

Flipping the Script: Memory, Body and Belonging in Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa's *Daughters of the Stone*

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A teacher of creative writing in the NYC Public School system and librarian before turning to writing full-time in her retirement, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa is a self-professed storyteller. As such, she understands the power of stories to shape who we are and writes to redress the silence that has stood in for representations of her experiences as an Afro-Puerto Rican woman. On her official website, she writes:

[W]hen I went to school I was told that reason and logic were the only acceptable ways of knowing. Emotions clouded reality. Definitions had to be exact, measurable, black and white, no in-betweens. Keep it simple, I was told. *But I was not simple*. I was a black, Puerto Rican female in a world that insisted I be one or the other and valued none of those parts of me ... And so I began to write my world, my way. (italics mine, Dahlma's Journey, np)

Confronted with such effacing scripts, her novel *Daughters of the Stone* is a literary intervention to re-claim the Afro-Latinxⁱ subject and to give witness to the past. She is ever the librarian and passionate about this project of recovery as evidenced by her assertion that "it's important to me that there be serious exploration . . . of the African presence in Puerto Rican culture" (*Q & A with Author*, np). Her narrative traces the lives of a family from slavery to an urban present.ⁱⁱ

The importance of her novel's intervention becomes clear when placed in the context of Puerto Rico's official history which privileges its European and Indigenous ancestry. In his article, "Making Indians Out of Blacks," anthropologist and race scholar, Jorge Duany makes the argument that the Taínoⁱⁱⁱ revival in Puerto Rico is a national project that has undergone different phases but that nonetheless shares the same romantic impulse. This revival aims to "rescue" the island's Taíno and European heritage while rendering blacks invisible. According to Duany's study: "The Taíno heritage has recently been canonized through state-sponsored institutions such as museums, monuments, festivals, contests, crafts and textbooks" in public displays of Puerto Ricaness despite incomplete archaeological and historical knowledge (57). Puerto Rico's extensive 19th century sugar plantation labor system was supported by the import of African slave labor. Notwithstanding, not one public site commemorates the African culture or its contributions to Puerto Rico. Duany's work highlights how this stands in sharp contrast to over a dozen existent museums showcasing the Spanish and indigenous traditions of Puerto Rico.

In response to the white-washing of Puerto Rico's history, Llanos-Figueroa's novel centers on the mother-daughter bond disrupted by slavery and the resulting inter-generational trauma spanning five generations to recover this silenced past. Attentive to the ways fiction can create community via moments of affective belonging, Llanos-Figueroa's narrative invites readers to *feel* with and for her characters to acknowledge the island's history of slavery. While the legacy of slavery and colonialism breaks apart the family by routinely separating loved ones, Llanos-

Figueroa's narrative does not simply focus on losses experienced. Instead her work foregrounds the matrilineal bonds her characters sustain despite the violence, even death they suffer in a gesture towards healing and hope. Attesting to the innovations needed in narrating trauma, her narrative is punctuated by moments of magical realism. Told mainly from the perspective of a third-person narrator *Daughters of the Stone* records the experience of several women in one family to create a collective remembrance of the past.

The importance of remembrance and its role in shaping identity is affirmed in the novel's prologue by Carisa. She is the last surviving member of the family this narrative traces and affirms:

These are stories of a time lost to flesh and bones, a time that lives only in dreams and memory. No matter. Like a primeval wave, these stories have carried me... they are stories of how I came to be who I am, where I am" (*Daughters of the Stone*, np).

The prologue thus sets the stage for the work of recovery that the novel sets out to do, the "acting out, working over, and working through" that Dominick La Capra stresses is the work of all trauma writing (Quoted in Arva 45). Llanos-Figueroa's recovery of the Afro-Latinx experience, I contend, is accomplished via a focus on the black body that seeks to remedy the chronic trauma of being defined as "Other" by a racially exclusive narrative of Puerto Rican nationhood. Of the stories she was given to read in school, for example, she notes: "They did not tell of the lines in my grandmother's face, or my father's broken hands or the smell of my grandfather's skin when he came home from the [cane] fields. . . the many hues of my cousins' skin" (*Color Online*, np). Llanos-Figueroa thus engages the complexity of race and memory via the body, and I maintain that an attentive reading of the Latinx corpus of literature must embrace the full spectrum of human experience, including the black body.

