

## **Decolonial Resilience: Resistance and Healing in Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa's Fiction**

**By Roberta Hurtado**

In 2014, U.C. Berkeley computational biologist Lior Pachter published in his online blog that Puerto Rican women are the closest humans to having perfect DNA structures. Pachter attributed the source of this near-perfection to Taíno Amerindian ancestors. He further noted that African and Spanish genetics might be perceived as bolstering that Arawak genetic perfection without providing any scholarly research for the presence of these communities on the island. Despite the lack of peer-review that would have come from publishing with a scientific journal, and the lack of scholarly historical sourcing, Pachter's claims found themselves picked up in popular media outlets such as the *Medical Daily*, *CNN Español*, and the *Latin Times*. Yet, none of these other sources noted his work as falling into a well-rehearsed narrative of the "lost indigenous" figure, or that Pachter's seeming compliment to Puerto Rican women simultaneously traffics in the reduction of African racial and cultural presence on the island to a side note rather than an integral part of the island's history and heritage.<sup>1</sup> Two significant questions emerge from Pachter's work and its subsequent presence in U.S. media: 1) how and to what ends do colonial narratives regarding Puerto Rican women circulate, and 2) do counter-narratives exist that speak to the resilience of Afro-Latinas in the face of such erasures and denigrations? To attend to these questions, I examine Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa's *Daughters of the Stone* for depictions of Afro-Latina resilience emerging from decolonial cultural resistance, and the potential for novelists to take on the role of artist-as-curandera.<sup>2</sup> Llanos-Figueroa's frame-narrative novel follows a matrilineal family from the first woman brought to Puerto Rico as a slave to the present day great-great granddaughter whose journey to heal results in the reclamation of her Western African heritage. "Decolonial Resilience" analyzes this novel for its depictions of Afro-Latina experience of coloniality on the island.<sup>3</sup> It also explores how *Daughters of the Stone* delineates the tensions that emerge when non-Western European cultures come into conflict with colonial hegemony across generations. This article concludes with an examination of how the reclaiming of resilience born out of Afro-Latina cultural resistance within literature can lead to a subversion of colonial structures and a praxis for healing beyond the boundaries of colonial imposition.

I argue that the artist-as-curandera is one who constructs a decolonial praxis of resilience via creative projects of empowerment that enable community healing from the wounds wrought by coloniality. This article explores the ways in which decolonial fiction storytelling can demystify, as well as challenge, erasure and/or denigration of Afro-Latina identity that manifests in colonial narratives. It begins by attending to the process via which individuals such as Pachter determine that Puerto Rican women are available objects of inquiry. I contend that Pachter's work illustrates that claiming knowledge of and narrating Puerto Rican women—down to the very genetic, cellular level—functions as an important technology of U.S. colonial endeavors in relation to its colony, Puerto Rico.<sup>4</sup>

However, this technology did not begin with the U.S. takeover of the island but instead functions as an extension of historical Western European strategies for domination in the Americas. Anibal Quijano writes in "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America" of

the process by and purpose for which such a technology was deployed. Specifically, he identifies two fundamental axes that enabled Western European colonization of the Americas: 1) a new codification of “race,” and 2) the constitution of a new “structure of control of labor, resources, and products” (534-35). Quijano notes that the emergence of racialized structures provided “a new way of legitimizing the already old ideas and practices of relations of superiority/ inferiority between dominant and dominated,” which transformed the cultures and phenotypes of the oppressed into features of “inferiority” (535). These narratives justify power dynamics by transforming cultural signifiers, as well as biologically inherited traits, into proof that justifies coloniality. Quijano continues “the racist distribution of new social identities was combined, as had been done so successfully in Anglo-America, with a racist distribution of labor and the forms of exploitation of colonial capitalism” (537). The interlinking of race and labor constitutes a social order in which biology determines that some are born to gain wealth and some are born to create wealth for those who rule. Walter Mignolo contends in *Darker Side of the Renaissance* that colonial narratives of the Americas and the final stages of Western European imperialism were not concerned with corresponding “true meaning” but instead enacting or “performing” a meaning that it had created (20). Colonial narratives regarding racialization are unconcerned with whether the designated markers of inferiority are *actually* representations of inferiority because what matters is that the colonial narrative deems them as such. Thus, colonial narratives of black experiences in the Americas—in areas such as Puerto Rico—function to justify and frame racialized oppression as necessary and natural.

