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## Meridians 18:2 Radical Transnationalism: Reimagining Solidarities, Violence, Empires

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## Editor's Introduction

In the mid-1990s a small group of feminist faculty from women's studies, Latin American studies, and Afro-American studies at Smith College came together to discuss the troubling lacunae in each of their respective fields.<sup>1</sup> Because each interdisciplinary field had a foundational mission to address the biases and assumptions of traditional disciplines that had overlooked—or worse, distorted—the experiences of its particular oppressed and/or exploited community, the fields prioritized one locus of discrimination and generally glossed over others. This paradigmatic weakness extended to each field's otherwise innovative curricula, scholarship, and pedagogy. As a group of Black feminist scholars put it in the title of their groundbreaking anthology more than a decade earlier, within women's studies and race and ethnicity studies it seemed that *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (Hull, Scott, and Smith [1982] 2015). Thus, one of the signature pieces of the *Brave* collection—the Combahee River Collective Statement—argued that gender, race, class, and sexuality are mutually constitutive systems that must be considered and addressed together as a critical corrective to single-issue agendas and paradigms. Just as these systems of oppression were co-constitutive of what another Black feminist called a “matrix of domination,” so too would their dismantling require an “intersectional” strategy in law and society (Collins 1990, 21; Crenshaw 1989, 140). Yet, despite the Combahee Collective's critique of U.S. imperialism and its celebration of Third World/Internationalist affinities—not to mention the long history

of Black internationalism in the United States—their radical intervention was still largely U.S. centric, as was the *Brave* anthology itself.

Likewise, given area studies's origins in the Cold War U.S. anti-communist intelligence community, early Latin American studies scholars (who were predominantly white men) invested minimally in studying race, even less in studying women and gender, and little to nothing in understanding the region's diasporas and its historic presence in North America. This was the case despite the concurrent rise and establishment of Chicano/Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and/or Latino studies. Unlike their contemporary Latin Americanist colleagues, these early Latino studies scholars did articulate what are now called "transnational" analyses and political concerns, including with race and gender, as systems produced by and productive of both geopolitics and domestic power structures. Nonetheless, Latino studies also largely shared with Afro-American studies a U.S. mainland analytical focus on civil rights matters. Similarly, Latina feminists joined Black feminists in insisting on intersectional analyses, but it was the more radical collectives such as Third World Women's Alliance that produced an analysis of the links between U.S. imperialism, European colonialism, and oppressive conditions for Black and brown women around the world.

So it was that although the word *trans-nationalism* was first coined by U.S. ethnic pluralist Randolph S. Bourne in his 1916 critique of the era's nativism, the term's meaning was radically transformed because of the facts on the ground of the late twentieth century U.S. academy and broader society. The end of fifty years of restrictions on immigration from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia following the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act meant that the turn of the twenty-first century saw tremendous growth in non-European heritage populations. These changing demographics forced a reconsideration of conventional (im)migrant assimilation and acculturation axioms. For example, by 1990 the anthropologist Eugenia Georges argued that Dominicans in the Dominican Republic and the United States should be studied together, as part of a unified social field that transcended national boundaries (Georges 1990). From there it was but a short step to the argument that intersectionality and transnationalism together offered a powerful corrective to the particular paradigms of earlier race and ethnic studies, area studies, and women's studies (Candelario 2017: 236–39).

It was within this historic context that professors Ann Arnett Ferguson, Nancy Saporita Sternbach, and Susan Van Dyne decided to establish *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* at Smith College. They did so in order to

center knowledges produced by and about women of color who critically integrated and interrogated feminist, racial, and transnational concerns. Serendipitously, Ruth Simmons, who in 1995 had become Smith College's first Black president and was committed to supporting innovation and equity at our historically white-serving women's college, responded enthusiastically to this intellectual and political project. With Simmons's generous support, *Meridians* published its first issue in fall 2000.

Thus, as we gear up to celebrate our twentieth anniversary in 2020, *Meridians; feminism, race, transnationalism* is particularly pleased to presage that milestone with this fall 2019 special issue on "Radical Transnational Feminisms," guest edited by highly regarded transnational feminist scholars Laura Briggs and Robyn C. Spencer. As Briggs and Spencer note in their introduction to this issue, in specifying that theirs is a "radical" transnational feminist commitment, they want to signal "an alliance with political movements that work to undo the nation and its violences, including imperialism, racisms, and colonialisms" while also "allow[ing] for certain types of solidarities to take root" (255). Accordingly, the texts in this issue call for consideration of a range of transnational feminist alliances, solidarities, and complicities. These various terms reflect related ideas, and perhaps are even considered synonyms by some. However, as a closer reading of this issue shows, each term signals divergent political responsibilities and possibilities. I encourage our readers to note where, when, and how *alliance*, *solidarity*, and *complicity* are used in the collection, and to consider how these terms both reveal and obscure the tensions within transnational feminisms.

Lastly, I take this opportunity to dedicate this issue to Professor Nancy Saporta Sternbach, who retired from Smith this year. During her thirty-five years on the faculty Nancy was not only a central member of the *Meridians* founding and subsequent editorial collective, she continued to serve on the journal's editorial advisory board in the decades that followed.<sup>2</sup> An outspoken transnational feminist, Nancy also labored ceaselessly to introduce, incorporate, and institutionalize Latin American and Latin@ studies at Smith and the Five Colleges. She taught thousands of students that Latin American peoples, languages, literatures, cultures, and social movements are central to understanding global history. As important, Nancy published some of the earliest English-language scholarship on Latin American, Caribbean, and Latina feminisms and women's movements, a commitment sparked when she was one of a handful of U.S. women in attendance at the first Latin American and Caribbean Feminists *Encuentro* held in Bogotá, Colombia in 1980. In the edited volumes, book chapters, journal

articles, and college courses that followed, Nancy documented the long, illustrious, and complicated histories of feminism and women's movements in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States (Horno-Delgado et al. 1988; Sternbach 1991: 91–102; Sternbach et al. 1992: 393–434). In doing so she was part of small group of U.S.-based feminist scholars working to correct the distorted and incomplete historical record typically relied upon by the U.S. scholarly and activist communities. In other words, Nancy Saporta Sternbach modeled radical transnational feminism in her politics, pedagogy, and scholarship well before it was safe to do so; she is one of those who were brave. I know all this because I had the good fortune to have been one of her undergraduate students when she first joined the Smith faculty in 1985, her faculty colleague from 1999 to 2019, and now part of her legacy at *Meridians*. *Gracias profesora, por todo.*

### Notes

- 1 Today these units at Smith are called Study of Women and Gender Program, Latin American and Latin@ Studies, and Africana Studies. However, I have used the monikers in place at the time of their activism.
- 2 The names of our founding editorial collective members can be found on our masthead.

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