

# A Case for Relation: Mapping Afro-Latinx Caribbean and Equatoguinean Poetics

Yomaira C. Figueroa

This, then, is the existential message of the Crossing—to apprehend how it might instruct us in the urgent task of configuring new ways of being and knowing and to plot the different metaphysics that are needed to move away from living alterity premised in difference to living intersubjectivity premised in relationality and solidarity.

—M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*

There is perhaps no one who has offered more to the historical, sociopolitical, and meditative concept of relationality than Caribbean philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant. In his landmark *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant traces the possibilities of relationality, beginning with the Middle Passage and the endless crossings of the Atlantic that created the abyss of the slave ship (“belly of the boat”), the abyss of the ocean (“depths of the sea”), and the abyss of the unknown (“edges of a nonworld”).<sup>1</sup> Enslavement, a “debasement more eternal than apocalypse” is but the beginning of relations, and Glissant aptly centers the Caribbean as a site through which to examine the multiple and overlapping ways modernity connects and disconnects peoples across the globe.<sup>2</sup> John Drabinski argues that within Glissant’s work, the Caribbean “is simultaneously local—hemispheric, specifically historical, particular in its

1 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1997), 6, 6, 7.

2 *Ibid.*, 6.

memories—and global—the crossroads of the world, from the beginning.”<sup>3</sup> Thus thinking with and through the Caribbean and the sea, as metaphor and as material history, enables Glissant to further develop rhizomatic thought, to follow errantry, to mark the impotence of totality, and to instead map how identity is “extended through a relationship with the ‘Other.’” For Glissant, the effects of the abyss are generational and its experience unifying: “It became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others.”<sup>4</sup> Living in the chasm of the abyss and its aftermath requires ways of reckoning. For Glissant, poetry and poetics become technologies that bear witness to the terrors that our ancestors withstood and are an aesthetic way to approximate the aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade, the afterlives of slavery and dispossession, and the unknown phenomena that we live and share. Relations are therefore political and require both a reckoning with the *longue durée* of our histories and a committed practice to seeing both relations and disjunctures across the Afro-Atlantic and across the world.

For women of color feminists since the 1970s, including the Combahee River Collective, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Angela Jorge, and M. Jacqui Alexander, relationality became a method of political organizing and a practice for making possible political and poetic relations across racial, ethnic, sexual, and class differences. Key here is how their approaches to bridging difference urged them, as Alexander states in the epigraph, to “configure new ways of being” that were not premised in radical individuality or hierarchical categories of difference that are the preconditions to modern/colonial capitalist frameworks.<sup>5</sup> The intersubjective practice of learning one another’s histories of migration, labor, and personal and political struggles became a strategic tool for organizing against cis-heterosexist and racist structures that preyed on the lives and livelihoods of women of color and their families and communities. For Alexander, relations were made in what she calls “the Crossing”—the Middle Passage, the crossing empires, and the generations that now bear witness to the living histories that are affected by contemporary crossings. This formulation of relationality as both embodied archives of knowledge and forms of political solidarity would lead to what Alexander calls a “confrontation with history” itself.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, decolonial feminisms have sought to think through and beyond the ways colonial hierarchies of the human seek to “fragment peoples categorically” and instead find ways to engage within difference and to find what Maria Lugones calls “possible companions in resistance.”<sup>7</sup> Interestingly enough, though similar in worldviews, Glissantian and women of color feminist approaches to relationality are often found in separate

3 John Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage: Philosophy, Beginning, Abyss* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), ix.

4 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 11, 8.

5 M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 7–8.

6 *Ibid.*, 274.

7 Maria Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 11. See also Yomaira C. Figueroa, “Faithful Witnessing as Practice: Decolonial Readings of *Shadows of Your Black Memory* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*,” *Hypatia* 30, no. 4 (2015): 641–56.

fields of inquiry.<sup>8</sup> Building on Caribbean theories of relation through the theorizing and political organizing of women of color feminists (many of whom are of Caribbean heritage) offers decolonial imperatives that can shape methodological and practical approaches to thinking about the complexities of Afro-Atlantic crossings.<sup>9</sup> Put another way, in my forthcoming *Decolonizing Diasporas: Radical Mappings of Afro-Atlantic Literature* I examine how the theories of relationality and decolonial feminisms by women of color offer conceptual and philosophical tools that enable a radical remapping of relations across the Afro-Atlantic. Using these political and intellectual contributions as both theory and method allows for a project that engages some of the most peripheralized works that emerge in Caribbean, African, and transatlantic crossings. Specifically, I call attention to the long histories of relation and the interconnected literary imaginaries that exist across Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Equatorial Guinea (the only Spanish-speaking nation-state in Sub-Saharan Africa), and their diasporas.

Because thinking through Afro-diasporas, and specifically through the Afro-Atlantic, requires contending with overlapping histories of dispossession, forced and voluntary migrations, slavery, colonization, and postcolonial realities, we must be able to attend to incommensurability.<sup>10</sup> In signaling the term *incommensurability*, I build on the work of Eve Tuck, K. Wayne Yang, and Keith Feldman as I articulate how the problems endemic to historical and ongoing forms of colonialism require us to contend with “overlaps that can’t be figured, that cannot be resolved” and to recognize the often irreconcilable processes of history, language, dispossession, experiences, and the sociocultural and aesthetic output across distinct locales in the African diaspora.<sup>11</sup> Incommensurability is also a way to track how our theoretical and practical approaches to excavating the relations and understanding shared values “does as much to obscure as it does to enlighten.”<sup>12</sup> Attention to incommensurability in the form of unfixed histories and migrations, as well as social, cultural, and linguistic difference, is a

8 While women of color writers have a politics and practice of citing and tending to the material contributions of one another’s works, there is not a robust practice of citation across the different genealogies of the concept of relationality. That is, Glissant does not cite women of color feminists’ works on relationality in *Poetics of Relation*, and he does not appear in most of the post-1990s meditations on relationality.

