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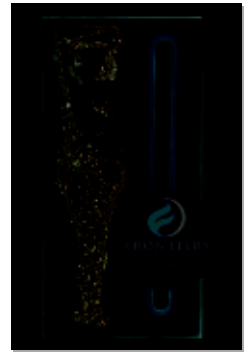
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## Your Lips: Mapping Afro-Boricua Feminist Becomings

Yomaira C. Figueroa

Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies, Volume 41, Number 1, 2020, pp. 1-11  
(Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press



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# Your Lips

## Mapping Afro-Boricua Feminist Becomings

YOMAIRA C. FIGUEROA

**Abstract:** This cross-genre essay examines how Afro-Latinas in general, and Afro-Puerto Rican women in the diaspora in particular, negotiate race, sex, and belonging within Latinx families and communities. Blending fiction with prose to discuss literary poetics, faithful witnessing, and “world”-travelling, this piece enumerates historical and contemporary practices of relating across difference that are part and parcel of women of color feminisms, decolonial feminist politics, and anti-colonial histories of struggle and resistance. The story “Your Lips” follows a young Afro-Puerto Rican girl’s encounter with anti-Black racial logics during a kitchen table conversation between the women in her family. Through prose, artwork, poetry, and short fiction, the essay examines and interrogates the forms of violent intimacies and anti-Black racism that Afro-Latina women and girls experience among their kin, within the academy, and in the world at large.

**Keywords:** Afro-Latina, anti-Black racism, Puerto Rican, decolonial feminisms, kitchen table, faithful witnessing

### PRELUDE: THESE WATERS

I write this to you from between two lakes.<sup>1</sup>  
I am the daughter of an ocean and a sea.  
I came up in concrete, nursed by two rivers.  
I was born black and woman and *desterrada*.  
A colonial subject hundreds of years in the making,  
rebellious and fugitive at every turn.  
An impossibility scattered across continents with  
salt-soaked bones mouthing my name into the future.  
This story, your lips, is a gift, for my diasporic kin.

In her 1979 essay “The Black Puerto Rican Woman in Contemporary American Society,” Angela Jorge offered a political and personal perspective of how race, racism, and colorism affect Black Puerto Rican women across generations on the island and in the diaspora.<sup>2</sup> In it Jorge asserts that “there is a difference between the black Puerto Rican woman raised in Puerto Rico with its covert racism, often overshadowed by the issue of social class differences and colonial status, and the woman raised in the United States, an openly racist society.”<sup>3</sup> Forty years after the publication of Jorge’s foundational essay, the commitment to examining and excavating Afro-Latina subjectivities and epistemologies has not waned but rather grown exponentially, as seen in the works of Miriam Jiménez Román, Marta Moreno-Vega, Vanessa Valdés, Lorgia García Peña, Maritza Quiñones Rivera, Omaris Z. Zamora, Dixa Ramírez, and Zaire Dinzey Flores, to name a few. Within this context I am interested in studying how the politics of race, color, sex, class, and desire are learned within mixed-race and mixed-color Afro-Indigenous Latinx families and communities.<sup>4</sup>

As Jorge argued in 1979, Afro-Latinas face manifold oppressions, and the Black Puerto Rican woman is triply “oppressed because of her sex, cultural identity, and color” and “is further oppressed by the act of omission or absence of literature addressing her needs.”<sup>5</sup> These oppressions and omissions continue today even as a cadre of Latina writers, scholars, artists, and organizers labor to make Afro-Latina lives, perspectives, and contributions visible through their many works. In envisioning and creating literatures, including scholarship and literary poetics, that address the absences around Afro-Latina subjectivities, epistemologies, and lived experiences, we necessarily build on the foundational work of Black, Indigenous, Latina, and women of color feminist thought. However, as Omaris Zamora argues, many feminist frameworks “have their limits or empty spaces where as AfroLatina women, we cannot locate ourselves.”<sup>6</sup> For example, the Black Latinas Know Collective (BLKC) contend that for Afro-Latina scholars, the racialized and gendered dimensions of Afro-Latina life include experiences ranging from “having our Latinidad and Blackness questioned, to dealing with white Latinx standards of beauty that exclude us, to being invisibilized, to being designated as incapable of occupying our places as professors, intellectuals, and knowledge producers.”<sup>7</sup> The BLKC, however, underscore that their “insights are important and unreplacable.”<sup>8</sup> Crafting Afro-Latina decolonial feminist politics that attend to these absences, omissions, and to the “triple consciousness” of Afro-Latina/o/x lived experiences can help us to be faithful witnesses to Afro-Latinas who find themselves at the crossroads of covert and overt-racism and indifference.<sup>9</sup>

