

Borne of Ghosts

By Melissa Annette Santiago

*There remains, therefore, the need for more work that does not either place Indigenous People outside or only at the beginning of modern history and thus makes them irrelevant to contemporary analysis of society and culture...Thus, this **disappearance**, either through extinction or racial mixture, is a given in much of Caribbean cultural and theoretical writing, and it has even been significant in the early articulation of postcolonial criticism.*

—Shona Jackson

I. Erasure

An amalgamation of indigenous Amerindian, European Spanish, and African ethnicities, the Puerto Rican denizen today is paradoxically situated as neither Spanish nor American, an inhabitant of an amorphous nationality that is all places and no place at all. As Shona Jackson makes clear in her book *Creole Indigeneity*, the rhetoric of disappearance used by explorers and later historians alike constructed accounts of indigenous peoples that suggested not only their extinction, but that also implied complicity for that erasure was within the indigene's own physiology. Nevertheless, Jackson exposes the veracity of such disappearances exists in discourse alone. She writes, "The repetition of indigenous disappearance as history is factual to the extent that it rhetorically supports the political economy of the postcolonial state...It reflects a new writing over or mythologizing of indigenous space in keeping with colonial epistemology and the settler/racial contract" (29). However illegitimate that contract, its language becomes the discursive tool of the colonizer used to efface the indigene's presence in the land of their birth.

For those Puerto Ricans, like myself, who came of age within the mainland United States, two disparate tracks of origin narratives compete within the discourse we use to undergird our sense of place within America. The first are the tales emanating from the kitchens of our elders, stories told about our Taíno ancestors who were brown, brave, and beautiful. The second are those quasi-anthropological histories of the island recorded after annexation in which officials recount the attributes of surprisingly "docile" Puerto Ricans. I experienced this disconnect myself as a curious preteen rummaging through my grandmother's home library where I discovered Federico Ribes Tovar's *The Puerto Rican Woman* (1972), an "historical" account of the settler/indigene encounter drawn from the archives. A personal site of rupture, Tovar's book first inculcated me into the loss and even shame I would come to associate with my own Puerto Rican indigeneity. Within the first pages of the book, Tovar explains the fate of the indigenous peoples of Puerto Rico writing, "Later there were native uprisings and massacres of Spaniards, but the aborigines were soon overcome and the survivors were distributed among the colonizers as *encomendados*..." (20). In Tovar's work, indigenous Puerto Ricans serve as an anecdotal presence, disappearing within the first pages of his twenty-three chapter retelling of the history of the island.

Via the replication and circulation of accounts of the colonial encounter like Tovar's, a discourse of erasure reinscribes itself with sustained force against the colonized body. As Diana Taylor explains in her work on encounter, "performing the act of possession makes the claim; the witnessing and writing down legitimates it. The letters and journals assure the reputation of the colonizer, not just in the eyes of the King and Queen but for generations to come" (10). The archives, once "closed," become additional weapons against the indigene who is still very much present within and around the spaces from which they've discursively "disappeared." Thus, the work of the humanist—and the work I attempt here—is to restore a body to the wandering self of the colonized subject, and affirm their temporal presence despite the rhetoric of disappearance. Tony Castanha in his work on indigenous refusal and resistance examines accounts of native populations fleeing inland to the mountainous regions of Puerto Rico, and documents the survival of those said to have been extinct. Castanha writes, "on the mountainous island there were hundreds of deep caves and hidden valleys. In these the *Borinqueños* hid and lived for generations. They became even then, as they were to become again, exiles in their own land" (41). Like so many written accounts of "new and undiscovered" lands, the mountains and valleys of Puerto Rico were often described as vacated spaces by historians, primarily because of their relative unimportance to economic operations of control. Accounts of Spanish colonization most notably describe port cities whose ease of access and coastal scenery are the coveted properties appearing in travel diaries and journals.