In Puerto Rico, among other Caribbean nations, colonial imposition and the linkage of race with labor structures manifested in a re-configuration of the island’s population. Despite Pachter’s depiction of African ancestry in Puerto Rico as minor in comparison with Taíno presence, Marta Moreno Vega evinces in “Espiritismo in the Puerto Rican Community” that the relative decimation of the Arawak population in Puerto Rico resulted in a significant forced movement of Africans to the island for purposes of enslavement (329, 332). Marta Cruz-Janzen contends in “Latinegras” that, for many, “Latinegras represent the mirrors that most Latinos would like to shatter” because “Latinegras are marked by a cruel, racialized history” (168). The advent of racialized-slavery determines some of the historical experiences of those who were exploited for labor purposes on the island: it is via this history that they are known in official documents. The question emerges as to how to grapple with this history without Afro-Latinas turning into symbols that are ostracized for that history. Lillian Comas-Díaz argues in “LatiNegra” that it is vital to “recognize both ethnicity and race” in order to resist the silencing of African heritage while simultaneously empowering Latinos to affirm their multiracial identities (170). I contend that reclaiming this identity from colonial narratives requires countering a coloniality of power and its mechanisms, as well as complicating the histories that coloniality bequeaths.

These tasks require attending to the traumas created by colonial imposition without trafficking in the denigration of African lineage on the island. Studies in cultural trauma, such as Jeffrey Alexander’s concept of collective trauma and Joy DeGruy Leary’s “post traumatic slave syndrome,” provide potential entryways into this task. Examination of these works points to a need for those who experience oppression to press against pathologization that emerges from narratives depicting them as only linked to trauma and their identities as founded on/by trauma. Gay Wilentz’s model of “wellness narrative” in relation to “cultural dis-ease” further illustrates this point: I contend that when examining attempts to narrate experiences of oppression, a distinction must be made between an individual’s or community’s response to trauma inflicted by coloniality and the cultural identity of those that coloniality imposes upon.

I propose a turn to decolonial feminisms theories to account for these needs and distinctions. The shift to decolonialism, or what Nelson Maldonado Torres describes in “Thinking through the Decolonial Turn” as a “decolonial turn,” begins by identifying the continued presence of coloniality as a problematic system that must be challenged (2). This turn takes shape in what Emma Pérez identifies in *The Decolonial Imaginary* as an interstitial space where those caught within a coloniality of power can analyze and critique colonial narratives and activities (110). This movement away from utilizing colonial narratives is vital because, as Xhercis Mendez posits in “Notes Toward a Decolonial Feminist Methodology,” attempting to gain acknowledgement as humans via the categories provided within a coloniality will only perpetuate the systematic dehumanization that founds such categories (49). Indeed, those who are oppressed by a coloniality do not gain liberation from domination by achieving category-inclusion, but instead become more insidiously imbedded into its mechanisms of control. María Lugones, in “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” asserts the need to “enact a critique of racialized, colonial, and capitalist heterosexualist gender oppression as a lived transformation of the social” (746). This critique emerges as part of a praxis that moves “toward a decolonial feminism,” which requires that those caught within a coloniality “learn about each other as resisters to the coloniality of gender at the colonial difference, without necessarily being an insider to the worlds of meaning from which resistance to the coloniality arises” (752-53). Such a turn points to Mignolo’s assertion regarding colonial narratives and intent, and that a space exists in which a coloniality does not frame how those who experience oppression perceive and narrate themselves to one another. I posit that this turn enables an examination of how Afro-Latinas theorize colonial imposition without reliance on colonial narratives and their accompanying logics.

It also allows for an investigation into how writers such as Llanos-Figueroa refute colonial denigrations and erasures of African cultures and identities by envisioning Afro-Latina experiences outside of colonial narratives. Gloria Anzaldúa describes in her posthumously published *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro* that “I ‘read’ and ‘speak’ myself into being. Writing is the site where I critique reality, identity, language, and dominant culture’s representation and ideological control” (3). Writing can transform as well as construct new visions of the self in relation to social structures that currently exist. For those working within a decolonial space, the question emerges regarding how writing provides such a platform. Anzaldúa posits “[m]y job as an artist is to bear witness to what haunts us, to step back and attempt to see the pattern in these events (personal and societal), and how we can repair el daño (the damage) by using the imagination and its visions. I believe in the transformative power and medicine of art” (10). This haunting exposes how the residual effects of history are alive and imposing on current generations. Artistic creation offers one method for attending to experiences of this haunting and communicating a decolonial praxis for resisting colonial imposition.

