Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa's *Daughters of the Stone*: Affirming the Afro-Latin

Interview by Danielle Georges

Daughters of the Stone, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa's debut novel, follows a family of Afro Puerto Rican women across five generations, detailing their physical and spiritual journeys from the Old World to the New. Llanos-Figueroa writes in her prologue: "These are the stories of a time lost to flesh and bones, a time that lives only in dreams and memory."

> *A gray braid falling over each shoulder, Tía Josefa stuck her head out of the window of Las Agujas, the embroiderers' cabin located just behind the main plantation house. The wagon returning from town swung around the main house and came to a final halt in the batey of Hacienda Las Mercedes, a sugar plantation near the northern coast of Puerto Rico.*

DG: There are many places though which to enter a story or "time." Why delve into the historical as opposed to the present or the future?

DL-F: I wanted to look at the long journey of the Puerto Rican people and why they are here in the United States. To do this, I felt it was important to look at the history of the people; and to do that, it was necessary to redefine what has been accepted as historical truth. One of my favorite proverbs, an African proverb, goes like this: *You will never know what happened on the hunt until you hear the tale of the lion.* Western history has often measured the past through 'documented' facts or 'objective' accounts, almost always told by the conquerors, invaders and colonizers—who had particular agendas in recording 'truth.' They discounted other 'truth,' the oral histories of conquered peoples. This book is about the history that wasn't recorded, the history that exists in the memory, the soul, the intuition and the verbal language of the historically voiceless. It is the lion's tale.

> *In her day, Tía had seen many black people come and go, but there had been no new ones in a long time. She knew Don Tomás had recently acquired a new parcela and needed more hands to work it into cane field. One thing Tía knew for sure, where there was more work to be done, it would be black hands that would do it.*

DG: The novel's first chapter introduces us to the compelling character, Fela, an enslaved African woman in early colonial Puerto Rico, who carries in her a particular power but who is also voiceless. The manner in which she is rendered voiceless is chilling and revealed later in the novel. Would you talk about the themes of voicelessness, agency, and voice that pervade the novel?

DL-F: It is no accident that Fela (who was a storyteller) loses her ability to speak early in the novel. In fact, the entire novel can be read as a journey to reclaim that loss. The journey of language, both verbal and non-verbal, and the uses thereof, is one of the major themes of the novel. In the patriarchal, plantation society of Puerto Rico, Afro Puerto Rican women were the most voiceless of all; yet in my experience, these women never stopped speaking, testifying, witnessing their truth. They were the wisdom-keepers who spoke constantly to each other and their children and their families. Within the circle of their homes and small communities, their voices rang out loud and strong and consistently. Publicly, however, they were seldom given the opportunity to raise their concerns or speak their opinions. This book is an attempt to give them voice.

DG: The novel also takes up competing epistemologies, clashing ways of knowing. We know that cultural collisions occurred for Africans in the New World, as well as for Europeans here, not to mention for Indigenous peoples already in the "New World." Would you speak to your decision to explore this theme in your novel?

DL-F: With the Age of Reason, western society more or less accepted one overarching way of knowing—one that relied on reason, rationality, science. It forgot or purposely buried the ways of its own elders who had a different connection to the cosmos. I feel that non-western peoples have often held on to the ancient, more intuitive ways of interacting with our world. In the novel I wanted to explore the more spiritual, magical, mystical ways of knowing and what would happen to those ways when confronted with urban modernity.

DG: Religious practice and spirituality are a source of tension and sustenance alternately for many of the characters. Would you address this?

DL-F: As the characters acculturate into western society, they struggle against traditional African spirituality in an effort to fit in and conform to new European modes of thinking. In the colonized society they live in, the younger generation gravitates towards the ideas of the people in power. As they mature, however, they realize that what they leave behind may have deeper significance and more lasting value than the illusion of belonging to a

group that may never fully accept them. Their task, then, becomes one of finding ways to honor the old while meeting the challenges of the new.