9 Relationality as a concept, methodology, and approach to creative and strategic political organizing has also been central to the work of indigenous scholars and in particular indigenous feminisms. While I cannot expand on these works here, the thinkers cited below have helped shape the ethics with which I approach thinking about decolonization and relationality, particularly as a diasporic colonial subject living in a settler colonial nation-state. See Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie, “Relational Validity and the ‘Where’ of Inquiry: Place and Land in Qualitative Research,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 21, no. 7 (2015): 633–38; Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Islands of Decolonial Love: Stories and Songs* (Winnipeg: ARP, 2013), and “An Indigenous View on #BlackLivesMatter,” *Yes! Magazine*, 5 December 2014, [www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice/indigenous-view-black-lives-matter-leanne-simpson](http://www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice/indigenous-view-black-lives-matter-leanne-simpson); Dory Nason, “We Hold Our Hands Up: On Indigenous Women’s Love and Resistance,” *Decolonization* (blog), 12 February 2013, [decolonization.wordpress.com/2013/02/12/we-hold-our-hands-up-on-indigenous-womens-love-and-resistance](http://decolonization.wordpress.com/2013/02/12/we-hold-our-hands-up-on-indigenous-womens-love-and-resistance); and Wendy Rose, *Going to War with All My Relations: New and Selected Poems* (Flagstaff, AZ: Northland-Entrada, 1993). Likewise, Frantz Fanon’s meditations on racialization, colonial conditions, and decolonization necessarily inform concepts and discourses of relationality.

10 For more on incommensurability, see Keith P. Feldman, “On Relationality, on Blackness: A Listening Post,” *Comparative Literature* 68, no. 2 (2016): 108.

11 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization* 1, no. 1 (2012): 31. Here I would like to call attention to how the authors productively posit *social justice* and *decolonization* as incommensurable goals. The recognition of these irreconcilable sets of demands can open a space for productive forms of organizing and “reduce the frustration of attempts at solidarity” (4).

12 Feldman, “On Relationality, on Blackness,” 108.

central component to the work of women of color feminisms. We can think about the ways they deployed relationality in the context of their political organizing, learning each other's histories and creating spaces to come together and share their similarities and differences and organize against oppressions that the Combahee River Collective understood to be "interlocking."<sup>13</sup> This engagement with Caribbean thought, women of color feminists, and decolonial scholars offers a palimpsestic view of relationality that can illuminate relational Afro-Atlantic literary and cultural studies projects. This is likewise a methodology akin to Glissant's concept of *errantry*, a following of the roots and routes of the Crossing and their afterlives.

Building on scholarship in Caribbean history, theory, aesthetics, feminisms, and diaspora, I engage relationality as a decolonizing methodology that allows for the critical linking of diasporic and exilic communities that emerge from the hispanophone Afro-Atlantic.<sup>14</sup> Relationality and decoloniality are theoretical and political approaches that take into account the *longue durée* of colonial histories of enslavement and dispossession, call attention to remaining structures of oppression and violence, and center the voices, knowledge, and histories of those most often ignored. This framework is useful particularly for projects that seek to mark relations rather than engage in comparativity, which has the potential to, according to Feldman, "delimit in advance the terms of address for subaltern knowledges and practices." For example, building on black feminist scholarship and the work of Alexander Weheliye, Feldman argues,

The relational as a critical concept thus surfaces in part as a way to account descriptively and analytically for connections, linkages, and articulations across the institutionalization of difference in disciplines and the nation-state cartographies they reference. As much a seeing as a doing, the interconnections revealed by a relational methodology are otherwise hidden or buried by modern frames of the nation-state, the scale and scope of research agendas, and the disciplines and interdisciplines that draw on genealogies of comparison themselves.<sup>15</sup>

Relationality as a decolonial feminist imperative offers discursive strategies to engage in shared histories and knowledge, to productively discuss incommensurability and linkages, and to center the struggles and insurgent resistance enacted daily on the ground within communities most affected by ongoing forms of colonialism and oppressions.

Literature is one of the ways we come to understand humanistic experiences and learn about often untold histories of struggle and resistance. Studying the literary and cultural productions of Afro-Latinx Caribbean diasporas in the United States in relation to the diasporic and exilic productions of Equatoguineans in Spain allows us to examine understudied aspects of diaspora, Caribbean, and African studies. For example, this relational method can help us track how the palimpsestic and intersecting histories of these diasporas help to constitute a

13 Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," in Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 264.

14 Portions of this essay appear in my *Decolonizing Diasporas: Radical Mappings of Afro-Atlantic Literature* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming).

