

## preface

IN FALL 2000, *Feminist Studies* published a special issue on gender studies in India and the South Asian diaspora, reviewing the trajectory of women's movements and identity formations and offering potent writing on citizenship, community, and nationalism. Over ten years later, this special issue presents important advances in feminist scholarship on the region. In a decade that has witnessed the official decriminalization of homosexuality, a vibrant sex workers' movement, female politicians holding the reins of state and national governments, expanding markets, and horrific violence against religious minorities, feminists have both refined and recast the scope of their analyses. Some of the most important contributions are found in scholarship on sexuality and intimate relationships, offering alternatives to standardized binary formulations of sexual desire and subjectivity. Whereas the forms and ramifications of marriage—its minimum age, its property, and status implications—have long been objects of critique in Indian feminism, recent scholarship moves the debate forward by de-centering the heterosexual couple, tracing desires and identities that flourish beyond hegemonic dictates. This special issue covers archival, ethnographic, filmic, and case law sources that underline the instability of the heterosexual couple. It presents a range of conjugalities by documenting various arrangements of procreation and household economies: from *devadasi* women gifted to goddesses, to lesbians who wed, to rapists who marry their victims as a means to atone for their violence. It offers scholarly and creative reflections on the place of sexuality in the formulation of gender categories, the nuclear couple, and caste differences. Drawing on the rich historical and anthropological record in India, the essays and artistic works in this issue provide an engaging set of reference points and a new politics of visibility on questions of intimacy, conjugality, and sexuality.

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In our first essay, titled “Abundance and Loss: Queer Intimacies in South Asia,” Naisargi Dave provides a clear sense of the shifting terrain of sexuality studies in South Asia. Reviewing a set of recently published books that demonstrate and examine the inventive fecundity of queer life,” Dave argues that what these books contribute is not merely their documentation of these extraordinary moments of queer presence but also their “tentative embrace of loss that lies at the heart of liberatory politics, if not of (queer) love itself.” Through this embrace, this active—and Dave argues, enabling—grappling with loss, the four books chosen, namely, Anjali Arondekar’s *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India*, Maya Sharma’s *Loving Women: Being Lesbian and Unprivileged in India*, Ruth Vanita’s *Love’s Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West*, and Gayatri Reddy’s *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, illuminate these very tensions, between presence and absence, between “the will to know and a willingness to acknowledge some things as unknowable.” Tracking a range of entitlements—the entitlement to seek (Arondekar); to speak (Vanita); to be respected, to care and be cared for (Reddy); and to love (Sharma)—these four books occupy, even “constitute,” the space of intimacy, a space that is “driven by a tension between presence and absence, one made manifest in the desire to both have the other and to love the other from a distance that enables human flourishing.” And it is precisely this intimate space, and these productive tensions, that the books—and Dave’s essay—capture so well.

Lucinda Ramberg, in “When the Devi Is Your Husband: Sacred Marriage and Sexual Economy in South India,” presents an ambitious agenda for recasting marriage and sexual exchange. Instead of focusing on objectification and agency, their most common conceptual girders, Ramberg focuses on how value is produced through marriage. Reflecting on her ethnographic work among devotees of the goddess Yellamma in southern India, as well as classic texts in feminist political economy, she argues that marriage is a technology for producing particular kinds of persons and value. Rather than placing married women and devadasis in opposition, as many conventional accounts do, she locates them within a single system. In noting that both daughters and devadasis are gifted by their natal families in marriage, with the attendant expectations of

reciprocity that gifts bear, she presents both kinds of persons as conduits of value rather than as sold objects. The result, then, is a deeper understanding of marriage and the affinities between various conjugal arrangements.

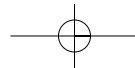
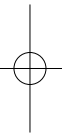
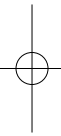
Mytheli Sreenivas, in “Creating Conjugal Subjects: Devadasis and the Politics of Marriage in Colonial Madras Presidency,” offers another critical analysis of conjugality in an article exploring devadasi reform efforts in pre-Independence (1920s and 1930s) south India. Notions about marriage and property inheritance in discourses by and about devadasis, Sreenivas argues, are central to better understanding nationalist and feminist debates at the time. Through her careful reading of autobiographical texts, petitions, letters, and legislative acts during this period, the author demonstrates for the readers what a history of devadasis offers a feminist project in India: it reveals the instability of the very category/subjectivity “women” and its necessary imbrication within wider social, material, and political relations—relations that, Sreenivas contends, were “redefined [using notions of conjugality] in order to incorporate devadasis as proper female subjects.” Although there is a growing body of literature on devadasis, it is not often that this literature is viewed through the history of conjugality to tell a larger story about the symbolic and material making and remaking of “the new woman” in colonial India. As such, this article provides a new—and different—lens through which to examine historically and culturally salient questions about nationalism, feminism, and marriage.