As articulated by María Lugones in *Peregrinajes/Pilgrimages: Theorizing Coalitions Against Multiple Forms of Oppression*, faithful witnessing is a political act and an ethical strategy through which oppressed peoples form coalitions in order to combat multiple and systematic oppressions.<sup>10</sup> Faithful witnessing is likewise a part of the practice of engaging in relations across difference. In her 1980 foundational essay “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” Audre Lorde argues that “refusing to recognize difference makes it impossible to see the different problems and pitfalls facing us as women.”<sup>11</sup> Just one year after the publication of Jorge’s essay on the oppression faced by Black Puerto Rican women, Lorde proposed that what separates women is the “reluctance to recognize those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences.” One of the projects that emerged from radical women of color feminist politics of relationality and solidarity was *This Bridge Called My Back*, a collection of essays, manifestos, and poetics edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. This groundbreaking collection brought together the works of Black, Indigenous, Latina, Asian, and other women of color in a single volume that spoke to the distinct yet related experiences of colonialism, dispossession, racial/sexual/gender oppressions, and resistance.

Building on the foundational work of women of color, Lugones’s contributions to decolonial feminist philosophy include the concept of “world”-travelling. In her article “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception,” Lugones argues that “knowing other women’s ‘worlds’ is part of knowing them and knowing them is part of loving them.”<sup>12</sup> Thus faithful witnessing, relations across difference, and “world”-travelling become practices that can help us understand and articulate Afro-Latina subjectivities and plot points of resistance within the realm of decolonial feminist thought and politics.

#### POLITICAL POETICS: AFRO-BORICUA BECOMINGS AT THE KITCHEN TABLE

This cross-genre piece—which includes a prelude, this introductory essay, and a short story—is an attempt to map some of the gendered and racialized aspects of Afro-Boricua diasporic experiences in the United States (Boricua is the Taíno-derived demonym for Puerto Ricans). As such, this piece also represents a traversing of what are often seen as the strict boundaries between scholarly, visual, and creative works. The illustration “Your Lips” (figure 1) created by Boricua-Chicana artist and organizer Angélica de Jesús, is her interpretation of my short story “Your Lips.” De Jesús’ visual rendering of

lips, waters, tears, trains, shatters, and other indelible images adds another layer to this palimpsestic conjuring, which aims to bring to the fore multiple ways of approaching the intimacies of Afro-Latina feminisms in-and-across distinct diasporic spaces that hold memories and moments of becoming and nonbelonging.

For Afro-Latinas coming of age in homelands, islands, and in the diaspora, these politics are often learned between women at the kitchen table.<sup>13</sup> The kitchen table is a place of politics, poetics, kinship, and sustenance. Likewise, we know that this hallowed quotidian space is also a site of violence, revelation, and revolt. Like Jorge, who railed against exclusionary feminist movements and racism in Puerto Rico and the United States four decades ago, I seek to render visible and make tangible the ways that Blackness continues to be a vexed topic in familial, social, cultural, and academic settings. To be clear, examining difficult kitchen table histories requires us to see how Afro-Latinas and other women of color learn to wield what Jessica Marie Johnson has called the “strategies articulated by [our] mothers, grandmothers, and ancestresses around kitchen tables generations before.”<sup>14</sup> As an Afro-Boricua decolonial feminist, I take seriously the task of thinking through and about the modes of racialization, violence, and overlapping forms of anti-Blackness that imbue the lives and experiences of Afro-Latina women and girls.