Consequently, in this article I seek to redress the lack of critical attention that Llanos-Figueroa's writing has received and propose that her writing underscores the creative process of memory, a hallmark of Latinx literature. In his now seminal *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference*, Ramón Saldivar critically stresses the importance of Latinx authors' attempts to symbolically express the Chicana/o experience when he states that "experience can only be known if it is first *imagined* as a formed product of the subjects" (212). He is not alone in his assessment. For other critics of Latinx fiction such as Mary Pat Brady (2002), Alvina Quintana (1996), Tey Diana Rebolledo (1995), and Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) the process of writing is not simply an aesthetic undertaking but an attempt at representing and re-inscribing the marginalized, misrepresented and otherwise erased histories of the Latinx subject in the U.S. I build on the foundational work of these Chicana/o scholars to take a pan-ethnic approach in my reading of *Daughters of the Stone*.

Stressing the importance of art to convey what might otherwise be dismissed, for instance, Puerto Rican writer and poet Judith Ortiz Cofer lays claim to artistic license in the preface to her memoir, *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*. She states: "I like to believe that the poem or story contains the 'truth' of art rather than the factual, historical truth that the journalist, sociologist, scientist – most of the world must adhere to. Art gives me that freedom" (Cofer 12). Like her contemporary, Cofer, Llanos-Figueroa also underscores her authority to flip the script and "write my world, my way" (*Dahlma's Journey*, np). And, yet, while

Cofer's work continues to enjoy scholarly attention and is taught in Latinx courses, Llanos-Figueroa's text as of this writing is no longer in circulation.^{iv} It seems no small detail that unlike Cofer whose text privileges upwardly mobile representations of Latinidad that do not directly engage issues of race, Llanos-Figueroa's narrative pointedly acknowledges the Afro-Latinx experience and community.

Llanos-Figueroa's narrative indeed foregrounds the relationship between memory, body and belonging to attest to the connection between embodiment and community. As race and cultural scholar, Sarah Ahmed proposes in *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality* the healing economies of touch cannot be overlooked and the body not as sign, but *the body in relationship* reveals hidden structures of power. Ahmed states:

To examine the function of cultural difference and social antagonism in the constitution of bodily matters is not to read difference on the surface of the body (the body as text), but to account for the very effect of the surface, and to account for how bodies come to take certain shapes over others, and *in relation* to others (italics mine 43).

While several relationships presented in the novel are worth examining given the scope of this project, I focus on Tia Josefa, Fela and Mati for the ways their bodies "take certain shapes over others and in relation to others" that gesture toward the potential for healing. It is the relationship between these women that allows them to make meaning when confronted with slavery's senselessness. Ahmed powerfully suggests: "[T]he act of hailing or recognizing some-body serves to constitute the lawful subject, the one who has the right to dwell, and the stranger at the very same time . . . I am suggesting that it is the recognition of others that is central to the constitution of the subject" (23-24). For slave subjects whose ownership is predicated on the very denial of their subjectivity and reinforced via a disciplining of the body, the act of being recognized by another offers the possibility of a restored sense of self and community.

While an extended study of trauma is beyond the scope of this paper, it befits us to briefly define it as trauma scholar Cathy Caruth does: not as the act itself, but the repeated intrusion of an experience the survivor cannot assimilate. Caruth challenges us to understand the impact of trauma and the ways in which it overwhelms the survivor long after the event has transpired. She asserts: "The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (5). Unable to integrate the event the survivor experiences its repeated intrusion upon the present as they are forced to relive the past. To move beyond this experience of helplessness the survivor must reconstruct the trauma story and reestablish their connection with community. Fela's story serves as both cautionary tale and is indicative of the ways in which the legacy of slavery is re-written in *Daughters of the Stone*. Fela, the first member of the female clan, is a slave on a Puerto Rican plantation after capture and import from Africa. A *bozale*, she is someone who had experienced a life of freedom prior to enslavement on the hacienda and its constant scrutiny. Drawing strength and knowledge from a past she can still recall "she carried herself with no less dignity" than the master, Don Tomás's wife, a sin punishable by death for the black subject (9). Fela, the victim of a brutal rape by her first slave master, is literally and figuratively silenced when she seeks justice following her attack from her assailant's wife. "In her naïveté and thinking another woman would surely understand, [Fela] presented her bruised body to her mistress" who promptly responds by having her tongue

cut out so that she cannot disgrace the family name (47). Her status, and her relationship to the family are thereby reinforced through the discipline and disfigurement of her body. In the face of repeated trauma Fela initially disconnects herself from her body, experiencing an additional loss of self, by using every opportunity to detach and “slip into memories of happier days of the distant past” (21).

