Decolonizing Diasporas

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Rocks hold memory. Land holds memory. . . .
Water always remembers.
—M. Jacqui Alexander, Pedagogies of Crossing

In the novel *Days of Awe*, Achy Obejas’s protagonist explains: “In English, destierro always converts to exile. But it is not quite the same thing. Exile is exilio, a state of asylum. But destierro is something else entirely: it’s banishment, with all its accompanying and impotent anguish. Literally, it means to be uprooted, to be violently torn from the earth.”¹ Literary writers and theorists in exile and diaspora have long expressed an interest in understanding the phenomenology of exile and diaspora. Literatures on Black internationalism, for example, have provided invaluable analyses of the experience and cultural productions of migrating, exiled, and displaced Afro-descendants across long historical and global contexts.² In this chapter, I transition from examining the possibilities of faithful witnessing to discussing how diasporic Afro-Latinx and Equatoguinean literatures meditate on overlapping forms of dispossession. These forms become critical to conceiving of real and imagined concepts of home, belonging, diaspora, and exile. I contend that one of the most important ethical questions to which we must attend is how destierro, or exile, diaspora, and the palimpsest of dispossession intersect and shape much of the lives of Afro-descended peoples. Here I examine how the concept of destierro can be used to articulate ontological dimensions of exile and diaspora through an examination of Loida Maritza Pérez’s *Geographies of Home* and Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel’s *El dictador de Corisco*.³ These novels underscore the differing ways in which diasporic Afro-Atlantic Hispanophone subjects experience destierro and resist the physical and metaphysical experiences of being “violently torn from the earth.”

In offering the term “destierro,” I aim to call attention to the impossibilities of home in decolonial contexts.⁴ While exile and diaspora are rich discursive spaces in postcolonial literature and theory, they have remained critical yet undeveloped in decolonial thought. In this chapter, I first examine some of the tropes of exile in postcolonial thought that undergird this meditation,
and then I offer and expound on the decolonial concept of destierro that emerges from within Latinx literature. I then engage in close readings of the two diasporic Afro-Atlantic novels by Ávila Laurel and Pérez to show how each of them unearths new ways of thinking about destierro as overlapping forms of dispossession, including attempts to cut peoples away from their land, bodies, memories, and spiritual practices. I argue that “destierro” is a term that can capture the complex and multiple forms of dispossession and impossibilities of home for Afro- and Indigenous-descended peoples in the modern world. Thinking about and through destierro within and beyond the *longue durée* of the modern colonial project allows us to further push decolonial thought towards liberatory practices, and map different forms of dispossession across intersecting identities.

**Postcolonial Exile**

Studies of exile in postcolonial contexts often lead us to the prolific work of Edward Said. While I center decolonial and woman of color feminist thought in this project, I must also note that postcolonial thought, and particularly meditations on exile, have been formative in my development of the concept of destierro in decolonial contexts. Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel has noted that the term “‘postcolonialism’ has not been a relevant notion for thinking about the political situation of Puerto Rico, and the same term has very limited political or theoretical resonance in Martinique. In some of these cases, terms such as ‘decolonization,’ ‘neocolonialism,’ or even ‘postmodernity’ seem more useful for understanding local political and cultural discourses.”

While postcolonial thought is rooted in a different temporal and spatial context—eighteenth-century British colonialism in the Indian subcontinent and Africa—this theoretical field has been a boon to many writers and thinkers who contend with the afterlives of colonialism and slavery across the world and within the context of the long sixteenth century. While there have been polemical debates on what constitutes the difference between decolonial and postcolonial projects and critiques, I see these tools for analyzing historical and contemporary phenomena as mutually enriching. Thus, in many ways my development of destierro as a decolonial conceptual framework dovetails with foundational postcolonial works on exile.

Exile, Said tells us, is comprised of “various forms of dislocation.” We can think of the punctuating and documenting functions of epistolary form, the indefinite sentence of exile, and the vaivén and the “ni de aquí ni de allá” of Latinx Caribbean migration as conditions that beg meditation. When I speak of “vaivén,” I am referring to the move or sway of a population that constantly migrates (in circular migration or otherwise) to and from a homeland. The word “vaivén” literally translates as “to go and return” or “fluctuation,” but is also a way to refer to what Jorge Duany calls a “nation
on the move,” or a migration that is “best visualized as a transient and pen-
dulous flow, rather than as a permanent, irrevocable, one-way relocation of
people.” Thus, vaivén is necessarily tied to the colloquialism “ni de aquí ni de
allá,” which gestures toward the impossibilities of belonging, of being from
“neither here nor there.” These two phrases, which are common parlance in
Latínx communities, especially within Latínx Caribbean and even Mexican/
Chicano borderland spaces, become an important way to mark location and
dislocation, and unveil the ways that lived experiences of migration or exile,
ushered in by varying forms of dispossession, intergenerationally affect sub-
jects, language, and memory. This can also be seen in the case of Equatorial
Guinea. The writers Remei Sipi Mayo and Trifonia Melibea Obono have
discussed the ways in which their subjectivities as migrants have shaped the
ways that they connect to Equatorial Guinea and to Spain. “Me he dado
cuenta hace tiempo que se puede tener dos o más sentidos de pertenencia o
identidad,” says Sipi Mayo, “pues en Barcelona yo pongo a hibernar mi iden-
tidad bubi, que despliego y pongo en juego en Rebola, y cuando para la gente
en Rebola soy la barcelonesa, para la de mi barrio de Gracia en Barcelona soy
la rebolana” (“I have realized for a long time that you can have two or more
senses of belonging or identity, because in Barcelona I put my Bubi identity to
hibernate, which I display and put into play in Rebola, and when for people
in Rebola I am the Barcelonan, in my neighborhood of Gracia in Barcelona,
I am the Rebolana”).

The writings of exiled subjects open discursive spaces for contending with
exilic conditions and imagining other ways to live within the impossibility
of home and homelands. Said tells us that exile is “the unhealable rift forced
between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true
home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. . . . The achievements
of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind
forever.” As an exilic writer, Said’s work takes on both the mundane aspects
of exile and the broader implications of its lived realities. In his reflections
on postcolonial Africa and exile, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza argues that while exile
“remains difficult to define as a concept and a condition,” the “causes, con-
texts, courses, constitution, and consequences of exile and the exilic life and
identity are so complex and varied that they cannot but have multiple refer-
ents.” Being able to hold multiple and complex realities, such as the rooted
desire to return to an often-impossible homeland, the complex relationship
to anti-Black and anti-Indigenous nation-states, and the desire for liberation
from a matrix circumscribed by these violences, becomes central to exilic
poetics and cultural productions.

In Reflections on Exile (2001), Said writes of the exiled subject as a bane
to the nationalist yearnings of his or her host nation. The exiled subject is
perpetually outside; that is, outside both the homeland and the host nation’s
community. This is what Said calls “a perilous state of not-belonging.” He
correlates the not-belonging position of the exiled subject to Pierre Bourdieu’s
concept of the *habitus*, which links the practice of habit with the act of inhabitation. Thus, the practice of living and being outside of the national collective is understood as an inferior existence. This solidification of the inside/outside binary, of belonging and not-belonging, further bolsters the foundational myths of the nation. Paul Zeleza argues: “Said seeks the validation of exile not in his own eventual return to the homeland but in the freedom inherent in the very condition of exile.”\(^\text{16}\) In postcolonial contexts, the condition of exile has both inherent freedoms and burdens of not-belonging, and this constant negotiation within tenuous positions offers a third space: a critical voice that writes from a position of difference.

