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## From the Editor

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## **From the Editor**

### Mechthild Nagel

A year ago, the Wagadu Collective met on an idyllic peninsula of Raquette Lake, that is home to the State University of New York College at Cortland's Outdoor Education Center and formulated a vision for this journal. A snake was sunbathing in the morning hours on the steps of the meeting house — an auspicious sign for a good start of our initiative. After all, devotion to a python is woven into the myth of the longevity and power of the West African Wagadu or Ghana Empire (300-1076 AD). While we may have spiritually moved beyond the violence of sacrificing young women to appease the mythic python, women's struggle against violence is a pressing global concern.

In our discussions, the collective of 12 members debated the efficacy of the word "feminism." Is it an Eurocentric term that should be transcended, or is there still salience in it, that can serve to rescue it from its oppressive, solipsistic white past? After much spirited debate, our collective decided that it is important to recognize the racist, elitist practices of feminism, especially in its Anglo-American formulations. Nevertheless, Wagadu members feel strongly that feminist theory and practice have gone through important transformations, as the Africana, Latin American, Asian and indigenous feminisms testify. Zillah Eisenstein's article is helpful in clarifying the complexity of doing theory and practice under the sign of "feminism."

Perhaps here it would be useful to reflect on the notion of inclusion and diversity, because it is important to understand what our Wagadu Collective aspires to address. In her famous talk, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," Bernice Johnson Reagon advocates coalitions and gives us a resonant metaphor of home (see also Mohanty 2003, reviewed by Nagel in this issue). When you go to a coalitional meeting, you are going to leave home and you are enmeshed in a polyphony of voices and energies; some of them you are not going to take home. However, it is important to draw on that home. The recent video *The Way Home* makes light of that in its title, certainly, but also, in setting up focus groups of Black women, of mixed race women, of white women, Muslim women, Asian women, Native American women, and lesbians. Such focus groups, perhaps, illustrate the need for "home," even if it means to confide to strangers, for one is confiding to women who can listen to one's own experiences with a great sense of empathy. Iris Marion Young (1994) makes an important differentiation between separation and segregation. Subjugated people may want to create venues where members from dominant groups are not invited to participate. The Combahee River Collective of Black lesbian socialist feminists residing in the United States was another instance of separation in search of creating a home, a chosen community. Its manifesto — written in the 1970s — still inspires feminists of color today. Segregation, on the other hand, is an institutional policy that creates divisions, from above, intended to keep people "separate and unequal" to paraphrase the infamous decision of the U.S. Supreme Court that legalized apartheid in 1896. Today, separation is often confused with segregation and a lot of schism in feminist movement politics is the logical result of that category

mistake.

As a journal, *Wagadu* is committed to highlighting feminist discourses and to bringing into conversation voices from feminist authors, artists, activists and organizations from all over the globe. As a collective, we also wish to interact face-to-face with feminists who share their original work with the SUNY Cortland campus community. To that end, we created a spring and fall distinguished lecture series. Our first year's participants were Dr. Siga Fatima Jagne, a gender consultant from The Gambia, and Dr. Maina Singh, a professor from New Delhi, India. Siga Jagne's talk is published in this inaugural edition, and Maina Singh's talk, "Issues Concerning Trafficking in South Asia," will be published in a future issue dedicated to the trafficking issues. Both speakers have joined the advisory board of *Wagadu*, and they already have participated actively in reviewing paper submissions.

This special issue is dedicated to the theme "Feminists Confront Empire." After September 11, 2001, this issue has a renewed urgency, as we have seen United States' imperial impunity raised to a new level: conservatives are clamoring for a "new imperialism" that seems to have finally retired the old Monroe Doctrine. No longer satisfied with controlling the material and intellectual resources of the Americas, the U.S. government has moved to proclaim the rest of the Earth and extraterrestrial space as the domain of the U.S. military, intelligence, business, etc. One ideological defense centers around Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations," a theme pursued in Asma Barlas' testimonial narrative in this edition. Christianity, i.e. Americans (sic), aligns itself with the force of good; Islam, i.e. the oriental Other (sic), is assigned the force of evil and must be fought accordingly. Women living in those (evil) countries become a convenient justification for rendering those evil sites impotent; they must be rescued from the Muslim other (Taliban, Baathists, etc.). So, the U.S. president could credibly say that his army freed the Afghani women from the rule of the Taliban when they bombed the country in search of the elusive Osama. In reality, it seems that rural Afghani women are worse off than ever before, and their plight is forgotten as the United States moved into its new imperial role of "liberating" Iraqi women from Saddam.

