

August 2020

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Recommended Citation

Fox, Diana J. and Afzal-Khan, Fawzia (2020). An Introduction in Two Parts: Three Months of the Global Covid-19 Pandemic: A Selection of Liberatory, anti-racist, feminist webinars, panels and interviews.

Journal of International Women's Studies, 21(4), 1-3.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol21/iss4/1>

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An Introduction in Two Parts: Three Months of the Global Covid-19 Pandemic: A Selection of Liberatory, anti-racist, feminist webinars, panels and interviews

By Diana J. Fox¹ and Fawzia Afzal-Khan²

Part 1

This special issue was born out of a conversation that I had with Fawzia Afzal-Khan, of Montclair State University shortly after she invited me to join her webinar, “Transnational Feminists and Social Change” (June 19). Fawzia had organized a web series titled, *Love and Solidarity in the Time of Covid*. I loved the theme’s emphasis on positive expressions of emotion and community building as a reflection of healing in a time of such division and stark manifestations of long-built inequalities. The idea of reaching out beyond our hunkered down locations in our covid-bunkered spaces—as academics and scholars whose last months of our spring semesters were spent frantically transitioning to online teaching—to foster not just an exchange of ideas, but an exchange bolstered by love, seemed both necessary and radical to me. It is radical because of Fawzia’s unabashed insertion of the value of love into the hallowed halls of academe, “cyber-halls” or no. This was an act of feminist courage, for in spite of the impact of feminist thought on so many disciplines, we are witnessing growing conservative attacks on the academy, especially on Humanities and Women’s, Gender and Sexuality studies in particular in tandem with the soul-crushing rise of the business model of higher education. Love does reach us in our academic lives, but through accepted channels of classroom and scholarly engagement with literature and poetry, film, art; through research about love in departments of psychology,

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²Fawzia Afzal-Khan is Professor of English and a University Distinguished Scholar at Montclair State University in New Jersey. She has recently been a Visiting Professor at NYU Abu Dhabi, as well as serving as Fulbright Scholar teaching Feminist Theory at her alma mater Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore. She works at the intersections of Postcolonial Feminist Literary Criticism and Cultural and Performance Studies and has published 6 books to date. 6th book recently released from Oxford University Press is entitled *Siren Song: Understanding Pakistan Through its Women Singers*. She has made an award-winning short film of the same title with the help of an NEH grant in 2011, and is a published poet, playwright and memoirist. She is also a trained vocalist in the Indo-Pakistani classical tradition, who has performed internationally and is founder of the Neither East Nor West fusion music ensemble in NYC. She is a long-time Contributing Editor to *TDR: The Drama Review* (MIT Press) as well as an Advisory Board member of the online journal *Arab Stages*.

sociology, anthropology—these and other accepted disciplinary channels both permit and constrain. Affection for our colleagues, love of our academic community, our campuses, our collaborative partners outside academe have limited venues for accepted expression. In addition, the creation of panels engaging love and solidarity comes at a time when so many of us are being called upon to bring to new publics via our current online formats, long studied social injustices analyzed through feminist lenses, our energies focused on dissecting the persistence and prevalence of doctrines of hate, exclusions, and discriminations that have built walls, both literal and ideological. Creating a space for love as a foundational emotion to traverse the explosion of inequalities unmasked for the first time for too many, seemed to me a brilliant intervention. I didn't want the idea and the product—the discussions on zoom in the time of COVID—to disappear with the end of the webinars; I wanted them preserved.

