



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 21
Issue 7 *In Medias Res: Decolonial Interventions*

Article 1

October 2020

In Medias Res: Decolonial Interventions Editorial Introduction

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Recommended Citation

Khoo, Su-ming; Vered, Anique; and Dey, Sayan (2020). *In Medias Res: Decolonial Interventions Editorial Introduction*. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21(7), 1-7.
Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol21/iss7/1>

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In Medias Res: Decolonial Interventions Editorial Introduction

By Su-Ming Khoo¹, Anique Vered² and Sayan Dey³

Since we announced the call for this Special Issue on *Decolonial Interventions: in the middle of decoloniality* in mid-2019, it feels like a lot has changed and the “middle” is more entangled and complicated than ever. The COVID-19 pandemic has locked us down to shelter in our places, yet it has made us busier and more connected, and more worried and questioning. The concerns and motivations that stood behind our decision to call for this Special Issue have not been eclipsed, as we might have initially thought. Indeed, our concerns have been magnified and thrust forward as the global spread of the pandemic has been accompanied by the eruption of Black Lives Matter protests against police violence in the US, scenes of pandemic refugees dying on their exodus from locked-down cities in India, toppling statues in Britain and horrendously unjust disparities of sickness and death burdening Black people, Indigenous people and people of colour in different countries. Deep questions about structural injustice and the colonial-modern have (re)surfaced as the entangled roots of oppression and violence have been thrust into the open, making them impossible to ignore. Racism, gender violence, indigenous dispossession and genocide, climate and environmental injustice, forest fires and species extinction render basic human demands for healthcare, shelter, food, clean water and even the universal right to breathe (Mbembe 2020) impossible for so many.

It remains our shared belief that the dismantling of coloniality must be an interdisciplinary project, it must be quotidian, and it must be practical. Yet, any action, any intervention finds itself entangled and bundled back in with coloniality - the tenacious, ambiguous and contradictory aftermath of half a millennium of colonization and empire. ‘Decoloniality’ – that which must follow in the wake of political decolonization - concerns the extensive, overlapping and shared struggles against the coloniality of knowledge, power and being itself. As coloniality is intersected by socio-cultural, political, economic, gendered, and sexual systems of hierarchy, domination, power and exclusion, we are also witnessing the emergence of possibilities for epistemological and ontological shift and renewal that can disrupt and push back against nationalist geopolitics,

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homicidal territorial boundary-policing and divisive categorizations of patriarchal, colonial, neo-colonial, and nativist politics. Alongside the politics of exclusion and *ressentiment*, we also glimpse possibilities and stagings of resistance, allyship, solidarity and conviviality.

This Special Issue titled *In Medias Res: Decolonial Interventions* was created from an online reading circle organized by the Convivial Thinking Collective in 2019. The issue was seeded by our involvement in the Convivial Thinking collaborative platform, which allowed each of us to step in and to begin to read, share, think and discuss ideas across many different locations. The collective is ‘an open group of scholars thinking, working and writing on all issues related to post- and decolonial approaches in the context of development, development studies and beyond’. The reading circle announced shared desires and commitments to generate dehierarchal, depolarized, pluriversal and polylogical spaces, where epistemological and ontological differences are not rejected or erased.

This reading circle opened with discussions on the works of Indian polymath Chandra Kant Raju and Martinican philosopher Frantz Fanon. Its first discussions and questions centered on the persistence of othering and racialization within the various systems of knowledge production across the globe. Touching upon the possibilities of decentralizing, decolonizing and pluriversalizing, the discussions raised far more questions than we could hope to answer – concerning epistemological and ontological differences, how these related to positionings of decolonization in Global North and Global South; the parameters of disciplinarity, transdisciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity; the problem of visibility and invisibility of knowledges in, outside of and across academia; and the differences between corrosive and healing positions or identities. These discussions seeded a collaborative archive, as a beginning from which we might interrogate the ambiguities of coloniality as a continuing condition, with a particular focus on gender and decoloniality.

For the next step, we remain indebted to Professor Diana Fox, JIWS Editor-in-Chief, for her generous and hospitable invitation to Dey to edit a Special Issue arising from the reading circle. Alongside, Khoo and Vered had begun a dialogue on the resonances between the ‘invisible middle’ of experimental arts and social justice with the ‘included middle’ of transdisciplinary theory, which then included further readings - of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui’s work, the concept of *ch’ixi* and matrixial borderspaces. The Call for Contributions via this Journal widened the polylogue beyond these initial conversations of the Convivial Thinking group and we are delighted to expand the reading circle outwards to a larger writing circle engaged with decolonial interventions from a wide range of geographical, disciplinary, practice and personal locations. This move from reading to writing richly highlights the connections between reading and writing, making and sense, resistance and the repair of the future⁴.

