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Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism (Special Issue, Indigenous Feminisms across the World, Part 1)

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As declared by many important Indigenous female leaders, although Indigenous women play a fundamental role in the preservation of biodiversity and ancestral knowledge, these contributions often go unrecognised and underdeveloped, to the detriment of the very culture and environment that should be preserved. This dilemma is not new, but the struggle of those women who have the capacity to effect positive change to claim visibility and agency over their lives continues to be a barrier to such transformation. For this reason alone, this wide-ranging, innovative and multi-layered special issue project takes an important place in the domain of writing from and about the experiences of Indigenous peoples across the globe.

As one such Indigenous female leader, Jihan Gearon, has noted 'Indigenous feminism is an intersectional theory and practice of feminism that focuses on decolonization, Indigenous sovereignty, and human rights for Indigenous women and their families' (2021)¹. As she further notes though, it is often the theoretical dimension that takes priority and dominates from a privileged academic perspective that runs the risk of reinforcing stereotypes and divisions, along with emphasising marginalisation and patriarchal structures. This is in part why this special issue of *Meridians* titled *Indigenous Feminisms across the World; Part 1* (2024) is distinctive in that it provides space for contributions across a range of formats devoted solely to this topic to come together and be brought into dialogue with one another.

While it is regrettable that the editorial team was unable to find an Indigenous scholar to take on the task of editing this special issue, the strategy of co-editing (Bengali scholar Basuli Deb invited to work with *Meridians* editor Ginetta E. B. Candelario) seems to have turned out to be a pragmatic way forward, part of a longer term and project of commitment by the team to acting in 'solidarity with Indigenous peoples' (2024, p.1). This decision results in part from a review of content over twenty-four years that revealed a 'lack of Indigenous feminists and/or Indigenous feminist work' (2024, p.2) across the preceding issues and it is to be expected now that future special issues will emerge soon, along with more empathic interweaving of such perspectives across all issues. This does indeed seem like a much-needed action given that the stated goal of the broader *Meridians* project according to its

¹ Jihan Gearon is a Diné and Nahilíí (Black) activist, artist and writer. Her online article of 2021 was a call to bring back matriarchy in Indigenous communities to rebuild and decolonise the foundation of Native community life.

own statement online is to provide a forum for the finest scholarship and creative work by and about women of colour in U.S. and international contexts.²

Therefore, the recommitment to highlight the very best of scholarship, including creative work, by and about women whose work, conditions, practices, histories, geographies, cultures, forms of resistance are often neglected is commendable.

The depth and range of this timeline volume offer some recompense for this *lacuna*, as does the suggestion that there will be further volumes taking the approach of Indigenous feminisms. The editors have achieved added-value through carefully selecting contributions, of differing formats, from many different parts of the globe, thereby blurring the boundaries between franchise colonialism, usually associated with nineteenth-century Asia and Africa, and settler colonialism, more often attributed to the Americas, and enabling an effective decentring of the Western/Northern concerns. Somewhat ambitiously, they also aim to contest the primacy of the Westphalian system of organising the world order via nation-states, while at the same time expressing an ambiguous stance towards the United Nations, despite (or perhaps because of) its *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007).³

The emphasis of this volume on interdisciplinarity is crucial and given added complexity through the lens of Indigeneity. Many of the contributors reveal both the challenges and the opportunities that emerge when they and their work do not fit, quite or at all, into an institutional or disciplinary structure. One such contribution that foregrounds this from its opening words is the enlightening and extensive critical essay, 'Traversing Disciplinary Boundaries, Globalizing Indigenities: Visibilizing Assyrians in the Present' (2024, pp.182-209) in which Mariam Georgis argues that the aim of her project is to understand more deeply the invisibility of Assyrians in contemporary politics through the examination of the academic disciplines of political science and Middle East studies. As a form of solidarity, she deploys an Indigenous feminist lens to call for the globalisation of conceptualisations of Indigenities, joining forces with scholarship on colonialism, decolonisation, and race. At the same time, she laments that her work does not align with traditional structures, reflecting the statelessness of many of the peoples who are given voice through the contributions in this volume.

The range of formats in which contributions appear, along with the care by which they have been ordered, also work well for this multi-dimensional and multi-layered topic, with critically reflective essays juxtaposed with extracts from memoirs, interviews, creative writing, interventions and artworks using a variety of media, thus allowing for tensions to be exposed and explored rather than closed down. For example, in her 'Media Matters' essay titled 'Honouring the Ancestors and Creator: Indigeneity, Diaspora, and the Politics of Spiritual Relationality in Tannis Nielsen's *A Creation* and Rosa Sungjoo Park's *Forgotten Dreams*' (2024, pp.52-81), Ruthann Lee argues that Nielsen's and Park's photographic artworks: 'imagine radical alternatives to neoliberal multiculturalism while at the same time being subject to appropriation within these increasingly institutionalized logics' (2024, p.57).