> *Mati knelt, surrounded by her Catholic santos—Santa Barbara, San Lázaro, Santa Clara. But it was the wooden representations of the parallel African gods who inhabited her mother's mind and spirit that drew Mati into her trances. Concha looked at the altar and remembered the names she had learned as a small child, the names with the beautiful sounds—Chango, Yemaya, Elegua, Ogun, Oshun.*

DG: As a writer, you employ myth, you imbue realistic settings with strange facets; it seems you engage elements of magical realism.

DL-F: Yes. I am a child of the African Diaspora born in Puerto Rico and raised in New York City. Two European languages, English and Spanish, are my tools of communication. The mid- to late-twentieth century with all its turmoil, challenging of the status quo and social activism was the period in which I came of age. I also carry West African religious symbology and Latin American magic realism in my core. When I sat down to write, my narrative naturally emerged from all those realities. I didn't initially make a conscious decision to weave all these threads into a tapestry. I recognized that what existed in magical realism was an unacknowledged but familiar part of my true self, and I thought, "Look at that! Where was that hiding all this time?" Of course, it had been in there all along. There was really no question where it had come from or where it was going.

DG: How did you come to the idea of this book—or how did the idea come to you?

DL-F: As a child, before television and 24-hr radio were ubiquitous elements of our society, I experienced the oral tradition of storytelling by listening to my grandmother and her friends sit on the porch and tell stories. That sharing in the form of narratives was socialization, education, history, community-building and passing on of tradition. I learned to keep my mouth shut (children were not allowed to enter into adult conversation) and my ears open. I learned to exercise my imagination and play with hyperbole and metaphor and manipulation of voice. I learned how to tell a tale. I didn't know it then, but that was my basic training for becoming a novelist. Later I learned how to hone those skills on paper—but in the beginning there was the spoken word.

DG: There are many of types of women in Daughters; of course, daughters, but also mothers, grandmothers, lovers, concubines, rape survivors, traditional healers (*curanderas* who are punished with the label of "witch" by other characters in the novel), women who love men, and women who love women. There are women who accept traditional roles, and women who don't do what women are "supposed" to do in many communities. All exist in the novel. Did you intend to present a multiplicity of women's experiences?

DL-F: For much of my life I looked around at stories about and images of Latinas and Blacks and found the stereotypes to be one-dimensional. These simplistic images belied all that I had known and all that had sustained me in the privacy of my home and community. When I sat down to write my world, I wanted to show the complexity of our women. Those women are intelligent, sophisticated, stubborn, contentious, contradictory, confused, angry, resentful, loving and just as virtuous and flawed as any other human beings. What they are not, is simple.

DG: The poet Yusef Komunyakaa questions the familiar advice that writers write what they know, offering up instead the idea that they write what they are willing to discover. I add to his idea my sense that writers engage in both recovery and discovery. What did you discover as you wrote this novel?

DL-F: I think one of the things I discovered was that nothing ever given to me by my women ancestors was ever lost. Even as a rebellious teenager, somewhere in my mind/soul were pieces of my grandmother, and aunts, and my mother, and my great grandmother; pieces they left of themselves for me to discover. Much in the way the stone works for the women in my novel, those pieces came to my rescue in the days of writer's block. They were jewels lying in wait in the dark, waiting for me to find them, and to lead me into the light. Those of us lucky enough to be born into loving families have all kinds of reserves we don't know we have. For me, all the tales that I had heard over the years came pouring back into my conscious mind when I needed to build the world of the novel. All I had to do was sit still, and remember.

> *They brought their stories in their pockets, their teacups, their photo albums, their treasure boxes. They brought them in lockets and broken picture frames and yellowed newspapers. They must have rummaged in the bottoms of their drawers, under the beds, between the old dresses in the backs of the wardrobes. They brought me huge leather-bound Bibles and yellowed christening gowns and pressed flowers. They brought me the pieces of their lives and bade me make them a quilt of words. When the*

> *world was moving too fast for them, they bade me stop time.*

DG: Has this book made you a better writer? What have you learned about the craft of writing fiction in the period of writing the book, and as you accompany it in the world?

DL-F: I believe every book I write makes me a better writer. I learned above all, how to edit. This book was almost twice as long as it appears in print. I had to be ruthless about cutting away passages I thought were wonderful, characters I loved, descriptions that got me out of bed and to the computer at the crack of dawn. These were all great—somewhere—but not in this book. I think that editing is a form of learning humility—a letting go of that which you love to make what's left stronger.

