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Meridians 2:2

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Editor's Introduction

As I draft this introduction in early December, 2001, the twenty year war in Afghanistan continues despite some arguments that it is over because the Taliban have been routed from a few of their strongholds in Kabul and Kandahar. The Northern Alliance is being primed to step in as the next government, although it appears to be an alliance that has as little regard for women's rights as the Taliban have had. The discussions about the war have moved from a singular focus on eliminating terrorism to one that includes assertions about the oppression of Afghani women under the Taliban regime. Such assertions are often racist and ethnocentric in nature, abound in much of the popular and broadside media, and are supported by eminent figures such as Laura Bush, the wife of George W. Bush, the Republican president of the United States of America. Simultaneously, the freedom of refugee Afghani women to live without war is relegated to email lists and similar spaces, for, despite a focus on the plight of Afghani refugees in general, the mainstream media and most-quoted commentators simply sidestep the issue of the rights of women, and others, to live in peace. Many feminists of color (and some white feminists) around the world are rejecting the tired yet sadly familiar arguments of hegemonic feminisms which assert, occasionally with regret, the importance of bombs being the necessary tools to achieve the liberation of Afghani women from the Taliban as if there are no feminist practices, or feminists, in Afghanistan who work on these matters. Yet, most versions of feminisms developed in Third World contexts hold little truck with either fundamental religious practices or nationalisms—both of which use women as cultural signifiers: religious fundamentalisms because they invariably promote the regulation of women's sexuality, and nationalisms because they often rely on cultural arguments focused on modernity and tradition, a binary that can only serve to reproduce gendered inequalities. The political unpredictability of the last two decades—as witnessed in the example of Laura Bush taking up the fight on behalf of Afghani women's liberation, an issue that one could imagine being addressed by Hillary Clinton, the previous First Lady in the U.S., wife of a Democratic party president—is now condensed into the discussions of

the war in Afghanistan. Given the above, what might be gained from drawing on the wide range of feminist analyses that *Meridians* provides?

The subtitle of the journal—“feminism, race, transnationalism”—provides some clues because each of these three elements directs the gaze to different yet connected aspects of critical writing. Feminist analyses, and I here include the many types of feminisms that I have encountered as I edit *Meridians*, guarantee that there will be at least an acknowledgment and sometimes an examination of epistemological issues. Discussions of racism and race/ethnicity inevitably illuminate the complex workings of power inequalities, and transnationalism serves as a reminder of the variety of ways in which resistance may be expressed. Epistemology, power, and resistance are central to the project of *Meridians*, and the essays in this second issue of Volume Two are exemplars of these three processes.

Yet epistemology, power, and resistance are sometimes understood as abstract and monolithic, which results in a consequent inattention to the fluid dynamics that organize their expression. The work included in this issue tackles these processes by asking readers to reflect on culture, the body, history, what working from the margins might involve, and demands that readers re-think what might be included within notions of activism and community.

An emphasis on women’s agency to reshape cultural forms, in contrast to the use of women’s bodies as objects upon which to inscribe cultural forms, is present in the pieces by Ifi Amadiume, Grace Poore, Gita Rajan, and in the poetry/spoken word of Marilyn Chin. All four authors discuss how culture provides a central site for meditating on women’s agency by offering analytic essays, retrospective thoughts on the making of a documentary, and poetry. This theme is continued in the fiction of Sejal Shah, the interview of the artist Sabah Naeem by Jessica Winegar, and the essay by Shane Trudell Verge; these contributors also discuss culture, but more specifically as a place from which to understand how the bodies of different women are sexed, by others as well as by the women themselves.

An examination through the lens of history is almost always present in the journal. In this issue there is discussion by Meera Kosambi of Pandita Ramabai’s writings, the poetry of Sara Littlecrow-Russell, and the report by Maylei Blackwell and Nadine Naber on the United Nations World Conference against Racism held in Durban, South Africa in September 2001, all of which also signal the diversity of historical interpretation. Simultaneously, the poetry by Maureen Tolman Flannery and the creation of an archive by four *Meridians* editorial board members—

Amrita Basu, Paula Giddings, Inderpal Grewal, and Kamala Visweswaran —of oppositional pieces written by feminists following the events of September 11th and the ensuing war in Afghanistan also allow readers to see how histories are constructed. All forms of feminist histories serve to ensure that the voices of often ignored women are not overlooked, and the pieces in this issue of *Meridians* that converse explicitly with history are no exception.

A discussion of what happens on the margins provides a form of engagement that I hope will always be present in the journal for it is the impetus from the margins that opens up possibilities for reflecting on how prevailing discourses and institutions can be shifted. Catherine Ramírez's pathbreaking essay on *pachucas* forces a re-thinking not only of zoot suit cultures, but also the centrality of women to sustaining those cultures. Sheree Renée Thomas's Afrospeculative fiction makes one wish for more such writing in the journal, while the poems by Catalina Ríos speak directly to the margins. Finally, the complexity of the often over-used yet still necessary words "community" and "activism" is captured in the short story translated by Debalí Mookerjea, the essay by Bonnie Claudia Harrison and the poetry by Mary Ann Larkin.

Meridians can be read in many ways. My hope is that the three issues of the journal which I have edited to date—and the next issue, Volume 3, no. 1, is to be my last—demonstrate the intricacy of inequalities, and thus the many-faceted manner of their eradication. It is not merely the interconnections among feminisms, race, and transnationalism that the journal seeks to map—I prefer "interconnections" to "intersections" because "interconnections" appears to capture more accurately the permeability of inequalities as well as the shifting natures of the relationships among them—but, also, that women of color/Third World women can and do create ideas and practices in which the global and the local cannot be disentangled from each other. It is this set of entanglements, and the ways in which they can unravel, that are, for me, the hallmark of *Meridians*.

Sudesh Vaid 1940–2001

As this issue of *Meridians* goes to press in January 2002, I have just read of the death of Sudesh Vaid, the lifelong Indian feminist, teacher at Indraprastha College, and active participant in the People's Union of Democratic Rights, India. Along with Kumkum Sangari she compiled a collection, *Recasting Woman*, published in 1989 in India, that became a landmark text for understanding how "woman,"

history, colonialism, and politics relate to each other. A December 2001 obituary by Urvashi Butalia reads, “Sudesh Vaid was fiercely independent” and notes that her “students spoke of her with affection.” Sudesh Vaid’s commitment to the fundamentals of feminist, democratic, and pedagogical work was evident in her writing as well as, clearly, in her personal interactions. Her death is a great loss for many reasons, and I mourn her passing.

—Kum-Kum Bhavnani