Imbedded within Anzaldúa’s call for critique is a need to constitute tools with which to grapple with and challenge colonial narratives of history and historical experiences. Aurora Levins Morales argues in *Medicine Stories* that, in resistance to a coloniality of power, a historian can become a curandera. The historian curandera begins a process of healing by disrupting “official histories” that are “designed to make sense of oppression, to say that the oppressed are oppressed because it is their nature to be oppressed. A strong sense of their own history among the oppressed undermines the project of domination” (24). This disruption begins at a heavily contested site: the control of how the past and present are narrated. However, describing colonial imposition has the potential to fall into a pattern of focusing only on the trauma of the past.

The impetus emerges to depict those same experiences as *not* natural but instead as something external while simultaneously showing that there is more to those who face oppression than their oppression. The “medicine of art,” as Anzaldúa describes it—and, in this article, fiction storytelling—becomes such a tool for decolonial resistance. Shari Stone-Mediatore contends in *Reading Across Borders* that “storytelling” is vital for communities experiencing marginalization because it functions as a process of describing experience that is not confined by the strict boundaries of historiography that are governed by marginalizing conventions (7). Storytelling thereby provides a method for the disruption of official histories that Levins Morales describes. I argue that fiction storytelling can function as a method to navigate colonial regimentation of historical accounts by not claiming or reifying its discourses. María Cotera takes up Stone-Mediatore’s claim in *Native Speakers*, contending that:

storytelling...performs a corrective function in culture because it reveals previously occluded, ignored, or misrepresented experiences, but it also reframes these experiences from the perspective of marginalized subjects. Storytelling therefore has the potential to transform embodied experience into critical knowledge. This critical knowledge moves beyond a merely corrective (and presumably transparent) account of history—what one might term a counterhistory—because, at its best, storytelling disrupts the reductive logic that stands at the heart of all narrative claims to “truth,” whether hegemonic or counterhegemonic. (141)

In moving out of the realm of “truth” as it is demarcated within a coloniality, the fiction writer can act as a storyteller who can critically engage historical experiences with a freedom to convey the essence of that experience without being locked to a logic constituted by colonial structures. I argue that storytelling—and for the purposes of this article, fiction—can communicate critical, imaginative revisions to history. This ability, in conjunction with the concept of historian as *curandera*, provides a position from which to heal from colonial imposition via literary work and thereby exemplify the potential that artists-as-*curanderas* create within their communities.

### **Speaking without Tongues**

“Decolonial Resilience” explores how Llanos-Figueroa counters the silences in which colonial narratives enshroud Afro-Latina experiences and identities. Levins Morales contends that historian *curanderas* begin with an understanding that “[w]hen you are investigating and telling the history of disenfranchised people, you can’t always find the kind and amount of written material you want,” but identifying the absences, or lack of information, “can balance a picture, even when you are unable to fill in the blanks. Lack of evidence doesn’t mean you can’t name and describe what is missing. Tracing the outlines of a woman-shaped hole in the record, talking about the existence of women about whom we know only general information, can be a powerful way of correcting imperial history” (27-28). Reading these gaps as narratives counters colonial silencing. This act also contradicts the notion that these gaps are bereft of a history that does not begin with the moment of Western European colonial imposition.

Filling these “gaps” requires a consideration of how the information will be portrayed. During her analysis of First Nations women’s literature in “Reflections on Cultural Continuity through Aboriginal Women’s Writings,” Emma LaRocque posits that:

Aboriginal women have continued to work for the preservation of our families, communities, and cultures, and in so doing, are keeping our peoples and cultures alive and current. Writing is one of such expressions of both creativity and continuity. Since the late 1960s, Aboriginal women have been creating a significant body of writing, which serves in many respects as a vehicle of cultural teaching and reinvention as well as cultural and political resistance to colonialism with its Western-defined impositions, requirements, and biases. But writing is also about the love of words... (155)

Storytelling contains within it the potential to resist colonial narratives because it emerges from a critical, creative artistry. Although LaRocque is here discussing First Nations and not Afro-Latina writers, her point is an important one for decolonial endeavors: storytelling can be a vehicle for sharing knowledge and constituting potential for change.