Before we introduce the ‘Decolonial Interventions’ articles that comprise this Special Issue, we are compelled to review some discussions of decolonization, decoloniality and postcoloniality. Lewis Gordon discusses decolonization thus: “[i]nitially referring to a process of achieving independence, it has long since expanded from the institutional form of one country’s control over another, to the mechanisms of what could be called ‘informal culture’” (2017). Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that “decolonization needs to be understood in its phases ... If you remove colonialism physically without removing it epistemically it will not disappear” (2020). Yet Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang contend that “decolonization is not a metaphor ... it is not a

⁴ As Claudia Rankine writes in her poem, “Weather” (2020): “.../Whatever contracts keep us social compel us now to disorder the disorder. / Peace. /We’re out to repair the future.” See also Gunaratnam and Farahtani.” *Aristic and Intellectual Hospitality* (2020).

metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools” (2012: 1). “Decolonization” from their perspective means, first and foremost, the restitution of stolen lands to the First Nations. The spatial and temporal range of framings indicates that it is unlikely that decolonization or decoloniality can be reduced to single meanings, or neatly fitted into a single ideological, political or cultural demand.

The ambivalent, open state of the conceptual debate poses a risk that everyday decolonial thinking and doing may get lost or trapped, between over-promising and too-narrow referential frames that don’t fit. Decolonial impulses may become rapidly polarized in the name of departing from, and dismantling, existing templates of coloniality, and get dragged along by different and complicatedly intersecting currents of caste, class, politics, gender and culture. When it becomes a slogan, “decolonization!” may even function as a mask - to systemically, epistemically and ontologically obscure new designs for internal or expansionary coloniality. For instance, the ‘Hindu Rashtra’ (Hindu nation) programme that is being prosecuted in the name of decolonization and indigenization in contemporary India re-stages many of the class, caste, gender, communal and religious hierarchies originally consolidated by European colonizers. In their critical discussion of the debate on ‘decolonizing the curriculum’ in South African universities, Niall Reddy and Michael Nassen-Smith (2020) caution against an uncritical embrace of ‘decolonization’, pointing to the problematic legacy of postcolonial theory in collapsing the debates around ‘decolonizing’ into potentially reactionary civilizational binaries.

With these caveats in mind, this Special Issue seeks to open up and animate the debate on decoloniality by focusing on interventions and moments in the ‘middle of things’: occupying obvious areas of impossibility and scenes of “brokenness” - of economies, powers, states of being, bodies and environments – while keeping alert to the possibilities of surviving and repairing the future.

In Medias Res has emerged as a practice in pluriversality, offering of a space where, as the Zapatistas of Chiapas put it: “many worlds make us ... many worlds fit”. A pluriversal space hopes to “overcome[s] patriarchal attitudes, racism, casteism, and other forms of discrimination”, (Kothari et al, 2019) to bring forth an otherwise that is always-already there. Early in our conversation, we asked:

Since decoloniality spans theory, praxis and everyday life in a system that continues to be dominated by patriarchal, colonial and capitalist powers, then how might transdisciplinary pedagogical practices open pluriversal spaces for being-with a decolonial otherwise?

We have paid attention to, and hoped for, ways to inhabit a transdisciplinary ethics of care in trying to make space for “decolonial interventions”.

The contributions in this Special Issue span the globe from East to West and South to North, with papers focusing on the experiences of Indigenous, Middle Eastern, Indian, African and African-American, Central and South American, European and Euro-descendent, migrant and settler. The essays traverse many disciplines, from gender studies to post-development, human rights, worker’s rights, law, ethnic studies, environmental studies, philosophy, the arts, literature and more. The selection of works shared here point to an arising of ecologies of knowledge that treat the conceptual and the methodological differently. They respond to two specific provocations inviting decolonial interventions: how can we situate, name and resist ongoing exclusions? And

how can we excavate, unlearn and repair structures of exclusion and injustice such as racism and sexism, and move towards new ways of thinking about anti-racism and anti-sexism?

