

Macarena Martín-Martínez, University of Seville, Spain

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“Made of Everything”: Black Joy and Diasporic Rootedness in Melania Luisa Marte’s *Plantains and Our Becoming*

ABSTRACT

This article examines Melania Luisa Marte’s *Plantains and Our Becoming* (2023) as a work that challenges canonical diasporic and migrant narratives. Marte articulates a holistic and holy Afro-Dominican-York identity, dismantling dominant constructions of Blackness, nationalism, and *mestizaje*. Going beyond water as the prevailing diasporic metaphor, she turns to plantains and mangos to affirm a transnational yet rooted sense of self. While acknowledging structural racism, police abuse, and dehumanization, Marte moves beyond narratives of victimhood and displacement to foreground the African diaspora and community as sources of belonging, insisting on unapologetic Black joy and thriving as radical forms of resistance.

KEYWORDS

Afro-Dominican York; Black joy; African diaspora; migration; decolonial studies; identity; belonging; dehumanization

1. Introduction

In 2023, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (Scheinert & Kwan, 2022) won the Oscar for Best Picture, along with six additional awards. It was celebrated for its inventive use of multidimensional scenarios. However, what was hailed as an innovative portrayal of the “metaverse” can also be read as a reflection of the everyday realities of migrant families – such as the one portrayed in the film – who live across multiple cultures and geographies at once. That same year, Afro-Dominican-York slam poet and writer Melania Luisa Marte published her debut poetry collection *Plantains and Our Becoming*, also affirming her own holistic and multidimensional identity. She does so by invoking the imagery of plantains and mangos – diasporic fruits carried across oceanic routes yet firmly anchored in place. This imagery signals her first major innovation in relation to canonical migrant and diasporic narratives, as she resists the primacy of water as diaspora’s dominant metaphor. Another of her significant challenges lies in her rejection to frame diaspora and migration primarily through victimhood. Instead, Marte

Macarena Martín-Martínez, Filología Inglesa, Facultad de Filología, Universidad de Sevilla, C. Palos de la Frontera, s/n, C.P. 41004-Sevilla, mmartinm@us.es, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4546-3274>

foregrounds joy and play – interna reaching for the stars by those never meant to rise.

Marte narrates her own migratory lineage across three generations: her paternal grandmother, who fled the Dominican Republic after Trujillo’s dictatorship; her mother, who bartered beauty and virginity for a blue passport; and herself, a Black Spanish speaker and Manhattan islander born into a tradition of spoken-word poetry that has evolved from Nuyorican Poetry to Slam.¹ Her family story mirrors that of many Dominicans who managed to obtain one of the limited visas the United States offered in response to the country’s post-Trujillo political instability, irregularly migrated, or were already born in New York. Despite Dominicans now constituting the largest immigrant population in New York, and notwithstanding the efforts of the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute and scholars such as Silvio Torres-Saillant, Lorgia García Peña, Omaris Zamora, and Sharina Maillo-Pozo, the experiences of Dominican New York-based authors – who, like Marte, were born closer to the Hudson than to the Caribbean Sea – still remain largely unaddressed. The life, practices, and negotiations of Afro-Dominicans, in particular, remain insufficiently examined – not only within broader diaspora studies, which remain largely Anglo-centered, but also within Latin American studies, where the ideology of *mestizaje* continues to erase Afro-descendants, and within US scholarship, where Blackness and Latinidad are too often framed as mutually exclusive.

Indeed, in her poem “Afro-Latina” – which opens *Plantains and Our Becoming* and was featured by Instagram on IGTV during National Poetry Month, garnering over nine million views – Marte insists that while Afro-Latin culture, especially in the form of music, has achieved global recognition and commodification, Afro-Latinas themselves “go missing in history books” (p. 4).² Since the 2010s, this limited attention has begun to shift, particularly with the publication of *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* (Jiménez-Román & Flores, 2010), which gave visibility to those experiencing a “triple consciousness” – Black, Latinx, and American – and opened the door to subsequent critical contributions. Yet even within Caribbean studies – where racialized perspectives have traditionally been more central – scholarship has largely centered Puerto Rican and Cuban experiences – understandably, given their earlier arrival and distinct political relations with the United States – while leaving Dominican migration comparatively unaddressed.