15 Feldman, "On Relationality, on Blackness," 110.

literary corpus that arcs toward decolonizing and liberatory possibilities. I propose that this mode of relationality that connects the material and aesthetic diasporas of hispanophone Africa and the Latinx Caribbean allows us to further “uncover, reveal, desediment, unveil, and excavate” and “prompt[s] us to account for entanglement and its obfuscation or burial.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, if decoloniality encompasses what Nelson Maldonado-Torres argues is a “process of undoing colonial reality and its multiple hierarchies of power as a whole,” then relationality as method is one way of revealing the entangled historical, material, and affective connections that would otherwise be obscured by dominant, truncated, and ahistorical narratives.<sup>17</sup>

Decoloniality and relationality as methodologies are meant to illuminate peripheralized perspectives. Mapping overlapping diasporic and exilic dis/locations requires an ethical engagement with the subjective experiences, forms of self-determination, and creative forces that emerge from these often-ignored spaces.<sup>18</sup> Decolonization is an embodied practice as well as a political and intellectual project. For example, Maldonado-Torres argues decolonizing projects are “grounded on the histories, lived experiences, and ethico-political imperatives of colonized peoples, as well as on their desires for open human interrelationality at the intimate erotic, and public levels,” while Laura E. Pérez argues that “a decolonizing politics must introduce, engage, and circulate previously unseen marginalized and stigmatized notions of ‘spirituality,’ ‘philosophy,’ ‘gender,’ ‘sexuality,’ ‘art,’ or any other category of knowledge and existence.”<sup>19</sup> These feminist decolonial and relational imperatives fundamentally reject the dehumanization embedded within the very structures of the colonial project since the fifteenth century. They counter the colonial difference, that is, the creation of a system that makes difference in hierarchies, and instead offer new ways of reimagining the human and a new ethics for relationships across a spectrum of life.<sup>20</sup>

In focusing on literary poetics, I take up part of Sylvia Wynter’s transformative project of subverting the overrepresentation of Man as the human and transforming the human sciences

16 Ibid., 111.

17 Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “The Decolonial Turn,” trans. Robert Cavooris, in Juan Poblete, ed., *New Approaches to Latin American Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 120. Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past* is particularly generative when thinking about what is obfuscated and what is revealed across histories of modernity and the Caribbean. “The past does not exist independently from the present,” he argues. “Indeed, the past is only past because there is a present.” Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 15.

18 I would be remiss not to mention the foundational work of Brinda Mehta as I conjure the term *diasporic dis/location*. While I do not engage the Indo-Caribbean in my work, Mehta’s tracing of how Indo-Caribbean women writers re/imagine female sexuality, labor, and resistance through literature, history, and quotidian practices is an excellent example of how to track subjectivity through entangled histories of migrations, diasporas, and multiple forms of dislocation. See Brinda Mehta, *Diasporic (Dis)Locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2004).

19 Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Epistemology, Ethics, and the Time/Space of Decolonization: Perspectives from the Caribbean and the Latina/o Americas,” in Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 200; Laura E. Pérez, “Enrique Dussel’s *Ética de la liberación*, US Women of Color Decolonizing Practices, and Coalitionary Politics amidst Difference,” *Qui Parle* 18, no. 2 (2010): 123.

20 When I am talking about relations beyond the human, I am referring to our ethical interdependence with nonhuman animals, ecology, and the environment, cosmologies that include the presence of ancestors and other forms of relations that are beyond the scope of colonial logics. For more on the colonial difference, see Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories / Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

through a new heresy. In her groundbreaking essay “The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism,” Wynter posits that it is the literary humanities that “should be the umbrella site for the transdisciplinary realization of a science of human systems.”<sup>21</sup> Thus for Wynter, literature, poetics, and the *studia humanitatis* are critical for the project of radically remapping the human.<sup>22</sup> My engagement with the literary poetics of Afro-Latinx and Afro-Hispanic writers in diaspora and exile is sustained through decolonial and women of color feminist thought. These works can help us think through the complexity of relationality in general and in Afro-Atlantic contexts specifically. This is because the works of women of color—political, personal, and poetic—have made clear the stakes and difficulties of working in relation to other oppressed peoples. For example, in *Pedagogies of Crossing* Alexander challenges us to continue the difficult work of relating across difference to apprehend how it might instruct us in the “urgent task of configuring new ways of being and knowing and to plot the different metaphysics that are needed to move away from living alterity premised in difference to living intersubjectivity premised in relationality and solidarity.” Furthermore, Alexander calls attention to the need for relationships between black women across the diaspora as she asks, “What kinds of conversations do we, as black women of the diaspora, need to have that will end these ‘wasteful errors of recognition’?”<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, centering the ways these diasporic dis/locations subvert and resist modernity and coloniality through their poetics and cultural productions is part of the aesthetic inquiry of the decolonial turn. Coined by Maldonado-Torres, the *decolonial turn* refers to “an epistemic, practical, aesthetic, emotional, and oftentimes spiritual repositioning of the modern/colonial subject by virtue of which modernity, and not the colonized subject . . . appears as a problem.” In imagining and creating new worldviews that unsettle the logics of modernity/coloniality, the decolonial turn “brings modernity into question and takes the colonized . . . as a source for inquiry into problems created by modernity and forms that may adequately respond to these problems.”<sup>24</sup> One fundamental aspect of the decolonial turn is the decolonial attitude, a subjective disposition toward knowledge that demands an ethics that takes seriously the contributions, practices, knowledges, and experiences of those who have been systematically oppressed, disenfranchised, and silenced.<sup>25</sup> In my *Decolonizing Diasporas* project I take on a decolonial attitude as I look to the imaginary as a source of possibility and its products as sites of knowledge and resistance. Taking seriously these works allows for a close examination of

21 Sylvia Wynter, “The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism,” *Boundary 2*, nos. 12–13 (1984): 45.

22 While Wynter does not identify as a feminist thinker, her project is critically aligned with women of color and decolonial feminist work. I have taken up this line of criticism in Xhercis Méndez and Yomaira C. Figueroa, “Not Your Papa’s Wynter: Women of Color Contributions toward Decolonial Futures,” in Joseph Drexler-Dreis and Kristien Justaert, eds., *Beyond the Doctrine of Man: Decolonial Visions of the Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 60–88.