Postcolonial scholars have long argued that exile has increasingly become the lived reality of more and more people, and because of this it can be represented by multiple conditions. I contend that exile overlaps with forms of exclusion, othering, and capitalist excising, including those surviving as refugees, asylum seekers, dispossessed immigrants, and others at the precipice of precarity. Each of these conditions has distinct origins of departure and different manifestations, illustrating Zeleza’s point that “exile is a metonym for various forms of dislocation from a physical and psychic homeland.” Perhaps it is in this inherent dissonance, this incommensurability, that the possibility of the relationality of these “various forms of dislocation” emerges.\(^\text{17}\)

If, as Said claims, the position of exile is one constituted by moments of solitude and dislocation, then the very act of writing in exile—which connects the exilic writer to the reader and to others—begets an ethical relationship built in exile. In writing, the exiled subject opens a discursive space for examining the ontological and phenomenological experiences of exile while also imagining other ways to live within and beyond exile. Azade Seyhan suggests that “literary expressions of contemporary sociopolitical formations offer critical insights into the manifold meanings of history and take us to galaxies of experience where no theory has gone before.”\(^\text{18}\) The exiled subject is not one, but many, and in the act of writing and giving a space for protagonists and characters to expound on exile, writers give weight and importance to the varied experiences of exiled subjects. Seyhan says that the narratives, imagined or not, draw from history and the past: “In narrative, we may be able to redress forcibly forgotten experiences, allow the silences of history to come to word, and imagine alternative scripts of the past. Our understanding of the present is invariably predicated on actual or imagined links to, or ruptures from, a recalled past.”\(^\text{19}\) Links to the past, though ruptured, are critical to understanding the present. This understanding of temporal and spatial connectedness within postcolonial thought is also central to decolonial projects.

Diasporic Afro-Atlantic Hispanophone literary and cultural productions take seriously the experiences of those condemned to exile in the modern world.\(^\text{20}\) What is more, these works offer human praxes and reveal possibilities for resistance within oppressive political structures and authoritarian
kinship networks. I contend that these texts, emerging from within a distinct spatial and temporal locale, bear on decolonial thought. Building from the conceptual and theoretical contributions on exile in postcolonial thought has allowed me to develop a framework for thinking about overlapping dispossession, exile, and diaspora as destierro. The concept of destierro is likewise a methodology that takes seriously the centrality of fifteenth-century modernity and colonialism within decolonial thought. Destierro as a decolonial concept offers us a way to think through exile and diaspora in longer colonial historical and relational contexts while also prioritizing the various and overlapping forms of dispossession that supervene when peoples are displaced and dispersed onto unceded and settled territories.

On Destierro and Relations

The *longue durée* of colonialism leaves a palimpsest of dispossession and genocide in its wake. If modern capitalism is the accumulation of land, resources, and labor, to the extent that it enables the accumulation of capital, then the act of tearing peoples away from their land and land-based practices is the central component of capitalist world-systems, particularly as they developed in the fifteenth century. While Zeleza argues that exile is “exceedingly common in modern Africa, indeed in the world at large, so much that it could even be seen as one of the major characteristics of the twentieth century,” I contend that for Indigenous peoples facing genocide and dispossession on Abya Yala and Turtle Island, for enslaved African subjects forcibly removed from their lands, and generations of their descendants, destierro has taken multivalent forms since the long sixteenth century. Jodi Byrd contends that “[dispossession] in North America . . . depends on the ongoing colonization of Indigenous lands as the transformation of those lands into property, but more, it depends on reproducing the propertied relations through which dispossession itself occurs and then reenacting those relations subsequently upon settlers and arrivants over time as a generative process that ensures that the original colonization of Indigenous lands remains unassailable, natural, rational, and necessary as the condition of possibility for all other disposessions to come.” I argue that imagining destierro as a palimpsest of centuries of overlapping histories, lived experiences, ties to land and land-based practices, and multiple movements (forced and voluntary migrations) by dispossessed peoples onto dispossessed lands allows us to be faithful witnesses to the layers and forms of being forcibly ripped from the land while also seeing the resurgence of those land-based practices and resistance to dispossession.

Destierro can become a decolonizing tool if, in calling attention to how it is a constitutive part of exile and diaspora, it also focuses on the long legacies of self-determination by peoples on the underside of modernity. Holding
this dialectic central to understanding the phenomenological, ontological, and epistemological experience of destierro is critical if we are concerned with not only documenting suffering, but also with marking, holding, and remembering resistance. Black and Indigenous marronage, literary poetics, art practices, and communal, tribal, political, and cultural organizing—such as Idle No More, #NoDAPL, #BlackLivesMatter, American Indian Movement, Young Lords Organization, Black Panther Party, Chicano Movement, MOVE, The Black School, Colectivo Ilé—are some examples of these forms of resistance that emerge amidst and against destierro. These forms of organizing and activism call attention to some of the structures of destierro, which are often made invisible by nativist and settler colonial trappings. In “Land as Pedagogy,” Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues that while the settler colonial project attempts to sever ties to Indigenous (specifically Nishnaabeg) spiritual and ancestral knowledge, it is critical to maintain, recuperate, and expand ties to land as practice. She argues that understanding land as pedagogy subverts the logics of “colonial permanence” and bolsters Indigenous knowledge and practices of sovereignty. Simpson contends that “within a Nishnaabeg epistemology, spiritual knowledge is a tremendous, ubiquitous source of wisdom that is the core of every system in the physical world. The implicature order provides the stories that answer all of our questions. The way we are taught to access that knowledge is by being open to that kind of knowledge and by being engaged in a way of living that generates a close, personal relationship with our ancestors and relations in the spirit world through ceremony, dreams, visions and stories.”

The term “destierro” includes exile, dispossession of land, removal, contestation, multi-diasporas, and other forms of being ripped from land, land-based practices, and communal and socioeconomic resources. These conditions, to which Afro- and Indigenous-descendant peoples are subjected, are phenomena birthed by modernity, and intersect across temporal and spatial planes in ways that intimately tie them to the histories and experiences of other peoples on the underside of coloniality. In order to understand the ontological impacts of destierro, it is imperative to have a critical and relational understanding of its processes and its impacts.

The works of women of color feminist thinkers are necessary theoretical and practical tools that aid our understanding of the complexities of destierro in relational contexts. That is, their works—political, personal, and poetic—have made clear the stakes and difficulties of working in relation to other oppressed peoples more broadly, and within our own racial/ethnic relations. In Pedagogies of Crossing (2005), M. Jacqui Alexander challenges us to continue the difficult work of relating across difference: “If we continue and meet eye to eye, black women born in this country, black women from different parts of the continent and from different linguistic and cultural inheritances of the Caribbean, Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific who experience and define themselves as black . . . there is nothing that can replace the
unborrowed truths that lie at the junction of the particularity of our experiences and our confrontation with history.” Here, Alexander calls attention to the relationships between Black women across the diaspora. Such a meeting would produce a confrontation with the divergent experiences of women of color, and would generate a confrontation with history itself. Alexander goes on to ask: “What kinds of conversations do we, as black women of the diaspora, need to have that will end these ‘wasteful errors of recognition’? Do we know the terms of our different migrations? Each others’ work histories? Our different yearnings?” This kind of move toward relationality is both a radical practice and a fertile ground for solidarity.

Alexander takes up concerns with exile, diaspora, and destierro and how peoples in exile/diaspora “have grown up metabolizing exile, feeding on its main by-products—alienation and separation.” She asks us to think specifically about the problematic of being “African American and exiled on the spot where one is born. To be Caribbean and exiled on foreign soil producing a longing so deep that the site of neglect is reminiscent of beauty.” Here, Alexander underscores the ontological and phenomenological aspects of being exiled in multigenerational contexts, a form of destierro, and how the effects of feeding on “alienation and separation” as a birthright engender a forceful bout of nostalgia and unwavering longing—even amid the edifice, political, and social ruins of our homelands.

In these contexts, destierro can be understood as processes of gendered racialization and dehumanization that are contingent upon the dispossession or tearing-away of a person or peoples from land. For decolonial political projects and discursive analyses, this term requires a reckoning with the longue durée of modern colonial knowledge systems and a faithful witnessing to how the longing for, and act of, remembering home/lands are acts of resistance. This is particularly powerful in the context of coloniality, which requires forgetting and erasure. Thus, in times and places where we are encouraged and even given metaphorical cookies for forgetting, it is rebellion to remember, to tell stories about land and land-based practices, and to make claims to home/lands in the face of dispossession. Likewise, it is heresy to claim that the land remembers you: “Rocks hold memory. Land holds memory,” and water, Alexander tells us, “will call you by your ancient name, and you will answer because you will not have forgotten. Water always remembers.” Thus, I propose that resistance to destierro through decolonial land and knowledge practices undermines the processes of coloniality, settler colonialism, and neocolonialism which attempt to further sever our connection to the land and systematically othered knowledge. If we are to take seriously diasporic subjectivities, then we must also see how they intersect with and resist settler colonialism as an ongoing project. The archive of destierro can be found in these narratives which force us to be faithful witnesses to varying forms of dispossession. Divergent forms of destierro appear across the literary poetics of the Latinx Caribbean and Equatoguinean diasporas.
Loida Maritza Pérez’s *Geographies of Home* (1999) is a meditation on a Dominican family in New York City. Pérez’s protagonist, Iliana, is a young woman who has just left a hostile university environment in order to return home to support her family as they contend with sexual and domestic violence, poverty, and mental illness. Iliana struggles with her discovery that the home she has returned to after college is a hotbed of racism and degradation, unwelcoming and circumscribed by a denial fueled by heteropatriarchy and conservative Judeo-Christian religious mores. In *Geographies of Home*, Pérez illustrates destierro as a failure to find home even among family. The rejection of Blackness and the contention with different forms of religious spirituality become central to understanding how destierro takes form. The symptoms of destierro can be seen in the deep resentments, mental illness, and depression exhibited across Pérez’s cast of characters. Furthermore, the novel is centered on Afro-Dominican experiences, particularly on Afro-Dominican femme identity formation in the diaspora. The literature written from these subjective experiences transforms dominant tropes of exile and diaspora, and shows different dimensions of destierro as experienced by Black and femme characters who are likewise othered racially and linguistically.

Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel’s *El dictador de Corisco* (2014) is written from the perspective of a woman named Malela, a mother of two sons and a lifelong resident of Corisco, one of the five Equatoguinean islands. *El dictador de Corisco* is tied to Spanish colonialism, the dictatorial rule of Macias and Obiang, and the arbitrary abuses of power that become part and parcel of Equatoguinean life. While one of Malela’s sons carries on an affair with a white tourist, her other son, upset by the changes occurring on the island, declares himself to be the new dictator of Corisco. Dictatorial abuses coupled with the collective power of memory lead the family to destierro, as they are torn away from the land and island they love. Here, exile is shown as an unwanted reality propelled by despotic power and ecological destruction. The ongoing forms of structural political and gender violence endemic to colonization—the coloniality of gender and power that are represented as repetitive acts of violence—become the backdrop as the protagonist and her two sons struggle to endure and remember traumatic events that have befallen their community. The novel’s discussion of the ecological impacts of dictatorial violence, greed, and neglect likewise underscores the kinds of ties to land and the ways in which the characters faithfully witness against the grain of dictatorial scripts. El dictador de Corisco points to dual forms of destruction and dispossession: the actual tearing-away of land and resources, and destierro which forces peoples to leave their lands.

At the core of these literary works are the acts of remembering histories and knowledges that subvert domination; a practice of faithful witnessing that is dangerous and potentially deadly. Exhuming these memories is an act of subversion, and in both of these novels the characters resist domination by going back to practices or knowledges that were previously foreclosed or forbidden.
Pérez’s novel *Geographies of Home* opens dramatically as the protagonist’s grandmother, Bienvenida, lies on her deathbed summoning her youngest daughter, Aurelia, through her metaphysical powers. Aurelia, in an act of rebellion and denial, has negated her filial responsibilities and refused to attend to her mother as she faces death. Aurelia wakes to a jarring sensation and witnesses a black cat running across the room. Just after she tastes “a bitter scent of freshly cut grass,” she doubles up in pain as the cat reemerges (ix). Aurelia notices that the scent and bitter taste that engender the pain are “familiar as the dirt she craved since the onset of her pregnancy” (ix). Her mother’s death and sudden apparition as the black cat bring on the onset of Aurelia’s labor pains; her child is to be the protagonist of the novel, Iliana, the youngest of thirteen children born to Aurelia and her husband, Papito.

This juxtaposition of life and death, the desire for consuming grass or dirt, and the reckoning of divergent spiritual practices are central to Pérez’s narrative. The novel questions familial ties and underscores how destierro shapes relationships and knowledge practices. The women in the novel, all Afro-Dominican, navigate the reconfigurations of home and belonging as they are unmoored from their homes, foundational beliefs, and their families. While the novel juggles several primary and secondary characters—Iliana has twelve siblings, eight of whom appear in the novel—I will briefly discuss just four of these characters: Iliana, her mother Bienvenida, and her two sisters, Marina and Rebecca. In doing so, I track Afro-diasporic feminist epistemologies and knowledge practices, and the deep-seated practices of gender violence, including the coloniality of gender, which impact how destierro takes shape for Afro-diasporic women. Likewise, these characters’ desires, resistance, and struggles offer an understanding of destierro as tied to the land, to spiritual belief systems, and to the Black femme body. Throughout the novel, we see how the repudiation of Blackness—revealed in the radical rejection of Afro-syncretic ritual practices, and by extension a refusal of Black identity—leads to physical and metaphysical destierro. Pérez offers us a glimpse into the lives of a sprawling Afro-Dominican family contending with the effects of destierro, including crushing poverty, Judeo-Christian mores, and rampant gender and sexual violence.

We meet Iliana, a first-generation college student, in the first chapter as she gazes at the word “nigger” written on her dorm room message board (1). This act of blatant racism and intimidation foreshadows her family’s conflicted relationship with their own racialized Blackness. While Iliana had imagined that the university would be a haven from her religiously conservative home, she quickly realizes that she is left unmoored by the racism and isolation of life in rural upstate New York. At school she finds herself in a kind of social isolation and has but one friend, a white-passing queer Latino man named Ed. Disillusioned with her institution and her liminal place in it,
Iliana resolves to leave her elite university and return home to New York City to be with her family.

In returning home, Iliana is at once faced with the dysfunctions of her family and plagued by feelings of obligation. Raised in a strict Seventh Day Adventist household, Iliana is fearful of her undisclosed and possibly queer sexuality, and is often taken aback by how her body is read by others. Lastly, she is coming to consciousness about her family’s anti-Blackness, which is reflected in her sister Marina’s racist delusions and her mother’s battle against her intergenerational connections to Afro-Dominican ritual practice. Iliana’s lack of attention to her appearance and lack of feminine performative incites a violent backlash from her family and culminates in a sexual assault at the hands of her sister Marina, who suffers from delusions marked by uncontrollable rage.

The rejection of Afro-Dominican syncretism is tied to a larger rejection of familial histories, legacies of slavery, the intergenerational trauma of the Trujillo regime, sociostructurally-enabled anti-Blackness, and the confines of heteropatriarchy. The confluence of these histories—autocratic repression and the rejection of ritual practice—underscore Aurelia and Iliana’s alienation from their identities as Black Afro-Atlantic women. This refusal magnifies their feelings of destierro; they do not feel at home in New York or even in their own bodies. We first see the denunciation of Afro-Dominican ritual practice with Aurelia, who rejects the “gifts” of telepathic communication, metaphysical powers, and the ability to “see the invisible,” all of which were given to her by her mother Bienvenida (134). A young Aurelia blamed the “sight” for the death of her brother and vowed to distance herself from her mother’s spiritual practices (134). Thus, she rejected her mother, to the point of refusing to be at her deathbed, and married Papito, a Seventh Day Adventist who demands that his family adhere to conservative Christian traditions. In her reading of feminist subjectivity and Afro-syncretic practices in the novel, Vanessa Valdés argues that Aurelia’s rejection of her spiritual inheritance provided “an opportunity for misogyny to flourish in what is to be their communal refuge, that is to say, their home.”

Valdés contends that the engagement with this unnamed matrilineal spiritual practice “allows for an appreciation of that whole self rather than an accommodation of the self to fit into the patriarchal norms.” However, Aurelia finds herself at a constant crossroads, shrouding her rejection of Afro-Dominican syncretism in a feigned religious fervor to please her husband. Only Iliana knows of the Sabbath-affected illnesses wherein Iliana and Aurelia dance merengue alone in the house (134). Just as Iliana is torn between a life outside of her parents’ home and her deep desire to return there, Aurelia is torn between the strict religious mores that her husband demands they follow and her own familial history and spiritual/metaphysical powers. Though nascent in her, Iliana too has these powers of communication, for it was her birth that occurred on the night her grandmother died. While Iliana too rejects her mother’s uncanny
ability to metaphysically communicate with others, she slowly begins to question the strict Protestant religious philosophies with which she was raised.