Llanos-Figueroa's *Daughters of the Stone* provides such a creative corrective. This novel begins with the current-day character, Carisa, first identifying that she will be sharing stories within the novel, and then focusing on her great-great grandmother, Fela. The great-great grandmother is the first in her matrilineal line to be brought to Puerto Rico for enslavement. Fela is introduced during her arrival at the new hacienda to which she is sold after being raped by her first Puerto Rican enslaver: "She remembered the pounding, the violence in that barn...the searing hot pain that had torn apart her groin cut through her still," and after which the rapist's wife has Fela's tongue removed to "keep this impertinent slave from spreading tales about her husband" (47, 48). This violation is framed by legal and social conventions: as property under the law, it is Fela who bears the burden of the rape, and also endures the punishment for speaking out about it. The decision to cut out Fela's tongue is symbolic: hindered from describing the assault, she is also denied the ability to communicate *anything* using her own voice. Further, this act represents how colonial imposition systematically silences and denigrates Afro-Latinas among Latinos. For example, among Puerto Ricans, such a history is often recalled with the question about one's "grandmother" when discussing race in allusion to the island's mixed-racial history: Comas-Díaz posits that this "emphasis on the femaleness of the black ancestor derives from the collective memory of dark females being sexually enslaved and raped by conquistadores or other white Europeans. This emphasis acknowledges the intersecting influence of misogyny and slavery" (171). Within a colonial narrative, blackness, gender, and legal status are interlinked to render exploitation normal. In this process of normalization, colonial narratives also displace responsibility for denigration and exploitation on to those without the power to refute such depictions. An individual such as Fela thereby becomes a tool for obfuscating power dynamics within the colonial narratives via a process of diverting social stigma onto its victim.

Carisa depicts Fela's self-perception via non-Western European frameworks to identify Fela's experiences of enslavement beyond the mystifying technologies of coloniality. Fela is described as having performed a taboo ceremony with her husband, prior to enslavement, for the goddess Oshun in the hopes of becoming pregnant: "He parted her legs and used his tongue to gently push the stone into place. Their childstone, guardian of their unborn baby's soul, was to sleep there, protected" but, unfortunately, that "message was never delivered. All was lost and now Oshun exacted punishment. Fela would have to do her penance" (22). Fela's culturally specific understanding of events is significant: it disrupts a narrative of Western European enslavers as being all-powerful and their ideologies as all encompassing. I do not argue that Fela is responsible for being enslaved, as being enslaved could—within this description—be perceived as part of her

penance for the incomplete ceremony. Instead, what emerges here is an alternative understanding of history that provides room for sentience in the face of dehumanization. Moreno Vega writes “[e]nslaved Africans brought to the New World their knowledge of spiritual and secular practices grounded in the forces of nature and ancestor workshop. Africans carried their knowledge of their cultural philosophies” (338). The presence of Western African cultures represents a rupture in narratives that position characters such as Fela as objects to be narrated by only Western European colonial endeavors. Fela’s depiction of her experiences via culturally specific ways of knowing transforms her enslavers into pawns of the gods. The novel thereby refutes the idea that individuals such as Fela are evacuated of identity and exist only via a master-slave dialectic, or, more importantly, that their identities are only the trauma of enslavement.

However, the presence of these cultures on the island does not deny the imposition of Western European coloniality or argue that its violence is resisted easily. In the new hacienda to which she is sold, Fela is forced to work as a seamstress whose talent provides her reprieve from work in the sugar cane (12, 48). However, despite this “value,” the owner of the hacienda—Don Tomás—seeks Fela out for sexual conquest: “she recognized the inevitability of her position. *Not again*, a silent prayer, *please, not again*,” but “[r]egardless of this *patrón’s* niceties, he could do whatever he wanted... So when she saw Don Tomás in the *batey* that night, she wasn’t terribly surprised” (44, 48). The narrative continues by detailing Fela’s determination to utilize the sexual encounter as a method to complete the pregnancy ceremony that she began prior to enslavement (48-49). I do not seek to argue that enslaved women could control whether or not their enslavers were able to use them for sexual exploitation. Nor do I argue that Fela’s experience with her enslaver should be interpreted as anything other than sexual assault. Indeed, and as Comas-Díaz notes, “[t]he constructs of colonization and internalized colonization add to the objectification of the LatiNegra, who often represents the antithesis of the white male colonizer” (185). Within a coloniality and its narrative dichotomies, it is the white male—here, Criollo—who has the power to make decisions and the enslaved, black woman who bares the burden of his actions. What this novel provides, however, is a complication of Afro-Latina experiences in Puerto Rico, and the histories of human interaction that occurred on the island: it is vital to consider how women experiencing these assaults perceived of themselves both as sentient beings as well as in relation to such violations.