23 Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 7–8, 274.

24 Maldonado-Torres, “The Decolonial Turn,” 112.

25 Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Reconciliation as a Contested Future: Decolonization as Project; or, Beyond the Paradigm of War,” in Iain S. Maclean, ed., *Reconciliation, Nations, and Churches in Latin America* (London: Ashgate, 2006), 225–45.

how relations across diasporic Afro-Atlantic hispanophone subjects help us to map forms of resistance to the unfinished project of Western modernity and coloniality.

### Implications: Thinking/Crossing the Afro-Atlantic

Thinking from the position of the Afro-Atlantic hispanophone world offers the opportunity to critically link literary poetics and cultural productions emerging from diasporic and exilic Afro-Puerto Rican, Afro-Dominican, Afro-Cuban, and Equatoguinean writers and artists.<sup>26</sup> Through this methodology of decoloniality and relationality, I track the long historical and literary, linguistic, and cultural relationship between often peripheralized Afro-Atlantic hispanophone subjects. For example, the hispanophone Caribbean and Equatorial Guinea share colonial histories under the Spanish Empire that include nineteenth-century historical crossings, such as the African Atlantic penal colony for Cuban (and some Puerto Rican and Filipino) anticolonial agitators on the Equatoguinean island of Fernando Po (now Bioko).<sup>27</sup> There is also a longer history of *emancipados*, or emancipated Cuban slaves, who were brought voluntarily (but more often deported) to Fernando Po from the 1840s through the 1860s. Most revelatory, however, is how Spain's defeat in the Spanish American War and the ultimate relinquishing of its last colonies in the Caribbean and the Pacific in 1898 (Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines) led the nation to reassert its imperial rule in its neglected Sub-Saharan colony, Spanish Guinea (now Equatorial Guinea).<sup>28</sup> In addition to sharing an official language, the hispanophone Caribbean and Equatorial Guinea share histories of anticolonial and revolutionary struggles, occupation, and postcolonial dictatorial rule.

Equatorial Guinea comprises five islands and a continental swath, most of which were sites of colonial exploitation, expropriation, wholesale neglect, and colonial resistance until its administrative decolonization in 1968. When Equatorial Guinea gained its independence from Spain, the nation effectively transitioned from fascism to dictatorship. The first democratically elected president, Francisco Macías Nguema, declared himself president for life in 1972 and was deposed in a coup d'état orchestrated by his nephew Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo in 1979. Still in power, Obiang is the longest-serving head of state on the continent of Africa. Since the discovery of offshore petroleum reserves in the 1990s, Equatorial Guinea has become one of the richest nations on the continent, yet corruption and fraudulent mismanagement have contributed to vast wealth inequality and human rights abuses. These experiences are often shared through literary poetics and fiction because of state-sponsored violence and the suppression of the press, books, and music that critique those in power. Thus the literature of Equatorial Guinea, when read alongside the resistance writing by Afro-Latinxs that reflect on

26 See Figueroa, *Decolonizing Diasporas*.

27 For more on this historical context, see Michael Ugarte, *Africans in Europe: The Culture of Exile and Emigration from Equatorial Guinea to Spain* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

28 See Benita Sampedro Vizcaya, "Rethinking the Archive and the Colonial Library: Equatorial Guinea," *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 9, no. 3 (2008): 341–63.

occupation-era, dictatorial-era, and contemporary Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and their diasporas, reveals relations across the vectors of colonialism, modernity, and coloniality. It is likewise possible to map how these works imagine themselves outside these landscapes and structures of oppression and domination through decolonial imperatives and insurgent critiques that envision liberatory possibilities.

Contemporarily, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Equatorial Guinea share sociocultural and political realities such as mass migration, racial and ethnic discrimination, and insurgent artistic and cultural productions that reflect these conditions. As I examine in my work, these literary and visual/sonic productions reveal shared preoccupations, including indicting the intimacies of coloniality, engaging in the act of witnessing against oppression, contending with dispossession or *destitierro*, creating new conceptions of and approaches to reparations, and imagining Afro-Atlantic futurities.<sup>29</sup> Most of these literary and cultural productions are written from exile or diaspora in the global north, specifically the United States for the Latinx Caribbean authors and Spain for Equatoguinean authors, and they often make gestures toward their islands and homelands in the Atlantic.

