

2020

Speaking Our Peace: Celebrating Twenty Years of Women of Color Feminist Transnational Knowledge Production in Meridians

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Recommended Citation

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https://scholarworks.smith.edu/swg_facpubs/35

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Speaking Our Peace

Celebrating Twenty Years of Women of Color Feminist
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I hope that the contents of this issue . . . will encourage us each to plant new seeds—of hope, of rage, of insurrection, of peace—that might allow all of us to breathe more fully, to claim our ground even in the face of the most difficult challenges that inevitably color the contour of our lives.

—Myriam Chancy

Here I begin to provide a way of understanding the oppression of women who have been subalternized through the combined processes of racialization, colonization, capitalist exploitation, and heterosexualism.

—María Lugones

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It strikes me as metaphorically appropriate that 2020 has brought anti-Blackness, systemic racism, nativism, misogyny, sexism, health disparities, class violence, and quotidian police brutality into sharp focus for typically myopic mainstream media and its consumers in the United States. Yet, who could have anticipated the twists and turns that this year would take? In January, we watched a theatrical presidential impeachment trial in the Senate fail to hold a documented liar, racist, and misogynist accountable for his actions. In February, we began hearing “rumors” of a deadly virus spreading rapidly through China and Italy. In March, COVID-19’s arrival in the United States was unequivocally confirmed, and suddenly our campuses, schools, workplaces, stores, restaurants, and in-person

MERIDIANS · feminism, race, transnationalism Volume 19 Supplement 2020

DOI: 10.1215/15366936-8765096 © 2020 Smith College

social worlds began to shut down as “shelter in place” orders were issued and our lives moved online. Millions were furloughed, laid off, and fired, and thousands began to fall sick and die nonetheless. As of this writing, more than one hundred and ninety thousand people have died in the United States, disproportionately the people of color and immigrants who are now recognized (at least rhetorically) as “essential” laborers, live in overcrowded housing, and suffer from systemic health disparities. In April, presidential primaries, congressional, and state election dates and procedures began to be affected by the pandemic, and voting required inordinate courage and perseverance as polling places were closed, voting systems failed, and the threat of contagion was ever present (*Washington Post* 2020). In May, a White Minneapolis police officer named Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd—a Black man who had calmly acquiesced to all the officer’s orders during the course of an unwarranted arrest. Chauvin kneeled on Mr. Floyd’s neck for nearly ten minutes in broad daylight before dozens of witnesses, including three fellow police officers who failed to intervene and even assisted Chauvin in restraining his victim. Within days, the video of Mr. Floyd’s death became the spark that lit the tinderbox that the president and his nationalist supporters have been fearing yet fueling. In June, massive national and international Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality erupted, campaigns to defund the police arose in communities large and small, and Confederate, Columbian, and imperialist monuments came crashing down. Confederate flags were removed from statehouses and NASCAR; Aunt Jemima and the Land O’Lakes Indian princess were forcibly retired; racist sports team mascots and names were finally acknowledged as such; and the stories of other Black people who have been recently murdered with impunity came to the fore.

We learned that twenty-three-year-old massage therapist Elijah McClain died of cardiac arrest in August 2019, after being subjected to a choke hold by Aurora, Colorado, police officers Nathan Woodyard, Jason Rosenblatt, and Randy Roedema. In October 2019, the story of Fort Worth, Texas, human resources professional, Atatiana Jefferson—who was playing video games with her eight-year-old nephew, whom she was babysitting at the time, when she heard a noise outside and looked out the window only to be shot dead by Officer Aaron Dean—garnered new media coverage. In June 2020, the Georgia vigilantes Travis McMichael and his father Gregory, who shot twenty-five-year-old jogger Ahmad Arbery in February, while their friend William “Roddie” Bryan filmed the murder, were finally charged as

a result of protests. The Louisville, Kentucky, police who killed twenty-six-year-old EMT Breonna Taylor in her home when they rained bullets into her apartment after forcing their way as part of a “no-knock” warrant in the middle of a March night were fired, and protesters continue to pursue justice until they are charged. Nineteen-year-old Black Lives Matter activist Oluwatoyin Salau and seventy-five-year-old AARP volunteer Victoria Sims were found murdered in Florida, and their likely killer, Aaron Glee Jr., was apprehended and charged in June. In Atlanta, the killing of twenty-seven-year-old restaurant worker Rayshard Brooks by police at a Wendy’s parking lot, where he had fallen asleep in the drive-through, triggered further protests and calls for justice in June as well. We add these to the long list of Black victims whose names we say in an incantation of hope and rage, and join the chorus of protests against police brutality, anti-Blackness, White supremacy, and the carceral state.