In *Plantains and Our Becoming*, Marte not only situates the Dominican-York experience within a broader diasporic and migratory narrative, but also redefines

¹ Further* information on this evolution of performative poetry from the 1960s to current slam poetry, see *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam* (Noel, 2014).

² Unless otherwise indicated, page numbers are taken from the publication: Marte, M. L. (2023). *Plantains and Our Becoming*. Penguin Random House.

it. This article dedicates one section to Marte's innovative explorations of identity and belonging, and another to redefining diaspora from a perspective of joy rather than victimhood, drawing on Black Joy frameworks.

2. "Made of everything:" Re-defining identity and belonging

Already in the fifth poem of the collection, "Island Gyal", Marte asserts that not being born in the Dominican Republic does not make her any less of an "island gyal", since Manhattan too is an island (p. 9). This witty statement conceals deeper questions tied to diaspora and migration: Who is allowed to claim the Dominican Republic as home? Do those born in New York City to Dominican families share that right? This initial interrogation opens the space to question and disrupt other notions that have become central in diasporic and migratory narratives.

Without diminishing the pain of displacement, Marte challenges the traditional and binary notion of *ni de aquí ni de allá*—"neither from here nor there"—(Candelario et al., 2004; Rivera-Rideau et al., 2016), rather portraying migrant identity as holistic and sacred. She declares herself "made of everything", claiming both "LES/DR" (pp. 9, 53) – the Lower East Side of Manhattan and the Dominican Republic. She transforms her entanglement with Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States into a "holy trinity" (p. 106), invoking the Christian doctrine in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are distinct persons yet simultaneously one God. In this way, Marte reframes the perceived burden of multiplicity as a source of divine power. The problem, she suggests, does not lie with her or others like her, but with those overwhelmed by such richness—thereby reframing where accountability lies:

ni de aquí ni de allá is a farce
 And i would like to move past fallacy
 Of claiming nothing when you're made of everything
 [...]
 This is not to discredit the confusion or pain
 This is just a reminder that all energy has purpose
 And wouldn't you rather spend it whining that waist [...]
 Than explaining
 To some uncultured fool how you [...]
 Were gifted too much culture [...]
 And you foolishly have no idea what do with it. (p. 9)

Marte's rejection of the dualistic label *ni de aquí ni de allá* in pursuit of a holistic identity also grounds her challenge to the misconception that Afro-Latinxs are merely "mixed". This notion, rooted in colonial *mestizaje* and whitening logics, presumes that Blackness in Latin America has been transcended and that US Afro-Latinxs must therefore result from the union of African Americans and Latinxs. Against this erasure, Marte affirms Blackness in the Dominican Republic, the

Caribbean, and Latin America, and repeatedly returns to the question “What Are You Mixed With” (pp. 6, 128) in order to interrogate the query itself.

Rather than offering the expected answer, Marte reclaims the question as a space to foreground the African diaspora. In this vein, she not only acknowledges being a “mix” of Latinx and African American cultural markers, like “Telemundo and BET” – two US-based television networks that cater to Latinx and African American audiences respectively – but also of elements that represent different geographies of Blackness, like “the Caribbean spice and Southern BBQ” (p. 6). The question thus becomes also a means to, while recognizing differences across diasporic geographies, affirm the shared and embodied Blackness of all Afro-descendants: “WHAT YOU MIXED WITH? ... Everything. A whole universe and just as Black” [capitals in original] (p. 128). Through such declarations, she underscores that although Afro-Latinxs have traditionally been denied Blackness in the US context due to cultural differences with African Americans, all Afro-descendants are legitimately Black. Indeed, Marte claims that even across languages, customs, and identity labels – *negra*, *morena*, *prieta*, *trigueña*, *africana*, Black –, both Blackness and anti-Blackness “translates so well” (pp. 128–29). Ultimately, she reverses the interrogation, turning it back on those ignorant about the African diaspora who perceive Black Latinxs as inherently “mixed” and inevitably estranged from African Americans:

