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Editor's Introduction

Equality of rights under the law
shall not be denied or abridged by the United States
or by any state on account of sex.
—Equal Rights Amendment

You can do anything. . . . Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything.
—Donald J. Trump

It was epidemic, and yet every incident was supposed to be an isolated incident, and nobody was supposed to connect the crimes to the culture that relished violence against women as entertainment, and denied it existed in any significant way as fact, and made sure that prevention and prosecution were as feeble as they were rare. All those forces still exist, but something else does alongside them: a vigorous conversation, speaking and naming and describing and defining; rejecting the excuses and cover-ups and justifications.
—Rebecca Solnit

As I began writing this introduction, the Commonwealth of Virginia became the thirty-eighth state to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), a milestone arriving thirty-eight years after the 1982 deadline for its ratification. Having finally met the two-thirds of the states bar, the ERA could in theory become the twenty-eighth amendment to the United States Constitution (Rankin and Crary 2020). In fact, that is politically unlikely given that the GOP's current dominance of the Senate and utter

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unwillingness to sanction their president was made evident when, as I was finishing this introduction, the U.S. Senate acquitted the forty-fifth president of the United States of the impeachment charges brought against him by the House of Representatives (LeBlanc 2020; Spillar 2020). This president is the same man whom more than two dozen women have publicly accused of sexual assault, and who has a long history of bragging about "moving on [women] like a bitch," "just kiss[ing them]," and "[not] even wait[ing]" for any indication that his desires are reciprocated (Bullock 2016). Moreover, this commander in chief is openly and unabashedly supportive of White nationalist, misogynist, settler colonialist, trans- and homophobic discourses, actors, and policy agendas. He also leads the chorus of global climate change deniers determined to roll back environmental protections in the United States and beyond. Thus, watching contemporaneous media coverage of both the Virginia victory and the president's acquittal, I had to remind myself that this is just the latest chapter in a long history of often simultaneous progress and regression inherent to the pursuit of social justice in the United States, a fact I have witnessed personally over the course of my fifty-three years.[1]

When I was a child growing up in the 1970s and a young woman coming of age in the 1980s, it was completely normal for men to act publicly and privately toward, and speak about women as the current president did in the above audio-recorded quote. As Rebecca Solnit recounts about her experiences in a recent *Guardian* piece, for me too "so much of what shaped and scarred my younger self, and made me a solitary feminist, and then much later one among many, was the unspeakability of violence against women and all the denigration, harassment and silencing that went with it" (Solnit 2020). One of the supposed victories of the women's liberation and feminist movements during my coming of age and young adulthood was not only stigmatizing the misogynist and sexist attitude, discourse, and behavior exemplified by the president—a victory in and of itself—but also shifting the social and political culture toward (we thought) a shared understanding that these ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving are patently wrong and, moreover, legally punishable. Likewise, among the victories of multiple antiracist/antinativist movements was making denigrating discourse verboten, at least in the public sphere and educational settings. And in fact, my first child, a millennial Latina who turns twenty-four this year, has until recently only ever known a society where she can

legally access birth control and safely terminate an unwanted pregnancy; where she can expect equal treatment at school, work, and play; where she can freely assert her erotic autonomy and political rights alike; and where she can—and did—organize to replace her college president, a middle-aged White man who failed to address a public instance of discursive racial violence against a woman of color alumna, with a Latina (specifically, Dominican like us) president (Hardcollis and Bidgood 2015; Corasaniti 2017).

As importantly, my twenty-two-year-old son and his peers were taught at home *and* in the community at large that they are not inherently entitled to touch or otherwise interfere in women's bodily autonomy, and that their female peers were not only entitled to every educational and athletic experience and social sphere that boys were, but that these same female classmates routinely bested them when they competed in arenas that had just a generation before been closed off to girls and women. Yet today, each of those supposedly established girls' and women's rights and entitlements—and the restraints to patriarchal and rape culture that make these entitlements possible—is under systematic and concerted attack. Likewise, the small but real reduction in White supremacy's more overt forms of racist, nativist, and xenophobic violence, as well as legal protections won by civil rights and Black/Brown/Red/Yellow Power movements, are being systematically undone. Shockingly, it is the president of the United States who leads the charge to "make America great again" for racists, misogynists, nationalists, homophobes, greedy capitalists, polluters, and sundry others who apparently feel aggrieved by the minimal advances made in the pursuit of environmental justice and social justice for women, people of color, queer folks, religious minorities, and the most vulnerable workers.