But what of those who fled, whose emigration to the innards of the island provided them with the necessary concealment to continue living and existing even after "extinction"? According to Castanha, "many Indian descendants have in fact known who they are and have maintained and continued to practice their culture. Many others have had some knowledge of their background, and some are in the process of recovering their heritage" (30). Disappearance becomes paradoxical for the Puerto Rican citizen as it safeguards against that from which the human spirit most recoils: extinction. Further, the dual experience of disappearing *and* living creates within the people of Puerto Rico a transnational experience unique to the island nation, one in which we emerge as multi-ethnic, "revived" and walking ghosts whose travels within our own borders mimic an immigrant experience. Perhaps that is why the counter-narratives of Puerto Ricans are so important to our "revival" and future survival. As Castanha points out, "indigenous voice and ancestral memory [of the native Puerto Rican] have been illegitimated as alternative sources of information" (32). Thus, the form of recourse most critical to a reclamation of visibility is the recorded discourse that will form an alternative archive, one written and produced by the kin who make up the bricolage of voices that abound on both the mainland as well as along the shores, within the valleys, and on top of the mountains that make up the island of Borikén.

With its obscured depiction of a person of indeterminate origin, the cover of the English translation of Eduardo Lalo's award winning novel *Simone* (2015) serves as an appropriate signifier of the ambivalent Puerto Rican identities of the novel's characters. Although the unnamed narrator and his love interest, Li Chao, attempt to forge an identity of artistry together through writing, the continuity of colonial erasure and abuse proves too powerful; as the narrator and Li find themselves imbricated in preconceptions and narratives constructed prior to their first meeting, each ultimately perpetuates an illogical subjectivity onto the other, mimicking the colonial exploitation experienced during encounter. Due in part to the rhetoric of disappearance, the difficulty of fortifying a transnational identity for both the narrator and Li is etched in the narratives of perpetual wandering each assumes, leaving them suspended in the faceless existence invoked by the novel's cover. Further, Lalo's preoccupation with embodiment reaffirms the Puerto

Rican citizen's ambivalence regarding visibility. Alluding to the devastating effects of colonial domination, Taylor ironically comments, "What else is there to say about the atrocity of conquest? The very scenario that numbs us with familiarity occludes the atrocious outcome. As a paradigmatic system of visibility, the scenario also assures invisibility" (2). Hence, Lalo's novel showcases the resultant and continuing trauma that occurs at the sites of encounter, and highlights the perpetually occluded status experienced by Puerto Ricans who've remained on the island, as well as those of us in whom the island beckons when we read ourselves through the archives.

II. Rupture

I am nine years old and in my grandmother's library, a room filled with endless fascination for me because this is where I've encountered quite a number of books I might not be able to find elsewhere. This is her personal library; a collection she's kept up through her lives in both Puerto Rico and here in the New York City apartment she's lived in for over thirty years. A former educator, my grandmother has textbooks on mathematics, environmental science, literature, and history. She has books used by her former students, as well as old workbooks used by the seven of her own children who've attended a number of New York's elementary, intermediate, secondary, and higher learning facilities.

I eagerly open each book, scouring the paratext for clues as to the various incarnations of my aunt's and uncle's identities during their formative years. Often, a hastily drawn doodle will tell me more about my family than I've ever dared to ask. I know my Uncle Wito at one time studied engineering, even though his *Materials of Matter* textbook loses my logic early on in its preface. I find proof that my uncle Amaury struggled to learn Spanish. Being born in the States and as the final of the seven siblings, it seems he was always competing for his mother's attention. So that he can finish out "Lección Dos," I hurriedly draw a line from a glass of water to its Spanish language signifier *agua*. I even find an old favorite, my Aunt Lillian's grade school novel *The Upstairs Room* by Johanna Reiss, a lesser known counterpart to Anne Frank's diary which I've just read in school. I must admit I prefer the former, perhaps because my aunt's scrawled notes serve as a springboard for my own analysis.

And then, between a bible and a dictionary, I find a yellowing copy of *The Puerto Rican Woman* by Federico Ribes Tovar. I quickly check the inside cover for a clue as to its purchase history. It belonged to my great-aunt Yolanda, herself born in Puerto Rico but transplanted to New York City in the sixties. Just before the copyright page I find her name, her phone number and address, along with a stamp from the community college bookstore from which she purchased the text. I'll admit, I know little about my great-aunt (aside from the evidently exceptional genetic matter that keeps her looking at fifty like she's still in her thirties). However, I do remember talk of her "breaking the mold," of being a fire starter who protested with fellow students at college sit-ins and of harboring a "die-hard" feminist sentiment. I'm curious to know if anything in these pages inspired her tenacity.