We learn in the novel that Bienvenida attempts to give Aurelia the tools of the family practice, but her daughter closes her ears and heart to the gifts: “She wanted no more of such a legacy. . . . She heard her mother’s voice but did not listen to the words” (2–3). Aurelia abandons the “gifts, including the quilt and shawl, at the base of a palm tree beside the road,” but comes to regret her decision to “[run] from her heritage as if the past had the power to transform her into a pillar of salt” (135). Aurelia, facing her daughter Marina’s physical, emotional, and mental deterioration, the sudden return of an independent Iliana, and the abuse and malnutrition of her three grandchildren at the hands of her daughter Rebecca and her husband Pasión, pleads for Bienvenida’s guidance: “She longed for the counsel of one who had been long dead.” Aurelia believes that her mother left her cursed with a “legacy of woe,” but, resolved to save at least one of her daughters, she considers how to use the other gifts her mother gave her (295).

Aurelia employs her exceptional abilities to bring on the death of her son-in-law, Pasión, who abuses her daughter Rebecca and their two young children. Fearful that Rebecca will return to Pasión and risk the lives of her grandchildren, Aurelia resorts to using her powers for what she believes is a just cause: “With her hands busy, she was able to concentrate on the task for which plucking the chickens was a guise” (254). As Aurelia plucks the feathers from dead boiled chickens, she conjures the image of Pasión feeding his flock on his rooftop coop. She compels the hundreds of chickens to create a flurry of feathers, and “sailed toward him on the feathers, depriving him of breath” (256). Valdés posits that in this act, “Aurelia reclaims not only her voice but also her willingness to act.” Pasión’s death is not mentioned again, and the reader does not know if his corpse is discovered. But what is clear is that Aurelia’s return to her familial beliefs is her first step toward reclaiming her spiritual identity, protecting her family, and finding a home within herself. In fact, Valdés contends that within the novel the idea of home “is defined by one’s cultivation of a holistic sense of self, a recuperation of that which was lost in the transit of exile. These characters develop a sense of home by engaging in spiritual systems that have survived for millennia. For these daughters, home is a processor healing broken psyches.” For both Valdés and Lyn Di Iorio Sandín, the fact that this spiritual practice remains unnamed throughout the novel is evocative of “Aurelia’s repression of it.” In recovering her power and using her embodied spiritual knowledge, Aurelia challenges the permanence of destierro.

Aurelia recalls her mother’s explanation of the gifts in the sack which she left at the base of the palm tree: “A fistful of the earth to which we return to nourish those who follow” (134). This earth that Aurelia was intended to carry was a gift that would anchor her to her homeland, to sacred knowledges, and to the generations before and after her. Leaving it behind leaves
her and her daughters wanting. Eating earth, then, is a signifier for a yearning for grounding or mooring, an understanding of past histories and spiritual practices. Aurelia’s metaphysical destierro has led her to reconsider her conception of home: “Only now did she understand that she should have yearned not for a geographical site but for a frame of mind able to accommodate any place as home” (137). Jill Toliver Richardson argues that in this act of rejecting her spiritual legacy, “Aurelia rejects her mother’s lessons and withholds this integral part of her inheritance from her daughters, which leaves them ill-equipped to navigate the American landscape.” Aurelia comes to terms with her dystopian perspective and realizes that a physical geographical home is an impossibility. She cannot return, but she would “hold herself accountable” for making possible some kind of fulfillment for herself and her children (137).

I trace Aurelia’s gift—that is, the practices that connect her to a familial home and histories, buried and forgotten under a palm tree in the Dominican Republic—to the recurring image of the desire to eat dirt and grass. Many of the women in the novel, especially those who are prepubescent or pregnant, express a craving to consume earth, dirt, land. In fact, destierro is tied to women’s bodies and to the development of their erotic selves. In one scene, Rebecca recalls her teen years in the Dominican Republic, when she would sneak out of the house to a quiet place and masturbate while chewing on grass: “The movement of her hands massaging the tender flesh between her thighs; the bitter taste of a blade of grass tucked between her teeth” (205). Rebecca finds pleasure in the erotic and finds solace in this grounded pleasure even as she is torn by feelings of abandonment. After leaving her grandmother’s home in the Dominican Republic at the age of eight, Rebecca is left unmoored in the diaspora. Rebecca’s destierro is then multifold, emotional and physical. As a child in the Dominican Republic and as a woman in the United States, Rebecca is unfulfilled. Married to the abusive Pasión, who beats, starves, and rapes her, she quickly loses her sense of place and realizes that she cannot care for her children. She is depicted as a lost woman who is transfixed by the desire for stability. Her longing for foundation can be traced to those sexual excesses on the land and her insatiable desire to consume grass. For these desterradas, eating the earth is a connection to land and landlessness. The medical term for eating dirt, grass, mud, and other non-nutritive substances is “pica,” and it has roots in Caribbean slave history; it is a practice that has been documented, pathologized, and condemned by plantation owners and doctors.

Rebecca’s craving to consume earth is descriptive of her life with Pasión, which is circumscribed by emotional, sexual, and physical violence. It also evokes the loss of her grandmother Bienvenida, by whom she was raised and nurtured in the Dominican Republic. In tracing the relationship of these women to the land, Pérez shows how they have been torn from it through spiritual and physical dispossession. As Simpson argues, “being tied to land also means being tied to an unwritten, unseen history of resistance.”
traces destierro through matrilineal lines, making femme bodies central to connections to the land and home. The distinct forms of destierro that Aurelia, Rebecca, and Iliana feel, and their connections to Bienvenida, have corporeal undertones. The novel frames a space to engage how Black women’s bodies and their “deepest and nonrational knowledge” are critical for understanding destierro as an ontological phenomenon (53). 

Geographies of Home also traces how destierro likewise produces psychological and physical distress. Marina, Iliana’s older sister, is battling her own demons and insecurities, and spirals into a deep psychosis as the novel progresses. Marina’s mental and emotional decline is central to the narrative arc, and her visions and sexual hallucinations become focused on her sister Iliana. Myriam J. A. Chancy argues that the novel seeks to “represent . . . multiplicity through sexuality and in defiance of patriarchal power structures.” Rather than present gender role reversals as a radical challenge, Pérez weaves a complex narrative that points to the erotic and racialized femme body as volatile defiance. Chancy argues that racial self-loathing and the “lesbian phallus” are central to understanding Pérez’s female characters, their identities and sexualities.

Marina, who is described as having “wide lips and kinky hair,” yearns not only to be white-passing, but also to become the wife of a white or light-skinned man. While such men have propositioned her, none have asked to marry her, and she hits a breaking point when sexually belittled by one of the lawyers for whom she works (97, 190). Marina’s psychological breakdown, marked by delusions and uncontrollable rage, is tied to her own desire for whiteness and its trappings: heteronormativity, middle-class aspirations, and a distancing from her own Blackness through an attempt at “marrying-up” or “bettering the race.” Dissatisfied with her life, Marina disassociates from her family mentally and emotionally. Her mental illness is marked by frequent hallucinations and a deeply racialized sexual trauma. In one scene, Marina rails against an imagined sexual assailant and declares, “No flat-nosed, wide lipped nigger would claim her soul. No savage with beads dangling from his neck” (17). Triggered by failed assimilation attempts and alienated from her own body, her erotic imagination becomes circumscribed by white supremacy, cis-heteropatriarchy, experiences of being sexually devalued, and fears of being racialized as Black and poor.

Marina’s mental illness is thus embodied, and Pérez articulates the changes in her body as a marker of her declining mental health. Alexander reminds us that much of what we remember and what we know is embodied: “[Violence] can also become embodied, that violation of sex and spirit. Assimilation is another kind of violation that can be embodied, assimilating alienation, one’s own as well as others.” Marina’s body odor, rapid weight gain, and unruly hair become embodied markers of her state of mind. Chancy argues that “Marina’s mind, rather than her body, is contaminated—filled with both racial and sexual loathing. Does her personal memory fail her here, or does it
Chapter 3

give shape to a cultural memory of miscegenation, racial fear, and the trauma of the rapes of enslaved African women, women of whom she issues?"49

Chancy links Marina’s mind to a longer cultural memory that likewise points to a long history of the violation of Black women. Whatever the case, Marina’s racist and self-loathing behavior is represented as physical convulsions, belief in spiritual anointment, and a deep distrust of her family.

