

INDIGENIZING AND DECOLONIZING FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

After the Hurricane: Afro-Latina Decolonial Feminisms and *Destierro*

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The first version of this piece was written for the opening panel of the 2017 Conference of the Association for Feminist Ethics and Social Theory (FEAST) in Florida. The panel, “Decolonial Feminism: Theories and Praxis,” offered the opportunity for Black and Latinx feminist philosophers and decolonial scholars to consider their arrival to decolonial feminisms, their various points of emergence, and the utility of decolonial politics for liberation movements and organizing. I was prepared to discuss some genealogies of US Latina decolonial feminisms with a focus on the relationship of decolonial feminisms to other feminist articulations—for example, a consideration of the relation and divergence between decolonial and postcolonial feminism. I was particularly interested in examining some of the “decolonizing constellations of resistance and love” created by Black, Indigenous, Latinx feminisms (Simpson 2014b).¹ I wanted to track the intergenerational labor of relationality as a part of women of color politics and to discuss how these politics unseat coloniality in its variant iterations.

The 2017 FEAST conference took place just a few weeks after Hurricane Irma and Hurricane María tore through the Caribbean and devastated my homeland, Puerto Rico. Hurricane María, in particular, ravaged the island’s already weakened infrastructure and revealed the existing systems of economic precarity and second-class citizenship endemic to colonies. This “natural disaster” or rather, colonial disaster, was made deadlier and more destructive due to local and federal mismanagement and neglect from the US government and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).² Two weeks post impact, very little information had emerged from the island as millions of people were left without electricity, potable water, or food. My family, scattered across the island, was part of those who were unaccounted for or incommunicado. I had been scheduled to attend a literary festival in San Juan, Puerto Rico (Salon Literario Festival de la Palabra) on the heels of the FEAST conference. However, all plans and possibilities were suspended, ephemeral, deferred. Instead of traveling to the island, I joined the millions of Puerto Ricans in the diaspora frantically searching for answers, listening in to walkie-talkie apps like Zello, and shipping boxes of first-aid supplies filled with money, clothes, batteries, formula, diapers, and nonperishable foods that we knew might never arrive. Sleepless and impassive, my presence at FEAST and my talk made a different intervention than what I had proposed and prepared. Rather than talking about the overlapping arcs of decolonial feminisms, I instead meditated on the connections I see between women of

color feminisms and decolonial feminisms as a way to locate some of the contours of Afro-Latina decolonial feminist thought. In contending with the impact of the hurricane, I wanted to flesh out one suggestive concept for decolonizing work in diasporic contexts that I had been working on for my book manuscript: a term I call *destierro*.

I. Afro/Latina Decolonial Feminisms

In her essay, “Enrique Dussel’s *Ética de la liberación*, U.S. Women of Color Decolonizing Practices, and Coalitionary Politics amidst Difference,” Laura 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.... [A] decolonizing politics resides in an embodied practice rooted in lived and liveable worldviews or philosophies and is therefore in decolonizing relationship to our own bodies and to each other as well as to the natural world. (Pérez 2010, 123)

The practice of “introducing, engaging, and circulating” peripheralized knowledge or *otros saberes* is contingent on intellectual and praxical generosity. In using the term *otros saberes* I am referring to the epistemological break that occurs when devalued or othered knowledge comes to be understood and valued as other ways of knowing.³ At their best, decolonizing projects subvert the ways in which colonial knowledge practices produce hierarchies of knowledge and being that produce oppressive human taxonomies. At their weakest, such liberation projects can fail to see the deeply entangled forms of oppression faced by different groups of people under modern/colonial and settler colonial regimes. Thus, not only is it important to center the lived experience and knowledges of those who “survive and more” the afterlife of colonialism, slavery, and coloniality, but we must locate one another along our paths of resistance (Sharpe 2016, 18).⁴