The BLKC articulate one of the horizons of my thinking when they state, “we are directly affected by anti-Blackness narratives and practices, even those that manifest within the process of scholarly production. Perspectives that exclude our Black Latina thought are by definition incomplete.”<sup>15</sup> We must acknowledge and combat the impacts of anti-Black racism that exist even within our most radical and liberatory spaces. This means that we must interrogate our politics and decolonial frameworks to ensure that as we combat the coloniality in all of its iterations, we also contest the living legacies of *mestizaje* and its failure to eradicate racial interpersonal and structural oppression and inequality. This also means actively subverting the forms of anti-Blackness endemic to Latinx and Latin American communities. To this end Jorge argued that “the continued denial of the existence of racism among Puerto Ricans because of the racial mixture of the population creates a sense of ambiguity in personal relationships with family and friends.”<sup>16</sup> Jiménez Román posits that the realities of overlapping racialization places Afro-Latinxs “between the myth of racial democracy with its implicit preference for *mestizaje*, and the reality of African descent and racism,” or simultaneously experiencing “the myth of race-free color blindness and the reality of white supremacy.”<sup>17</sup> This means that even the visionary political and practical contributions of decolonial feminisms will not be enough if we do not continually articulate and

interrogate forms of anti-Blackness within our kinship networks and political and intellectual communities.

Literary poetics has played and continues to play a special role in examining how race, gender, class, sex, and color are constitutive parts of our identities as Black Latinas. For this reason Audre Lorde proffers that “the literatures of all women of color recreate the textures of our lives” and that the examination of these works “effectively requires that we can be seen as a whole people in our actual complexities—as individuals, as women, as human.”<sup>18</sup> Literary poetics, as reflections of the human, allow us to glimpse formative moments of becoming. Likewise, in the Puerto Rican and Nuyorican literary tradition, autobiographical fiction, poetry, short story, and memoir have been genres that offer rich retellings of intimate and public life and reimagining of lives under the heel of oppression as well as possibilities beyond it.<sup>19</sup> This pertains especially for Afro-Puerto Rican writers such as Jesús Colón, Anjelamaría Dávila, Piri Thomas, Mayra Santos Febres, and Dahlma Llanos Figueroa. The queries that arise from reading Afro-Latina literary works with the ethics and politics that Jorge, Lorde, and Lugones urge us to have may include the following: What would we come to know if we were to “world”-travel to Afro-Latina lives? What is revealed in coming to know how Afro-Latina women and girls learn race, color, sex, class, and desire within their family? How do we account for the quotidian nature of anti-Blackness within mixed-race Afro-Indigenous families of the Latinx Caribbean? Is it possible to bear witness to moments of becoming? What remains unseen?

Tracing the ways in which race, gender, class, sex, and color are constitutive parts of our identities necessarily entails mapping snippets of Afro-Latina becomings. Part of articulating an Afro-Latina decolonial feminist politic includes understanding the harms we enact when we engage in liberation struggles while positing *Latinidad* as a racial democracy or monolith. Moreover, we stand to lose political, intellectual, and intimate relations when we elide the overlapping histories of racialization, colonialism, and dispossession that are endemic to diasporic experiences. For example, an Afro-Boricua decolonial feminist politics must take seriously how Puerto Rican colonial subjectship and generations of dispossession and diasporic dislocation intersect with ongoing US settler colonial projects—including Indigenous erasure and the US pursuit of global hegemony. Holding these colonial realities and histories of resistance together is part of a radical and relational ethics of decolonization as project. One important practice in my formation as an Afro-Boricua decolonial feminist has been the engagement with multiple discourses and genealogies of decolonization that emerge from Indigenous, Black, Latinx, and African thinkers. This practice is informed by the longstanding commitments

