

---

3-1-2001

## Meridians 1:2

Kum-Kum Bhavnani

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.smith.edu/meridians>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Bhavnani, Kum-Kum, "Meridians 1:2" (2001). *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*. 35.  
<https://scholarworks.smith.edu/meridians/35>

This Journal has been accepted for inclusion in Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@smith.edu](mailto:scholarworks@smith.edu)

---

## Editor's Introduction

The end of the twentieth century marks a time of realignments in the cultural and political economies of gender throughout the world. Protests in many places against the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank have brought together a range of constituencies which had been fairly remote from each other in the previous decade. Women's organizations seem to be making links despite ethnic, sexual, and national boundaries, and racial/ethnic difference is much spoken about—and occasionally engaged with—sometimes creating an illusion that racialized inequalities are dissolving.

*Meridians* offers a site for the debates and dialogues that surround both the interconnections as well as the contradictions of such realignments. For example, Christian fundamentalists in the United States and their Hindu counterparts in India—patriarchal movements *par excellence*—traffic in images of female piety, and use women to recruit other women to their cause by drawing on populist notions of female rights and autonomy. Elective plastic surgery for women has increased in the past decade in both the United States, the Middle East, and Europe. Genital mutilation has been banned by Senegal due to the efforts of women's organizations but reconfirmed as a legitimate cultural practice elsewhere. In rural Bangladesh, often as a result of development projects, women who seek to be economically independent appear to be able to do so only through obtaining bank loans that require them to make handicrafts to sell to tourists, thus reinscribing Eurowestern conceptions of Third World women's traditionalism.<sup>1</sup> Lesbian and gay groups are subject to increasing legal restrictions and monitoring in Latin America; at the same time more people are prepared to engage in open protest against these measures. In Southeast Asia and throughout the Americas, as well as in Europe, sex work has become a site for discussions about the interconnections amongst tourism, militarism, migration, and masculinity. In the Third World, policies of population control created to improve women's health and to enhance their economic, social, and political autonomy often subject women to newer, more brutal forms of familial control—as is seen in the dramatic increase in the abortion of female

fetuses in many countries — and may often remove the last vestiges of love and security in many poor women’s lives (Bhavnani and Hancock 1999). This is a period when satellite telephones are handed out by Red Cross workers and websites are built by North American college students to help unite Albanian families separated in the tragedy of Kosovo, yet the greatest representation of East Asian women on the Internet is as subjects of porn sites (Walker 1999). It is these unexpected and unpredictable outcomes of globalization and transnationalism that I hope will be discussed in the pages of the journal.

As the first full-time editor of *Meridians* I shall take this opportunity to introduce myself and to put forward my vision for the journal, as well as to showcase the pieces in this second issue.<sup>2</sup> I am an interdisciplinary scholar who pays particular attention to the racialized expressions that emerge from the theoretical, practical, and political discussions within feminist and women’s studies. I have been writing about racism in hegemonic — sometimes (though not always accurately) referred to as “white” — feminist thinking and practice for over twenty years. The focus of my research has included empirical work which examined what young working-class children in Britain like to read, as well as research that analyzed how young working-class people in Britain think about politics. In the early to mid-1990s, since migrating to the United States, I have examined how race, celebrity, gender, and class intersect in the U.S. imaginary, and Donna Haraway and I have conversed about how feminist psychology can be shifted to engage with race and biography. Most recently, through a collaborative research project with Angela Y. Davis, I have looked at how incarcerated women in California, the Netherlands, and Cuba discuss alternatives to incarceration.

During the past three years, I have shifted my research to center women and development in the Third World, where development is understood as planned social transformation. I draw on cultural studies, and feminist and anti-racist scholarship to frame that writing and research. During my period as editor of *Meridians*, I plan to start a new project that looks at four successful examples of women’s organizations in regard to employment, environment, peace, and sexuality in different regions of the global South in order to suggest some categories within which to imagine feminist futures and alternative development in the dawning century.<sup>3</sup> The organizations that I will discuss integrate the concepts of gender, sexuality, and culture as lived experiences within their work. My hope is that in analyzing the actions, histories, and future

goals of these four organizations, my research might contribute to rethinking economic globalization, and to discussions on how to, at the very least, slow down the alarming rate at which poverty, environmental degradation, and insecurity are becoming increasingly feminized around the globe.

