work of terrorizing Jewish people that Hitler intended it to do. Moved by their classmate's perspectives, EKTA agreed to take flyers down and advised the students who would have otherwise decorated their doors with the Diwali swastika not to do so, and instead to celebrate Diwali with *rangolis* and light *diyas*—or some version of these. In turn, the Jewish and other students acknowledged the empathetic accommodation. In other words, rather than create a wall between our at times incommensurate experiences, cultures, and histories, we Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish students endeavored to respect one another's boundaries, work together, and make well-considered sacrifices of some of our dearly held desires for the good of all. Simply stated, we strove to coexist in solidarity with one another and allowed ourselves the messiness and discomfort that getting there entailed. In honor of that spirit, I take the liberty here to say “Diwali Mubarak!” to my South Asian sisters. May we all bask in the light of truth and joy as we labor to banish the ever-encroaching shadows.

Note

- 1 By the time I was proofreading this Introduction, these early warning signs were confirmed. On January 6, 2020 thousands of Trump supporters gathered in Washington, DC, were told by their leader to “march to the Capitol” and “stop the steal.” Hundreds heeded his call and broke into the Capitol Building intent on preventing the Senate's certification of the 2020 Election results. The insurrectionist mob vandalized, destroyed, and stole federal and personal property alike, and terrorized elected officials and Capitol employees, including Vice President Mike Pence, posting selfies and photos of one another on social media in real time as the world watched in disbelief and horror at the events unfolding. By the time the authorities regained control of the building that evening, dozens were injured, five people were dead, and hundreds were traumatized. Still, the 2020 Election results were certified, the Trump family and administration left the White House, and the new administration assumed control.

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