This nuance is necessary because, within *Daughters of the Stone*, Fela’s reaction to being impregnated by her enslaver challenges dehumanizing processes that exist and found colonial narratives. After giving birth, Fela gives her life to the goddess Oshun so that her daughter, Mati, can live. For Mati, “[s]he left behind a box of trinkets, some threads, a few old pieces of silk, a yellow and white embroidered dress, and my great-grandmother Mati clutching a little black stone in her newborn hand” (59). Fela bestows her daughter with gifts rather than rejecting her because she is also the child of Don Tomás. Fela, in passing the stone on to Mati, provides a legacy and memory to her child from prior to her enslavement. In “Trauma to Resilience: Notes on Decolonization,” Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux contends “without an awareness of the underlying damage, or possession of healthy, internalized representations of the dominant culture that could be manipulated to their benefit, women were left without a strong representation of their own self-identity and self-worth” (24). It is through this last gesture of bequeathing these items that Fela provides her daughter with a source from which to gain empowerment and resist colonial denigration. Although Fela dies before being able to pass on all of her knowledge to her daughter—not able to teach her this information over years—she nevertheless bequeaths a vision of love with which to navigate the imposition of coloniality.

### Tense Colonial F(r)iction

Narrating Afro-Latina experiences of colonial structures and slavery paradigms also requires accounting for the tensions that coloniality creates. I contend that these tensions reflect the distance between what a coloniality attempts to obfuscate via its narratives and the realities of those caught within its grasp. Levins Morales recalls that “one important way that colonial powers seek to disrupt the sense of historical identity of the colonized is by taking over the transmission of culture to the young” and continues that “invading the historical identities of the subjugated is one part of the task...the other part is the creation of an imperial vision of our lives” (23). Engaging in a decolonial turn means refuting colonial narratives that deny the oppressed any form of agency. I make a distinction here: coloniality does not afford agency to those it oppresses, but those who experience colonial oppression might perceive their own actions from a perspective not conferred by a coloniality and thereby know themselves as active agents being imposed upon.

Interpreting historical silences exposes the tensions that colonial narratives attempt to obfuscate via imposition. Levins Morales notes, “people who are being mistreated are always trying to figure out a strategy. Those strategies may be shortsighted, opportunistic, ineffective or involve betrayal of others, but they nevertheless represent a form of resistance” (30). Indeed, not all of the techniques that are engaged are inherently designed to be decolonial or to challenge social injustice. Yet, examination of these attempts elucidates that a problem exists and its imposition is not inherently desirable.

The artistic and informational choices that fiction storytellers make when depicting these strategies identify tensions that show the colonial imposition while also exposing what it obfuscates. LaRocque posits that “[t]he act of writing is an act of agency, and agency is cultural continuity in its articulation of our histories, our invasions, and our cultural values...Writers certainly challenge both standard academic notions about cultural difference and change as well as political and societal demands that we stay different, that is, stereotyped” (163). Storytelling can account for such tensions as well as challenge colonial authority over how those tensions are depicted. The task, then, is to balance the realities of culture, and how that culture is maintained, while simultaneously pressuring stereotypes as all-encompassing images of what and who is narrated.

*Daughters of the Stone* engages these tensions by depicting the continuation of Fela’s cultural knowledge in her daughter, Mati, despite being on a colonized island. Mati is known to have supernatural powers and the ability to heal wounds and illness. In one instance, surrounded by the smell of freesia, she heals a piglet that had been mortally wounded (65). This scene is followed by her divulging that she routinely is visited by Oshun, the goddess whose ceremony Fela had conducted in order to conceive Mati (66-67). Mati’s method of healing—not seeking medical advice from a veterinarian but instead using a supernatural force conjured in her spirit, mind, and hands—leads to questions regarding the possibility of such a healing taking place and if its capabilities are even possible because of its roots in non-Western European culture. Scholar Mario Nuñez Molina contends in “Community Healing Among Puerto Ricans” that he, himself, had experienced such a healing at the hands of a brujo (witch) while in his childhood (121-22). Such a healing *is* possible. Further, it is consistent with a way of knowing the world that perceives healing as a spiritual, as well as physical, ability.