Despite Fela’s persistent refusal to participate in communal life among the slaves, her very presence has an effect on those with whom she comes into contact. Her bodily demeanor and her struggles manifested in nightly terrors, for instance, leave Tia Josefa, a fellow *bozale*, confused: “What was there about this woman that touched her so deeply? What was it about her that Tia *remembered* (22)? What Fela evokes in Tia Josefa are images she had tried to “push into the shadows of her mind for many years” (23) of the strong and proud husband, Clemensio, that she lost to her overseer’s, Romero’s hatred, and her master’s debts when he is sold away from her. The importance of Tia Josefa’s relationship with Clemensio, one where she experiences herself as more than property, and regains a sense of self is expressed when she “marvel[s] at the new sensations he had brought out in her. She loved him all the more for helping her find unimagined facets of herself” (29). As Susan Mayberry concludes: “the ability to choose and be chosen by loved ones remains an important by-product of slavery for the African-American community” (Quoted in Schreiber 7). The agency involved in choosing to love another cannot thus be easily dismissed. A proud man who challenges the status quo by not submitting his will to his overseer despite having to submit his body, Clemensio is senselessly beaten and ultimately sold in auction leaving Tia Josefa traumatized and bereft of her family. When he is taken:

[Tia Josefa’s] mind was gone for days. She didn’t remember much about the morning her husband was taken away. But what she did remember – would remember for years to come – was the look in his face and the rattle of the side panels of the wagon as it pulled away. She would hear *that rattle* everyday of her life – every time they went for provisions, every time a delivery was made. For years, every day of her life, she lost him again and again. (*Daughters of the Stone* italics mine 31)

Fela’s bodily presence elicits Tia Josefa’s intangible loss otherwise only recalled through the empty signifier of the “rattle” that haunts her. In this literary illustration of loss, Llanos-Figueroa attests to the veracity of Cassie Premo Steele’s claim that traumatic memories are encoded as “images and feelings. It is poetry - with its visual images, metaphors, sounds, rhythms and emotional impact – that can give voice to having survived” (3). In her creative writing, Llanos-Figueroa thus adeptly communicates to her reader not the facts of an erased history but the feelings of loss that define slavery.

What remains significant about Llanos-Figueroa’s narrative, however, is that memory is also tied to healing. Tia Josefa, for instance, finds someone who need not *only* trigger her loss, but who also represents a kindred spirit. Like Tia Josefa, Fela has also lost a husband to slavery. Because of their relationship Tia Josefa is able to recall the joy she shared with her husband while also recognizing Clemensio’s strength in Fela. In her she sees “the same defiance living in her face for all the world to see” which she admires (31). Pivotal, in relationship with Fela, Tia Josefa has an opportunity to work through her traumatic experience. While “traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning,” helping

Fela can and does assist Tia Josefa, to re-establish, albeit to a limited degree, her own sense of agency (Herman 33). It is Tia Josefa who cuts through the distance that Fela works so hard to maintain through repeated acts of kindness and by affirming:

You won't make it if your body's here and your mind's back there all the time...We all have stories. Sometimes the pain lies so heavily inside us it can only be whispered . . . So you think you're different? There are many silences. You've got one kind, but each of us has her own . . . You're not alone . . . we're all part of each other's pain and can be a part of each other's healing, too. (19)

By acknowledging Fela's pain revealed in her silence and asserting her belonging, Tia Josefa affirms her humanity. Consequently, when Fela is raped by her new slave owner, Don Tomás, it is Tia Josefa who uses her body as a "silent and impassable presence" to prevent him from seeing Fela during the ensuing pregnancy despite his attempts (50). In this way Tia Josefa is able to reconstitute the self she would otherwise be denied. She experiences belonging via the body, first in relationship with her husband Clemensio, and later declares agency with Fela whom she nurtures and cares for as a mother would. Unable to tolerate the present and isolated by her pain, however, Fela ultimately dies following childbirth.