Kristie Dotson’s metaphor for this kind of locating suggests we consider oppression as “millions of miles of ivy” that we all are tasked with pulling down.⁵ She considers that we cannot see how others, miles away, are pulling down the ivy, but insists that we must trust and understand that others are also on the task of subverting oppression in conceivably different ways. Indeed, in locating one another and ourselves along our varied modes of resistance to oppression, we stay alive. Decolonial feminist thought is located in various temporal and spatial locales. One strand of US queer women of color decolonial feminism, in particular Chicana/Latina decolonial feminism, understands modernity as having emerged in the fifteenth century with the rise of colonization in the Americas, Indigenous dispossession, and the transatlantic slave trade. Framing the modern/colonial within these spatiotemporal contexts means that decolonial scholars within this strand understand that the peoples who confronted imperialism and slavery in the long sixteenth century represent those on the underside of modernity.⁶ Furthermore, Chicana/Latina decolonial feminist scholars have made critical correctives to modern/colonial sex-gender politics (see Maese-Cohen 2010). This includes articulating and centering forms of racialized gender and sexual violence that are endemic to colonization. One such contribution is María Lugones’s concept of the coloniality of gender.⁷ Decolonial feminism thus requires an “analysis of racialized, capitalist, gender oppression,” or the coloniality of gender, in order to “understand the oppressive imposition as a complex interaction of economic, racializing, and gendering systems in which

every person in the colonial encounter can be found as a live, historical, fully described being” (Lugones 2010, 747).

I am interested in tracing emerging Afro-Latinx feminist methodologies that exist within and across intersections of diasporic identities, experiences, and politics.⁸ I am empowered by the ways that decolonial feminist ethics recognizes the intersectional subjectivities and lived experiences of women of color as necessary for liberatory practices and the transformation of human sciences and relationality. Perhaps the most challenging and fruitful part of Afro-Latina decolonial feminism is the practice of challenging the colonial difference through relationality or what Audre Lorde calls relations across difference.⁹ I envision US Afro-Latinx decolonial feminist works as embodied knowledge or “theory in the flesh” that are likewise intellectual, political, and spiritual praxes that bring to the fore the histories, living legacies, and racialized gender dimensions of chattel slavery, diaspora, dispossession, and resistance to these multivalent oppressions (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981, 24). These violent phenomena are always already linked to the histories and lived experiences of Indigenous women of Turtle Island and Abya Yala, Black women across the diaspora, and other communities of color on the underside of the modern/colonial project that resist forms of ongoing colonization.¹⁰

II. A Lifetime Pursuit

The project of women of color feminisms, as articulated by the Combahee River Collective, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, M. Jacqui Alexander, Michelle Cliff, and others is one where relations across difference and complex coalition-building are the stepping stones toward fashioning new futures that do not rely on shared understandings of oppression and resistance. In their 1978 statement, The Combahee River Collective declared that they not only understood oppressions to be interlocking, but also believed that Black feminist thought and political organizing could combat the oppressions faced by all women of color:

[We] are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.... As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face. (Combahee River Collective 1977)

This collective of visionary African American and Afro-Caribbean lesbian feminists articulated a politics of relationality that has resounded in the work and organizing of women of color feminists over the last three and a half decades. In her essay “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” Audre Lorde tells us, “The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference” (Lorde 2012, 123). She argues, “we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals,” and because of this we stand to be fractured from one another and ourselves (115). This project of relations is a “lifetime pursuit,” one that women of color feminists have kept alive as a politics and a quotidian practice (115). In using the term *quotidian* I am referring not only to everyday practices or to home in a domestic sense, but rather I am hailing Tina Camp’s articulation of the quotidian as a site of resistance or a “practice of refusing the terms of negation and dispossession” (Camp 2017, 96).

Relationality is a methodology of complex coalition-building, of learning one another's histories, and of understanding why difference can fragment communities in search of liberation. My intellectual and political work considers Afro-Latinx diasporas and the varied intersections with other Black, Indigenous, and people of color. My commitment to this work stems from my lived experience as a descendant of African, Indigenous, and European peoples, from the experiences of being a colonial subject living in the entrails of a settler colonial nation, and from the experience of existing on the periphery of several discourses in the academy. It is necessary to continue the difficult conversations about colonialism, to reject settler-colonial narratives of belonging, and to challenge the ongoing forms of dispossession affecting those who are both citizens and colonial subjects of a settler nation. Yet even with these guiding ethics, questions remain: How do our liberation struggles as Afro-Latinas actively engage with yet also undermine the struggles of our Indigenous and African American immediate and extended communities? How can we acknowledge and build solidarities and constellations of love and resistance that also bear witness to our collective and respective intergenerational wounds? What are some of the kin wounds that we share and how do we begin to imagine decolonial futures from within and beyond these spaces?