Since these texts primarily emerge from the geopolitical locus of former insular colonies (islands and their diasporas), the project is engaged in the archipelagic turn in Latinx studies and expands this turn toward Sub-Saharan African islands. In that emerging field, the work of Caribbean thinkers such as Lanny Thompson, Michelle Ann Stephens, and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel has been in conversation with and examined in relation to archipelago studies emerging from Oceania, including the work of Epeli Hau'ofa, Craig Santos Perez, and Brandy Nalani McDougall.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, my project finds a home within the larger body of work in Hispanist studies dedicated to opening space for engaging the hispanophone Afro-Atlantic and its diasporas in Spain and beyond.<sup>31</sup> The work of Benita Sampedro, Michael Ugarte, Elisa Rizo, and a cadre of junior scholars including Martin Repinecz has made space to think through the implications of Spanish colonial subjectship in Sub-Saharan Africa and the contributions of Equatoguinean postindependence literature.<sup>32</sup>

29 See Figueroa, *Decolonizing Diasporas*.

30 See Lanny Thompson, *Imperial Archipelago: Representation and Rule in the Insular Territories under US Dominion after 1898* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010); Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens, eds., *Archipelagic American Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, *Coloniality of Diasporas: Rethinking Intra-colonial Migrations in a Pan-Caribbean Context* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," in Eric Waddell, Vijay Naidu, and Epeli Hau'ofa, eds., *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands* (Suva, Fiji: School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific, in association with Beake House, 1993), 2–16; Craig Santos Perez, *From Unincorporated Territory [Hacha]* (Kaneohe, HI: Tinfoil, 2008); and Brandy Nalani McDougall, *Finding Meaning: Kaona and Contemporary Hawaiian Literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016).

31 In 2014 scholars joined efforts to establish a Modern Language Association forum on the global hispanophone that engages the literary poetics and cultural productions from the lesser-known former Spanish colonies including Equatorial Guinea, the Philippines, and Western Sahara, to name a few. See [mla.hcommons.org/groups/global-hispanophone/forum](http://mla.hcommons.org/groups/global-hispanophone/forum).

32 See Benita Sampedro Vizcaya, "Engaging the Atlantic: New Routes, New Responsibilities," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 89, no. 8 (2012): 905–22; Ugarte, *Africans in Europe*; Lola Aponte and Elisa Rizo, "Guinea Ecuatorial como pregunta abierta: Hacia el diálogo entre nuestras otredades," *Revista Iberoamericana*, nos. 248–49 (July–December 2014): 745–60; and Martin Repinecz, "Raza or Race? Slavery and Transatlantic Family Ties in Equatorial Guinean Literature," *Hispanic Studies Review* 2, no. 1 (2019): 121–35.

Thinking of relationality as a method for analyzing the Afro-Atlantic hispanophone diasporas also adds to discourses on decoloniality and in particular contributes to the study of the Afro-diaspora and Latinx Caribbean epistemology and subjectivity. The Caribbean has been a site of insurgent anticolonial and decolonial thinking since its very conception as the geoeconomic locus of modernity's extraction. Furthermore, the Caribbean is critical in locating the temporal and spatial parameters of modernity for decolonial thinkers, particularly those in Latin America and the United States, and there is a pressing need to further analyze the insurgent *movidas*, ruptures, and contributions to decolonial thought that emerge from the Caribbean and its diasporas.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, decolonial thought emerging from African contexts has been able to address some of the contemporary manifestations of coloniality, particularly across postcolonial dictatorships and settler colonial states.<sup>34</sup> The study of Equatorial Guinea benefits from the decolonial theoretical gestures and nuanced approaches emerging from both Africa and the Caribbean, especially as the oppressive postcolonial political climate in Equatorial Guinea is matched only by the resistance writings and practices emerging from within the nation-state and from its diaspora in Spain. These works reflect sustained efforts to eradicate the forms of coloniality endemic to dictatorship and also to underscore the humanity and dignity of Equatoguineans who struggle to recuperate histories and language practices and to imagine liberation outside of the terms of coloniality.

Examining the hispanophone Afro-Atlantic through women of color feminist thought and decoloniality opens a discursive space to engage the contributions of arguably peripheralized diasporic populations. In deploying the term *peripheral* I build on Ramona Hernández and Silvio Torres-Saillant's work on Dominicans in the diaspora, in which they argue that if the Latinx experience is marginal, then the Dominican experience is peripheral to that margin.<sup>35</sup> I contend that the literature of Equatorial Guinea, the sole Spanish-speaking nation-state in Sub-Saharan Africa, is peripheral to both African studies writ large and to African literature. Equatorial Guinea, surrounded by anglophone, francophone, and lusophone nation-states, has a literary corpus that, while situated firmly in an African worldview, is primarily produced and published in Spain, and as one might imagine, as black postcolonial literature it has not been readily accepted into the Spanish canon.<sup>36</sup> Latinx Caribbean literature is similarly positioned

33 Latinx Caribbean scholars have contributed much to scholarship in discourses on modernity, coloniality, and decoloniality. See Kelvin Santiago-Valles, "'Race,' Labor, 'Women's Proper Place,' and the Birth of Nations: Notes on Historicizing the Coloniality of Power," *CR* 3, no. 3 (2003): 47–69; Ramón Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Martínez-San Miguel, *Coloniality of Diasporas*; Agustín Lao-Montes, "Afro-Latin@ Difference and the Politics of Decolonization," in Ramón Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and José David Saldívar, eds., *Latino/as in the World-System: Decolonization Struggles in the Twenty-First-Century US Empire* (London: Routledge, 2015), 81–94; and Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality," Fondation Frantz Fanon, 2016, [fondation-frantzfanon.com/?s=Nelson+Maldonado-Torres](http://fondation-frantzfanon.com/?s=Nelson+Maldonado-Torres).