you tell me we different kind of black and I say, where? And how? [...] we different to you. Yet all hold the same spice... got me feeling like life can't be this simple but y'all can't be this dense. Tell me, how do I divorce all the women in me who taught me about myself? And for what? For your token? Your box? (pp. 128–29)

By being the one who poses the questions now, Marte insists on moving beyond colonial divisions imposed through the nation-state, such as census forms, and instead calls for diasporic unity and sorority among all Afro-descendants. Indeed, she names several African American women from whom she learned Afro-diasporic practices of care and art, as well as Afro-diasporic history and articulations of identity. In her poem “If I Could Buy All My Homies an Island?” she in fact emphasizes that the only way back “home” is through finding the “way back to each other” (p. 74), highlighting relational bonds across the diaspora. This diasporic connection, she argues, should span multiple Black locations, since when roots are cut – as they were through the Atlantic slave trade – 1,000 more were born “in Harlem,/ in the Bronx,/ in Houston,/ in Louisiana,/ in Miami,/ in Hialeah,/ in Oakcliff,/ in Compton,/ in Atlanta,/ in Jersey City” (pp. 74, 90).

By equating home with community rather than a singular place or familiar lineage, Marte rejects the nostalgic ideal of a ‘utopian home’ and the ancestral return narrative that has long shaped diasporic and first-generation migration literature. Marte instead chooses to be “more healer and less archeologist”

(p. 119), refusing to contribute to corporate genealogical projects like "Ancestry.com" that profit from diasporic and migrant populations' need of belonging: "my unknowing, their triumph. My search, their child's play. My insecurity, their comedy" (p. 76). Unlike her mother and those of her generation who migrated to the US carrying "a mystified mirror of nationalism" and an idyllic memory of the Dominican Republic (p. 5), Marte is openly critical of Dominican society. In poems such as "Questions for Hispaniola" and "Internalized & Anti____", she denounces Dominican conformism, anti-Haitianism, complicity with colonialism, internalized colorism and whitening. Instead, in "What Is Missed", she adopts a pragmatic view of belonging, claiming that a house ceases to be home when basic needs are unmet: "when home / becomes a hole which you can never climb out of [...] When you can't afford basic human rights / then you must leave home that very night" (p. 15).

In this sense, Marte reverses the traditional diasporic/migrant narrative in which the "place of origin" (the Dominican Republic in this case) is somewhere to return to or miss, while the "place of arrival" (the United States) is to be abandoned, for example, upon retirement. Instead, she recognizes that the place of origin may sometimes be necessary to leave, and she shifts her focus to staying and building a life in the US. In "Mami & Technology", she describes her mother's attachment to technology as rooted in the desire to stay connected with relatives in the Dominican Republic—an act that, according to Marte, simultaneously signals her mother's active decision to remain in the US: "Mami loves technology for the same reasons/ she loves to call herself a resident not a citizen/ she wants to remember staying more than leaving" (p. 18). Her mother's emphasis on resident status – a permit that grants the right to reside and enjoy certain protections—over citizenship, a more permanent status typically acquired by birth – reflects a politics of actively claiming and constructing space beyond birthright. As Marte provocatively asks: "maybe this is not my land but who is more deserving of it than me?" (p. 14).