III. It Comes with My Bones

In *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" (Obejas 2007, 309). At the FEAST conference I chose to discuss the concept of *destierro*, an untranslatable term for exile in Spanish, which is akin to being torn from land, because *destierro* remains a relevant and precarious condition for Black and Indigenous peoples. In wrestling with the term, I turn away from its bourgeois underpinnings and instead understand it as a vector of dispossession constitutive of colonial modernity. My point of entrance was Hurricane María, which tore through Puerto Rico in September 2017. In effect a colony of the US for one hundred and twenty years, and Spain for four hundred years before that, Puerto Rico has withstood dispossession, genocide, sterilization, diaspora, and recently, vulture capitalists intent on collecting an odious debt of seventy-two billion dollars.¹¹ There are now more Puerto Ricans living in the US than on the island, and this is yet another a process of dispossession by design. Speculators boast that the effects of the hurricane will further empty the island, leaving more land in American and corporate hands, more Puerto Ricans displaced onto settled lands. Puerto Ricans living in the diaspora contend with multiple forms of colonialism and domination. Second-class-citizen colonial subjects living on Indigenous lands in a settler state—this is to say nothing of how Puerto Ricans in the diaspora fall at the bottom of almost all social indexes for education and employment.

In light of these political, ecological, and visceral realities, I contend that Afro-Latinx decolonial feminisms can help us think through multiple forms of domination and dispossession in diasporic and exilic contexts. 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* enables us to push decolonial thought further toward liberatory practices, and map different forms of dispossession and resistance across intersecting identities.¹²

The *longue durée* of colonialism leaves a palimpsest of dispossession and genocide in its wake. If modern capitalism is the accumulation of land, resources, 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 precondition of capitalist world-systems, particularly as they developed in the fifteenth century. For Indigenous peoples facing genocide and dispossession across Abya Yala and Turtle Island, African slaves forcibly removed from their lands, and generations of their descendants, *destierro* has taken multivalent forms.¹³ Imagining *destierro* as a palimpsest of overlapping histories, lived experiences, ties to land and land-based practices, and multiple movements, the afterlives of slavery and the migration of dispossessed peoples to dispossessed lands enables us to become faithful witnesses to the layers and forms of being forcibly ripped from the land while also seeing the resurgence of the land-based practices and resistance to dispossession. María Lugones describes faithful witnessing as a political act that is aligned with feminist and decolonial epistemologies and is a method of collaborating with oppressed subjects who are often silenced and ignored (Lugones 2003). Thus, this decolonial feminist philosophical concept is a strategy through which oppressed peoples form coalitions in order to combat multiple and systematic oppressions (Figueroa 2015).

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 that 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 foregrounding resistance. Black and Indigenous marronage, literary poetics, art practices, communal, tribal, and political and cultural organizing including Idle No More, #NoDAPL, #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, the American Indian Movement, the Young Lords Organization, the Black Panther Party, the Chicano Movement, MOVE, and the Black School are some examples of these forms of resistance that emerge amid and against *destierro*.¹⁴ These forms of organizing and activism call attention to some of the structures of *destierro*, which often seek to invisibilize themselves through nativist and settler colonial trappings.¹⁵

On the 2017 album “The Navigator” by indie band Hurray for the Riff Raff, lead singer and songwriter Alynda Segarra included two songs (“Rican Beach” and “Pa’lante”) that are political statements about Puerto Rican history and contemporary struggles for self-determination. The song “Rican Beach” is particularly poignant in that it underscores ties to land and the generational effects of dispossession of land, language, and cultural practices. In telling a story about colonialism as a necropolitical imposition, Segarra (2017) underscores the humanity of Puerto Ricans who’ve struggled to maintain ties to culture, land, and language practices:

First they stole our language
Then they stole our names
Then they stole the things
That brought us fame

And they stole our neighbors
And they stole our streets
And they left us to die
On Rican Beach

Well you can take
my life

But don't take my
 home
 Baby it's a solid price
 It comes with my
 bones

The chorus of “Rican Beach” reveals a reckoning with the history of theft and dispossession and ends with an expression that underscores how one’s life is intimately tied to one’s land or homeland.¹⁶ The lyrics make clear that the theft of a home/land can never be a clean transaction for it comes with “my bones” or rather, human material, corporeal, and affective ties to the land.