Mati’s gift also represents a strategy for resisting colonial imposition. However, the difference between how Mati perceives herself, based on her access to non-colonized perception,

and how she is depicted by a coloniality leads to a point of tension within the colonial structure. Mati, the daughter of an enslaved woman and that woman's enslaver, has no legal claim to her biological father's property. Yet, upon his death, Don Tomás bequeaths his lands to Mati. However, these lands are auctioned to local hacienda owners who plot to stop Mati—a mulatta, former slave—from gaining property made valuable by slave labor. Mati appeals to the church for assistance but, after this venture fails, turns to her own resources for justice:

One after the other, the neighboring plantation owners who had taken her land developed ailments for which the doctors could find no explanation or remedy...When the situation seemed hopeless, words were whispered in the dark. And then there would be a nocturnal knock on Mati's door. Soon after, a visit from Mati and an understanding. By the end of the year, every man who had stolen a parcel of her land would sign it back in exchange for her elixirs. (116)

Mati's supernatural activities could be interpreted as self-serving and unethical. Further, within a coloniality, her actions could be considered evil. Indeed, throughout the novel, Mati is called a "bruja" (witch) several times (73, 114). Historically, Moreno Vega notes, "the forced Christianity imposed by the Catholic church forced African religions to go underground, actively subverting European oppression. Legal documents indicated that Ladinos and Africans were frequently persecuted for practicing black magic and witchcraft" (346). Those who attempt to resist coloniality via non-Western European tactics can be denigrated within colonial narratives. The meaning of "black magic" and "witchcraft" become tools with which to dominate. Countering such claims within storytelling, as Stone-Mediatore and Cotera identify, can create a critique of such narratives. Further, it frames Mati's actions within a decolonial space to elucidate her actions as not evil but, instead, an attempt to rectify social injustice.

The tension that exists in such a moment is not confined to Mati and Puerto Rican Criollos, but also occurs intergenerationally as the coloniality of power maintains over time. Mati's daughter, Concha, is born a free woman with matrilineally inherited supernatural capabilities. Concha—despite Mati's distrust of Western European and Puerto Rican Criollo structures—attends a local school so that she can attain alphanumeric literacy. During her time in school, Concha learns that there are negative perceptions of her and her mother's gifts. After classmates call her a "bruja" (witch), Concha returns home and "recognized the fear she had been holding at bay since that day. It had grown with her...taken up residence in her heart and become a part of her...Concha saw clearly, perhaps more clearly than Mati, that her childhood had ended the days she started school" (143). This fear marks a break in Concha's development. Indeed, feeling "fear" in connection with the gift that she inherits transforms who and what she is into a source of danger. The rupture in this instance emerges from the destruction of this gift as a source of empowerment with which to resist cultural denigration. In "Mujerista Discourse," Ada María Isasi-Díaz argues that "[o]ften considered intellectually inferior, Latinas' understandings are indeed one of the many subjugated knowledges that are ignored to the detriment not only of our own community but also of the whole of society" (44). Colonial narratives are intended to subvert the sources of empowerment that those who are oppressed can draw from in order to resist domination. The goal of these narratives is to create a community that is no more than oppressed, which results in a tension between those who are being imposed upon and the potential for resistance that their own cultures provide. Although Concha later reclaims her gift, what is witnessed in this moment is the

insidious reach of colonial narratives that denigrate the cultures of those who are being caught in structures of domination.

### **Resilient Decolonial Praxis**

Decolonial movement outside of colonial structures, and how to intergenerationally heal from the ruptures and breakages that have emerged as a result of colonial histories of violence, requires specifically attuned strategies. Wesley-Esquimaux posits “perhaps the most important factors that help First Nations women to rebound from negative experiences in life are in their awakening cultural and social resiliency...Resiliency is the ability to rebound from challenges one encounters in daily life. As a process, resilience allows for the integration of the teachings that those experiences present” (26). Resilience, in this definition, is more than just survival. It contains within it a component of “learning” from negative experiences. However, this resilience does not emerge from accepting and internalizing colonial imposition but instead finding ways to navigate it for survival and potential resistance. Afro-Latina rejection of colonial narratives, here, requires what Moreno Vega points to as the “cultural revolutionary role in maintaining an African consciousness” (346). I argue that this consciousness provides an ability to see the coloniality of power and its accompanying narratives as externally imposed, rather than innately true to the individual. This consciousness also knows that the coloniality is not all encompassing and that what exists outside of its oppressive boundaries provides potential for resistance.