Connected to this notion of claiming US land and rights, Marte articulates a deep sense of rootedness in the urban island of Manhattan. She does so, however, through an explicitly transnational and diasporic framework, mobilizing plantains and mangoes as central symbols of her Dominican American belonging, at once rooted and diasporic. These foods evoke the island, its landscape, and its culinary traditions, echoing familiar migrant and diasporic narratives in which landscape and food index identity beyond the United States. As numerous scholars have noted, nature, land, ecology, and familiar foods function as emotionally and politically charged sites of memory, serving as affective and intellectual anchors through which belonging is articulated, particularly in moments of displacement (Boyce Davies, 1994; Copeland & Thompson, 2018; Savory, 1998; Williams-Forsen, 2022).

However, rather than reinscribing a nostalgic attachment to a lost homeland in the face of a hostile host nation, Marte strategically deploys these crops to articulate belonging across multiple sites. This becomes particularly clear when she explains that both plantains and mangoes originated in Asia and arrived in the Americas through oceanic trade “along with genocide, slavery, and whitewashed religion” (p. 7). Although these crops seem native to Caribbean soil – so deeply rooted in the land that they have become emblematic of the region –, Marte complicates their presumed non-diasporic origins to draw an implicit comparison with herself.

On the one hand, she repeatedly affirms to be firmly anchored in the New York City projects—subsidized public housing – where she was raised. In doing so, she dislodges diasporic models that privilege ancestral roots over routes, often overlooking the inhabited urban contexts, their socioeconomic implications, and lived experience. Instead, she echoes frameworks that understand cities like New York not as mere backdrops but as sites of embodied belonging. On the other, Marte articulates a transnationalism that, like those of these crops, is forged through Atlantic trade. Indeed, she explicitly aligns plantains with the African diaspora, asserting that they know no borders, split into ten, and carry fruit far from the original tree (p. 7). Thus, like mangoes and plantains, she is as deeply rooted in the soil of the projects as she is in diasporic crossings and networks, or as Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez (2020) would call it, “rooted and relational”³.

Like scholars who use water to theorize diaspora as nationally fluid, border-crossing, and yet spatially situated rather than placeless (DeLoughrey, 2007; Gilroy, 1993; Hey-Colón, 2023; Moreno, 2022), Marte uses these emblematic crops as signs of her rooted connection across continents. Though this contribution, she expands the vocabulary of belonging beyond nationalism. Furthermore, just as the sea simultaneously evokes the Middle Passage and anti-colonial borderlessness, these crops echo the violence of the Plantationocene (Haraway, 2015) while affirming diasporic communities’ capacity to grow “despite the knife” (pp. 62, 90). Like plantains, diasporic subjects claim space in an “ungrateful” and unloving land—one that exploits their labor without granting full recognition or political rights, including the right to vote in federal and some state and local elections (pp. 32, 90). As Marte poignantly observes, they learn to play in “someone else’s backyard and somehow feel at home” (p. 71). If these transplanted crops have become cherished symbols of the nation, Marte implicitly asks why the transnational subjects who sustain that nation should not also have the right to belong.

³ “Rooted + Relational” is a five-year research initiative at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies (City University of New York), funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, that aims to reimagine the Center’s research agenda as well as its scholarly and community impact.

For Marte, this insistence on growing, belonging, thriving, and finding pleasure despite a neoliberal system that reinscribes colonial logics and dehumanization resonates with broader scholarly and artistic investments in Black joy as a mode of resistance. It is precisely in this refusal to be reduced to pain or loss that Marte's work is most powerful. The following section turns to this theme in greater depth.

3. "Dem Dog Dayz Are Ova:" Black joy

Afro-diasporic people have endured a long history of hardship. Dehumanization, displacement, violence, and abuse trace back to the Atlantic slave trade, and since then, new – yet historically familiar – forms of oppression have continued to persist and emerge. In the last two decades, some of the most visible examples include police brutality – whether at marches, while driving, or even at home – as well as disproportionate vulnerability to respiratory illness, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected racialized populations at higher rates. Black communities and Black Studies have responded to these ongoing conditions both through Afro-pessimism and Black joy turns.