So, I settle in amongst the comfort of a patchwork quilt my grandmother had sewn and laid over the pop-up bed in the library/spare bedroom, and begin to read my own reflection through the words of a famed academic. Tovar writes, "the Taíno women had pleasing features. Their skin was copper-colored, and they had long, very smooth hair, black or dark brown. They were very supple, of medium height, with slanted eyes, high cheekbones and sloping foreheads" (19). I pause my reading, slightly disconcerted. I check the illustration on the front cover. The woman pictured is indeed "copper-colored" with beautiful, long eyelashes staring out at me from almond shaped eyes

and, yes, ink-black fine, straight hair. I touch my own head of curls. The parts just behind the ears have always been coarse, and the overall shape something akin to a lion's mane if left untamed by the force of my mother's comb.

I continue reading: "Many of the Indians, both male and female, were sodomites. Males who took the female role wore *naguas* (skirts) like the women. These skirts consisted of cotton cloths that hung from the waist to the middle of the leg" (Tovar 20). I quickly relinquish the comfort of my reading nook to grab one of the dictionaries close at hand. There are several, but I choose the Spanish-English version hoping I can find discursive aid in one language if not the other. The definition—"one who practices sodomy"—does not help. When I scroll down to *sodomy*, I'm faced with a troubling truth according to Tovar. Everyone in my family is descended from a "people that enjoy anal and oral *copulation* (after a quick visit to 'c,' meaning "intercourse") with a member of the same or opposite sex *see also* with an animal." I am stunned. With the same manner in which Tovar describes the native dress of my people, his gloss leads me to the genealogical discovery that I am a moral renegade, descended from people who may have slept with their own livestock!

When I have to pause again in my reading to look up the word "miscegenation," I'm almost tempted to stop entirely. Whatever this next word means, the prefix alerts me to the fact that it contains the suggestion of another *mis*step, a further assertion that I am *mis*made, that the origin of my people was a *mis*take, a condemnation for their own *mis*deeds. I am relieved, however, to find that the definition is not so bad, merely "a mixing." Continuing to read in the hopes of locating anything that might reaffirm my sense of self, I come to a declaration that leaves me feeling even more untethered: "Alongside the Creole, the Indians and the Negro slaves, a new caste began to emerge in the colony almost from its inception...In the beginning, the *mestizos* were the offspring of white males and native Indian women. Although, the Indians of Puerto Rico are extinct as a people..." (43). Confused, I recall the photo of my great-grandmother wedged in the mirror of my grandmother's vanity. The story goes that she was Taína, an Indian, and that my great-grandfather, a Spaniard, was so enchanted by her beauty while visiting the island, that he forsook his disapproving family and his nationhood to stay in Puerto Rico and have fourteen babies with my *bis-abuela*. But how can that story be true if she had been "extinct"? How can families be borne of ghosts?

The more I read, the worse it gets. I had visited my family in Puerto Rico just last year, and had detected none of the secret deviance hiding just below the surface of their skins. The town in Bayamon where my grandmother's family lives is accessible only by small jumper plane because of its location in the mountainous terrain of the inner island. Turning to a chapter on "*jibaros*," or mountain people, I am confronted with more facts about my untoward ancestors: "country women did practically no work at all. They doted on their children with exaggerated and over-demonstrative affection. They did not give them any education because there were no facilities for that in the country...Nor did they prepare them for any trade or occupation, with the result that the boys are indolent and resentful of all authority" (Tovar 77). Suddenly, it all made sense to my 9 year old mind: my uncle's homosexuality, my own father's drug addiction, his brother's incarceration—it could all be attributed to our blood.

I run into the bathroom with my pilfered tome and stare at my reflection. Instinctively, I palpate the scar on my chin from when I was three. It happened in Puerto Rico. I remember the rupture, the skin split and screaming (or was that the sound coming from my own mouth?) as the blood coursed down my naked, sexless chest. My grandmother was so mad; a trip to the hospital meant money we didn't have. The scar is thick and textured, the work of a doctor who didn't even

bother to numb the area with lidocaine; I was Puerto Rican after all. Somehow, so many years later, the scar still throbs at the oddest of times. As is it does at this moment of reckoning, when—reading myself through Tovar’s words—I am faced with his truth about where I come from, what my people are, and what that makes me.