As part of a decolonial praxis, culturally informed resilient strategies take on the ability to resist dichotomies of inferiority/superiority that exist within colonial narratives. Isasi-Díaz argues that “[r]esistance speaks to being human among others, particularly when one protests against oppression and struggles for liberation. The process of self-definition, or of becoming one-self/oneself is, therefore, relational-communitarian, and it happens in the process of being in solidarity with an-other” (60). Reviewing history for evidence of resistance that allowed ancestors to “rebound” from physical and cultural violence can identify decolonial strategies. However, this project is not one solely based in empowering one individual but instead empowering an individual as part of a community that can, in turn, continue to change.

Returning to this knowledge and perceiving it as having a subversive power recreates it as a tool for challenging the colonial status-quo. It also becomes a tool for affirming what is lost in colonial narratives in relation to being more than an object controlled by a structure of power. The importance of reclaiming these histories via fiction storytelling is not only the imaginative license that writing fiction offers but also, and as Anzaldúa argues, “[t]hrough creative engagements, you embed your experiences in a larger frame of reference, connecting your personal struggles with those of other beings on the planet, with the struggles of the Earth itself” (119). Creative acts have healing potential because they can challenge and subvert colonial narratives while simultaneously offering visions of decolonial action. They contain visions of learning to see these experiences as not things that destroy but as things that have been overcome and that can be read as proof of the ability to transform and heal. Anzaldúa, here, points towards Lugones’s call for decolonial feminists to move across boundaries that separate different communities while also honoring their differences.

The concluding section from *Daughters of the Stone* points to this reclamation of resilience as a source for healing and empowerment that the artist-as-curandera produces. Now following Carisa, the narrative moves to New York City where the family has relocated. This portion of the novel begins its focus on the clashes that occur between her own culture and that of the Anglo-

U.S. While attending college, Carisa shares her writings and learns that her professors find her work arbitrary: “‘She writes about semiliterate, poverty-stricken people who have no past and even less of a future...And what is that mish-mash that passes for style? Is that pig Spanish she throws in there for good measure...The kindest thing you can do is to let her have it, now. There’s no point encouraging her. She’s impossible...’” to which Carisa responds by first sinking into a depression and then traveling to Puerto Rico (272-73). The professor’s contempt for Carisa’s subject matter, as well as style, evinces the ways in which colonial narratives of inferiority continue to circulate in the contemporary era, even if expressed differently than would have been done by enslavers such as experienced by Fela. Indeed, underlying the professor’s obvious racism is a predetermined valuation of *what* and *who* are deemed worthy of depiction and analysis, echoing premises found in Pachter’s work. Anzaldúa writes that “[t]o camino de conocimiento requires that you encounter your shadow side and confront what you’ve programmed yourself (and have been programmed by your cultures) to avoid (desconocer), to confront the traits and habits distorting how you see reality and inhibiting the full use of your facultades” (118). Confronting the mechanisms that have systematically dehumanized people of color is a strenuous task: it means accounting for how interactions with a coloniality have impacted interpretations even as that coloniality is an external imposition.

Carisa’s journey to Puerto Rico forces her to confront the systems of oppression her family has experienced while also learning new ways to heal from them. After befriending a photographer in Puerto Rico, Carisa ventures throughout the island documenting abandoned plantations, old photographs, and the presence of those who have been left out of historical narratives: Afro-Boricuas. Carisa notes “I was totally immersed in these pictures because some of them could have easily been of the people in my own family stories, people with no public voices” (306). In working with images of people and places that are not included in “public” narratives, Carisa engages in a process of reclaiming from history a culture of survival in the face of dehumanization. Isasi-Díaz writes that in “order to remain true to the struggle for liberation, one needs to continuously find ways of creating knowledge from the underside of history. This is why *mujerista* thought attempts to be beyond controlling rationality of dominant discourse. To do this, we use the experience of Latinas as the source of knowledge” (44-45). Such an action requires having the fortitude to confront what it means to be from a heritage that has been systematically oppressed within a coloniality. It means being able to see this heritage as more than the sum of colonial narrative, while also seeking to learn from the survival strategies of those who have come before.