Furthermore, Marina becomes obsessed with the possibility that Iliana may have a hidden or inverted penis. Marina’s fear and loathing of Iliana’s Blackness, queerness, and gender nonconformity have made her a target of Marina’s suspicions. These suspicions are exacerbated when she meets Iliana’s queer friend Ed. Marina has difficulty reading his queer body as something other than femme or non-masculine. For her, Ed’s queerness underscores Iliana’s masculinity vis-à-vis the idea of white middle-class womanhood that Marina has imagined as normative. In order to better observe Iliana, Marina stops taking her medication and begins to carefully study her sister’s hands, walk, clothing, facial structure, and presentation: “Iliana’s body—with its meager breasts, long arms and massive hands, thin legs and knobby knees—had appeared as lean as a prepubescent girl’s and more so like a boy’s. Her gait, when she headed into the bathroom, had been the exaggerated walk of a man imitating a woman” (276). Marina decides to bring Iliana’s “secret” (hidden or inverted penis) into the open by sexually assaulting her sister while she sleeps. In the moment of violence, Iliana thinks of herself beyond flesh and body: “She was far more than the sum of her spilled blood and her flesh that had been pierced, she was the breath seeping from her lips, the heart resounding in her chest, the anima enabling her to perceive” (287). However, when Marina attacks her for a second time, Iliana loses all sense of calm. She realizes that Marina’s actions are not solely the actions of someone who is ill, but rather stem from denial, deep hatred, and perhaps jealousy of Iliana’s ability to move through the world independently (290). She becomes enraged upon seeing Marina’s look of satisfaction at having penetrated her body, gratified by the idea that she has taken something vital from Iliana. Thus, Marina’s destierro and fear of sexual violence lead her to violate her sister’s body as a way to ground her delusions and disillusion.

Iliana, nauseated at the events that have transpired and recognizing how deeply in denial her parents are about Marina’s condition, steels herself against her sister’s attempt to tear her away from her very own body (291). Iliana flees and cannot face returning home. She begins to hate the very blood that flows through her veins and contemplates suicide. Echoing Obejas’s Days of Awe, Iliana realizes that this destierro will kill her. When she returns home the following day, she is confronted and slapped by her father Papito. It is then that she becomes fully conscious that her father’s narrow religious beliefs and the home he has created based on those beliefs have no place for her or her body. She is left with no home or safety or foundational beliefs to which to adhere.
In Pérez’s novel, destierro is not a form of exile that is overtly linked to the nation. Instead, she provides a rich terrain through which to understand the various ontological dimensions of non-being produced by anti-Blackness and the coloniality of gender. Coloniality and dispossession, in their myriad forms, are present in every aspect of the family’s destierro. The family’s members try and fail to adhere to conservative religiosity and attempts at assimilation. Iliana’s body is the final limit. Though she is left desterrada in multiple ways, she refuses to be torn from her body. Valdés contends that this critical moment is one in which Iliana “cultivates a sense of wholeness” and looks to her own deepest knowledge as a “guide for living.”30 This is the decolonizing moment in Geographies of Home, the reclamation of their corporeal and ritual knowledge for both Iliana and her mother Aurelia.

The themes in Geographies of Home trouble the idea of home as a spatial location. Iliana is forced to choose a life beyond the obligations she feels to her mother, father, and siblings; “she felt as displaced out in the world as in her parents’ house, she had made the decision to return and to re-establish a connection with her family so that . . . she would have comforting memories of home propping her up and lending her the courage to confront the prejudices she had encountered” (312). Iliana decides that she can no longer interact with her family, nor imagine thriving in a world without “the only home she knew” (312). There is no neat ending for Iliana; her destierro, like that of her parents and siblings, is a part of her own experience as an Afro-Latina immigrant in the United States. Her desire to belong somewhere and find fulfillment is also the desire of many of the other characters in Geographies of Home. As C. Christina Lam argues, “Fiction, far from providing mere escapism, works to transmit the horror of traumatic experiences so that it can be accessed and acknowledged by the reader who, in turn, becomes a potential witness.”51 This novel, comprised of Afro-Latinx characters and authored by an Afro-Latina writer, speaks to an often-unspoken set of questions about Afro-Latinx immigrant families regarding race, spirituality, and sexuality. Iliana’s embrace of familial destierro and rejection of corporeal destierro underscore the complex negotiations of racialized, sexualized, and marginalized immigrant subjects. Contending with destierro allows for many of the characters to reimagine their relationships to embodied knowledges and practices, and radically redefine home.

Memorial

In his novel El dictador de Corisco (2014; The Dictator of Corisco), Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel fictionalizes little-known histories of Equatorial Guinea’s island of Corisco. By examining the political impossibilities of dictatorship, the novel underscores the danger of memory in a nation where dictatorship and autocracy followed colonialism and fascism. As Benita Sampedro
Vizcaya has noted, memory and forgetting are powerful practices that emerge in the wake of colonialism and dictatorship. In her article “Routes to Ruins,” Sampedro Vizcaya tells of an event that all the inhabitants of Corisco of a certain age (over seventy years old) recall: a horrible and uncontrollable fire caused by a priest, Father Andrés Bravo, who quickly escaped the island and never returned. While the memory of this fire lives on, the details have been forgotten, and Sampedro Vizcaya argues that the “brutal repression and exploitation in the decades following the event helped to shape the politics of forgetting; new forms of repression in the present day generate a combination of amnesia and nostalgia closely associated with political disempowerment.” In crafting this narrative, Ávila Laurel offers a searing critique of the machinations of dictatorial power, ecological destruction masked as transnational collaboration, and memory as both a salve and a curse.

*El dictador de Corisco* introduces us to a Benga family, Malela and her two sons, Primero and Segundo. While in *Geographies of Home* the characters face psychological and emotional destierro in the diaspora after their own experiences under the Trujillo regime, in *El dictador*, Malela and her sons experience destierro as the perpetual threat of death and/or displacement as a result of colonial and then despotic rule. For Malela, Primero, and Segundo, Corisco becomes an impossible home because of the long-standing excesses of dictatorial power and the ecological destruction of the island brought on by modernization.

The novel engages matters that are important to understanding the contemporary social and political realities affecting Equatorial Guinea. The novel’s backdrop includes living among the physical and emotional ruins left by colonialism; the educational, social, and welfare neglect of the postcolonial authoritarian government; the suppressed histories of ethnic cleansing during Macias Nguema’s dictatorship; and the destruction of ecological sites without regard for Indigenous populations. Sampedro Vizcaya’s “Routes to Ruin” interrogates the affective, edificial, and historical archives across some of the more distant islands of Equatorial Guinea, including the island of Corisco, which is located approximately thirty miles southwest of Equatorial Guinea’s continental swathe. She notes that the “ghost-like villages and vacuumed-like empty islands can be as eloquent about the past as archives. . . . They speak of the politics and experience of abandonment, and they are ‘endowed with a capacity to penetrate our sensibility’ . . . and eventually move us to action—that other data may lack.”

*El dictador de Corisco* takes place amid these ruins left by colonial and industrial processing facilities, and highlights the absurd repetition of destructive political practices. The neglect is further emphasized by the history of genocide, and thus creates a state of precarity. Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s definition of racism as “state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” holds for the case of Equatorial Guinea, and more specifically for the picture of Corisco.
that Ávila Laurel paints for us.\textsuperscript{56} This is because the ethnic groups that comprise the population of Equatorial Guinea, including the Bubi and Ndowe, represent an ethnic underclass in relation to the Fang ruling class (the dictator and his extended family and cronies) since the transition from colony to dictatorship.\textsuperscript{57}

The kinds of ecological, sociopolitical, and economic devastation faced by some of the more peripheral islands and smaller ethnic groups, however, leave witnesses in their wake. Sampedro Vizcaya argues that “the places—or, rather, spaces—in which we encountered the women and the men of Elobey, Corisco, and Cabo San Juan bear continued witness to the experience of large-scale exile, migration, depopulation, alienation, dispossession, illness, alcoholism, and deprivation of educational and health resources.”\textsuperscript{58} \textit{El dictador} is a form of witnessing and acts as an indictment against the dispossession and destierro that eventually force Malela and her sons to escape.

We first encounter Malela as she watches a white tourist from Holland, Anika/Anita, enter her town. Anika/Anita’s arrival puts into motion a set of events in Corisco that forces Malela to recall some of the most painful colonial and dictatorial histories that have been strategically forgotten by the elders. News of Anika’s arrival incites Malela to smoke her pipe, which, in the narrative, is unheard of for a woman in Corisco, especially after the departure of the white commercial factory owners in the late 1960s. Malela’s pipe-smoking floods her with memories about her youth, and she laments the fact that she never married even though she was from a prominent family. She discloses that because she was constantly visited by white suitors, no one from her community approached her for marriage. Though her parents followed Ndowe traditions and indeed wanted her to marry into the community, Malela was perceived as belonging to the white colonizers.