Worse yet, the GOP-dominated Senate has aided and abetted the president in manifesting those agendas. From confirming two Supreme Court justices—one of whom was publicly accused of having attempted to rape a high school classmate—and filling nearly one hundred federal judiciary vacancies with radically conservative appointees at the time of this writing (American Bar Association 2020), to abetting over one hundred executive orders that attempt to attack environmental protections, labor rights, and civil and human rights (Association of Federal Government Employees 2020; Bierman and Megerian 2019), to normalizing the forced removal of children from their asylum-seeking parents at the border and housing them in cages (Briggs 2020), our elected officials have put Republican Party

interests above the constitutional principles they are sworn to abide by. One could easily lose heart.

Until, that is, we remind ourselves that "we were made for these times," as post-trauma specialist and poet Clarissa Pinkola Estés extols (Pinkola Estés 2003). That long view is an advantage conferred by fifty-three years of observing the necessarily constant struggle for justice that I did not anticipate when I was a child coming of age in the midst of the many social movements happening all around me—American Indian, antiwar, Black Power, civil rights, environmental, poor people's, Raza, sexual and women's liberation, among others—in the 1960s and 1970s. I vividly recall media coverage of racial justice uprisings across the country, and of "women's liberation" activists such as Angela Davis, Billie Jean King, Bella Abzug, and Gloria Steinem, who tirelessly pursued passage not only of the ERA, but of Title IX and Title VII. I also remember the profound sense of foreboding when Ronald Reagan won the 1980 presidential election, somehow understanding even as an eighth grader that this new regime not only did not care about people like me and mine, but wanted to erase whatever small protections we had secured. And indeed, Reagan was elected into the presidency precisely to put into motion the neoliberal agenda that would devastate domestic labor and global south countries alike. Perhaps not surprisingly, two years into Reagan's first term (1980–84), ERA proponents failed to meet the 1982 deadline for ratification by thirty-eight states. That same year also ushered in the "debt crisis"—one manufactured by the Federal Reserve, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, which put into place quintessentially neoliberal "austerity measures" that devastated economies throughout the region, buttressed repressive regimes, and triggered increasing emigration to *el norte*—initiating what would come to be known as "the lost decade" in Latin America.

Coincidentally, 1982 was also the year I celebrated my quinceañera.[2] The celebration was a minor miracle since the Aid to Family with Dependent Children and food stamps that my divorced, immigrant Dominican mother relied on were rarely enough to feed, shelter, and clothe our two-person family adequately. Yet, contrary to Reagan's racist "welfare queen" mythmaking, the resilience and resourcefulness that *Mami* used to pull off this Latina coming-of-age celebration offered evidence of her boundless work ethic, not its deficiency (Candelario and López 1995; Hancock 2004). In some ways, this was simply the latest chapter in the new life story she

began in the fall of 1960 when she became one of just ten thousand exiles who escaped the U.S.-installed and U.S.-supported Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, where she was born. Leaving there as a twenty-two-year-old woman who spoke only Spanish and had no ties to the United States defied all the odds; in that instance and in every other sexist, classist, and racist obstacle she encountered before realizing her aspirations, *Mami* was determined and unabashed.

Thus, over the course of many months leading up to the big day that spring, *Mami* gathered the necessary materials and sewed my gown herself, down to the skirt hoop; she slowly purchased and stockpiled the makings of a meal for fifty guests; she searched and searched until she found a venue that would not only be appropriate and affordable, but would let her pay their nominal fee over time; she recruited my aunts to help her cook all the food she had purchased over the course of the week leading up to the big day; together, we made the floral decorations, including our corsages and boutonnieres with flowers she had purchased in bulk, and decorated the hall at the American Legion Post 18 in West New York, New Jersey on the day of the event.

Pulling off my quinceañera, while living in the belly of the beast[3] that fed on the harvest of empire, was one of the happiest of many object lessons I received from my mother about the long history of Dominican transnational feminist resistance to patriarchy, racism, and imperialism. Celebrating my quinceañera in an American Legion hall was an especially exemplary lesson because the Legion's mission is to promote a kind of nationalist patriotism that denies the facts of United States imperialism, and *Mami* and I were in the United States because of the country's long history of intervention in the Dominican Republic. To celebrate a Dominican quinceañera in this particular space—despite the shortage of cash, despite a "welfare" system that Reagan and his supporters wanted desperately to be rid of, and that in the meantime prohibited recipients like us from owning televisions and other typical household items deemed too luxurious for welfare recipients, and despite the disparagement and discrimination *Mami* routinely faced because of her thick Spanish-accented English and her non-White appearance—exemplified my mother's brand of Dominican feminism. *Mami* believed we were entitled to the same beauty, joy, celebration, well-being, and opportunities that "typical American" families with two parents, better jobs, single-family homes, savings and inheritances, unaccented English and White(r) skins had a

presumptive right to claim. If the U.S. system didn't allow for it, she would point out how and why the system was wrong, and then work to make it happen one way or another, for us *and also* for others like us. Moreover, *Mami* believed that women's education was the key to making justice for women happen; as she would often put it, *saber es poder*—knowledge is power.