This line of my thinking intersected with a social media thread I read on an Indian colleague's Facebook page, in which she bemoaned the prevalence of poor-quality webinars and the eagerness for scholars to accumulate certificates of participation as impoverished measures of achievement. I myself had only become aware of the use of certificates as emblems of engagement with a community of scholars, when I became Conference Chair for the World Conference on Women's Studies (WCWS) organized by The International Institute for Knowledge Management (TIKM) out of Sri Lanka (an energetic conference organizing platform made of up young Sri Lankans working contribute to a culture of knowledge exchange in the global south, particularly between Asia and Africa, around pertinent cross-disciplinary conferences). Participating in these conferences exposed me to the importance of certificates in this academic culture, and surprised me, since it is alien to western conference venues, beyond specific awards for particular scholarly achievements. Having myself participated in and listened to, a number of very exciting webinars, I chimed in on the comment section saying that there were, indeed high-quality events out there. But then, later, I realized that I hadn't provided any specific details about which ones I believed worthwhile for those readers scrolling through the comments. That moment, combined with the inspiration from Fawzia's series, led to the idea for this collection, to serve as a kind of repository and archive of the time. While no certificates will be granted for downloading the JIWS' collection (!) I hope waves of wisdom from rigorous and insightful presentations, discussions, and questions, will inspire and compel those who listen and watch to reflect on the spirit in which the webinars and interviews herein have been created: to create a dialogic experience of sharing knowledge to build a world inspired by love and care. And in that spirit, this Introduction itself offers you, our readers, a dialog as I turn over the writing to Fawzia, who shares with us, her own thinking in creating and curating the series *feministas envisioning change and staying engaged in the time of corona* that heads off this issue. Fawzia, over to you.

Part 2

In lockdown with my immediate family following the outbreak of the Covid pandemic at home in Westchester County in New York, a little north of NY City, which was fast becoming the central hotspot of the crisis, I felt overwhelmed by these conflicting emotions simultaneously: 1) gratitude/relief at the privilege of being able to work from the safety of my home, 2) the anxiety of isolation from the world of my friends and colleagues, and 3) a desire to connect to those who mattered to me most in hopes of sharing and thus alleviating our burdens, but also to building larger solidarities around the intersectional crises in our social fabric that the pandemic was laying

bare like never before. The moment we were/are in, demanded a response that connected the personal to the political—a familiar feminist insight and *modus operandus*.

As a first step, I turned to a group of five cis women *campadres*, academics of South Asian background living and teaching in the USA, who have become friends over the decade and a half, since we together co-founded the South Asian Feminist Caucus of the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) of North America (the largest organization of scholars and practitioners in the field of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies programs in North America). Over this time period we've met regularly at the annual conference of the NWSA, to share and present our work both critical and creative, in its space of transnational feminist solidarity, and stayed in touch, developing and strengthening personal bonds of affection and care and mutual solidarity as we face various professional challenges. So, I formed a zoom group for us to meet up and chat over *chai and samosas* (albeit consumed alone!)—and then, as we started exchanging our thoughts and feelings about the unprecedented times we were living through—well, it occurred to me that we needed to spread the love!

And so, I came up with the idea of opening-up our “domestic zoom sessions” to “public” engagement—as a way of modeling our feminist engagement with the issues that were surfacing as urgently in need of (re) theorizing and debating. I sent out the following announcement on social media and my desi feminista group did the same—to let folks know that we were launching a series of sessions on the zoom platform for folks with progressive ideas to come together and just share our thoughts and hearts. Here is the message:

Today, in this difficult time in world history, we find ourselves facing uncharted territory, anxious about the present and future of our shared world and our role and place in it as we move forward. Like many of you, we feel both disheartened by the many interlocking factors that have led the world to this sad juncture, but also committed to figuring out collectively what now must be done to help create better, fairer futures for us all.

Feeling the need to connect to each other to help us envision more hopeful spaces and actions, we thought we would invite friends and colleagues from our different networks to tune in to our weekly “*conversation hour with friends envisioning change and staying engaged*” on fridays at 5 pm EST, via this zoom link here:

Connecting with Diana as these sessions unfolded led to the adventure of finding a 'permanent home' for our interactive webinars in the JIWS—and demonstrated to me the power of love and solidarity: as she says, without love, we cannot build anything of lasting value. And so, it is my hope, echoing hers—that these sessions might provide some hope, some solace as well as some ideas for moving forward in lockstep—rather than lockdown—toward a future we all deserve.

With Love and Solidarity in the Time of Corona,

Fawzia Afzal-Khan (Curator)

And Founding Members of the South Asian feminist Caucus of NWSA:

Rekha Subramaniam

Pramila Venkateswaran

Shoba Rajgopal

Alka Kurian