Ruby Lal, in her article “The Lure of the Archive: New Perspectives from South Asia,” also focuses on sexuality and gender in the colonial encounter, reviewing three recent books that attend to the possibilities, tensions, and conundrums that the archive continues to open up for scholars, historians, and nonhistorians alike. On the surface, the three books in question—Anjali Arondekar’s *For the Record*, Rochona Majumdar’s *Marriage and Modernity: Family Values in Colonial Bengal*, and Michael Fisher’s *The Inordinately Strange Life of Dyce Sombre: Victorian Anglo-Indian MP and “Chancery Lunatic”*—engage with markedly different colonial and ethical projects, namely, a hermeneutics of the archive in relation to sexuality (Arondekar), a symbolic and material genealogy of modern conjugal forms (Majumdar), and a social history of an “inordinately strange”



subject who reveals the fluid and contingent nature of knowledge that emerges through the “negotiated character of colonialism” (Fisher). Brought together in this essay by Lal, they imaginatively question not only what constitutes the form of an archive as well as the subject matter of each of the books—the sexual, the social, and the biographical—but also critically engage “how knowledge practices around these forms are produced, how certain forms of knowledge become elevated and others denigrated: why we see some life forms easily, while others remain hidden from view.” In so doing, much like the other review essay and the art essay in this issue, this essay highlights the complex politics of visibility and the manner in which we discern and “recover” subjects and our knowledge about them in and through the archive. It reveals the “checkered presence” (and absences, silences) of the archive and emphasizes the challenge we face in our work: to illuminate both our subjects as well as the limits of our knowledge about them; to reveal, in other words, the tensions between knowing and the unknowable.

Chitra Ganesh’s inventive artwork echoes many of the same questions about visibility and knowability. As Svati Shah’s essay notes, however, Ganesh’s paintings are not just about recuperating marginal subjects and reading frames through an “oppositional” lens but also about invoking figures that question the politics of representation, that both “look out and look at.” Ganesh’s work actively reconfigures the postcolonial dynamic and offers subjects that are simultaneously known (as Other) and yet, unknown, according to Shah. Recall the space of intimacy in Dave’s essay, a space between the known and the unknowable. It is just this kind of visual instantiation of intimate encounters, of the gaze, that the author explores in her essay on Ganesh’s “The Unknowns,” a series of seven figures, drawn, as Shah notes, “from the margins of a mythic history.” This series (as with much of Ganesh’s other work) highlights the limits of an oppositional narrative that holds certain subjects as always “other,” never intelligible except within cultural/autobiographical frames (rather than formal or art historical ones), never speaking back to and questioning the canon in any way. In allowing us to question the politics of visibility and representation, “what we see and what can be seen,” Ganesh’s work therefore serves as a “lens through which to question the



organizing rubrics that frame contemporary art and the art historical canon.” As Shah concludes, “If the story of the art historical record is that of categorizing the canon into the knowable forms and places of the universal Western canon, under which emergent categories such as feminist, queer, or Asian art are produced and assimilated, then Chitra Ganesh’s work abstracts this narrative, pulls it apart, and looks intently for what remains.”

Rethinking canonical narratives, albeit in late nineteenth-century Bombay Presidency, is also what is at stake in Shefali Chandra’s article, “Whiteness on the Margins of Native Patriarchy: Race, Caste, Sexuality, and the Agenda of Transnational Studies.” Analyzing newspaper articles, fiction, and memoir texts that contrast the sexual practices of Indian and European women, Chandra makes an innovative argument about how Brahman and masculinist identities were sedimented through representations of white female sexuality. By tracing how non-white people indexed whiteness through its sexual practices, Chandra reveals both the instability of “whiteness” and indigenous social categories, as well as the intricate ways in which local caste identities were vigorously shaped by colonized actors themselves. Through the local play of (and with) whiteness and female sexuality, therefore, this article highlights the complex recasting of the social terrain and upper-caste marriage in Maharashtra. As such, the article destabilizes easy colonial narratives and makes a unique argument about the place of the “local” in transnational and whiteness studies, while simultaneously revealing the historicity of sexuality as a dense transfer point for relations of power in India.