The discussions of excavation, learning and repair across this collection suggest four organizing motifs that we have used to structure the overall Special Issue: *Knowledges*, *Haunting*, *Ecologies*, and *Bodies* – the latter particularly with respect to reproduction and embodiment. The 15 research papers presented here are thematically organized along these four motifs.

The articles in the first section, *Knowledges* address decoloniality's epistemic-systemic crux, exploring new forms of relationality, worlds of unknowing, and critical practices within higher education and research.

In her visionary paper "On Witches, Shrooms, And Sourdough: A Critical Reimagining of the White Settler Relationship to Land," Abby Maxwell dreams up a white settler relationship to land defined by reciprocity, accountability, and care. Resisting the cultural appropriation of Indigenous ways of relating, the paper unfolds Euro-descendent forms of earth-based spirituality and relationality to offer fellow white settlers "a relationality that is ours."

In "The Salon is now in session: a reflection on UNISA's decolonial reading", Motlatsi Khosi and Lenka Vrablikova try to critically grasp the various ways through which decolonial theories can be used in the everyday practice of teaching and learning as the practice of freedom in higher education institutions. They discuss the factors that motivated them to initiate a "reading salon" on decolonial thinking and doing and how it was organized, situated and enacted. They discuss strategies of resistance in mainstream educational practice, targeting heteropatriarchal and capitalist coloniality and reflect on how decolonial reading functions as a collaborative and co-creative exercise.

In "Decolonial African feminism for white allies", Deirdre Byrne explores how white feminists in Africa might centre a response to African feminism and African feminists. Byrne moves to articulate a decolonial response for white feminists that foregrounds solidarity, ally-hood and respect.

Nicole Dillard, in "Designing research to dismantle Oppression building: Utilizing Critical Narrative Analysis & Critical Participatory Action Research in Research on Mothering and Work and Beyond", presents her research into the impact of master narratives on working mothers, and in particular mothers of colour in the USA. She promotes the combination of Critical Narrative Analysis and Critical Participatory Action Research as a valuable research methodology that can provide engaged publics with emancipatory actions for change in local and societal contexts, while systemically challenging the absoluteness of master narratives through personal and counter-narratives of research participants.

Rebekka Kiesewetter's "A New Genealogy for Critical OA Publishing: Towards a Politics of Intersectional Transnationality" proposes a genealogy of open access publishing that takes into consideration feminist and decolonial transnational publishing initiatives that have been active in non-digital realms, prior and in parallel to the telling of their digital origins. She suggests that the ways in which pre-digital feminist and decolonial transnational struggle have been mobilized and organized through publishing may offer important insights for contemporary critical open access publishing.

The articles in the second section, *Haunting*, bring together and lay bare the invisible, erased and forgotten, questioning the tellability of certain subjects while pointing to the power that can come with rethinking deviance and the politics of visibility.

Situated between a contemporary prominent asylum case of a lesbian Guatemalan refugee and the 1980s Sanctuary Movement, Maria Vargas examines how different constructions of

deserving subjects across sexuality, gender, whiteness, and class produces ghostly others in U.S. asylum and sanctuary movement discourse. Her paper, “Ghostly Others: Limiting Constructions of Deserving Subjects in Asylum Claims and Sanctuary Protection” exposes the politics of “tellability” and invisibility, and writes “from a location that is haunted in order to gain insight into how a post-modern, late-capitalist, postcolonial world represses what it dares not name.”

In “Embodied Liminality and Gendered State Violence: Artist Expressions in the MMIW Movement”, Rachel Presley offers a critical analysis of the psychosocial and political impact of four artefacts emerging out of the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women (MMIW) crisis in North America. Presley examines Indigenous feminist activism as a pathway to decolonization. Through the conceptual exploration of ‘embodied liminality’, Presley points to the possibilities for recognizing the Indigenous body across fluid boundaries and the potential for surfacing radical resistance and critical vocabularies of aesthetic deviance in the decolonial movement against MMIW.

Hannah Barrie also explores the persisting problem of murdered and missing indigenous women in Canada, in “I Used to Think You Were Just a Story”: Imagined Violence in Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers’ *A Red Girl’s Reasoning*”. Barrie explores the utopic possibilities opened by a film featuring an indigenous girl’s violent revenge. This fictional tale comes up hard against the ethics of nonviolent resistance, surfacing and confronting the perennial question of decolonial praxis as violent versus the praxis of nonviolent resistance.

The third section, *Ecologies*, links the intimate body, the poetic body and the environmental body, confronting extraction, commodification and dispossession with song and the commons.