This lucid exposition is preceded by the powerful poem 'Open Your Mouth' by Caribbean Afro-Latinx writer Yael Valencia Aldana (inspired by her painting of the same title), part of the collection *Black Mestiza* (sadly not referenced by this volume), that interweaves narratives that connect her with her Caribbean parents and, particularly in this poem, intertwines her with her own Colombian grandmother, along with their heritage, mythologies, knowledge and traditions. Summoning up images of a complex matriarchal genealogy, 'Open Your Mouth' also speaks of a multiplicity of complex connections with the spirits of the land and water: 'we are waiting, call our people out of the mountains, out of rubble burned ash piles, out of silted, slimy river bottoms bring us.' With her poetic response to trauma, Aldana thus interweaves the psychological, the emotional and the spiritual, to powerful effect. Indeed, it might be said that all of the contributions here address trauma in some way, whether explicitly – such as via Elena Ruiz's Counterpoint essay 'Structural Trauma' (2024, pp.29-52), which precedes Aldana's poem – as acknowledgement of the widespread effects of structural colonial power felt by Indigenous communities worldwide, or more implicitly as a structural force through the whole of the rest of the volume.

Another format that is highly relevant to this context of Indigenous Feminisms is the transcription (translated by Elena Langdon and in the original Portuguese) of a formal public address given by two female leaders of Brazil's pan-ethnic Indigenous rights movement, Sônia Bone Guajajara and Célia Xakriabá, during their residency at Smith College (USA) in 2020, just prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. In each of their sections of the contribution 'Indigenous Women on the Frontlines of Climate Activism: The Battle for Environmental Justice in the Amazon', these leaders again reveal the tensions of their situations, rather than stake any claim to monolithic intentions and ambitions. As such, their addresses explain how and why they became involved in the struggles for the human and

² *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* is an intersectional feminist journal based at Smith College; celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2025, it has grown to become an influential community for women, with global network of contributors, readers, and teachers. See <https://sites.smith.edu/meridians/> for further details.

³ Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2007, the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* provides a global framework for efforts to advance indigenous peoples' rights. Together with other human rights instruments and growing human rights jurisprudence concerning indigenous peoples, the Declaration contains crucial guidance for building societies that ensure full equality and rights of indigenous peoples.

environmental rights of their communities, while also drawing attention to the risks in seeking recognition and protection of the traditional territorial claims and land-use practices of Indigenous peoples in the Brazilian Amazon and beyond. Increased visibility on the global level comes with new dangers of their own, they concede, and their determination to seek protection all too often flies in the face of the motivations of some of their own community members.⁴ In the introductory note to this section, Malcolm McNee draws attention to the formation of Sônia Bone Guajajara as an activist which came about through studies and professional activities that took her away from her community; the act of leaving being a familiar refrain in the life stories of the activists and writers of this volume. In the case of Guajajara, we learn that she fulfilled a promised to return to her community and it was the coming together of external and internal lived experiences that seem to have awakened the determination to secure the survival of her own and other Indigenous communities across Brazil.

I suggest then that this special issue, dedicated to Native Hawaiian anticolonial activist, scholar, educator, and poet Huanani-Kaye Trask (1949–2021), who passed away while this volume was being produced, is highly relevant and timely, perhaps even long overdue, for its contribution to knowledge around Indigenous feminisms by its decentring of the transnational, and for its disruption of boundaries that have developed, in recent times, between decolonial and postcolonial approaches. It should be of interest to any scholar, at any level, with its thoughtful blend of dialogues between formats, contexts and interdisciplinary perspectives, all centred on the experiences of Indigenous women across the globe, especially in relation to regionality as overriding or eschewing the Global North lens of nationality. More importantly, perhaps, it should appeal to all those interested in critical questions and creative expression relating to anti-imperialist solidarity, spirituality and decolonial political action.

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⁴ Ketty Marcelo Lopez is another important contemporary Indigenous leader; at the time of writing, she is head of OMIAASEC, a non-profit organisation based in the Junín region of Peru that promotes the defence of the individual and collective rights of the Indigenous women of the central Amazon. She and others such as Melania Canales Poma (ONAMIAP) continue the struggles of earlier leaders like Dolores Cacuango (*kichwa* leader of the Ecuadorean Andes in the 1960s) and many others like her who believed in fighting from a female perspective for the rights of Indigenous peoples.