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## Meridians 17:2 Cartographies for the Twenty-First Century

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## Editor's Introduction

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Here, I deliberately call . . . Wambui by [her] first name, not to take away from the titles that carry [her surname] but to acknowledge [her] contribution to black thought and to briefly point to the place of friendship in intellectual work coming from parts of Africa—intellectual work that has beautifully morphed into a network of friendships and affirmation in a world in which Africans are to be studied while taking the place of academic tour guides.

—Neo Sinxolo Musangi, “Homing with My Mother”

.....

The first African feminist I ever met was Wambui Mwangi, my 1990 classmate at Smith College. It was the spring of 1988, at the Mwangi Cultural Center, where all the heads of student of color organizations on campus had gathered together to discuss and strategize our response to yet another instance of institutional racism at Smith. That we were meeting at a center with which she shared a name was not coincidental. In addition to founding the Smith African Students Association, in which capacity she attended the meeting, Wambui was also renowned at the college for being N'gendo Mwangi's daughter. Dr. Mwangi was the first African woman to attend Smith, where she took a degree in biology in 1961, a fact commemorated a decade later by the newly formed Black Students' Alliance when they named the college's first cultural center in her honor in 1973 (Cole 2005). After completing medical school in the United States, Dr. Mwangi had returned to Kenya, where she was the first woman doctor in East Africa, a lifelong

public health activist, and until her death in 1989 a trenchant critic of colonialism and authoritarianism in Kenya.

Despite several notable biographical, cultural, and temperamental differences between us, Wambui and I shared a fierce commitment to anti-racist, anti-imperialist, critical feminism that predated our arrival at Smith. Consequently we became not only fast friends but self-declared sisters, kindred spirits who shared the experience of being raised by indomitable, courageous, and pathbreaking “single” mothers. Both women from what was then called the “Third World,” our mothers defied dictators born of patriarchy, imperialism, and colonialism in our respective motherlands, and went on to complete their college educations in the United States at a time when few women did.

Inspired by our mothers and united by our politics, Wambui and I established Concerned Students of All Colors (CSAC) together with Pakistani, Korean, Indian, African American, Jewish, South African, WASP, poor white, and sundry other heritage Smith women. CSAC was an ad hoc radical multicultural group of students committed to addressing institutional racism and classism at Smith. Side by side across differences and divides, we organized meetings and protest rallies, held press conferences, provided radio interviews, and reported racist “incidents” at the college, which included incidents that targeted Wambui specifically, to the U.S. Department of Justice’s Community Relations Divisions and the Massachusetts Commission against Discrimination. In sum, we insisted that the college live up to its founder’s hope that Smith College would help to create a society in which “what are called [women’s] ‘wrongs’ will be redressed, their wages adjusted, their weight of influence in reforming the evils of society will be greatly increased, as teachers, as writers, as mothers, as members of society, their power for good will be incalculably enlarged” (Smith College n.d.).

The work we did resulted in the *Smith Design for Institutional Diversity*, a historic college policy commitment that institutionalized programs to address the economic, educational, and sociocultural gaps that hampered the recruitment, retention and achievement of students, faculty, and staff of color, as well as low-income students at Smith; it also identified the “traditional norms” of elitism and white supremacy that would be challenged on campus by the time we graduated in 1990 (*Smith Design* 1988).<sup>1</sup> That particular aspect of the *Smith Design* drew national attention to the extent that the Harvard historian and Kennedy-era policy adviser Arthur

Schlesinger mentioned it by name in his 1991 anti-multiculturalism screed, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*. Just as Schlesinger and others feared, less than a decade after its articulation the *Smith Design* fomented transformations that allowed for *Meridians* to be imagined, conceptualized, and established at the college by the Women's Studies Program and, in turn, fostered epistemic, demographic, and paradigm shifts led by critical women of color in the U.S. academy.<sup>2</sup>

In the thirty years since then, Wambui and I both went on to earn PhDs in political science and sociology, respectively. Along the way, she worked for the Goree Institute in Senegal and I for the Ford Foundation's South Africa Program in New York; we each conducted research about and taught in the United States and Canada, as well as in our motherlands, Kenya and the Dominican Republic; and we shared the experience of transnationalism, internationalist multiple consciousness, and multilingual multicultural worlds. Ultimately, Wambui chose to return to Nairobi and like her mother devote herself to the uncompromising pursuit of justice, artistic creation, and scholarship.

Thus I admit that when Alicia and Gabeba approached *Meridians* about guest-editing a special issue on African feminisms, the possibility of obliquely honoring both Dr. Mwangi, N'gendo and Wambui, occurred to me. I was even more thrilled when I saw that Neo Sinxolo Musangi's "Counterpoint" in this collection makes explicit not only Wambui's role in Kenyan feminist praxis but also in African feminism's expansive and generous branches. Like Musangi and Keguro, whom Neo quotes, I share their sense that "from Wambui Mwangi and Frantz Fanon I learn to begin from where I am standing. And this also means returning to where I started." So it is that, returning to where the possibility of *Meridians* at Smith was born, I dedicate this issue to Dr. N'gendo Mwangi (d. 1989), one of Africa's many original feminists who have nurtured and inspired their own and many others' daughters to create "network[s] of friendships and affirmation" that transform the known world into the beloved community of which we dream.

#### Notes

- 1 One of those programs, the Praxis internship program, still operates today, as does the Office of Institutional Diversity.
- 2 It was Mary Maples Dunn (1933–2017), Dr. Mwangi's dear friend, who began the process of developing and realizing the *Design's* vision during her tenure as president of the college from 1985 to 1995 (Slotnik 2017).

### Works Cited

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