Before taking her final breath, however, she uses her final strength to bless her child. Tia Josefa continues in the role of caretaker for Fela's offspring, Mati, the second-generation of the family. At this critical moment when death would sever the matrilineal bond, Llanos-Figueroa turns to magical realism in her narrative to preserve what would otherwise be lost.^v Accordingly when Fela gives birth to a baby girl, Mati, as a result of her rape, she also transmits extraordinary knowledge and discernment of the spirit world to her child. She bestows on her supernatural abilities that offer protection unseen and a connection to her past thereby unsettling the traditional slave narrative of broken family ties. Furthermore, she transfers her former husband's essence to the child, making Imo her *soul* father. She accomplishes this by using the sacred stone that she preserves on her journey from Africa:

Taking out the pouch, Fela pulled out the black stone. She dipped it in the water and rubbed it over the baby's body making the markings, *leaving a secret message on the child's skin* as Imo [her husband] had done to her a lifetime ago. . . .When she opened her eyes the baby was watching her with the eyes of an old soul. . . She reached out to her daughter with all her senses. (*Daughters of the Stone*, italics mine, 56)

Though short-lived Fela's relationship with her daughter is an embodied experience felt through all the senses.

When read in the context of Ahmed's theorization of the body, Llanos-Figueroa's narration takes on added significance. Ahmed claims:

The skin is not simply a matter in place, but rather involves a process of materialization it is the effect of surface, boundary and fixity (Butler 1993: 9). The skin allows us to consider how boundary-formation, the marking out of the lines of a body, involves an affectivity which already crosses the line. For if the skin is a border, then *it is a border that feels*. (italics mine, 45)

Significant to this moment is the fact that Fela cannot speak because her tongue has been previously removed thus her interaction with her baby must register on the skin, the border that feels. By foregrounding the body as a way of knowing, Llanos-Figueroa counters the reason and logic she was taught to privilege by her academic education and flips the script of Puerto Rico's colonial history vis-à-vis the colonized who are the focus of her story. Consequently, her narrative reduces Don Tomás, the slave owner and master, to nothing more than a footnote in Fela's story. Having possessed Fela bodily, Don Tomás, who had deluded himself with notions of courtship, ultimately realizes "he had never come anywhere near her secret self...that [in fact] there were many ways of not having another person" (50). Here it is important to note that I do not dismiss the traumatizing reality of rape or its inherent violence. Rather, what I draw attention to is how in Llanos-Figueroa's narrative rape does not become the *defining* story.

In her imaginative remembrance of the past, Llanos-Figueroa shifts the focus instead to the ways that the matrilineal legacy remains unbroken. Because of Fela's gift, Mati becomes a powerful *curandera* imbued with magical powers to heal via a knowledge of plants and trees. Mati possesses the ability to influence nature and subsume its energy allowing her to "see into the hearts and bodies of people and [is] able to heal the hidden hurts" (105). It is because of Fela's gift, the magical connection *inscribed* on her body at birth that Mati dreams in the language of the Lady Oshun, the Yoruba goddess whose name is synonymous with transformation. The Lady Oshun "spoke in a language Mati had never heard and yet Mati understood. . . about a long-ago village, about Mati's mother, Fela, and father, Imo, and her grandfather, the keeper of tales" (67). Although she may be parted from her mother physically, Fela's strength and protection remain with her in a narrative that authenticates not only Afro-Latinx's physical journey but spiritual one as well. Lynn Di Iorio Sandin advances the stone -- known as *otanes* in Santería -- that Fela preserves "as the only material object that remains of the past in Africa . . . a touchstone of memory making and storytelling" (35). I maintain, however, that it is Fela's body and soul that preserve a connection to memory and storytelling, which she transmits to subsequent generations.

Fittingly, when Mati inherits the plantation from owner Don Tomás and the fellow patrones ignore her claim because they do not consider her a lawful subject, she is able to elide her mother's tragic fate and re-write her story. In a moment that explicitly echoes her mother's traumatic silencing, Mati experiences the rape of her land in a visceral way:

Her head was pounding and her mouth was parched. She was having difficulty breathing. . . The air she breathed seemed seared by both the heat of the day and the greed of the bidders. . . The men toasted their good fortune with golden rum. They slapped each other on the back and smiled . . . White teeth flashed everywhere. *They had taken her tongue.* They had walked away without even glancing at the woman whose land they had stolen. (93)

Unlike her mother who cannot assert agency until her final moments of life, Mati is able to act in the here and now by tapping into her spiritual connection to her. Subsequently, when she is taunted by Romero, the overseer who had once attempted to rape her mother, "Mati's face shifted and suddenly there was Fela, and then the lines shifted again and he saw a face he hadn't seen in years but recognized immediately. The guttural, multi-tonal voice coming out of her mouth was as much

Mati's as it was Fela's...." (98). While Mati's connection to her mother remains spiritual, it is here expressed bodily and has tangible consequences.