III. Aftermath

How is one to account for the shame that sociological and physical displacement like this brings to the native islander? Castanha, in interviews with descendants of formerly exiled *indigenes* who themselves still inhabit the mountain towns of Puerto Rico, finds that “many stories had been kept within family histories, often having gone ‘underground’ as the result of an abusive past. Some individuals growing up on the island in the first half of the twentieth century were made to feel ashamed of being Indian” (34). The legacy of shaming continues to reverberate. In the days that followed 2017’s Hurricane Maria, I saw my people accused of wanting handouts, of not working hard enough to ensure their survival, of feeling too entitled to relief aide (did they not understand the mainland’s perception of their alterity?). Any suggestion that enough wasn’t being done to help the people was an attack on democracy by “immigrants,” an attempt at playing politics with a natural disaster that in the minds of mainlanders wasn’t truly all *that* bad. We now know that the total number of deaths at 4,600 make Hurricane Maria the worst natural disaster to hit the United States in over a century (Campbell and Barclay). Yet the rhetoric used to undermine the actuality of Maria’s impact was largely successful because it has always been wielded against Puerto Ricans in ways that publicly amputate us from the body politic, and personally dissuade our desire for a visibility that calls us indolent, unworthy, and inept.

This resultant ambivalence towards disappearance and embodiment is concretized in the motifs of wandering and suspension in Eduardo Lalo’s *Simone*, a novel that reads like a series of fragmentary conversations between the narrator and his imagined readership. A college professor, the narrator of the novel vacillates in tone between cynical despondence and hopeful sincerity within the novel’s short compass. Lalo’s opening lines situate discourse as a companion to the wanderer of Puerto Rico’s neocolonial landscape: “**Writing.** What other choice do I have in this world, where so many things are forever beyond my reach? But I’m still here, alive and irrepressible, and it doesn’t matter if I’ve been condemned to corners, to cupboards, to nothingness” (Lalo 1). In a moment of metafiction, the reader learns that the segmented paragraphs are short entries in a journal kept by the narrator which serve as his attempt to be made legible to an outside world. While he recalls with something akin to regret his lack of relational ties to others on the island, he recognizes his sense of displacement, even though he is unable to conceive of himself as belonging anywhere other than San Juan. Recalling the first of several recorded dreams, the narrator contemplates, “Isn’t the impossibility of escaping this space an image of me in this city? ... If I’d stayed in Madrid...even if I had remained there, I could never have made that world my own or become a part of the generation I’d been born into” (Lalo 4). Thus, the narrator exhibits the sentimental displacement of the island-born Caribbean native. Kept in a constant state of suspension, he vacillates between the movement and stasis characteristic of a unique, transnational identity.

The narrator’s ambivalence does not deaden his ability to understand the source of his suffering or lessen his desire for legibility despite his claims that such a reading of his person is inconceivable in his present space and state. Constantly meandering between restaurants and coffee shops around the city, the narrator invokes his paradoxical stance when he writes on a slip

of paper, “This is something I think whenever I read, write, hear this name of a country that means so little beyond its borders (and perhaps within them, too). What sort of silence is this? That is to say, what sort of pain?” (Lalo 8). As an untenured professor at the Universidad de Puerto Rico, the conversational fragments captured by the narrator as he moves throughout the neighborhoods of the island and the halls of academia display a lucidity about his own positionality. He recalls a page from a book by Maximo Noreña: “Our place in history, our efforts to live and leave a mark, a narrative, were not permitted to exist. We claimed to be a country, but in reality even many of those who were convinced of that fact acted as if we were nothing but a stop on an empire’s bus route” (Lalo 14). His recollection of his colleague’s words convey the narrator’s understanding of his own ambiguous positionality: he is himself both an intellectual insider and an ethnic outsider in the land of his birth, a land that often negates his existence within the national narrative.