Between life and death there is the constant anti-Black racism and misogynoirism (Bailey 2010) of everyday life—whether microaggressions or overt harassment, verbal or physical assaults, or institutional and structural racism, the violence is pervasive and commonplace. In addition to the trauma of witnessing and documenting a slow death in broad daylight, Darnella Frazer, the seventeen-year-old Black girl who filmed George Floyd’s murder has been subject to racist threats since then. Atlanta police officers violently assaulted twenty-year-old Spelman student Teniyah Pilgrim and twenty-two-year-old Morehouse student Messiah Young by tasing them and dragging them from their car as they were trying to return home after being caught in the protests over the Brooks killing (Green 2020). Likewise, Black people experience the weaponization of White womanhood in everyday life by women who threaten to or actually do call the police on them for the crime of going about their lives (Lang 2020). This pattern was perhaps best exemplified by Amy Cooper’s threat to call the NYPD and tell them that Black birdwatcher Christian Cooper was “an African American man threatening [her] life” because his request that she leash her dog in accordance with Central Park rules enraged her. That this occurred on the same weekend that George Floyd was murdered illustrates the continuum of harm caused by the conjoined logics of anti-Blackness, White supremacy, settler-colonialism, imperialism, and patriarchal heteronormative gender norms.

Additionally, we have witnessed a dramatic increase in anti-Asian rhetoric and violence, thanks in large part to the president’s racist insistence on

attributing the deadly impact of COVID-19 to “the Chinese” rather than to the now undeniably evident inadequacy of our for-profit health-care system (Human Rights Watch 2020). Over fifteen hundred incidents of anti-Asian hate speech, discrimination, and physical attacks in the United States alone were documented by “Stop AAPI Hate” in an April 2020 report (Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council 2020). Anti-Semitic violence in the United States likewise saw a dramatic increase, with the Anti-Defamation League documenting over two thousand assaults, vandalizations, and hate speech acts in 2019 (Schumacher 2020). At the same time, Islamophobia, another cornerstone of the revitalized White nationalist movements stoked by the president, has also increased apace. From the President’s “Muslim bans” to mosque vandalizations to physical assaults and murder, persistent violence against Muslims and those mistaken for Muslims has increased exponentially since 2017 (Alsultany 2020; Klaas 2019). These hateful patterns are global, as anti-Asian, anti-Semitic, and anti-Muslim violence—state-sanctioned and otherwise—has increased everywhere.

In the Americas, Latin American migrants and asylum seekers are being denied their internationally recognized human rights through the current administration’s new “Remain in Mexico” policy, which has essentially made Mexico a purgatory zone (Hinojosa 2020). For those who do make it across our increasingly militarized borders, the taking and jailing of their children—thousands of whom continue to languish in over two hundred “detention centers” and dozens of whom have died while in custody—has become normalized. In 2019 alone, eight-year-old Felipe Gómez Alonzo, sixteen-year-old Carlos Gregorio Hernández Vásquez, seven-year-old Jake-lin Caal Maquín, two-year-old Wilmer Josué Ramírez Vásquez, and one-year-old Mariee Juarez survived the arduous journey from Guatemala to the United States, only to be taken from their mothers and fathers, fall ill, and die while in detention. The trauma of forcible separation from their parents, the abysmal conditions in the centers, and the sexual violence, illness, and death will haunt these children, their families, their people—and us, for we are accountable for our government’s actions (Briggs 2020). That many of these migrants are also indigenous people of the Americas who have already survived centuries of Iberian/Ladino/mestizo settler-colonial violence and U.S. imperialist violence in their homelands—violence that triggers their exodus to el norte, where they are then presumptively criminalized—adds to the outrageousness of these detentions

(Asad and Hwang 2019; Davies 2019). Hate-mongering and scapegoating are intrinsically part and parcel of nationalism and settler-colonialism.

Yet simultaneously, voices decrying anti-Blackness have recently risen from many unexpected quarters—corporations, universities, the NFL, Facebook, Twitter, retailers, and sundry others—in support of the movement for Black Lives and, supposedly, to the work of dismantling systemic racism more generally. That these historically White-serving institutions are not just latecomers to the struggle but a root source of the problem perhaps goes without saying; one could reasonably respond to their “statements” with cynicism. Still, as with the Revolution of 1776, the War of 1812, Reconstruction, the Great Depression, and the late 1960s, it seems that we are once again at a critical juncture in the United States, a moment of reckoning with racism in which we can do the right thing once and for all. At *Meridians*, we hope that the multiracial, intergenerational, and cross-class protests that erupted this year indicate that we have reached a new tipping point toward accountability in the United States and globally.