In, “Decolonizing the Anti-Extractive Struggle: Amazonian Women’s Practices of Forest-Making in Ecuador”, Andrea Sempertegui offers the actions of indigenous women’s struggles against oil extractivism in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Their “forest-making” actions sing into existence “something else” that speaks radically in the name of life, a “Living Forest” that overturns, and offers an alternative to, the modern-colonial division between nature and culture.

In “Valli” at the border: Adivasi women de-link from settler colonialism paving re-enchantment of the forest commons,’ Deepa Kozhisseri presents the impact of land dispossession among the Adivasi women in the Attappady Hills, in Kerala’s Western Ghats region. The discussion links a gradual increase in the practice of elopement with land dispossession, and correlated household collapse and (primarily male) alcoholism. The article charts the rupture of gendered agricultural foodways and women’s responses, setting up community kitchens to provide nutritional meals.

The fourth section, *Bodies*, focuses on reproduction and gendered embodiment. Starting from hacking the molecule as political, this section bares the potential pluriversality of reproductive rights, presents a view of mothering as a political embodiment of decoloniality, and offers the “matrixial borderspace” as a co-creative conceptual space for decolonial critical and reproductive praxis.

In “Decolonizing Molecules”, Maddalena Fragnito points to the contradictions between the leakage of an excess of pharmaceutical hormones into the environment as pollution and the unavailability of commercial hormones for gender transitioning leading to a fundamental rights shortage for some people. She shows how contemporary art practitioners and community workshops are gesturing towards decolonization through biohacking, making the decommodification of pharmaceutical molecules possible, to re-create and produce the hormones

already present in bodies, and necessary for gender transitioning potentially accessible as commons.

In “Analysing Contemporary Women’s Movements for Bodily Autonomy, Pluriversalizing the Feminist Scholarship on the Politics of Respectability,” Dyuti Chakravarty, Alice Feldman and Emma Penney critically analyze the racialized politics of representation in the Repeal campaign and referendum on reproductive rights in Ireland. They present a unique convocation and genealogy of the transformative opportunities created by working class, Black feminist and Indian postcolonial practices for “pluriversal engagement and transperipheral connectedness.”

In “Decolonizing the Womb”, Ester Espinosa and Marlene Solis-Perez offer an account of the colonality of reproductive health and obstetric violence in Mexico. They highlight the misogynistic and racist nature of Mexico’s industrial-medical complex, underpinned by a deep history of embodied colonization that sought to control the reproductive and gendered body, specifically the womb.

Hasret Çetinkaya, in “Mothers as the middle-ground between the Mountain and the State,” offers an intimate portrait and historicization of the Kurdish ‘Peace Mothers,’ a social movement advocating for peace. Çetinkaya evokes the woman as a decolonial political agent through her portrayal of the Peace Mothers’ engagement in public, ritualized confrontations with the state to demand an end to the war against their children, while also promoting the ethic of living with one another in shared vulnerability, despite differences.

Su-ming Khoo and anique vered, through their article “Including the ‘invisible middle’ of decoloniality,” trace the possibilities of theorizing and approaching the inclusion of experiences, concepts and bodies situated in the ‘invisible middle’ of decoloniality. Khoo and vered argue – if colonality is an immense and lengthy process towards developing colonial/modern structures of the present, then decoloniality requires surfacing, baring and bringing to bear the invisibilities and erasures of bodies that exist and resist in spite of colonial extractions and appropriations. Responding to the call to orient thinking towards transformation, they propose surfacing affective entanglements and co-emergences of meaning that return to what really *matters*.

We must acknowledge that, over the year and a half that we have spent involved in this project, the salience of environmental catastrophe and systemic racism have increased unbearably. The hopes we expressed in the Call for Papers: for diversity as a source of strength and for the “middle” to act as a site for a kind of “intimate othering” (vered 2020), where differences can be faced and becoming-collective, seem momentarily possible, seem even more urgent, but also difficult. How can we step into a shared vulnerability and move through the discomforts of excavating and unlearning? How can we hope to move from spaces of brokenness in the present to spaces when the future can be repaired? A key aspect of the “revolution within the revolution” is reclaiming how we reproduce ourselves in relation with human and nonhuman others, even as the systemic problems seem to shift under us. Thinking with a variety of interventions *in medias res*, in the messy middle of things, offers a kind of portal for thinkability itself, allowing us to step from the present reality into a hospitable, convivial and other-wise frame of thinking and being-with in the present trouble.

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