In fact, the narrator is surprised to have found relative success after renewed circulation of three of his books in a reprinted edition entitled *Three-in-One*. Unbeknownst to the narrator, a student at the university, touched by the work of the somewhat “successful” professor turned writer, begins to engage him by sending anonymous epigraphs on slips of paper, even going so far as to scribble a message in chalk outside the university. Normally the observer and historian of fragmentary conversations, the narrator finds himself in the uncomfortable position of *object* for the first time. He writes, “Who am I, what do I represent to that other person? What are they looking for, to go to such lengths?” (Lalo 19). A heretofore similarly disembodied presence within the novel and the land of his birth, the narrator is soon seduced by the epistolary intercourse that gives him shape within the context of someone else’s thoughts. He is no longer merely “a pair of watching eyes” (Lalo 48). Ironically, on the first note the narrator receives from the eponymous “Simone,” the stalking presence writes, “I came looking for you, but I don’t want to find you. I want you to read me” (Lalo 15). So interrelated are the functions of writing, reading, and legibility, that the narrator’s secret stalker has read onto the professor his desire for recognition despite the self-perpetuated erasure he practices through his lack of lived experience.

Li’s approach of watching, observing, and noting the narrator’s traces fulfills a function similar to Audra Simpson’s conception of “seeing unencumbered, what and who is before you—seeing as one ought to be seen, in a way that is consistent with one’s sense of self and property” (3). Admittedly, the narrator himself compares his daily movements to “the life of an invisible man” (Lalo 52). Soon, however, Li decides to penetrate the narrator’s world with more than just reprinted notions quoted from other’s works and scribbled on scraps. Li calls the narrator and leaves a voice message: “Hello I’m Li Chao, alias Simone Weil. I think it’s time I introduce myself. I hope you’ll forgive my little game” (Lalo 60). The alias chosen by Li of “Simone Weil” is interestingly juxtaposed with her own character. A feminist philosopher and humanitarian activist, Weil sought to inhabit the spaces of those for whom she worked towards social justice, which eventually caused the physical deterioration that would lead to her death (“Simone Weil”). Thus, the chosen moniker creates questions for the reader. Is Li’s initial motivation a “pure” one, considering that her stalking pseudonym connotes a goal of altruism and not alterity? Or is Li’s form of data collection the propagation of the type of colonial objectification long ascribed to those who “study” the residents of postcolonial spaces? Read this way, the stalking plot of Lalo’s novel and the stalker’s ability to be everywhere in everything functions, then, as an analog or mimetic of colonialism’s continued presence in all facets of daily life for the people of Puerto Rico.

This analogous action of performing “data” collection is complicated in the novel, however, when Li finally reveals herself to the narrator. In fact, as the reader later learns, Li herself is situated as a polyphonic, transnational subject. Originally from China, Li immigrates to Puerto

Rico with her mother after her father is jailed as a political dissident in the seventies. Having been aided by distant Chinese relatives already living in Puerto Rico, Li finds herself indebted to her “family” after her own mother’s death leaves her orphaned and isolated in a foreign land. Li explains to the narrator, “My problem isn’t the language but the impossibility everyone else has of imagining me. Is it possible to write when no one shares your identity, when the vast majority of people can’t even imagine you” (Lalo 67)? Instead of “writing” the words, Li draws them, choosing to etch the lines of names over and onto themselves, until they form complicated frameworks of dense matter contrasted against empty space. According to the narrator, “The lines erased their passage until they became a solid, pulsing body that took a mammoth feat of tedious and hypnotic labor” (Lalo 80). Her own origins erased, Li hopes to form a working relationship of artistry with the narrator in which they might use discourse “as a weapon for survival” (Lalo 70).