Las constantes visitas que le hacían los dueños de factorías hicieron que todas las familias creyeran que su vida pertenecía a los blancos, por lo que ya no sería bien visto que ningún hombre de aquellas familias la quisiera para el y para su familia. Se pensaba en aquellos tiempos que los mares estaban llenos de peces y en que la echada de una red daba para alimentar varias bocas, que una mujer que había sido tan visitada ya no podía ser de ningún sitio. Estaba en medio del pueblo siendo mirada por todos como si nadie la quisiera reconocer como alguien de la comunidad. (6)

The constant visits made to her by the owners of factories made all the families believe that her life belonged to the whites, so it would not be well seen that any man from those families would want her for themselves or their families. It was thought at that time that the seas were full of fish and that the pitch of a single net was enough to feed several mouths and that a woman who had been visited so much
could no longer be from any place. She was in the middle of the town being seen by everyone as an outsider, as if no one wanted to recognize her as part of the community.

Malela lived amidst her people, and yet they saw her as someone they did not want to recognize as part of their community. Malela’s proximity to colonial-era white men, by virtue of being desired, marked her as an outsider and left her desterrada from certain forms of kinship and community ties.59 Sampedro Vizcaya’s research resonates once again, as she notes that the “dark past” of colonization “is characterized not least by gender exploitation.” In her interviews with Equatoguinean elders, Sampedro Vizcaya underscores the forms of gendered subjugation and exploitation that women in Corisco face:

Life stories unveiled, in interviews with women in their sixties and seventies, are threaded through with the image of the corisqueñas as an inexhaustible harem of concubines, miningas in the local colonial parlance. Their stories speak of miscegenation, of children that grew up without ever meeting their (white) fathers, of women eternally at the disposal of their capricious European partners, personal experiences of subjugation.60

These tacitly understood practices of gender exploitation are the backdrop for Malela’s peripheral experience within her community. Though she was never officially outcast, she is barred from the community by congosa, or gossip, as if she no longer belonged to any place. However, Malela is a keeper of much of the community’s oral histories, especially of events that have been long suppressed and forgotten. It is her peripheral position that enables her to keep this historical memory that many others—those who live day-to-day within the community as full members—do not know or remember. In this way, Malela as desterrada, as someone living on her own land but ripped away from community, is key to keeping alive what others have let die.

One example of this periphery as destierro is that Malela’s community remains baffled about the origins of her two children. In questioning the parentage, birth, and appearance of her two sons, the community underscores that Malela is not part of natal kinship or child-rearing practices in her community. Thus, many community members ask what kind of power has intervened to occlude her life: “¿Quien había metido su mano en la vida de Malela para que los hechos de su vida parecieran haber ocurrido en un tiempo en que nadie del pueblo lo daba por cierto?” (8; “Who had put their hand in the life of Malela in such a way that the facts of her life seemed to have occurred in a time that none of the people could be certain of?”). This trope of memory and forgetting is tied to the larger histories of trauma and forgetting in the novel, and it is likewise an indictment of the reader. Ávila
Laurel’s question haunts the reader, for we too are reading about a time, space, and nation whose histories go unknown and unmarked. The conjuring of memory in the novel is also a conjuring or coming to consciousness for the reader.

The story of Malela and her sons is intimately tied to the dictatorship of motodu Don Francisco (i.e., Macías Nguema) and the later rule of motodu Obiang. Malela recalls the era right after independence, when Don Francisco took power, expelled all Europeans from Equatorial Guinea, and sent into exile all those who had any intellectual, social, and economic relations with them. The factory owners of Corisco were expelled their factories and homes, never to return while Don Francisco exerted power over Equatorial Guinea’s island territories. In some ways, the histories of Equatorial Guinea after colonialism mirror much of what we know about the formations of domination and dispossession in ongoing settler colonial projects. Malela’s retelling of this history points to Don Francisco’s fear as reason for his distrust and violent rule: “Como Don Francisco no conocía el mar ni había tenido un trato profundo con los blancos, los temía mucho, y desde su puesto de motodu luchó para borrar las huellas que dejaron, dondequiera que estuvieran las mismas” (9–10; “Since Don Francisco did not know the sea nor had ever had any deep relationship with the whites, he feared them very much and from his position as motodu he fought to erase the fingerprint that they left, wherever they may have been”). Don Francisco’s distrust of white people becomes his distrust of the inhabitants of Corisco, who had the longest history of relations with Europeans.

Motodu Don Francisco aimed to eliminate anyone who had had any relationship with whites, and dictated that after “gloriosa evacuación de los blancos de los territorios nacionales, era considerado un delito de alta trascendencia que hubiera un grupo de hombres, un pueblo entero, que tuviera a los blancos en el recuerdo” (14; after “the glorious evacuation of the whites from the national territories, it was considered a crime of high treason that there be a group of men or an entire population that had the whites in their memory”). The expulsion of the whites occurred in tandem with the destruction of any village or peoples who at any time had had economic, social, or educational connections to the whites. Malela’s island, with its many factories, was a prime example of a territory that had had too much contact with whites and was thus tainted. The safety of its people, however, was guaranteed by the presence of their dignified “ekambi” (chief), and by the fact that in order to reach Corisco, Don Francisco would need to embark on a sea voyage. It is implied here that because Don Francisco was part of the Fang ethnic group and from the continental swathe, he feared the ocean. Corisco’s insularity kept it further away from, yet still under the heel of, an all-dominating power. Malela’s conjuring of the past at the opening of the novel and her memory of the plantation owners and their post-independence departure would be considered high treason.
Malela’s position as an outsider and as a desterrada allows her to remember one of the most violent episodes of motodu Don Francisco’s regime. She painfully recalls the destruction of an entire Ndowe village by Don Francisco’s military. Families were killed, their homes burned to the ground, and young girls taken to the woods and violated. Of the latter, Malela recalls:

Las mujeres jóvenes que tenían Buena Mirada y no habían tenido hijos, un hecho decidido por Dios, fueron apartadas y obligadas a acompañar al bosque a los mismos que cometieron aquella cosa terrible con su pueblo. En los bosques, y sin nadie que las defendiera, sufrieron tanto que cuando regresaron al sitio de sus casas quemadas no pudieron hablar. (14)

The young women who were of good looks and did not have children, a fact decided by God, were taken aside and forced to accompany to the woods those very same men that had committed that terrible thing to their people. In the woods, and with no one to defend them, they suffered so much that when they returned to their burned homes they could no longer speak.

Ávila Laurel’s choice to make Malela recall this painful event in detail highlights the significance of memory in historical trauma. That it appears in a literary text and not in archives or history texts emphasizes the role of literature as a discursive strategy with heretical and decolonizing potential. This destruction of the Ndowe community is one of the few documented events of the era that propelled a great number of Equatoguineans into exile beginning in 1969. In fact, Francisco Macías Nguema’s reign resulted in the execution, imprisonment, or exile of more than one-third of the nation’s population, and his tactical ethnic cleansing was directed at groups such as the Bubi and the Ndowe, particularly those located in the island territories. These kinds of overtly violent pacification tactics were meant to show Macías Nguema’s authority and ensure obedience from the Ndowe and other non-dominant ethnic groups that were indigenous to the islands off the coast of the continental swathe. These strategies were part and parcel of the brutality of the regime, whose soldiers so brutalized the bodies of their victims that mourners could not identify their dead. Moreover, these strategies mirrored the kinds of foundational violence within Spanish colonial imperial projects. The coloniality of power reveals itself in the ways that a “postcolonial” nation can enact the same forms of physical, structural, and ideological domination and violence.