As the novel concludes, Carisa’s social consciousness regarding racism, history, and reclaiming resilience leads her to seek out knowledge of her Western African heritage to continue her own healing. When telling her friends and family about her intended trip to Western Africa, Carisa realizes that they “had forgotten the place of memory and could see only the manufactured stereotype” (318). The loss in this instance is palpable. Colonial narratives have so systematically depicted that cultural lineage as inferior that many only know it through that denigration. Yet, Carisa’s trip challenges this sentiment: “I don’t know what I’ll find. But I hope I will find a way back to older stories” and describes how she holds the stone that each woman inherits, going all the way back to Fela, in her hand and that as she does so a dream woman comes to her and starts to sing and “[w]hen she turns her face to me I see that the Lady has my face” (323). Thus, the novel avoids trafficking in over-celebratory images of Afro-Latina identity as an object, or transforming her story into one of cultural nationalism. During her discussion of the three necessary steps for decolonization, Wesley-Esquimaux notes that:

We are storytellers. We have an obligation to tell our stories to each other and to other Non-Native women. We may have to change the language of our stories and the focus of our discourse. Instead of telling only the stories about trauma and victimization and pain, let us talk about our survival and our undeniable strengths. It is essential for us to articulate the strengths that we have, not only in a way that validates our survival, but in a way that validates and “victorizes” our ability to take control of our lives and be, in spite of past pain and present dysfunction. (28)

The artist-as-curandera can trace out the shapes of those who have been written out of history. However, the task does not end there. The artist-as-curandera provides a narrative of community that turns from dichotomous thinking or reactionary strategy and towards viewing that culture and community from a space of empowerment. In this novel, the artist-as-curandera provides a vision of a community that is not bound by the constraints of colonial imposition.

### **Resistant Decolonial Resilience**

Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa’s novel, *Daughters of the Stone*, provides a corrective to colonial narratives that denigrate the culture and heritage of Afro-Latinas. In reclaiming voices of those who have been silenced within the technologies of coloniality, this novel provides a creative vision that pressures the boundaries of coloniality while simultaneously constituting resilient strategies as significant within decolonial resistance. Llanos-Figueroa’s novel clarifies the experiences of Afro-Latinas in Puerto Rico while also pointing to the importance of demystifying the systematical violence they endured. The artist-as-curandera emerges as one who can grapple with the gaps in history with dignity, and evince an integrity that is denied to those that a coloniality deems inferior or unworthy via the construction of artistic creations. Although there is no one, monolithic cure for healing from the wounds wrought by Western European colonial endeavors, or those of the Anglo-U.S., here the writer who takes on the histories of Afro-Latinas opens an opportunity to promote resilient strategies for empowerment within their communities. In constituting such a vision, Llanos-Figueroa challenges the notion that colonial narratives are the arbiter of knowledge regarding all Latinas. Indeed, this novel imparts an opportunity to see Afro-Latinas as more than the sum of coloniality.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See Gabriel Haslip-Viera's *Taíno Revival: Critical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Identity* for information on contemporary debates regarding Amerindian revivalism on the island and its diaspora.

<sup>2</sup> In 1978, Satendra Nanda put forward a concept of "artist as healer" regarding what is described in "Beyond Colonialism" as "colonial writers" responding to colonialism and its legacies. Our models are distinct: I contend that the artist-as-curandera is one who constitutes a decolonial praxis for healing and empowerment

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within his/her community, and attending to colonial narratives while not being limited to responding to only those narratives. Nanda's model speaks to an early moment in de-colonization during which what are now considered postcolonial writers were responding to the actions and impact of European colonialism.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this article the terms "coloniality" and "colonial" are used. However, the term "coloniality" refers to a very specific structure as defined by Quijano. My use of "colonial" identifies certain types of technologies, such as narrative and discourse, which are constructed and deployed within a coloniality to enable domination and as such is strictly employed in combination with those terms as an adjective. The terms "coloniality" and "colonial" are not used interchangeably as they are conceptually distinct.

<sup>4</sup> The United States does not officially narrate Puerto Rico as a colony. However, recent developments in the island's financial crises have led to clear examples of its colonial status maintaining. For more information regarding the island's legal status, please see *Foreign in a Domestic Sense*.