Two decades later, when I began to research women's history in the Dominican Republic, I finally realized that rather than being exceptional as I had imagined during my childhood, my mother's feminism and faith in education and perseverance as *the* principle vehicle for liberation and freedom were exemplary of a long history of Dominican, Caribbean, and Latin American women's movements and feminisms. Latin American and Caribbean schoolteachers called themselves *feministas* at the turn of the nineteenth century, decades before women in the United States would do so,[4] and they participated actively in national, international, and transnational campaigns to establish democratic civil society cultures in which women were *conciudadanas* (co-citizens), or alternatively, envisioned revolutionary societies in which women were vanguard leaders (Miller 1991). This is why feminists in Latin America and the Caribbean have long found U.S. feminists'—particularly but not exclusively White/Anglo feminists'—claims to vanguard and presumptive leadership roles in the hemisphere ludicrous (Candelario, Manley, and Mayes 2016).

Thus, in keeping with that legacy of autochthonous Latin American and Caribbean feminisms and transnational spirit, this issue of *Meridians* features essays that take up feminist, antiracist, and anti-imperialist politics and organizing by African American, Cuban, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Chicana, and South American diasporic activists, culture workers, and scholars working in a variety of sectors and institutional contexts. The ground we cover ranges from the postbellum southern United States courtroom to mid-twentieth-century Puerto Rican South Bronx housing projects to the twenty-first-century ivory towers of historically White-serving colleges to Cuban feminists organizing for comprehensive legislation addressing gender-based violence. As our two archival selections from the International Council of Women of the Darker Races of the World and the Committee on International Action of the National Women's Party make evident, these sites have long been linked by the social networks and organizing efforts of African American, Hispanic Caribbean, Latina, and Latin American feminists.

Leigh-Anne Francis's essay, "Playing the 'Lady Sambo': Poor Black Women's Legal Strategies in the Post–Civil War South's Civil Courts," convincingly argues that Black women plaintiffs routinely used White people's distorted racist perception against them by behaving in ways that seemingly verified White belief in Black inferiority in order to accomplish goals they could not openly pursue without risk of violence. In the courtroom, Black women hoisted White judges on their own ideological petards by playing to their racist and sexist paternalist sensibilities in order to win favorable judgments against White men with whom the judges shared a commitment to White patriarchal supremacy. Similarly savvy dissemblance is a strategy that Vanessa Rosa's grandmother, Calixta Rosa (1911–2002), also used in her work as a public housing tenant organizer in Harlem's appropriately named Ulysses S. Grant Houses. As she details in her *testimonio*, "*Mi casa* Is Not *su casa*: A Research Reflection," the fraught relationship between light-skinned Calixta and her son Gilbert—"a dark-skinned Puerto Rican boy"—mapped onto the divides between the Spanish Harlem most Puerto Ricans settled in, the Black Harlem the Rosas lived in, and the White city beyond Harlem. Although the bridge called their backs was irreparably stressed by the cost of crossing the divides, Calixta left a proud legacy and archive of activism that together with Gilbert's legacy of love for the Afro–Puerto Rican Harlem of his childhood is evident in Rosa's own work as a sociologist of race and urban planning.

Moving from a singular to a collective testimonio, professors Sabrina F. Sembiante, Cristóbal Salinas Jr., J. Andrés Ramírez, Maria D. Vásquez-Colina, and Yamilé Silva argue in their essay, "Different When I Opened My Mouth: Experiences, Reflections, and Perspectives of Faculty Members with Foreign English Accents in Higher Education," that the borders of Latina/o and other immigrant belonging are marked on the tongue as well as the body. This group of non-Hispanic White and White-presenting Latin American immigrants write about how their "English with an accent" marks them as racially other in the context of historically White campuses in the United States. "Differences between the privilege encountered by the White South African participant and the challenges experienced by the Latino/a faculty members point to societal bias toward faculty members' origin, ethnicity, and ability by way of their accent" (316). In other words, while any "foreign" accents marks one as Other in the United States, a Spanish accent marks one further as racialized non- or off-White. Moving from the racial politics of language to a poetic code-switching, Shana

Bulhan's poem "a language outside" obliquely bemoans the loss of homeland and consequent "bad grammar" Hindi mother tongue, in a new love's language.