Malela’s community suffers a great loss when their ekambi dies. His death is especially distressing because his son, who is to be his successor, is abroad. They fear that he will not hear of his father’s death in time for his burial or that he will have difficulty reentering the country. Anxiously they wait
for the inevitable; motodu Don Francisco hears news of the ekambi’s death and sends militants to investigate. Since the motodu could use any excuse of disloyalty or omission to finally wipe them out of existence, the entire community engages in open celebrations and food preparations in order to convince the visitors that all is normal. Throughout the days-long visit, the body of the ekambi rots in the woods, a disgraceful decomposition unworthy of his status. The villagers, though putting on a façade of happiness and subservience to the militants, are in mourning, so much so that Malela recalls “el llanto en las gargantas de la gente” (21; “the rising cries in the throats of the people”). In the end, the militants leave loaded with goats, foodstuffs, and excessive gifts that they have demanded. The village is traumatized not only by the loss of the ekambi and their inability to bury him properly, but also because of the angst of their prolonged act of subterfuge. They have been removed or desterradas from both their grief and their bodies. Malela notes later in the novel that this event is never spoken of again. It becomes a suppressed memory, one that the elders do not want to pass along to their children, and it foreshadows the novel’s tragic ending.

This relationship with the past is made material by the constant presence of colonial-era ruins, which engender conflicting memories. The dictatorial regimes’ disregard further dislocates the present by allowing blight and disrepair to overrun the neglected island. “Ruins of the old regime,” Sampedro Vizcaya notes, “are a shattered mirror of colonial production, power, modernity, and subjugation.” The ruins reflect or act as mirrors for the tyranny and manipulation of the postcolonial regimes. These mirrored ruins also reveal a kind of memory play, what Sampedro Vizcaya calls “a combination of amnesia and nostalgia closely associated with political disempowerment.” However, Malela’s conjuring of the past is not circumscribed solely by the destruction of the Ndowe community and its constant fear of reprisals. Rather, Malela thinks about the past colonial legacies of imperial violence while also thinking about the realities inflicted by the present dictator, motodu Teodoro Obiang.

The novel closely reflects reality in that the fictional motodu Teodoro overthrows his uncle, the fictional motodu Don Francisco. Motodu Teodoro practices a sustained negligence and disregard which results in the island lapsing into ruin. But Motodu Teodoro later sees the island as an opportunity to increase his wealth by attracting affluent white tourists to bask in its beauty: “Ese descubrir de las maravillas ocultas de la tierra de Malela hizo que el siguiente motodu hablara con el ekambi de otro lejano país” (25–26; “This discovery of the occult marvels of Malela’s land made the next motodu speak with the ekambi of another far away”). After discovering the marvelous beauty of Malela’s island, the motodu speaks with the ekambi of another faraway nation, and they decide to “desecar un hermoso lago que había en la zona oeste de aquella tierra recién descubierta por los que habían hablado con ellos” (25–26; “drain a beautiful lake that was on the west side of that land recently discovered by those they had spoken to”). Motodu Teodoro
contracts foreign laborers to drain and fill the large lake on the western side of the island in order to lay a landing strip so that wealthy foreigners can easily access Corisco. It is within this matrix of occurrences that Anita/Anika, the tourist and catalyst of the novel, appears.

Ávila Laurel’s narrative centers on the destruction of this lake and the devastation it brings. This is a deliberate discussion of the airport actually built on the island of Corisco in 2011, which extends the entire length of the island from north to south. In an ecocritical turn, Ávila Laurel reveals the draining’s environmental impact. He stresses that in making this choice to destroy the largest source of fresh water on the island, the motodu had no regard for the people’s needs:

Lo primero que había que hacer era decir a las mujeres del pueblo que desde aquella fecha tenían que saber que lo más importante en el pueblo no eran sus plantaciones para que la gente tuviera que comer con el pescado que traían los hombres, sino la obra de la pista de los ricos de otros países. Entonces si alguna plantación se encontraba dentro del terreno elegido por los capataces musulmanes, las mujeres tenían que alegrarse pues podían favorecer los planes del que estaba en la silla renunciando a las mismas. (26)

The first thing that needed to be done was to tell the women of the community that from that date forward they needed to know that the most important thing in the country was not their plantations that served for people to eat the fish that the men brought, but rather, the work of the landing strip for the rich men from other countries. So if any plantation was found in the area chosen by the muslim foremen, the women needed to rejoice because they could favor the plans of the very one sitting on the throne that was damning them.

Developing the airport served motodu Obiang’s plans, but it left families in the area in destierro, literally ripped away from their plantations and displaced.

The arbitrariness of the motodu’s plans and power can be seen in the decision to forge ahead even when the project’s foremen realize that the lake is much too difficult to seal. Not to be deterred, when filling the lake with dirt and trees proves ineffective, they spend excessive amounts of money securing rocks from a neighboring nation in order to fill the basin and displace the water. Malela laments that the foreign engineers may do so good a job that no one will remember there was ever a large, beautiful lake on the island (55). This ecological violence mirrors other kinds of violence that the motodu arbitrarily inflicts without any regard for human life.

Segundo, Malela’s second son, living under motodu Teodoro’s regime, becomes enraged at the destruction of the lake and the island’s ecosystem.
He comes to believe that he can solve the political dilemma by becoming the new dictator of Corisco:

Aquí caeremos de culo cuando esto se convierta en otro Sahara porque estos salvajes están protegidos por el kalashnikov de Bob Denard. Y nadie lo quiere ver; solo abriremos la boca cuando estemos con el agua aquí. Pero no me voy a callar. Aquí hay que hacer algo antes de que estos mamelucos se lleven todas las ceibas y nos dejen sus viejos catapilas. Nadie quiere hacer nada y como soy un muana mboka, voy a defender mi pueblo. Aquí hay que montar una verdadera dictadura y yo voy a ser el dictador de Corisco. (30)

Here we will fall on our asses when this becomes another Sahara because these savages are protected by Bob Denard’s kalashnikov. And nobody wants to see it; we will only open our mouth when we are up to here with water. But I’m not going to shut up. Here something must be done before these crazies take all the ceibas and leave us their old Caterpilars (machines). Nobody wants to do anything and since I am a muana mboka, I am going to defend my town. We need to mount a true dictatorship here and I am going to be the dictator of Corisco.

Here, the Ndowe phrase “muana mboka” (or “mwana mboka” or “mwa mboka”) is key. It refers to a young person or youth who is essentially of the earth or the land—“un joven esencialmente de la tierra.” In this moment Segundo emphasizes his connection to the land, and his emotional and political commitments to protecting it by any means necessary. He tells his mother and brother, “Aquí hay que montar una verdadera dictadura,” and declares, “Yo voy a ser el dictador de Corisco” (30). His dictatorship would defend his community from the inevitable: the island’s ceiba trees surrounding the lake, which had been uprooted to facilitate the draining, will be replaced by more ruins: the abandoned construction vehicles.

The narrative arc of the novel, a critique of the dictatorship, closely resembles the work of another Annobonese writer, Francisco Zamora Loboch, whose poem “Vamos a matar al tirano” (“We Are Going to Kill the Tyrant”) is likewise a cry for the eradication of dictatorship and tyranny. In it, the speaker asks his mother to give him “esa vieja lanza / que usó el padre” (“that old spear / that the father used”) for he is going to “matar al tirano” (“kill the tyrant”). Similar to Segundo’s claim that he is a muana mboka, the speaker of the poem states, “pertenezco a un pueblo de revueltas / observa mi hechura / de escaramuzas y levantamientos / mi pulso no temblara,” (“I belong to a people of revolts / observe my workmanship / skirmishes and uprisings / my pulse will not tremble”), making clear his resolve to join a long history of his nation’s resistance to tyranny. The poem conjures the long
history of Annobonese resistance to colonial rule and dictatorship, histories that often remain untold but are nevertheless alive in the memories of the people. The poem ends with the declaration “ya no habrá más tiranos / nunca más dictadores / sobre mi pueblo, sobre tu miseria / sobre tu miedo” (“there will be no more tyrants / never more dictators / over my people, over your misery / over your fear”), which resembles but is likewise incommensurable with Segundo’s announcement that he will become the dictator of Corisco. While Zamora Loboch’s poem proclaims that there will no longer be tyrants or dictators after him, Segundo appoints himself a dictator, seemingly the only form of power that he can replicate.

