Decolonizing Diasporas

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There are many tangled threads that have led me to this book. While I could attempt to trace or unravel those critical moments, what has guided me to and through this project can only be put into words insofar as this book is in your hands.

There is, however, an impetus. I am guided by an ethics forged in diaspora and brandished on the island, the empire, and innumerable points in between. My family, colonial subjects thrust out of our island, made home in impossible places. We call it Nuyorican, diasporican, Boricua, Afro-Latinx, Caribbean. In no world is this book an objective endeavor. It is anchored in the histories I grew up hearing and is haunted by voices often unheard. The years of living in destierro have made me a faithful witness to the experiences of overlapping forms of domination, racialization, and exploitation. This text bears witness to the distinct and ever-present forms of resistance, imagination, and poetics that emerge from the ruptures of colonialism and coloniality.

I was transformed when I read my first novel written by a Latina Caribbean writer. One hot summer, locked inside my abuela Santos’s house in Caguas’s barriada Morales, a whole new worldview was opened for me and so many possibilities unfolded. I felt as if I had been written into existence. Latinas were writing us into being, in and against a system that erased us by trapping us within predetermined scripts and pathologies. I carried that book, Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, from the lush mountains of Tomás de Castro to Vega Baja’s resilient Alto de Cuba, reading and rereading diasporic experiences on my island. Uncanny the feeling. At twelve years old I knew that whatever I was going to become, these books had to be a part of it.

Over the last twenty-plus years, that one book became hundreds. During that time, I have attempted to articulate what they conjured in me then and how they summon me now. I find in this literature a reflection of strangers I know, elders I’ve loved, children I’ve helped to raise, and ancestors I never knew. When I read these poetics, hear their sounds, see their art and images, complex and beautiful prisms emerge. I see what I’ve always known and could never know.

We are tied to one another: Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Equatorial Guinea. History and language and struggle connect us. Blackness and hope and survival connect us. Tropical islands and hard cities connect us.
Our imaginations connect us. There is a place where we know one another, and perhaps that place is the page.

The risks these artists take in conjuring these poetics are chasms, they are sinkholes. They expose the contradictions of diaspora and the specters of migration. They reveal the machinations of power observed from up close and afar. They resist and collide against facile notions of oppositional consciousness; they are entangled and write back from within shape-shifting power structures. They summon worlds/otherwise that act as talismans and bear azabaches against colonizing notions of home, relations, love, time, space.

I wrote this book because encountering Latinx literature as a twelve-year-old changed my life. I am indebted to these writers and thinkers. So I think alongside them, I trace imaginaries, I dedicate years of my life to studying and sharing these knowledges.

In Equatorial Guinea I went in search of a linguistic connection, and I found long histories of Crossings, an affinity of experiences under colonialism and dictatorship, and liberation struggles fueled by love and fury. Equatoguinean diasporic literature is a product of violent processes that are very different yet reminiscent of the Latinx Caribbean diaspora. I found that the horizons of their archipelagos are dotted with similar preoccupations with intimacy, witnessing, dispossession, reparations, and futures. I also found that when this African literary corpus, peripheralized in almost every sense, is placed alongside the peripheralized literary corpus of Afro-descendants in the Caribbean, it explodes what we know and what we can know about decolonization, liberation, and the ontological experiences of the contemporary Afro-Atlantic Hispanophone world.

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