Sangita Gopal’s article, “Sealed with a Kiss: Conjugality and Hindi Film Form,” examines the making of the sovereign couple in Hindi cinema. With great lucidity, Gopal reflects on the informal prohibition of on-screen kissing, tracking how kissing came to be supplanted by the song and dance duet. Arguing that the song and dance sequence allows viewers to more “sensually experience the stakes of such coupling,” Gopal presents the duets, a distinctive feature of Indian films, as “engine[s] of couple formation.” She follows the emergence of the romantic duet in certain key films of the 1930s, Nitin Bose’s *Chandidas* (1934), Himanshu Rai’s *Achhyut Kanya* (The Untouchable Girl, 1936), and V. Shantaram’s *Admi* (Life Is for

Living, 1939), alongside critical newspaper comments and fan mail. If Ramberg's article notes how married persons are accountable to elaborate social systems of exchange in India, Gopal analyzes how, in reaction to social pressures, the nucleation of the couple is fantasized in modern Indian film. The very constituting of the couple as a romantic unit in isolation from society is a modern move, and the tension between the individual and the social is highlighted in romances that bloom across lines of caste.

Systems of exchange and property are at the center of Srimati Basu's compelling analysis of rape cases in India, "Sexual Property: Staging Rape and Marriage in Indian Law and Feminist Theory." Examining the language within which rape is framed in multiple and often highly publicized rape trials in contemporary India, she demonstrates how the adjudication of rape cases is deeply imbricated in supporting the sanctity of marriage. Citing the widespread acceptance of rapists who use marriage proposals to erase the violence of rape, as well as the casting of sex extracted using the false promise of marriage as "rape," she observes that marriage functions as a proxy for consent in contemporary legal cultures. She questions the imperative of protection that frames legal provisions and cautions that legal protections against rape in India end up solidifying caste and religious boundaries. Basu engages productively with North American feminist political theorists to offer a thoroughgoing critique of the language framing rape. Ultimately, then, this commentary on the state of rape law in contemporary India becomes a critique of marriage—its privileges and its pretenses.

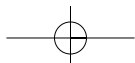
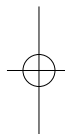
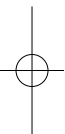
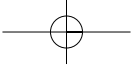
The poetry we present in this issue embodies this special issue's theme of alternate conjugalities. Minal Hajratwala's poem, "Incantation for the Occasion," was written on and for the occasion of a lesbian wedding, and its "seven steps" recast a central Hindu marriage ritual as they joyously trace the trajectory of a relationship. "First Love," in a different register, conveys the anxieties and fragility of proscribed intimacies. The three other poets featured in this volume, Prathibha Nandakumar, Mandakranta Sen, and Rajee Seth, are noted writers in the Indian regional languages of Kannada, Bengali, and Hindi, respectively. In recognition of the vibrancy of feminist writing in languages beyond English, *Feminist*

*Studies* has reproduced their translated poems for their resonance with this special issue's themes. These poets were among 200 participants in an innovative series of workshops organized by Women's WORLD (India) between 1999 and 2006, focused on women's writing in Indian regional languages. Selections from these workshops recently appeared in *Interior Decoration: Poems by Fifty-Four Women from Ten Languages*, originally published in New Delhi by Women Unlimited (an associate of Kali for Women). Nandakumar's "Jogathi" brings to life the kind of figure who is at the center of the essays by Ramberg and Sreenivas—someone who is untethered by normative conjugality. Seth's "It Can't Ever See—The Sky" ponders the relationship between domesticity and freedom. And Sen's "A Letter from Lesbos" articulates the intensity of a desire that reaches its "triangular shore," simultaneously dispelling gender binaries by asking "Is she a man, or a woman?—Who's there to determine?"

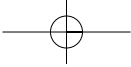
It is the potential to refract simple binaries, to highlight objects as subject effects or "traces" that undo the fixity of categories, that links the articles in this issue. In a variety of ways, the articles highlight the "constructed and contingent nature" of subject and category formation. Writing, as they do, in relation to both colonial and post-independence India, they allow a nuanced understanding of the symbolic and material contexts that have shaped the country's varied realities. And even as they interrogate the discourses of marriage and sexuality in India, they also pose questions that are at the heart of current knowledge production and subject formation in settings elsewhere.

Finally in this issue is a News and Views section that focuses on recent campus activism, giving tangible evidence of the effects of women's and gender studies courses in the academy.

Gayatri Reddy and Ashwini Tambe,  
for the editorial collective







*Preface*