Afro-pessimism, represented by thinkers such as Saidiya Hartman (1997, 2007), Christina Sharpe (2016), Frank Wilderson (2010, 2021), and Calvin Warren (2018), argues that slavery and colonialism are not aberrations but the very foundation of the modern world. As a result, Black death is integral to the system itself. This perspective introduces concepts such as Hartman's "afterlife of slavery" (2007) and Orlando Patterson's "social death" (1982) – which Wilderson (2021) popularized – to describe systemic racism and its enduring legacies. At the same time, Afro-pessimism has faced substantial criticism. Raphaël Lambert (2025) describes it as "time-collapsing", since in order to sustain the claim that Blackness is coterminous with slaveness and that contemporary migration echoes the Atlantic slave trade, Wilderson in particular is accused of erasing agency and collapsing distinct eras into one undifferentiated narrative (p. 6). Critics have also pointed to the afro-pessimist tendency toward essentialism, reducing Black identity to permanent subjugation. Furthermore, its radicalism has been considered paradoxically conservative, more invested in naming and maintaining the logic of racial hostility than in offering new tools or visions for transformation.

In contrast, scholars such as Fred Moten resist reducing Black life to trauma or social death. While deeply attentive and aware of violence and anti-Blackness, Moten (2003) insists on the excess of Black existence – what cannot be fully captured by domination. His thought often appears in conversations on Black joy, even if he does not use the term. Black joy emerged explicitly with *The Black Joy Project*, founded by Kleaver Cruz, an Afro-Dominican-York like Marte. Confronted with relentless police violence and the disproportionate toll of COVID-19 on racialized communities, Cruz not only became a Black Lives

Matter organizer but also, in 2015, began posting daily images of Black joy on social media for thirty days.

This Black Joy Project was not a gesture of naïve optimism, unawareness, or denial. Rather, it was a deliberate practice of addressing anti-Blackness and reclaiming humanity. Black joy signals resistance through subversion. Although aware of the systematic oppression, it refuses the equation of Blackness with death and trauma, and affirms a right to joy, love, and wellness. This current has since been taken up and expanded by scholars like Catherine Steele (2019), Jennifer Nash (2019), Lindsey Stewart (2021), Hinderliter and Peraza (2021), Tracey Lewis-Giggetts (2022), Barbara Combs (2023). Similarly, Marte's work "examines a lineage of reclamation and resistance in the face of racial injustice with freedom and joy at the helm" (Velasquez, 2023). She deliberately chooses to revisit a personal encounter with the police not in order to reproduce trauma but to re-write the narrative from the perspective of Black joy as resistance.

From *The Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968) to *Get Out* (Peele, 2017), and from historical events like the Alabama police attack on the Selma to Montgomery marches (1965) to the 2010s–2020s cases of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor –whom Marte memorializes in her poetry – the fear of the police and its deadly consequences remains inscribed in the collective memory of racialized communities and their protest movements, including #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName. In her poem "Good evening, officer", Marte captures this terror by recounting the experience of being stopped by the police for driving five miles above the speed limit.

What initially appears to offer her protection in the face of her encounter with the police—the fact that she looks "flawless" that day (p. 30) – suddenly becomes a source of vulnerability. Initially Melania describes her anxious relief in believing that her polished appearance might shield her from violence. Yet the black turtleneck she is wearing complicates her sense of safety, as Marte wonders whether her clothing protects her or, instead, is the very reason she has been stopped. By asking if the officer knows "that the people are reawakening" (p. 30), Marte points to the symbolic connection between her outfit and the Black Panther Party – an organization that in the 1970s defended the rights of African Americans against systemic racism and state violence, and whose members, often dressed in black turtlenecks, leather jackets, and berets. If the Black Panthers were criminalized back then, Marte reflects, then she too could be persecuted now.