Twenty years ago, the founding Smith-Wesleyan editorial group stated unequivocally in the introduction to the journal’s first issue that “fundamental to our mission is the awareness that the production of knowledge is political” (Aggarwal et al. 2000: x). Critical optimism, radical hope, and faith in the power of knowledge production from the margins to change the world are central to our political project. We believe that lending our voices to the cacophonous conversations taking place about anti-Blackness and racism more generally has the potential to shift their tenor away from empty platitudes and toward empowering platforms. As Smith College President Ruth Simmons wrote in her foreword to volume 1, number 1, at *Meridians*, “we believe that issues affecting the lives of women of color must be given greater attention and support and that such support, both public and private, will result in increased economic prosperity, exciting scholarly innovation, and much societal good” (Simmons 2000: vii).

To that end, *Meridians* has made small but meaningful contributions to growing the pipeline of women of color faculty, to supporting the work of women of color artists and activists, and to expanding the reach of intersectionality into all our fields of labor. We have successfully addressed the conflict between the norms of historically White (male)–serving institutions and the innovative and contestatory nature of women of color feminist scholarship by undertaking a double-blind peer-review process in which, rather than the gatekeepers of old, our reviewers are truly *peers*—

other women of color feminist scholars with expertise in the fields, debates, and questions we engage with at *Meridians*. Our peer reviewers know what our authors are talking about, and typically offer constructively rigorous and generative responses. Although their labors are typically latent rather than manifest in the publications that result, we are as proud of our work growing a large community of thoughtful peer reviewers as we are of our authors. In order to preserve the double-blind promise of anonymity, we have not acknowledged our reviewers by name, but I take this opportunity to thank them collectively for their generous service.

Given the entrenched nature of the “publish or perish” tenure norm, in being a venue that recognizes and supports the expertise of both the reviewer and the author of works attending to feminism, race, and transnationalism, with the generous assistance of our peer reviewers *Meridians* has become a notable contributor to the project of changing the “face of the academy.” Likewise, since volume 3, *Meridians* has solicited and published the work of women of color visual artists on our covers and as features, a practice that simultaneously materially supports independent artists and brings joy to our readers. Finally, regardless of the vehicle, *Meridians* promotes the understanding, development, and expansion of intersectionality as a paradigm and a practice (Crenshaw 1991).

I believe that these contributions are being made manifest in the uprisings taking place all over the United States—on the streets, at the ballot box, in the classroom, on our screens, and at our kitchen tables. Protestors’ trenchant refusals to accept subordination anymore is precisely what the contemporary White supremacist patriarchy of the United States has attempted to forestall ever since Reaganism initiated the attacks against the progressive policy initiatives won by the social justice movements of the late 1960s/early 1970s. In the world of higher education, right-wing attacks on academic freedom, faculty governance, and tenure have increased in tandem with the growing number of women, people of color, immigrants, and people of working-class origins who enter into the ranks of faculty and student bodies. We newcomers to the academy have developed and authorized new ways of knowing and being, demanded structural change, and are resourcefully transforming the ivory tower from a citadel of privilege into an accessible community resource. That is, rather than gratefully assimilate into the status quo, Black/Indigenous/people of color and progressives are slowly but surely changing the America that had been so “great” for the White nationalist misogynists to whom the current president appeals to, most recently during his hateful speech at Mt. Rushmore

on July 4, 2020 (Muller 2020). As editor emeritus Myriam Chancy put it in her first introduction for *Meridians*, it has always been our work “to plant new seeds—of hope, of rage, of insurrection, of peace—that might allow all of us to breathe more fully, to claim our ground” (Chancy 2003). This 20th Anniversary Reader is a sowing of those seeds.

Like seeds, some issues are perennial concerns for women of color feminisms. Nonetheless, deciding what to include in this anniversary reader required a set of principles by which to choose from the hundreds of essays, culture works, activist reports, memoirs, and poems that we have published over the past twenty years. I began the process by gathering impact data such as citation rates, downloads, and readings across multiple sites (Project Muse, e-Duke Journals, Academia, Research Gate, Google Scholar). Drawing from those combined sources, we identified the one hundred texts that appeared time and again on the various lists that result from this first phase.¹ Reading through those thousands of pages, I was struck by how rich and broad-ranging our authors’ contributions have been, how cacophonous yet symphonic our voices, how steely-eyed yet generous our visions. I would have loved to publish all one hundred. Unfortunately, the reality of budgetary constraints set fixed spending limits and, by extension, a page limit.