Another ideological defense of imperialism springs from a triumphalist celebration of singular superpower status; yet, the demise of the Soviet Union notwithstanding, perhaps Seattle 1999 has ushered in a counterbalancing power — a power from below, i.e. people around the globe who are rallying for peace, for the possibility of another world that is free from nuclear proliferation of arms, free from possessive individualism, a world where women and men are free to explore cooperation and dialogue across cultural differences, free to disarm the oppressive logic of flexible accumulation.

Women around the globe have mobilized in unprecedented numbers to spearhead this movement from below; they participated in the uprising of Chiapas against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); they danced and mobilized in the Seattle demonstration against the World Trade Organization (WTO); and they are part of the World Social Forum. Of course, the struggle

for women's liberation from patriarchal practices is far from accomplished — and certainly, feminist theory has to account for white solipsism, class and caste elitism, and internalized oppression — but nevertheless, women's agency and women's rights can no longer be ignored at a local or global level.

The articles by Zillah Eisenstein and Asma Barlas address systemic and personal violence in the imperial age. They also emphasize resistance strategies to intersectional oppression.

Zillah Eisenstein's article is an excerpt from her forthcoming book *Against Empire, Feminisms, Racism and Fictions of "The" West* (Zed Press, Summer 2004). She deftly critiques a liberal, or mainstream, feminism, favoring a feminism that is radically pluralist rather than liberally pluralist. Although feminists may emphasize different aspects of the struggle for equality, it is imperative that systems of oppression (racism, [hetero]sexism, class exploitation) are transformed rather than merely reformed. In the times of the rearticulation of Empire (and its veritable celebration by the right), it is clearly important to unify the forces of resistance across the globe. Eisenstein chronicles the painful struggles of realizing such unity. One such crossroad was the 1992 Women in Africa and the African Diaspora conference held in Nigeria. Its proceedings give us a glimpse of some of the conflicts and candid dialogue between conference participants (cf. *Sisterhood, Feminisms, and Power*, Obioma Nnaemeka, 1998). Inclusion, specificity, diversity, and equality are some of the key principles Eisenstein explores in her essay. She grapples with the question of how feminism could best be suited for addressing these ideals. In the end, she holds that feminism must remain vibrant and open to new meanings.

Asma Barlas discusses the psychological and political impact of living as a colonized subject, far from home — a home that has become hostage to violent forces, thanks in part to the foreign policies of Empire. Barlas makes use of Memmi's analysis of the "mark of the plural" which inevitably faces people of color in a white supremacist society, whereas whiteness bestows invisibility, normalcy and the mark of the singular — in Manichean fashion. Especially after September 11, 2001, the United States has applied a crude Manichean logic to subjects deemed undesirable and therefore considered evil: Arab and Muslim men.

Resistance to Empire also is a theme in Amoo-Adare's exploration of a critical literacy of space, i.e. of developing skills to look at the hidden agendas of spatial, capitalist developments. In her case study, she interviews Asante women in Accra, Ghana, a city with a high percentage of households headed by women. Drawing on her own experience, as an Asante woman and trained in architecture, she reflects on her grandmother's courtyard house which defies the western capitalist trajectory of spatiality and which also differs from her mother's city dwelling. These various childhood experiences enable Amoo-Adare to develop a renegade architectural stance, which is womanist and contests the racial, gendered, and class formations in the ownership of space.

Faranak Miraftab's article interrogates the invited and invented spaces of participation and calls on feminist researchers to validate oppositional practices of the poor whose novel, i.e. "invented"

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ideas of citizenship may not be welcomed by government officials and international donor agencies, and in fact, who may face persecution and imprisonment when protesting privatization of water and electricity (cf. the struggles in South Africa and Bolivia) or stopping encroachment on their lands by multinational corporations (e.g. Coca Cola in India). Miraftab notes that most research has focused on the docile poor, who take their proper place in “invited spaces,” given to them — from above — by donors and governments. Miraftab is careful not to romanticize informal, community-based politics — a politics from below, but she argues that it is important to focus attention on an “inclusive reformulation of informal politics.”

All of these articles highlight the concern for a feminist critique of neoliberalism. They put into relief a differentiated politics of location that deals with identity, agency, place and space and invite us to explore a radical polyversal feminist theory and practice.

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