34 See Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa: Myths of Decolonization* (Oxford: African Books Collective, 2013).

35 See Silvio Torres-Saillant and Ramona Hernández, *The Dominican Americans* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998).

36 While Spanish is the lingua franca and official language of Equatorial Guinea, most of the population also speak their respective indigenous languages (Fang, Bubi, Ndowe, and Annobonese, to name a few). The nation has also adopted French and Portuguese as official languages (though spoken by fewer of its citizens when compared to Spanish) for diplomatic purposes.

in the United States, where we find Latinx literature often juxtaposed to a Eurocentric canon and continually subordinated by white supremacist markets and logics. Although recent turns in Latinx studies have made space for Afro- and indigenous *Latinidades* to become more visible, Afro-Latinx literature has remained peripheralized, and much more work remains to be done. In black studies, research on Afro-Latinidades is continually mapping new terrain. This is especially true when thinking through the contemporary material, symbolic, and ideological effects of the colonial difference within anglophone (African American) and hispanophone (Afro-Latinx) diasporic populations in the global north.<sup>37</sup> Finally, Equatorial Guinea has had little place in the academy as a source of study or knowledge, with the exception of linguistic anthropologists and Hispanist studies scholars.<sup>38</sup> Outside these areas, a sustained engagement with Equatoguinean literature is often absent.<sup>39</sup>

My work on the diasporic Afro-Atlantic hispanophone literatures makes racialized blackness and ethnoracial difference a primary site of analysis. I understand racialization and racism as products of the colonial difference maintained by coloniality and ongoing colonization, including settler colonialisms. I map relations between the Afro-Latinx Caribbean and Equatoguineans as a way to understand what I am calling the “critical cartographies of racialization” for Afro-Atlantic hispanophone subjects in exile and diaspora.<sup>40</sup> This relational framework helps us track the different ways antiblackness and the colonial difference imbue former colonies and contemporary metropolises. It outlines and gives a name to the (un)fixed racial/ethnic ontological and phenomenological experiences of Afro-diasporic and exilic people as they move across spatial and temporal locales. This is not new, however; Caribbean studies scholarship has long tracked how migration and diaspora likewise produce different forms

37 Consider, for example, some of the contemporary discourses on social and digital media around issues of race, blackness, and cultural productions. These include polemics on the verifiable “blackness” of Afro-Latinx entertainers. For example, we see campaigns that question the authenticity of black Latinidad in debates on Afro-Latinx entertainers such as Bruno Mars, Amara La Negra, and Cardi B, to name a few. The racial discourse of hypodescent in the United States differs from the racial logics of *mestizaje* implanted by Spanish empire during the long sixteenth century. They are both, however, fundamentally and unequivocally antiblack and anti-indigenous. The polemical discourses that emerge attempt to define blackness or afro-descendance in narrow terms, often adhering to linguistic (colonial) borders. This is a particularly salient issue because of the rising Afro-Latinx population in the United States that poses a challenge to discourses of hypodescent and more often represents a palimpsest of racial logics. For example, since 2014 Dominicans have become the largest Latinx population in New York. See Laird Bergad, *Have Dominicans Surpassed Puerto Ricans to Become New York City’s Largest Latino Nationality? An Analysis of Latino Population Data from the 2013 American Community Survey for New York City and the Metropolitan Area* (New York: Center for Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino Studies, CUNY, 2014); and Michelle Stephens, “What Is This *Black* in Black Diaspora?,” *Small Axe*, no. 29 (July 2009): 26–38.

38 On linguistics, see John Lipski, “The Spanish Language of Equatorial Guinea,” *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 8, no. 1 (2004): 115–30, and “The Spanish of Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, and Its Significance for Afro-Hispanic Studies,” *Hispanic Linguistics* 1 (1984): 69–96. Linguistics, language practice, and the development of Spanglish become primary vectors of analysis within Latinx Caribbean diaspora studies. Closer attention to the phenomena of Nuyorican, Latinx, and anthropological linguistics can be seen in Yomaira C. Figueroa, “The Life Work of Ana Celia Zentella: Anthropological Linguistics, Bilingualism, and Linguistic Communities at a Crossroads,” *Centro* 28, no. 1 (2016): 176–95.

39 One example of a transatlantic engagement is the volume *Hijas del Muntu*, which includes women writers from Equatorial Guinea. See María Mercedes Jaramillo and Lucía Ortiz, *Hijas del Muntu: Biografías críticas de mujeres afrodescendientes de América Latina* (Bogotá: Panamericana, 2011). Also see Jerome C. Branche, *The Poetics and Politics of Diaspora: Transatlantic Musings* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

40 See Figueroa, *Decolonizing Diasporas*.

of racialization and other modalities of violence.<sup>41</sup> Following this, decoloniality as a political practice and vector of thought has always already been present in Caribbean studies scholarship, even if the terminology was not available as such.