In my research I turn to cultural productions such as this song in order to point to the ways that music can disclose often unspeakable trauma, grief, and even the intergenerational impacts of dispossession. “Rican Beach” offers us a way to imagine what it means to be torn away from a place and still have your bones, your matter, your body, be an essential part of the land/scape. Even as subjects condemned to *destierro*, our bodies remember home.¹⁷ This is particularly powerful in the context of coloniality and ongoing forms of colonialism that require forgetting and erasure. Thus, in time/place where we are encouraged and even given metaphorical cookies for forgetting, it is rebellion to remember, to tell stories about land and land 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,” water, M. Jacqui Alexander tells us, “will call you by your ancient name, and you will answer because you will not have forgotten. Water always remembers” (Alexander 2005, 274). Enriching our scholarship with artistic and cultural productions that complicate and elucidate the preoccupations and phenomena we study give us the opportunity to expand our approaches to philosophical inquiry. In fact, the *studia humanitatis*, as discussed by Sylvia Wynter, is key to reimagining the human and as such, literary humanities and arts practices are part of the intellectual and political project of a new science of human systems.¹⁸

A complex understanding of *destierro* would be attuned to exile, dispossession of land, removal, contestation, multi-diasporas and other forms of being torn away from land, land-based practices, and socioeconomic resources. These conditions, to which Afro and Indigenous descendant peoples are subject, are phenomena birthed by modernity and intersect across temporal and spatial planes in such a way that they are intimately tied 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 in a relational context.

The works of women of color feminist thinkers are necessary theoretical and practical tools to 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 matrix of relations (see Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Rose 1993; Levins Morales 1998). Alexander’s work, for example, challenges women of color to continue the difficult work of relating across difference, and in particular, calls attention to the relationships between Black women across the diaspora. She 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” (Alexander 2005, 274)?

Alexander argues that peoples in exile/diaspora “have grown up metabolizing exile, feeding on its main by-products—alienation and separation” (274). She asks us to think specifically about the problematic position 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” (274). Here she underscores the ontological and phenomenological aspects of being exiled and dispossessed in multigenerational contexts. The consequences of “alienation and separation” as a birthright generate forceful bouts of nostalgia and unwavering longings for home, belonging, and embodied practices that connect us to the land—even amid the potential edificial, political, and social ruins of our homelands. Such forms of *destierro* necessarily intersect with, and are overlaid onto, continued Indigenous dispossession and the afterlives of slavery and colonization.¹⁹

In these contexts, *destierro* can be understood as processes of gendered racialization and dehumanization that are contingent on the dispossession or tearing away of a person or peoples from land, land based-practices, and epistemologies. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues that “being tied to land also means being tied to an unwritten, unseen history of resistance” (Simpson 2014a, 20).²⁰ 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. Resistance to *destierro* through decolonial land, knowledge, and other embodied practices undermines the process of coloniality, settler colonialism, and neocolonialism that attempts to further sever our connection to land and land-based knowledge and practices.

The archive of *destierro* can be found in the stories that force us to be faithful witnesses to varying forms of dispossession and divergent forms of dispossession. My work, deeply rooted in the literary poetics of the Afro-Atlantic Hispanophone diasporas, reaches toward practices of relationality that seek to unsettle the permanence of settler colonialism and to subvert structural and epistemological forms of ongoing colonization. In the diasporic Afro-Atlantic Hispanophone literary and cultural productions that I study, I track how *destierro* takes form as a dispossession of spiritual syncretic practices, alienation from the body, refusal of memories, and the physical deprivation of land. Across these works, the act of remembering and awakening the memories of home/lands, land practices, and resistance to uprooting are tools of resistance against *destierro*.