> *Elena was comforted by her father's presence as he drove the pink and gray 1950 Studebaker down the country road. The flamboyán branches, heavy with their red blossoms, struck the car as it made its way. It had been drizzling all morning, and the windshield wipers kept a steady beat, "Don't go . . . don't go. . . don't go."*

DG: There is the suggestion that a writer's first book invariably treats, on some level, the writer's childhood. Is this the case for you?

DL-F: Yes, it is true for me. I think I had to tell my story, or at least my version of my story, before I could go on with other narratives. I had to tell my story because it had been omitted and I had to give it form, a body, a voice so I could look at myself full in the face and claim my place in the world. *Daughters of the Stone* is not biography or even memoir, but it codifies the physical, emotional and spiritual journey of the Afro Puerto Rican people from its beginning in West Africa to the present day. I wanted to carve out a space in the universe and call it mine. This said, I have found that so much has been omitted, that maybe I'm not finished telling this story yet. There's a famous poem by Fernando Fortunato Vizcarrondo, a Puerto Rican poet, which asks "And where is your grandmother?" It questions whether the reader keeps his/her ancestry hidden. Is *abuela* being kept out back, out of sight, in the kitchen? Well, I'm bringing my *abuela* out into the parlor where she'll pull up a chair to greet my readers.

DG: The characters in this novel are not unaffected by race. They're forced to contend with issues of systemic racism, not unlike actual Afro Puerto Ricans, who, as a group have had a large influence on the history and culture of Puerto Rico.

DL-F: Our island has borne the brunt of many levels of oppression from both Spanish and U.S. dominance. In order to control to the souls as well as the bodies of the enslaved Africans in Puerto Rico, the conquerors went about the task of attempting to make black people feel intrinsically worthless. This was done systematically, with attempts to close off as many avenues of self-expression and self-[i]determination as possible. Some people did internalize the self-loathing promoted by the powerful white colonists.

> *When Clemensio could no longer get to his feet, he dragged himself to his knees and looked up at the mulatto standing over him. Spattered with Clemensio's blood, Romero stood heaving with the effort it took to torture the black man before him.*

DG: Many Latinos have African roots, African ancestors. Why do you feel this fact hasn't been recognized, much less celebrated, until very recently, either in Latina/o culture or literature?

DL-F: I think people would rather side with the powerful oppressor rather than with the victim. The worst type of racism is self-hate because it devours a people from the inside out. Many afro-*descendientes* accepted the cleansing of anything African from themselves and from their cultures, helping to support a binary society of the haves and the never-will-have. To this day many people who have obvious roots in the African continent would rather identify with their European ancestors or even the native Tainos than embrace their African roots. Many resisted however, clinging obstinately to those modes of expression and values that had served them well for millennia. The children of those African slaves are now recognizing and reclaiming their heritages.

DG: Taking too long to come, it seems the moment has finally arrived for a critical and spacious contemplation of an Afro-Latin experience. Within this discourse is the 2011 collection of multidisciplinary essays edited by Daisy Rubiera Castillo and Inés María Martiatu Terry on Afrocubans; Henry Louis Gates' recent series *Black in Latin America*; Arlene Torres and Norman E. Whitten Jr.'s 1998 double volume *Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean*, the wonderful visual art of Maria-Magdalena Campos Pons, a number of other texts—and your novel. I know that you've worked a long time on this novel. The world has finally caught up to you, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa.

DL-F: Beginning in the 1970s Afro Puerto Rican scholars and others began unearthing our histories. There has been an increase in the recorded oral histories, literature, fine

arts, religious studies on the island and in the United States. People are seeking what had been purposely obscured. They are helping to show our ancestors not as victims but as incredibly resilient survivors, people who sacrificed, people who endured, people who went within when the physical reality became impossibly oppressive and dehumanizing. They took the sacred inside, safeguarding it and quietly passing it down to their children. And so here I am, writing books that honor the common folk who were proud and resilient and who passed on their knowledge.