

Review: Figueroa-Vásquez, Yomaira C. *Decolonizing
Diasporas: Radical Mappings of Afro-Atlantic Literature.*

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Figueroa-Vásquez, Yomaira C. *Decolonizing Diasporas: Radical Mappings of Afro-Atlantic Literature.* Northwestern University Press, 2020. Pp. 296. ISBN 978-0810142428.

Yomaira C. Figueroa-Vásquez's first monograph analyzes an impressive array of contemporary literary and artistic works by Afro-Diasporic authors—employing decolonial frameworks as well as women of color feminisms. *Decolonizing Diasporas: Radical Mappings of Afro-Atlantic Literature* (Northwestern UP, 2020) results from several equally important methodological processes. Firstly, *Decolonizing Diasporas* is a work of creative curation. Figueroa-Vásquez selects works not for geographic provenance, nor for their relationship with a perceived canon. Instead, archipelagic groupings of varied contemporary texts, artworks, and songs manifest as acts of “worlds otherwise.” By relating and comparing Afro-Atlantic Hispanophone diasporic works from Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and the United States with works from Equatorial Guinea, Figueroa-Vásquez proposes a politically/decolonially productive arrangement through which we might understand highly complex networks of transnational cultures. The resulting analysis spans eleven novels, a series of visual/sonic works, poetry, essays, and a short story. Secondly, Figueroa-Vásquez hopes to highlight and elevate literary, musical, and artistic works for their didactic utility: “making the world in which we live intelligible to ourselves and to each other” (3). Thirdly, the book continues the above-mentioned process of creative curation by employing and elevating the work of an expansive array of decolonial and/or feminist thinkers like Audre Lorde, Michelle Cliff, Sylvia Wynter, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, Chela Sandoval, Vanessa Valdés, Laura E. Pérez, Édouard Glissant, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, María Lugones, Barbara Smith, Paula Moya, Derek Walcott, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Leanne Simpson, Kim Anderson, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and more. I list these thinkers at length to underline that Figueroa-Vásquez deftly interweaves existing theory with her own arguments in a way that honors and revitalizes previous contributions. Intellectual forebearers too often find themselves relegated to a book's preface, introduction, or conclusion, making way for the author's own efforts, but each chapter of *Decolonizing Diasporas* is dense with theoretical references put into constructive dialogue. Lastly, Figueroa-Vásquez offers insightful literary criticism, replete with “what I am calling” moments (of

which I will focus on two) where she coins new terms and breaks new ground.

The book is segmented into thematic chapters: an introduction; followed by chapter 1, “Intimacies,” which tells how intimacy, kinship, and communal relations are impacted by coloniality and past traumas; chapter 2, “Witnessing,” traces the concept of “faithful witnessing” across several literary works; chapter 3, “Destierro,” explores themes of exile, memory, violence, and dispossession; chapter 4, “Reparations,” delineates a concept of reparations beyond the material; chapter 5, “Apocalypso,” shows how Afro-Atlantic Hispanophone diaspora are shaping and promoting new possible futures by innovating in medium and content; and the conclusion, “Sea.” Such enigmatic chapter headings may frustrate some readers when attempting to isolate specific topics, but within the body of the book Figueroa-Vásquez meticulously signposts and summarizes her arguments. Indeed, each chapter introduction provides a precise roadmap of arguments-to-come which helps to clearly communicate complicated ideas.

One example of Figueroa-Vásquez’s many contributions appears in chapter 4 where she introduces the term “reparation of the imagination” (124). Here she employs Sandoval’s “decolonial love” in dialogue with Olivares, Lorde, Maldonado-Torres, and Coates to analyze how literary works in her archive expand upon an inadequate North American notion of reparations to extend the concept beyond money and territory. After all, the “plunder of Black bodies, wealth, and property,” she points out, was also a plunder of “families, dreams, and lives” (122). She highlights Ernesto Quiñonez’s *Bodega Dreams* as a particularly illuminating articulation of the politics of reparations (125). The novel’s protagonist, an aging former Young Lord named Willie Bodega, undertakes an ambitious project of community self-empowerment hoping to stave off proposed development and commercialization at the hands of real estate speculators who are eager to displace and erase residents of New York City’s Spanish Harlem. Bodega’s project of reparations—focusing on land and business ownership—is born of liberation ideals but relies on money from illicit drug trade. Figueroa-Vásquez asserts that Bodega’s ultimate tragic failure results from a “single-minded” approach that “emulates the elite power structures that he critiques,” referencing Audre Lorde’s “The Master’s Tools...” (127-128). A truly “heretical” politics and economy for Figueroa-Vásquez would not seek to create a Puerto Rican Kennedy or a Dominican Rockefeller, but rather manifests in transformative projects defined by respectability, women’s empowerment, non-hierarchical community-making, and intersectional solidarity. The chapter then diverts into *The Brief Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz to show how “reparations of the imagination” must address “oppression, violence, pain, rape, and degradation” inherited as intergenerational trauma (139). In her role as a scholar of literature, Figueroa-Vásquez recognizes the power of Sylvia Wynter’s *studia humanitatis* (which she cites prominently on pages 17 and 192). She applies a humanistic approach in this instance to nuance and amend a North

American discourse of reparations that might better account for decolonial love and imagination.

In another “what I am calling” moment, Figueroa-Vásquez lays out how the contemporary Afro-Cuban French musical group Ibeyi contributes to “worlds/otherwise, or the Afro-Atlantic imagination” (148). She views worlds/otherwise as “part and parcel” of a reparation of the imagination because artistic acts can anticipate, create, and reveal new paths toward futures that hold space for radical alterity (148, 163). Under this conception, Ibeyi’s incorporation, repurposing, and remixing of sacred Lucumí (Afro-Cuban Santería) practices provides a potent illustration of how the *damnés* peoples of the underside of modernity are laying claim to their right to live as fully human subjects. In this case, Figueroa-Vásquez demonstrates scholarly versatility in mapping an artistic project that is at once poetic (lyrical), musical (instrumental), and visual (video). Ibeyi’s 2015 eponymous album includes cantos dedicated to the Orishas and follows ceremonial patterns (151-154). As a result, Figueroa-Vásquez says that “Ibeyi’s poetic forms, music and visual arts, highlight the delicate interplay between ancestors and the human world, underscoring the thin veil between what is past and future” (155-156). Figueroa-Vásquez asserts that Ibeyi undertakes “future work practice” by encouraging listeners to imagine the dead as simultaneously “behind them, holding them, and most importantly, continuing alongside the living” (158). To express my own personal preference, the book might have benefitted from de-centering the novel within its archive. For example, *Decolonizing Diasporas* addresses the work of writer Junot Díaz in several instances but Figueroa-Vásquez’s work on visual and musical material—in the case of Ibeyi—is equally enlightening.

In choosing to focus primarily on just two of *Decolonizing Diasporas* contributions, I have of course excluded many other excellent arguments contained within. My inability to thoroughly address each of the book’s arguments attests to the breadth and complexity of the work. The book impresses with a style of argumentation that consciously reflects the very relational, archipelagic, and rhizomatic theoretical constructs to which the chapters often refer. Figueroa-Vásquez’s analysis succeeds by insightfully incorporating her own groundbreaking methodologies, corpus, and analysis with an extraordinarily large network of women of color feminist, decolonial, and Caribbean thinkers. In this way, *Decolonizing Diasporas* is itself an exercise in decolonial love and it will without doubt benefit those who engage with it.