*Meridians* fills a need within academic and related publishing by bringing to the center writings by women of color/women living in the Third World, as well as the issues that arise from these often unstable identities. While the terminology used to identify this constituency is rather unsatisfactory, and I hope this will be discussed in the pages of *Meridians*, most supporters of the journal understand its intended focus. Similarly, the subtitle of the journal, *feminism, race, transnationalism*, suggests many possible identities. The multiple identities suggested thus invite submissions that both center women of color/women living in the Third World, as well as engage with each element of the subtitle by highlighting the tensions and contradictions inherent within and among them. For example, transnationalism can be understood both as a way for movements of resistance to link up against the processes of economic globalization, and as the means by which multi-national corporations organize their profit-seeking imperatives, thereby creating unprecedented poverty on a global scale. Often these corporations use the work of people in the Third World, as well as that of women and children, and many immigrants in the First World. In pointing to the above, the instability of the divide between Third and First Worlds comes into view, and yet I am simultaneously aware that to elide the two could mean a privileging of one at the expense of oversimplifying, or making invisible, the other. The unstable divides between race and ethnicity, among academic disciplines, between fiction and nonfiction, and between scholarship and advocacy also deserve an exploration that avoids the problems of elision, oversimplification, and invisibility.

My hope is that *Meridians*, while discussing the above tensions and contradictions, will also attract submissions that contribute to discussions of 'race' and ethnicity by showing readers that the black/white model of 'race' which was prevalent in the United States until comparatively recently is inaccurate for most of the world, as it is in the United States.<sup>4</sup> In this issue, Nellie Wong's poem, which expresses the joy of music and food combined with the rhythms of jazz, Laila Halaby's short story about violence, and Wendy Harcourt's reflections on the relationship of white Australians to indigenous Australians act as reminders that

gender, nation, 'race' and ethnicity are overlapping and are rarely discrete categories of inequality. At the same time, attention to the specificities of racialised ethnicity is necessary in order to grasp the interconnections amongst these categories of inequality. This specificity of racialized ethnicity may be read into the poems by Yolanda Wisner and Yona Harvey as well as in the historical analysis of Ida B. Wells-Barnett's relationship to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People by Paula Giddings. Her essay focuses on one racialized ethnicity, yet it simultaneously permits readers to better comprehend the more general process of how individualised explanations of behavior, even when accurate, often can mask other equally meaningful explanations.

In a similar vein, the existence of *Meridians* demonstrates that to reify the distinction between scholar and activist can undermine the possibility of changing the values accorded to each of these categories. For example, the lives and works of women such as Isabelle Allende, Rita Arditti, Maria Serrano, and Luisa Valenzuela in Latin America; Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma; Ruth First and Miriam Makeba in South Africa; Fatima Mernissi in Morocco; Arundhati Roy and Gita Sen in India; Angela Davis, Winona La Duke, Elizabeth Martinez, and Haunani Kay Trask in the United States, as well as of the members of the founding advisory board of the journal and the women in the organizations analyzed in Kimberley Springer's essay in this issue—and I must stop for the list could go on for a long time—show that for many women the distinction between scholar and activist makes little sense. Still, scholarship and activism are elided at the peril of losing the creative tension between them. The importance of keeping these categories distinct, yet not institutionalizing their difference, can be seen in the conference report, "The Color of Violence" by Andrea Smith, who demonstrates the importance of both scholarly and activist work of indigenous women in the anti-violence movement. Smith argues that if anti-violence advocates were to take the work of indigenous women in the areas of land rights and sovereignty into account, these advocates could develop a more comprehensive movement, while retaining the tension between the different starting points of scholarship and activism. Similarly, Doris Witt shows in her review essay on global feminisms and food that positionality is not merely an academic concern: "If one is either a member of, or is writing about a demographic group whose association with food production and provision (as agricultural workers, domestic servants, wet nurses, etc.)

has been overdetermined, what are the challenges involved in finding a position from which, and an audience with which, to speak? And how might one conceive of the relationship between scholarship and advocacy?” (Witt 2001).