These intersections offer fertile ground that helps to complicate notions of race, sex, belonging, and migration. Rather than a neatly corseted study on the links between the Afro-Cuban, Afro–Puerto Rican, Afro-Dominican, and Equatoguinean writers and thinkers, my *Decolonizing Diasporas* project marks some of the preoccupations that emerge in these texts and reads them against the grain of coloniality and toward decolonial possibilities. I trace and call attention to interlocking structures of oppression, including sexual and relational violence, sociopolitical and economic exclusion, the haunting remnants of colonial intervention, and public and intimate forms of domination. This study is also deeply committed to seeing how writers, thinkers, and artists imagine possibilities beyond violence and positivism through ethical relations and approaches. In bringing Afro-Hispanic writers into the fold of a diasporic Afro-Latinx Caribbean project, I aim to contribute to and help reconceptualize the fields of Latinx Caribbean, African, and decolonial studies. I do this by way of the discourses on relations across Caribbean and women of color thought. Doing so allows us to listen and track the insurgent creative interventions from often-ignored Afro-Atlantic hispanophone peoples and offers ways to think about the radical possibilities of, and ethical approaches to, mapping human geographies of struggle and resistance.<sup>42</sup> Through the use of these critical lenses, I read the literature and cultural productions that are not usually studied from a relational perspective and contend that this approach elucidates how, tucked in the periphery, these Afro-Atlantic subjects challenge the intimacy of dictatorship and occupation, engage a philosophy of witnessing that rejects colonial politics of recognition, resist *destierro* even as they are diasporic, reimagine reparations beyond positivism, and offer meditations on futures that imagine worlds/otherwise.

## Gestures: Witnessing Intimacies

As I have outlined above, my engagement across Caribbean, decolonial, and women of color feminist thought has allowed for an expansion of the ways we can map the crossings between Africa and the Caribbean. Focusing on Equatorial Guinea alongside the hispanophone Caribbean through their diasporic poetics has offered me the opportunity to track some of the shared ethics and decolonial imperatives. For example, the preoccupation with dictatorship,

41 Two texts come to mind when thinking about this: Fanon's meditation on the colonial subject who travels to the metropole and back in *Black Skin, White Masks* and the essays and novels of Jamaican author Michelle Cliff, in which she tracks how moving from the Caribbean to the United States and Europe fundamentally alters the subjective experiences of black peoples. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2008); and Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven* (New York: Plume, 1996), and "If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire," in Smith, *Home Girls*, 15–30.

42 See Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

occupation, and coloniality, and the need to mark it, name it, document its actions, and subvert and topple it, is a pressing political concern in the literatures of the Afro-Atlantic. In these contexts, literatures work to uncover the machinations of power by making visible what is often dangerous to utter in public (and even intimate or private) spaces. Literature becomes a witness to the unbearable reach of dictatorship and occupation by revealing the normalization of domination and revealing the absurdities of power by exposing its innermost machinations.

In one such meditation in *Decolonizing Diasporas*, “Intimacies,” I focus on what I call the intimacies of coloniality that take shape as forms of occupation, dictatorship, and corporeal control. I engage in a close reading of Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel’s *Arde el monte de noche*, Nelly Rosario’s *Song of the Water Saints*, and Trifonia Melibea Obono’s *La Bastarda* and track how the intimacies of coloniality in general, and the intimacy of colonial blackness in particular, become “shadows” over the lives, livelihoods, and imaginations of entire communities and nations.<sup>43</sup> While there is a preponderance of state-sponsored violence and what Achille Mbembe has called “private indirect government,” the resulting isolation enabled by such corruption allows for resistance to take shape through corporeal desires and radical reconfigurations of relationships.<sup>44</sup> By examining how the intimacies of coloniality impact intimate, kinship, and communal relations, I trace the ways in which structural domination shapes and impacts everyday intimate practices including access to sustenance, sociality, and sexual desire. Key to understanding these intimacies is seeing how the novels divulge how dictatorship, occupation, and coloniality become intimate parts of the lives of the *damnés*, those condemned on the underside of coloniality.

Ávila Laurel’s *Arde el monte de noche* takes us to Annobón, one of Equatorial Guinea’s most remote islands. Annobón is where the nameless protagonist recounts his childhood among his family and his community, and in doing so he shares the disastrous consequences of living both too close and too far from the seat of power. Rosario’s *Song of the Water Saints* centers the lives of four generations of Afro-Dominican women on the Caribbean island and in diaspora in New York City. In this novel the US occupation of the Dominican Republic and later Rafael Trujillo’s US-backed dictatorship are represented as ever-present shadows, as vectors of intimate violence, and as catalysts that shape the psyche and the kinship and erotic practices of each woman. Obono’s *La Bastarda* is known as the first LGBTQ novel in the Equatoguinean literary corpus.<sup>45</sup> Through the narrative of the protagonist Okomo, Obono elucidates how the coloniality of gender, including homophobia, within Fang communities leads to social, familial, and political exclusion. Yet the story is not a tragedy; Okomo, caught

43 I extrapolate the term *shadows* here from an Equatoguinean dramaturge (name redacted) who said the dictatorship was “la sombra que nos acompaña” (“the shadow that accompanies us”) during a 2014 interview in Malabo. Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, *Arde el monte de noche* (Madrid: Calambur, 2009); Nelly Rosario, *Song of the Water Saints: A Novel* (New York: Vintage, 2007); Trifonia Melibea Obono, *La Bastarda*, trans. Lawrence Schimel (New York: Feminist, 2018).

44 Achille Mbembe, “On Private Indirect Government,” trans. A. M. Barrett, in *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 66–101.

45 Obono’s *La Bastarda*, originally published in Spanish in 2016, is also the first novel by an Equatoguinean woman to be translated into English. Currently the book is banned in Equatorial Guinea.

within matrices of desire, obligation, and conscription, ultimately chooses erotic freedom and queer communal living in the forests outside of her Fang community.

