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## Meridians 11:2

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PAULA J. GIDDINGS, EDITOR.

## Meridians Introduction, II.2

### Nationalism and Its Discontents

I remember the moment when feminist transnationalism made its first indelible impression on me. I was a participant on a panel during the United Nation's Women's Conference (1985) that took place in Nairobi, Kenya, with three other women who were activists in Algeria, Palestine and Israel, respectively. We had come together before the panel to talk informally about our presentations, when, during the conversation, I bemoaned the fact that black women in the U.S., who had been so instrumental to the early civil rights struggle, were now being criticized for their leadership roles by men. By the 1980s, of course, women acting outside of traditional gender roles were being criticized for usurping male authority and thus undermining the movement and racial progress in general. In North America this idea was confirmed by the so-called Moynihan Report, which insisted that the black "problem" was not racism as much as it was the dysfunction of the family brought on by the dominance of women within it.

At the end of my litany, my colleagues looked at me with that lightbulb flash of recognition: "This is happening in the U.S.?" said the the Israeli woman, "it is happening with us, too." The Palestinian and Algerian women chimed in that they were experiencing the same thing in their countries. The subsequent conversation we had about the issue became my first lesson in the ironic way that nationalisms—which help to raise

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political consciousness—also construct gender and gender roles in a particular way. Cultural differences might provide some variability as to how, and by whom, these constructs manifest themselves, but there are also striking similarities in how nationalism challenges activists, and particularly women, who operate outside of traditional roles.

This is certainly the lesson of Sudarat Musikawong’s “Gendered Casualties...” an essay that explores how the 1970s women’s movement in Thailand encountered gendered violence—particularly during the 1976 massacre there—and how masculinist nationalist notions, by both conservatives and the left, shaped the methodological strategies that structured, erased, and reconstructed the memory of the event.

Women in the public sphere are, too often, anathema to nationalism while motherhood, with its notions of domesticity—and confinement—holds a sacred place in the ideology. Still, the domestic can be a site of violence, and motherhood, a site of radical work, social justice and resistance. In “Covert Wars in the Bedroom...” Leigh Johnson applies Patricia Hill Collins’s theory of motherwork to the works of two Chicana writers, Lucha Corpi and Demetria Martínez, to illustrate transnational survival strategies and defiance of patriarchal practices in government policy.

The domestic is also a subject of analysis in “Gender, Religious Agency and the Subject of *Al-Huda* International” by Khanum Shaikh. *Al-Huda* International is a Pakistani-based Sunni Muslim women’s organization that works toward social reform through women’s religious education. While the members “positioned” themselves within the domestic sphere, they did not confine themselves to it in their pursuit of religious education and community building. In 2005, the organization’s founder, Farhat Hashmi, established a branch in Ontario, Canada, for diasporic Muslim women, and Shaikh, using a transnational framework, analyzes the comparative critiques and anxieties surrounding the *Al-Huda* women and their practices in two different national contexts.

Issues of immigration, border control, and violence also reflect nationalist ideology and are deeply gendered as well. Following Chandra Mohanty’s axiom that visibility and rememory leads to consciousness and identity, the scholar and interviewer Vanessa Perez took interest in the work of artist Andrea Arroyo, whose projects bring attention to border violence toward women. One of her shows brought together a group of artists to “speak” to the punitive SB1070 immigration bill signed into law in 2010 in Arizona.

Another project commemorates the women who have been killed in Juarez, Mexico, where since 1992—the year that the NAFTA agreement made the city the site of hundreds of processing factories where women came to seek work—some 400 women have been murdered. Many of the victims, who were also tortured, raped, and mutilated, were accused of sexual transgressions such as lesbianism or prostitution.

Yet another Arroyo project examines the women-centered mythologies of India, Mexico, and Greece among other cultures. One of the most longstanding and archetypal myths she brings to the fore in her work is *La Malinche*, the nationalist archetype of the “disloyal woman.” Historically, *La Malinche* was a Nahuatl woman, Doña Marina, whose intimate relationship with the Spanish Conquistador, Hernán Cortés, played a role in the fall of the Aztec empire and the colonization of Mexico by Spain.

*La Malinche* is reimaged in the essay “Vendidas y Devueltas...” by Aimee Carillo Rowe. The author, through the lens of queer erotics and temporality, proposes a reading not of (heterosexual/ nationalist) betrayal but of *La Devuelta*, one who is returned, as an empowering figure that provides a new subjectivity and relationship to the community/nation.

In her essay, “Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics and Post-Intersectionality” Jennifer Nash also explores affective—and alternative—modalities. In this case, the author calls on the long tradition of “love politics” as conceived by June Jordan, Alice Walker, and Audre Lorde, among others to create community and to remedy—or at least mediate—the perceived shortcomings of identity politics and its analog of intersectionality, particularly as it has been articulated by legal scholars.

A third essay that explores affective perspectives is “Jhumpi Lahiri’s Feminist Cosmopolitics and the Transnational Beauty Assemblage” by Vanita Reddy. The author maps Lahiri’s engagement with beauty on a continuum of what she calls the transnational beauty assemblage: an analysis that focuses on not so much the changing standards of beauty with its familiar feminist critiques, but its affective capacities as a socializing force.

Beauty is also deeply implicated in the narrative of Sara Baartman, the Khoekhoe woman who was brought to Europe from her native South Africa in 1810. Exhibited as the “Hottentot Venus,” the case of Baartman has been utilized by scholars to illustrate the iconic representation of the black woman’s body as representing the lowest rung of civilization and as the trope of sexual difference between the European and persons of African descent.

Sheila Lloyd, through her reading of the literary imaginaries—and feminist cultural activism—around Baartman in the works of Elizabeth Alexander, Barbara Chase-Riboud and Lori Parks, challenges the transhistorical perspective of the Baartman discourse to situate it within an analogic framework of nineteenth century imperialism and twentieth century neoliberalism, both of which created an “economic place-holder” for the black woman’s body.

In addition to the essays, this issue of *Meridians* is the beneficiary of moving poetry and fiction that laces our scholarly essays with imagery, feeling, and shared subjectivity.