For Ávila Laurel, the narrative underscores an ignorance about the modalities and functions of power. Because Segundo does not know how power works, he believes that he can arbitrarily declare himself a dictator and that he will prevail in changing the abuses in Corisco. Segundo’s declaration opens a floodgate of memories, as Malela recalls the last time someone declared himself a dictator. She understands the power behind Segundo’s utterances, and thinks about the repercussions and reactions her son would receive from the elders for even daring to utter the word ‘dictator’: “Y fue después de aquellos hechos, y durante los mismos, los que conocían las palabras dijeron que todo aquello podía ocurrir porque lo que imperaba era una dictatura. Como aquello se decía en voz tan baja que parecía una confidencia, la gente aprendió que era una palabra que no se podía soltar así por así” (30; “And it was after those events and during them that those that knew the words said that all of that could happen because what propelled it was a dictatorship. Since that was said in such a low voice that sounded like a secret, the people learned that it was a word that could not be set free at whim”). Segundo goes on to reveal that he knows a history which has been long forgotten: “Como no montemos una dictadura para expulsarlos, acabaremos envueltos en la red como sardinas o como la cabra que llevaban los militares el día en que estaba pudriéndose en el bosque el ekambi” (31; “Since we won’t enact a dictatorship, we will end up tangled in a net like sardines or like the goat that the militants carried the day that the ekambi was rotting in the woods”). In uttering these words Segundo recalls a history that he should not have known, remembering the visit of motudu Teodoro’s militants after the death of the ekambi. Malela closes her eyes and crosses herself.

Aquel hijo suyo había mencionado los aspectos de una historia muy triste, y dura, en la vida del pueblo, pero que el no debería haber debido conocer porque cuando ocurrieron aquellos hechos era un niño y porque nunca quisieron los mayores que se contara como si fuera un cuento de su tradición. De hecho era así un secreto que quisieron guardar los mayores para que quedara en la memoria oculta del pueblo. (31)
That son of hers had mentioned the details of a very sad and difficult history in the life of the community, but one which he should not have known because when they occurred he was a child and because the elders did not want it to be told as an oral history of their tradition. As a matter of fact, it was a secret that the elders wanted to keep so that it would become a suppressed (occult) memory of the people.

Though the community elders have attempted to suppress this history, Segundo invokes it at the very same moment that he declares his petit dictatorship. This act of remembering and retelling is a decolonizing act, one that indicts violence through a practice of listening and conjuring the past. Segundo’s remembering, however, mirrors another kind of repetition—that of coloniality. That is, while remembering these histories, he also declares himself a dictator, therein repeating the cycle of political repression. However, Malela is aware of the layers of danger that her family is facing.

For Segundo, this dictatorship is not a fantasy, but a plan he would like to put into action. Day after day he traverses the island until he discovers something unbelievably grim. In a forgotten coastal quarter, he finds a community of people, descendants of the servants of the colonial settlers who left in the late 1960s. This group of survivors made homes for themselves from littoral caves previously used for preparing and burying dead bodies. Segundo finds that in addition to taking shelter in these mausoleums, they reside amid mass open-air graves with bodies in various states of decomposition. It is this news of what Segundo has discovered on the forgotten edges of the island, along with Primero’s illicit affair with Anita/Anika, that cements Malela’s decision to escape from Corisco.  

Malela’s decision to go into exile is tied to the fact that her sons are repeating many different aspects of histories that they do not know. Primero’s affair with Anika and the possibility that it could encourage congosa is eerily similar to the community’s attitude when Malela was visited by, or “belonged” to, white plantation owners. Segundo’s desire to become a dictator is an act of repetition that can bring on brutal forms of violence; his imagined regime, though intended to help the communities of Corisco, takes the very same approach as the dictatorial regimes that have ruled Equatorial Guinea since 1968. The destruction of the lake to build an airport that would welcome the same kinds of foreigners who were expelled decades before is an act of violence and displacement—one that arrives on top of the long-standing neglect exemplified by blight, ruin, and the extreme isolation of the servants’ descendants on the other side of the island.

Malela finally chooses another kind of destierro for her family, but the emotional toll is more than she bargains for. As they board the ship to leave Corisco, Malela and her sons take a final look at the island: “Abandonaban la tierra donde habían vivido siempre y desde lejos veían que estaba rodeada de agua por todas partes. El sol se ponía, y en la penumbra no dejó que de
los ojos de Malela caín unas gotas de lágrima” (55–56; “They abandoned the land where they had always lived and from afar they saw that it was surrounded by water on all sides. The sun set and in the shadows of light you could not see that out of Malela’s eyes tears fell”). For the first time, the family sees Corisco from afar, and the reader feels the pang of their decision to abandon their home for a future life in destierro. Her sons feel Malela’s devastation as well. Primero sits next to his mother, blinking rapidly, while Segundo stands up and walks to the edge of the ship: “Quería ver cómo se perdía su tierra al salir de ella por el mar. Su espíritu inquieto le llevó a mirar todo lo que se podía ver. . . El sol se había metido, pero la noche cercana, con sus negros brazos sobre la aguas, tenía cosas que mostrar. Por esto se levanto de donde estaba su familia. Salío solo” (56; “[He] wanted to see how his land was lost as they left by sea. His spirit, restless, took him to survey all that could be seen. . . . The sun had set, but the night was near, with its black arms over the waters, had things to show. This is why he stood away from where his family was seated. He went alone”). This moment, when the setting sun and the night skylights dance on the water, is circumscribed by Segundo’s melancholy over leaving Corisco indefinitely. Ávila Laurel tells us that he went alone, “salío solo,” and Segundo does not return. The next morning, Malela realizes that Segundo has vanished. Perhaps he leapt overboard to his death, or has disappeared in a rejection of destierro and towards some other possible life. Malela and Primero, however, are never to see Segundo again, and so it seems that this young keeper of memories, this mwa mboka, could not endure destierro.

*El dictador de Corisco* is a novel about memory—about the act of forgetting and the dangerous, even deadly, act of remembering. The novel indicts the arbitrariness of power, the liminalities of dictatorship, and the indefinite repetition of tragic histories. For Malela, Primero, and Segundo, Corisco has become an impossibility, and the novel builds to this moment of choosing destierro as an act of resistance against the kinds of removal and dispossession occurring on their lands. In this narrative, destierro is not only being removed from resources, land, memories, and histories, but is also an act that refuses to capitulate to a regime which demands ahistoricity and subservience. Malela chooses the destierro that she does not know over the destierro that she knows intimately.

### Remembering Destierro

In writing these narratives the authors undertake a decolonizing task, one that examines, subverts, and complicates forms of destierro. In *Geographies of Home*, destierro is rooted in the rejection of ritual practice and an adherence to heteropatriarchy and anti-Blackness. It is this aversion to Blackness, a product of anti-Black racism rooted in the modern colonial project, that
poisons the home, the psyche, and in the end leads to Iliana’s sexual assault at her sister’s hands. Furthermore, Aurelia’s rejection of Afro-syncretic beliefs exiles her from her own innermost knowledge. It is only by recovering these practices and accepting these histories that Aurelia begins to reconceive her familial history and tries to address the trauma her daughters have suffered. Iliana, like her mother Aurelia, begins to reimagine home outside of a geographical location, and comes to a corporeal consciousness.71

In *El dictador de Corisco* Malela and Segundo are vessels for long-forgotten memories, which is dangerous in a nation where remembering can be considered an act of high treason. While the principal problems in the novel seem to revolve around the draining of the lake, other critical issues also come into view. Segundo’s encounters with people living among open-air graves and Primero’s sexual affair with Anika/Anita propel the family into destierro. However, the novel centers the act of remembering in spite of and against power. It is in the rejection of forgetting that Malela is able to imagine a life outside of Corisco. Not only are Malela and Primero devastated by the loss of their home, they also suffer the tragic loss of Segundo, the son who had declared himself the dictator of Corisco. *El dictador de Corisco* illustrates how the act of remembering trauma, of speaking its unnameable name, is a kind of decolonial love. It is speaking and writing truths and histories that have been left tacitly unspoken. Through writing narratives such as *Geographies of Home* and *El dictador de Corisco*, these authors show an acute understanding of destierro and dispossession that severs them from a homeland. While the novels’ plots remain unresolved or unknown, we are left in the ethical position to take seriously what they have posited. The question remains: how can we attend to the ways in which modernity tears peoples from their roots and dispossesses them through varying forms of destierro? The condition of destierro demands reparations. Yet, does an ethical reparation exist for the condition of living in destierro in the face of overlapping and often incommensurable dispossession? The following chapter takes up these questions and tracks how diasporic Afro-Atlantic Hispanophone authors consider the question of reparations in decolonial contexts, and offer ways to think about a reparation of the imagination through acts of decolonial love and resistance.