Yet she questions whether the officer realizes that contemporary Black activism extends beyond organized groups and mass protests – such as the former Black Panther Party or today's Black Lives Matter movement – to include Black joy and the very act of thriving as forms of political resistance: 'Has he been warned that exuding unfiltered joy is also an act of political warfare? That my resistance is in the subtle way I smile at him? All proper and well-fed' (p. 30). For Marte,

Black joy is far more political than suffering in silence and “sitting in the dark and crying over horrors” (p. 140). It is a form of resistance because it disrupts the capitalist system that builds on the structural oppression and abuse of BIPOC communities. She argues that her wellness, beauty, bilingualism, and transnational identity may themselves provoke the officer’s detention, precisely because they embody the most visible signs of disobedience to the system. She describes the officer’s surveillant gaze – through which the police come to embody the state’s mechanisms of control and discipline – as if it were saying:

How dare you? Be Black and a woman and pretty and happy? Daughter of immigrants whose native tongue I use at my convenience. How dare I live the joyous life my grandmothers prayed for. Have the audacity to claim America as my own. How dare I claim a country that doesn’t love me as my own? (p. 31)

Marte’s bold and unapologetic joy recalls the disruptive presence of Cardi B – a Grammy-winning Afro-Dominican hip-hop artist, celebrity, and outspoken cultural figure who began her career as a stripper in the Bronx and rose to international fame. Marte dedicates a poem to her, recognizing that Cardi B embodies dissidence not only through her explicit lyrics or her social media reflections on race and diaspora, but also, and above all, through her very journey: daring to thrive, to be happy, and to “reach for the stars” (p. 35)⁴. Like Cardi B, Marte underscores the radical importance of daring to enjoy, laugh, love, and dream, rejecting the constrained, deathly, and precarious futures that BIPOC are “supposed to have” (p. 88), as well as the pull toward being consumed or immobilized by trauma and fear.

Refusing such futures—rooted in dehumanization – is central to Marte’s politics. In her poem “Dem Dog Dayz Are Ova”, she proclaims survival and buoyancy as defiance:

i will not drown. not how they want me to. not today like they insist. not now. not for them. not for their gaze and prize. not for their joy. not for their meal or playtime. i will not drown. nor will i die. not on their watch. not for their pleasure [...] i am no victim and nobody’s fuckin’ martyr. and nobody’s doormat or dog. i am no dog. (p. 88)

The title of this poem, “Dem Dog Dayz Are Ova” – a phonetic reworking of Florence and the Machine’s “The Dog Days Are Over” (2009) – signals dissidence not only in content but also in form, echoing bell hooks’s rejection of capitalization as a refusal of dominant norms. Here, “dog days” shifts meaning: no longer a seasonal metaphor, it names the long history of dehumanization endured by the

⁴ For further information on Cardi B’s “polemic” views on feminism and African diaspora, see Martín-Martínez’s (2024).

communities from the African diaspora and the Global South. By declaring that the “dog days” must end, Marte calls for diasporic communities to move beyond victimhood, trauma, and dehumanization. As she writes:

we are no longer mourning,/ not searching for grief,/ not praying for freedom. Today, I want to learn play again/ run wild with the wind,/ [...] isn't that what we fight for? To live a life worth living./ that our passions be a legacy lasting longer than our pain./ that the warmth of safety allow us to feel at ease. (p. 126)

Choosing laughter as legacy (p. 93) does not mean overlooking depression, bullying, body-shaming, colorism, generational trauma, or even the realities of suicide and death as alternative forms of emancipation and belonging (pp. 22, 91, 104). Yet, Marte insists on preferring to “die sleeping” – that is, having a non-traumatic death—rather than “dream[ing] of dying”, because unfortunately dying is the only way for some racialized individuals “to make it home” (pp. 113, 91). In doing so, she envisions and advocates for a mode of resistance that is “hopeful” rather than “hostile” (p. 144). In this vein, Marte aligns with Latinx and Black scholars such as Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez (2020), Lorgia García Peña (2022), and Esteban José Muñoz (2009) who advocate for hope as a call for action, reparation, and dissidence, rather than as a naïve form of “cruel optimism” that sustains the status quo (Berlant, 2011).