Thus, I asked each Editorial Advisory and Creative Writing Advisory Board member to identify their top three favorites from among the one hundred texts in phase one. Although, not surprisingly, there were some idiosyncratic favorites, there was also a helpful degree of consensus about some of the pieces that facilitated developing the second-phase list of fifty texts. Once again, I was so moved by the quality and range of work on that shorter list that I struggled to narrow the list down further. Ultimately, I chose texts that represented all the feature areas we publish—In the Archives, Counterpoints, Culturework, Essays, In the Trenches, Memoirs, Media Matters, Pedagogy, and Poetry—and that, true to the *Meridians* project’s mission, spanned disciplines, demographics, and geographies. Thus, the original 275 pages initially proposed to Duke University Press blossomed into the 559 pages you now hold in your hands. Even so, this represents but a sampling of the innovative and critical knowledge producers that *Meridians* has offered a platform from which to speak.

We consider this *Meridians* 20th Anniversary Reader a staple text for educators who undertake social justice pedagogy from kindergarten to graduate school. Beyond the classroom, we hope that this reader becomes a resource to activists laboring in the trenches of social justice globally and

the realms of cultural work, from poetry to painting to photography to performance, because empowerment through education is our *raison d'être*. The authors include internationally renowned U.S.-based scholar activists such as Angela Davis and independent Global South scholars such as Sarah Ahmed; established poets such as Nikky Finney and younger poets such as Laurie Ann Guerrero, who after publishing in *Meridians*, would go on to become San Antonio's Poet Laureate a decade later; senior scholars such as the former president of the Latin American Studies Association, political scientist Sonia Álvarez, and younger scholars such as UC Berkeley lecturer in English Jennifer Cho. As a way of historicizing the journal's leadership, and also because they appeared in the lists generated in phases one and two, I also decided to include works by each of *Meridians*' editors—Kum-Kum Bhavnani (2001–2003), Myriam Chancy (2003–2004), Paula J. Giddings (2005–2017), and myself (2017–present).

Altogether, the texts in this reader are concerned with uncovering the gendered racialization of embodiment (Candelario 2000; Saraswati 2010); contesting the carceral state (Davis and Shaylor 2001; Palacios 2016); expanding archives and revising history (Giddings 2001; Basu et. al. 2002; May 2014); questioning the adequacy and accuracy of media representation (Bhavnani 2000; Brooks 2008; Deb 2016); memorializing resistance and organizing (Bachetta et. al. 2002; Majaj 2001; Torres 2009; Zook 2003); highlighting activism (Calvo 2004; Mithlo 2009); documenting activism (Álvarez 2016; Barker 2006; Ferreira and Medeiros 2016; Thobani 2002); theorizing from the margins (Ahmed 2006; Cho 2011; Price 2010; Nash 2013); telling our stories in prose and poetry (Chancy 2011; Finney 2003; Guerrero 2009; Hammad 2002); and, to borrow a phrasing, teaching to transgress (May 2014; Palacios 2016; Rajgopal 2010; Wise Whitehead 2016).²

Meridians authors are largely—though not exclusively—women of color: Black diasporic, South Asian, Middle Eastern and North African, Asian American, Latin@/Latin American/Caribbean, Native American Indian/Indigenous, and multiracial. They are typically feminist interdisciplinarians whose work has helped to transform the traditional borders and boundaries of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, to decolonize ethnic and area studies, to globalize and transnationalize women/gender/sexuality/feminist studies, and to center race as a critical intellectual project and political concern. Thus, I close by dedicating this reader to recently deceased María Lugones (1944–2020), whose life work was to both theorize and materialize resistance against modernity's oppressions.

Lugones’s animating questions resonate with the spirit of this 20th Anniversary Reader: “How do we learn about each other? How do we do it without harming each other but with the courage to take up a weaving of the everyday that may reveal deep betrayals? How do we cross without taking over? With whom do we do this work? . . . How do we practice with each other engaging in dialogue at the colonial difference? How do we know we are doing it?” (Lugones 2010: 756). As our cover art by Samanta Tello, *Silenced Voices of Everyday Heroes*, illustrates beautifully, *Meridians* believes that the answers lie in seeking—and speaking—our peace together. *A luta continua*.

Notes

- 1 Although our anniversary issue celebrates the past twenty years of knowledge production, I made the conscious decision not to include works published since I assumed the editorship in 2017. This choice does not imply that recent scholarship and creative work published in the journal is less meritorious; rather, it takes time and potential for impact to be ascertainable. It is my hope that we can publish a reader for our thirtieth anniversary that will include some of those recent pieces.
- 2 See hooks 1994.

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