It is also evident that *Meridians* offers a forum where globalization and transnationalism are critically engaged not only through formal analyses, but also by means of photo essays and such other cultural work as fiction, poetry, and art. In this issue, Adrienne Su’s poems “Geography” and “Epigram” hint at such an engagement, as does Kamala Kempadoo’s essay on the global sex trade: “There exists at the beginning of the 21st century a global sex trade that leans heavily on the sexuality and bodies of women of color . . . to ‘develop’ ‘underdeveloped’ regions of the world to either attract foreign exchange or as an export commodity that can service industries abroad” (Kempadoo 2001).

As I suggested earlier, *Meridians* recognizes the instability of the divides among the academic disciplines, as well as between analytical and creative work. These instabilities can be taken advantage of to derive innovative ways to think about feminism, race, and transnationalism. For example, the physical chemist Abha Sur draws on analyses from the human sciences to illuminate the processes by which women scientists produced science in C. V. Raman’s laboratory in India, while France Winddance Twine builds on arguments developed by legal scholars in the United States to inform her sociological research on transracial mothering. Likewise, the poems by Mei-mei Berssenbrugge and Darlene Pagán explore ambiguity, fragmentation, and affinity. And the novelist Edwidge Danticat demonstrates the blurred boundaries between fiction and non-fiction with the claim that

fiction gives you deeper insight into the truth. It is as if you are telling a series of lies to arrive at a greater truth. For example, think of the way we learn and remember things. Someone can tell you a fact and you might remember it. However if they tell you a story you are more likely to remember the event through the story. Stories make events come alive. You can use a story to illustrate something in a manner that a fact cannot, and with fiction you can make up as many scenarios as you want to illustrate one thing, so you have more routes at your disposal. Something factual never changes, but with fiction the means you have of illustrating your “truth” are endless. (Danticat 2001)

From the above it can be seen that the study of feminism, race, and transnationalism evokes many histories. I hope that *Meridians* will build on those histories not by avoiding the contestations that the terms feminism, race, and transnationalism raise, but by addressing them in all of their historical, theoretical, material, and political complexities. I look forward to encouraging these discussions during my tenure as editor.

#### NOTES

1. I use Third World to refer to regions in Africa, Asia (excluding Japan), the Middle East, and Latin America.
2. I should like to thank Ruth Simmons, President of Smith College, the person who had the vision to imagine *Meridians*, for her unwavering support for the journal and myself. John Connolly, Provost of Smith College, the Smith-Wesleyan Editorial Group, and Tom Radko of Wesleyan University Press have also unfailingly supported me in my settling-in period as editor. Elizabeth Hanssen, the Managing Editor of *Meridians*, works long hours to ensure the office runs well and that the production of the journal goes smoothly—with great grace and humor. Jayne Mercier’s generosity in working with me and for the journal has been touching, and Jessica Horn, Emily Martinez and LaToya Thompson—the *Meridians*’ student interns—have been conscientious in their support for *Meridians*. Thanks to all of you.
3. They are the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India, the Xapuri Women’s Group in Brazil (women rubber tappers and others), Women in Black in Israel/Palestine, and Tostan in Senegal (a group prominent in achieving the ban in that country on female genital mutilation).
4. Given that there is no sound evidence from the natural and biological sciences to justify the assumption that the human species can be divided up into separate ‘races’, I use quotation marks with ‘race’ as a reminder that ‘race’ is created, reproduced, and challenged through economic, political, and ideological institutions.

#### WORKS CITED

- Bhavnani and Hancock. 1999. In “Discussion Document.” Unpublished paper by Kum-Kum Bhavnani, Cynthia J. Brown, and Janet Walker.
- Walker, Janet. 1999. In “Discussion Document.” Unpublished paper by Bhavnani, Brown, and Walker.