In its poetic assertion of rising and cultivating agency even amidst structural oppression, Marte particularly echoes Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise” (1978) (p. 135), and portrays children playing at a funeral (p. 44). Although Western binary thought often frames funerals primarily as somber occasions rather than spaces for joy, they remain communal moments where relatives and friends both mourn and honor a life they cherished. Even Christina Sharpe (2016), whose work is well-known for emphasizing how Black lives persist in the ongoing wake of slavery, argues that wakes affirm the existence of Black life. Wakes affirm agency, belonging, and community—for to mourn a Black life means that life was not disposable, but rather worthy, loved, and thus, “livable” (Butler, 2004). That, in itself, is a reason for joy. As Danez Smith (2017, p. 47) suggests in *Don't Call Us Dead*, laughter and mourning could be and are intertwined: “listen to my laugh & if you pay attention, you'll hear a wake”.

Another poetic image Marte uses to illustrate her non-dualistic philosophy, where struggle and love coexist is through her reflections on mothering. Although the experience left her with depression, anemia, and chronic back and knee ailments, it also gave her an enduring sense of vitality and care. In particular, she dwells on the physical toll of breastfeeding. Despite the exhaustion it caused, she chooses the Spanish word “*amamantar*” – because it resonates with “*amar*” (“to love” in Spanish, and “immortal” or “long life” in Arabic) (p. 143), thus, confirming the coexistence of joy and hardship. Just as diasporic subjects have

learned to play in someone else's backyard and still feel at home, they have, in Marte's words, "learn[ed] to heal the same way [they] learn to bleed" (p. 126). This ethic of play, flourishing, and healing amidst systemic oppression and struggle ultimately summarizes in her defiant smile at the police, which metaphorically inverts the gaze of interrogation. Now she is the one that through that smile seems to ask the officer "How dare you? Do you not realize? That anything you do, I do it in heels all the while bleeding?" (p. 31).

In *Plantains and Our Becoming*, Melania Luisa Marte reimagines the Afro-Latinx experience not as a state of fragmented loss, but as a site of divine wholeness and unapologetic Blackness. By dismantling both the assumptions embedded in *mestizaje* and the dualistic notions of belonging foregrounded in traditional diasporic and migrant narratives, she asserts a holistic and multidimensional identity that is as grounded in the urban soil of Manhattan as it is in historic and current oceanic crossings and networks. However, her work shifts the diasporic paradigm, where narratives have long relied on the fluidity of water to describe displacement yet fluid transnationality. Instead, Marte anchors her belonging in the symbolic weight of plantains and mangoes. These fruits – transplanted through the violence of the oceanic trade yet flourishing "despite the knife" – serve as the ultimate map for the diasporic rootedness that Marte experiences. Just as these crops have become emblematic of a land they were once forced to inhabit, Marte suggests that the Afro-Dominicanx subject is not a perpetual visitor or a victim of history, but a deeply rooted inhabitant that deserves full rights and recognition. Thus, she transforms the New York projects of her upbringing into a site of embodied belonging, asserting them as a space to claim rather than merely a backdrop for survival

Marte's poetic intervention calls not only for a scholarly shift away from Anglo-centered frameworks of the African diaspora, but also for a move beyond social death paradigms associated with Afro-pessimism, urging scholars in Afro-Latinx and Diaspora Studies to center Black joy as a radical form of political resistance. She calls on future scholars, authors, and diasporic communities to move beyond the archeology of trauma and toward a healer ethics that celebrates affirmation, love, happiness, and thriving as legitimate acts of defiance. Ultimately, Marte's work suggests that the future of the field and of diasporic subjects lies in recognizing the "hopeful" rather than "hostile" possibilities of the diaspora, advocating for a mode of belonging grounded in the radical audacity to be "diasporically rooted" and still reach for the stars.

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