NOTES

An expanded version of this topic will appear in *Decolonizing Diasporas: Radical Mappings of Afro-Atlantic Literature* (forthcoming from Northwestern University Press, 2020). Early versions of this work were presented in the Department of Romance Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2017, in the Latino/a Studies Program at Williams College in 2017, at the Association for the Worldwide Study of the African Diaspora in Seville in 2017, at the “Beyond the Postcard” symposium at Bowdoin College in 2018, at the Latin American Studies Association in Barcelona in 2018, and at the Conference of Ford Fellows in Washington, D.C. in 2018. My thanks to the Ford Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship and to the Department of English at Duke University, especially to Tsitsi Jaji for her mentorship and support. The Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies and the College of Arts and Letters at Michigan State University supported the “Palabras PR Project” which enabled our research team to travel to Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricane María to partner with the recovery projects organized by Salon Literario Festival de la Palabra. The interviews and work that we undertook during that trip offered me a renewed understanding of *destierro*, reclamation, and resistance. A special thanks to Mayra Santos

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1. In referring to constellations of struggle, I am calling on the work of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Simpson 2014b).
2. For more on the economic mismanagement and the effects of the hurricane, see Bonilla 2017. For comprehensive resources on Puerto Rican history and work that examines the hurricane and its aftermath, see Bonilla, Lebron, and Molinari n.d.
3. Examples of this radical, community-informed, and community-centered approach to engaging with Indigenous and African communities in Latin America can be seen in Hale et al. 2014.
4. In using the term “survive and more,” I am referring to Sharpe 2016.
5. Personal conversations.
6. For more on the underside of modernity see Dussel, Krauel, and Tuma 2000; see also Maldonado-Torres 2008.
7. For more on the coloniality of gender and the wages of gender, see Méndez 2015. For more on the ways that Indigenous decolonial feminism resists heteropatriarchy, see Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2013.
8. These include the activist and intellectual work of scholars such as Dominican thinker and organizer Yuderlys Espinosa-Miñoso, the Puerto Rico-based Colectiva Feminista en Construcción, and Mayra Santos Febres’s articulation of heretical feminisms.
9. See the essay, “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in Lorde 2012.
10. For more on decolonization in Indigenous contexts and the refusal to reduce decolonization to social justice efforts, see Tuck and Yang 2012.
11. For more on the debt crisis, see Negrón-Muntaner and Muir n.d.
12. I use the term *liberatory* here rather than *emancipatory* because the act of liberation is one in which oppressed subjects engage in resistance acts in order to free themselves from subjugation. Emancipation is generally understood as the act of enslaved or oppressed subjects being freed by another. Furthermore, as I discuss the process of communities moving from states of unfreedom to states of freedom, I am building on literary and theoretical traditions that center *liberation* as a term both historically and contemporarily.
13. The term and the concept *Abya Yala* emerged toward the end of the 1970s in *Dulenege*, or what, for others, is today San Blas, Panama, a Kuna Tule territory. *Abya Yala* in the Kuna language means “land in its full maturity.” Takir Mamani, the Bolivian Aymara leader, and Tupaj Katari, one of the founders of the Indigenous rights movement in Bolivia, suggested that Indigenous peoples and Indigenous organizations use the term *Abya Yala* in their official declarations to refer to the American continent. (<http://www.e-ir.info/2014/05/20/self-determination-a-perspective-from-abya-yala/>).
14. For more on the concept of marronage as a freedom practice, see Roberts 2015.
15. For more on colonial permanence, see Simpson 2014a. For more on settler moves to innocence, see Tuck and Yang 2012.
16. We can read these lyrics alongside some foundational texts in colonial/anticolonial studies, including Wa Thiong’o 1986; Ndongo-Bidyogo and Ugarte 2007; Fanon 2008; Memmi 2013.
17. In this context, the word “condemned” is referring to Frantz Fanon’s concept of the *damné*. See Fanon, Sartre, and Farrington 1963.
18. For more on Wynter and the *studia humanitatis* see Wynter 1984; Méndez and Figueroa 2020.
19. Here I am thinking about Michelle Cliff’s discussion of ruination in Jamaica. See Cliff 1987.
20. Simpson argues that land-based practices such as sugar-bushing and the intergenerational stories they engender—which are likewise theories of being and knowing—are forms of resistance “propelling us to rebel against the permanence of settler colonial reality and not just ‘dream alternative realities’ but to create them, on the ground in the physical world, in spite of being occupied” (Simpson 2014a, 8).

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