Ultimately hopeful that he can achieve a measure of knowing and being known, the narrator and Li attempt to defy the colonial mechanisms into which they’ve already and forever been imbricated. Their attempts at visibility and embodiment eventually take the form of sexuality. He writes, “In joining our bodies, we were creating an uncharted territory where past experience was no guide, and the wide field before us defied all assumptions. It was impossible to know what we’d find in it and what was expected of us” (Lalo 74). With the same degree of earnest seeking undertaken by Li, the narrator hopes his own transparent positionality will allow for a formative understanding of Li that allows her to take shape through her agency alone. However, ever the cynic, the narrator at once recognizes the impossibility of what they both desire. He thinks, “There was no need for a concrete event to come along and undo us. It had already happened; not in the history we were making, but in what came before us” (Lalo 75). Like the cyclical continuity of colonialism that ensures its performative replication over and over again, the past and present impede the development of a future of their own imagining for the narrator and Li. Though both Li and the narrator would like to believe that it might be possible to traverse a new temporal space set apart from everything that “came before,” their inability to do so is reflective of the still living experiences of neocolonialism in present day Puerto Rico.

In a novel in which characters are paradoxically both fleeing from and suspended in their existences, instead of a finite resolution, the climactic scene of *re-encounter* occurs not between Li and the narrator, but rather amidst a party dedicated to a traveling Spanish professor visiting the island as part of a promotional book tour. Although the party is hosted by Carmen Lindo, a university bigwig who the narrator learns is Li’s sometimes financier and sometimes lover, the writer Garcia Padron admits that his presence isn’t related to any academic accolades, but rather set up through, “a corporation with assistance from a ministry that invests in publicizing Spanish culture” (Lalo 147). While the narrator attends hoping to engage Li, the climactic confrontation occurs between the traveling writer and the narrator’s friend, Maximo Noreña. When Garcia Padron tells Noreña that Spain will forever remain the epicenter of Latin American culture, Noreña disagrees causing Padron to announce, “I detect tremendous frustration in you fellows...Puerto Rico is a small country and that perhaps has something to do with it. You gain nothing by taking it out on us. We aren’t your enemies. I’m not even sure if enemies exist” (Lalo 149). There, in an environment of mainly Puerto Rican natives and academics, Garcia Padron lays bare the circular logic and erasure of the imperial power that projects violent sentiments onto those who have long been subjugated and who still suffer its effects under neocolonialism. At the very least, these discursively replicated scenarios of conquest prove fruitful to the humanist, providing the footing needed to traverse the space from trauma toward healing.

IV. Recovery

I comb my daughter's hair each morning even though she is getting too old for this. Seemingly a woman at twelve years of age, my first born says she cannot do it on her own, that her thick textured mane defies attempts to conform to the pressure of her own small hands. I acquiesce of course, reminding her that someday it will fall upon her shoulders to manage her hair, that I won't be around forever. I see her eyes look into mine in the full length mirror. She reads my meaning. Hardworking and smart, she is a fire starter: she questions everything and challenges all of my assumptions. Her almost opaque and almond-shaped eyes unflinchingly connect to mine. How is she already so much more than me? There is a certainty with which she views the world, a substantive refusal to be ignored. Born and raised in South Florida to a first-generation Cuban immigrant father and a third-generation Puerto Rican mother, her transnationality affirms itself in those eyes. An instinctive protectiveness swells within me. "All done, *mi vida*," I tell her, smoothing over a defiant wisp of hair near her temple. She smiles, and we watch one another in the mirror. Behind her I stand, along with my own mother and hers before her, two seen presences among a myriad of those who remain unseen waiting to be written, wanting to be read. Together, we construct a narrative that gives voice to the invisible ghosts of the past:

Extranjeros

My presence is my trauma; I haunt myself.
 I excuse my body when walking into a room,
 I avert my eyes. If I seem quiet, it's because
 I'm apologizing for invading a space. An alien,
 I walk and talk and look like you. But inside
 I know you are thinking that I don't belong.
 You assume I speak another language, something
 foreign and different from your own.

But that
 tongue's mute—numb from generations of
 disuse. And my memories? These are not mine.
 They belong to my mothers and grandmothers
 alike. I remember what it feels like to give birth
 on the floor of a zinc roofed shack in the middle
 of a storm, scared that the doctors might be
 summoned to rip my womb from the wound
 between my thighs.

I was there when they arrived.
 Not the ones who said freedom, but those who
 came floating on the sparkling waters of my
 elder's sleeping premonitions. Puffy faces white
 and bloated, billowing outwards from the winds
 that whisked them to our shores. It was I who
 descended the *flamboyant*, lit the fire to confirm:
 flesh seekers would soon taste our sleep-laden skins.

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