As a result of this exchange, and in an act of poetic justice, Romero takes ill and is cursed to "know the agony of a putrid and bleeding body. . . a living death" akin to the slavery he enforced on others (98). Following this key victory, Tia Josefa also experiences the re-writing of her own past experience that leads to her peaceful passing into death. She remembers "[Romero] who had always seemed so big, powerful and unbeatable," and who had once brutalized her husband, and saw him now as he "lost his stature as he stood before her little girl" (100). Because of Mati's ability to break the overseer's dominion over her community, Tia Josefa is no longer afraid. When Mati finds Tia Josefa dead in her sleep "she wore serenity on her face like a mantle" (100). The other men who oppose Mati's land ownership soon follow suit experiencing ailments for which doctors could find no cures so that "by the end of the year, every man who had stolen a parcel of land from her would sign it back in exchange for her elixirs. . . It would be years before anyone noticed that none of these *patrones* fathered any children after their mysterious illness" (116). Imbued with her mother's strength, "a new well of fortitude," Mati is thus able to redress the wounds her mother could not and to "make changes to the [house] she [ultimately] inherits by sharing its treasures with her community" (97, 119). Once again, Llanos-Figueroa upsets the script of slavery and ends the *patrones*' bloodline while ensuring the survival of the colonized. In essence she re-writes the script of slavery from one that hinges on survival alone to a story that also makes room for the potential to thrive in the black community.

The house and plantation whose wealth and ease was once predicated on the invisible labor and discipline of black bodies that did not partake in its comforts is transformed into a communal space under Mati's ownership and protection. The house itself is renamed "Caridad," which translates to charity, owing to the refuge it affords the people it once consumed in its maintenance. Of the transformation we learn:

Embroidered napkins now served as diapers for brown babies who had always gone bare-bottomed. People who barely had enough to eat before now ate their beans and rice and pig's feet from china plates. . . Mati filled her house with her own work. Although she couldn't write and didn't do a lot of talking she was a great storyteller. Her stories flowed from her needles . . . The first tapestry she ever made was one of the Lady Oshun. (*Daughters of the Stone* 119)

Mati's ability to provide for her community and heal are here again underscored via a reference to the body and the recovery of memory which provide a sense of belonging once denied the black body. Babies once naked are clothed, empty stomachs are filled, and healing is found via Mati's talent to weave, which also gives expression to her African heritage.

The importance of narrative reframing, of owning one's story, is indeed repeatedly underscored in *Daughters of the Stone*, a phenomenon articulated in an exchange between Mati and her granddaughter, Elena:

[I]f you live your life well and you give love to those around you, a part of your soul stays behind with every person you have loved or every person who has loved

you. In that way you never die. You are just shared by more and more people . . . That's why the stories are so important *m'hija* . . . the most important thing I learned from Mother Oshun is that stories make us stronger. (161-163)

Ultimately that is the gift that *Daughters of the Stone* imparts, the remembrance of the Afro-Puerto Rican body as a site of memory and knowledge, which makes belonging and community possible in its recognition.

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ⁱ The term “Latinx” has become increasingly used in the field of Latina/o studies as a gender-neutral term. For more information on the significance of the term see Ramirez, Tanisha Love, and Zeba Blay. “Why People are Using the Term ‘Latinx.’” *The Huffington Post*, 5 July 2016. See also “The Case for ‘Latinx’: Why Intersectionality is not a Choice” by María R. Scharrón-del Río and Alan A. Aja. *Latino Rebels*, 5 Dec 2015, LatinoRebels.com

ⁱⁱ Llanos-Figueroa also provides a selected bibliography on the impact of slavery in Puerto Rico in response to interest generated by her novel thus addressing the historical realities for her work. See her official website: <https://www.dahlmallanosfigueroa.com/just-for-educators/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Taino is the term for Puerto Rico’s pre-Columbian indigenous population. Puerto Rico is not the only country who has attempted to “whiten” its history. See, for example, Ginetta Candelario’s *Black Behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops* for a fascinating analysis of the Dominican Republic’s racial politics.

^{iv} As of this writing repeated requests to the publisher for information on why *Daughters of the Stone* has gone out of print have gone answered. Since the book is no longer in print I have also been unable to incorporate it into my Latinx courses. I have, however, been in contact with the author who is working with her agent to make her book available in paperback and digital format available via Amazon.com by Fall 2017.

^v For an extended study of the ways in which magical realism is a literary vehicle particularly suited to the expression of trauma see Eugene Arva’s sustained study *The Traumatic Imagination: Histories of Violence in Magical Realist Fiction* (2011).