Each of these works demands that we witness something distinct and perhaps incomensurable about the intimacies of dictatorship. For Ávila Laurel, *Arde el monte de noche* demands attending to the reach of power on those oppressed by the decisions made from afar that impact an isolated community, and bearing witness to how political isolation begets illness, malnutrition, and a form of erotic violence that leaves an indelible mark on the social history of a place and its people. For Rosario, *Song of the Water Saints* acts as balm and spell that depicts black femme erotic freedoms as bound to both the US military occupation and later the Trujillo dictatorship. The erotic practices and corporeal consciousness evoked by the Afro-Dominican femme characters point to the emergence of liberatory spiritual connections across generations. Finally, Obono's *La Bastarda* demands that we acknowledge the imperiled lives of women as well as queer and gender nonconforming peoples in Equatorial Guinea and bear witness to how erotic freedoms make possible corporeal liberation even in spaces constrained by heteropatriarchal traditions, misogyny, homophobia, and other affective impossibilities. Reading these texts in relation surfaces the interconnection between racialized modes of intimacy and reveals how gender, sexuality, and women's corporeal and erotic practices are not private affairs but rather are sociopolitical matters that do not escape power structures. The intimacies of coloniality, in this case dictatorship and occupation, produce uncanny personal intimacies while antiblackness is articulated through intimate relations under the heel of coloniality.

Across each of the novels, the erotic becomes a site of possibility but also a critical lens. The resulting narratives reveal how domination from afar is felt within the realm of the intimate. I argue that these texts not only document how the intimacies of dictatorship, occupation, and coloniality dictate how Afro-Atlantic and black femme subjects live and die and what they consume, but also track the development of ravenous quests for corporeal and erotic freedom. Analyzing the often-invisible impact that dictatorship/occupation has on reproductive labor, food insecurity, sexual economies, and the psyche underscores the insidiousness and intergenerational effects of domination. Most importantly, these novels center the often-observed subjectivities of black women and femmes, showing how erotic freedoms emerge and travel, in relation to, against, and outside of dictatorship, occupation, and coloniality. To scaffold this meditation, I build on the works of women of color feminists, including Audre Lorde, M. Jacqui Alexander, and Mayra Santos Febres, and take up Nadia Celis Salgado's concept of *la consciencia corporal* (corporeal consciousness) and Jessica Marie Johnson's concept of *black femme freedom* as ways to bear witness to forms of erotic freedom enacted

by Afro-Atlantic women and femmes, even in the midst of the most intimate forms of structural and political domination.<sup>46</sup>

Other decolonial, insurgent, and liberatory strategies emerge across the literatures of the Afro-hispanophone Atlantic diasporas. For example, in “Witnessing” I contend that María Lugones’s feminist philosophical concept of *faithful witnessing* is a critical component to the decolonial turn and to reading decolonial imaginaries.<sup>47</sup> I engage in a close reading of two novels—Donato Ndongo’s *Shadows of Your Black Memory* and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*—and argue that the concept of faithful witnessing enriches our understanding and analyses of religious colonization and coloniality of gender.<sup>48</sup> My sustained interest in tracking what concepts or practices these literatures can offer us can be seen in my work on reparations. In “Reparations” I read Ernesto Quiñonez’s *Bodega Dreams* and Joaquín Mbomio Bacheng’s *Matinga, sangre en la selva* to examine how to expand our notions of reparations and offer futurities predicated on practices of decolonial love.<sup>49</sup> I highlight how each text cautions us to conceive of reparations beyond the material and underscore their demand for what I call a “reparation of the imagination,” which is achieved through an ethics of decolonial love.<sup>50</sup>

## Horizons: Other Seas and Shores

This research emerges from within the intersections of Caribbean, Africana, Latinx, Hispanist, and literary studies. Its arcs are shaped by decolonial feminist imperatives, and it represents one aspect of the decolonial turn in Caribbean studies, writ large. In reaching across Afro-Atlantic hispanophone diasporas, I aim to make legible and render visible the lives and cultural productions of often-overlooked Afro-Atlantic subjects. The decolonial feminist *movida* of engaging relations across difference understands literary poetics and cultural productions as radical practices that are central to tracking and reformulating our notions of decoloniality and diasporic crossings. In this way, my diasporic project became transformed through the act of being a faithful witness to the insurgent work of Afro-Atlantic writers from the Latinx Caribbean and Equatorial Guinea.

46 See Nadia Celis Salgado, *La rebelión de las niñas: El Caribe y la “conciencia corporal”* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2015); and Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming).

47 See also Figueroa, “Faithful Witnessing as Practice.”

48 Donato Ndongo, *Shadows of Your Black Memory*, trans. Michael Ugarte (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); originally published as *Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra* (Madrid: Fundamentos, 1987); Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (New York: Riverhead, 2007).

49 A version of this chapter appeared as Yomaira C. Figueroa, “Reparation as Transformation: Radical Literary (Re)Imaginations of Futurities through Decolonial Love,” *Decolonization* 4, no. 1 (2015): 41–58. Ernesto Quiñonez, *Bodega Dreams* (New York: Vintage, 2000); Joaquín Mbomio Bacheng, *Matinga: Sangre en la selva* (Barcelona: Mey, 2013).

50 See Figueroa, *Decolonizing Diasporas*.