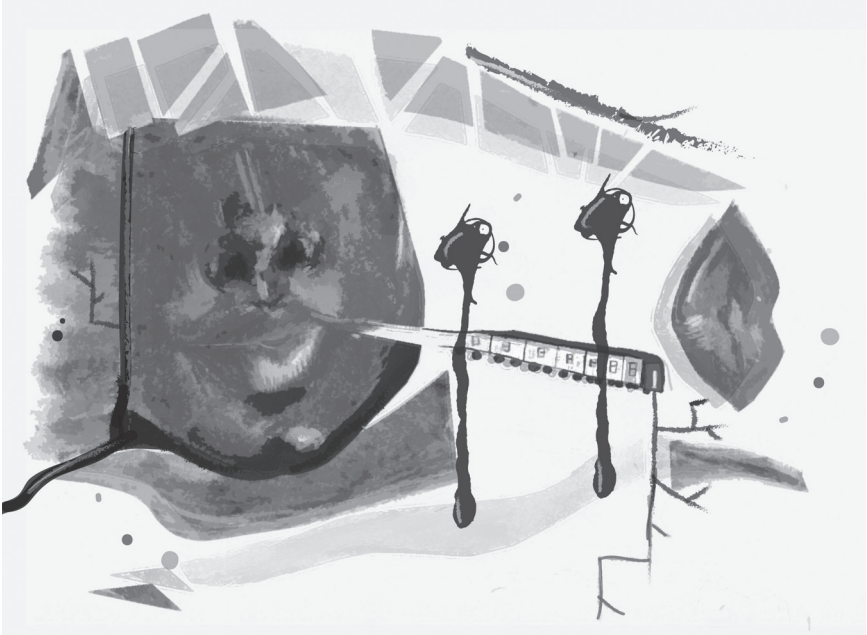


Fig. 1. "Your Lips," by Angélica de Jesús

of women of color feminists who labored to “become fluent in each other’s histories,” “shared a nonbelonging,” and struggled to recognize the different experiences and demands of peoples living within interlocking oppressions.<sup>20</sup> Even as I articulate this decolonial feminist politic, I am not interested in reifying or cataloguing Afro-Latina feminisms. Nor am I enticed by merely being seen or by tropes of representation. Let us instead be faithful witnesses to the intimate folds of Afro-Latina becomings and take on the labor of seeing, knowing, and feeling the aches and beauties of Blackness for ourselves and with one another. If there are “world”-travellers among us, glimpse them, join them in relation. For as M. Jacqui Alexander reminds us, “We are not born women of color. We become women of color,” and in order to do so we need “cultivate a way of knowing in which we direct our social, cultural, psychic, and spiritually marked attention on each other.”<sup>21</sup>

#### STORY: YOUR LIPS

You see? They aren’t like ours. Lali traced her lips with bright red lipstick. It was the late 1980s and that color was everywhere. Your sister

Nelly wore it against her pale skin and long copper curls which she dyed religiously. Nelly was so serious it stung and she held a dagger stare that pierced every family photo. The tias agreed that she was the most beautiful of the nieces and family lore held that she was so cold that she had never hugged her own mami. Así nació, the sickly twin that had survived against all odds—her life taking root as her twin brother's soul was snuffed out by a symphony of medical malpractices. Y que linda, the tias would say even though Nelly was cold and andariega, always skipping church and going out dancing. Her red lipstick, probably a wet-*n*-wild from her after school pharmacy gig, was making its way around the tangle of women at the kitchen table. It was Saturday in los sures, and to get there every weekend mami took all four of you on a bunch of trains from hoboken to manhattan from manhattan to brooklyn. Under one river and over another; two rivers that ran like blood. And it was always exciting to be on the brink of being with the cousins and exhausting because of all that walking behind everyone trying not to get left behind. It probably wasn't that far, but it always felt like your family was so far away, walking so fast to the trains, siempre going so fast. And those trains were your nightmare. Literally. The recurring dream that tossed you about the cot in the room you shared with your two brothers and sister was always about a new white train with blue letters, zipping through the path station tunnel. The train was so beautiful, a glimmering intoxicating white, and when you'd walked to touch it, the train would snatch you up over the top or down under its wheels and crush you. And in every dream you tried to stop walking, tried to pull your hand back but you couldn't. It was like a you were programmed to reach for it, to be near it. And you screamed yourself awake every time you saw yourself in pieces on the tracks. But those were just dreams and you were here, in beautiful, broken, tropical brooklyn with your family. From your titi Celia's second floor apartment you could hear your cousins playing stickball on the street amid the bell of the piragüero and the clash of salsa and freestyle tumbando from every home on the block. And titi Celia, titi Lola, titi Luisa, titi Mercedes, mami and the primas sat in the kitchen of the four-room railroad apartment. Salty rice was boiling in pools of oil, the habichuelas were stewing, and everyone was busy chatting and trying on the deep red lipstick that was being passed around. Nelly and Carmen were peeling platanos in the sink, trying not to splash the water onto their clothes for fear of black manchas. They were the older of the cousins and trendsetters for the tias—though titi Lola, the youngest of the aunts who everyone called