That things are not as they first seem is also the argument that Laura Halperin makes in her essay, "Not No Rapunzel: *The House on Mango Street*'s Revised Ever After." Here, Halperin deploys José Esteban Muñoz's theorization of Latino dissemblance along with "Third World feminist analysis" to make the case that Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* "engages with the fairy-tale genre while challenging its problematic bases, following *and* undoing the genre's trajectory" (325). Similarly, Kristie Soares's essay "Dominican Futurism: The Speculative Use of Negative Aesthetics in the Work of Rita Indiana" argues that Dominican artist Rita Indiana's performances and novel enact "negative aesthetics [that] offer a way of staying with the pain and unrest of trauma" that is personal, political, and historical (401). Soares puts Indiana's body of work within both the Dominican literary legacy of pessimism and United States Black diasporic Afrofuturism, both of which consider that the personal body is as much a site of colonial and decolonial struggle as the body politic. Crossing the Mona Canal to Puerto Rico, "The Making of *Viequenses*: Militarized Colonialism and Reproductive Rights" by Marie Cruz Soto, tells the story of how women from this island off of Puerto Rico's eastern coast long occupied by the U.S. Navy were forced to travel to the main island in order to give birth. In addition to being dangerous, costly, and inconvenient, these women's experiences of pregnancy and "travel birthing"—and the activism of women health workers like Afro–Puerto Rican Susana Centeno, in whose honor the island's first OB-GYN facility was named—offer new insights into the everyday, gendered, classed, and racialized violence of "militarized colonialism" under U.S. rule (360).

Our "In the Trenches" selection for this issue—"Petition for a Comprehensive Law against Gender-Based Violence in Cuba," translated by Lucía M. Suárez—comes from Cuba, where in November 2019 a group of feminists petitioned the revolutionary government to pass a comprehensive law targeting violence against women. As they explain in their petition, being citizens of a revolutionary state does not protect Cuban women and girls from gender-based violence; indeed, rates of violence against women in Cuba are greater than or on par with those of Chile, Panama, and Peru. Similarly, in his essay "Between Protest and Politics: Black Lives Matter Movement(s) for Black Lives," Robert J. Patterson argues that the Black

Lives Matter movement pursues a much more radical Black liberation project than the agenda of the civil rights movement preferred by Black middle-class and other elites who have become instruments "to enact, enforce, and reinforce an economic order that . . . cement[s] black inequality" (430).

Lastly, our cover art by Los Angeles–based Persian-German artist Shiva Tamara, *Get It While You Can*, alludes to Caribbean palm trees, whose strength derives from their ability to thrive and survive even regularly devastating hurricane seasons, much as the region's nations have flourished despite ongoing colonial and imperial depredations. In many ways, the coconut palm is a tree of life in the Caribbean. Coconut palms offer entrepreneurial coconut vendors an independent livelihood; coconut fruit provides rich nourishment and thirst-quenching water, and the tree's palm fronds are still used to roof informal housing and commercial buildings alike. As with the image, women are often hidden in plain sight in midst of these life-sustaining labors, yet are as central to them as the trunk is to the tree. *En ese espíritú*, this issue is dedicated to two Afro-Cuban women living in the United States whose life stories exemplify all the connections illustrated in this issue—Marta Formoso (March 22, 1943–February 25, 2020) and her daughter, my childhood best friend who danced with me at my quinceañera, Maritza Rodríguez Formoso. *Fuerza mi hermana, que juntas seguimos adelante, cultivando los frutos de los esfuerzos de nuestras madres y bailando hacia el porvenir.*

Notes

1 Nationalism is on the rise worldwide, from Brexit in England, to White supremacists in Germany and France, to India changing its constitution to explicitly exclude Muslims from religious rights, with subsequent Islamophobic violence (Kamdar 2020).

2 This coming-of-age fifteenth birthday party is commonly celebrated throughout Latin America, the Hispanic Caribbean, Spain, and the Latin@ United States. It is usually quite elaborate, with the birthday girl wearing a ball gown, tiara, and high heels for the "first" time, and typically includes a male escort and "court" of peer couples who perform a choreographed dance (Alvarez 2008).

3 When asked about the source of his political perspective on U.S. imperialism and race relations, Cuban revolutionary writer José Martí famously said, "Viví dentro del monstro y conozco sus entrañas" ("I lived inside the beast, and I know its entrails").

4 The exception, of course, was anarchist feminists from Italy and Russia who immigrated to the United States (Guglielmo 2010).

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