la india, was just five years older than Nelly and Carmen, would not be outdone. Her coarse black hair betrayed her nickname but titi Lola fought back taming it daily with an iron. As far as the family was concerned, Titi Lola's cherry dark skin and pin-straight hair skipped Africa and marked your collective taíno ancestry. Titi Lola had arrived from the island just four years earlier and her husband already owned a bodega on the block right below their apartment. The bodega meant that she didn't work at the factories like all her sisters and you thought it was glamorous. You wanted papi to have a bodega too. You were still small, four or five, but you knew that the women at the table were all so beautiful. When they laughed all their teeth showed and the sounds fell out hard and floated up, filling the whole room. We all have the same shape. See, the little curve? It makes a perfect kiss Lali said. Yes, you did see. Your primas were all smearing bright red on themselves or reaching for a younger cousin to put it on. You reached for the lipstick, you wanted it on your lips. Ay pero Palmita, your lips are like your father's. Tu ves? They aren't like ours. Lali looked around and raised an eyebrow at her sister Carmen. And that was it. A cement wall that locked you out of the women. Like a careening crashing train that took you up over or down under, crushing your bones into a fine dust. A dust like the ones your primas applied to their faces in smooth circles. What hit you then was the blackness. Everyone in the room was soft and honey and even las trigueñas eran claras. But you were small and brusque and brown and black and all curls and no beauty. You knew it then. At four or five. Your papi was the black one. He's the one that made you black and you did not belong to the table. Even though you were all from the same island. The same saltwaters. The same hard rivers. The same blood. It was then that the anger came. And you didn't know at what or who. Maybe they'd teased you before, but it never hit. You never knew that they were drawing a line keeping you out. But no one paid much attention to that moment. Even when you pouted and cried, No! I am the same! You made tight little fists under the table and you imagined smashing the lipstick and breaking the compact mirror. But instead you put the lipstick on yourself and kissed a piece of paper again, again, again, and tried to show Lali how perfect your kiss was, how it was the same as everyone else's. But not even mami came to rescue you. After a while, your brothers and cousins came in from the street and papi and your tios came down from the rufo, cervezas in hand. Everyone was chattering in the kitchen, trying to find a place to sit and busying themselves ducking the oil splatter from the little chicken drums popping in the pan. Tío

Tony made a rare appearance that afternoon and his sisters doted on him, their baby brother, their negrito. He had dark curls and big eyes like you and he was always flashing his luminous smile, one gold tooth, one chipped tooth. He sat by Nelly near the window teasing the cousins, scratching them with unpeeled platanos as they walked by. He poked you with one in the side and you cried dejame. You pouted when mami bunched up her lips at you and said no seas zangana. A threat to behave and be quiet. You curled up by Nelly defiant, poking out your lips at tío Tony to prove you weren't scared of him at all. He laughed as he reached over and pulled you onto his lap, gently rocking you by the window in his long brown arms riddled with bruises. You won't forget his tender face or how he shined his love on you in that late afternoon light. In just a few weeks he'd be dead. SIDA [AIDS], mami whispered between sobs. At the funeral home you played elevator and tag with your cousins. You all zipped around a crowd of mourners, and imagined that the first-floor closet would take you up, up, up. On days when the afternoon light is just right, you think of that day and of your tío. You trace the contours of your lips with your finger. You claw and scrape at the beginning and ends of your belonging, and inevitably, something inside you slides and breaks.

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YOMAIRA C. FIGUEROA is assistant professor of Afro-Diaspora Studies in the Department of English and African American & African Studies at Michigan State University. Her forthcoming monograph *Decolonizing Diasporas: Radical Mappings of Afro-Atlantic Literature* (Northwestern University Press, 2020), examines the textual, historical, and political relations between diasporic Afro-Puerto Rican, Afro-Cuban, Afro-Dominican, and Equatoguinean poetics. Her published work can be found in *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, *the journal of Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, *CENTRO Journal*, and *SX Salon*. A scholar and organizer, she is a co-founder of the MSU Womxn of Color Initiative, the collaborative hurricane recovery project #ProyectoPalabrasPR, and the Electric.Marronage, a collaborative digital/material project.

#### NOTES

1. I've written this essay from Michigan and specifically the lands occupied by Michigan State University, which are the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary lands of the Anishinaabeg—the Three Fires Confederacy of Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples.

2. Originally published as Angela Jorge, “The Black Puerto Rican Woman in Contemporary American Society,” in *The Puerto Rican Woman*, edited by Edna Acosta Belen, 180–86 (New York: Praeger, 1979); reprinted in the second edition of that same volume in 1986 and in the 2009 volume *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States*, edited by Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores.

3. Jorge, “The Black Puerto Rican Woman,” 180–81.

4. I have used the prefixes “Afro” and “Black” interchangeably throughout this essay as a way to hail longer histories of *afrodescendiente* racial identification with Africa throughout Latin America and the Hispanophone Caribbean and to mark the criticality of Black identity politics in the United States and the Anglophone world. Juan Flores and Miriam Jiménez Román argue that “the term *Afro-Latino* has primarily been used by international agencies to refer to people of African descent in Latin America and the Caribbean. Along with ‘Negro,’ ‘*afrodescendiente*’ and ‘*afrolatinoamericano*,’ Afro-Latino serves to name the constituency of the many vibrant anti-racist movements and causes that have been gaining momentum throughout the hemisphere for several generations” (Juan Flores and Miriam Jiménez Román, “Triple-Consciousness? Approaches to Afro-Latino Culture in the United States,” *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 4, no. 3 [2009]: 319–28). I use the term Afro-Indigenous in order to underscore how many African descended families and communities self-identify and understand their own familial, cultural, political, and linguistic histories. Rather than a move away from Black racial identity, this term (and other related terms) can help to complicate notions of authenticity, racial purity, Indigenous disappearance, and legacies of dispossession.

5. Jorge, “The Black Puerto Rican Woman,” 183. Jorge outlines a “threefold” oppression that may necessarily include more factors, especially considering the impact of class, ability, sexuality, and other intersecting identities.

6. See Omaris Z. Zamora, “Expanding the Dialogues: Afro-Latinx Feminisms,” *Latinx Talk*, September 20, 2018, <https://latinxtalk.org/2017/11/28/expanding-the-dialogues-afro-latinx-feminisms/>.

7. Black Latinas Know Collective, “BLKC,” *BLKC*, [www.blacklatinasknow.org/](http://www.blacklatinasknow.org/).

8. “BLKC,” [www.blacklatinasknow.org/](http://www.blacklatinasknow.org/).

9. Flores and Jiménez Román (“Triple-Consciousness?,” 321) build on W.E.B. Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness and argue that Latina/o/xs experience a triple consciousness: “Afro-Latinidad is at the personal level a unique and distinctive experience and identity, ranging as it does among and between Latino, Black, and US American dimensions of lived social reality.” See Yomaira C. Figueroa’s monograph *Decolonizing Diasporas: Radical Mappings of Afro-Atlantic Literature* (forthcoming, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020).

10. 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.

11. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984; repr. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2012), 118.
12. Maria Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987): 3–19, quote 17.
13. The concept of women's work at the kitchen table took a radical shape in the form of a publishing press founded by Black feminists. From 1980 to 1992 the Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, founded by Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde, published some of the most important works by women of color writers and activists. For more on this see Barbara Smith's essay in *Frontiers*, "A Press of Our Own: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press," *Frontiers* 10, no. 3 (1989): 11–13.
14. Jessica Marie Johnson argues that the feminism of our foremothers was "rooted in ways they encountered these systems of oppression on a daily basis and . . . their battle for their lives and right to live." "Fury and Joy: Feminism at the Kitchen Table," *Women ReVamped*, November 26, 2014, <https://womenrevamped.org/2014/11/14/fury-and-joy-feminism-at-the-kitchen-table/>.
15. "BLKC," [www.blacklatinasknow.org/](http://www.blacklatinasknow.org/).
16. Jorge, "The Black Puerto Rican Woman," 183. Jorge continues, "The one overriding feeling generated by the ambiguity of the Puerto Rican community about color is that of guilt at having disgraced first the family and then the community by simply being black or darker than other members of the family."
17. Miriam Jiménez Román, "Alla y aca: Locating Puerto Ricans in the Diaspora(s)," *Diálogo* 5, no. 1 (2001): 4, 12.
18. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 118.
19. Nuyorican, at first a pejorative term to refer to Puerto Ricans in New York, was reclaimed as a political and cultural identifier by young people in the mid-to-late twentieth century through counter-cultural artistic movements and political consciousness raising. The Nuyorican Poets are a good example of this movement era.
20. M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 269, 263.
21. Alexander, *Pedagogies*, 269.